

Homily for Friday August 19th
19th Week of Ordinary Time

Today's Gospel reading gives us Jesus' clearest teaching on the Sacrament of Marriage and the vocation to celibacy. Matthew is the only Gospel writer who brings together the vocation of marriage and celibacy.

Let me set the context for Jesus' teaching here. He has been asked the question:

Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?"

Now we are told that the Pharisees' asked this question in order to "test" Jesus. The Greek word often implies evil intent and is the same word used in Matthew 4 when Jesus is tested by the Devil in the Judean wilderness.

It is interesting to reflect on this. Just as there are many today who would "test" the Catholic Church's teaching on marriage, seeking to challenge and reject it, so too our Lord himself was tested.

Listen to how Jesus responds to their test.

Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female'¹?

Here Jesus is referring to Genesis chapter 1, the first creation story. One of the interesting things about Genesis chapter 1 is that in the verses immediately before verse 27 we are told of the creation of all animals. Even though they are given the command "Be fruitful and multiply" there is no reference to their being made male and female. It is implicit in the text. However what is implicit in reference to all the other animals is made explicit with the creation of the man and the woman.

***So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.***

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply,

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.* (1993). (Mt 19:4). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

Here are words that have not previously appeared in Genesis. Humankind is made in the image of God and the nature of that image bearing is explicitly stated as being reflected in the complementarity of the sexes.

What is so important to see here is that immediately after their creation we have liturgical language. God blesses them, the very thing God does now through the Marriage Liturgy and calls them to have offspring, the sealing of the marriage bond through the marital embrace.

Jesus is therefore making it clear that marriage is intrinsic to creation. It is the norm for men and women to marry in a relationship that is both unitive and procreative.

The unitive nature of marriage is emphasized by what Jesus says next:

'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one'?⁶ So they are no longer two but one²

Here Jesus is referencing Genesis two. What is significant about this text is to recall the parallel between Adam's sleep and the Lord's sleep on the Cross. In order for Eve to be formed Adam falls into the deep sleep and Eve is then taken from his side. On the Cross Jesus falls into a deep sleep of death and from his side pour forth water and blood. This has always been interpreted as Christ's bride, the Church (water symbolizing baptism and the blood the Eucharist) being created from Christ's side. Similarly Adam's bride is created from his side thereby anticipating the sacramental nature of marriage as having its Genesis here in Genesis. Because the unity that exists in marriage is to parallel the unity that exists between Christ and his bride Jesus goes on to say:

"What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder."

That marriage is a lifelong indissoluble union is clearly affirmed by Jesus. Similarly God's will for his bride the Church is that she would be one as Jesus and the Father are one.

We know that both the unity of marriage and the unity of the Church have not been actualized in history. Divorce is common and the Church is divided. Even though God's purpose for marriage and for the church's unity have often been thwarted this has in no way led the Catholic Church to compromise her teaching on the indissolubility of marriage nor the call to the unity of the Church.

² *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Mt 19:5–6). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

This is because while we understand that people's hearts are hardened because of sin, God's heart is not hardened. Therefore his desire for marriage is that it be unitive and procreative and for a Church that is united under Peter. Both are of the very essence of God's purposes for us.

This bring us to the phrase:

“There are some who have made themselves Eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven”

Jesus discusses celibacy in surprisingly glowing terms—surprising because Judaism considered marriage and procreation a duty rather than a mere option on a menu of life choices. Celibacy was not esteemed or promoted as a religious ideal until the dawn of Christianity.³

Yet here in Matthew the most Jewish of the Gospels we have this verse on referring to those who choose the vocation of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is therefore establishing the gift of celibacy as a way for men and women to love and serve Jesus and his bride the Church.

This is why it is the norm for Catholic Priests to be celibate. As those who are conformed to Christ through ordination they are in the person of Christ (*persona Christi*). Just as Adam was married to his bride so priests are married to the Church, the bride of Christ.

The Catholic Church teaches the unity of marriage as a heterosexual lifelong union is paralleled by the union that exists between those called to a special relationship to Christ and his Church through the vocation of celibacy.

As Catholics we affirm the goodness of marriage and celibacy because both are related to God's purposes for human beings. An affirmation established by the teaching of Jesus here in Matthew 19.

³ Mitch, C., & Sri, E. (2010). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 243). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.