
WITNESSES OF GOD'S LOVE (3)



I hope that this third excerpt from my Pentecost 2004 pastoral letter help us better understand the beauty and greatness of Christian marriage.

SPRIT OF STRENGTH

This is perhaps the best-known and most sought-after gift! This is the gift which helps us courageously make decisions, overcome obstacles along the way, and change course if necessary. This is the gift which is attached to the duration of love, so that a couple continue to love one another even more intensely after five or sixty years of marriage, than on their wedding day. It is the gift which allows a couple to “last” despite adversity, trial, illness, and the major changes which occur in time. Every couple experiences growth pains. In order to grow while respecting each other's charisms and pursuing their vocation as a couple, the gift of strength is what is needed. So many examples come to mind when I think of couples who have been through major problems and have overcome them without mutually destroying one another. When the most beautiful dreams are broken because of illness, the death of one's beloved, loss of work, or accidents, fires, paralysis, or betrayal, so much strength is needed. The Spirit can give the gift of strength to start anew, to a couple that feels weak, powerless, and sometimes unfaithful. Today more than ever, the couple needs extraordinary strength to witness to its faith and hope, to its convictions and values. The gift of strength enables the couple to witness at all time to Christ's love for humankind.

SPRIT OF WORSHIP AND PRAISE

Worship and praise is such a wonderful gift! It is the gift which enables us to acknowledge God in all confidence when He makes himself known to us, to pray to Him in simplicity, and to thank Him for the wonders He works on our behalf. It is an extraordinary gift which enables us to say “Thank you” to God and to our brothers and sisters, a gift which allows us to experience awe for the love that God has for each and everyone of us, and for the love we bear one another. In accepting life and love, there is a breath of well-being and of freedom which calls the couple to gratitude and prayer. Sister Emmanuelle, the Rag-Picker of Cairo, had this prayer: “Lord, help me look into the sun-drenched face of each one I live with. It is at times so hard for me to overlook their irritating defects rather than focussing on the living qualities they have and which I enjoy without my being aware of them. Help me also, Lord, to look into your sun-drenched face even in the worst events. There is not one person who cannot be the source of some goodness still hidden from me.” It is really a grace to work only for the good, the beautiful, and the real; it is a grace to seek in every human being – especially in one's spouse – the spark placed there by God in creating us in His image. It is a exalted gift that opens us to the invisible reality, so that nothing shakes the optimism of those who believe and hope in God and in their fellow brothers and sisters.

ENLIGHTENED BY A LIFE-GIVING TEACHING

In this part of the pastoral letter on the vocation of marriage, in seven points I would like to recall the Church's invaluable teaching as formulated by the Second Vatican Council, the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Family *Familiaris Consortio*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the pastoral messages of our Church, especially those of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB). The Canadian bishops reaffirmed in September, 2003 that marriage is a human reality, a natural institution which predates social, legal, and religious systems. Marriage has existed since time immemorial. Marriage predates our present government or any other, as well as the founding of the Church. Marriage is not the creature of State or Church, and neither a government nor the Church has authority to change its nature. This form of life for couples has always been valued and protected as an institution because of its unique character, its way of ordering human relationships, and its procreative potential. Marriage between a woman and a man constitutes

a unique good for all society. It has a fundamental and irreplaceable role in building societies and civilizations. The social value of marriage comes from its role as a stabilizing force for the family, which in turn is the basic unit of society. The conjugal partnership of a man and a woman has always been considered to be the basis of the family, providing a stable and positive environment in which to care for children and so educate future generations.

CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

The biblical text on the creation of the world in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis uses poetic imagery to convey fundamental truths about humanity. Two major points can be taken from this text which offer profound understanding of the conjugal state. First, God gives human beings freedom, fertility, power, and the stewardship of all the earth and everything that inhabits it. Secondly, human beings are created in God's image: "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). This is the wellspring of the dignity, meaning and life of the human being. The image of God is manifested in both a personal and a conjugal way. In Genesis 1:31, this image of God is the pinnacle of creation which leads to its fullness: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." The image and likeness of God is not only in the very nature of the couple, but also in their power to give life through procreation.

TESTIMONY: WITH AGING, OUR LOVE HAS GROWN

I would pray every day for the ideal husband. My intention had always been to have a family because I loved children very much. After meeting Gilbert, frequenting one another for two years helped us get to know and love one another. At the time there were no marriage preparation courses, but there was prayer. During the five months we were engaged we promised to pray every day the "Prayer for Engaged Couples" and to make a weekend retreat: both of us wanted our marriage to be successful. We were married in 1952. I was 20, and Gilbert was 21. It was a marriage of love. The vow made before God to love one another despite adversity was sincere. Times were rather hard, at first, but the birth of our first child was greeted as a gift from heaven. My husband had to go to the United States to find work in the woods. We had a great trust in God who helped us through difficult times. Our greatest sorrow was the death of our eldest son at age 5, hit by a car before our eyes, on Easter Sunday of 1960. This was a difficult cross to bear, and the pain is still there. Faith in God and love of one another helped us through and live for our other children. Our greatest joy is our 8 surviving children, 18 grandchildren, and 4 great-grandchildren. We would love to see them grow in the faith and in the love of God, but our materialistic times often make them forget the essential. We place our children in the hands of the Lord and continue to pray for them, welcome them, and set an example. With aging, our love has grown. It is possible to still love one another today because God has pride of place in our lives and we are always able to forgive one another. All along the way we have kept the flame burning through prayer and spiritual weekends: Marriage Encounter, couples meetings, Bible study, and Cursillos. We have also been Grey Nuns Associates for a number of years, with a special commitment to the needy. In this way we share with others: this is our way of giving thanks to God.

– Lorraine and Gilbert

+ François Thibodeau

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.
Bishop of Edmundston

« From A Bishop's Journal » (550) (20 July 2004)