



Marriage is about Making Space

Kevin Hargaden, director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, writes of different aspects of the marriage relationship, with an emphasis on how we change over the years.

2022 may yet turn out to be the year with the most weddings in the history of Ireland. With many nuptials delayed by the pandemic, the total figure could top 35,000. I know of one couple who have now set their fifth date after lockdowns and COVID-19 interrupted four previous attempts to become a Mr and Mrs.

While there are some statistics to suggest that marriage is in decline in the Western world, weddings remain almost ever-present in our popular culture. The plots of TV shows, movies, and novels often rotate around a wedding day, and many people are raised to believe that they will not be fulfilled until they are wed.

Marriage is depicted so often in romantic and even sentimental terms. We have ideas about 'love at first sight' or finding our 'soulmates' that suggest falling in love is something that happens to you, as against a project you gradually build in partnership with another. This somewhat unreal-



istic vision of marriage can cause a lot of heartache because when the mundane reality of sharing your life with someone else hits home, it can be a shock.

I had a teacher once who advised, 'You always marry the wrong person.' When he said this, he wasn't trying to warn people off marriage, but to push back against overly romantic and sentimental ideas. We see this very clearly in the preoccupation with the wedding day. In a survey conducted the year before the pandemic, it was discovered the average amount of money spent on Irish wedding celebrations was €25,000. If you are spending the guts of a deposit on a house on a single party, it is inevitable



that it would become significant. The wedding day should be an excuse to gather loved ones together and toast the good health of the couple!

My teacher's little slogan has always seemed wise to me because of how he encourages engaged couples to remember that every day after the wedding is just as important. People change. Regardless of whether you marry when very young or a little older, after a few years you won't quite be the same person you were when you stood before your friends and family and vowed, 'I do!'

This is especially true if we consider marriage from a Christian perspective. If the marriage is healthy and two people involved are eager to listen

to one another, care for each other and say sorry quickly when they have made mistakes, then that experience of safe, consistent love cannot help but prompt change and growth. This has been my experience of marriage: I am a different person because of the love my wife has shown and continues to show me. We are at our best when we are loved.

This, then, is what my teacher meant: we always marry the wrong person if we think the person we are marrying is going to be the person we are married to for the rest of our life. They will change, and we will change. Marriage becomes impossible if we are stuck with a static, sentimental ideal forged on the wedding day.

One of the reasons why people are sometimes critical of marriage is that they think committing to one person alone for the rest of your life is a commitment to boring repetition, to eventual relational tedium. This perspective is usually presented as hard-won realism, but it in fact relies on the same sentimental fantasy as the average rom-com movie. In reality, to do marriage well is to commit to the constant adaptation of changed circumstances and evolving characters. It is a collaborative project in generously making space for the other.

I asked one of those couples who have been waiting for their wedding what they were most looking forward to. Without hesitation, they said, 'The task of falling in love with each other for the rest of our lives.' That's a much better vision of marriage than is often presented in our society. 💕