Wedding Anniversary Mass
Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption
February 29, 2020

Most Rev. Salvatore J. Cordileone

It is a rather curious coincidence that this Wedding Anniversary Mass occurs on this very unusual day. This day, of course, happens only once every four years. We're in a Leap Year and this is Leap Year Day. I say it's a curious coincidence because in different cultures, varying customs arose around the practices of courtship and marrying during a Leap Year and sometimes specifically on this day. These were primarily in English-speaking cultures, but also elsewhere. In Ireland and Britain it has been a tradition that women may propose marriage only in Leap Years. It is said that way back in 1288 Queen Margaret of Scotland enacted a law requiring fines to be levied if a marriage proposal was refused by the man, and the compensation was deemed to be a pair of leather gloves, a single rose, one pound Sterling, and a kiss.

In some places, this tradition was restricted not to the whole year, but just to this day, February 29th, when women could propose marriage to men. In Finland it was a tradition that if a man refuses a woman's proposal on this day, that he should buy her fabrics for making a skirt. So these are quaint courtship customs of what is really a bygone era. Life was very different, but it was all presumed on the principle of difference and complementarity between man and woman. And so somehow this Leap Year and specifically Leap Year Day was seen as sort of a role-reversal. So that was different from the times we're living in now but at the same time, we cannot get around the principle of complementarity. We cannot get around it because it begins with the very design of the body.

Recall what Saint Paul tells us in the first reading here in his First Letter to the Corinthians, "The body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" This teaching helps us to make sense of an old English formula that not until all that long ago actually was the standard one used at a wedding, whether Catholic or Protestant. And as I understand it, it is still used in some more traditional congregations of the Anglican communion. This formula was as the groom placed the ring on his bride's finger, he would say, "With this ring, I thee wed. With my body, I thee worship."

A little startling to us today, but historians of the English language tell us that the word ‘worship’ did not have the same connotation in earlier days that it does now. But these rather startling words underscore the important truth that marriage, and this is really true with any vocation, but is a true and especial, very particular way with their particular application in marriage, the truth that the vocation is lived out in the body. Married love is not just a meeting of minds. It involves the gift of one's whole self, body and soul. God created the human person with this bodily aspect precisely so that marriage could be a complete and comprehensive union; something only possible between a man and a woman in marriage, a communion of body, mind and soul, a communion which begets new life.

This is how it is that marriage is as God designed it to be: an image of the most Holy Trinity. Because we know from revealed truth that the love between Father and Son, their mutual love, mutual self-giving, sends forth the Holy Spirit who is the giver of life, who creates us and creates us to share that life of the Trinity forever. This is the nature of love. Love is always other-centered. It is outward-focused, not focused in on oneself. When that happens, the love dies.

But notice how it is that God gave us new and eternal life. The Spirit vivifies the Church, but the Church was founded by His Son who won our redemption by His sacrifice on the cross, the sacrifice which we prepare to celebrate in the most solemn way during the season of Lent that will culminate with the Holy Triduum at Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. So this brings us to another very important point, something you know better than I do, and this is that marital love has to be lived out in very concrete ways. And this is the point our Lord is getting at in the gospel reading we just heard. This is the end of the Sermon on the Mount, and he ends it on this very practical, pointed, perhaps a little bit uncomfortable, note: "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."

This is why God gives to each one of us a vocation, so that these lofty ideas and ideals don't remain up there in the abstract, but they're brought into the here-and-now in two very concrete ways where they have to be lived out, where they make a difference in our lives and where we feel the difference.

We could make a comparison with the bodily penance we do during Lent, right? We speak about penance and sacrifice. We observe this in very practical ways where we feel the difference with prayer and a fast and especially fasting and almsgiving. We feel the sacrifice giving alms. We feel the sacrifice because money is a very concrete reality. If we fast seriously, we feel that difference in the body, we feel the hunger pains that we do not satisfy to offer as an act of sacrificial love to God, out of repentance for our sins. Likewise, living out the vocation and in a particular way in the vocation of marriage as it's lived out in the body, the sacrifices you must make in order to persevere in your vocation, to continually give when it becomes hard and tiring, to forgive, to make the sacrifices for one another.

This is the only way to persevere in a vocation which is God's gift to us so that we can attain the happiness he wants us to have, which is the communion with Himself, the communion of the love of the Trinity, but it's lived out in these practical ways because that sacrifice creates with us an ever-deeper capacity for love, to give and receive love, and that's what makes possible communion.

Now, if I might just speak a few words for our Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters here.

 [Spanish 00:07:52 – 12:54]

 I wish to conclude simply by thanking you all for your perseverance in your vocation of marriage, a witness so important in the world today. I'm so deeply grateful for, and inspired by, those of you who have persevered a very long time. Some, I've been told, you have some 70 years of marriage, 72 years of marriage. When I think of this it makes me wonder, what am I doing here, standing here preaching to you about these truths? Your lives are witness to the power and beauty of these truths. Thank you for your perseverance in this vocation that the world needs so desperately today. And I pray that your vocation may help to create within you this capacity for an ever-deeper love and communion so that you may, in the words of St. Paul, glorify God in your body and that He may raise you up by His power to eternal life.