

In the Heartland
With Bishop Pates

Hopes for Year of Marriage and Family

On Oct. 19^h our diocese kicked off the Year of Marriage and Family with an opening Mass and family carnival. I was deeply edified to see so many families joyfully celebrate their marriages and families. I couldn't help but think about how this privileged moment would be a foretaste to the many graces God has in store for us this year. In my homily, I reflected on the readings and expressed my hopes for this Year of Marriage and Family. In this column, I'd like to unpack this theme even further.

Our first reading was the famous story in Genesis when God takes Abram out to view the stars in the sky and promises that his descendants will similarly be limitless. God is again confirming the covenant he made with Abram who is tempted to doubt God's goodness. Abram has heard this all before, he has trusted God and left his homeland, and still he is without an heir. He's so fed up that he responds, "What good will your gifts be?" At times all of us feel this way. Whether it is doubting God's plan in our own marriages or doubting God's providence in the world around us, all of us can feel like God truly is not in charge. Genesis gives us a reason to hope. At the end of this reading we see God's promises fulfilled: Sarah bears Isaac, and for those of us who know the rest of the story we see God's promises fulfilled beyond Abraham's wildest expectations. *It is my hope for this year that throughout it we can grow in our trust of God, that we can more deeply see Him in charge of our own homes and our society, and that this faith and hope will be a consolation in trying times.*

There will be trying times. Our first reading skips over five chapters in Genesis, but we must remember that during these challenges Abraham faces more doubts, trials and obstacles to God's will. And yet God is faithful. This is no less true today. Every family experiences obstacles and pain, but it is often exactly in these moments that God most wants to transform us and draw us more deeply into His divine life! Our theme for the Year of Marriage and Family is *"Family, become what you are."* I hope that in this year we can more readily see God's saving action in our homes, that marriage is a privileged encounter with the living Christ, and the transformative power of that encounter!

The second reading came from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians, when he calls us all to "put on... heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." What a perfect model for family life! Are our homes places where we "bear with one another and forgive one another?" *Are they places where we "put on love... the bond of perfection?" This is the heart of family life. I hope that this year will help families grow in living this vision.*

St. Paul's words should also shape how we approach those who experience the Church's teaching on marriage and family with difficulty. Do cohabiting couples, people who experience same-sex attraction, and the divorced and civilly remarried encounter the Church as a place of "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience?" Conversion happens when someone experiences the love of Christ, and if we only preach without showing love, then we are as St. Paul says in another letter a "noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." In order to show true love to those who suffer, we must always stand in the truth, for compromising the truth is a false mercy, but so too we fail in mercy if we are not the first to welcome, serve, and

bear with and forgive one another. *I hope that this year will help us grow as a community that can truly welcome all those who experience our teaching as a cross, even as we challenge and invite everyone to a deeper conversion.*

In our gospel passage we see how Simeon responds to his encounter with Christ. He has been longing for Christ, excitedly waiting for Him, and now Simeon can go in peace, recognizing in Christ salvation and fulfillment. Simeon's response should lead us to ask, do we long for Christ? Do we see in Christ our salvation and fulfillment? In our families, where Christ is daily present, do we recognize Him? *I hope that this year both deepens our longing for Jesus and our ability to recognize Him in our families. We know that the family is the domestic Church, and this means that the family is the living presence of Christ in the world today. I hope that our families will have the grace to see this more clearly, so that we can all "become what we are."*

Finally, I'd like to take a moment to reflect on Anna in the gospel passage. Anna is a widow, and Luke tells us that she serves the Lord in her fasting and prayer. Anna, too, sees Christ for who he is, and to me this is a great reminder that the Year of Marriage and Family is for every member of our community, married or not, with or without an intact family. *I hope that this year helps us recognize the parish as a "family of families" so that every person, no matter his or her situation can see in the Church a loving home and place of refuge.*

Please keep the Year of Marriage and Family in your prayers, that it may bear abundant fruit in our lives. I pray that through this initiative all of us may more fully respond to St. John Paul II's challenge, *"Family, become what you are."*

Info box

To reflect further on our Year of Marriage and Family kickoff readings look up:

Genesis 15:1-6, 21: 1-3

Psalm 100

Colossians 3:12-17

Luke 2:22-40