

FALLING IN LOVE ... FINDING GOD



Marriage and the Spiritual
Exercises of St. Ignatius
of Loyola

M. Bridget Brennan and Jerome L. Shen

About *Falling in Love... Finding God*

The theme and substance of *Falling in Love... Finding God* is the integration of our marital journey to union with each other and our spiritual journey to union with God. Specifically, we integrate the Four Weeks of the Spiritual Exercises with the four Stages of marital growth and show that the spiritual journey of the Exercises is the same as the journey of married love. Reading the book and doing and sharing the reflection questions will lead couples to recognize that they are living holy lives of love and intimacy and inspire them to desire even deeper intimacy.

Using the insights and stories from our 40+ years of our journey, we lead couples to find love, intimacy, and God in their experiences. Along the way, we offer practical marriage tools such as communication and conflict resolution as well Ignatian spirituality tools such as Discernment and Examen. This book also offers encouragement for couple to reach out to others (mission).

And with the grace of the Holy Spirit, we hope that our readers will know and experience the following:

- how the conscious living of marriage and spirituality can reveal God in our daily, ordinary lives, and impact everything that we do;
- how the blending of head and heart can allow us to live our marriage with joy, depth, and authenticity;
- how using Scripture leads us to discover how the Word of God speaks to us as married couples;
- how to use prayer and meditation guided by the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius;
- how the discernment process will lead to mutually desirable choices and give us the energy and freedom to implement the discernment;
- how marriage expands our world view;
- how to live an integrated whole life rather than juggling separate spiritual, marriage, family, work, and individual lives.

Endorsements

Tim and Sue Muldoon

Jerome L. Shen and M. Bridget Brennan have done a great service: inviting those who are married or to-be-married to an experience of Saint Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises. Those who have been married a long time understand how the relationship with a spouse is the primary experience of vocational life, and as such it is the primary lens through which we come to understand the sacramental presence of God. Shen and Brennan call us to reflect on that vocation, drawing on their many years of ministry to the married and their deep knowledge of the Spiritual Exercises. We warmly recommend this book both to those who have seen many seasons of married life, and to those yet to embark on this beautiful vocation. Let them be your guides to an experience of the living God, through a reflective pilgrimage in the company of your beloved.

Tim and Sue Muldoon, authors of *Six Sacred Rules for Familie*, *The Discerning Parent: An Ignatian Guide to Raising Your Teenager*, and other books.

Dr. Ann M. Garrido

I have known Jerry and Bridget now for close to twenty years, as we both share a common Jesuit parish home. In addition to their professional careers and parenting two remarkable sons, they have always dedicated a significant portion of their time to lifting up the sacrament of marriage in our church—through their writing and speaking, their leadership in pre-engagement counseling and marriage preparation, and marriage enrichment programs. They are a constant witness to the power of the sacrament to heal and bridge and grow not only persons but our wider world.

In this book, they propose to highlight the particular link that they have discovered between the stages of married life and the Ignatian exercises—a link, which to my knowledge, has not been made before in such an explicit way. The reflection and discussion questions they offer can help other couples to also discover the power of an Ignatian framework for developing in their own marriages.

One of the things I appreciate most in Bridget and Jerry's writing is their vulnerability. Their stories illumine the multiple, daily ways in which we have a choice to turn toward or away from one another. And they show how discernment is just as much a part of the marital vocation as it is a priestly or religious vocation. Bridget and Jerry are pioneers in exploring what Ignatian spirituality looks like when embraced wholeheartedly in the lay life.

Dr. Ann M. Garrido, Associate Professor, Aquinas Institute of Theology, Author, *Redeeming Administration* (2013) and *Redeeming Conflict* (2016)

James Martin, SJ

It is surprising that so little has been written on marriage from the Ignatian point of view. Surprising because Ignatius's inviting and accessible spirituality, which speaks of how to love freely, how to center oneself in Christ and how to make good decisions, is a natural fit for couples longing to lead loving lives. In their new book, this husband and wife team provide a wonderful introduction for how to incorporate Ignatian spirituality into the married life. In doing so they have done a great service to married couples, and, therefore, to the church.

James Martin, SJ, author of *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything; Jesus: A Pilgrimage; Becoming Who you are* and many other books.

