You don’t find the right partner, you become the right partner

"Marriage demands a process of growth; only in the course of time does a marriage reach its fullness." For the co-founder of the International Academy for Marital Spirituality (INTAMS), Aldegonde Brenninkmeijer, growing in relationships involves establishing a healing relationship with each other.

Twenty-five years ago, together with her husband, Aldegonde Brenninkmeijer founded the International Academy for Marital Spirituality (INTAMS). The time was ripe for an interdisciplinary reflection by priests and laity on the challenges of marriage in an increasingly complex world. Distancing itself from a narrow, moralizing approach, INTAMS focuses particularly on the lack of marriage spirituality.

Years of knowledge and know-how

After a quarter of a century, INTAMS can boast of a large experience in the field of marriage and the family. An enormous collection of books relating to marriage has been built up and has found a home in the library of the Theology Faculty of Leuven. During colloquiums and summer courses, insights and experiences have been exchanged, often with subsequent publications. Academic research in this area has received a boost and various bishops’ conferences have profited from their advice. Twenty of INTAMS' Board members recently collaborated on the volume *Das Herz spricht zum Herzen; Reflexionen über die Ehe*, Herder Verlag, 2012 (*Close to our Hearts: Personal Reflections on Marriage*, LIT Verlag, 2013). "The title refers to the motto John Henry Newman chose on becoming cardinal and communicates well what our aim has always been. What do experts, on the basis of their various disciplines and experience, want to pass on to young people who want to get married? If they should have the opportunity of speaking from 'heart to heart', what message would they give to them? INTAMS has always sought for a realistic and positive approach towards marriage and this resounds in the book," comments Brenninkmeijer.

The right partner

Young people wrestle with their search for their perfect match. How to find Mr or Mrs Right? "You don’t find the right partner; you have to become the right partner!", laughs Brenninkmeijer. "Marriage is the work of a life-time, a work of art that gradually takes on its own colours and contours. This demands a process of maturation: two personal histories, two backgrounds, two genders, come together and seek from that time on to write one common history; but there are so many
differences between partners! It demands creativity and imagination to handle this and to keep the love alive. Only in the course of time will fullness hopefully be achieved."

Cherishing the good moments

Brenninkmeijer advises young couples to articulate their aim in life and to work at it step by step. "We hold on, much too easily, to the negative experiences, but it is essential to cherish the good moments and to recall them again and again. Good communication is exceedingly important in order to overcome crises and disappointments. Such a respectful culture of communication is necessary from the beginning in order to reap the benefits later on. Alfons Vansteenwegen is completely right in saying that love is a verb."

Spirituality

Couples are so overwhelmed with challenges that a sound marriage preparation in which relational skills are developed is no superfluous luxury. Brenninkmeijer is however of the opinion that marriage spirituality is wanting. "Where do partners find the humus to ground their commitment to each other when life is so full of external factors and superficialities? Spiritual resources are needed that will promote durability. People are seeking for depth, meaning, and significance. The Church in her proclamation misses, in my opinion, opportunities for offering constructive thoughts for married life. In his sermons and texts, Benedict XVI gave much attention to the subject."

How does one experience God in one’s family? "Through love mutual", responds INTAMS’ founder. "Relationships demand great effort and we are not always able or prepared to give it. Recognizing our limitations and admitting that we hurt the other person are part of a realistic spirituality. Through their readiness to forgive and their capacity for loving, partners often come to transcend their own limitations. The success of a relationship or the mending of its brokenness reveals a love that goes beyond our own selves. It is precisely in this way that we can experience a transcendent power in our relationship." Growing in a relationship involves seeking for a healing relationship with each other. "Any wound needs first to be cleaned to be able to heal. It is important to first get rid of aggression so that the envisaged path can again come into focus. A domestic liturgy, through which you forgive one another and bless one another again, can do miracles. (Grand-)parents, who are able to talk through their conflicts and become reconciled with one another, can be an important role model for the (grand-)children," argues Brenninkmeijer.

The Domestic Church

This brings her to her favourite theme, that of the domestic church. This concept is a novel term used by the Second Vatican Council in speaking of the family. "In our book Close to our Hearts, Cardinal Godfried Danneels gives a clear explanation of
what is meant by this term. In 2010 INTAMS organized a colloquium on this subject of which the proceedings have recently been published in our book *The Household of God and Local Households*. The Council's perspective on marriage as a loving and living community was such a breath of fresh air in contrast to the former purely juridical-contract perspective on marriage. In my opinion, the domestic church is interwoven with the common priesthood and with the prophetic, priestly, and kingly task of all Christians. As an initial school of faith, prayer, and service, families are the living stones with which God's house is built. The family is the place where faith, hope, and love should be practised, so that peace and light can radiate to the whole world."

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