

What is Proper for Courting?

A boy chases a girl until she catches him/But this is one thing he should never see
and the love for her man makes a woman understand/and that's the way love should be

woman helping man/underneath God's plan
woman helping man/and man protecting her the best he can
--Mark Charron, "Woman Helping Man"

There is a question today about what is proper in dating. Of course, there are as many aspects to dating as there are people dating, and a similar number of opinions. But what does our faith teach us about dating? Certainly, we cannot find a direct answer to this question because dating is actually a relatively new phenomenon. Arranged marriages have been the norm for most of man's history, and it is still common in much of the world today. But we can learn from our faith what the roles of a man and woman are, and how to apply these roles to the specific act of courting. I'm certainly not going to come up with an endless list of computer-like "if-then statements," but I am going to try to identify key points each party should consider, many of which I suspect most people didn't normally think about as being important to the matter.

How one should, or ought, to act is always a matter of morality. Not every choice one makes in life needs to carry the weight of a sin or virtue (which is where Civil and Ecclesiastical Law comes in, see below), but the decision-making process is the same. As a result, while the Catechism of the Catholic Church generally looks at morality in terms of sin and virtue, I believe the logic behind the Church's teachings can apply to individual choices on what is "best" for them as well. Furthermore, by following the intent, as opposed to the letter, of the law, I can use this paper to reach out to non-Catholics as well.

There is one last thing I want to address before I start in detail, and that is the scope of this paper. I am specifically going to be talking about the murky grey area of courting. Any choice that is clearly "right or wrong" ought to be acted on accordingly without any instruction from me or this paper. By ignoring the "no brainers" on how to act, I am able to greatly simplify a topic that is still going to be rather complex. What I am presenting here is primarily for two purposes. The first purpose is to help provide relief to situations that one may assume are wrong, yet are hard to understand why they are wrong. Perhaps there is good reason for calling something improper, perhaps not. How can one decide in such situations? The second purpose is to provide a way to deal with the myriad of situations that no cultural norm (no matter how sophisticated it may be) can address.

To begin with, let me start with the four moral laws. Divine Law is law commanded by God, and it must always be obeyed. There are numerous commandments throughout the Bible. Most of the commandments will not apply to this topic, and those that do generally fall into the category of being "clearly right or wrong." Again, I am not writing this to discuss the moral imperatives that everyone should already know, but rather how to act in "good faith" in odd situations. However, the second greatest commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself," (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:39 and Mark 12:31) is one commandment we ought to consider when dating. While courting, a man and woman should treat each other as if they were reflections of themselves. But there are many people who don't know how to love themselves. Some people are conceited (often, but mistakenly, described as "loving

oneself too much," which is not possible with real love), and some people actually hate themselves. But even for most people, an improvement in one's own self-love is possible. We all have our fears, doubts and insecurities. I suggest learning about what love really is. My paper "The Holy Trinity of Apologetics" briefly covers this matter, while C.S. Lewis's book *The Four Loves* does so in detail. I recommend the gentle reader to research either of these resources or a similar one, even if one is comfortable with oneself. In any case, this commandment makes it clear that we ought to love ourselves properly before engaging in any relationship.

The second law is Revealed Law, and I think we have quite a treasure trove for our topic to be found in the Bible. Throughout the paper, I will quote many passages from scripture, and reference some others. While I think there is enough scripture here to help my Protestant brethren, I would recommend that the gentle reader have a Catholic Bible available. The books of Tobit, Sirac (which is considered especially valuable, although not inspired, by most Protestant scholars) and Wisdom are rich with guidance. After all, we are talking about morality here, not doctrine. Good advice is good advice, no matter what its source.

Next, we need to address Natural Law. What one needs to know about Natural Law is that it is NOT saying that what happens in nature is always good. CCC #1955 states that Natural Law does not get its name because it is "in reference to the nature of irrational beings, but because reason which decrees it properly belongs to human nature." Generally speaking, when one uses the four cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude, also discussed in detail in "The Holy Trinity of Apologetics"), one is utilizing Natural Law. Most of this paper is to provide relevant materials and resources that one can use when applying Natural Law to one's specific situation. This is the law that, in light of Revealed Law, will help one act correctly while dating.

