



**Keynote Speech by Sr Catherine Joseph Droste OP  
at Diocesan Forum on Marriage in Helsinki on October 28, 2017**

*The Beauty of Marriage*

***Love is patient... Of Virtue and Marriage:***

Beauty / Marriage – two simple words, yet challenging. Why? Consider an analogy: if I asked you to describe a beautiful tree, some of you would describe a tall, stately tree with green leaves fluttering in the breeze, offering a shady respite, others might propose a quite different image - the beauty of an old gnarled tree, twisted by wind and storms, yet standing firm with a mysterious majesty. Both are beautiful – but in radically different ways.

Even more diverse than the beauty of trees is the beauty of marriage. Some marriages are more gnarled and rough - others calm and steady – some vibrant with color, all beautiful but in different ways. All witness to deep roots that have enabled survival and flexibility, a necessary quality for surviving stormy winds. Like the young sapling, the beauty of the bride and groom on the day of marriage is only the beginning – a sign of what is to come. The full blossoming of marriage comes after many years, since, using another metaphor, like any fine wine, marriage grows richer with age. The bottles may grow dusty and lose their original sheen, labels fade and peel, but inside, often unseen by others, the wine is perfected; its flavor, its aroma, deepening - maturing, mellowing. So, too, with marriage and true love.

In speaking of the beauty of marital love we must avoid two contemporary pitfalls: the first is a false idealism that seeks the “perfect marriage” – the fairytale marriage where the handsome prince and beautiful princess live in continual joy and contentment.

Second, a false realism which focuses on the problems surrounding marriage, the sin, suffering, intolerance, jealousy, monotony, discord, or the many social



challenges facing young couples and families today, and responds with a flat, “impossible.”

Balanced between these two extremes is a truth of Christian marriage grounded in realism and grace. A realism that recognizes marriage as first, a fundamental human good; second, an ideal which lies beyond our reach; but third and most importantly, a sacrament that bestows the grace of God enabling the spouses to strive for the ideal of true love.

This is the context of Pope Francis’s Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. Our focus is chapter 4 and elements of his extensive commentary on Paul’s hymn to love in his first letter to the Corinthians, with accompanying reference to Catherine of Siena whose teaching on patience clarifies the intrinsic connection between the challenges and sufferings of married life and the beauty of spousal love.

This *love* is not merely the emotion or feeling; true love does not exclude feeling, but true love rises beyond emotion to the level of a fully willed human action, a free choice involving a total gift of self to another. This is the primary human communion of persons modeling the Love that originates in the Trinitarian God. This is the beauty of marriage.

### **Marriage as preparation for marriage, priesthood, and religious life**

But first, to address the elephant in the room. Some of you may have wondered, and I asked myself prior to coming here, what gives a Catholic religious sister who has taken a vow of perpetual chastity authority to speak on marriage?

The simple answer would be that as a moral theologian, one can address the moral elements of marriage. This may, in fact, be the reason I was asked to speak here today. But I propose another, more foundational reason. Each one of us here, whether priest, married, unmarried, religious, bishop – whatever our vocation – received our initial formation in our own family, no matter how diverse that family setting may have been.

Consider a personal experience: though I became a religious sister and most of my brothers and sisters married, we all had the same initial formation – a



formation that began as children, in the context of family and my parents' marriage.

This is not insignificant. Marriage preparation held a central position in the two Synods leading up to the publication of *Amoris Laetitia*, and in the document itself. It is in this very context that Pope Francis, speaking of the need for formal marriage preparation, noted that for every married couple,

marriage preparation begins at birth. What [the couple] received from their family should prepare them to know themselves and to make a full and definitive commitment. Those best prepared for marriage are probably those who learned what Christian marriage is from their own parents, who chose each other unconditionally and daily renew this decision (*AL* 208).

