

The Cause of Marital Conflicts¹

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A few years ago I had an interesting conversation with the workman who was repairing my garage door. He needed to unburden to someone. He began the conversation something like this: “My wife and I have been married seven and a half years and all we do is fight, fight, fight.” I have had enough experience over the years to recognize that the marital conflict he was describing is more common than uncommon. I have often reflected that if I could see with the eyes of God as I drive through suburbia, I would observe mushroom clouds over many well maintained homes and lawns, because World War III was raging inside. Drawing on Fr. Dubay’s insight, this essay identifies four causes of this problem and the one cure that works.

1. Egoism

Egoism is the first and fundamental root of conflicts. No one has to develop an egocentric outlook and behavior. It comes as original equipment like a heart, brain and lungs. We are born utterly self-centered. When, for example, we were hungry as infants we wanted nourishment – now! There was no consideration given to mom’s fatigue. Our egocentric woundedness is the result of original sin. Combating it is the work of a lifetime.

Egoism is a multithreaded monster that has numerous manifestations. Let’s consider a few examples of self-centered thinking:

- “I won’t be patient with your ways of doing things and your faults, but I expect you to be patient with mine.”
- “You must accommodate my desires and preferences, but I need not accommodate yours.”
- You should understand my idiosyncrasies, but I need not understand yours.”
- When we disagree, I need not be gentle and amiable and open-minded, but you must be all of these.”²

When one or both parties have these or similar egotistic attitudes, it is inevitable that their relationship is marked with frequent conflicts and endless bickering. In the world of omnipotent egocentrism what predominates is: *my* aspirations, *my* reputation, *my* thoughts, *my* desires, *my* conveniences, *my* pleasure, *my* preferences, etc.

2. Illuminism

The second root of hurts and conflicts in marriage is illuminism. This term comes from the Latin word for light: *lumen*. The word is not common, but the malady is. It tags along with the egoism, and comes in two unpleasant forms: one purely natural and the

¹ The idea of this essay and much of its content comes from Fr. Thomas Dubay’s excellent little book, *Deep Conversion / Deep Prayer*, Chapter 9, “Conflicts and Conversion,” pp. 77-90.

² *Deep Conversion / Deep Prayer*, p. 79.

other pseudo-religious. At the purely natural level it is the conviction, one might be inclined to say myth, that my ideas, opinions and preferences are automatically superior to those of others. As a result, evidence to the contrary has little or no effect on the opinion of the illuminist. This is true even when the evidence supporting another viewpoint is objectively compelling. The illuminist's resistance to truth might be compared to BBs bouncing off a tank.

At the pseudo-religious level, the illuminist operates under the fallacy that he has a special insight from God that others lack. Therefore, he is always right and you (and anyone who disagrees with him) are wrong. One can present to him objective evidence from reason, Scripture, the teaching of the Church, and brilliant theologians, but all of that is merely wasted energy. He is deeply cemented in the mindset: "I know better and you are wrong." Ronald Knox wrote a 600-page study of this mindset³.

I once worked with a man who lived on a fantasy tower of perfection from which he hurled thunderbolts of criticism at his wife and son who could never hope to live up to his standards of perfection. After all, there was only room for one God in the narrow world of his mind, and he was it. Clearly, disagreements with an illuminist are unresolvable until he or she imbibes a substantial dose of humility, which is, after all, based on truth.

3. Lack of Perspective

A lack of perspective is the third cause of marital conflict. The person inflicted with this defect finds it very difficult to distinguish between the big things and the small things. As a result little things are often viewed as big things. Spouses can get into bitter and mean spirited arguments about almost nothing: a lack of tidiness, arriving late, or a minor complaint. I knew of a wife who constantly brought up an act which she judged was a grievous example of her husband's thoughtlessness. As they were coming out of a restaurant with another couple, she complained about the cold, so the husband hurried ahead to open and warm up the car. She was incensed at this thoughtlessness because she was left to follow behind with the other couple.

Here is a second example. A professional of my acquaintance wanted to reorganize his extensive client files. To accomplish this task he purchased fancy new file cabinets, which arrived on the afternoon of his departure for a two-week vacation. His devoted secretary, who was also scheduled to be on vacation, spent ten hours a day for the next two weeks reorganizing the entire office including the client files. On the day the great man returned from his vacation, he exploded in anger because she had used 11/2" tabs for each file and not 2" tabs. Here was a man who could not distinguish between the big and the small things. Oh, by the way, he never before expressed the intention of using 2" tabs.

³ *Enthusiasm.*

The issue in marriage is not that spouses have no need to correct small faults. Of course they do. But what is a minor fault compared with the biggie, namely, that they genuinely love each other in their disagreements and they are gentle and loving in their discussion of them.

4. One Mind

The final cause of suffering and conflict in marriage comes from the lack of one mind. In other words they do not have a shared vision about the main issues of life: God, religion, principles of morality, how to handle money and finances, raising of children, and what real love is or is not. When spouses are at odds about these fundamentals, their life together is likely to be a continual conflict.

I know a man who suffered a painful divorce and endured a bitter custody battle to gain the full custody of the children. On one occasion, he was complaining to his attorney about the harmful things the children's mother was doing. The attorney quipped: "Well, you're the dummy that married her!" They both had a good laugh. However, on the drive home the man thought, "The lawyer's right. I am the dummy that married someone with whom I have very little in common. Why did I make such a bad decision?" This thought changed his life. Instead of blaming his wife for the disaster of their marriage, he took responsibility for himself. The children were the beneficiaries of dad's changed attitude and the armistice that followed, because it takes two people to fight.

The Solution

Competent counseling can help with each of these issues, but these four harmful characteristics that many of us share in different ways need something that skilled therapy is incapable of giving. What is ultimately needed is a radical conversion that supplants the ego with genuine love for God that overflows into all our other relationships, especially with our spouse and children. As long as the fundamental equation in a marriage relationship is him over his selfish ego plus her over her selfish ego, conflict and unhappiness will be an ever-present reality.

During the lovely marriage ceremony I attended last week the following verse from the Song of Songs was read, "My beloved is mine and I am his" (Song 2:16a). I feel confident that similar sentiments were voiced at one time by couples whose marriages ended in divorce. We would expect that a husband who claims he loves his wife would prove it in the minor details of daily life as well as the major ones. We entertain similar expectations of the wife who says she loves her husband. Experience proves otherwise. We often discover that people who do in fact love each other to some degree choose not to love each other completely.

The same is true in our relationship with God, for there is often a great gap between what we say to God in our devotions and our actual performance. We may tell God we love him with our whole heart, but a short time later a divided heart reveals something quite different. The same is true in marriage. In fact it is my experience that no one

loves his spouse or children more than he or she loves God. In either case we are greatly attached to our lesser faults, called theologically – venial sins.⁴ Learning to love, which requires self-sacrifice and commitment, is the great challenge we all face to become the men and women we are capable of becoming. That is why God-centered marriages work and me-centered marriages fail.

⁴ For the biblical distinction between deadly (mortal, grave) sins and those sins that are not deadly (venial) see: 1 Jn 5:16-17.