Finally, we have Civil and Ecclesiastical Law. These laws are designed for the smooth operations of whatever organization the laws are made for. They set standards that need to be kept for the organization to be efficient. These laws are valuable mainly for guiding behaviors in an economical and/or safe manner. The only inherent "good or evil" these laws have is that it would be wrong to not have them. For example, there is no moral superiority for the U.S. having drivers on the right side of the road over England, where drivers are on the left side. It does not matter which side of the road drivers are on, but they need to be on the same side. Civil and Ecclesiastical Law goes a long way in defining what is "clearly right or wrong," and ought to be obeyed. However, they are often not specific enough for the grey areas that we are talking about in this paper.

So, for the scope of this paper, we find that Natural Law, as seen in the light of Revealed Law, is what we ought to be primarily concerned with. But before I completely move past the laws, I want to talk a little about culture. While culture is not the same as Civil and Ecclesiastical Law, it fills a very similar role. Indeed, the biggest difference is that Civil and Ecclesiastical Law is formal, whereas cultural norms are traditional. While one need not have to obey cultural norms, one ought to go against them *only* if there are compelling reasons to do so, and after an honest examination of conscience.

Culture and tradition play a major role in deciding what is and is not appropriate in a relationship. As cultural norms can vary greatly even among communities that are in close proximity, there is no point in holding any given standard as being better or worse than another, as conditions may be different someplace else. There is, however, value in understanding the benefits and limitations that any given custom may have. There are two benefits in particular that ought to be considered for courting. The first is that the guesswork of a relationship is greatly reduced, which gives a certain freedom to all those concerned. If it is customary for a boy to ask a girl for a date, and the boy never

asks, then the girl can safely assume that either the boy is not interested, or that he is not man enough for a serious relationship anyway. She can therefore put him out of her mind and pursue more worthwhile projects. And since culture provides a set of standards for the community to live by, one can judge the moral character of another by how well they abide by the societal norm. This isn't to say that small infractions are a "deal breaker," but habitual and/or serious infractions say a lot about who this person really is, as does any excessive display of contempt for one's culture as a whole.

There are also some disadvantages to cultural norms as well, and sometimes the culture needs to be ignored. To begin with, I would argue that moral considerations will always trump societal norms (after all, "culture" is not a law). Still, this should be rare in courting. Another consideration is where cultures are different. Misunderstandings of expectations on both sides can create a huge barrier that blocks communication, but it only takes a little humility to tear that barrier down. With all that being said, let us now begin to explore what Revealed Law has to tell us.

The elegant poetry found in Genesis 2:18 ("The Lord God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone.'") and Genesis 2:23-24 ("This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called 'woman' for out of 'man' this one has been taken. That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.") clearly shows that man and woman were meant to be one. While the sexual and marital aspects of these verses are both obvious and thoroughly discussed in Christian literature, I propose that to share "one body" also suggests sharing "one will." I feel there is quite a bit to support this assertion on my part. The Church is the bride of God, Jesus is head of the Church, and we are the body of the Church. Jesus tells us that "I came down from Heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me." (John 6:39) The will of Jesus is that of the Father. The bride of God will therefore have the will of God with Jesus as its head. It is by God's revelation that husband and wife were intended to be of the same will. But perhaps the most obvious scriptural quote supporting this is "Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste, and no town or house divided against itself will stand." (Matthew 12:25) If the husband and wife are of opposing wills, then the marriage will fail. Note that having one will does not mean they share the same consciousness, but rather that their consciousnesses are in accord with each other. The love of *philia* (friendship) plays a big part in this.