Some important words and phrases: self-knowledge, full and definitive commitment, choosing unconditionally, and daily renewal of one's decision. All apply to marriage preparation, but these same qualities apply to the priestly and religious vocations as well – that is to say, that preparation for marriage, preparation for a priestly vocation, and preparation for a religious vocation all begin at birth – in the midst of marriage and family. Family is the normal context where human beings first experience love – the love that lies at the foundation for all vocations – the vocation of marriage and the vocation of celibacy and continence.

In the family we first learn commitment, self-knowledge, fidelity, self-sacrifice... all the basic human qualities required of any mature adult – whatever his or her vocation. Marriage is about committed faithful love – a love no man or woman can live without - as Pope John Paul taught in *Redemptor Hominis*:

[man] remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it" (*RH* 10).

This is not to say that those who come from broken homes or non-Christian marriages cannot have good marriages or be good religious and priests. But regardless of individual experience of marriage and family, it remains true that the human being is made for love, and that each person possesses an inherent social



dimension, and “the first and basic expression of that social dimension... is the married couple and the family” (CL 40; AL 316).

This perspective on vocation preparation is further supported by Pope John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*. There he develops the notion of the complementarity between celibacy (of priests and religious) and marriage since both, he says, are firmly grounded in Christ’s love for the Church. The priest or religious makes a “particular response of love for the divine Spouse” – publicly witnessed in the Church “for the sake of the Kingdom” (*Theology of the Body* 28.4.82; Mt 19.12). Their “gift of self” and renunciation of conjugal love does not negate, but rather affirms the spousal “gift of self.” Spousal love, on the other hand, involves the mutual self-giving of each spouse to the other, not in a merely human manner of subjection and power, but also in imitation of Christ’s love. Hence Paul’s words: “husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5.25), words which if neglected, deform Paul’s teaching on marriage.

From these teachings we can conclude that each person has a similar remote preparation for their particular vocation, whatever it may be - and that each couple, in context of the sacramental covenant of marriage, continues this process of formation for their own children, in the simple living out of their role as lay Christians.

Of course, the theology of the lay Christian, married and single, is still in need of development. Some, whether laity, cleric, or religious, still have inadequate perceptions of the lay person. Consider the story of the man who approached the priest and asked him to explain the role of the lay person in the Church. The priest responded that “the layman has two positions. He kneels before the altar - and he sits below the pulpit; that is the other.” A Cardinal who heard the priest’s response noted his error, and added a third position, the layman “also puts his hand in his purse.”<sup>1</sup>

Rather, the Second Vatican Council presented a clearer teaching on holiness of the laity, but specifically taught in *Lumen Gentium* that the married Christian couple is to live their own vocation, seeking the kingdom of God “in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life... [working] for the sanctification of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Congar relates this in *Lay People in the Church* (1957; ed. 1965); citing story told by Card. Aidan Gasquet, OSB, (p. xi).



world from within as a leaven” (LG 31). The role of the Christian couple is first to become holy themselves, and in their daily life to work towards making the world around them holy.

Leaven has special qualities... just a small amount makes a big impact, even when we aren’t looking. Every instance of Christian marriage is a leaven in the world – a leaven that has an impact on everyone in the Church – lay people, religious, and clergy.

## **2. Self-Knowledge: a key to love and marriage**

But leaven can go flat. Everyone knows couples in good marriages, couples struggling, and marriages that have failed. What makes a marriage successful? The answer to this question depends on what we mean by “success”. And anyone attempting to use “success” to describe marriage would do well to remember the words of Mother Teresa: “God does not ask that we succeed, but that we are faithful.”

Marriage is about fidelity and fidelity is not about easy things. Fidelity in marriage means persevering in the midst of obstacles, whether they be jealousy, problems with children, financial issues, physical suffering... fidelity means spouses are faithful *through* the challenges. But how?

The answer appears in Pope Francis’s simple yet beautiful commentary on St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians 13.4-7, his well-known hymn to love:

Love is patient; love is kind;  
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.  
It does not insist on its own way;  
it is not irritable or resentful;  
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.  
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

The freshness of Pope Francis’s commentary lies in its concrete analysis of the text, applying Paul’s teaching to the daily life of a couple and a family. I wish to focus on two phrases of the text – the first and last.