John Padberg, S.J.

Here is an insightful, imaginative, personal and practical book with a high ambition that it succeeds in fulfilling.

The husband and wife co-authors want to describe their twofold growth in intimacy with God and with each other in their marriage as a help toward such a growth in other married couples. They do so in the context of an imaginative and persuasive correspondence of the "weeks" or stages of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* and the stages of the growth of a loving intimacy in marriage. As they say, "We are an ordinary couple living our commitments to marriage and to our faith as best we can . . . through forty years of marriage." Many other couples will find moving and persuasive

their writing on “the integration of the spiritual and marital life” from bliss and enchantment through dissatisfaction and frustration to honesty and courage to a love of God and of each other that is made ever more transforming through each other.

And lest prospective readers be put off by what at first sight might seem an impossibly high ideal, they are brought down to earth by practical examples and stories of such a marriage lived day by day. Read this book slowly, wife and husband; it will grow on you as does the love of each other and of God toward which it leads you.

John Padberg, S.J., internationally recognized scholar and author, former Director of the Institute for Jesuit Sources

William Barry, SJ

Bridget Brennan and Jerome Shen have written a fine and helpful book on the interplay of intimacy with God and intimacy in marriage. Using their own experience of growing in intimacy with God and with one another through Ignatian spirituality, they offer to take couples through the stages of growth in both intimacies. At the end of each chapter the authors give couples very helpful exercises that they can do separately and together. If you use this book, you will find that you are growing together as a couple while, at the same time, growing closer to God. Since closeness to God and to one another never stops there, the effects brighten the world around you.

William A. Barry, S.J., author of *Finding God in All Things; Paying Attention to God; God's Passionate Desire and Our Response* and many other books.

Michael V. Tueth, S.J.

The happily married Jerome Shen and M. Bridget Brennan remind us that St. Ignatius Loyola began composing the Spiritual Exercises while he was still a layman. While we often associate the work with Jesuits and other consecrated religious, Jerry and Bridget demonstrate how the Spiritual Exercises are a guide for married couples to achieve greater intimacy and holiness by finding God in their daily graces and challenges. While they shape their book on the pattern of the four weeks of the Exercises, they also

illustrate how they have experienced the working of Ignatian spirituality with their own personal stories and their work with married couples over the years. Amid the huge number of books on Ignatian spirituality and on marriage counseling, this book in its own unique way blends the two issues in a most convincing and helpful way.

Michael V. Tueth, S.J., Professor Emeritus, Fordham University

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M. Bridget Brennan and Jerome L. Shen

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We dedicate this book to

Pope Francis,

Champion of marriage and family

**“The Joy of Love experienced by families
is also the joy of the Church.”**

“Each marriage is a kind of ‘salvation history’, which from fragile beginnings – thanks to God’s gift and a creative and generous response on our part – grows over time into something precious and enduring. Might we say that the greatest mission of two people in love is to help one another become, respectively more a man and more a woman. Fostering Growth means helping a person to shape his or her own identity.” (Amoris Laetitia)

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Acknowledgements

This book is the result of a long journey of faith and relationships that goes back to the 1600s when the Shen family in Shanghai, Jerry's birthplace, was converted to Christianity by French Jesuit missionaries. Many generations later, the Ignatian charism continues to thrive and animates our marriage today. In fact, it was there from the beginning. The two of us met in the John XXIII Christian Life Community (CLC), part of a lay movement grounded in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. We both participated actively at the local, national, and international levels.

In addition to the love and support we received from our local CLC, we were nourished as individuals, as a couple, as family by the many opportunities that the national and world CLC federations provided. Our now-adult sons look back on and recall fondly the adventures of attending the CLC conventions and conferences throughout the United States.

It would be challenging to name all the people who have touched our lives and who have contributed in some way to this book. Our parents, people of deep and unwavering faith, passed on to us the gift of faith in our childhood. Indeed, that deep faith is the strongest bond between us, who are from different races and different economic strata, and who have different last names and very different personalities.