I would also like to promote the idea that the purpose of having both man and woman was to help each other. God said that it was "not good" for man to be alone. This is an extremely interesting comment, as it is the only time God described something as being "not good" about His creation (Genesis 1-2). This begs the question, why is it not good? I would like to suggest that, at least in part, the purpose of woman was to help man do things that only a human could otherwise do. While I think that is a fairly reasonable and uncontroversial position, it always seems there is someone who is not satisfied with a reasonable position. So let me propose that love was the reason. Love is a unifying force, and so when the scripture says "two ... become one," we have a Divine Command for man and woman to love each other. Of course, sexual intercourse is often suggested here, but one must also remember that this was before the two of them had "knowledge." The Bible often uses "knowledge" (and related words) as an euphemism for sexual intercourse, and uses it so often that a strong case can be made that man and woman were still virgins before eating the forbidden fruit. But my proposal neither confirms nor denies sexual intercourse before the Fall, only that there is evidence that the union of love was more than just *eros*.

So, if we assume this union is, at least in part, a form of love, then we can look at each of the four loves and try to see how each fits into this picture. Charity (*agape*) is loving the unlovable, and this seems misplaced. Man and woman were still "good," so there was nothing inherently unlovable about either of them (at least at first, I'll come back to this point soon). Passion (*eros*) may certainly

have been there, even without sex. We clearly see man's joy at the discovery of woman (Genesis 2:23). But while eros probably did exist, eros is a one-way love, and so it seems too "selfish" to assume this is what all the excitement was about. Affection (storge) is certainly possible, but man already had animals for such a love to exist, so woman was not needed for this one. This leaves friendship (philia), which is two-way love, and it grows from having common interests. We see explicitly in Genesis 1:28 that they both had the same commandment to "be fertile and multiply; fill the Earth and subdue it. Have dominion over all the [animals]." These are common interests they have, and they come from their entire purpose of being. Philia is also the love that desires to grow in number, so it is the love that encourages the pro-creation commanded by God. This *is* something that Man clearly needed Woman for. And the command to subdue the Earth is unique to man and woman, something Man could not share with other animals. So the Biblical evidence points to the conclusion that the love Man and Woman had was primarily philia. And since they had common interests, having their wills in accordance with each other would have been both desirable and expected. Since they were both still "good" at this time, their wills should have been in perfect accord. There is one common interest in particular that I want to build on, and that is the common interest they had in each other, or at least *should* have had in each other. Now, I realize that I previously dismissed agape earlier, but, through friendship, the love of charity could now be manifested between them by watching out for each other. Only, something happened and they didn't act charitably toward to each other. This suggests their wills were out of accordance *before* eating the fruit, which is explained by the serpent tempting woman.

Specifically, we see in Genesis 3:6 that woman not only acted independently of man, but also against her own self-interest. Man is said to have been with her. Out of concern for her well-being, he ought to have acted through charity and tried talking her out of it (in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, man chose to eat the fruit out of solidarity, so she would not face exile alone -- this is arguably charity, but a corrupted version of it). After she acted independently of man, she imposed her will over man by offering him the fruit as well. By doing so, she became an authority figure to man, and man showed himself to be all too ready to forsake the authority of God for hers -- "The woman whom you put here with me -- she gave me fruit from the tree." (Genesis 3:12) When these passages are seen this way, God's reaction to it becomes rather interesting in ways most people don't seem to consider.

I've often thought that calling God's reaction a "curse" is overstated. To call something a curse suggests that certain bad things would *not* have happened if the curse was not spoken, or if some higher power did not intervene. But everything said in the "curse" is the logical conclusion of mankind's sin. As mankind had dominion over the world as well as himself, it should come as no surprise that the world became corrupted along with mankind. And, by being so corrupted, it should come as no surprise that the world became a harsh place for mankind to live in. But for this paper, the part of the curse that matters the most is the curse placed on woman's relationship to man -- "Your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Genesis 3:16)

The traditional marital roles of male and female, so beautifully summarized in Ephesians 5:21-32, is not really a curse, but rather God's first corrective method to save us from our wretched state. Women are to obey men because of their tendency to exceed authority. Man is to cherish woman (and, by extension, provide woman the protection the first man failed to do) because his natural tendency is to shirk responsibility. To claim one gender is better or worse than the other misses the whole point of why God established the marriage relationship the way He did. Both genders need to improve themselves, and Biblical marriage is structured so both parties can help the other with their own inherent weaknesses. The Biblical model of a healthy marriage is actually a life-long therapy session. So, with this insight into morality, and a foundation laid concerning man's and woman's roles in a romantic relationship, we can now move forward to some specifics about courting.

