



Choosing  
a partner  
for  
marriage

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John A. O'Brien, Ph.D.

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# Choosing a Partner For Marriage

What to Look For in a Mate

By

John A. O'Brien, Ph.D.

"YOUR ANSWER will be kept absolutely confidential," the letter said. It was an inquiry sent out by a large firm, asking that we give a recommendation for a former pupil who was seeking employment with them.

If they hired him, he would be free to quit any time he wanted. And the company would have the right to discharge him at its discretion. Yet they regarded it as important enough to ask us for some sort of evaluation of him as a prospective employee.

All this caution . . . and only on the question of a job! If only such care were always taken in the more important decisions of life—such as that of finding a marriage partner. Marriage, "a world-without-end bargain" as Shakespeare calls it, is so important that it demands the greatest prudence, vigilance and caution. It is no place for cutting corners, for

scrimping, for taking for granted. It calls for an all-out effort—mobilizing the best judgment, discretion and wisdom of which a person and his counsellors are capable.

In the selection of a helpmate, one should look for certain qualities which will go a long way toward ensuring the success and the happiness of the marriage. While love involves the affections of the heart, it must be guided by reason. Otherwise it is likely to be short-lived. What then are the qualities or marks which a Catholic should keep in mind in the choice of a mate?

### A Practical Catholic

First of all, the party should be a *practical Catholic*. Religion colors the whole outlook on life. It provides incentives for much of our conduct and supplies us with criteria for the forming of moral judgments and the evaluation of objects and actions in the light of eternity. The greatest treasure which any Catholic possesses is his holy faith. With it, he is rich. Without it, he is poor indeed.

His religion teaches him the sanctity of marriage and its indissoluble character. Where the Catholic faith is held in common, there is the strongest possible guarantee that both receive the sacrament in complete agreement as to their mutual obligations and privileges in the family life. There is

the same understanding of the moral complexion of birth control, abortion and divorce.

Marriage is the most intimate union which two human beings can form. The ideal union is one in which there is the largest area of shared experience and of common ideals, values and aspirations. The entire circumstances of two human lives should coincide and blend together. Where there are considerable segments of experience in which the other has no sharing, there is inevitably a falling from the ideal. Where those segments embrace such fundamental matters as one's relations with God and the means of attaining eternal life, there results a spiritual aloofness, a subtle estrangement, where community of outlook is craved most of all.

### **Indestructible**

Among all the religious organizations in the world, the Catholic Church alone stands unflinchingly today, as she has for nineteen centuries, in defense of Christ's law concerning the sanctity and the indestructible character of Christian wedlock. Marriage is fraught nowadays with unusual hazards. Those hazards are vastly minimized and almost annihilated when the powerful influence of a common religious faith is brought to bear upon their conscience and their heart. The first consideration for any

Catholic then is to find a helpmate for life among those of his own faith.

If circumstances beyond his control prevent his finding a congenial prospect among his own, then he should explain to his non-Catholic friend how much his religion means to him and ask her to take a complete course of instruction. This he should do before he becomes too deeply involved emotionally.

If he sets the proper example, prays earnestly for her conversion, accompanies her to all the instructions, brings her regularly to Sunday Mass, then the evidence of the divine origin of the Catholic religion along with the truth of its doctrines and the beauty of its worship will through God's grace bring conviction to her mind, peace to her heart, and faith to her soul. She will become a devout and fervent Catholic.

### Moral Character

Closely related to religion is moral character. The term is here used to include disposition, temperament, attitudes as well as ethical standards. Character is basic among the qualities to be sought in a helpmate. Vastly more important than appearance, social status and wealth, moral character penetrates to the roots of one's being and largely determines the nature and disposition of the individual. It is the wellspring whence issue such important traits as fidelity, un-

selfishness, honesty, kindness, sympathy, integrity. Without these no marriage can long survive.

To build a marriage upon such superficial qualities as good looks, winning manners and abundant spending money, while neglecting the solid foundation of moral character, is like building a house upon the shifting sands. The rock bottom upon which alone the edifice of marriage can long endure is integrity of character. An ounce of goodness will outweigh a ton of cleverness. Goodness breeds charity, understanding and a capacity to forgive and forget the little irritations along the marital path.

### Rose-colored Glasses

The tender sentiment usually causes lovers to see each other through rose-tinted spectacles. They wear their best manners and their most engaging smiles.

