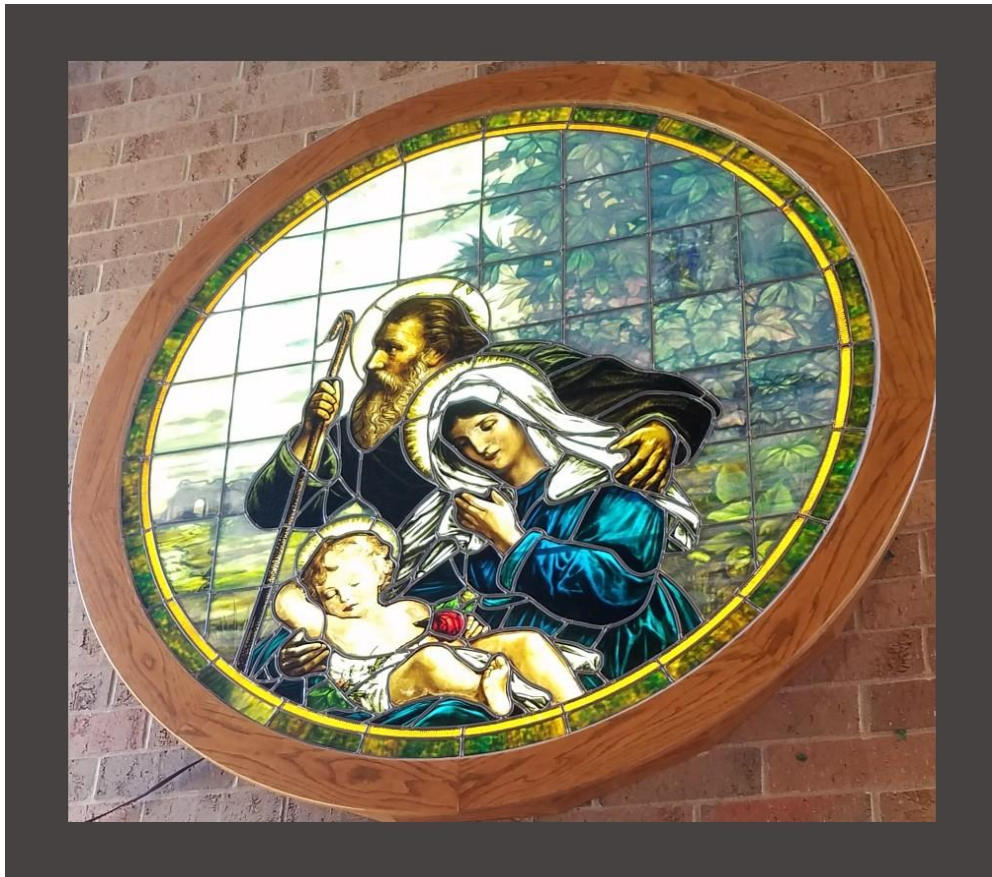


Novena for Marriage Renewal
For the Feast of Saint Joseph, Husband of Mary



This Novena can be prayed and appreciated by anyone, especially those who want to better understand and appreciate how God's plan for marriage comes to be enfolded in ordinary human lives, or even who wants to pray for a married couple near and dear to you. But, it is designed for married couples seeking renewal in their marriage. Its primary intended use is to prayerfully prepare for the renewal of your wedding vows, to be celebrated with other couples in the parish community on March 19, the Feast of Saint Joseph, which focuses on his role and identity as husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary (as opposed to May 1, which focuses on his role as a model of workmen). Of course, this renewal and preparation can take place at other times as well. It is recommended that the preparation involve daily personal prayer, both individually and as a couple, as well as the Sacrament of Reconciliation. As a time of renewal for couples, it also recommended that it be a time to work on improving healthy communication with each other, having crucial conversations with openness and respect and prioritizing your marriage however you feel called to do so. If couples feel called to pursue marriage counseling, it is recommended that they be open to this. Your marriage is worth fighting for, whatever the cost!

The readings within do not focus solely on the unique marriage of Joseph and Mary, but on a variety of married couples who play an important role in the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, you may notice parallels, which serve as types and foreshadowing of how God's Will comes about through the Holy Family. Understanding the story of Mary and Joseph requires understanding that they are part of a much larger story. The Son entrusted to them would be the center of that story, but He would not even be the end of it, in the chronological sense. You are a part of that story, which continues to this day. Thus, we will also read of another married couple, who offers us a glimpse of how married life plays a part in the New Covenant, even after the Holy Family. Through all of this, we ask Mary and Joseph to intercede for our marriages and families, that all may be made new in Jesus Christ.

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Daily Novena Prayers:

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be

Reading

Reflection

Litany of Saint Joseph

Litany of Saint Joseph

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Christ, hear us. Christ, graciously hear us.

God, the Father of Heaven, have mercy on us.
God the Son, Redeemer of the world, have mercy on us.
God the Holy Spirit, have mercy on us.
Holy Trinity, One God, have mercy on us.

