

Celebration of Marriage

St Bede's, Basingstoke

18th June 2011

Every Mass is an occasion for celebration and thanksgiving and I attended just such a celebration in Jersey a week or so ago when a number of us gathered in the chapel of the Little Sisters of the Poor for Fr Harry Donnelly's 100th birthday and a few days later for the 75th anniversary of the day of his ordination. As you can imagine, it was a very joyful and moving occasion which will remain in the hearts of all who were present.

But it isn't only priests' jubilees that we celebrate. Our gathering here today – the third that I have celebrated – is equally memorable and full of joy. You are the couples who have born the heat of the day and your lives, whether it is for 25 or 40 or 50 or even more years, have been defined and marked by Christian marriage. Your fidelity and love for one another over so many years gives us all the chance for a celebration and for rejoicing.

Many people in today's society write off marriage as an institution or, indeed, as a credible way of life. They see it as just one of a number of possible ways in which human society and relationships can be formed. Your very presence here today and this celebration are a powerful witness to the fact that this is not true.

You know – and give witness – to the blessings you have found in your Christian marriages. You know that in your marriages you have been empowered for lives of lifelong commitment and fidelity. You speak to us – and to the wider world – of love and through your mutual loving, you have known and you remind us that God is love.

Love of its very nature has within itself those seeds of permanence that speak of God and of God's eternal and undying love for us. Your married love is of such intimacy and fidelity that Christ has described it as a sacrament, both for the grace it confers on you who have embraced this state and live out its commitments, and for the sign that it gives all of us of the love that the Lord has for us.

Real love, such as that which binds you all together, isn't like the morning dew, which evaporates in the heat of the sun. On the contrary, under God's grace, it grows stronger and more devoted as the years pass. He leads us deeper and deeper into that irrevocable gift of ourselves, which is both selfless and sacrificial. In fact, your love is so powerful and fruitful that it is made incarnate through the gift of children in the family.

You might be tempted to say that this is the sort of rosy vision of marriage that you'd expect a celibate to express. But I know that, just as with any vocation, marriage has to be worked and the work is hard and can cost not less than everything. I have seen and experienced and been blessed by the sheer generosity and love that characterises so many marriages in our communities. Today's world is constantly attracted by the easy and the instant and often feels threatened by ideals. Our vision and our living out of Christian marriage is an ideal – I unashamedly proclaim that – but it is not out of reach. Graceful and needful of grace it may be, but impossible – no, never – because nothing is impossible to God. This is our faith; this is the faith of the Church and, in marriage, you witness to that faith.

Listen once again to those words of St Paul that we have heard: "As the chosen of God...you are to be clothed in heartfelt compassion, in generosity and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other...the Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same." These are the qualities by which your lives have been shaped over the years and it is in them – and in you – that we find the sanctity of marriage, its richness for human growth and its importance, both for our immediate families and for the family of the nation.

Today, as you celebrate this recommitment of your lives to one another, you are entering once again into the particularity of loving to which the Lord has called you – and it is costly. "Remain in that love...and love one another as I have loved you." John also writes a little later in the same Gospel that "no one has greater love than to lay down their life for a friend." This is precisely what you promised to do when all those years ago you pledged your love to one another in Christ and in marriage. That was a profound moment when "the peace of Christ reigned in your hearts and it was for this that you were called into one body."

You are in the front line of the mission of the Church – proclaimers and witnesses to the Gospel of love. Hear again those beautiful words of Blessed Pope John Paul – "What the world needs are heralds of the Gospel, who are experts in humanity, familiar with their own emotions, able to share them with others. And who are, at the same time, contemplatives who have fallen in love with God."

Today, then, let once again, our "yes" be "yes" and let our thanks to God come from the depths of our hearts.