

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today is World Marriage Sunday. It is a day when we honor this great gift of marriage and those who have persevered in the joys and struggles of marriage.

I was talking to a priest recently who shared that sometimes young men struggle to say “yes” to the priesthood because of a misunderstanding of what vocation is. One young man said, “I know God might be calling me to become a priest, and I *might* be happy if I become a priest, but I know I *will* be happy if I get married.” Everyone who has been married can attest to the delusion that is here – marriage is not easy, and being married doesn’t insure happiness. Marriage takes work – sometimes hard work.

There is a lie out there that says, “My spouse is supposed to fulfill me.” Whether it is conscious or subconscious, this lie can kill marriage. Why? Because no other human person can fulfill me. To put that burden on another is giving them a load they will never be able to carry. Only God can be our fulfillment. International speaker Christopher West tells of a vday realizing (with great joy) that his wife couldn’t fulfill him. He was so joyful because he realized how wrong he was to put that burden on her, and now he could love her for who she was, even when she did not fulfill his needs. He would look to God to fulfill him.

Marriage is hard work. With the sudden death of Kobe Bryant, he is getting a lot of press. Into the spotlight are various stories including his return to the Catholic faith of his youth. His faith became a rock for him in his struggles. In the midst of marital turmoil, he learned that he had to work as hard on marriage as he did on the court. I think this is sage advice for all!

As I’ve mentioned before, the great gift of marriage is a reflection of the life of the Trinity – God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in relationship. The Father is eternally pouring out His love on the Son, the Son is eternally returning the love of the Father, and that love is *so real* it is a person – the Holy Spirit. God made marriage because it is a sign of His inner life – as husband and wife exchange their love (gift and receptivity) within the promises of mutual fidelity.

A priest friend of mine shared that when he is preparing couples for marriage, he goes over the wedding vows with them, and asks them to read them. You may remember that the vows end either “As long as we both shall live,” or “Until death do us part.” He then asks them to read the footnote attached to the vows. When, in their confusion, they say they can’t see any footnote, he smiles slyly and points out to them how right they are – there is no footnote to lifelong marriage. God made marriage to be a lifelong covenant (covenant means gift of self).

So how can we live this? Even the disciples of Jesus, when confronted with His teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, replied, “If that is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (Matthew 19:10). Marriage is hard (as is every life worth living). It requires dying to oneself – dying to one’s old way of life, to one’s own desires and plans – for something greater: the marriage. In our Catholic tradition, we believe that Marriage is actually a Sacrament. You remember that a Sacrament is an outward sign, instituted by Christ to give grace. Marriage itself is a conduit of God’s grace when it is lived as a Sacrament! But this grace is to be an image of Christ’s love for the Church – giving of oneself for the other, receiving the life and love of the other, but also *dying to oneself* for the other. So, the Sacrament of Marriage gives us the grace to die to ourselves. In those moments when we’re overwhelmed, when it seems the “wine” has run out of our marriage, when the feelings of love are gone, or when we’re dealing with struggles, trials and suffering too much to bear, we can call on the grace of the Sacrament, begging God for the grace to endure, to rekindle love, to turn the water of our suffering into the superabundant wine of the Kingdom. While God will not step on our free will (it takes two to tango, as the saying goes), I have seen incredible changes in a “failing marriage” when people surrender it to God – taking the “death” of the marriage into a new Resurrection.

On this World Marriage Sunday, I invite you to pray – pray for the strengthening of the Vocation and Sacrament of Marriage. Below is a prayer for World Marriage Day.

Almighty and eternal God, You blessed the union of married couples so that they might reflect the union of Christ with his Church: look with kindness on them. Renew their marriage covenant, increase your love in them, and strengthen their bond of peace so that, with their children, they may always rejoice in the gift of your blessing. Through Christ our Lord. Amen