The most significant person on our Ignatian marriage journey was a Jesuit priest, Father Tom Curry, who guided our discernment to marriage. He knew in his heart that we would be called to marriage ministry in some way. He planted the seed that led us to participate in Ignatian retreats and to receive spiritual direction as a couple. It was on our journey with Tom that we first experienced a love relationship that mirrors the Trinity. Since that time, many others have befriended, guided, and supported us along the way.

We also thank the following people who reviewed our manuscript and

offered valuable suggestions: Michael Harter, SJ; Marian Cowan, CSJ; (†) Rosemary Jermann; Deb Meister; Francis Nichols; Sara and Kevin Lee; Lucien Roy; Gene Donahue, SJ; Jean Monahan; Kathy McGrath, RSCJ; and Michael Tueth, SJ. A special thank you to Mary Domahidy, Professor Emerita, St. Louis University for creating the Love Everlasting symbol.

We are grateful for those who took time to read and endorse our book: William Barry, SJ; Ann Garrido, James Martin, SJ; Tim and Sue Muldoon; John Padberg, SJ; and Michael Tueth, SJ.

Additionally, we wish to thank the following friends and colleagues for their affirmation and assistance in sharing, suggesting, and connecting us with resources: Ron Mercier, SJ, Provincial UCS; Dan White, SJ, Pastor of St. Francis Xavier (College) Church; Tim Godfrey, SJ; Len Kraus, SJ; J.J. Mueller, SJ; Michael Tueth, SJ; Robert O'Toole, SJ; Joe and Mary Milner; Lisa Reiter; and Marie Schimelfening. A special thanks to our faithful prayer supporter, Alice Weis. Her prayers kept us moving forward. We are in gratitude for the witness of CLC communities. The seeds for this book were planted in Christian Life Community. We thank the community at St. Francis Xavier (College) Church who nourished us and the Ignatian Volunteer Corps, whose members' lives validate this book.

May all that we do, all that we are, and all that we are invited to be, lead us to a deeper realization and union with the Trinity dwelling within us. May we always be grateful to all those who touch our lives with their love.

AMDG

Bridget and Jerry

I

Introduction

Fall in Love

Nothing is more practical than
finding God, that is than falling in love,
in a quite absolute, final way.
What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.
It will decide
what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends,
what you read, whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.
Fall in Love, stay in love,
and it will decide everything.

From *Finding God in All Things: A Marquette Prayer Book* © 2009 Marquette University Press. Used with permission.

Attributed to Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ. *Father Arrupe, the 28th Superior General of the Jesuits, was loved by many. He died in 1991 after a long post-stroke illness.*

necessarily calls forth. Once again, we have the opportunity to grow and learn through this stretching. To honestly face our fears, our insecurities, and our anxieties and to share them with our partner takes tremendous courage and energy; but such honesty is essential if we wish to continue growing and if we want to be healed.

Our partner's love is a critical element in our being healed of "brokenness." But first we must be willing to own our need for healing, and that is difficult. There is not much in our society that encourages us to turn within and to admit that we need to be healed.

Fourth Stage: Transformation

If we persevere in living the commitment, we will experience the transformation stage. Through Christ, in Christ, and with Christ, our love is made whole and we move forward to become a sign of God's love in our world. In union with each other and with God, our joy and peace are beyond our hopes.

