"The Christian family...is the first community called to announce the Gospel to the human person during growth and to bring him or her, through a progressive education and catechesis, to full human and Christian maturity."

On the Family, Pope John Paul II

Have Mercy! You don’t have to point out your spouse’s shortcomings.

By Steve and Kathy Beirne

"Research shows that women who carry a little extra weight live longer than do the men who mention it."

This little funny showed up on the internet recently, and got a laugh from us, but if you think about the sentiment behind it, there is a lesson to be learned, or as the jester says in Gilbert and Sullivan’s Yeoman of the Guard, "a grain or two of truth among the chaff."

Nobody likes to have their shortcomings pointed out. And in marriage it is especially hurtful. It’s tricky—because our lives are so intertwined we know things about each other that maybe no one else in the world knows. And so, when we are angry with each other we have more ammunition to hurt than anyone else.

When we were first married we made a pact. Steve would never call me fat, and I would never call him stupid. I wasn’t fat and he wasn’t stupid, but those were the labels that could instantly cause pain.

I had been a chubby child, and Steve had struggled in school, so our vulnerabilities were formed early and even though I was a normal sized adult woman and he had completed college and a master’s degree, the words still stung.

I was surprised that a man, whose wife now does carry a little extra weight, has the grace and wisdom not to mention it.

Whatever the hot button is for you, does your spouse know? And do they know that it is off limits to push that button? You may not know how important it is to be clear with each other because we live in a world where people often guard their fears and inadequacies. And poking fun at one another is a very accepted amusement. We celebrate people with roasts and we publish satirical papers like The Onion.

If poking fun at each other is part of your relationship that is perfectly fine, as long as you know where the line is that you should not cross. Everybody has one, and if it’s crossed it creates feelings of hurt, or worse, betrayal. It’s hard to regain a sense of trust if you have crossed that line.

So what happens if you do violate that trust? Are you doomed to a future with your spouse’s guard always up, ready for another zinger?
No, not if you are willing to apologize and have a "firm purpose of amendment," as we used to say about sinning. It's not enough to say you're sorry. You have to have a plan in place to make sure it doesn't happen again. How are you going to zip your lip if you think you might be about to say something you'll regret?

- Ask God's help. God loves your spouse more than you do, and has promised to help if we only ask. So ask!
- Say, "I need a time out." If you take a break chances are you won't come back with the same feeling of wanting to attack.
- Think of a vulnerability of your own, and how it would feel to have it thrown up at you. We all have our thing what we don't want used against us, so engage your sense of fair play.

This year Pope Francis has decreed a year of mercy in our church. His hope is that there will be a “revolution of tenderness” in the church and spreading out from it during this year. How appropriate to have it begin in our homes and in our marriages. Leave the jokes for the office, put the hurtful remarks in a box labeled “do not open,” and let the love that brought you together invade your life. The church’s year of mercy will then become the foundation for your lifelong marriage, built on the tender regard you each have for the other.

Steve and Kathy Beirne have extensive experience in marriage and family education, catechetics, and marriage ministry. They are the editors and publishers of Foundations Newsletter, FACET premarital resource, and Catholic and Newly Married, an award winning book published by ACTA publications. They live in Portland, Maine, and are the parents of 7 children and grandparents of 5. You can visit their websites, facetsite.com, or foundationsnewsletter.net, or contact them at foundationseditor@gmail.com