In Biblical times, indeed until relatively recently, most marriages were arranged, although there is lots of evidence that young ladies usually had a say in who their potential husbands were (contrary to what is being taught today about ancient times). But while the young lady may have had a say, she still did not make the decision. The would-be suitor would have to be acceptable to the girl's family to have a chance to marry her. Although we now live in a culture where parental consent is not necessary, I still think we can learn a lesson here. During a courtship, a man ought to act in a manner he thinks would be pleasing to his future wife's parents, and a woman ought to seek a man she thinks would be acceptable to her parents. There are those who, for one tragic reason or another, either do not know this answer, or have a family so dysfunctional that this advice is not helpful. Again, we can turn to the Bible for help here.

Granted, this help can be difficult to find as its writers were more acquainted with the concept of arranged marriages than with dating. Indeed, Jews and Christians ourselves are "wed" to God through an arranged marriage, with Abraham consenting to the marriage. Still, if one looks, one can find a wealth of helpful advice here. The books of Proverbs and Sirac (in the Catholic Bible) have a lot to say to a young man on what to look for and what to avoid in a wife. This is also helpful for a young woman to know, as she can use this information to groom and present herself in a manner attractive to a man. Ruth is a good model for young ladies, and Tobias (from the book of Tobit, also in the Catholic Bible) is an excellent model for young men. The Song of Songs (often called Song of Solomon in Protestant Bibles) is as much a courtship as it is a honeymoon. Finally, if we consider Jesus as the bridegroom, then all four Gospels have something to teach the young man. If we consider the Church as the bride, then the Epistles have something to teach the young lady. Still, I know that hermeneutics are difficult for even the most learned scholar, so here are some points I would like to bring out.

Without a doubt, the man is to take some kind of lead. As his weakness is to defer authority to others, he needs to start the relationship off right by taking the initiative. When Tobias heard that a woman suitable to be his bride lived near where his father was sending him, he resolved to make the marriage happen no matter what the danger. Boaz showed Ruth obvious favoritism despite the cultural and economic differences between them. Jesus not only came into the world to find his bride, He traveled all over the Holy Land until His passion in doing so.

But the women were by no means passive spectators. Sara remained at the side of Tobias, resolved to join him in whatever fate would come his way. Ruth risked great scandal to let Boaz know he could take her as a wife. The Bride of Solomon sought out her lover when he didn't return (Song of Songs 3:1-3). The Epistles all exhort the Church to respond to the beckoning of Jesus.

And I think we can find lessons that can be found for both parties when looking at the methods of Jesus. Jesus did not walk up to people and call Himself God. He began by letting his actions speak for themselves. As time moved on, He revealed Himself more and more. While Jesus certainly did stand apart from the crowd even at the beginning (consider the Temple incident at age twelve, Luke 2:42, 47), the parts of Him that mattered the most, the parts that made Him the perfect bridegroom, took time to be revealed. Those that rejected Him immediately continued to reject Him. While not all those who accepted Him at first stayed with Him, all those who did stay with Him accepted Him from the beginning. It is only in Nicodemus where we might find a possible exception here. But while it appears he wasn't sure whether or not to accept Jesus at first, neither did he outright reject Jesus. In all cases, those who stayed with Jesus found something that interested them, and it grew over time. While some initially accepted Jesus in a bigger way than others, whatever it was that first caught their attention turned out to be nothing compared with what came at the end. I believe courting should

follow a similar pattern. Not every woman will answer a man's effort to begin a courtship, and most of those that do will eventually fall away. But for the one who stays, the end should be beyond what either had imagined at first.

I would also point out just how critical it was for Jesus to have help in his courtship, especially from the women. Even if we ignore His childhood and His dependence on His earthly parents during that time, it is clear that He needed help. Most notably, Jesus could only perform miracles with the help of others. Jesus did not create bread and fish, He multiplied what someone else had brought. Jesus could not heal without the faith of the petitioner (this limitation was explicitly claimed in Mark 6:4-6). And I would propose that women played a huge part in this. We see that His mother never left his side. It was a woman (presumably Mary Magdalene), not the hosting pharisee, who welcomed Jesus to dinner (Luke 7:37-38). Mary Magdalene, and her siblings Martha and Lazarus, funded much of Jesus's ministry. If the perfect suitor with the perfect courtship could not successfully woo the would-be bride without the bride's help, then how much more do mere men need help?

