



## DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



### THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE: A GREAT UNTAPPED LIFE-SPRING Archdiocese of Houston, Texas

Note: This was given at a Conference sponsored by the Office of Family Life in the Archdiocese of Houston, Texas.

Dear friends gathered here this morning,

I am truly grateful for Cardinal DiNardo and Deacon Arturo for their invitation to this important conference. Before I begin to speak about the topic at hand, I would like to share with you some of my pastoral background and experience over the years and how it is related to the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. I bring with me nearly thirty years of priestly ministry, and much of it has been "woven together" into the fabric of the lives of many married couples. After my ordination, I was sent to Rome where I earned a doctorate in Canon Law from the *Angelicum* (The Pontifical Dominican University in Rome), and then for nearly 15 years I worked in the Marriage Tribunal of the Diocese of Springfield Illinois, in the Marriage Tribunal (both in the diocese and on the Appellate Court) in a variety of roles. I was involved in Pre-Cana, Marriage Encounter, Marriage Preparation classes, NFP, Ministry to the Divorced and Separated (DASC), Remarriage Ministry, and Retrouvaille. More recently, I have been a member of the U.S. Bishops' committee on Marriage, Laity, Family Life and Youth Ministry, and just recently I accepted the position of Episcopal Conference Liaison to the national group for Divorce and Separated Catholics. With that are the many weddings, con-validations and radical sanctions that I have celebrated and assisted with over the years.

As any pastor or parish priest, I have had many couples come to the rectory door when it seemed as if all else had failed in their lives. These situations, along with what I have read in many marriage cases, certainly showed their share of pain and sometimes violence which had replaced hopes and dreams; more often than not these situations revealed a superficial lack of faith and daily prayer in the lives of these couples that allowed problems to overtake them.

I am fortunate to still celebrate about five or six weddings a year as a bishop. Since a significant part of my life and ministry had been marriage preparation and the weddings themselves, I truly missed those moments in my first year or so as a bishop. I have been blessed by many friendships with married couples, and have baptized the children of quite a few couples whose marriages I witnessed: both in Illinois and now in Fort Worth. In all of these moments I have been able to see the parallels and related struggles between the Sacrament of Holy Orders and the Sacrament of Marriage.

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The title of the reflection that was suggested to me was "The Sacrament of Marriage: A Great Untapped Life-Spring" in the context of a conference on marriage and family in what is called the social and media age. [Please note that I am using an iPad for this lecture....easier than carrying around a legal pad!]

At first glance one might wonder how these two titles go together, but they can, as you know. In this media age when our human contacts are more often via Facebook, and texting, blogs [even though I now write one] and e-mails [which I reluctantly use, even though I said that I never would], the ability to form lasting human and spiritual relationships, face-to-face, seems to be diminishing. I wonder if the life giving spring of the Sacrament of Marriage is not the real "LIVE" life-giving witness and example of married couples in all stages of life whether in the family of the church or in the community of our daily life? Real marriages and real moments in couples and family life are not found in a text book, in the pages of theological and catechetical and canonical journals....even as important as they must be to us. Real examples and real models of faith are "Incarnational" when our beliefs become reflected in our lives by examples of faith, hope, and love, sometimes against the most impossible situations.

I am going to couch this reflection in the analogy of music and art. Music first:

If you have ever been to a symphony concert, you know that the orchestra must tune up first. Usually there is a lot of noise and it is very dissonant before the music and the program become clear and in focus, and the beauty of the composer's work is finally revealed through the cacophony of "tuning up."

With the title of this reflection being "The Sacrament of Marriage: A Great Untapped Life-Spring," there is a lot of background noise, distraction and dissonance that surround us today. The challenge for us is to acknowledge the noise and what it is, but with the help of God, let the music of the stages of married life pull the dissonance together into tune, so as to hear and see what is truly from God amidst the din. Your lives, in all stages of marriage can do that!