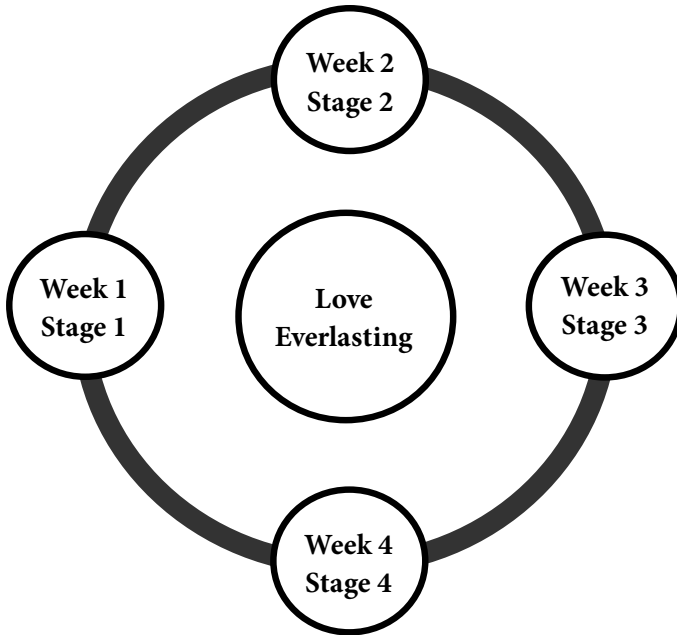
Circle of Love and Triune Union

Imagine marriage as a circle dance. Growth in life and relationship are cyclical processes. The Spiritual Exercises are a guide for what will work and what will trip us up as we endeavor to stay in the circle of love. They help us to discern the movements that lead us to union with the Trinity.

However, it must be stated that entering the circle dance of marriage requires stamina and commitment. Circles can swirl you, twirl you, and toss you off course.

Jerry and I have found that incorporating the directives of the Spiritual Exercises into our personal and marital lives supports us in being steadfast amidst the swirls and twirls.

The Triune God is the epitome of all relationships. All relationships have been created to move us toward union and communion with the Triune God. When, with God's grace, we have moved through the four stages of the Exercises, we will have come full circle. God's love initiates our journey, and at its end, draws us fully into the Triune Love. In our temporal world, we travel this circle over and over until ultimately, we are assumed into the Trinity, the Circle of Love Everlasting.



The relationship and intimacy of the Trinity is a mystery beyond human comprehension and experience. Yet in moments of marital intimacy, we seem to experience a glimpse of the divine intimacy. Thus, as in the Trinity, love begets love for the spouses and begets love for all those in their lives.

“The ability of human couples to beget life is the path along which the history of salvation progresses. Seen in this way, the couple’s fruitful relationship becomes an image for the understanding and describing the mystery of God himself, for the Christian vision of Trinity, God is contemplated as Father, Son, Spirit of love. The Triune God is a communion of love, and the family is its living reflection.” — Pope Francis⁴

About this Book

Being formed in Ignatian Spirituality, we write about what we know and have experienced. Reflection on our experiences using the Spiritual Exercises has greatly inspired and accelerated our spiritual growth as individuals and as a couple and has brought us closer to God and to each other.

On our marriage journey, we are influenced by the rapidly developing

⁴ Pope Francis, *The Joy of Love: Amoris Laetitia*. (Washington, DG USCCB, 2016) 56

social and psychological understanding of relationship and especially of relationship in marriage. Bridget is trained as a marriage and relationship educator. We have given numerous pre-marriage classes and marriage enrichment workshops. This relationship knowledge helps us to understand our experiences, to realize that we are not alone in our struggles, and provides us with tools to strengthen our relationship. Putting these two influences together resulted in our book on the integration of Ignatian Spirituality and marriage.

Why We Write

Originality of Our Book

Much has been written and disclosed on both Ignatian Spirituality and marriage and relationship. But relatively little has appeared on the integration of marriage and Ignatian Spirituality. We feel that we can make a worthwhile contribution here.

Need for Our Book

At a time when more and more people consider spirituality and marriage to be irrelevant, we feel compelled to tell the world that there are still many who choose spirituality and marriage as the motivating forces for living their lives. And because of their choice, they are rewarded with lives of peace, joy, and gratitude.

Therefore, we write on the integration of the spiritual and marriage life. As we grow closer to God, we also grow closer to each other. Our spiritual growth enhances our marital relationship. And our marital relationship enriches our spiritual life. This integration has led us to see that we are living holy and blessed lives and that we are helping to bring about the Kingdom. And this realization brings to us great joy, fulfillment, and gratitude.

We Hope the Book is Useful

We wish for others, especially married couples, to be aware of the holy and blessed lives they are living. We hope by telling our story that we encourage

others, especially you, dear reader, to tell your own stories. For that purpose, we have included reflection questions at the end of each chapter to stimulate your own reflections. In our own life, sharing prayers and reflections have led us to encounters with God and with each other. And we hope that you, the reader, also will receive the gifts of love, intimacy, and joy from the Holy Spirit.

This book is our testament of our:

- falling in love with each other and with God,
- growing in love and intimacy,
- living out that love and commitment in our daily lives,
- going out of ourselves to serve others, and
- finding joy in being with each other and with God.