Holy Mary, pray for us.
St. Joseph, pray for us.
Renowned offspring of David, pray for us.
Light of Patriarchs, pray for us.
Spouse of the Mother of God, pray for us.
Chaste guardian of the Virgin, pray for us.
Foster father of the Son of God, pray for us.
Zealous defender of Christ, pray for us.
Head of the Holy Family, pray for us.

Joseph most just, pray for us.
Joseph most chaste, pray for us.
Joseph most prudent, pray for us.
Joseph most courageous, pray for us.
Joseph most obedient, pray for us.
Joseph most faithful, pray for us.

Mirror of patience, pray for us.
Lover of poverty, pray for us.
Model of workmen, pray for us.
Glory of home life, pray for us.
Guardian of virgins, pray for us.
Pillar of families, pray for us.
Comfort of the afflicted, pray for us.
Hope of the sick, pray for us.
Patron of the dying, pray for us.
Terror of demons, pray for us.
Protector of Holy Church, pray for us.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, spare us, O Lord!.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, graciously hear us, O Lord!.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. .

V. He made him the lord of his household. R. And prince over all his possessions.

Let us pray. O God, in your ineffable providence you were pleased to choose Blessed Joseph to be the spouse of your most holy Mother; grant, we beg you, that we may be worthy to have him for our intercessor in heaven whom on earth we venerate as our Protector: You who live and reign forever and ever. R. Amen

Day One: Adam and Eve

Reading: *Genesis 3:8-20, 4:1-2, 25-26*

When they heard the sound of the LORD God walking about in the garden at the breezy time of the day, the man and his wife hid themselves from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. The LORD God then called to the man and asked him: Where are you? He answered, "I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid." Then God asked: Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat? The man replied, "The woman whom you put here with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it." The LORD God then asked the woman: What is this you have done? The woman answered, "The snake tricked me, so I ate it." Then the LORD God said to the snake: Because you have done this, cursed are you among all the animals, tame or wild; On your belly you shall crawl, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; They will strike at your head, while you strike at their heel. To the woman he said: I will intensify your toil in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you. To the man he said: Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, You shall not eat from it, Cursed is the ground because of you! In toil you shall eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bear for you, and you shall eat the grass of the field. By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, Until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; For you are dust, and to dust you shall return. The man gave his wife the name "Eve," because she was the mother of all the living.

The man had intercourse with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, saying, "I have produced a male child with the help of the LORD." Next she gave birth to his brother Abel. Abel became a herder of flocks, and Cain a tiller of the ground.

Adam again had intercourse with his wife, and she gave birth to a son whom she called Seth. "God has granted me another offspring in place of Abel," she said, "because Cain killed him." To Seth, in turn, a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the LORD by name.

Reflection:

What a broken place to begin! The first married couple leaves us the reminder and example of the entrance of sin into the world and the mess it left behind. We see hints of how the entrance of sin into our lives brings greater suffering and trial and becomes an enemy to marriage and the family, in how their sin was compounded by beginning to turn on each other and even to the point that one of their sons would take the life of the other. We should remember that the “sentence” that the Lord pronounces for sin is more of an explanation of the consequences than a dealing out of punishment. So, we see in our own lives and in our homes how much selfishness and sin eat away at our own inner happiness and our harmony with one another. It causes us to turn inward, so much so that the very things which were once a mark of the joy of a shared life can now become an opportunity for more drudgery and pain. But, the story doesn’t stop here. No, it is just beginning. So also, neither must we stop here. Yes, this story begins right after the entrance of sin, just like sometimes we may become awakened to how our own personal sin has done damage to our lives and to our families and can have difficulty seeing that it can become a new beginning. But, by the grace of God, this story becomes not merely a story of sin and division. It becomes a story of redemption. Immediately, when sin entered the world, hope dawned upon the garden. The moment they heard the sound of the Lord God walking about in the garden, although they hid in fear and shame, we know that allowing Him to enter the picture, even giving Him our fear and our shame, is where our hope begins. We should remember that He does not merely give a “sentence” to our first parents, but also to the Enemy who deceived them! He promises that serpent that there will be One who will crush his head, even as he desperately grasps to strike at the heel. And that One will be born of a woman. God created something beautiful when He created the human family, beginning with this first married couple. He creates something beautiful every time He calls a husband and wife together. The Enemy sought to destroy it. But, God declares victory over that which He made to be good, in His own image and likeness. He is not giving up on marriage and the family, just as He is not giving up on humanity as a whole. He is going to bring forth victory from a human family. He promises redemption. He promises hope. He promises that this is not the end of the story, not if we allow the Divine Author to keep working in our lives. We must not hide from Him, seeking to keep hidden the sin and selfishness that are tearing ourselves and our homes apart. If we bring everything to Him, He promises hope, healing and redemption. After the sins of the first parents, we heard the first proclamation of the Gospel, of the Good News of the One whose name we did not yet know, but we know Him now: Jesus Christ. After the sins of their children, we again saw hope in the new child the Lord brought them, Seth. In Seth, the human family would continue to grow, and “at that time people began to invoke the Lord by name.” Let us invoke Him now by the name we now know:

Jesus Christ, our Healer, our Hope, and our Redeemer, fill our hearts and our homes with the hope that you alone can bring. Amen.

