

082309 FOR WHO? FOR WHAT? FOR YOU!

(Saint Paul tries to reflect on the mind and heart of Christ to gain an insight into married life for husbands and wives.)

When my mom and dad drew near to their fortieth wedding anniversary they decided that they would have a Mass which I would celebrate and renew their wedding vows. At that time I was stationed at Old St. Mary's parish down at Fourth and Spruce Streets in Philadelphia. Each morning I offered Mass at a small convent chapel know as St. Regis House run by the Sisters of Mercy. The residents of Saint Regis House were single working women, many of whom were Irish domestics who worked in the hotels and for rich families in the area. These women were old and retired now. Somewhere before the renewal ceremony my mother pulled me aside and gave me my marching orders. "Look, I'm okay with the love and honor bit but I am not doing the 'obey' thing." I had been a priest about eight years at that time and must have looked a little startled because there was no mention of 'obey' in the marriage vows that the Church had been using for a while. I reassured her that the words of the vows said only this: "I will love you and honor you all the days of my life." I do not know when the word 'obey' had been inserted into the marriage vows nor when it was dropped from them. I do know this. At the present time and for a long time the vows that the man and the woman say are identical. There is not something that is present in one form and absent in another. The vows are identical. Both promise the exact same thing.

Today's second reading from Saint Paul to the Ephesians is read every three years on this Sunday and it is one of those "bell-ringer" passages that easily get our attention from time to time. Priests who try to preach on this passage do so at their own risk. How do I know? Because I have preached on this a dozen times over the years. Here's a quaint insight regarding this passage. Men and women hear these words in very different ways. Surprise! Surprise! Women want to know what Saint Paul could possibly have been thinking and the men want to know what the big deal is.

Being celibate I have no first hand, insider information about marriage or great insights into marriage. On the other hand, I have presided at hundreds and hundreds of marriages and have helped to prepare hundreds and hundreds of young couples as they prepare to enter into marriage. I have preached at hundreds of weddings and spent a good deal of time reflecting on the life of Christ seeking to find there aspects of his life that I believed were applicable to married life.

Here is a simple insight from me. Every culture has marriage as part of it. What is said, what is promised, how the ceremony flows, what is given and

received and how all of this is understood varies from culture to culture and varies from religion to religion as well as from one denomination to another denomination within the same religion.

For me, the marriage vows seem to echo what Jesus said at the Last Supper with his chosen disciples. When the Lord took the bread and said, “This is my body—for you” and when he took the cup of wine and said, “This is my blood poured out—for you,” he was, in effect, speaking his vow of love to them and to all who would believe in him down through the centuries. I hear the echo of his words in the words spoken by each bride and groom as they enter into marriage in the Catholic tradition. The bride and groom make similar promises: “This is my body—for you; this is my blood poured out—for you.” Every marriage, in every culture involves the giving and receiving on the part of the bride and groom. The giving and receiving is physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological.

What separates marriage in Christ from every other celebration of marriage? For me, it is contained in those two little words Christ spoke at the Last Supper. “For you!” “I will live no longer for myself first. From now on I will live—for you.” I will be there in love—for you. You become first in my life. It is a reality and a sentiment that is heard in several passages from the Scriptures. It is John the Baptist with Christ (“He must increase; I must decrease.”) It is Jesus in the garden speaking with his Father (“Father take this cup away; not my will but thine be done.”) It is Mary with the archangel Gabriel (“I am the maid servant of the Lord let it be done to me as you say.”) It is the young priest at ordination when he places his hands in those of the bishop, looks him in the eye for this little dialogue (“Do you promise me and my successors obedience and respect?” “I do.”) That is the priest’s vow to his bishop. It is found in the Pastor’s relationship with his people (“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.”) I am no longer to live for myself first but for you.

We are not always successful with this kind of living but it is what we are called to do. The way Christ lived and what he did is to have implications for all of our lives, single, married, vowed religious. I think that Saint Paul was trying to reflect on the life of Christ and to make this kind of connection to husbands and wives in his own day. He may not have been too adept at the way he said it and if he were alive today he might rephrase his words. Perhaps he would say something like “Marriage in Christ, for each spouse, is about learning how to live no longer for themselves first—but for the other first. I will no longer live for me; but for you.”