Youth must struggle desperately to break through the painted facade and the false front of pretence and pose to glimpse the real "McCoy" that lies beneath. When courtship ends and the honeymoon is over, the individual's true character comes to the surface with a vengeance and sometimes with alarming effect. That's likely to be the nature which the spouse will now see morning, noon and night. If a sound moral character is in

the driver's seat, all will be well. But if it's absent, well . . . there's trouble ahead.

What a person wants in a life partner is dependability. Like charity, that quality will cover a multitude of defects. "When I put my head on the pillow," observes a young wife, "I don't have to stay awake, worrying about where Joe is or what he is doing. I can trust him absolutely. That's the basis of every successful marriage—mutual trustworthiness. Without that, you're on the top of a volcano and you never know when the lid is liable to blow off." There's the case for moral character . . . in a nutshell.

### Health

In virtually all ratings, whether for husband or wife, health stands close to the top in the list of desired qualifications. Since it is so important for the proper discharge of the normal functions of the family life, its importance is readily recognized. Health of the mind and of the body is normally a requisite for happiness, whether a person be single or married. When the party is married, the complications greatly increase.

Poor health may incapacitate a man to such an extent that he is unable to support his family. All the members are then likely to be pulled down into hardship, privation and misery. Even when the disability is not so great, it frequently occasions financial



worry and disturbs the family peace. The procreation and rearing of healthy children become difficult, if not impossible, if the wife is a chronic invalid.

While exceptions occur, the sad fact remains that in the overwhelming majority of cases ill-health constitutes a serious impediment to normal happy family life and should be frankly recognized as such a liability before the marriage is contracted.

### **Alcoholism**

One should proceed cautiously when he discovers marked tendencies to alcoholism or emotional instability of one kind or another in the family of the prospect. The occurrence of insanity or feeble-mindedness in the family stock should not only make one wary but also prompt him to look elsewhere. Whether he likes it or not, an individual marries not only the bride but to a large extent her family stock as well. Sentiment here should hearken to reason.

There are other diseases that raise the sign, Stop, Look and Listen! First, whenever there is any heredity disease, of whatever nature, one's prospective marriage partner has the right to know it. Such a disease will not always be an insurmountable obstacle to marriage, but a wise person will consult a doctor to find out its probable effects on his or her future family.

Then there is the further distasteful possibility of venereal disease in one's prospective mate. While such disease is not *always* indicative of previous immorality, it often is. And apart from moral considerations, such diseases are very contagious and can't help but have extremely unhappy consequences for the health of the whole family.

### Medical Exam

So serious a threat do these diseases pose to the health and life of the marriage partner that many states now require a medical examination and a physician's certificate declaring both to be free of these diseases before a wedding license will be issued. Even where the law does not require such medical proof, it should be presented voluntarily by both.

This voluntary exchange of medical certificates is fast becoming a universal custom and will eliminate many painful and tragic discoveries which come only after the damage has been done. Neither party should fail under any pretense to conform with this elementary dictate of prudence and common sense. The failure of either to do so should sound the danger signal at once and call for a showdown before it is too late. One's very life and that of the children are at stake.

## Intelligence and Education

Husbands and wives in happy and successful marriages rate highly the factor of congenial companionship. This implies a sharing of interests and an exchange of thoughts and ideas which render conversation both interesting and enjoyable. The emphasis on the physical shifts increasingly to the intellectual as the months and years of married life go by. It is of enormous importance that the partners have some similarity in intelligence and in culture in order to deepen and strengthen the bonds of their love.

Passion is like a bit of explosive. There is a flash and a roar. It vanishes as quickly as it came, leaving but a whiff of smoke behind. Pitiful indeed is that union which rests chiefly upon physical attraction when the passions have largely shot their bolt. Dissimilarity in intelligence and education has here a fertile field for the spawning of boredom, irritation, and repulsion. The delicate threads of intellectual interests, which grow with the years into mighty cables of strength, are missing.

Two young people discover all too late that marriage reposes even more upon a knitting together of the minds than of the bodies and that radical differences in intellectual endowment and culture tend to undermine the happiness and the stability of

the union. Intellectual communion, a sharing of interests, a pooling of hopes and dreams beget mutual contentment, peace and happiness and evidence that deeper love which far transcends the merely physical.

The education of both partners, however else it may diverge into different fields of interest, should embrace at least all the essentials of marriage. They should both be thoroughly instructed in the nature and purpose of wedlock and in the psycho-physical differences of the two sexes. Innocence is not to be confused with ignorance, which in this field exacts a particularly heavy toll in disappointment, frustration and unhappiness.

