

Homily for the 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

From time to time I get the question: “Does the death of a husband or wife, which brings about the legal end of a marriage, also bring about the end of communion between them?” Or, in other words, why in the marriage vows, does a husband and wife promise to take one another for better, for worse, until *death do them part*? “Will I still be married in heaven”, they ask?

Sometimes they ask such a question because of trying to understand the words of Jesus that we just heard in our Gospel today. Jesus is speaking to the Sadducees, which was a body of religious leaders in some ways similar to the Pharisees. The context of the statement in question is about the resurrection of the body at the end of time, which the Sadducees denied. That’s why they’re “sad, you see”! And in juvenile fashion they come up with the preposterous example of a woman who was successively the wife of seven brothers, asking him whose wife she would be after the resurrection. To this Jesus answered: “The children of this age marry and remarry; but those who are deemed worthy to attain to the coming age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.”

Interpreting this saying of Jesus incorrectly, some have claimed that marriage ends with death. But with His reply, Jesus is actually rejecting the caricature the Sadducees presented of heaven, as if it were just going to be a simple continuation of the earthly relationship of the spouses. Rather, in heaven, we are completely united for all eternity with God, who is perfect love. The particular love of husband and wife is actually preparation for total union with God in heaven. So, this fulfillment does not cause a separation between husband and wife in heaven. Rather, they become more united than they ever could have been on earth. It's just they are united with everyone else too, who has become united to God in this way, with a joy that is completely beyond anything we can imagine. So, when considering heaven, we need to think outside the box of our human experience here on earth – for heaven is all about God. And our lives on this earth are to prepare us in every way for how we will spend eternity.

Interestingly enough, the celibate vocations of priests and consecrated religious also speak to – actually, embody – these words of Jesus. Celibacy is choosing to remain unmarried for the sake of the kingdom of heaven in order to give oneself entirely to God and to the service of His people. In this way, it's actually a sign of the resurrection and of the kingdom of God, which is drawing near, for in the resurrection and the kingdom there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage. So the lives of priests and consecrated religious actually point to that future time when we will live totally immersed in God's kingdom in love, with our deepest longing for perfect communion with God and one another completely fulfilled.

Also interestingly enough, today begins National Vocation Awareness Week, a special time for us as a parish family to foster a culture of vocations to the priesthood, the diaconate, and the consecrated religious life.

It's my experience that most people think that such vocations come from somewhere else. And yet, God invites us to consider that He is raising up vocations to priesthood, the consecrated life, and the permanent diaconate from within our own communities, our own parishes, even our own families. I truly believe that God is calling men and women from our parish to serve Him and His Church as priests and consecrated religious. Despite what we might hear, there is not a crisis in these vocations today. Rather, there's a crisis in hearing God's voice.

Research suggests that community encouragement plays an important role in discerning such vocations. This means parents, family, parishioners – we all play a role in fostering vocations. But, what do you look for? How do you know if someone might be called to be a priest or a religious sister? Well, you don't. But there are usually signs. To help you out, I decided to poll my family and ask them the question: "When you knew me growing up, did you have any memories or stories about thinking I might be a priest someday?"

To this question, I got back several responses. My Aunt Gloria said that she remembered talking to her mom – my grandmother – at the Ponderosa steak house once about the paths all the grandchildren were on and telling her that I gave her a special feeling of goodness and spiritual awareness, and that she felt some inclinations that I might have a vocation to be a priest. My cousin, Eric, said he honestly thought I'd either be a pilot or an attorney. But on second thought, he said, "I guess in a way you're kind of like both – guiding us like a pilot towards what's right and representing us as our "legal" advocate before God!"

My Dad remembered me telling him that several of the previous presidents of the Catholic Campus Ministry at Millersville University, where I was then a student, ended up going into the seminary. When I told him I was the next president, he wondered whether I too would become a priest. And finally my Mom. She said, “my memories of you growing up not necessarily had visions of you being a priest as a youngster because you drove us crazy. What stands out the most was "Prayer at the Pole". I remember realizing then how much God and prayer meant to you.” She said that as my involvement grew in the Catholic Campus Ministry, it prompted her to ask me on several occasions if I was thinking of becoming a priest. She remembers the first time asking me, that I very firmly said, “NO”! But, she said, “the fact that I even approached that question with you was part of God’s plan in motion for you.”

So, family, friends, parishioners, don’t be afraid to ask the question – you just might be part of God’s plan in motion for someone. And, children, teens, young adults, take to heart the words of Pope Francis from the final Mass of World Youth Day earlier this year: “Don't be afraid to say 'yes' to Jesus with all your heart, to respond generously and to follow Him! Don't let your soul grow numb, but aim for the goal of a beautiful love which also demands sacrifice.” God bless you.