In our post-modern context, reflecting on Paul's three small opening words: "love is patient," some might say he got it wrong. He should have opened with "love is kind" – or "nice"... or even love is not envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude, etc. But love is patient? One might add at the end, if at all.

Yet, if what we've said above about marriage and fidelity is true – that it involves suffering, then Paul is absolutely correct to open with "love is patient."

But what is patience?

## **Virtue**

To fully understand "love is patient," we need to take a step backward and define "virtue." Our contemporary relativized culture too often judges by emotions rather than reason, and as a result, many terms we use to discuss morality are either incomprehensible to contemporary man or they have been hi-jacked, so some might call "virtuous," that which is merely a false imitation.

Take for example the new trending Swedish term *lagom* – touted by Americans and Southern Europeans as the new way of imitating the Scandinavians, replacing last year's Danish *hygge*. Commentators note that *lagom* was traditionally translated as something of moderation / virtue (as in the proverb "*Lagom är bäst*" - "Everything in moderation" – or "There is virtue in moderation"). However, the 2017 international definition no longer references virtue or objective moderation, but instead proffers a subjective "I'm ok, you're ok" attitude, whereby I do what seems appropriate for me – and am tolerant of others. This is not virtue.

Nor is virtue something I am born with – it is not a temperament, say, of a person who is naturally outgoing and happy or naturally curious. Virtue is also not something I do by "habit" – i.e. out of routine alone – like having a cup of coffee every morning or taking the dog for a walk. Why? Because virtue, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, is a good quality of mind, by which a person lives righteously, and of which he / she cannot make bad use.

Here an example may help: the computer programmer who has studied and worked hard acquiring intellectual knowledge which is a good thing. However, this programmer who has perfected his "intellect" may not have true moral virtue



because he can use this knowledge for evil and hack into someone's bank account and steal all of their money. Thus, Thomas adds one other important point on virtue: it not only makes my act good, but it makes me good.

A concrete example of Thomas's definition of virtue arises in the life of Matt Talbot, an Irish drunk of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Talbot spent his evenings and weekends getting drunk in local pubs. One Friday evening, he found himself in a sorry situation, not only had he spent his week's wages, but none of his friends were willing to buy him a pint. In a moment of grace, Matt realized just how low he had sunk. He didn't get drunk that night but went home to bed. Talbot knew that one night of sobriety did not mean he possessed any virtue, and that the slightest temptation would send him headlong into a drunken stupor. But firmly determined to change his life, and to avoid temptation, he not only changed his normal path of walking to work (to avoid the pubs), but kept no money in his pockets. Eventually his perseverance paid off and he acquired the virtue – “a permanent disposition” not only to avoid getting drunk, but to do it with facility, promptly, and with joy. That's virtue.

## Patience

So back to *love is patient* – and its relation to marriage. The term patience comes from the Latin *patior* or *passus*, and refers to *enduring* difficulties / sufferings well.

No one likes pain and suffering, and rightly so, because they are evil – a lack of some good. Yet, suffering, as Pope John Paul II notes, is in some way “*essential to the nature of man...*” That is, if we are human, we will suffer. But the reality of suffering does not stop there, because unlike other sentient creatures, man's suffering belongs to his transcendence (*SD 2*). [There is a reason why we shoot the wounded horse but not the wounded man.]

Pascal captured the complexity of human suffering and transcendence when he wrote that:

man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature; but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him... But if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which killed



him because he knows that he dies and the advantage which the universe has over him; the universe knows nothing of this.<sup>2</sup>

It is the nobility of our nature which enables us to suffer, but also to love. Christ demonstrated this preeminently on the cross. Love is not opposed to suffering. Christ redeemed suffering by love thus making suffering an opportunity for love... a love that is patient.