### Housekeeping Ability

In most testing of the qualities desired in a mate, domesticity is rated high. By domesticity is meant a pride in the home, a love for children and a willingness to rear them, a desire to find happiness in the family circle and to make the home the center of activities. Where such an interest in the home throbs in the heart of a girl, she will not fail to acquire proficiency in the domestic arts. Some training in housekeeping, in cooking and in all that goes to make a house a real home should precede the wedding.

"Tell me, Henry, did you marry that

pretty night club singer," inquired Joe, "or do you still darn your own socks and do your own cooking?"

"Yes," replied Henry glumly.

"Yes, what?" persisted Joe.

"I married the girl and I still darn my own socks and do my own cooking."

### In the Kitchen

The courtship is carried on in the parlor but much of married life centers around the kitchen. Woe to the husband who returns from a trying day at the office or the factory only to face a poorly prepared meal. He will find his patience running out. Uncomplimentary, if not angry words, will be thronging upon him, seeking an outlet. On the other hand, an inviting table with tastily prepared food will bring him great pleasure and enhance his admiration for his wife in her important role of homemaker. "A man," observes Samuel Johnson, "is in general better pleased when he has a good dinner upon his table, than when his wife talks Greek."

While tasty and well-prepared meals are not the whole of the house-keeping art, they are an important part. The ability to keep the home clean, neat and attractive, so that it is a source of pride to parents and to children bears a rich return in gratitude and

deepened happiness. A woman's skill in the factory or proficiency in business or the professions is a poor substitute for ability as a homemaker. Man's greatest happiness is found at the heart of a well-ordered, smooth-running home. To preside as the queen over such a domestic kingdom is no small honor for a wife and a mother.

The husband, too, must be deeply interested in all that concerns the home. He must yearn for it during the working day, return to it at evening with eager joy, and find his greatest contentment and happiness with his wife and children gathered around him at the family fireside. No preoccupation with business affairs can excuse him from spending the bulk of his leisure time in the loving companionship of his family.

### **The Heart of the Home**

Children constitute the heart of the home. When they grow up enjoying the sympathy, encouragement and love of their parents and of one another, they are achieving a well integrated personality which will stand them in good stead in the years ahead. They are not without their burden to parents who relieve their aches and pains. But they bring wonderful compensation to their elders and bestow upon them a love and devotion which no money can buy. The patter of their

footsteps, the hum of their eager voices and the melody of their laughter create an atmosphere charged with the fragrance of sympathy and warmth of love. Children convert a house into a home.

This is the note which our Holy Father sounds with such simple eloquence in his Encyclical on Christian Marriage: "Let, then, those who are about to enter on married life, approach that state well disposed and well prepared, so that they will be able as far as they can to help each other in sustaining the vicissitudes of life, and yet work in attending to their eternal salvation and in forming the inner man unto the fullness of the age of Christ. It will also help them if they behave toward their cherished offspring as God wills: that is, that the father be truly a father, and the mother truly a mother; through their devout love and unwearying care, the home, though it suffer want and hardship in this valley of tears, may become for the children, in its own way, a foretaste of that paradise of delight in which the Creator placed the first man of the human race. Thus will they be able to bring up their children as perfect men and perfect Christians. They will instill into them a sound understanding of the Catholic Church, and will give them such a disposition and love for their fatherland as duty and gratitude demand."

## Wealth and Income

No matter how ardently a young couple may be in love, they must keep a weather eye peeled on the bread-and-butter realities, on the matter of nest egg and income if they wish to graduate from courtship into marriage. Young people can't live on love any more than their elders can. Hence a girl must look for a capacity to earn a living in the marriage prospect.

Domesticity is perhaps more essential on the part of the woman, while the ability to provide a home and support a family is more necessary on the part of the man.

A young man should manifest an awareness of the economic necessities by setting aside as much as possible from his monthly salary for a nucleus with which to start his home. He should possess a willingness to work steadily at his job and not be shifting constantly from job to job with no real advancement. A man who has been working for four or five years and has saved nothing should make a girl wonder if he has the stability and the thriftiness which should characterize every good breadwinner.

More important than accumulated wealth is income. An industrious and thrifty spouse with reasonable earning power will keep the wolf from the door more effectively and more permanently than a wealthy spend-



thrift. A fool and his money are soon parted. What a wife needs is a husband who is willing to work and to save and who is determined to make the security of the home his primary consideration. It is good for the young couple to taste a little of hardship and sacrifice. It draws them still closer, deepens their love and will afford both the satisfaction of working out their own economic salvation.

