

Marriage as a Christian Vocation

Families Following Christ, “Connecting with Your Spouse”

St. Joseph’s Cody Family Enrichment Center, Jacksonville

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Dear Friends, I am delighted to be with you today for this most important conference on “Connecting with your Spouse,” the first of the Families Following Christ Summer Marriage Series. There is hardly a more important work that couples can do for their families than to be united, communicative, and faithful to each other. It is good for you to periodically withdraw from your daily affairs in order to invest yourselves in your marriage. I pray that this spiritual retreat and time away from home will have a profound impact on your marriage and ultimately, on your family.

I am grateful to Jeff Mall for the invitation to be here with you and to talk a little about the Catholic concept of “Marriage as a Vocation.” I also thank Brandon and Katie Duncan for their tremendous work in coordinating all the activities of this three-month series.

Marriage as a paradigm

To start, let me make an observation about the covenantal relationship that we all have with our God. We are immersed in a great mystery, one which God spoke about from the first page of the Bible to the last – it is the mystery of God’s love for sinful man. From the moment of creation to the final consummation of the world, this mystery is played out in human history, and every one of us is a part of it. Not surprisingly, the primary image that God chose to express His love for His children through history is marriage. Historically, God’s love for His People was reflected in the many covenants which He formed with the People of Israel, but in the era of the Church, His love for each of us is reflected through the sacraments. If you think about it, we often use marriage imagery to describe the sacramental life of the Church and that place of final destiny to which we are all called:

- Baptism clothes us with a “wedding garment” of salvation and anticipates the white-robed participants of the Wedding Feast of the Lamb in Heaven
- Confirmation confirms our baptismal covenant and strengthens our relationship with the Mission of salvation through Christ’s Bride the Church
- Penance restores the covenant when we have broken our marriage bond through sin
- Eucharist is a foretaste of the final Wedding Banquet of Heaven
- Even the Sacrament of Holy Orders calls men, in a metaphorical way, to serve the Bride of Christ, the Church, in imitation of Jesus the Bridegroom.

The sacraments express the rich marriage imagery very easily because Christian marriage is perhaps the most direct reflection of the covenant love of God in this world. Marriage is really a paradigm for the whole Christian way of life.

Our magnificent Catechism speaks of marriage as an “intimate community of life and love.” It says that

‘the married state has been established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws. ... God himself is the author of marriage.’ The vocation to

marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator. (CCC, 1603a)

In other words, the vocation to marriage is part of a grand design that God intended for mankind from the beginning; it is a plan for the sanctification of men and women as well as for the building up of the human community and the Kingdom of God.

The Eucharistic dimension of marriage

While Christian marriage reflects the grand design of the whole Christian life, marriage itself finds its source and its strength in the Eucharist because it accomplishes the same goals as this Most Blessed Sacrament. In the Eucharist we are drawn into the very sacrificial love of God for us, and it is through our reception of Holy Communion that we learn to love others as He loved us. In his famous prayer after Communion, St. Thomas Aquinas prays that Eucharist may teach us “charity and patience, humility and obedience, and growth in the power to do good.” The Eucharist does all that and gives us the strength to continuously grow in Christian virtue. The Eucharist is also the source of the unity of the Church. In fact, without the Eucharist, we would not even have a Church. And, of course, it is our Eucharistic faith that causes us to go forth and transform the world – or at least our portion of the world – into the Kingdom of God.

It is in these several ways (and I’m sure many more) that there is a deep connection between Marriage and the Eucharist. In fact, as Christian spouses you live out the Eucharistic dimension of your married vocation every day through three related missions. The first mission of Christian marriage is to learn and to teach love; marriage, like the Eucharist, is truly a “school of love.” The second mission of marriage is to unify, and the third mission is to evangelize. Allow me to explain each of these briefly for your reflection during this time of retreat.

1. Christian marriage is a school of love.

We can speak of marriage as a “school of love” because it trains us to be fully open to God’s love in daily life and to practice its precepts on a daily basis. But it is a difficult school and can be a demanding teacher because love is the most important virtue and value of the Kingdom.

