

**Homily for Mass for Couples Married Fifty Years or More
The Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year C**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, [consecrated men and women,] my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I am happy to be with you to celebrate this Mass for Couples Married Fifty Years or More. Your fidelity to one another for more than half of a century is a powerful witness to the entire Church of the beauty of the vocation of matrimony and is a symbol of the love that Christ has for His Church.

I would like to begin by recounting a story that was in the news just over a month ago. The story is about a married couple from Ohio, Harold and Ruth Knapke, who were within ten days of their sixty-sixth wedding anniversary. This elderly couple was no longer able to live by themselves at home so both of them moved into a nursing home where they could receive better care. In order to continue to remain together, they were placed in the same room. On August 11th, Harold passed away at the age of 91, leaving Ruth alone after having spent almost three-quarters of her

life married to him. Ruth, however, did not have to spend much time trying to adjust to a new way of life without a husband. At the age of 89, she died the very same day, just eleven hours after her husband.

Some people might look at a story like this and say: "What a happy coincidence!" The family of Harold and Ruth, however, saw things differently. They said that despite his failing health, Harold had willed himself to stay alive so that they could take the next step of their journey together. It was no coincidence, but, as they described it, a "final act of love." It is also not the first time that I have heard of a long-time married couple dying within a short time of each other, their deaths also apparently not a coincidence.

This story is a very appropriate one for us today as all of you celebrate the gift of love that has united you with your spouses in the bond of Holy Matrimony. It is hopefully a reminder of the many unique and special ways in which that love has been manifested in your marriages over the past fifty years or more. At the same time, this story provides some insightful reflections on this gift of the Sacrament of Matrimony and its meaning within the Church. Our Gospel for today helps to shed some light on one of the important elements of this great sacrament.

In the Gospel, Jesus tells a story to His disciples on the topic of stewardship. On the surface, it may seem as though He is just speaking about the need to take care of those financial and material possessions that have been given to us. Such an interpretation would reflect a narrow view of stewardship. While the practice of stewardship does include the proper use of material goods, the Christian perspective on this issue, and the underlying message of this story, is much broader.

In their Pastoral Letter on Stewardship, the bishops of the United States define stewardship as follows: "As Christian stewards, we receive God's gifts gratefully, cultivate them responsibly, share them lovingly in justice with others, and return them with increase to the Lord."¹ God has blessed each and every one of us with many gifts, both material and spiritual, and it is our duty to be good stewards of them and to be generous in sharing them with others. Marriage is of course one of those gifts to be shared. The story of Harold and Ruth that I told at the beginning of this homily offers some insight into how they shared this gift with one another as evidenced by the longevity of their marriage and their staying close to one another until their dying day.

But there is another way in which they shared this gift. They shared it with their children. When interviewed about their parents, one of the daughters explained that “[t]hey were so committed and loyal and dedicated, they weren't going to go anywhere without the other one.” This example shows how Harold and Ruth’s fidelity to one another had an impact on their children. They must have learned a great deal of what marriage and commitment are supposed to look like because of the witness given to them by their parents. This highlights one of the important elements of the stewardship of marriage: that it is to be a vehicle through which the Good News of the Gospel is communicated. This proclamation is transmitted first and foremost through the witness of life. We can see then, how good stewardship with the gift of marriage not only benefits the couple, it also works for the benefit of the family and the larger society.

During this Year of Faith, the Church has encouraged us to consider the call to participate in the New Evangelization. This is a rather technical term that can leave us confused as to the meaning of this task. In his Apostolic Letter announcing the Year of Faith, Pope-Emeritus Benedict helps to clear up this confusion by explaining its meaning in a way that we can more easily understand. He wrote: “What the world is in particular

need of today is the credible witness of people enlightened in mind and heart by the word of the Lord, and capable of opening the hearts and minds of many to the desire for God and for true life, life without end.”²

Our participation in this New Evangelization, then, is through the witness of our lives. This witness, which is so urgently needed, is to come from Christians in every state of life, including those who are married. I think it is safe to say that the witness provided by Harold and Ruth is indeed a credible one which has not only impacted their own family, but countless others who had known them throughout their lives. I am certain that the same can be said of all of you as well in various ways. Your presence here is in itself a witness of great value. In a society where the institution of marriage has been challenged in so many ways, having so many couples in one place who have been married fifty years or more shines forth for others to see the goodness and beauty of marriage. In a culture where commitment has become difficult, you show forth that it is possible to remain faithful to one person for life.

Consider also how many people have seen how you live your marriage, day in and day out, in good times and in bad, and in sickness and in health. This provides an encouraging example to others who may

be struggling in their marriages that, with the help of God, all obstacles can be overcome. In this way, then, all of you have been participating actively in the New Evangelization without necessarily even intending to do so. The Church is most grateful for the role that you have played in spreading the Gospel through that witness, and you are to be commended for being good stewards of the sacred gift of Holy Matrimony that the Lord has given to you.

We gladly join our prayers and gratitude to yours and ask the Lord to allow the example of your faithful and committed love to continue to shine brightly before the world in witness to the love of Christ and the sanctity of marriage. Let us pray that your witness will continue to encourage and inspire other couples, and indeed all people, to follow your example, that all might be renewed in their vocation and persevere in their journey toward eternal life in Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ USCCB, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 42.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 15.