The din, the noise and the cacophony that can distract us certainly include the challenges to the nature and purpose of marriage, lack of understanding of how this comes from the natural law and God, and the efforts to reshape and redefine it to the culture of the times through legislative and other efforts. It can also push out any notion of the supernatural or the presence of God that allow us to see marriage as coming from God and any part of the plan of God for humanity. The pain and failure of divorce, the loss of faith, the seemingly difficult challenges to live the virtue of chastity, whatever one's state of life may be, and the inability to respect boundaries, outside and within the Church show a lack of civility and charity, and even sometimes for the most Catholic. Some pursue their own thoughts and ideas without regard to what is called the "communio of the Church", and then react negatively and mean spirited to others who approach matters differently, resulting in ongoing internal dissonance and lack of charity within the Body of Christ. That is the dissonance that surrounds the Sacrament of Marriage. Certainly many of these matters must be dealt with forthrightly and

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courageously on a one-to-one basis, through our catechetical and evangelical works, and in our legislatures as we bring our voice of Faith to the "public square."

But, if we think about the title of what I was asked to speak about, I wonder if we could find a way for the Sacrament of Marriage, in all of its moments, from the beginning to the end of life, to bring into tune with God, the elements that are out of tune in other marriages and other lives. You can do that. I have on my desk at home a plaque that belonged to my aunt which reads "A life that is in harmony with God is keyed to the note of love." Thus, the Symphony composed by the hand of God in the lives of married couples, in all of their stages, is what is to rise above, with clear and beautiful notes. The symphony of the "life-spring!"

This image can also be found in art. Recently, I had the privilege to bless some new stained glass windows in one of our parishes, Holy Redeemer Catholic Church in Aledo, Texas. These windows were some of the finest and most beautiful stained glass windows that I had seen in years. They depicted the celebration of the Sacraments with real people, the geography and scenery of Texas in the background, and Texas wildflowers in all seasons. For example, the window with the Sacrament of Baptism show the bluebonnets which are now in season! The windows with the theme of dawn is surrounding the celebration of Baptism, and finishes with a sunset reflecting on the the image of the sacramental celebration of the Anointing of the Sick at sunset. This portrayal of the Sacramental life of the Church with a life-giving stream in the background, not only reflects this conference, but the new translation of Eucharistic Prayer III, when we will soon hear "From the rising of the Sun to its setting." From the dawn of the first moments of proposal and engagement leading to marriage; to the sun crossing the horizon in the early and middle years of the marriage covenant; to the heat of the sun in the middle years, to the sunset at the time when the many years of marriage end in this life as the couple are called home to the Lord...this is a symphony; it is a work of art in the hands of God. A composer and artist who created this reality for us--not us. The life giving spring of marriage should be the symphony that is lived each stage of married life; or the portrait painted by the Hand of God. We are not.

Interestingly enough in these windows, the faces all look toward the Tabernacle, the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament-reflecting the foundation of our Faith, that marriage is interiorly ordained to Jesus Christ; He is the Bond between God and his people, that is shown in the bond of marriage; and Jesus is the Source of all grace.

I would like to share with you some brief vignettes of marriages from whom I knew and know. They, for me, show this symphony of the great untapped life-spring of Marriage at all moments, that can be shared with all, and taught to all who cross paths.

There certainly is a place for a direct more confrontational approach to the noise and din surrounding the sacrament of marriage, but I believe these moments speak, teach and witness more clearly, and offer a window of conversion and grace in a positive manner that has a longer lasting effect. They also help to heal the discord and division within the Body of Christ, and also reflect, I believe, the recent words of Pope Benedict XVI in his second volume of Jesus of Nazareth:

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"In contrast to the cattle trading and money-changing, Jesus his healing goodness. This is the true cleansing of the Temple. Jesus does not come as a destroyer. He does not come bearing the sword of a revolutionary. He comes with the gift of healing. He turns toward those who, because of their afflictions, have been driven to the margins of life and society. He reveals God as the one who loves and his power is the power of God."

Marriage as a great untapped life-spring at dawn: the engagement

A. Experience of engagement: *El Nacimiento*; The Blessed Sacrament

What is the life-spring here for those who observed this, or those whom this couple will know?