Marriage teaches couples, over time, how necessary it is to put God in the absolute center of our lives. If you are not clear about that early on in your marriage, you soon learn it! The trials of life, the economic ups-and-downs, the challenges of raising children, as well as many other sufferings that are part-and-parcel of life make it abundantly clear that we need a greater strength than our own meager resources to help us survive. The couple that keeps the Eucharistic Lord at the center of their marriage and family life and adores him every Sunday will never be lacking in grace and favor, especially when they need it most.

I know a priest who once told me that he was sure that his parents never once missed a Sunday Mass in their sixty-plus years of marriage. He was equally convinced that even before they married they had never missed a Sunday Mass because their parents, the priest’s grandparents, were equally devout. There is something truly marvelous and inspiring about such long-term fidelity.

I do not need to tell you how marriage also helps spouses to become more loving people and good teachers of love to their children. There are at least a million ways and opportunities to practice the virtues of love with your spouse on a daily basis, those virtues which St. Paul laid out in his First Letter to the Corinthians:

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, it is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor 13: 4-7).

We all have to learn those virtues somewhere. The priest learns them largely through the practice of his pastoral ministry or living in community with other religious. Spouses learn them in marriage and family life. This is precisely because marriage is a school of love, designed by the Creator to give us the forum in which to practice virtue – and practice makes perfect.

It goes without saying that parents hand on the virtues of love to their children at the same time and in the same environment in which they themselves are learning to become more loving people. The learners transform into teachers in both a natural and a supernatural way. I have noticed that most parents have a natural teaching ability to guide and train their children in the lessons of life because God equips His people with natural capacities to do the jobs He gives them. It is not my intention to spend time detailing the myriad ways in which you make your family life a school of love for your family but simply to note the fact that your vocation to Christian marriage makes you both learners and teachers by definition and that is a great and wonderful reality.

2. Christian marriage is for unity.

When we speak of “vocation” in a strictly religious sense we are speaking of those men and women who are called to dedicate themselves to the exclusive service of the Kingdom of God. Priests, deacons and bishops, in particular, receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders as a way of consecrating them for that mission. Religious sisters and brothers consecrate themselves through their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Our Catholic Catechism calls Holy Orders a “sacrament in the service of unity” because priests do so much to maintain the unity of the Church through their celebration of the Eucharist, among other things. But you may be surprised to know that the Catechism also calls marriage a “sacrament in the service of unity”! Marriage, like the priesthood and consecrated life, serves the unity of both the Church and society in a very real way. Let me illustrate this with an example:

Have you ever noticed how children who come from broken families tend to gravitate to families that are intact? They crave the stability that such a family offers. Kids of every age will evaluate marriage and family according to their own needs and stages of development. Younger children will unconsciously choose friends that come from happy families and spend more time over their friends’ homes than their own. Teenagers will subtly bask in the warmth of a stable and happy marriage because they are thinking about their own futures and looking for role models to emulate. Even if those kids don’t ever speak of their need for unity as such, the intact marriage and family exerts a dramatic pull – like iron filings to a magnet – on those who experience brokenness.

In this humble sense the Church recognizes that Christian marriage is a radical force for unity in the world. It was so wise of the Catechism to designate marriage as a “sacrament in the service of unity.” And how desperately we need unity in a society that is so divided today! Truly you, as Christian spouses, accomplish more than you know by simply living faithfully your vocation to marriage. There is a grace that far transcends the two of you as a couple. God, as it were, “uses” you to build up others, to build up the Church, and even to build up society by your unity. To return to our Eucharistic analogy: if the Church remains strong because of the Eucharist, society remains strong precisely due to the strength of good marriages.

3. Christian marriage is for evangelization.

That leads me directly into the third Eucharistic mission of the married vocation, which is to evangelize. I would say that this dimension of marriage goes beyond just the daily living out of your calling and enters into the realm of mature and deliberate vision. When couples realize how potent a force their Christian marriages can be, they become transformed into missionaries. In the priesthood, as with marriage, it is easy to go through the motions and fulfill our basic duties and responsibilities well. These things in themselves are valuable, but they are not enough! I recall one preacher who exhorted his hearers to “be missionaries, not functionaries!” God calls us to offer the gift of ourselves and the gift of our vocations to the service of His Kingdom.