But patience is often misunderstood. Many see the patient person as one who passively allows others to use and abuse them; being a doormat. Thus, the patient wife is viewed as one who allows her husband to berate her, criticize her, even beat her, and she simply accepts it, thinking herself unworthy of being treated otherwise, or in fear, wary of what might happen if she responds.

This false conception has nothing to do with virtue. Patience is not mere passivity, enduring abuse and injustice. Rather, patience is the permanent disposition towards the good. Patience endures suffering not because of fear, or weakness, repressing anger at the injustices inflicted; the patient person endures suffering / evil with equanimity – with serenity, and this is due to a conscious rational choice for good. The patient person does not play the victim, but prudently determines the best course of action in this particular situation.

Many are familiar with St. Monica, mother of St. Augustine. Fewer are aware of what she endured at the hands of her husband, Patricius, a man with a violent temper, who was particularly irritated by his wife's religious devotions. In response, Monica would remain in silence, and only later, when Patricius had calmed down, would she respond and address the issue. Her patience not only prevented physical abuse, but earned her Patricius's respect, as well as that of other wives who knew her suffering (*Confessions* IX.ix).

But as Christ demonstrated in his own life, sometimes the virtuous response may be to get angry. Remember he threw the moneychangers out of the temple. But this same Christ endured abuse and suffering in his passion. So when to be patient? When to be angry? The key lies in Aristotle's definition of a virtuous action: the

---

<sup>2</sup> *Pensées* (Trotter, 6.347-348)



act which is done to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way (*Ethics* II.9).

## Catherine of Siena

One of the best teachers on “love is patient” is St. Catherine of Siena, a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Dominican – an uneducated Italian woman who, among other things, is renowned for following St. Bridget of Sweden in calling the Pope to return the papacy from France to Rome.

A few brief points on Catherine: she was a mystic and one of her key writings is her *Dialogue* – a conversation with God the Father. But Catherine was a mystic with Tuscan realism – and her writings are filled with images from daily life. Born into a large Italian family, she knew a great deal about love, marriage, virtue, and vice from experience. By the time of her death at the age of 33, she had innumerable followers and admirers - including her own mother and brothers, popes, priests, kings and queens, religious men and women, young men and women, as well as many married couples. And Catherine wrote letters to all of them – almost 400 are still extant.

## The Tree

In speaking of virtue, Catherine uses the image of the tree of love or charity.

Imagine a circle traced in the ground, and in its center a tree sprouting....

The tree finds its nourishment in the soil within the expanse of the circle, but uprooted from the soil it would die fruitless (*Dialogue* 10).

The Tree is the human soul which is made for love or charity and lives only in love. Catherine continues:

Charity, it is true, has many offshoots, like a tree with many branches. But what gives life to both the tree and its branches is its root, so long as that root is planted in the soil of humility.

Humility, like patience, is frequently misunderstood. Too often one sees the humble as a person lacking strength, power, or having a poor self-image and



belittling oneself. True humility is none of these things. Humility is about self-knowledge – an honest assessment of myself – both strengths and weaknesses.

For Catherine, self-knowledge is nothing other than the realization that I am a creature and God is creator. These two knowledges can never be separated, for to focus on myself without God leads to despair and confusion, and to focus on God without honest recognition of my human limitations, leads to pride and presumption.

Thus the tree is in the “circle of humility” --- a circle without beginning or end for it is “true knowledge of [self]” joined to knowledge of God. True humility in self-knowledge moved Paul to declare: “I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me” – and led St. Catherine to write to Stefano Marconi, a young follower: “If you are what you should be you would set the world ablaze.”

To continue the image, the tree of love / charity, like any tree, has branches that reach out to others and bear the fruit of other virtues – like justice and hope, and courage, and fidelity.

Patience, however, is not merely a fruit of the tree. Gentle patience, Catherine says, is the marrow – the sap moving nutrients from the roots through the trunk and into each branch. Love, humility, and patience are so fundamental that without them the tree will die. But patience not only gives life, Catherine adds that if “gentle patience,”

the very heart of charity, is present in the soul, she shows that all the virtues are live and perfect (*Dialogue* 95).

