

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

**October 4, 2015
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here for this Mass, during which we celebrate the gift of married love expressed so beautifully by so many of you who have shared that gift of marriage for fifty years or more. Your commitment to one another for over half of a century is truly inspiring and a much needed witness for our world in which the institutions of marriage and the family are being so heavily threatened.

Just over a week ago, I, along with several other pilgrims from throughout the diocese, had the opportunity to travel to Philadelphia for the historic visit of Pope Francis to the United States. The visit of the Holy Father was in conjunction with the World Meeting of Families taking place in Philadelphia, an event which brought together more than twenty thousand people to celebrate the gift of marriage and family life, and to learn new ways in which to spread the joy of that gift to the world around us.

At the final keynote address for the congress, Cardinal Sean O'Malley, Archbishop of Boston, told a story about a parish celebration in which he participated when he was a bishop in the West Indies. The occasion of the celebration was to recognize a couple who had been married for fifty years. Before the Mass, he asked the couple about their secret to a successful marriage. The husband responded that he and his wife, on the day of their marriage, had come up with a scientific manner in which to make all of the decisions for their life together.

When the Cardinal asked what that scientific formula looked like, the husband responded that it was really quite simple. They had decided that he would make all of the big decisions, and she would make all of the small decisions. When asked how that had worked for half a century, the husband responded that it had actually been working quite well, except that, in all in those fifty years, they had not yet had any big decisions to make!

The Cardinal was quick to remind the audience, though, that both the husband and the wife had indeed made one very important big decision together, and that big decision was to love. That decision to love was the

one that carried them day in and day out through their life with one another.

That is a very fitting way to reflect on what we celebrate today, how each of you who are celebrating fifty years of marriage or more, that in the midst of all of the ups and downs of marriage, it has been that big decision made on your wedding day, to love one another until death separates you. Every joy and blessing in your marriage has been the fruit of that decision to love, and every obstacle overcome, every issue resolved, has been because of the power of love that you said 'yes' to so many years ago.

The readings for today's Mass paint the wonderful picture of marriage as intended by God. From the very beginning of creation, God created man and woman to be together in a special bond of love. In the Garden of Eden, that love was lived in an ideal way in which the two looked upon one another as the perfect complement to each other, and their two lives truly became "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24).

Unfortunately, this love did not last, due to the wickedness of the Devil, who entered into the picture and tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God by eating the forbidden fruit. After doing so, the Book of Genesis says that "the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were

naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (Genesis 3:7). This is significant, because it shows that one of the results of their disobedience to God was a disruption in the perfect love that they experienced with one another before the Fall.

They hid themselves from one another because they felt shame. They knew that the other person could now look upon them no longer with a pure gaze, but with one that sees the other as an object for their own pleasure, as opposed to the gift that they were intended to be for one another. This wound in interpersonal relationships would go on to affect all of their offspring through what we call original sin. We see it already in their children, as Cain killed Abel out of jealousy. And there are so many more examples throughout the Scriptures of how this original wound has affected our relationships with one another.

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks about how God, in His great love for us, even when we had turned away from Him, did not want to leave us in this state of separation from Him and one another, and so He sent His Son into the world, to become “lower than the angels” (Hebrews 2:9) to heal what had been wounded by our disobedience.

In a very particular way, as we hear in the Gospel, He came to heal that most intimate relationship of man and woman in marriage. He instituted the Sacrament of Matrimony. The sacraments grant us a share in the very life of God, and since "God is love" (1 John 4:16), as St. John tells us, the sacraments give us a share in His love, that perfect love which sin cannot weaken or break. His gift of this sacrament to the Church was His specific desire to return man and woman back to the gift of love He desired for them in marriage from the beginning.

It is so important for us to recognize this dynamic of God's love for us, and in particular, for the love that He wants to exist in marriages. I do not mean in any way to discount the many years of hard work and sacrifice all of you have undertaken to get to the point that you are at today, but in the end, it's not about what you have done – it's about what God has done for you and through you. Going back to that point I made earlier, your part in all of this was making that big decision to love, the decision to love God first, and then to invite His love into your relationship with your husband or your wife, and to let that love carry you through life.

Of course, that decision has had to be renewed every day of your marriage in the many actions of your life together, but all of these have

been rooted in that 'yes' to love, that 'yes' to God. And after fifty years or more, I hope that you can truly appreciate just how wonderfully that love has worked in your lives and in the lives of your families. God's love has been able to take even those hard and confusing times, times when you may have wondered how you could go on another day, and brought good out of those situations. That's how good God's love is!

Let those experiences of God's love working in so many remarkable ways continue to strengthen you as you move forward. There may still be unresolved fears and anxieties, such as children and grandchildren who maybe no longer practice their Catholic faith. This is a real cross for many couples who have loved their faith so much and worked so hard to pass it on to the next generation. There may even be some of you here who feel that weight of sorrow, even in the midst of this joyful celebration.

Do not give up hope, for God will never give up on them. I am not encouraging you to just throw your hands in the air, letting God take care of it – I'm encouraging you to keep on doing what you have been doing for fifty years – saying 'yes' to love every day – in one another, and in your families, in all of your actions. When you do that, you make possible the passing on of God's love, which can do so much more than we could

ever imagine or hope. As St. Paul so beautifully reminds us, “We know that all things work for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28). Your continual ‘yes’ to God *will* work for the good, and that is a promise we can have faith in, not because of what *we* might do, but because of what *He* will do through the love He has for all of His children, each of whom He has died for and each of whom He desires to be with for all of eternity.

As I said at the beginning of this homily, your witness is badly needed in our world today as marriage and family life experience so many threats from within and without, as Pope Francis said when he visited our country just over a week ago. Cardinal O’Malley commented that the tools that we have to confront these difficulties are beauty and joy. Your witness of fifty years or more of marriage are just that, beautiful and joyful expressions of the great gift of married love. Every person who has the privilege of encountering you is blessed with your gift, even without your ever saying a word to them.

I thank you for the gift that you are to one another, to the Church, to other couples, and to the entire world. You are a real sign of hope in our world, because you point to something greater than yourselves – you point to love! And that love, which comes from God, will not be

constrained, will not be limited, for in the end, love is the one thing that will remain, and your witness points to that truth in a beautiful way.

Let us prepare ourselves now to receive the perfect gift of love, Jesus Christ Himself in the Holy Eucharist. May our hearts be enflamed with a greater desire to give a more resounding 'yes' to His love in all of our actions, for in doing so, we contribute in a significant way to turning our world from a culture of death to a culture of love, a culture in which the Kingdom of God is built up and the fullness of love in Heaven, meant for all of us, draws closer and closer to its fulfillment.

May God give us this grace. Amen.