Day Two: Abraham and Sarah

Reading: *Genesis 18:1-15*

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oak of Mamre, as he sat in the entrance of his tent, while the day was growing hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them; and bowing to the ground, he said: "Sir, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let some water be brought, that you may bathe your feet, and then rest under the tree. Now that you have come to your servant, let me bring you a little food, that you may refresh yourselves; and afterward you may go on your way." "Very well," they replied, "do as you have said." Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick, three measures of bran flour! Knead it and make bread." He ran to the herd, picked out a tender, choice calf, and gave it to a servant, who quickly prepared it. Then he got some curds and milk, as well as the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them, waiting on them under the tree while they ate. "Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There in the tent," he replied. One of them said, "I will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah will then have a son." Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, just behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years, and Sarah had stopped having her menstrual periods. So Sarah laughed to herself and said, "Now that I am worn out and my husband is old, am I still to have sexual pleasure?" But the LORD said to Abraham: "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really bear a child, old as I am?' Is anything too marvelous for the LORD to do? At the appointed time, about this time next year, I will return to you, and Sarah will have a son." Sarah lied, saying, "I did not laugh," because she was afraid. But he said, "Yes, you did."

Reflection:

By now, we know that these stories of married couples throughout salvation history often involved a lot of brokenness and trials and even sin, but that they are stories of redemption. There may be some reading this and thinking, "Just because these people in the Bible saw their lives become stories of redemption, that doesn't mean that MY story - OUR story - can become a story of redemption!" To anyone troubled by such thoughts, I repeat the words of our Lord to Abraham concerning Sarah's laughter: "Is anything too marvelous for the Lord to do?" This second story of a marriage finds a very old couple who had endured a great many long years of trial, which had worn their patience thin, as well as their faith, as we see evidenced by Sarah's laughter. Their difficulties had sometimes led them in desperation down paths they never ought to have taken. But, time and time again, the Lord called them to keep trusting Him. Little did they know how much their story of redemption would be precisely the lesson countless believers for generations to come would need as a reminder that faith endures only with great patience, and that this patience is sometimes sorely tried. Indeed, they would become a father and mother to children more numerous than the stars in the sky and sands of the earth. Yet, they had never seen a child of their own. Indeed, one of the great pains which they knew so acutely was a pain that many couples have suffered: the sadness of infertility, of wanting to bring forth life and nurture it and watch it grow and being sorely disappointed time and time again. Many couples know how deep this pain can be. Such couples should remember that Abraham and Sarah understand it quite well, even when sometimes friends and family members can't. And this should be the reminder that points to the deeper truth, that there is One who knows and understands our hearts, our hurt and our pain perfectly. And He is the One who keeps asking us to trust Him. Whatever challenges and difficulties you have endured, first of all, know how perfectly you are loved by God. He loves you. He loves your marriage and your family. Let His Love strengthen your faith, that it may give new life to your hope. However long the struggle seems to have gone on, the story is not over. You will notice an important theme of these various stories of marriage, these stories of redemption, or rather these chapters in the one great Story of Redemption. They are not pristine portraits of perfection. They are stories of struggle and even failure, but also of hope and perseverance. They are the fires in which faith, hope and love are forged. They are stories of God at work, in lives as broken as yours and mine. They are stories of victory. They can be your story.

O Divine Author, help us to trust in the good work you are bringing about in our lives.

Day Three: Isaac & Rebekah

Reading: Genesis 24:11-21, 50-54a, 57-67

Near evening, at the time when women go out to draw water, (the servant of Abraham) made the camels kneel by the well outside the city. Then he said: "LORD, God of my master Abraham, let it turn out favorably for me today and thus deal graciously with my master Abraham. While I stand here at the spring and the daughters of the townspeople are coming out to draw water, if I say to a young woman, 'Please lower your jug, that I may drink,' and she answers, 'Drink, and I will water your camels, too,' then she is the one whom you have decided upon for your servant Isaac. In this way I will know that you have dealt graciously with my master." He had scarcely finished speaking when Rebekah—who was born to Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor—came out with a jug on her shoulder. The young woman was very beautiful, a virgin, untouched by man. She went down to the spring and filled her jug. As she came up, the servant ran toward her and said, "Please give me a sip of water from your jug." "Drink, sir," she replied, and quickly lowering the jug into her hand, she gave him a drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw water for your camels, too, until they have finished drinking." With that, she quickly emptied her jug into the drinking trough and ran back to the well to draw more water, until she had drawn enough for all the camels. The man watched her the whole time, silently waiting to learn whether or not the LORD had made his journey successful.

(The brother and father of Rebekah,) Laban and Bethuel said in reply: "This thing comes from the LORD; we can say nothing to you either for or against it. Here is Rebekah, right in front of you; take her and go, that she may become the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has said." When Abraham's servant heard their answer, he bowed to the ground before the LORD. Then he brought out objects of silver and gold and clothing and presented them to Rebekah; he also gave costly presents to her brother and mother. After he and the men with him had eaten and drunk, they spent the night there.