## Patience Tested

Considering the importance of patience – as the heart of charity and proof of all virtue, we should be asking how to get it. Catherine’s answer is simple – but simple does not mean easy. If patience is about enduring suffering well, then “patience is not proved (or acquired) except in suffering” (*Dialogue*, 95). To state it in another way, patience and any other virtue is acquired through its opposite - by being tested.



Catherine explains:

You test the virtue of patience in yourself when your neighbors insult you. Your humility is tested by the proud, your faith by the unfaithful, your hope by the person who has no hope.

Your justice is tried by the unjust, your compassion by the cruel, and your gentleness and kindness by the wrathful.

Your neighbors are the channel through which all your virtues are tested and come to birth, just as the evil give birth to all their vices through their neighbors (*Dialogue 8*).

Consider Job, his story seems to prove beyond a doubt that God (and the devil whom he allowed to tempt Job) understood patience, and particularly patience in marriage. The poor man lost everything imaginable - his children, his crops, his livestock, his health – and even his friends, who basically told him he was a miserable wretch, refusing to disclose the sins for which he was being punished. Suffering all these losses tested his patience and his faith. [What is the only thing he didn't lose? His wife? Perhaps that he could have endured!]

## Impatience

If we know what patience is and how to attain it, the remaining question is how do we know when we have patience? Most of us like to think we are patient; right now, as we sit here, most of you can think how patient you are with your spouse – and I can think of how patient I am with my superior or sisters. But let's face it; most of us are merely proving C.S. Lewis correct, when he said: “Everyone feels benevolent if nothing happens to be annoying him at the moment” (*Problem of Pain*).

It may help to reverse the question. Instead of asking when I am patient, I need to ask myself, when am I impatient. It's rather like old photo negatives – looking at the reverse image brings to light details easily overlooked in the actual photo.



So, according to our individual situation, I need to ask: when am I irritated with my boss, my colleagues, my employees, my neighbors, my children? And for married couples: when am I angry with my spouse?

We also need to take it one step further and ask: when am I impatient and angry with myself?

Whenever I become unjustly angry – whenever I lose my equanimity, regardless of the cause, I have to admit that I am lacking in patience, and therefore somehow lacking in love.

Once I know I am impatient, I need to ask why. Catherine would again give a simple response. When I am impatient, I am lacking in some virtue. I am impatient because I am seeking my own will, and I strike out in anger when my will, my sensuality is not satisfied. There is an evil present – a suffering of some sort that I don't like – and I refuse to endure it.

You may be asking why all this is necessary? Let's just focus on love – it's a more comfortable topic. Yes, but if patience is the marrow of the tree of love – then I cannot pretend to love if I am impatient, and impatience is the marrow of the tree of pride – from which arise every vice or lack of virtue.

Writing to a married woman, Catherine puts it bluntly: “There is no sin, no vice that gives one such a foretaste of hell in this life as anger and impatience” (LT38 Monna Agnesa di Orso Malavolti).

Consider St. Monica again: she could have responded to Patricius's rage in a variety of ways. She could have gotten angry and thrown dishes at him, which probably would have resulted in Patricius responding in kind. She could have judged Patricius an evil man and complained about him to her friends and to the priest. She could have resigned herself to the role of abused wife, condemning herself, thinking herself unworthy of being treated with respect. In her specific situation, she knew this would only make her life worse. And as Pope Francis stated recently, resignation is not a Christian virtue.<sup>3</sup> So instead, Monica refused to condone Patricius's actions but patiently endured his weakness. Her prudent

---

<sup>3</sup> Francis, 11.X.2017 Audience.



handling of the situation not only helped prevent further evil, but eventually led to his conversion.

