

Homily for Mass for Couples Celebrating 50 Years of Marriage or More

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The 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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Reverend Fathers and Deacons, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good for us to be here to celebrate this Mass for Couples Married Fifty Years or More. Your fidelity to one another for more than half of a century is a powerful witness to the entire Church of the beauty of the vocation of matrimony.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “An eye for an eye will make the whole world blind.” Yet how hard it is not to seek revenge, and instead to choose to forgive. If you were to scan the headlines of most news sources today, you are bound to see multiple examples of hatred, grudges, vengeance and even war. Whether they are across the world or in our own communities, these topics have become all too commonplace in our lives today. I would be mistaken if I were to stand here and claim that these are new problems; on the contrary, anyone who has studied history can quickly point to the

fact that these problems have been present in the world since the beginning of humanity. As a matter of fact, all of our readings today point to the need for mercy and forgiveness in our sinful world. The Book of Sirach, the Letter to the Romans and the Gospel of Matthew have similar messages for us today, namely, to free ourselves from hateful things and begin to live in the light of God's grace.

The passage of Scripture that we find in our first reading points out the reality that while anger and wrath are hateful things, people tend to cling to them as opposed to love and friendship. The author later reminds the Jewish people that they are bound to the Lord by the covenant, which in turn challenges them to model their lives on the example of God by extending mercy and compassion to others.

Some two hundred years after the writer of the book of Sirach wrote those reflections, we see Jesus speaking with Saint Peter about the very same topics in our Gospel today. We see Peter ask our Lord how many times he must forgive and go on to suggest that he could forgive someone who harmed him seven times. I imagine that Saint Peter was thinking that he was substantially raising the bar by proposing the idea of forgiving someone seven times, for in those days, the rabbis indicated that a sinner

could be forgiven three times. Therefore, can you imagine how shocked Peter must have been to hear Jesus tell him that rather than seven times, a sinner must be forgiven seventy-seven times. According to Jewish tradition, seven is the number of completeness and perfection, both physical and spiritual, as can be seen at the outset in the Book of Genesis in God's resting on the seventh day after His completion of creation. Thus, to say the one must forgive seventy-seven times was actually a symbolic way for our Lord to say that someone must be willing to forgive an infinite number of times in order for mercy to be perfect and complete.

I imagine that even Saint Peter may have initially been a bit taken aback at the idea of Jesus calling the disciples to forgive without limits. But as our Lord went on to explain in the parable that followed, God places no limits on how many times He forgives us and therefore we too should not place limits on how many times we forgive others. For if we follow the example of our Lord and forgive out of love, a love for our neighbors, then our forgiveness must be unending and from the heart.

Throughout the years since our Lord and Saint Peter had this conversation, countless Saints have followed the example of Jesus, for if He was able to forgive those who nailed Him to the Cross and killed him, they

too could certainly forgive those who harmed them. So too must we follow the example of our Lord by looking to the lives of the Saints as models of forgiveness and mercy.

One such Saint that clearly understood Jesus' call for His disciples to forgive without limits is our late Holy Father, Pope Saint John Paul the Great. On May thirteenth, 1981, while he was crossing Saint Peter's Square, Pope John Paul II was shot in an assassination attempt. In 1983 he visited his would-be assassin in prison with one purpose in mind: that of mercy and forgiveness.

In addition to the Saints, I would go one step further and say that we who are gathered here today need to look no further than the couples in our midst who have been married fifty or more years for examples of the sort of forgiveness to which our Lord calls us as His disciples. It is almost certain that throughout the half-century or more that you husbands and wives have been married that you have forgiven each other without putting limits on that forgiveness.

My dear couples whom we honor today, your example of forgiveness in marriage will teach others what it means to forgive out of love for another person. In doing so, you will most certainly lead others to do the

same and lead them to a deeper understanding of what it means to be Christ's disciple today.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let us all take to heart the Gospel's message of forgiveness and the example of those around us. The Roman philosopher Seneca wrote: "The sins of others are before our eyes, our own are behind our backs." We all know we should forgive, but that does not mean it is easy to do so. As disciples of our Lord, we all must strive to follow the example of Jesus and, with the help of His grace, forgive without limitations on how many times or to what extent we are willing to forgive one another.

C.S. Lewis said, "To be Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you." As we prepare now to receive the real presence of Jesus in the Communion we share, we recognize that receiving so great a gift would not be possible without the generous mercy and infinite forgiveness of our loving Savior.

May God give us this grace. Amen.