

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
February 1, 2009

Readings: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28

Love Your Spouse to Heaven

In my homily last week, I talked about the *Survivorman* television series. And after Mass, at the pancake breakfast, a gentleman stopped and mentioned that he liked the show, but that his wife wouldn't let him watch it. She was standing nearby, heard his remark, and commented that she didn't like the show because the *Survivorman* character was always in trouble. I joked that this may be the reason her husband enjoyed the show; that he could relate to someone who was always in trouble. Husbands and wives love each other, but everyday life can still bring its differences and annoyances and difficulties.

And this relates to another comment, or question, that I received at the breakfast, again from a male parishioner. It was about the second reading from last week. I didn't touch on that reading in my homily last week, but it is a very interesting passage. And that passage continued in today's second reading. Last week we heard St. Paul tell the Corinthians: "***From now on, let those having wives act as not having them.***" This line interested some of the men in our parish; you could tell they were listening to the readings. "***Let those having wives act as not having them.***" There were quite a few scratching their chins and reflecting on the possibilities.

What did St. Paul mean by this instruction? Well, first, let's not take it out of context. He goes on and continues saying: "***[Let] those weeping [act] as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away.***" St. Paul is reminding the people of how temporary our life is on earth; of how we need to put priority on our eternal life. We shouldn't let the things of this world interfere with this goal.

Today, as I said earlier, we continue with St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and today he talks about those called to virginity. He talks about how those called to live a single, celibate lifestyle are not distracted from their devotion to God. And this is one of the reasons why the Church has chosen that our priests not be married. In discussing priestly celibacy, the Catechism refers to this very passage. St. Paul says: "***An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided.***" As a married man, I can testify that it is easy to be anxious about how to please your wife and keep her happy. After 35 years, I surely don't have it figured out yet.

Being single or being married are different ways of life, but we shouldn't try to imply from Paul's comments that celibacy is better than marriage; it's just a different vocation. If everyone practiced celibacy, there wouldn't be any new souls created to give honor and praise to God. I don't think that is what God intends.

We can also consider how it is that we show our love for God. We know that when we feed, shelter, clothe, and visit our neighbor, we are doing it for Christ. Who is a closer neighbor than our spouse? St. John says in one of his letters: "***If anyone says, 'I love***

God, but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.” (1 John 4:20-21) Instead of the generic “brother”, let us substitute “wife” and paraphrase the last part of this verse: *“[F]or whoever does not love a wife whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his wife.”* And so we can see it is not a choice of loving God or loving our spouse; the two are inseparable. If we ignore our spouse, we are in effect ignoring God.

It is a matter of how we love our spouse that needs to be considered and controlled. Is it with true, unselfish love? Do we pursue the goal of making our spouse happy by means that are holy and in accordance with God’s will? In effect, one of the goals of marriage is for the spouses to help each other be holy so that they can get to heaven. The Constitution on the Church from the 2nd Vatican Councils states: *“[M]arried couples ... should follow their own proper path (to holiness) by faithful love. They should sustain one another in grace throughout the entire length of their lives.”* (LG 41)

“Sustain one another in grace”; this can be a difficult challenge, especially when the spouses are not on the same page spiritually. It is one of the concerns the Church has with mixed marriages, where a Catholic marries a non-Catholic Christian, and with disparity of cult marriages, when a Catholic marries a non-Christian. But as we all know, differences in spiritual fervor can arise just as easily between two Catholics. And in those cases, being married can definitely seem to be a distraction. I know many, usually it’s women, who must limit the time they spend at church to avoid creating hard feelings with their spouse who objects to too much time spent away from the home. But those people can oblige their spouse’s wishes and offer it up as a sacrifice, and to offer that sacrifice for their spouse in love. It is a time modeling Christian love and not creating arguments and dissention. It is a time for prayer.

In marriage we become one with our spouse. We cannot ignore them and act like they do not exist. This is not the meaning of St. Paul’s words. Our focus should not be on things of this world, but on the things of heaven. To get there, we must do everything to get our spouse there as well.

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