

May 3, 2009

Because of the Gospel reading, this Sunday is called Good Shepherd Sunday. It has been designated by our Holy Father as World Day of Prayer for Vocations. I strongly urge each of you to pray that those whom the Lord calls to serve you, His priestly people, as priests or religious will respond generously to their vocations. Last week I wrote about the vocation to religious life and, in a future column, I will write once again about the priestly vocation.

Nowhere are vocations to the priesthood and religious life better fostered than in the homes of good Catholic families. This Saturday, I will celebrate the vocation to married life which is the basis of the family and the bedrock of the Church and society. I will celebrate Holy Mass in our Cathedral for husbands and wives from throughout our diocese who are celebrating their 25th, 50th, or more than 50th anniversary of marriage this year. I will thank these couples for their faithfulness to their marriage in the Lord and they will have the opportunity to renew their vows.

In secular society, marriage is described as a contract or an agreement. However, Christian sacramental marriage is much more than that. It is an exclusive lifelong covenant of love between a man and a woman. It is an intimate partnership in which husbands and wives learn to give and receive love unselfishly, and then teach their children to do the same.

In his first encyclical, "God Is Love," Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that St. John summarized our faith in these words: "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us." Our love is our response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us.

In his encyclical, Pope Benedict tells us that the exclusive and definitive love of a man and woman in marriage is the icon, or the sacrament if you will, of the relationship between our loving God and us, His people. The Church celebrates every marriage publicly because God established marriage, not only for the good of the partners and their children, but also for the good of the Church and the good of society at large.

God's love for us is everlasting. Even when we sin, God does not turn His back on us. He sent His eternally beloved Son to save us from our sin and lead us back to His eternal embrace. The most radical form of God's love is seen in Jesus nailed to the cross, His side pierced.

In the Sacrament of Marriage, husband and wife profess to love and honor each other until death do they part. In fulfilling their marriage commitment to be true to each other in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health until death, they witness to God's fidelity and love for all of us.

Fidelity in relationships is not easy. Selfless giving, faithful and exclusive until death, is possible because in sacramental marriage, Christ is the permanent third partner. His presence and abiding grace are the cornerstone of every sacramental marriage and the basis for faith and confidence even in the midst of struggles.

While I began by asking your prayers for those called to the priesthood and religious life, I also invite your prayers for all of those who have accepted the noble vocation of marriage in our diocese. May their love for one another grow stronger as they share tears and laughter together in the surprises that God has in store for them.