### Congeniality

Similarity in age, tastes, interest, outlook, social status, education, race and religion, makes it possible to share most things in common and offers a strong assurance for the success and happiness of the marriage. Contrary to a fairly common impression, most young people find themselves attracted to those who are similar. All the things which they share in common serve to deepen their sympathy and understanding and make for harmonious relationships. Radical differences tend to create tense situations, friction and strife.

Congeniality in age ordinarily implies that the partners are of approximately the same age. Since girls mature more rapidly than boys, they generally feel greater compatibility with boys a year or two older. In the United States, bridegrooms are usually a couple of years older than their brides. This arrange-

ment seems to be a wise one, since upon the man usually falls the main burden of support, and the additional years of experience help him toward this end.

While there are marked differences between the psychological age and the chronological age of individuals, making it difficult to formulate a hard and fast rule, it is safe to say that in general the ages of the partners should be sufficiently close to contribute to a community of interest in social and intellectual activities as well as in diversions. When the age differences exceed ten years, the chances of widespread congeniality generally decrease markedly.

Similarity among individuals may be traced to inborn traits or probably more frequently to culture. By this term is meant not only the religious, racial, educational and recreational customs of a people but also their folkways, habits, attitudes, tastes, aims, ideas and ideals. Differences of race generally involve differences of culture. Thus a Chinese peasant has a culture radically different from an Italian peasant.

In the United States the intimate mingling of different racial groups has tended to blur the differences in their culture. Happy and successful marriages among persons of different racial extraction are a common and indeed a daily occurrence. A young person should proceed slowly and cautiously, how-

ever, when the cultural differences are too radical and pronounced. Better still, he should stop and look elsewhere. In general it can be said that the marriage of persons with the maximum of congeniality in tastes, interests, outlook and culture has the best assurance of success and happiness.

### Thoroughly Feminine

There is, however, one field in which the emphasis should be upon the difference or dissimilarity instead of the likeness or similarity. That is in the matter of sex traits or characteristics. A normal man admires a woman who is thoroughly feminine. He finds himself attracted toward her while he shies away from the mannish woman. The girl who apes the manners of men and becomes a tomboy, perhaps thinking she thereby shows herself a good sport, makes a great mistake. Normal men experience an inner revulsion to such masculine women.

God created man and woman with two distinct physical and psychical natures. It is these distinctive differences which constitute the peculiar charm and special attraction of the one for the other. They should be respected and emphasized. The normal woman experiences an instinctive reaction against effeminacy in a man. She admires the man that is virile, masculine and thoroughly manly.

## Complementary

The marriage that gives the greatest assurance of success and happiness is the one which unites the virile man with the feminine woman in a union where the distinctive differences complement the deficiencies of each other and thus enable both to achieve a larger and fuller life. In response to the stimulation of each other, they find the latent qualities of their respective natures, like the blossom responding to the kiss of sunshine, unfolding into the full flower of their queenly womanhood and manly dignity. It is God's plan and nature's too, and it cannot be thwarted without producing abnormalities.

## Good Disposition

While this has been treated implicitly in the discussion of moral character, it is so important as to justify a few explicit words about it. Perhaps as much as any other single element, if not more, it is a good disposition, an even temperament, which lubricates all the family relationships and makes a marriage tick. While many qualities are embodied in such a character, the central one would seem to be unselfishness. The unselfish person is easy to get along with. He has tolerance, sympathy, understanding, and is considerate of others. He knows that per-

sons have differences of viewpoint, of likes and enthusiasms, and he respects those differences instead of trying to shape all others into his particular mold.

These then are the qualities you should look for in a mate. You will rarely find all of them present in the fullest measure. Men and women aren't paragons of perfection. They are, at best, but approximations. As one doesn't possess all perfections himself, a kindly disposition and a fair degree of intelligence will enable most couples to make a go of marriage and to achieve abiding happiness in the family life.

A young person should be warned not to expect an angel from on High as his partner, and hence he should not pass up one prospective partner after another while waiting for his impossible ideal to hove in sight.

### The Real Article

We had occasion recently along with a minister to conduct an open Forum on Courtship and Marriage at a large coeducational university in the East. The period for questions had come.

"How is a girl in love," asked a young coed, looking up from her knitting, "to know whether or not it's the real thing?"

The crowd laughed.

But the question is one which doubtless many a girl finds herself asking at times.

“When it’s the real article,” answered the young minister, a married man, “you’ll know by the convulsive breathing . . . like when mountain climbing. . . .”