"Let us call the young woman and see what she herself has to say about it." So they called Rebekah and asked her, "Will you go with this man?" She answered, "I will." At this they sent off their sister Rebekah and her nurse with Abraham's servant and his men. They blessed Rebekah and said: "Sister, may you grow into thousands of myriads; And may your descendants gain possession of the gates of their enemies!" Then Rebekah and her attendants started out; they mounted the camels and followed the man. So the servant took Rebekah and went on his way. Meanwhile Isaac had gone from Beer-lahai-roi and was living in the region of the Negeb. One day toward evening he went out to walk in the field, and caught sight of camels approaching. Rebekah, too, caught sight of Isaac, and got down from her camel. She asked the servant, "Who is the man over there, walking through the fields toward us?" "That is my master," replied the servant. Then she took her veil and covered herself. The servant recounted to Isaac all the things he had done. Then Isaac brought Rebekah into the tent of his mother Sarah. He took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her and found solace after the death of his mother.

Reflection:

The story of how Isaac and Rebekah came together is likely quite different from how you and your spouse came together. This story, in particular, shows us how different many of the customs recorded in Scripture were from ours today. But I would hope that we would not get so caught up in these differences that we would lose sight of the rich symbolism at work pointing to the deeper mysteries in play. While our spouse may not have been selected by a servant of our father, still many spouses were introduced to one another by a third party, whether family or a mutual friend. What was it that this person saw in your spouse that led them to believe they would be a good fit for you? What was it *you* saw in them? What was the beauty within them that moved your heart and stirred your affections? What truth did you see in their lives, that perhaps others could not see, at least not in the same way? What goodness drew out a greater goodness within you, a goodness willing to make a lifelong, selfless commitment? What was it that *your spouse* saw in *you*? It is good to recall, in short, why you fell in love in the first place. This cannot be merely about nostalgia or chasing a feeling that you felt a long time ago, when your lives were very different. But, these are things that must be remembered. There is a unique truth, goodness and beauty to your marriage that is a gift to the world, which awakens the thirsts of the heart for that true love, for which we are all made. That unique gift that is your marriage is a reflection of the marriage of Christ and the Church, just as this story of the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah is so abundantly rich in symbolism that points, even beyond God's plan for marriage, toward the love of the Lord for His beloved people, to whom He promised, through the prophets of the ages, to espouse Himself. That unique reflection of God's love that is your marriage must be rediscovered. You must drink deeply of it once more. True, it will have changed over the years, aging like a fine wine. That is part of the beauty of God's plan, as your love and life together matures and deepens through the years, even if it is also tried and weathered. Even these various trials can become like the refiner's fire, that molds our hearts and provides a new light in which we can see His beauty reflected.

O Divine Artist, grant that we may rediscover the beauty you are bringing about in our lives, so that this beauty may better reflect the glory of Your Love. Amen.

Day Four: Jacob & Rachel

Reading: *Genesis 35:9-20*

On Jacob's arrival from Paddan-aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him. God said to him: Your name is Jacob. You will no longer be named Jacob, but Israel will be your name. So he was named Israel. Then God said to him: *I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply. A nation, indeed an assembly of nations, will stem from you, and kings will issue from your loins. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you; and to your descendants after you I will give the land.* Then God departed from him. In the place where God had spoken with him, Jacob set up a sacred pillar, a stone pillar, and upon it he made a libation and poured out oil. Jacob named the place where God spoke to him Bethel. Then they departed from Bethel; but while they still had some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel went into labor and suffered great distress. When her labor was most intense, the midwife said to her, "Do not fear, for now you have another son." With her last breath—for she was at the point of death—she named him Ben-oni; but his father named him Benjamin. Thus Rachel died; and she was buried on the road to Ephrath (now Bethlehem). Jacob set up a sacred pillar on her grave, and the same pillar marks Rachel's grave to this day.

Reflection:

