

## **Homily on Marriage by Fr. Dan Donovan**

Although the time we have is much too short, I would like to say a few words about marriage and the family and about the Catholic Church's understanding of them.

Almost from its beginnings the Church has viewed marriage both as a fundamental human reality and as something that is caught up into the saving mystery of Jesus Christ.

Marriage and the family are as old as humanity. The fact that we are made as male and female is obviously related to the continuance and survival of the human race. The book of Genesis suggests that marriage also had from the beginning a deeply personal dimension. Men and women are drawn to one another in order to escape from their loneliness and to find in one another the partner of their hopes and fears, of their joys and struggles. The first line of poetry we find in the Bible was provoked by the sight of a woman. "This, at last," Adam says, "is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."

Like everything that is human, marriage and the family take on different forms in different cultural, social and economic contexts. Even today people experience these realities in different ways. In some countries, to take but one example, marriages are still arranged. The extended family, to

take another, continues to be an important dimension of life for some ethnic groups. In our own country we encounter an increasing number of single parent families.

There is no one model, no one pattern of the human reality that we call marriage and the family. Even while recognizing that, the Church believes that at its deepest level marriage of its very nature always involves certain

values and commitments. It entails, for example, an intimate sharing of life and love that is meant to be exclusive and life long; it is open to the possibility of children, open not only to having them but to helping them grow and develop into decent and productive adults.

It is this human reality in all its complexity and variety which, the Church affirms, has taken on a new dimension in Christ.

While recognizing the goodness of creation and the unique dignity of human beings, Christianity knows that human life have been undermined by sin and self-destructiveness. It believes, however, that in Christ we have a source of forgiveness and healing. He enables us to become the kind of creatures that God intended us to be from the beginning.

In saying that marriage is a sacrament, the Church is affirming that a

couple's love and mutual commitment can be strengthened and deepened by being rooted in Christ. It is also saying that their relationship can be for them and for their children a means and instrument of God's healing love.

The received wisdom of our culture is that the Church is against sexuality. In fact, it is probably closer to the truth to say that it is one of the few institutions in our society that takes sexuality seriously. It sees it, within marriage, as a sign and expression of a sacred reality. The way in which sex is portrayed in much of contemporary popular culture, has little to do with intimacy and respect, sharing and love. It reduces people to objects rather than affirming them as persons; it turns them into instruments of pleasure rather than seeing them as partners in a mutually enriching relationship. Among the many things that tend today to undermine marriage and family life, one of the most powerful is the radical individualism that permeates our culture. Everything encourages us to focus on ourselves, to worry about our concerns and feelings, to do whatever we have to do to get ahead. Marriage, on the other hand, presupposes an ability to give and receive, an ability to go beyond the self and enter into relationships involving

others, it demands a capacity for love and friendship.

At the heart of marriage is fidelity. It is threatened not only by the way that sex permeates our culture and by our radical individualism, it is also undermined by the tendency today to sacrifice honesty and truthfulness to personal gain. What we are seeing writ large in the worlds of business and politics, I see in some of the young people at the university. A depressing number of them have no hesitation to plagiarize, to download substantial parts of their papers from the net or to buy them from one or other of the numerous sources available to them. What is most bothersome about this is that it seems to reflect a rather course bottom line mentality. The only thing that matters is the end result. Lying and cheating are not recognized for what they are. In this kind of environment truth and honesty become casualties and with them, fidelity.

Vatican ii applied the phrase "the domestic church" to the family, in doing so it wanted to suggest that what the Church is all about, what it stands for, the difference it is intended to make in the world, is meant to have its impact first of all in the family.

Our families are not perfect. They suffer from the inadequacies and

failures of their individual members, and from the pressures to which they are

subjected in our culture. Although imperfect, they remain enormously important. It is in the family more than anywhere else that we first get a sense of ourselves and of our dignity and that we begin to learn how to be decent and loving human beings. The grace and the challenge of the gospel have much to offer to our families. If baptism and the eucharist, for example, free us from selfishness and self-centredness, if they free us for a life of love and service, surely the first place in which we should try to live this is the family. Catholic Christianity believes in marriage and the family, believes in their the dignity and value. In spite of their vulnerability, they are precious realities which are meant to be for the individuals who live in them a source of life and strength, of affirmation and love. They merit our support and commitment and our prayers.