

DIOCESE OF NOTTINGHAM

Homily of the Bishop of Nottingham at the Celebration of Marriage & Family Life in Saint Barnabas' Cathedral Sunday 21st February 2016

This afternoon, let us be clear. You are not here in this Cathedral as a celebration of martyrdom, as a celebration of those who have simply 'survived' marriage, as if it were an endurance test! In this Mass, we are celebrating much more than your resilience as married couples, much more than your toughness and durability in putting up with each other for so many years. This afternoon is very much about acknowledging and celebrating the fact that you have been able to keep your promises, because God has kept his to you: 'I will be with you always, yes, to the end of time.'

Gathered here in this Cathedral, we also wish to celebrate the fact that you are couples who are a living sign to our society that, despite the frailty of the human condition, faithfulness to committed love in the vocation of marriage is not only possible, it is very much worth the effort! Your marriage is an icon of God's faithful love for us. You mirror in your lives as couples that love of God for us which is faithful, fruitful and forever. You reveal that it is possible for a husband and wife to live the vows to love one another in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, until death do you part. I have no doubt that most, if not all, of you have experienced challenges in your married lives; but that this doesn't weaken, in any way, your witness to God's love, but rather it serves to strengthen it!

I feel sure that you would agree, based upon your own experiences, that the important thing when Catholic and Christian couples experience difficulties is to remember that it is God who has united them in the sacred bond of marriage, that he therefore is the foundation of that bond; that's why prayer is so important in marriage. The husband praying for his wife, and the wife praying for her husband. This mutual prayer helps to preserve the bond of marriage, and helps the love of the couple to grow. So, when there are disagreements or arguments – which is very much part of our human condition – the bond between you is strong enough not to be broken when you remain open to the power of God's grace received in the sacrament of matrimony. Prayer is so important for all of us in our vocations, mine included, to make us strong in our vocational commitment, to help us, to give us strength and courage to live out what we have promised, and to stay faithful to it.

One of the challenges that was discussed last October at the Synod of Bishops Meeting in Rome was the decline in the number of marriages that now take place in our society. Many young people are, as you know, opting to live together without marriage. They look around them, note the increasing number of divorces, perhaps they have experienced divorce in their own families growing up, and so they question whether it is possible to make the definitive decision to marry, to love one person, forever. There is a very real fear on their part to make such a definitive choice, such a life decision, because we live now in a culture of the temporary, the provisional.

My dear couples, you bear eloquent witness today that the definitive commitment of marriage is possible, and that the permanence of marriage is not only possible, it is truly beautiful! For you are people who have learned to walk together as spouses, in the very often difficult journey of life, with all its demands and challenges. You are people who have learned to face these challenges together, hand in hand, helping each other to trust and to grow in God's faithful presence in your marriage. You have not run away, under pressures, from your commitments to each other, but rather you have put your trust in the truth of God's word to you on your wedding day that, what he has joined together, mankind must not divide, and that he will always be with you.

So today I join other Bishops, who are doing the same in their dioceses, in asking you to speak positively of the beauty of marriage to young people at every opportunity that is presented to you. Speak to them of the grace, of the help that God has given you in your marriage, and continues to give you, and speak too of the faithfulness, however tested it might be at times, which God makes possible in your lives. Speak to them of what God calls you to in the sacrament of marriage, to a love and a self-giving at times beyond the limits of just your own strength, but which God supports you with. Speak to them honestly, but speak to them positively of the joy, happiness and fulfilment that can be found in married life, that you have found in your marriage.

May the Lord continue to bless you all with his love and, in and through your lives as married couples, may He enable you to radiate to others, especially young people, the beauty and joy of married love and commitment to each other.

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