### Emotional

“There’s an emotional stirring,” he pointed out, “and a strong one. Your heart beats faster and a pleasant glow suffuses your whole being. You enjoy being in his presence and you find yourselves sharing each other’s thoughts and feelings. But these subjective stirrings, these emotions and sensations reflected in heightened respiration, blood pressure and pulse, are not decisive. They may be present, substantially the same, in mere physical infatuation. By themselves, they are quite untrustworthy. They may even play the role of the Lorelei, luring sailors to their destruction.

“In addition to the stirring of the heart with its emotional response, there must be the response of the intellect, conveying its carefully thought out approval. It must say in effect: All the essential qualities for a good life partner are present. I know not merely from the testimony of a throbbing heart but also from the impartial verdict of clear-eyed reason. Moral character, a common faith, health, intelligence, earning capacity, good disposition, unselfishness, congeniality in taste, temperament, culture,

character, are all present. Now, heart, you can let yourself go. Pour out your love without stint, for the person is worthy of it. He will not let you down. He will empty his heart to you in torrents of love and devotion. And sealing it all is the authentic signature of a moral character that is beyond dispute.

“When a girl gets the approval of the mind and heart, each corroborating the other, she can be sure it’s the real McCoy. But if she hearkens only to the heart and ignores the verdict of the mind, she is likely to discover all too late that she has sought her happiness in a fool’s paradise, which is but another name for Dante’s deepest hell. True love must get the green light from both the mind and the heart. Otherwise it must keep its foot on the brake instead of the accelerator.”

### Love Will Follow

When the requisite qualities are present in each and the young couple have sufficient opportunity to know each other, respect, admiration, friendship and love will usually follow. This is proven by the custom common in many European countries where the parents for the most part make the selection. The tender sentiment of love is not slow in developing in such a couple, thus confirming the good judgment and practical common sense of the parents. This fact was recognized

by Samuel Johnson who declared: "I believe marriages would in general be as happy, and often more so, if they were all made by the Lord Chancellor, upon a due consideration of the character and circumstances, without the parties having any choice in the matter."

### Common Sense

Marriages arranged by the parents in many of the countries of the Old World are, on the whole, far more successful and lasting than the marriages in America where the Hollywood type of romantic love dominates the thoughts and procedure of our youth and is responsible for so many ill-starred marital adventures. We need more common sense, more hardheaded thinking, and less of the "boy meets girl, falls in love at first sight and finds his dream turning into a nightmare before the honeymoon is over" sentimentality in choosing partners for life.

Persons who act on impulse, with little more than cosmetic attractiveness pulling the trigger, usually find they have chosen a ball and chain instead of a congenial companion for a life partner. Such hasty and impetuous marriages, where no serious effort was made to ascertain the presence of the essential qualities of character, congeniality in religion, culture, taste, temperament, health, of homemaking and breadwinning capacity, are strewing our landscape with the wreck-



age of millions of homes and are undermining our nation's strength and threatening her very existence.

When the essential qualities are present, love will discharge its sacred mission. It is a great mystery, a divine fire which kindles paltry clay into a masterpiece of beauty and makes it glow with a divine light. It is God's magic which enables a man and a woman to find life's meaning in each other's eyes. It is an emanation from God's nature which transforms the selfishness of the individual into the unselfish devotion of a father and the divine self-forgetfulness of a mother.

### The Miracle of Love

To make marriage a go, love must touch the qualities of each mate and integrate them into the richer and fuller personalities born in the womb of matrimony. "God," says an old Portuguese proverb, "writes straight with crooked lines." Love is of the essence of God and thus partakes of His mysterious power. It is the miracle and the mystery of love that it blends the separate notes of each partner, which alone sound off-key, into the glorious symphony of life in whose overtones and undertones one catches ever and anon the melody of love's mystic song.

No earthly treasure can equal the gift of a good husband . . . a devoted wife . . . gifts

which God bestows upon those who follow with obedient minds and prayerful hearts the laws, principles and ideals of Christ and His Church.

True, married life is no heaven on earth, no surcease from life's pilgrimage. It has its cares and responsibilities, its trials and its tribulations as has all human life here below. But this much may be said with certainty: At the fireside of the Christian home, in the loving companionship of husband and wife, with their children gathered around them, man and woman achieve the largest measure of happiness that can be attained on this earth. Central in the achievement of such enduring love and happiness is the choice of a suitable helpmate.

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Censor Deputatus

**IMPRIMATUR** — ✠ Most Rev. John F. Noll, D.D.  
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Thirteenth Printing, 1963



**AVE MARIA PRESS**  
**NOTRE DAME, INDIANA**



