

MASS OF THANKSGIVING FOR MARRIED LIFE
ST CHAD'S CATHEDRAL 3 FEBRUARY 2019

There are three things that last...and the greatest of these is love.

Yesterday I celebrated a Mass of Thanksgiving here in the Cathedral for all the Religious brothers and sisters in the Archdiocese. A number of them were celebrating the jubilees of their Religious profession as they re-committed themselves to their vows. All of us were giving thanks for the vocation that called them into Religious life.

Today we are celebrating the vocation to married life – a vocation that can never be solitary for it takes two to enter into the holy pact of matrimony – but also a relationship and vocation that finds its fullest and richest expression in a sacrament. As you know, the Church's sacraments are not simply occasions. They are events built upon our relationship with Jesus Christ – moments when he has touched our lives in a way that has transformed them for ever.

The vocation to married life rests on the foundation of a virtue. In his First Letter to the Corinthians St Paul speaks of the three theological virtues: faith, hope and love. Anyone who commits the whole of life to another beloved person in marriage needs all three of these enduring virtues. Faith has played its part in uniting you in a sacrament and in keeping you close to one another as married disciples of the Lord. Hope gave you the original inspiration that foresaw a life together, a future home and family.

But St Paul says *the greatest of these is love*. As married couples you teach the rest of the Church what is truly meant by love, because we believe that you are the sacrament of Christ's love for his bride, the Church. In the shared lives and experience of every married couple we see a reflection of the love of Jesus Christ for all the baptised. That is an essential part of your vocation and one of its consequences is that the Church needs the insights of married people to understand her own mission better and to express it.

This was powerfully demonstrated to me last August when I joined a hundred and fifty pilgrims from the Archdiocese at the World Gathering of Families in Dublin. For several days we listened carefully – as clergy and lay faithful united together in prayer - to the wonderful testimony of married couples and families about the lived reality of their lives. We reflected on the challenges that they face today and the ways they have learnt to live by Gospel values in an increasingly secular society. In his Apostolic Constitution *Amoris Laetitia* Pope Francis puts it this way: *The tenderness and compassion they experience helps them grow in confidence and self-esteem, and see the world as a good and welcoming place.*

The world is where you witness as married couples to the love of Jesus Christ for the Church, and through the Church for all people. It is the world of your home, the homes of your family and friends, your neighbourhood, your parish community, your place of work, the places where you shop or seek recreation, the school or the sports-field. In all of these and in many other places you are witnessing to your faith. Simply by being present together you are communicating the love of God.

Dear friends, if I offer any observations about married life today which actually reflect your experience it can only be because I have learnt something from my parents and from the married couples in my family, among my friends and in the Church. One thing that is clear is that the pathway of married life is not perpetually strewn with roses, like a Valentine's-day card. But the struggles, challenges and temptations that you encounter can add depth to the joys that you share together.

As you reflect Christ's love for the Church you will also echo some of the challenges that he faced. Today's Gospel offers us an example, where he reflects sadly that *no prophet is ever accepted in his own country*. Home truths are not always easy to accept and act upon.

Pope Francis says that each spouse helps the other to become more truly the person that God has created you to be. In *Amoris Laetitia* he writes: *Might we say that the greatest mission of two people in love is to help one another become, respectively, more a man and more a woman? Fostering growth means helping a person to shape his or her own identity*. There is a profound respect for the dignity of each individual in the Holy Father's insight, but also a realisation that this rests upon the ability to communicate, to keep on talking to one another about the joys and the sorrows, *for better and for worse*.

If I may offer you one final quotation from *Amoris Laetitia* it is the Holy Father's thoughts about the importance of communicating. He says: *Communication is an art learned in moments of peace in order to be practised in moments of difficulty. Spouses need help in discovering their deepest thoughts and feelings and expressing them. Like childbirth, this is a painful process that brings forth a new treasure*. There is much food for thought there.

I am conscious that for some today's celebration may highlight an absence or loss in their own lives. While we rejoice with all our couples renewing their commitment today, we also remember those who have lost their spouses or those weighed down by failed relationships. We pray that the bereaved may draw comfort from the memory of shared blessings and joys – and that those who struggle may be supported and helped to find a new way forward in their lives.

So I now invite those who are renewing their commitment to the vows of marriage to stand and I invite each couple to face one another, as husbands and wives prepare to make your declaration together.