

Homily: 27th Sunday: Cycle B: 2015 Gen 2: 18-24; Ps. 128; Heb 2:9-11; Mk 10: 2-16

“The Mystery of Marriage in God’s Plan”

Christ’s vision of marriage is **radical**: above and beyond the ordinary. It makes sense though in light of what he tells us our mission in life is to be: to be holy as your Heavenly Father is holy. Holiness is virtue or habits of goodness beyond the average, beyond the mediocre, above and beyond the human understanding of duty. **Since the vast majority of the human race is called to the vocation of marriage it is important to reflect on what Christ calls the marriage life to be in terms of holiness.** People may chuckle to themselves and think what does a priest who vowed to remain celibate for life, for the sake of building up God’s kingdom know about marriage? Well, we priests know more than people realize. *We counsel many engaged couples, we work on troubled marriages both in terms of counseling and in the confessional, and also after the fact in working on annulments, we deal with our own family and friends who are married, we grew up in a certain family with all its blessings and challenges, and finally many of us priests spend a significant time of our professional reading dealing with this topic.* Consequently we know more about this topic than people give us credit for, and we can often take a more **objective** view of the blessings and challenges of married life because of our vantage point of dealing with so many married couples in so many varied circumstances. **We truly see what works and what doesn’t in married life.**

1. **The Sacrament of Marriage:** what is the difference between getting married before God’s holy altar in the Catholic Church vs. getting married at the JP, or just living together? Well, THE difference is God is being invited at the altar to be the 3rd party in the relationship. **Catholic marriage is an irrevocable covenant between the man, the woman, and the Blessed Trinity.** After all, as St Paul so beautifully points out in his letter to the Ephesians, human marriage is to be a reflection of the inner life and love of the Blessed Trinity and the love of Christ for the Church. **The social statistics bear this out.** Catholics who get married outside the Church have a **50%** divorce rate - similar to the rest of US society. If they marry within the Church the divorce rate drops to **33%**. A 17% drop is very significant. **It is truly a covenant of 3 parties.** God’s way is the better way, as will be shown in some other statistics as we move through this reflection.

2. Jesus tells us today in the Gospel that, “*From the beginning of creation God made us male and female. And for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and **the two shall become one flesh**. So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate.* A Catholic marriage is to be a covenant of love and life. There are two **inseparable dimensions** to that covenant. The **unitive** dimension is that the two become one flesh in marriage, both in conjugal union and in all aspects of their life together. To do this well both partners need to pray for the gift of kindness, patience and charity. Focus on complementing each other instead of criticizing and nagging which causes the heart of the other to grow cold over time. To focus on the good instead of the negative. The other dimension of the two becoming one flesh is the **procreative** dimension. To be generous with God and accept all the children He wants to bless the married couple with. If Catholics do their best to follow the radical yet liberating teachings of the Catholic Church in regards to marriage and sexuality it also makes a huge difference in the divorce rate. **Couples who contracept or are sterilized have a 55% divorce rate which drops to an amazing 3.5% if they use natural family planning which is permitted by the Church - if a couple needs to space out their children for serious economic, physical, emotional, or spiritual reasons.** Something to ponder. God’s way is obviously the better way, and secular social scientists are showing us this through their statistical analysis of contemporary marital life – e.g., *see the U of Rutgers marriage study*. The statistics do not lie in this regard. A married couple is truly called to share in Christ’s self-gift to die to self for the good of the marital union and the family. It is most people’s path to holiness. This is why St. Paul uses the image of Christ giving his life for the Church in relation to what Christian married life is to be like (*Ephesians chapter 5*).
3. **Finally the sacrament of marriage is to be the path to Heaven for the married couple.** If you are married the question must be asked: **what am I doing right now to help my spouse get to Heaven?** At the Catholic marriage ceremony the newly married couple is called be a light for the world by their lives of self-giving

love in obedience to the teachings of Christ and His Catholic Church - to counter the worldly values of selfishness and putting limits on love of God and neighbor - this is **THE foundation** of their new married life. And by living this well is the only way their lives will truly be **successful** in the light of eternity. Once again this is borne out statistically. If you remember the **divorce rate** of couples following the Church's teaching in regard to procreation goes from **55% to 3.5%**; well, if a married couple also goes to **Mass together** as a couple on a weekly basis in addition to practicing NFP it drops to **2%**, and then if in addition to those two things they **pray together daily** as a couple it drops to **.9%! Yes, God's way is the better way.** And this is not just Catholic propaganda, it is statistically shown! **But you may say:** *what about the reality, Father, that most marriages are not that way?!* Yes, I know, that is why I am reminding you of what they are called to be based on the teaching of the Scriptures and the Church. From all these statistics the conclusion we are should draw is: **if you want to have a happy successful marriage the solution is to be converted to Christ and the Catholic Faith on a deeper level.** The real problem comes when one partner wants to do this and the other doesn't. In that case one must win the other over through patient love and endurance, as St. Paul says (*see 1 Corinthians chapter 7*). **It's a cross that is so heavy!** Sometimes in marriage there is a need to go for counseling with a professional marriage counselor or a priest or deacon, depending on how serious the issues are. If in the marriage one spouse merely tolerates the other person but there is no real love or affection or desire to be with the person, or they are living two separate lives, or can't get over previous hurts and misunderstandings - that is a sign to me as a priest that is a couple that needs professional help! There is no shame in that, but it does take humility for a married couple to admit it: we got problems and maybe big ones at that, and we can't solve them on our own because we tried and it hasn't worked. **The real tragedy is if married couple who are having problems don't seek out help. The Church prays for a renewal of married life in our midst because it is the foundation for a true renewal in goodness, life, and vibrancy both the Church and our society in our day, to go from a Culture of Death to a Culture of Life.** God bless you.