

27<sup>th</sup> Sunday In Ordinary Time – Year B

Genesis 2:7ab, 15, 18-24

Hebrews 2:9-11

Mark 10:2-16

I expect most priests like myself feel conflicted whenever these scripture readings are proclaimed during this Sunday liturgy. This conflict arises from a desire to expound on the Church's beautiful and profound teachings on marriage, while knowing well that many of one's parishioners have gone through the experience of separation and divorce. Let me say right now that anything I say about Marriage as understood in the Church in this homily should not be interpreted as a putdown, as being insensitive, or to cast aspersions on anyone here who has gone through separation and divorce. All of you present, I'm sure, if not having gone through separation or divorce personally, know someone of your family and friends who have, given the wide presence of marriage breakdown in our society. Members of my own family, in fact, have gone through the same – one marriage became so toxic that separation was needed to prevent physical harm. I'm not unfamiliar with the experience of divorce and separation.

Because of the reality of divorce in our world, the Catholic Church, given its teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, has been accused of being blind or at least pastorally insensitive to those who have experienced marriage breakdown, given that Catholics too separate and divorce at largely the same rate as non-Catholics. The Church understands this and responds with counselling and support to strengthen married life and to offer support to divorced Catholics, such as assisting them through such things as an annulment process. The Church tries to respond with sensitivity and compassion.

Saying that, while there is pressure on the Church to recognize divorce as a viable option, the Church's teaching has no option but to follow Jesus' teachings on marriage, as expressed here in today's Gospel reading, or in the Sermon on the Mount as found in the Gospel of Matthew. The Pharisees who ask Jesus a question concerning divorce were aware of the concession that Moses allowed on this matter. Jesus reminded them that Moses allowed for this concession because

“of your hardness of heart.” He then reminds the Pharisee that this was not God’s original plan for married life. From the first reading, which is one of a series of origin stories found between the first and eleventh chapters of Genesis, we find the original blueprint for marriage. God is the originator of married life and has called men and women to form bonds of love with each other so profound it is as if they are one flesh, an image that can be understood at a variety of different levels. This one-flesh union, ordained by God, is so profound that no power or authority on earth can sever it.

Marriage exists for men and women to grow in deeper love with each other, and for that loving bond to thrive and reach out beyond itself. We call this bond a sacrament and a covenant. It is a sacrament, meaning a tangible sign instituted by Christ to give grace, because the married couple are meant to be a tangible, or “enfleshed”, expression of God’s love in the world. It is a covenant, a reflection of God’s covenant with his people. As God established a covenant with his people—an everlasting agreement to love, care for and lead his people—so marriage couples reflect this covenant by the covenant they live for each other. This covenant is meant to be lived out freely, faithfully, fruitfully and forever.

This beautiful teaching on marriage is often obscured, as the world perceives it, by a great N-O! Namely, no to divorce. This is partially right. The Church’s teaching on indissolubility must necessarily mean no to divorce. But an insight drawn from the words of the Catholic writer G.K. Chesterton might be helpful here. He said that every ‘no’ the Church proposes opens the door to a multitude of “Yes”’. The no to divorce is yes to indissolubility, to faithfulness, to love, to support, and so on. These “Yes”’ could not be without the prerequisite “no” to the possibility of marriage being dissolvable.

This, of course, flies in the face of modern conceptions of marriage. As much of our life’s values today are directed towards self-advancement, self-transcendence, and self-actualization, many bring those values into marriage, as expressed by a “what’s in it for me?” attitude. If that’s the case, it will be a marriage full of disappointment, frustration, anger and tears.

That’s why the Church insists that every couple wishing to marry in the Church attend a marriage preparation course. During the marriage preparation course, an engaged couple is given the opportunity to ask themselves two questions: Am I

entering this marriage with full freedom? And, am I entering this marriage with full understanding? Full freedom means that I am entering this marriage for one reason—I love this person with the totality of my being and am ready to share the totality of my life with this person for the rest of my life. Full understanding means that I understand what sacrifices I will need to accept out of love for this person and am ready to take them on, for they are worth the sacrifice entailed.

Whenever I occasionally celebrate Mass as part of a Marriage Ceremony, I remind couples to listen closely to the words of the eucharistic narrative, because Jesus' words "this is my body" and "this is my blood" is also what the husband and wife are expressing to each other when they give the consent of marriage to each other. They are giving their very selves to each other, today and for the rest of their lives, in imitation of Christ Jesus who gives himself to us in the Eucharist.

Given that many marriages have not reflected this vision of marriage, as expressed by the Church's teachings, the Church provides resources for people in difficult marriages, like Retrouvaille weekends and, to those whose marriages have ended, counselling support and annulments. The point is, God loves you and the Church community supports you, regardless of your present state of life.

I would like to conclude my homily with a story, that I used at many marriage celebrations. A man had a dream in which he saw two massive dining halls. He walked into the first hall and saw a long dining hall table, with rich, juicy, sumptuous food piled on top of it. Surrounding the table were many people who were not, however, enjoying this rich banquet and were crying and looking very miserable and unhappy. When the man asked one of them why they were so unhappy, the person said, "we can't enjoy this banquet food. Look at the eating utensils they gave us! The man looked and saw that the person was holding a utensil with a three-foot long handle. "The handles are so long that we can't get the food to our mouths". The man then left the banquet hall and these unhappy people.

He then entered a second banquet hall, which was much like the first. In the hall he saw a similar long dining hall table, loaded down with rich sumptuous food, like that in the first hall. There were also many people surrounding this table, like in the first hall, but they were enjoying themselves, talking and laughing while they partook of this banquet food. They had been given the same utensils as

found in the first hall, with the three-foot long handles, but they knew how to use them—each of them fed the person across from them at the table, taking advantage of the long handles.

I like this story because it provides a fitting analogy to marriage and how to make married life thrive. Remember that marriage is not about you. It is about you and your spouse. Beginning each day with the thought “what can I do to benefit my spouse” rather than “what can I do to benefit myself” authentically gets to the heart of what makes marriage thrive, and better reflects God’s vision for marriage.