

[Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 128; Hebrews 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-16]

Throughout the United States this weekend, we observe our annual “Respect Life” Sunday. We also begin October as Respect Life Month, and the Month of Our Lady’s Holy Rosary. It is a reminder of the call each responsible Catholic has to address the moral dilemmas of how to care for our aging members, the value of the unborn, the rightful place of those who are mentally or physically different, the rights of the undocumented, and our responsibility toward the economically disadvantaged. To protect the sanctity of marriage and family life. And to preserve the identity, the integrity, and the value of men and women.

To understand the Church’s teaching on marriage, we need to go back to the beginning, to the issue of complementarity which we find providentially in today’s First Reading and in today’s Gospel. We have to heal the rift in our mindset that some are born to win and others to lose; that one kind of person is more valuable than another. This might be another one of our “original sins” -- that we have failed at partnership in favor of power. Men and women are equal. But they are not identical. They are complementary. Our culture forgets that.

In an address at the Knights of Columbus Supreme Convention, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York, shared some great insights into a forgotten treasure in our midst: the sacramental marriages that we find in every parish community. That would be most of you folks! He said, “We still hold fast to the teaching of the Bible that God so esteems marriages that He compares His personal, passionate, eternal love for Israel to that between a husband and wife. St. Paul likewise tells us that the love of Jesus for us, His Church, is just like that of a groom for his bride.”

He goes on, “The lofty, divine luster of marriage can at times be tarnished a bit in the day-in, day-out challenges of lifelong, life-giving, faithful love. Tension, trial, temptation, turmoil – they come indeed. But just as Jesus worked His first miracle at the request of His Blessed Mother at Cana by turning water into wine, so too does Jesus transform those choppy waters of tension, trial, temptation and turmoil into a vintage wine of tried-and-true trust in marriage.”

He then goes on to say that the vocations response crisis to the priesthood, diaconate and religious life can be reversed if we “pray for, promote and foster lifelong, faithful and life-giving marriages.”

He even proposes that as we often include a petition for vocations in the Universal Prayer – which used to be called the Prayer of the Faithful or the General Intercessions – we should also include a petition for a vocations response by those men and women called to such good and strong sacramental marriages. Historians, sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists all agree that the normative relationship for a man and woman’s existence is that of husband, wife, father and mother; and then home, industry, finance, culture, society and governing structures are more easily directed to virtue, responsibility and the restraint of the primitive lust and selfishness that wreak civilization.

Destroyed marriages mean destroyed families; destroyed families means destroyed neighborhoods; destroyed neighborhoods means destroyed cities, and destroyed cities means a destroyed nation.

Divorce, when it occurs, is not a sin. Marriages end for a lot of reasons that may include occasions and habits of sin, but the civil action of divorce does not negate a Catholic’s standing with the church. (The Council of Baltimore in 1843 did call for excommunicating the divorced, but that censure was removed by the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884.) Anyone convicted by a sense of moral wrongdoing, including individuals whose marriages have ended, should feel welcome to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Many believe they are automatically excommunicated if they remarry after divorce. The American bishops lifted that excommunication in 1977.

Whenever I begin marriage preparation with an engaged couple, I ask them to begin praying the answer to these two questions: “Is God calling me at this time in my life to the sacrament of marriage?” And, “Is God calling me to the vocation of sacramental marriage with this person?”

Divorce among Catholic couples is only about 1/3, whereas the national average is now 55% among couples in general.

I submit that if every engaged couple asked themselves these two questions, there would be far more sacramental marriages, and fewer divorces. Because you are doing not only what YOU want to do, but you are doing what GOD wants you to do. That is the secret to a valid, sacramental marriage!

A couple married 50 years was asked the secret of their marriage. The husband said, "To keep our relationship fresh, we go out twice a week. I go out on Tuesday nights, and she goes out on Thursday nights!

To keep the flame of faith alive in your marriage, I ask you to consider the various retreat opportunities for married couples, such as Marriage Encounter.

You will learn why marriage is reflected in nature and in the Church as the union of one man (Christ) to one woman (the Church.) And how if that is truly a sacramental union, it can never be broken.

And here is the key. If through the annulment process, a marriage is proven not to be truly a sacramental union, even if it takes place in a Catholic church before three priests, then the Catholic parties are free to attempt marriage again in the Catholic Church. The annulment says that the union was a legal union; that all children of that union are very much legitimate offspring, and that the divorced person was not automatically excommunicated as some people think.

This month, look at and pray our Joyful, Luminous, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries of the Most Holy Rosary. Meditate on them with a different twist. For they reflect events not only in the lives of Jesus and Mary but also parallel events in the lives of each one of us and of all who experience joy and light, sorrow and glory in this world and in the next.

May Mary, our Blessed Mother and the Protector of all life, pray for us, intercede for us, guide us and shield us with her motherly love. AMEN!