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## WITNESSES OF GOD'S LOVE (1)

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Today and in the coming weeks I shall give you excerpts of my Pentecost 2004 Pastoral Letter titled *Witnesses of God's Love*. May they help us understand more and more the beauty and greatness of the sacrament of matrimony.

### ELEVENTH PASTORAL LETTER

On the occasion of Pentecost, 2004, united to all the couples in the Diocese of Edmundston who have entered into a Christian marriage, in union also with all those who were sealed with the Holy Spirit when they were baptised and confirmed, I thank God also for His love which He showered in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. In this my eleventh annual pastoral letter, I want to praise the Holy Spirit for all the gifts he constantly raises up in our Church. Saint Paul the Apostle was right in saying: "There are different gifts but the same Spirit, there are different ministries but the same Lord; there are different works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone. To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good... It is one and the same Spirit who produces all these gifts, distributing them to each as he wills." (1 Cor. 12:4-11)

### CRIES FROM THE HEART

After having meditated together on the priestly vocation, in 2002 and on the vocation to consecrated life, in 2003, this year – as I mentioned at the beginning of the new millennium – I would like us to reflect together on the vocation of Christian marriage. It seems to me, in fact, that it is through a specific call of God that a couple celebrate marriage and are made in this way witnesses of Christ's love for humankind. The man and woman chosen receive the grace to show throughout their life together the Spirit they were given for the benefit of all. This divine Spirit accompanies every couple before, during, and after the celebration of their marriage commitment. He is the origin of all love. He binds together two altogether different beings in a communion of heart and mind. He makes the love exchanged and promised between them lasting. In the first part of this pastoral letter I shall give thanks for the seven gifts of the Spirit in relation with the reality experienced by couples. I shall then reflect on seven points of the Church's teaching on Christian love and on seven ways of strengthening the community of life and love which binds the couple. At the end of each chapter, the witness of couples will tell us of the joys and hopes, sorrows and difficulties they have experienced.

### GRACED WITH WONDERFUL GIFTS

Sacramental preparation gives us a very special opportunity to discover the richness of each of the sacraments. Wonderful work is being done in parishes to help the people better understand baptism, forgiveness, the Eucharist, and confirmation. However, there is often a long waiting period between the celebration of confirmation and matrimony. It is my hope that the following reflections bridge the distance between these two sacraments; I deem it of the utmost importance to clearly understand the vitality which the Holy Spirit has established in the hearts of every baptised and confirmed Christian.

## **SPirit of WiSDOM**

As we thank God for every gift received, we can discover how the seven gifts traditionally recognised by the Church are at work in every Christian marriage. The gift of wisdom helps us discern the presence of God at the heart of our lives. It is the gift that makes helps us welcome God as we welcome the sun's warming and life giving rays. It incites us to have an important place for God in our daily lives, and gives us a taste for God. It will sometimes take us months or even years to recognise the place of wisdom at the heart of our love. Holy Scripture shows us this presence at the very centre of Abraham and Sarah's marriage, the couple to whom was promised a posterity as numerous as the stars. It was the same with Rebekah and Isaac; the book of Genesis relates the story of this union which was willed by God, as well as other celebrated in the days of Isaac, Rachel, and Leah. According to God's word to Moses, the book of Leviticus has very severe prescriptions on married life: "I, the Lord, am your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you once lived... My decrees you shall carry out, and my statutes you shall take care to follow." The books of Wisdom, psalms, and of the Prophets shall repeat the sacred instructions. The book of Tobit has wonderful considerations on the place of God at the heart of every human union: "We are descendants of a holy people and we cannot come together like pagans who do not know God." After Tobias's prayer, Sarah prayed thus: "May we live together to a happy old age."

## **TESTIMONY: A COMMITMENT TO MUTUAL SUPPORT**

My wife Sandra and I were very happy to receive acknowledgement of our thirty years of marriage in the eyes of the Lord. Back in 1974, we were married by Father Normand Thibodeau, O.F.M. at St. Ann's Parish in Tobique First Nation. We are more than happy to share with others why we believe our union has lasted. First, coming from a strong Catholic community, we had the support of our families. This was very important. They supported us but they also had the wisdom to stay at arm's length so that Sandra and I would be able to work through difficult times. Many couples run to their respective families to gain support each time they have a disagreement, which to us only complicates reconciliation. Our parents would say: "You made your bed, you lie in it." We took that to mean that our disagreements didn't need outside interference. Secondly, we strongly believe in our marriage vows. The vows state that we support each other in good times and bad, whether we are rich or poor, in sickness and in health, until death do us part. Thirdly, we believe that the Holy Spirit and the gift of the Catholic faith enriches our lives. Today, in 2004, our marriage has shaped our emotional, spiritual, mental and physical beings as humans. We are more caring and respectful of our responsibilities as parents and grandparents. Each year we make a pilgrimage to Sainte-Anne- de-Beaupré with our grandchildren and other community elders to give thanks to Saint Anne for her intercession, and that of her husband. We realise that this trip is a historical venture by First Nation people. We see the importance of carrying on this tradition by showing our offspring the basilica in the hope that they will carry on long after Sandra and I are no longer able to continue our pilgrimage. Lastly, commitment to our marriage has made us stronger throughout the years. There is a saying that "there is more strength in numbers." Our immediate family – children and grandchildren – totals nine, and we are very proud of this." – Tim and Sandra

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