

Bro and Sis,

(This Sunday, I'm going to talk about a vocation that doesn't get as much attention – it but should.

It's one that has affected every man, woman and child in this church today.

And it's one that many here are living out every day – maybe without even realizing it.

It's probably the most visible vocation in the world.

I'm speaking, of course, of marriage: the vocation of being a husband or a wife.)

This Sunday marks World Marriage Day and so the Church takes this opportunity to celebrate this sacrament.

To honor men and women who have made this commitment to one another, and to remind ourselves of what it means to be married.

Though this takes place just before Valentine's Day, those who are married know: it's not all chocolates and roses.

Sometimes, it's sour grapes and poison ivy.

It's socks on the floor and dishes in the sink and diapers that need changing, meetings with teachers, paying bills, fixing the car and snoring at three in the morning.

It's not always easy. It's one reason why about half the marriages end in divorce and so many today shy away from it.

And the culture does little to help.

If you were looking for a movie to see this weekend, you can find a romantic comedy or a suspense-action about a single man and a woman who are friends or even married to another, and decide to have physical intimacy just for fun...with no strings attached.

Sadly, relationships have become recreational and not truly unitive and procreative as God ordained it to be.

The menus of cable or satellite TV are full of it.

The message is clear: who needs marriage?

But I think that's because we've stopped understanding something fundamental.

Being married isn't just a lifestyle choice, or a living arrangement that has tax advantages and can result in several little deductions.

No. Marriage is something else. Something more. Something deeper. Something that should inspire awe and wonder.

But how many of us treat or think of it that way?

How many of us – even the most faithful of Catholics – look on this sacrament as something like Holy Orders?

How many of us realize that those of us who are lawfully married are a part of something sacred?

How many of us understand that this life we live as a married couple is – like the life of a priest or religious – a calling?

It is. Make no mistake: those who are married in the Church have been called to this way of life.

It is a sacrament!

God has spoken to us, just as he has to priests and religious, and He has summoned us to live our lives in a radical way.

Putting the interests of another person, or even the interests of an entire family, ahead of our own.

He has asked us to do this for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for a lifetime. Share this mission with me, He says.

Offer your life for this great adventure: to be a spouse, to begin a family, and continue the work of creation in the world. That is God calling to us.

It is a wonder, and a mystery – and a summons that can't help but leave us feeling humbled.

Married life is God extending Himself through time, continuing what began when He first called forth light and life.

The creative work of the Creator continues, through every husband and wife, who is open to God's will, who strive to bring light and life into the world through their children.

It's a holy covenant. It's God's presence among us!

And like any vocation, it requires an ongoing dialogue with God.

Can that dialogue honestly exist among those who live together outside of marriage or in fornicating or adulterous relationships outside the marriage covenant?

Because God knows the strengths and weaknesses of the other person better than you do. You need God's help. We need his grace!

Every marriage does. Every vocation does. No priest or brother or sister or deacon can last long in effective ministry without an active prayer life.

And so it is with this vocation of marriage.

It requires what the Church has so beautifully described as "the domestic church" – each couple, each family living and praying and sharing together, finding communion together.

It is something beautiful. And it's holy.

Imagine what might happen if we honestly, sincerely treated marriage that way.

Parishes would have regular marriage vocation fairs.

There would be marriage novenas before Mass to Mary and Joseph, asking their intercession to call forth more good husbands and wives.

There would be prayers offered regularly to Blessed Louis and Zelie Martin – the parents of St. Therese of Lisieux, and one of the few married couples to be beatified together, as a couple.

There would be an ongoing effort, in every family, in every parish, in every diocese, to pray for holy marriages, just as we now pray for increased numbers of holy priests.

If we began to have that kind of a mindset, more of us might then come to see this sacred calling as, indeed, a calling that is sacred.

We would begin to see it as a kind of daily prayer – an offering to God, and an offering to one other person. An offering made once, and forever.

It is the presence of God to those around us!

Imagine what it might mean if we all thought of marriage that way.

Imagine how that might change our church – and change our world.

Bro and Sis, let me share one example of this.

There was a soldier blinded by an explosion during the Vietnam War recovering in an army hospital.

While recuperating he fell in love with a nurse who was attending him and later married her.

Their devotion to each other was tremendous.

One day he overheard someone speaking about himself and his wife.

“It was lucky for her he was blind; he would have never married such a homely woman if he had eyes to see!”

The disabled soldier rose slowly to his feet and walked towards the spot where he heard the voices coming from.

“I overheard what you just said, and if what you say is true, I thank God from the bottom of my heart for my blindness;

For it kept me from being blind to the marvelous worth of the soul of this woman who is now my lovely wife.”

“She is the noblest character I have ever known.

And if her outward appearance masks her inward beauty, then think how rich I have become through the mere loss of my sight!”

If only we too might be in some way, as blind as that soldier, as he was to his wife and to those around us!

Amen, now and forever!

JMJ