

Next Saturday, I'll preside at a marriage for the first time since my ordination. For more than a year, I've looked forward to it, yet feared it. As presiding minister, it's my responsibility to guide and counsel a couple to the moment when they stand before this altar, God and His Church... and state to me...as the Church's representative...their intention to be true to each other in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health...and to love and honor each other until death do they part.

40 years ago I shared their excitement and expectations...when after three marriage proposal rejections...my fiancé and I finally exchanged our wedding vows. The fear I referenced comes from having experienced many challenges these newlyweds don't even have a clue may be coming.

They may face job loses, struggles with children, deaths, addictions, infidelity and other issues...times when moving forward can only happen with forgiveness and compassion. In 40 years, I did enough dumb things that could have justified my wife leaving me several times...but it was her mercy and forgiveness that not only kept us together...but drew us closer; the kind of relationship you don't hear much about on celebrity blogs and twitter...because it requires work.

Our culture promotes marriage as a contract between 2 people who begin as roommates, develop into teammates and ultimately...civilly agree to stay together until one or both decide that the challenges they face are just too difficult.

But Jesus and His Father tell us in our readings today that marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman...who commit to begin and end...not as teammates or roommates, but soulmates...whose roles are to lift each other after every fall...in essence...helping each other **fall upward**, closer to God...until each finally meets God and his or her joy is complete. It's about each helping the other to holiness...and that can't happen without prayer... and the statistics bear that out.

The media tell us that half of all U.S. marriages end in divorce. What they don't tell us...according to Shaunti Feldhahn, a Harvard-trained researcher and author of *The Good News About Marriage*...is that only about 15% of first-marriage couples divorce if they attend church together once a week. And *Focus on The Family* studies have revealed that the more involved a married couple is in practicing their Christian faith, the less likely they are to divorce.

It's what Fr. Patrick Peyton, known as *The Rosary Priest*, understood as early as the forties...when he began an evangelization campaign with the slogan: *The family that prays together stays together.*

Nobody enters into a marriage with the expectation that it will fail...but some marriages do fail. Most of us have directly or indirectly experienced the pain that's tied to those failures. But how can we deal with that pain? Here are some suggestions:

- First, if you ARE married, make Christ the center of that relationship;
- Next, be aware that if you ARE a divorced Catholic who has NOT remarried...and you are in the state of grace...you may receive Holy Communion;
- Also, if you are a Catholic whose marriage did not follow the approved Catholic form for a marriage, there may be a relatively simple process to validate your marriage;
- And if you ARE divorced AND remarried...but WANT to be able to receive Holy Communion, there may be a Church process to allow that to happen; and
- Finally, if you are a spouse in a life-threatening situation, the safety of you and your children REQUIRE you to REMOVE yourself from that situation; then seek counseling.

Information on ways Catholics can address marriage-related issues can be found at the Diocesan Tribunal Office website or talk with me, Fr. Bob or Fr. Chris.

Our Heavenly Father loves us so much that He allowed his Son to be sacrificed for us. That Son loves us so much that He made the Catholic Church His spouse with a no-divorce guarantee and the promise that the gates of hell won't prevail against it.

That reality was an important part of the Holy Father's message at the *World Meeting of Families* where he reminded us how God defines family; and that as pope, he'll do all he can to make it easier to restore separated Catholics to the Church and sacraments...from speeding up the annulment review process...to eliminating the fees associated with it. In short, the streetlights are on and it's time for all of us to return home to the family. [You have to be older than 60 to understand that last statement.]

In this week's Pittsburgh Catholic, Bishop Zubik tells us [QUOTE] *you and I must do everything we can in all we do to offer healing to the wounded, hope to those in despair...You and I must open doors to those who have left us for whatever reasons and reach out in kindness and dialogue to those who do not believe, to those who do not pray* [END QUOTE]. That's an important part of the new evangelization!

Let us pray that ALL married Catholics who have experienced the pain of divorce will seek the assistance of the Church and return to the sacraments that unite us with our heavenly spouse, so that what God has joined together does not remain separated.