Monica understood that love is patient – not because of the greatness of patience, but because of the greatness of love. Patience serves love. The marrow of the tree is hidden and unseen, yet healthy sap allows the nutrients to flow from the roots to all the branches, nourishing each leaf so that the tree grows and stands strong amidst storms and earthquakes.

### 3. Marriage: The beauty of love

Having seen that Catherine’s teaching on patience as a causal virtue, underlying all others, corroborates Paul’s statements that love which is patient is also kind and not envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, selfish, irritable, or resentful, does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth, we move on to the last phrases of Paul’s hymn.

The passage culminates in a quartet of absolutes:

[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

*Bears all things:* Francis notes the Greek *panta stégei*, translated as “holding one’s peace” applies to “the use of the tongue”, speaking ill about others, venting one’s anger or envy or resentment. All of those ways of speaking which harm another person’s good name – something that is almost impossible to repair. St. Philip Neri illustrated this several centuries ago. A woman confessed to the Saint that she often gossiped about others. For her penance, Philip told her to get a feather pillow and take it to the top floor of a tall building. There she was to hold the pillow outside the window, cut it open, and let all the feathers out. And then? She was to go down to the street and pick up all the feathers. Quite difficult – if not impossible, especially on a windy day.

And how do spouses *bear all things* – spouses who know the weaknesses and faults of the other better than anyone? Monica knew Patricius – as any wife knows her



husband, or a husband knows his wife. Who better than a spouse knows where to insert the verbal sword – with a simple word or phrase and the right tone of voice.

Pope Francis speaks of bearing the spouses faults in silence because one sees the bigger picture, that each of us is “a complex mixture of light and shadows.” Consider the great *chiaroscuro* artists like Caravaggio or Rembrandt. When we view Rembrandt’s *Prodigal Son*, or Caravaggio’s *Call of Matthew* - do we see only the shadows – or do the shadows accentuate the light --- do we allow the darkness to blind us to the beauty, or does the beauty overwhelm the darkness? Love *bears all things*.

*Love believes all things*: belief here is not merely religious belief, but a trust which, when lacking in marriage, makes true love unattainable. What is trust? Confidence – *con fidere* – to have faith in another person. What does trust / confidence do in a marriage? Pope Francis notes that it “sets free”. There is no dictatorship of one spouse over the other – but trust sets each of the spouses free, both the one who trusts – and the one in whom they trust. The spouse who trusts and believes in the other respects their dignity as a human being. Trust allows for spontaneity and transparency, casting out suspicion, false judgments, and secrets.

The image: Jan Van Eyck’s *Marriage of Arnolfini*. The masterpiece includes several symbols of trust / vows / commitment / fidelity. The joined hands - a symbol of the marital oath; the dog - a symbol of loyalty; the mirror – symbolizing the “eye of God” witnessing the vows; cherries – a symbol of love... Love *believes all things*.

*Love hopes all things*: this hope is not a mere human hope, but supernatural. Hope is about a future greater good, difficult, but possible. Only supernatural hope in God can help us see beyond our own faults and failings, and those of others, to the greater possible good – a good which surpasses all the evil that exists in this world – all the evil that exists in my family – all the evil that exists in me. And the only way to maintain this hope is to look beyond – to see beyond the present difficulties – just as in the Renaissance paintings of Giotto and Pallaiolo and others – hope never looks at the material world but gazes upward, just as Monica hoped for peace, not only in her marriage with Patricius, but also for her playboy son, Augustine. Love *hopes all things*.



*Love endures all things:* Paul ends where he started --- Love is patient / Love endures all things. Though not identical, patience is enduring and enduring requires patience. To endure *all* things means to never give up – on one’s spouse, nor on oneself, therefore, like patience, it is not merely passive, but an active acceptance of things I cannot change.

I had a confessor who often used the longer prayer of dismissal for the sacrament of confession. It concludes with the words:

Whatever good you do and suffering you endure, heal your sins, help you to grow in holiness, and reward you with eternal life.

