

TENDERNESS IN MARRIAGE

Adapted from a chapter of Before Marriage and After Marriage by Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss

“Tenderness” is a word we associate with helplessness. You feel tender toward a little baby who could easily be hurt, or to someone aged or sick or crippled. We can be tender toward certain animals who need care. We don’t tend to think of feeling this way toward another human being, who is healthy and strong and who seems perfectly capable of taking care of him or herself. Yet, we are very tender when we first fall in love. The love itself seems fragile, something to be treated with care. The partner’s feelings are cared for, tenderly. But when we get used to each other, there is a tendency for us to treat this other grown human being more roughly. We demand our own rights and expect the other person to protect his or her rights.

Love Means Taking a Risk

Far too many marriages are based on the kind of friendship that high school boys have. There’s a rigid code of decency, and each boy is expected to keep it. The code is based on fairness, every person gets an equal share of benefits. Each is supposed to look out for himself and see to it that he doesn’t get unfair treatment. He will be aggressive about protecting himself, guarding his freedom and not letting someone else get him to do what he doesn’t feel like doing. When these rules are kept, the friendship is a good thing.

Is this the kind of friendship we should seek in marriage? Many couples might do this. They make marriage into a partnership where each person puts in “x” amount of effort. Each one accommodates, but only to a point, and each one is guaranteed a certain amount of freedom (a night out with the boys or the ability to spend a certain amount of money each week). If things are going fine, then the couple is very loving. But if a partner steps over the bounds, then the other one stands up for him or herself, and they have a fight on their hands.

It is easy to slip into a pattern like this because it seems natural. After all, we’ve all grown up defending and standing up for ourselves. Without thinking we drift into doing it with our partners—only half trusting them to love us. This is *not* the kind of ideal marriage love the Lord is offering. Love means taking a risk! It means being willing to care for the other person’s needs more than our own “rights,” giving without demanding something in return, losing unnecessary pride in the commitment of total love. When you do these things, you take a chance on getting hurt, but if you’ve married someone you love, you really aren’t taking much of a chance in the long run.

The problem with the “code” kind of marriage is our proprium or selfish loves—our pride and our wants. When we don’t get what we want, we tend to harbor grudges and to feed on them and turn them over and over in our thoughts. This makes us feel hard, even harsh toward someone we love. Yet tenderness in marriage is a possible, precious ideal. It can seem to be a weakness. When you feel tender you fear people might laugh at you. When you feel softness toward a person, you sometimes cover it up in case it makes you too vulnerable. But remember: You have to take a risk sometimes in order to gain something precious.

The Importance of Trust

Heavenly conjugal love exists when a man, together with his wife whom he loves most tenderly, and with his children, lives content in the Lord. From this he has in this world an inward pleasantness, and in the other life heavenly joy (*Arcana Coelestia* 5051).

This quote from the Heavenly Doctrine of the New Church is talking about the conjugal or true marriage love people can have *in this world*. It's speaking about how a couple feels about each other year after year in this world. This tender love softens their hearts toward each other, and in time develops a complete trust and a wish to do every good thing for the other person (see *Conjugal Love* 180). Why? Because trust comes when you treat someone's feelings gently, not harshly, and honestly, not unfairly. This is the way love ought to be. Through tenderness we can escape from guarding our rights, insisting on fair play and protecting our freedom, into a love which doesn't feel the need to protect its own dignity.

The Gift of Tenderness

Tenderness is a gift of the Lord to women, and a gift of women to men. The Heavenly Doctrine teaches that "As woman is beautiful, so she is tender; and as she is tender, so she has the ability to perceive the delights of conjugal love." Because she can do this, she is the one who guards the happiness of the couple, fostering love and inmost friendship. In *Conjugal Love* 56 we are told that some husbands in heaven were talking about how their wives made their feelings more gentle. When the host's wife came into the room and invited him to speak, her presence softened the tone of his voice. "The life of wisdom from his wife was sensed in his speech; for her love was in the tone of his voice." Think about this. The man was talking; it was his voice. But her love softened its tone, and her love gave life to his thoughts. This is how conjugal love produces tenderness in men. It softens them from within, and they discover what it is to be loving.

