

Homily to Deacon Convocation

A special and gifted opportunity is mine this morning to offer this Mass with the deacons of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and their spouses in the context of today's Gospel. And on several levels.

Most of you are married and we welcome the wives who are present. We thank them for their invaluable partnership that exists in your marriage, a double sacramental partnership graced by the Sacrament of Marriage and enriched by the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

Some of you are unmarried and others widowers, in either case, living a celibate life.

Marriage and celibacy are mutually enriching, each nourishing the value of the other. Celibacy reminds marriage that all human love is transitory. Only God is worthy of our absolute love. In marriage, we celibates witness both the extraordinary sacrifices that are possible and necessary in the Christian life and that selfless, disinterested love of neighbor which should be the hallmark of all who have chosen celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom.

I would address you married deacons and your spouses this morning, primarily ours is a culture with a very shallow understanding or appreciation of the divinely ordered institution of marriage. It is approached as a convenience entered into on human terms, replete with personal conditions and reservations and contracts,

Even in the Christian context, I know of no other Church communion than ours that still uses the words, or is committed to the meaning of the words, "For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness or in health, until death." This is not to extol the situation among Catholics today, when they approach marriage. You know well from your experiences in marriage preparation the vast number if not the vast majority of Catholics living in concubinage (when was the last time you heard that word!) as they come to you for instructions. And now many enter marriage with but the slightest understanding of the sacramental meaning of marriage. And does not the divorce rate among Catholic couples come very close to that of society in general?

And that is why I want to seize this opportunity to address diaconate marriages in light of today's Gospel, because it is from your own insights into and experiences of the meaning of sacramental marriage and from your own witness, living witness, to this sacramental marital love, that Church's teaching on marriage has the unique chance of convincing others in their approach this sacrament.

From your theological formation you know that the spousal relationship of husband and wife is not meaningful on its own terms but rather an analogy of the love of Yahweh for Israel and even more profoundly of Christ for his Church. The total radical gift of spouses to each other reflects and participates in that total and radical gift of Christ to his Church. He poured out his life completely for her and she, in turn, spends her life in seeking to return the gift of herself to Him. To quote one theologian: "Nothing could more vividly depict the burning love of Christ for his Church than the impassionate love that unites "man and wife in one flesh"

And how fitting, how opportune, that this is Respect Life Sunday! Note that Christ continues his teaching on marriage today in Mark's Gospel by the embrace of the children who are brought to him.

Secular culture (and now how often secular culture creeps into Christians' thinking) routinely sees children as a burden and a threat to the good, materialistic life. But children are an essential purpose of marriage. Two thousand years Christian thought, still preserved in Catholic teaching, insists upon the unitive and procreative meaning of the marriage bond: yes, what God has joined together, no human being must separate. To prohibit the possibility of new life contraceptively is to separate the God-given meaning of the marriage embrace and until the 1930s, every Christian church taught this. Indeed, the sexual revolution and rampant immorality prophetically predicted by Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*, has inevitably overwhelmed us.

Deacons should be in the vanguard of the latest Catholic insights into marriage and family, exciting developments in the revolutionary teaching of Pope John Paul II on the Theology of the Body and the profoundly spiritual movement called Natural Family Planning. The destructive selfishness that seeps into so many marriages can be traced in so many instances to a tragic misunderstanding of marriage and the

marital act, profound mysteries beautifully address in contemporary Catholic theology.

And who can deny that in secular America the infant in the womb is seen as an intruder, aggressor, an enemy, a virtual disease to be prevented, expelled, attacked by chemical pharmaceuticals of every invention and then when all else fails, the scalpel and the vacuum are easily justified in destroying innocent life even at the very moment of birth.

Thank you for living your marriage as fully Christian, thank you for welcoming children as did Christ — all children as gifts from a heavenly father. Thank you for upholding the consistent ethic of our Church in unitive and procreative marital love and in unwavering public defense of all human life, especially the most vulnerable, from conception to natural death.

In your witness, in your teaching ever faithful to the fullness of Church teaching, you deacons and diaconate couples are singularly precious and valuable collaborators of this Archbishop. Again, I thank you!