

**Homily for Mass for Couples Celebrating 50 Years of Marriage or More  
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**

**September 7, 2014  
23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, for more than seventy-five years, the Harvard Medical School has been conducting a study on men to determine the factors that lead to an optimum life. The Grant Study, as it is commonly known, has tracked the lives of more than 250 men for three-quarters of a century to see how various life experiences and the passing of time has contributed to or detracted from a life of fulfillment and happiness. When asked what he learned from the Grant Study, the chief researcher replied simply “[t]hat the only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people.”<sup>1</sup> In another interview, he put it even more clearly and simply when he affirmed that the key to a good life was love.<sup>2</sup>

As Christians, such a study seems unnecessary, for it is at the very center of our beliefs that relationships rooted in love are the key to life. We hear this in our second reading from the letter of St. Paul to the Romans,

where he writes: "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8). Love should find its place in every relationship in our lives, first of all in our relationship with God, then in our relationship with ourselves and others. Being made in the image and likeness of God, who Himself is love<sup>3</sup>, we most authentically express and live our identity when guided by His love. Although this love is expressed in various ways, one of the most significant and profound ways is in the mutual love between man and woman as they image the "absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man."<sup>4</sup>

Today, we celebrate that great gift of love which has been the bond that has united so many of you for fifty or more years in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. It is truly inspiring to see so many of you who have lived many years of marital fidelity and love. I am fairly confident in saying that your understanding of love for more than half a century has matured and that as you look back over your many years together, you can appreciate just how powerful that love has been in assisting you to navigate the ups and downs of a life lived together.

We are all well aware of the many challenges that the institution of marriage faces in our society today. These challenges have caught the attention of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, as he has made the decision to host a gathering of bishops in Rome, known as a synod, to address some of these difficulties facing marriage and the family in our world today. In preparation for the synod which begins next month, a document was produced to provide some observations gathered from throughout the world “on the present-day situation of the family, on the challenges of the family and on the reflections related to the family today.”<sup>5</sup> In that document, it was noted that “a key point in fostering an authentic, incisive pastoral program for the family seems ultimately to rest on a couple’s witness of life.”<sup>6</sup>

This point makes good sense because we know how much easier it is, especially in our modern times, to get a point across by means of a physical example. While presenting the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family has an important role to play in promoting a culture which embraces those teachings, the witness value of those who are living that teaching is absolutely essential. The document speaks of promoting

marriage and family life by following the “way of beauty, namely, by a witness which attracts others simply because the family lives the Gospel and is constantly in union with God. This entails ‘showing that to believe in and follow him [Christ] is not only something right and true, but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendor and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties.’”<sup>7</sup>

Father Robert Barron has spoken of this type of approach to spreading the faith and the importance of showing people the beauty of the faith before trying to overwhelm them with all of the various teachings of the faith. He draws an analogy to baseball where he says that if you want to explain the game to somebody, you start by allowing them to experience the beauty of the game. You do not start by trying to explain the infield fly rule. This is the principle behind what the Church envisions with regards to marriage, by first showing forth its beauty for all to see.

In our celebration today, we celebrate the fact that your marital commitment to one another shines forth as a beautiful example for the whole Church to see. In a time when divorce has become such a regular occurrence, you show to young couples that it is possible to remain

married to the same person, even when that marriage encounters difficult circumstances. It is also beautiful to see how, as time goes by and our physical bodies grow weak under the burden of years, your love for one another shines forth as you learn to rely on one another more and more to help each other to do even the most ordinary tasks. Your dependence upon one another is a visible sign of how your lives are intimately tied to one another and how important that love is which bonds you together. This very point is captured by the study that I mentioned which observed that husbands and wives truly grow more precious to each other as they enter the twilight of their lives.

In this work of the New Evangelization of the Church, the role that you play is very important. You may not necessarily think of yourselves as evangelizers, but you are because of the witness that you provide to the beauty of marriage. Your effectiveness in promoting the Church's teaching on marriage rivals that of the most learned scholars in theology because you give flesh to the concepts being proposed. Moreover, since the institution of marriage and family is one of the most basic cells of our society, few witnesses can be as valuable as that which you have provided

and will continue to provide until the Lord welcomes you home at the end of your lives.

As we continue our celebration of the Eucharist, a word which means “thanksgiving,” we give profound thanks to God for the gift of His love, which has strengthened you to remain in that love with Him and one another for so many years. We pray that the Lord will continue to bless all of you for your faithfulness to this gift of which you have been good stewards. We also pray that, by your witness, many people will come to see the beauty of marriage and commit themselves to it with renewed confidence, believing that marriage is indeed good and that it is worth the dedication of a lifetime in order to experience not only true happiness in this life, but eternal happiness in the life to come.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Shenk, Joshua, “What Makes us Happy?” *The Atlantic*, June 1, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> George Vaillant, interview by Tracy Bowden, *The 7:30 Report*, ABC Australia, May 5, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:8.

<sup>4</sup> CCC, §1604.

<sup>5</sup> *Instrumentum Laboris*, 24 June 2014, Introduction.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* §59.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* §59, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 167.