This story shows the tragic end of a life and thus also of a marriage. But, there is great beauty in this tragedy. We see the death of Rachel in childbirth, which causes her to be revered by God's people for generations as a kind of "sorrowful mother" - just as we see referenced later on from the Prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 31:15) and then later in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt. 2:18). And so the mission that the Lord gave to Jacob, of being a father to his people for generations to come, would be shared by his beloved wife, Rachel, as she too would be revered as a mother to them, especially in their suffering. As husband and wife, they share a calling that is given to them both. We see this especially profoundly in parenthood, as the mother and father share the mission of raising their children. Yet, we can see this sharing of a mission, together as one, in a variety of ways (even if their marriage is not blessed with children). First and foremost, husband and wife share a mission to be an image of God's love, first of all to one another and second of all to others. Thus, every married couple must discover themselves as a gift both to one another and to others whom the Lord has placed in their lives. As a sign of God's love, they offer a beacon of hope, especially to those who are suffering. They can even show this in tangible ways, by the charity and hospitality they show toward others. Just as Rachel came to be known through the ages as a sorrowful mother, especially when God's people were hurting, so also, those in need of this beacon of hope, this sign of God's love, can find hope in the midst of suffering. This is a mission every husband and wife share together. In sharing this mission, it is good that they would work to keep their marriage strong, in how they prioritize their relationship, how they work to improve their communication with each other, and in how they pray and sacrifice for one another. Every married couple must keep their eyes fixed on the cross, where Christ the Bridegroom lays down His life for His Bride, the Church and shows us all how to love. This is the image to which every married couple must seek to be conformed, such that all who enter their home might say of them what was said of the early Christians: *see how they love one another!* In a world where many find it difficult to believe that a lifelong commitment is even possible, we know that many despair, not only of the notion that a man and woman could love one another freely, totally, faithfully and fruitfully, but also that God can love us this way! It is into such darkness that the light of married love shines, inviting people to rethink their despair... *"Maybe, just maybe, love does believe, hope and endure in the midst of all things. And maybe this love is offered to me by the God who is Love."* And yet, as beautiful as this sounds, we know that it is accomplished by the little daily choices that are made in the context of real human lives, that are often as messy as they are inspiring. We certainly know the marriage of Jacob and Rachel is anything but perfect or ideal, yet God worked through them in profound ways. Jacob would be revered as a father to generations to come and Rachel as a beloved, sorrowful mother. We see how Jacob leads the way in this reverence and honor shown to their mother in the way he honors her in her burial and the setting up of the sacred pillar. A wise man once said to me, "One of the best gifts I can give to my children is to love their mother." May each and every one of you seek to love one another in a manner that reflects the perfect love of God.

O Lover of our souls, teach us to love one another with a love that is patient, kind, selfless and humble, that we may shine the light of Your Love, for one another and for others. Amen.

Day Five: David and Bathsheba

Reading: *2 Samuel 12: 18-24*

On the seventh day, the child died. David's servants were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said: "When the child was alive, we spoke to him, but he would not listen to what we said. How can we tell him the child is dead? He may do some harm!" But David noticed his servants whispering among themselves and realized that the child was dead. He asked his servants, "Is the child dead?" They said, "Yes." Rising from the ground, David washed and anointed himself, and changed his clothes. Then he went to the house of the LORD and worshiped. He returned to his own house and asked for food; they set it before him, and he ate. His servants said to him: "What is this you are doing? While the child was living, you fasted and wept and kept vigil; now that the child is dead, you rise and take food." He replied: "While the child was living, I fasted and wept, thinking, 'Who knows? The LORD may grant me the child's life.' But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." Then David consoled Bathsheba his wife. He went and slept with her; and she conceived and bore him a son, who was named Solomon. The LORD loved him..."

Reflection:

Yet again, we have the witness of a couple whose marriage was anything but perfect. In fact, most of us know far better the story of the very rocky start with which it began. Sadly, most people who know the names of “David and Bathsheba” hear them and quickly think of their sin together, that rock bottom moment of the revered king. Many of us don’t know or forget how Bathsheba went on to be the Queen Mother in the reign of her son, Solomon, who was revered for his wisdom and for building the Temple, which his father David desired to build. Likewise, we may forget how Bathsheba’s importance is confirmed by the listing of her name in the genealogy of the Lord. Indeed, we can so easily forget that the marriage of David and Bathsheba is yet another story of redemption. Although their first coming together was in sin, God brought the first glimmer of good from it, in that a child was conceived. Yet, they mourned together the death of this child. This too is a deep and profound pain that many married couples have known and shared. Such couples should remember that David and Bathsheba are yet another couple who understand. There is such power in the very simple words, “David consoled Bathsheba his wife.” Tragedies like this can bring couples closer together. Sadly, many couples have experienced that it can also put further strain on the marriage. As two very different people cope with such trials as grief differently, one or more parties may be looking to the other for support and feel they are not finding it, due in part to this very simple fact that they are two different people coping differently. Especially if they are struggling to communicate effectively, deep misunderstandings can set in, causing one or more parties to feel unsupported, isolated and alone. Next, unforgiveness and resentment can begin to set in, driving the two further apart, rather than closer together. Consider again the power and beauty of those simple words: “David consoled Bathsheba his wife.” The selflessness, tenderness and genuine love of this second embrace of David and Bathsheba (after David’s repentance) holds a clear contrast to the selfishness, lust and sin that motivated their first embrace. Thus, the child to be born of this embrace is the son of redemption: Solomon, the heir to the throne who would have a such a noble beginning to his reign, that it would be marked by the humility that caused him to ask the Lord for the wisdom he needed to rule with justice, which he knew he lacked. God honored his humble request and gave him wisdom beyond measure. Still, over time, he would squander this gift and allow his passions to lead him astray, even leading the nation into the worship of false gods. How often do the difficulties and even sin that arise in the lives of their children put added strain upon the marriage of the parents. And yet, they may also wrestle with how the sins of the parents influence the lives of their children. Still, they are different people and cope with all of this differently, and the same cycle can set in. So many trials that couples can endure, which can put strain on the marriage, have the potential to be opportunities to draw closer. This will require healthy, honest and effective communication that seeks to support one another, while also respecting one another’s differences. It also may require the assistance of a professional, such as a counselor, who God has gifted and called to help people find these healthy methods of coping, communicating, and processing. Couples should not be afraid or ashamed to pursue this, when it seems appropriate.