Next, I want to look at Jesus and the hemorrhaging woman (Matthew 9:20-22, Mark 5:25-34 and Luke 8:43-48), and note how it revised the roles of Boaz and Ruth. We see Jesus presenting an opportunity, and the woman embracing it at great risk to her already low social standing. Boaz and Jesus both allowed an opportunity, no matter how small and unlikely, for the women to respond. They can both be said to have taken the initiative (albeit a small one). But neither Ruth nor the hemorrhaging woman waited for everything to be perfect. Instead, they made the most of what was offered by good men. Still, I think the most beautiful example was the woman at the well in a Samaritan town (John 4:1-42). Through her actions, she delivered the entire town as a bride for Jesus.

Now I would like to briefly talk about "[Tying] up heavy burdens and [laying] them on people's shoulders, but ... not lift a finger to move them." Matthew 23:4 When the man does take the lead, it becomes the woman's responsibility to respond. If the woman does not respond, the man should not place a heavy burden on himself by constantly reaching out, and instead he ought to move on with his life. The woman should not place a heavy burden by being too specific in what type of initiative she expects to see. If there is an obvious attempt by the man, she ought to treat it as such. Furthermore, while a man ought to work to be the man the woman he is courting deserves to have as a husband, he is placing a heavy burden upon himself if he tries to be a man he can't be. Humility is critical for both parties.

Revisiting "Your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall be your master," (Genesis 3:16) , a woman must never presume to look at real character flaws of the man as something to be "fixed." A woman must accept that the problems are either going to be "deal breakers," or be prepared to accept them as part of her new life. A woman should not reject a suitor simply because there is no instant attraction. When arranged marriages were discarded so the woman could decide for herself who to marry, courting became the institution where she could find out *over time* if he was a good match. Take advantage of it. Do not place unrealistic expectations (either in quality or quantity) on a potential suitor based on first impressions. Take time to know the man, and offer reasonable assistance throughout the courtship when appropriate. This was the relationship between Jesus and His followers, and a godly man and woman should be expected to do likewise.

As part of his therapy for man not protecting his woman from the serpent in the garden, man is now commanded to be responsible for defending the woman ever after. This includes her honor and reputation. But the woman still ought not put the man in a position to test him (remember, woman's job is to help man, not torment him). If Jesus needed help in His perfection, men need help in our

wretchedness. This is not an excuse for a man's bad behavior (remember, the woman should decide to either accept behavior or reject the suitor), but an acknowledgment that no potential suitor, no matter how hard he tries, can do everything right. Just as Sara stayed with Tobias for his trial, and as the women stayed with Jesus during the crucifixion, a woman should not abandon a good man for the things he legitimately struggles with, but rather help where she can. Even if the only help she can give is companionship.

Now that some specific examples of Revealed Law are mentioned, let us finish this paper by going over the cardinal virtues. Remember, no computer-like "if/then statement" sheet can ever account for every possible contingency, and it would be too massive a document to be used even if one were attempted. Instead, prudence should be used to analyze the situation as it exists, come up with various options, and the likely outcomes of each option. Temperance should judge each option against both Biblical examples of courting and the cultural norms of where one lives. Justice should be considered based on the burden one places on the other party, and how much help ought to be provided. And of course, fortitude is needed here, as one should expect that most of one's efforts are going to fail.

I hope the gentle reader can find something of value in these brief reflections. I offer them humbly, and I know full well that no two relationships are the same. I do not pretend to have a "silver bullet" here to solve all problems, but I offer what I think is a different point of view to the age-old problem of relationships. No one knows one's situation better than the one living it, so take charge of the situation and approach it with a little thought inspired by the Word of God.

Raymond Mulholland
Original Publication Date: 30 May 2024