Protecting Fragile States

Here is another reason for the importance of tenderness in marriage. In the internal sense of the Word, "tender" refers to loves that are just beginning to grow. These loves are fragile, easily hurt or destroyed (*Arcana Coelestia* 4377). When our good loves are growing, they are easily hurt at first. Let's look at a few examples. A couple has just had a child. They want very much to be good parents, but they are uncertain how to do things right. This is a time for being gentle with each other as each of them tries to care for the baby. It is not a time to be finding fault with everything. In another example, a husband loses a job and knows in his heart that he was not able to do it. He's fighting hard to be fair to his ex-boss and not try to put the blame for his failure onto someone else. His wife needs to be very tender with him, understanding his honesty and wish to face up to reality. If he finds excuses, he might not succeed next time. If he faces the truth, he can go forward with strength and integrity. These growing feelings must be treated with tenderness. Finally, a wife is trying hard to treat both her children fairly, even though one of them is harder to handle than the other. It would be so easy for her husband to lecture her about it. That could hurt her and make her feel unfair (which she is possibly secretly feeling anyway). Or he could assume that she is trying and encourage her, dealing gently with her feelings.

Treasuring Tender States

Now let's look at some examples of beautiful loves and how to deal gently with them. The first Christmas a couple spends together is a wonderful memory. Take time to enjoy it. Make sure that you sense how happy the other person is and share in that happiness. When a husband holds his first child he's often quite nervous—proud and happy, but unsure of himself. A wife should know how he's feeling and help to make that feeling better, to share in it. It would be easy to laugh or joke, and miss these moments, but they are precious and should be treasured. There are times in all married people's lives when they look across a room and feel very close to each other. Make sure those moments linger. If you treat them tenderly, they'll grow. If you treat them carelessly or even harshly, they'll wither up and die like a tender plant that got scorched.

Guarding Against Harshness

Let's say you feel tired and worn out and you come home and your spouse is excited about something. Here's a moment when you both need to be tender or considerate. Your partner should sense your tiredness and be willing to give you some extra help and maybe a quiet moment to recuperate. And you should share in your spouse's excitement so he or she doesn't feel that this special moment was spoiled. When people are harsh to each other, then tender feelings are hurt. What happens then is that they shrivel up and form a protective layer against further hurt—like a cut that forms a scab as a protection from rough treatment. We have to try not to let this happen, or we are harsh, to say we are sorry and to mean it.

Perhaps the most difficult thing in life is to admit, in a moment of anger, that anger is wrong. Being able to acknowledge this will come slowly. But we are asked, when our hearts feel hardened toward our partners, to look at that person, whom we love above all others, and force ourselves to admit that we love him or her, that our anger is wrong. Then we must resist the temptation to hurt the other person, and pray and work for the return of tenderness. Of course, this is hard, but it is not impossible. It is hard because hell fights against tender love between married partners more than against any other feeling, and it glories in combat and strife in a home. But in our moments of tender love, we know that this can be done, and that for the sake of a love which softens us eternally, the effort to overcome our anger and to apologize are worth making. They are worth it, because, no matter who is right and who is wrong in any conflict, giving in to anger or irritation is really being untrue to our love. For what married couple does not feel, many times too deeply for words, that their greatest happiness will come when they will never hurt each other again? And the Lord promises that it can be so, because it is from Him that love truly conjugal, with its tenderness, flows into the heart of a married couple.

Sharing Our Joys

It is in the communion, the sharing of growing joys that heavenly happiness is felt. A couple can build happy memories and a sense of caring for each other's deepest feelings until there's nothing they would not share. As the Heavenly Doctrine puts it, "They dwell together in all things of life, even to the inmost ones" (*Arcana Coelestia* 2732). That beautiful inward sharing is the result of showing kindness and consideration for all a loved one's feelings. It comes from a day-by-day commitment to be tender with one another.