

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

**September 25, 2016
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year C**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good that we are here on the occasion celebrating marriages of fifty years and more. As you reflect on the grace that has brought you to this milestone in your lives, allow me to share with you a testament to power and fidelity of this beautiful sacrament:

In the town of Siroki-Brijeg, off the southwest coast of Bosnia and Herzegovina, not a single divorce has been recorded among its 13,000 residents!¹

If this statement shocks you consider this: not one single family has broken up in living memory among these people. Does the country of Herzegovina enjoy a special blessing from heaven? Is there a magic formula that keeps the scourge of division away?

The answer is very simple. For centuries, because of persecution from the Turks and later the Communists, the people of this tiny country

suffered greatly because of their Christian faith. They knew through experience that salvation comes through the Cross of Christ.

The source of salvation is the Cross of Christ!

These people possess a wisdom that does not allow them to be duped over questions of life and death. That is why they have indissolubly linked marriage with the Cross of Christ.

The marriage tradition of this country is so beautiful that word of it has spread and it is beginning to take hold even in the United States. When a young couple is preparing for marriage, they are not told that they have found the ideal partner.

No! What does the priest say instead? He tells them that they have found their cross. And it is a cross to be loved, to be carried, a cross not to be thrown away, but to be cherished. In Herzegovina, the Cross represents the greatest love and the crucifix is the treasure of the home.

When a bride and groom set off for the church, they bring a crucifix with them. The priest blesses the crucifix which takes a central role during the exchange of vows. The bride places her right hand on the crucifix and the groom places his hand over hers. Thus, the two hands are bound by the cross. The priest covers their hands with his stole as they proclaim their

vows to be faithful according to words of Christ. The bride and groom do not then kiss each other, but the cross. Anyone close enough to see their two hands joined over the cross understands clearly that if the husband abandons his wife or the wife abandons her husband, they let go of the cross. And if they abandon the cross, they will have nothing left. They will lose everything if they abandon Jesus.

After the sacrament is celebrated, the newly-weds bring the crucifix back and give it a place of honor in their home. It becomes the focal point of family prayer. When trouble arises or conflict breaks out, it is before the cross that they will seek help. They will not go to a lawyer to solve the problem. They will go straight to Christ. They will get on their knees and weep and pour out their hearts to one another and exchange forgiveness. They will not have a heavy heart because they have tuned to the only one who has the power to save. They will teach their children to kiss the cross every day and not go to sleep without having thanked the Lord first.

A couple who seeks the Lord in their marriage will have the confidence and trust that with the Lord's grace and help, they can overcome any obstacle.

The scriptures of today's liturgy warn us that "excessive concern for comfort and the things of this world will inevitably lead to neglect of God and neighbor."² The prophet Amos and the parable Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus as recorded in the Gospel of Saint Luke caution us about living as if God did not exist. We are not owners of what we have, but only stewards of God's creation. Too many people today view marriage as a way to fulfill their own selfish desires rather than as a total giving of themselves in love for the good of their spouse and their children.

As a vocation, the ultimate call of married life is help your spouse and your children get to heaven, that is, to attain the goal of perfect happiness in eternal life. In his First Letter to Timothy, Saint Paul reminds us that the way to this perfect happiness in eternal life is to "pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness" (1 Tim. 6:11).

You who have come here today to celebrate fifty years or more of married life have known the many gifts that marriage brings as well as the crosses that you have been challenged to bear. By the grace of God you have persevered in loving one another through your devotion to Christ.

You are beautiful examples of fidelity to the world, a world that is in such desperate need of fidelity. On behalf of the community of faith in this diocese, as well as the universal Church, I thank you for your witness to the beauty and dignity, and holiness of the sacrament of matrimony. And I ask for your continued prayers for other married couples as they persevere with one another. May couples see your example and imitate you who have so marvelously imitated the love that Christ has shown for his bride, the Church.

In every Mass, we encounter Jesus who rose from the dead after being nailed to a cross. Jesus promises that we too will be raised up from the crosses we bear in this life. In today's Eucharist, we give thanks to God for the blessings of your married lives and for His richest gift to us: His Son, Jesus, who comes to us in this Blessed Sacrament.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Nicole Kidder, "Until Death Do We Part: Catholic Croats Have Never Divorced: Catholic Croats Know the Secret to Lifelong Marriage," <http://weddingtraditions.about.com/od/MarriageTraditions/a/Until-Death-Do-We-Part.htm>, accessed September 25, 2016.

² Francis Fernandez, *In Conversation with God: Daily Meditations*, Volume Five: Ordinary Time, Weeks 24-24 (London: Scepter, 2012), p. 132.