O Divine Healer, since You have called us to share a mission, teach us also to share our burdens, by respecting and supporting one another through our trials, so that they may draw us closer together, rather than driving us apart. Amen.

Day Six: Tobiah and Sarah

Reading: *Tobit 8:4b-9a, 15-17*

Tobiah rose from bed and said to his wife, "My sister, come, let us pray and beg our Lord to grant us mercy and protection." She got up, and they started to pray and beg that they might be protected. He began with these words: "Blessed are you, O God of our ancestors; blessed be your name forever and ever! Let the heavens and all your creation bless you forever. You made Adam, and you made his wife Eve to be his helper and support; and from these two the human race has come. You said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; let us make him a helper like himself.' Now, not with lust, but with fidelity I take this kinswoman as my wife. Send down your mercy on me and on her, and grant that we may grow old together. Bless us with children." They said together, "Amen, amen!" Then they went to bed for the night.

Then they praised the God of heaven in these words: "Blessed are you, God, with every pure blessing! Let all your chosen ones bless you forever! Blessed are you, for you have made me happy; what I feared did not happen. Rather you have dealt with us according to your abundant mercy. Blessed are you, for you have shown mercy toward two only children. Grant them, Master, mercy and protection, and bring their lives to fulfillment with happiness and mercy."

Reflection:

The story of Tobiah and Sarah takes us back to the innocence and beauty of the newness of marriage at its outset. Yet, even this story clearly illustrates how fear can set in so quickly and burden the hearts of both husband and wife. Even if the unique fear of Tobiah and Sarah is different, we can still see a connection. Often, this fear even precedes the marriage and can even cause unmarried couples to fear, not only the commitment that marriage entails, but also the possibility of failure. More of us *have* been touched closely by divorce, in the lives of either our own parents, other members of our family or other loved ones or even oneself, than those who *haven't* had any personal contact with it. This can influence a fear of entering into the lifelong commitment of marriage. This fear doesn't automatically withdraw from the heart after the vows have been made, but can continue to weigh heavily upon their hearts, even when it remains unspoken. So, yet again, it is good to allow your hearts to return to the beginning. Notice how Tobiah and Sarah set out upon their marriage with purity of heart, seeing their marriage as a part of the story that the Lord began writing with the first marriage of Adam and Eve. They begin by allowing their hearts and minds to turn to the Lord and also to the beauty and goodness of His plan for marriage in the beginning. This is very much like how Our Lord addresses questions about marriage and sexual morality. He acknowledges that there is brokenness in the human heart, which overflows to brokenness in marriage and in our view of sexuality. But, in the beginning, it was not so. In the beginning, marriage played an integral role in God's glorious and wonderful design. And He is not going to give up on it. He came to heal our hearts, so that this healing too can overflow into marriages and into society, especially within the Church. He is not giving up on your marriage, and He invites you again to allow your hearts to return to the beginning and recall the beauty of your marriage at its outset. Again, this is not to chase after a feeling, but to recall that the pure intention with which you first chose to make of your lives a gift to one another was a part of God's glorious design. As He seeks to make of your marriage a story of redemption, He can restore the beauty that was there and even elevate it, as it deepens and matures. You too may cry out to the Lord, like Tobiah and Sarah, "You have dealt with us according to your abundant mercy."

O Heavenly Father, help us to see once more the beauty that you saw when you looked upon our marriage and said, "Behold it is very good." May the good work You have begun in us be brought to fulfillment. Amen.

Day Seven: Zechariah and Elizabeth

Reading: Luke 1:57-80

When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her. When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said in reply, "No. He will be called John." But they answered her, "There is no one among your relatives who has this name." So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called. He asked for a tablet and wrote, "John is his name," and all were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God. Then fear came upon all their neighbors, and all these matters were discussed throughout the hill country of Judea. All who heard these things took them to heart, saying, "What, then, will this child be?" For surely the hand of the Lord was with him. Then Zechariah his father, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied, saying: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and brought redemption to his people. He has raised up a horn for our salvation within the house of David his servant, even as he promised through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old: salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show mercy to our fathers and to be mindful of his holy covenant and of the oath he swore to Abraham our father, and to grant us that, rescued from the hand of enemies, without fear we might worship him in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God by which the daybreak from on high will visit us to shine on those who sit in darkness and death's shadow, to guide our feet into the path of peace." The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel.