I would like each of you to take some time tonight or in the next couple of days reflecting on the way in which God has called you – as a couple – to evangelize others in your own special way. Most of you – I’m sure – will look into your lives and recognize that you are already accomplishing some form of special Christian service without calling it “evangelization” as such. In all likelihood the service that you are already performing is humble and not spectacular in a worldly sense. That indicates, all the more, that your service is a Christian mission. God uses the “normal” and humble forms of daily human service to save people’s souls, and gives every Christian marriage grace so that the spouses may be effective instruments for the salvation of souls.

Some of you may not yet be aware of just how God is using your marriage for evangelization. This may rather be a time of discernment and petition to ask Him how He wishes to use your gift of marriage for others. God will answer that prayer quickly and generously. And you may well imagine that if He gives you a particular mission to accomplish, He will also give you the grace with which to accomplish it, both for the service of others and for the sanctification of your souls. Be not afraid to offer your marriages to Him who called you to this state of life for the sake of His Kingdom. As the priest sends us out at the end of Mass “to love and serve the Lord,” so the Lord Jesus sends your marriage out as true missionaries of His Kingdom.

Conclusion

Allow me to conclude this exhortation with an illustration of the immense power of the married vocation, a power that is never to be underestimated.

I am sure that you are all familiar with the story of St. Gianna Beretta Molla, who sacrificed her own life in 1962 when confronted with a serious problem: pregnancy rather than choose abortion for her child. St. Gianna Molla’s blood sister is a religious nun, Sr. Virginia Molla, who travels the world witnessing to St. Gianna’s heroic act. Yet, when listening to the testimony of Sister

Virginia, one is initially surprised to hear very little about her saintly sister. She always begins her talk speaking about her parents and the marvelous family she grew up in!

Her parents' example conformed to every standard of heroic sanctity and goodness that we can imagine. Sr. Virginia tells the story about the mutual love of her parents, the unity and discipline of their large family, their devotion to their Catholic Faith, the children's respect and love for one another, and the deep happiness of their home during very hard economic and political circumstances. It was all due, she said, to the sacrificial holiness of her parents, which was so great that they produced thirteen children during the turbulent years surrounding the First World War.

St. Gianna was the eleventh child, and her sister noted that after Gianna made her First Holy Communion at the age five, she went to Mass every day with her mother. When Gianna was 15 years old she made a retreat with the Dorothean sisters, and one of the numerous resolutions she wrote in her journal from that retreat was, "I would rather die than commit a mortal sin."

Now, I ask you: How does a 15-year-old girl acquire such an attitude? Surely God's grace that she received each day in the Eucharist was paramount, but let's remind ourselves that grace builds upon nature and that there had to be a good garden into which this seed of profound faith would be planted. That garden was the family in which the Molla children had grown up. That family was formed by profoundly Christian parents whose marriage was immersed in grace.

When Sr. Virginia finally speaks about the heroic act of self-sacrifice for which St. Gianna is known to the world, she says that the act of giving her life for her baby was not the only act of generosity of the saint's life; it was just the last act.

In a unique modern witness to the sanctity of human life, the Saint – who was a medical doctor herself – absolutely rejected abortion as an option for the child, and she challenged the attending medical personnel to save both lives. Ten days before the child's birth she said to her family: "If you get to the point where you have to choose between the baby and me, choose the baby." Her greatest sorrow was not for herself but that she would have to leave behind four little ones without their mother. True, her death was an immense loss for all, but what an example she left to those same children who knew that their mother made the ultimate sacrifice for one of their siblings.

That sacrifice was the act of a woman who had grown up in a family where every single child was seen as a blessing from God and accepted without reserve by parents whose vocation opened channels of grace for them to transform the world. Now the world has been amazed and enlightened by the example of St. Gianna Beretta Molla at a time when such a heroic witness is needed. If St. Gianna was capable of such a gift of self-sacrifice, it is only because she received and learned such generosity from her parents. If St. Gianna is the Patron Saint of Mothers and Unborn Children, it is because she was first a disciple in the school of her parents' marriage.

Dear married couples, what a blessed calling you have! Very few people, your children included, will see or appreciate the sacrifices that you make on a daily basis for your families. But God

sees. God sees your many sacrifices! And that is all that matters. Have no fear at all in allowing the Lord to use your marriages to transform the world.

Dear brothers and sisters, I wish you much success in this time of retreat and reflection, and I ask the Lord to bless you all in the Name of the Father +, and of the Son +, and of the Holy Spirit +, Amen.