

TWENTY SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: 150th
Anniversary Mass at St. Brigid

The readings this weekend, as we have heard, share with us a theology of marriage. In other words, the true intention of marriage as God has designed it. In response to the Pharisees, Jesus is upholding the original biblical understanding of marriage as the union of male and female, inseparable by human will. The law for divorce in 1st century Judaism came from Moses as a response to the hardness of hearts of the people of his day. Divorce legislation seemed to favor easy divorce, but in practice divorce was very infrequent.

So Jesus' response is not so much an attack on any widespread abuse, but it is a prophetic challenge that comes out of God's creative purpose for marriage, namely: Unitive (two shall become as one), permanent, exclusive, faithful, sacrificial and fruitful. In marriage, neither man alone or woman alone embodies the fullness of God's creative design, but man and woman together, in union, mirror the mystery of God and his love for humanity.

The love between a husband and a wife involves a free, total, and faithful mutual gift of self that not only expresses love, but also opens the spouses to receive the gift of a child. So it is fruitful. No other human interaction on earth is like this. This is why sexual intimacy is reserved for married love – marriage is the only context wherein sex between a man and a woman can speak the true language of self-gift, “and two become one flesh.” There is no other type of relationship that is capable of authentically expressing this conjugal love – a love which by its nature includes the capacity to give oneself fully to the other and to receive the other precisely as gift in a total communion of mind, body and spirit. Therefore, there is no other relationship that can ever be held up as equal or analogous to the relationship between husband and wife.

Like all vocations, marriage is a sacred symbol of God's love for the world. Marriage, like all vocations, has at its center, the cross of Jesus Christ – his radical gift of self. It signifies the union of Christ and the

Church.

It gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved his Church. I wonder how often married couples think about this reality. Let's look at another reality behind the truth of marriage.

In the Scriptures, Jesus is referred to as the bridegroom, and the Church as his bride. But this spousal imagery is first seen in the Old Testament. God reveals the mystery of His desire for union with humanity – a union so intimate that He describes it as spousal love: God is the bridegroom and Israel is the bride. Jesus has been sent as the fulfillment of this spousal love.

The love of the Bridegroom for his Bride, the Church, was most fully expressed and consummated on the Cross when Jesus weds himself totally to humanity forever. Jesus, the bridegroom, totally gives Himself for His bride, the Church. That is you and me – the Body of Christ.

But let's look at this a little deeper. More than a last meal, the Last Supper is a wedding banquet wherein Jesus, like a good husband, offers the total gift of Himself. This is then ultimately expressed the next day on the Cross. In the words of St. John, "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." These words, which are so important for the Eucharist, remind us of the fundamental statement about marriage we heard earlier: "*For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become **one flesh**.*" This physical union of flesh in marriage is an image, though a weak one, of the total union that Jesus brings about in the Eucharist with his Church and every single believer. What the union of marriage seeks to reach is realized in the Eucharist between Jesus and the Church. The Eucharist shows clearly that the Church is the Bride of Christ and that He is her Bridegroom. He gives his body to her.

So this casts a light on the sacrament of Marriage. Marriage, in the eyes of God and his Church, points to the Eucharist.

So, here we are today celebrating 150 years as a parish. Again, congratulations! For 150 years, the Bridegroom has been present to his Bride, St. Brigid's Church. In celebrating major events such as this, it is an opportunity to reflect upon the great ministry that began under the guidance of Father Scutchins in 1870 as he celebrated the first Catholic Mass in Midland at the Keely residence on E. Buttles;

and then continued by Father Van der Haven who was the first pastor to celebrate mass in Midland regularly, once a month. When Saint Bridget became a Parish in 1884, Fr. Burns arrived as the first resident pastor, followed by Fr. Thomas McNamara, who guided the growing flock until 1887; and without going through the whole 150-year history, leading us to today with Fr. Andy as your shepherd, taking his place in a long line of priests who have served this faith community.

It's also a great opportunity to reflect on the people who came before you, on all the work that has been done in this faith community, and the legacy of the families who have made it all possible by their generous support throughout the decades. All of this brings us to where we are now – to recognize and acknowledge that we are not the first ones to have the experiences of Christ's love that has deepened the faith in this community. In reality, you have received something special that has been handed on for many years, for many generations, and this faith continues to grow and hopefully will continue to blossom for the faithful members who will follow you.

This is cause for great celebration! I want you to think about this. This parish has been the home of saints and sinners for many, many years. And I hope that it will always be a place for saints and sinners to gather to experience the healing presence and mercy of Christ in the Eucharist, who continually pours out the mercy of the Father.

What is important to celebrate is the effective ministry that has taken place over the course of history in every Catholic community.

The mystery of God has been shared with so many through the sacramental life of the Church, being a source of Christ's life and love over the past fifteen decades – where faith has been introduced, nourished, and strengthened as not only clergy proclaimed the Gospel, but also religious and lay people. This has been the fruit of the Eucharist, born by the love of the Bridegroom for his Bride...as we have been talking about.

That is the beauty of the past 150 years. For the Church to do her job and be an effective agent for the Kingdom of God, it needs a continual empowerment of the Holy Spirit with all its charisms and gifts. The Spirit must be alive in her people in order for the Lord's work to continue. Every one of us has been sent into the world to proclaim with our voices and with our lives the wonderful Gospel message of Jesus Christ – a message that challenges, but a message that brings hope and healing and profound love to those who fully embrace it. The Gospel is the greatest love story ever told. It is an extraordinary gift! And it must be shared!

This is done through each of us individually. But it must also be carried out in the way married couples live out their married life following the image of Jesus, and it must be carried out in the way families live out this communion of love, often called the ‘domestic church.’”

Each week, as we gather for this Eucharist, let us always be mindful of this “wedding feast” where we celebrate our union – or I should say, **our communion** – with the Bridegroom, who gave up his life for each of us.

And finally, my friends, as you celebrate this historical moment in the life of this parish, it is important for all of you to think about the legacy that you will leave for the many generations to follow. Many before you have laid a very firm foundation for you to build upon.

May you always build with the love of Christ that is within each of you, the mercy of Christ which is continually offered to you and the generosity of Christ which has been given to each of you. Amen?