Read this book as our story. Recall your own experiences as you read our words. And let your own story take over.

Our focus is on our relationship with ourselves, with our spouse, with God, with the people in our daily lives, and with the world that we live in. We begin by acknowledging that growing in intimacy is a gift, all of life is gift, and all is grace. Although, the journeys to union with God and to union with our spouse are concurrent and intertwined, and indeed, one and the same journey, we have piece-meal experiences of different parts of the journeys. It is only in reflection that we discover their concurrence and integration.

Structure of the Book

Since the marriage journey to love and intimacy with each other parallels the spiritual journey to love and serve God, this book is organized per the logical process of the spiritual journey as expressed in the Spiritual Exercises. Descriptions of the processes of marriage are matched to the corresponding stages of the Spiritual Exercises. This match is illustrated in the following table.

Stages in the Spiritual Exercises	Stages of Marriage
<p>First Week: Preparing for God</p> <p>God calls us where we are.</p> <p>God's love allows us to let go of fears so that we can enter relationship with God.</p>	<p>Pre-commitment: Preparing for Relationship</p> <p>God awakens our desire to love.</p> <p>We gain basic wholeness and personal freedom that are required to enter marriage.</p>
<p>Second Week: Seeking Jesus</p> <p>We seek to know Jesus and his call to us.</p> <p>Out of love for Jesus, we commit to union with Jesus and his mission.</p>	<p>Commitment: Seeking our Beloved</p> <p>We respond to the call to marriage.</p> <p>We commit ourselves to live out the vision of marriage.</p>
<p>Third Week: Living as a Disciple</p> <p>We enter the passion and death of Jesus.</p> <p>We embrace both consolation and desolation.</p> <p>We gain the desire to make the necessary sacrifices to serve God faithfully.</p>	<p>Living the Commitment: Living our Marriage</p> <p>We experience the continual rhythm of dying and rising in our journey to intimacy.</p> <p>We make the necessary sacrifices to sustain the commitment and to grow in intimacy.</p>
<p>Fourth Week: Being with God's Love and Joy</p> <p>We desire being with God.</p> <p>We seek to be with the risen Jesus and contemplate God's love for us.</p>	<p>Transformation: Being with my Beloved in Love and Joy</p> <p>We are transformed day by day into greater union with each other and with God.</p> <p>We are energized to serve others.</p>

Brief Biography

M. Bridget Brennan has a B. A. in Education and Sociology and a M. A. in Human Relations as well as a M. A. in Religious Studies. She is a Certified Family Life Educator, Relationship Skills Coach, master level, and a Marriage Preparation Educator. She is also trained in the PREP and PAIRS programs.

Jerome L. Shen has a Ph. D. in chemistry. Jerry was the Director of Research for Ralston-Purina and Assistant Professor at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. Jerry has also been trained in PREP and PAIRS, and other relationship programs.

Jerry and Bridget have presented workshops on *Living Ignatian Spirituality in Marriage* at several Ignatian Conferences at St. Louis University.

Bridget and Jerry have traveled throughout the US presenting retreats for couples; workshops at national conferences: Smart Marriages; NACFLM; Missouri Social Services; US Adm. of Children and Families; and many more regional conferences and programs at parishes and spirituality centers.

We have developed and directed a marriage preparation seminar for first time and second time marriages. Over the 18 years, we have prepared over 5,000 couples for marriage.

In our work, Jerry tends to seek the ideal and Bridget keeps us grounded with the practical. Together, we can seek ideals that are attainable in our practical reality.

This book and our first book - *Claiming our Deepest Desires: The Power of an Intimate Marriage* - came from our experience. We write this second book in gratitude to God and to those who have helped and enriched our marriage and spiritual journey.

We warmly recommend this book both to those who have seen many seasons of married life, and to those yet to embark on this beautiful vocation. Let them be your guides to an experience of the living God, through a reflective pilgrimage in the company of your beloved.

—Tim and Sue Muldoon,
authors of *Six Sacred Rules for Families* and *The Discerning Parent: An Ignatian Guide to Raising your Teen*

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—Dr. Ann M. Garrido, Associate Professor,
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