

My Brothers and Sisters,

As the number of priests continues to decrease and their age continues to increase, there is much debate in the Church today about mandatory celibacy for priests in the Roman Rite. One argument for mandatory celibacy is that an unmarried priest can be more devoted to the service of God and his parishioners than a married priest with a family. There is certainly truth in this. However, it should be noted that married Eastern Rite Catholics are permitted to become priests. Likewise, when married Episcopalian priests or married Lutheran ministers convert to Catholicism, they can be ordained as married priests in the Roman Rite.

Traditionally, today's reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians has been used to argue that celibacy or virginity is a higher calling than marriage. Just this past week, I received a model homily for today that continued to make that argument. However, we have to read this passage in its context. At the time when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he and the early Church believed Christ's return in glory was imminent. If Christ's return was imminent, an unmarried person would be more free to devote himself or herself to preparing for his coming. However, we also know that Paul changed his position. In his later letter to the Ephesians, for example, Paul called married couples to make their relationship a mirror image of Christ's relationship with the Church.

A speaker once said that the Second Vatican Council rediscovered marriage as a sacrament. Neither celibacy nor consecrated virginity nor the single vocation is a sacrament. Since next Sunday is World Marriage Day, today is a good day to reflect briefly on the sacrament of matrimony or marriage. The Church's teaching on the sacramentality of marriage can be rooted in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 5, after calling husbands and wives to make their relationship the mirror image of the relationship between Christ and the Church, Paul concluded, "*This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church*" [5:32].

Christian marriage provides a dramatic sign of Christ's love for the Church. The love of Christian man and woman for each other in marriage both symbolizes and embodies Christ's love for the Church. In other words, when Christian husbands and wives love each other in marriage, their love is not only a sign of Christ's love for the Church but also makes that love real and present in our world today.

If Christian couples who love each other are the sign and realization of Christ's love for the Church, Christian husbands and wives who do not love each other not only do not make visible and present Christ's love for the Church. They become countersigns and effectively block his presence in the world. For example, it is very difficult for children who do not experience love in their family to understand and believe in God's love for them.

My brothers and sisters, in all the sacraments, Christ is dynamically present during the celebration of the sacrament. The Eucharist, however, is a permanent sacrament. In other words, once the bread and wine have become the Body and Blood of Christ, they remain the Body and Blood of Christ as long as they remain in the form of bread and wine. Of all the sacraments, marriage is most like the Eucharist. Even in the very best marriages, the love of a couple at the beginning of the marriage is like tinsel that must mature into deep gold. As the love of the couple matures and deepens, Christ's love for us is made more visible and more present in our world. There are few things more inspiring than an older couple who still very obviously love and are in love with each other. May we always be grateful to all the married couples in our lives and in our parish who make Christ's love for us real and present to us.