

In the Heartland

At the heart of it all, MARRIAGE

Column by Bishop Richard Pates
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As I reflect back on my family life in simpler times, I always conclude that I have been blessed. My Mother and Father enjoyed a solid marriage. By their own admission, they were far from perfect. Nonetheless, their married love and commitment remained intact for 56 years of marriage. They were people of faith, they cared deeply for each other, my two brothers and I constituting our family were of highest priority to them. They spruced things up with humor. Asked on the occasion of their 50th wedding anniversary if divorce were ever considered, my Mother replied, "Divorce never, murder thousands of times."

As priest and bishop, I enjoy the rare opportunity of being invited into friendship with any number of couples and families. It is exhilarating to share their joys and wonderful accomplishments. It is a privilege to be with them in times of tragedy and loss. At the heart of it all is the foundational love of husband and wife which is central to our human nature as the Book of Genesis testifies.

Today marriage is under severe stress. The by product oftentimes is weaker and disjointed families, troubled and anxious children. To the demise of that which is at the core of our culture, that which generates happiness and genuine satisfaction, we are stretched in a thousand different ways.

Marriage is expressed in the Sacrament of Marriage and family life is integral to whom we are as Church. Thus, together, the bishops of the United States have been reflecting and pondering what we might do to reach out to today's spouses and families in pastoral care. One outcome is the publication of a pastoral letter entitled: Marriage, Love and Life in the Divine Plan.

The introductory portion of the letter rejoices in the blessing and gift of marriage. It highlights the reality of how natural and complementary it is for a man and a woman to come together in total commitment and in the full expression of love. The handiwork of God and his involvement are manifested in this very order of creation. The purposes of this bonding are to be united in love and all its dimensions and to be open to children by which husband and wife share as partners in the ongoing creation of God.

The bishops cite contemporary challenges which have crept into our culture over time and which in the bishops' perspective are at odds with the classical and long standing nature and purposes of marriage. They are: contraception, same-sex unions, divorce and living together without marriage. The bishops realize that these phenomena arise sometimes out of difficulties and many times out of a determination to resolve practical

and concrete situations. Thus, in addressing these, in a spirit of compassion, an effort is made to provide clear and helpful explanations of the underlying destabilizing factors involved in these practices.

Realizing the struggles many spouses experience and the help that is needed to genuinely live the life-long commitment in the face of contemporary challenges, the second part of the pastoral letter speaks of “Marriage in the Order of the New Creation.” It explains how marriage has been restored in Christ, how it is a great sacrament of vocation, how it reflects the life of the trinity and the trinity’s relationship of love and how the family, in one of Bishop Maurice Dingman’s favorite images, is a domestic Church.

The bishops realize that genuine help and support of marriage is not only one of words but of action, which translates into specific programs. For many years, the Diocese of Des Moines has enjoyed the dedicated services of Deacon Dennis and Sarah Luft. They along with associates trained over the years have conducted marriage preparation sessions which have been invaluable in the later experience of marriage.

One sponsoring couple related to me that they had met with a somewhat reluctant couple 17 times! They managed to transform a tense relationship into friendship. Their efforts have born fruit in a solid marriage that benefits to this day from the preparation classes. In addition to these marriage preparation courses, a cornerstone of the diocesan program has been an outreach to enrich marriages.

With the encouragement of the Lufts, the diocese intends to move forward in building programs of solid marriage preparation courses. But there is also a need to expand the enrichment programs for our married couples. This is especially true in the first five years of marriage. Thus, Jim Houston who is preparing to be ordained a deacon on August 14th and his wife Mary have been working on the development of such assistance especially for young couples.

In addition to the foregoing, many initiatives are organized to assist husbands, wives and families such as Christian Family Movement, Marriage Encounter, Regnum Christi, and Teams of Our Lady to name a few. Our goal in the diocese is to make what is available known and to make the programs accessible in the busy lives of our families.

Many elements need to come together to foster healthy, happy and life-long marriages which support loving husbands and wives and enable the unsurpassable joys of family. The Church finds its engagement with spouses and families at the very heart of its mission. Marriage and family are institutions established by God. I believe most of us will vouch that they hold the key to our most precious memories and meaning in life.