Reflection:

God is doing something new in our midst. Perhaps this awareness has been rising within your hearts and your homes throughout these days of prayer, as the renewal of your vows draws nearer. This awareness was certainly a defining quality of the story of the marriage of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Their long barrenness, followed by the gift of a child at a most unexpected time, certainly holds an echo of the story of the marriage of Abraham and Sarah. And like Sarah, Zechariah also would struggle to believe this wonder. Yet again, the words ring true: Is anything too marvelous for the Lord to do? And yet, the gift of this child marks the dawning of the new and final covenant, as the dawn from on high breaks upon us, revealing His tender mercy to His people. Elizabeth and Zechariah have a unique perspective from which to understand and appreciate that the child granted to them is a gift from God, as he will be the final prophet of the old covenant, sent to prepare the way for the Messiah, indeed to prepare the way for the Lord Himself! May every married couple blessed with children, particularly when it is at an unexpected time, always understand and appreciate what a great gift this blessing is, a gift beyond measure. Yet, it is not only the blessing of a child, but also the witness of their faith that deserves our notice. Defying all expectations based on custom, they are obedient to the Lord in giving the child the name identified by the angel. They could not fail to honor the Lord, who had blessed them so abundantly in bringing about this good work. They could not allow the expectations of others to sway them from being obedient to the Lord. Instead, they allowed this extraordinary, yet simple, act to become a witness that God was indeed doing something new in their midst. How can you be a witness to others of the goodness the Lord has shown you? What simple acts of faithfulness and obedience is He calling you to, in honor of the goodness He has shown to you? Where have you seen His goodness and generosity manifest in your lives together? Take some time to count your blessings. Recognize how the goodness of God has brought you two together to this day! Name His blessings and His gifts. Notice them, identify them, one by one. Thank Him and seek to honor Him by your simple acts of faithfulness to Him. Consider how the faithfulness of His parents, in humble gratitude to God, who had shown them His tender mercy, influenced the growth of their son, as he “became strong in the spirit... until the day of his manifestation to Israel.” Whether he has blessed you with children or is calling you to be mindful of the people in your life to whom you give witness - or both - consider how the simple faithfulness, by which you honor His abundant goodness to you, is important in the lives of those He has placed in your lives. Your marriage was and is a gift to the world, a light meant to shine to point to the dawn from on high breaking upon us, revealing His tender mercy. Allow that light to be rekindled by recognizing how He has been so good to you, and the simple faithfulness He asks of you in return.

O Divine Giver of All Good Gifts, help us to recognize Your gifts to us and never to take them for granted or to forget that they were not given for us alone. May the grateful recognition of Your gifts add new fuel to the fire meant to burn and shine brightly for one another, and for all those You have placed in our lives. Amen.

Day Eight: Joseph and Mary

Reading: *Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23*

When (the Magi) had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him." Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt. He stayed there until the death of Herod, that what the Lord had said through the prophet might be fulfilled, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee. He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He shall be called a Nazorean."

Reflection:

At last, we come to the marriage that inspired this whole endeavor, that unique virginal marriage through which the Lord brought about our salvation, the husband and wife destined to be mother and father to the Son of God Himself: Mary and Joseph. We see a profound example of the trust in God and obedience to His Will that we all would hope to emulate in Mary and Joseph. We also see in the drama of their story a sign of the great providential care with which the Lord looks after the Holy Family. While His concern for the family to which He had entrusted His Only Begotten Son was of course unique, still it should be an encouraging and hopeful reminder of how greatly cares for and looks after your own family. Like the Holy Family, this does not mean that we will not endure trial, hardship and sorrow, but if we trust in the Lord and seek to follow His lead, we can be instruments of His providential care for our families. Good Saint Joseph provides us with a profound example of this. We see how his dutiful attentiveness to his responsibility to care for His family, which made him ready to rise quickly into action, was preceded by a kind of surrender and trust in God. In preaching about Saint Joseph at the 2018 "A Call to Catholic Men of Faith" conference, Fr. Johnathan Steffen points out that Joseph was chosen, not only because he was virtuous and hardworking, but also because God wanted "a man who can sleep. Not the sleep that comes from the folly of selfish pleasure, but the sleep that comes from the peace that surpasses all understanding." God chose a man who had "learned to place his own troubles in the hands of the Almighty and trust in a Divine Plan that is higher than his own." Joseph did not know what awaited him in his dreams. He simply had to surrender to God, let go and trust Him. Consider how the three instructions that we are told Joseph was clearly given in his dreams all involved how to care for the family entrusted to him. This is where the first priority lies. May we never fall into the trap of thinking that providing for one's family can be rightly done by elevating anything in our lives, including our profession, to a higher level of importance. Caring for his family was the first and most important responsibility given to Joseph. Perhaps it is with good reason that our minds might first focus upon his need to look after and care for the precious gift of the Christ Child entrusted to him, just as any parents must always understand the important role that their children play within their marriage. Still, consider that the first precious gift entrusted to Joseph was the Blessed Virgin Mary, his dearly beloved spouse. Thus, we are preparing for a feast day which specifically honors Joseph as "Husband of Mary." Consider how precious the gift of his beloved spouse was to him and how heavily it must have weighed upon his heart when he learned that she was in danger! Consider how precious your spouse is to you and what a great gift beyond measure has been entrusted to your care. Consider how this causes the hardships that weigh upon your spouse to weigh so heavily upon your heart as well. Now, consider *how* Joseph learned to care for his spouse, even when the danger she was facing was great. He trusted God and surrendered to the guidance and providential care of the One who loved her first and loved her perfectly. May each of you have the grace to care for one another this way, with renewed confidence in the Father's providential care.