He would always stress the words “whatever suffering you endure”; these words conveyed to me both the consolation and concrete realism of the Christian faith. Christ redeemed suffering, but also told us bluntly that we would suffer: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” *Love endures all things.*

Now how do these four phrases relate to the beauty of marriage? I would propose two ways:

First, they touch on the difficulties married couples will encounter during their marriage. As Pope Francis states:

The life of every family is marked by all kinds of crises, yet these are also part of its dramatic beauty. Couples should be helped to realize that surmounting a crisis need not weaken their relationship; instead, it can improve, settle and mature the wine of their union... Each crisis has a lesson to teach us; we need to learn how to listen for it with the ear of the heart (*AL* 176).

Second, Paul adds the adjective *all*. True love is not just about bearing, believing, hoping, and enduring “some” of the difficulties, when I am feeling up to it, when I have a good reason, or when I want to. Love is for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death.



The beauty of love does not lie in the crisis – the worse, the poverty, the sickness. The beauty of love lies in the couple who perseveres through the difficulties.

As we noted at the beginning, the physical beauty that epitomized the wedding day: the beauty of the bride – the handsome groom – a beautiful ceremony and cake... and all the beauty of youth and joy that comes with the celebration, gives way to a different beauty – a beauty embodied in the totality of marriage.

When the physical beauty has faded, the wrinkled old man gently touching his wife's shriveled hand bespeaks a beauty that began many years ago, but which blossomed slowly, perhaps fading at times, yet through trials, joys, and tribulations, remained steadfast. This is married love; it doesn't give by halves or on condition.

This love has no limits – and yet, paradoxically, Pope Francis notes that at a point it reaches a “certain disillusionment”. He gleaned this concept from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who noted that even in married love, the couple reaches a point where he or she recognizes that even the beloved spouse cannot satisfy all his or her needs.

This revelation brings marriage to a new level transcending all that came before, for in this moment the spouses discover that their love, however wonderful it may be, reflects an even greater love – the love of God alone (cf. *AL* 320).

Who could dare enter such a union? Who could dare commit to a love until death when people in today's world can hardly love for a day? Fully aware of the mental state of men and women today, Pope Francis writes: “a person who cannot choose to love forever can hardly love for even a single day” (*AL* 319). Perhaps we need to state his words in the positive: a person who chooses to love for one day, can love until death.

Today, younger and older people are afraid of the commitment required. Some are disillusioned by divorce or abuse or the lack of love they experienced in their own family. Others see no reason for marriage; they claim they can love without useless social formalities.

Whatever the cause, no matter how many reject, ridicule, or scorn marriage, the beauty of marriage remains the clearest, irrefutable response to its detractors.



Couples who have accepted the challenge, recognizing their own imperfections – both as individuals and as a couple – and with enthusiasm face each new day together, provide the witness our world so desperately needs. A couple that does not lose heart in spite of their weaknesses and limitations, witnesses to young people, witnesses to newly married couples, witnesses to struggling couples, witnesses to priests and religious, that it is possible to “take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage” (cf. *AL*).

Ultimately this is true because the sacrament of marriage and the love that flows from it is an icon of Trinitarian love, an icon of God’s covenantal love for mankind, and an icon of Christ’s love for his Church (cf. *AL* 72). This is why, as the French Dominican Sertillanges notes, throughout history whenever the mystics speak of supernatural love and of heavenly love, they always used symbols found, not “in friendship, filial love or devotion to a cause,” but rather married love, precisely because of its “totality”.<sup>4</sup>

This totality takes us back to where we began, to marriage, the leaven which provides the seedbed for all vocations – to married life, to the priesthood, to religious life, because every Christian must love, and marriage is the first school of love where we must learn “love is patient... love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

---

<sup>4</sup> “All the mystics have affirmed that supernatural love and heavenly love find the symbols which they seek in marital love, rather than in friendship, filial love or devotion to a cause. And the reason is found precisely in its totality” (*AL* 142 – quoting Sertillanges, *L’Amour chrétien*, Paris, 1920, 174).