

**Anniversary Mass for Couples Married 50 or More Years  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**

**The Twenty-Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)  
September 25, 2011**

**+ Thomas John Paprocki  
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, beloved husbands and wives celebrating fifty years or more of married life, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The last novel that Jane Austen wrote was called *Persuasion*. It is less well known than her *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, but it continues Jane Austen's great theme of love triumphing over social conventions. In *Persuasion* the heroine, Anne Elliot, regrets breaking off an engagement eight years earlier to a young naval officer, Frederick Wentworth. When she meets him again she becomes aware of how she had been foolishly persuaded to give him up by those around her. Then, she was the daughter of a wealthy baronet, and he was a poor sailor. Her friends and family warned her away from marrying a man who was not worthy of her status. By the time the novel begins, her family has fallen

upon hard times through her own father's foolishness, whilst her ex-fiancé has become a wealthy and successful captain.

The novel details how they meet again and shows how awkward their communication is. Neither talks about their feelings and they both try to avoid one another. As the novel progresses, Anne's regret becomes all the greater as she admires Captain Wentworth more. Eventually he is persuaded that she still loves him when he overhears her in conversation with a friend. He reveals his true feelings and they finally marry.

On one hand the novel is a romance, but it is also a clever and witty exposé of the morals and manners of its time. It shows how society is primarily concerned with status and wealth at the cost of feelings of love or happiness.

In the present day when so many marriages sadly do not last, couples whose marriages have withstood the test of time are often asked about the secret to a long and happy marriage. Various answers are proposed, ranging from the more profound suggestion of never going to bed angry with your spouse to the more humorous suggestion of always letting the wife be right.

In today's second reading taken from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Philippians he suggests the true secret to a long and happy marriage: "Have in you the same attitude that is also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

Writing to the Ephesians, Saint Paul instructed wives, saying, "As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject to their husbands" (Ephesians 5:24). At the same time, he instructed husbands, saying, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25-27).

The relationship, then, between Christian spouses is built upon their individual relationships with Christ; in him, a Christian husband and wife are bound together in his love and become one. Because the bond of husband and wife binds them in Christ Jesus they can – indeed, they must! – have in them the same attitude that is in him. But what is this attitude?

In the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, it is described as justice and forgiveness. In the second reading, Saint Paul

describes it as humility and self-emptying love. In the Gospel, it could be described as patience and self-sacrifice.

Each of these qualities and characteristics that together, as it were, make up the attitude that is in Christ Jesus are ever present necessities for a successful and happy marriage. You, dear husbands and wives, know this well.

The Apostle today shows us, in a sort of summary fashion, the way to put this attitude before us each day: “Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but also for those of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

Commenting on this passage in the early part of the fourth century, Marius Victorinus said:

If we think only of ourselves, we may act for our own benefit and bother only with our own affairs, our hope, our own deliverance. But this is not enough. We are truly acting for ourselves if we also have a concern for others and strive to be of benefit to them. For since we are all one body, we look out for ourselves when we look out for others.<sup>1</sup>

This is especially true for those of you, who, through the bond of matrimony, have truly “become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). By caring more

about the good of your spouse than your own good, you actually care for your own good because in God's loving and mysterious plan of salvation you are bound together as one and bear in your marriage the imprint of divine love.<sup>2</sup>

When I first toured this Diocese after my installation as your Bishop last year, I expressed in the seven Deaneries my vision for the future of this Diocese. In part, I said: "I see communities where family life is valued, homes with a mother and a father who love their children and whose children love them; parents who educate and form their children and themselves in the Catholic faith."<sup>3</sup> Each of you has had and continue to have an important role to play in the fulfillment of this vision.

Throughout the many years of your married lives you have remained faithful to the promises you made before God and before the Church. I am deeply grateful to you for your fidelity and for your examples of sacrificial love. I am also grateful to Almighty God who, through the many outpourings of his grace, has made it possible for you to remain faithful to one another. With great happiness, I congratulate you on the fine witness you have given to the world.

At the same time, I call upon you to renew your commitment to be for the world the mirror of God's love for his Bride, the Church.<sup>4</sup> In an age ever more consumed by individualism and self-gratification, the world desperately needs to learn the joy and beauty that come from a life lived from the attitude that is in Christ. Yes, dear husbands and wives, be neither afraid nor ashamed to show the world that a life of mutual self-giving is possible, indeed, that it is necessary!

I urge you to speak with couples married only a few years and to those seeking to be married. Help them to understand the fundamental beauty and goals of marriage. Help them to deepen their relationships with Christ and to unite themselves with his sufferings. Help them to be faithful to God and to one another in every circumstance of life.

With your help and guidance, and following the witness of your own married lives, many more couples will come to know the joy of a long married life. In this way, the world will have many mirrors reflecting God's love for his people and the message of salvation will be spread far and wide.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Marius Victorinus, *Epistle to the Philippians 2.2-5*. In *Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture, New Testament Vol. VIII: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*. Mark J. Edwards et al, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1999), 224.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Preface C in *Rite of Marriage*.

<sup>3</sup> Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki, Homily for the Deanery Masses of Welcome, September 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Preface C in *Rite of Marriage*.