O Good, Providential Father, watch over my spouse and our whole family. Teach us to love one another well, by trusting in You and rediscovering anew how greatly You love and care for us. Amen.

Day Nine: Priscilla and Aquila

Reading: *Acts 18:1-4, 9-11, 18-19, 24-28*

After this (Paul) left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. He went to visit them and, because he practiced the same trade, stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. Every sabbath, he entered into discussions in the synagogue, attempting to convince both Jews and Greeks.

One night in a vision the Lord said to Paul, "Do not be afraid. Go on speaking, and do not be silent, for I am with you. No one will attack and harm you, for I have many people in this city." He settled there for a year and a half and taught the word of God among them.

Paul remained for quite some time, and after saying farewell to the brothers he sailed for Syria, together with Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had his hair cut because he had taken a vow. When they reached Ephesus, he left them there, while he entered the synagogue and held discussions with the Jews.

A Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, an eloquent speaker, arrived in Ephesus. He was an authority on the scriptures. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord and, with ardent spirit, spoke and taught accurately about Jesus, although he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the Way (of God) more accurately. And when he wanted to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. After his arrival he gave great assistance to those who had come to believe through grace. He vigorously refuted the Jews in public, establishing from the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus.

Reflection:

The story of Priscilla and Aquila is sadly unknown by many. But, as these little glimpses of them within Acts of Apostles show us, they played a very important role in the mission of the Early Church. As collaborators of Saint Paul, we see how greatly he trusted and valued them, even leaving them behind in Ephesus to continue the good work of spreading the Gospel, which would result in them even providing a dynamic and influential preacher with the guidance he needed to make his preaching both more effective and more truthful. But, how did they get to this point? It all began with the hospitality they showed to Paul, which allowed them to establish a close relationship with him, as well as having the opportunity to continue to grow and be formed in the faith themselves. Now, before you think that by ending on this note, I am showing my cards, that this was all an elaborate ruse to get more couples to invite me over for dinner, let me elaborate. At the point when they first met Paul and welcomed him into their lives, they probably didn't exactly have everything in neat and pristine order. The little we know about them at this point, besides that they practiced the same simple trade that allowed them to connect with Paul, is that they were recently exiled from their former home. They had plenty of turmoil in their lives, plenty of reasons why they could have told themselves that now was not the time to increase the presence of the Church in their lives. Quite the opposite, in this turbulent time, they found solace in the bond of their Christian faith with this apostle who had made his way to the city they were now calling home. And likewise, he found in them trusted collaborators, in whose home he could confidently receive the exhortation from the Lord not to be afraid, that he was not alone, for the Lord had surrounded him with His own people. Tomorrow, you may find yourselves in the church, surrounded by other members of the Body of Christ, as together you all look into the eyes of your spouses, before Christ and His Church, to renew your vows. You may have turmoil in your life at the time. So may well those other couples around you. You are not alone and you do not have to be afraid, but can draw upon the community for strength, as should happen in any parish. Priscilla and Aquila did not only invite Paul into their home. They invited the rest of their brothers and sisters in Christ to find a home in their home, as Paul mentions the church gathering in their home numerous times in his letters. Indeed, the Church is a family of families and each family's home is to become a domestic church. In commenting on the witness of this holy married couple, Pope Benedict XVI wrote that we learn, "from their example: every home can transform itself in a little church. Not only in the sense that in them must reign the typical Christian love made of altruism and of reciprocal care, but still more in the sense that the whole of family life, based on faith, is called to revolve around the singular lordship of Jesus Christ." This process begins by inviting Christ Himself into the heart of your home. Allow His Love to transform your heart, your marriage and your home, that your love may reflect the beauty of His Love for His people, as it was made to do in the beginning.

O Loving Bridegroom of the Church, enter more deeply into our marriage and our home, that the transforming power of Your Merciful Love may continue to bring ongoing renewal, as we seek to allow our home to be a domestic church, where the faith is known and loved, so that You may teach us how to love. Amen.

Vow Renewal Celebration For Holy Matrimony

The Questions Before the Renewal of Consent

N. And **N.**, have you come here to renew the vows of marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly?

We have.

Are you resolved, as you continue along the path of Marriage, to love and honor each other for as long as you both shall live?

We are.

Are you resolved to continue in the prayerful support of the children you have lovingly accepted from God and to promote and encourage a life according to the law of Christ and His Church?

We are.

The Renewal of Consent

I, **N.**, choose you, **N.**, again this day for my lawful wife, To have and to hold, from this day forward, For better, for worse, For richer, for poorer, In sickness and in health, To love and to cherish Until death do us part.

I, **N.**, choose you, **N.**, again this day for my lawful husband, To have and to hold, from this day forward. For better, for worse, For richer, for poorer, In sickness and in health, To love and to cherish Until death do us part.

The Reception of the Consent

May the Lord in His kindness strengthen the consent you have declared once again before the Church, and graciously bring to fulfillment His blessing within you. What God joins together, let no one put asunder.

The Blessing and Giving of Rings

N., receive this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity
In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
And of the Holy Spirit.

N., receive this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity
In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
And of the Holy Spirit.