- 1) Pray before all else (Tobit)
- 2) Our Savior Encounters Christian spouses (CCC 1642)
- 3) The first steps to holiness as a couple (FC 34)

B. Marriage as an untapped Life-Spring at early morning: the first years of marriage

- 1) Circumstances of meeting: "Come back in a year"
- 2) Going to Communion; why not: the importance the Eucharist
- 3) Work with them; explanation of contraception
- 4) Reception into the Church/validation of marriage
- 5) Additional children
- 6) They become involved in the parish; great enthusiasm...and bring others with them

"The moral dimensions the Sacrament of Marriage; the evangelistic nature of Marriage; Love of spouse and love of children; The performing of good acts in the *Catechism*; A life-giving spring for the parish.

C. A great untapped life Spring at midday: Families I have known for 25 years

- 1) Circumstances of meeting: Pastoral considerations....previous marriage: importance of Tribunal ministry
- 2) Baptism of first children

In the neighborhood and in the community and parish involvement; a life-giving spring for the community - drawing of others in.

JP II: FC 45: Family and society that compliment each other

D. A life giving Spring at late afternoon: marriages at "maturity"

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Opening and locking of Church each day; praying for the students; spouse becoming Catholic....example  
Seven children and grandchildren surrounding the husband/father at death;

JP II: Letter to families: A communion of parents and children spanning several generations

E. A life-giving spring in the evening of life

My own grandparents; Married in 1915;

What they saw: WW I; The Roaring Twenties; The depression; WW II; loss of a child at birth; helped my parents with us; my grandfather becoming Catholic;

Married 64 years; their passing into eternity was only separated by nine months.  
Reflection of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church 1642*

Each of these couples were married (or will be) in the Church at the beginning of their marriage, or into their civil marriages. All realized that the Lord had to enter and be part of their marriage covenant...yet it was not always an instant moment of conversion...but a gradually dawning of the light for some. For that life-giving spring to be just that, the marriage covenant must be made in the sight of God. A recognition that the symphony or work of art is not theirs, but it is God's. The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony witnesses the desire of humanity to have an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. The words in the Rite of Marriage calls the couple to "Join their right hands and declare their consent before God."

The mistaken notion within society is that a man and woman can fill each others' needs without the supernatural. These couples either knew that was not right, or came to that realization at some point in their lives. They are living witnesses - that life-giving spring - of the 'why' and the necessity of being 'married in the Church' and they would tell you that themselves.

The *Catechism* reflects this way:

"The love of spouses requires, of its very nature the unity and indissolubility of the spouses' community of persons, which embraces their entire life: so they are no longer two but one flesh. They are called to grow continually in their communion through day to day fidelity to their marriage promise of total mutual self-giving. This human communion is confirmed, purified, and completed by communion in Jesus Christ, given through the Sacrament of Matrimony. It is deepened by lives of the common faith and the Eucharist received together." (CCC 1644)

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It is important to certainly know the *Catechism*, and the richness of the magisterial teaching on the Sacrament of Marriage. Technology can help us have these at hand for instant reference. Yet, technology can never be a substitute for the lived out reality and witness of the Sacrament. And the printed words of the *Catechism* are important, but all the more so is the evangelization given by actual married couples, some of which I mentioned above. You can touch an application on an iPhone and iPad and instantly find what you are looking for. To experience that "great untapped life-giving spring of the Sacrament of Marriage" is more than an application; it is a life time journey to the Lord, in which couples show us the way and call us to do the same.

The *New American Bible* has a brief commentary on *Ephesians* Chapter 5 when it says that St. Paul "Exhorts married Christians to a strong mutual love. Holding with *Genesis* 2:24, that marriage is a divine institution, Paul sees Christian marriage as taking on a new meaning symbolic of the intimate relationship of love between Christ and the Church." From this the life-giving-spring of God's grace and life can flow out to others, and be the clearest voice to those around them of the presence of Christ in marriage. Let us thank couples who do that for us, and the communion of Faith at all stages of life, from morning to evening, sunrise to sunset.

God bless you always,  
+ Most Reverend Bishop Kevin Vann

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