

**Homily for the Mass for Couples Married Fifty Years or More
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, Springfield, IL**

Mass for the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C) | September 18th, 2022 AD

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brother priests, deacon, married couples, and all gathered here for this Sunday celebration of Our Lord's salvific work:

It is good for us to be here today to thank God for His gift of the Sacrament of Matrimony. As I prepared for this Mass, and as I now look out over all of you today, my mind goes back to all the many times that as a deacon, then a priest, and now as a bishop, I have had the beautiful opportunity to witness couples making their vows and entering into a lifelong marriage. I cannot help but smile at the moment when the groom looks at his bride, and then the bride at her groom and says *"I, (name), take you, (name), to be my (wife/husband). I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life."*

Today I want to step back with all of you to that life changing exchange at your own marriage. I invite each of you to recall that moment, that day, that Mass ... to remember the joy and grace that came as you made that vow to God together. You have all lived out of those promises for 50 years or more,

promises to be faithful, to love, to honor. Today I want to thank you personally for your witness to the world, to the Church, and to me, of fidelity in your vocation. Holy marriages are a great reminder and inspiration to the entire people of God as we see how you have fought for your marriages day by day, through good and bad, in sickness and health, carrying together the sorrows and joys of giving your lives in commitment to one another. How happy we are to know and love you, to see your strength and commitment, to see the fruit and beauty of the sacrifices that your married love has entailed, to have before us your witness of what lasting forgiveness, patience, gratitude, and communion look like.

I have been reflecting this past week on the life of Queen Elizabeth II after her death on September 8th, and in light of her funeral tomorrow. I find it striking that more than all the other historical and political details that we might recall in thinking back through a long-reigning monarch, instead, the world seems to be captivated by Elizabeth's *virtue*. It is amazing that even though our world seems so fixed on profit, stature, pleasure, and success, in the face of someone's death, we are reminded instead of the things that last, things like perseverance, dedication, and courtesy. Those were three virtues, among others, that I find evident in Queen Elizabeth's life. They are three

virtues, among others, that I also find evident in all of your lives as well, given that these virtues are key to your reaching this great milestone of being married to the same person for half a century or more!

Anything that is going to last, of course, requires *perseverance*. Whether we're trying to run a marathon, or run a diocese ... or raise a barn, or raise a child ... or love one's spouse, all of these things require us to persevere, to press on, to endure. Obstacles will *always* get in the way of any authentically good endeavor. Sometimes those are just our own weaknesses or our natural reluctance to work through something that is difficult, costly, or demands us to go beyond where we are comfortable, or beyond where we are certain of the outcome. Sometimes, though, our struggle towards the good arises because of a more deeply grounded fragility. We are apt to choose the easy path, the selfish path, the path of least resistance. We are tempted to listen to the voice of the Evil One who tells us to do it our way, to make life about ourselves, to neglect the other person, or neglect God, maybe just this one time. But to persevere means to push past those temptations! It does not mean we will never fail, but to repent always and step back on the path towards the Good.

Each of you couples who stand here today show us all what perseverance looks like, not in one instant, but day after day and decade after decade. Thank you!

As for dedication, I suspect this is one of the things that you recalled when you thought back to your wedding vows. It is what comes to mind when I recall the promises of my ordination. Dedication, commitment, self-gift, devotion. This is not just a constancy of sticking with someone else through thick and thin, but the continued choice to love, to sacrifice, to embrace, to lay our lives down, to give ourselves away. I suspect that dedication has looked very different over your years of marriage. When a young couple has their first child, dedication takes on a whole new meaning! It does again, as more children enter the family, but also when loss, disaster, or sickness strikes. The virtue of dedication is not a blank check that you wrote to your spouse and to God on your wedding day; it is a blank check that you write to the other person and God *every day*. We cannot just give ourselves completely to another once and for all and think we have done it for good. No, dedication necessarily entails *re-dedication*, continuous dedication, a dedication that not only embraces challenges as they come, but sees those challenges as opportunities to dedicate oneself anew, and in a new and deeper way, to your beloved.

Lastly, I turn to that virtue of courtesy. Unfortunately, I think that our modern age has dwindled “courtesy” down to politeness or civility, something like “tolerance.” Now politeness and tolerance are not bad things, but they are not full-fledged virtues either. Putting up with others without insulting or denigrating them is perhaps a minimum standard of civility, but it is not the standard of the saints. Full-fledged courtesy goes deeper than this. One can see its roots in the word “court” or even “curtsy”; it has to do with courtly-manners, not just respectfulness and elegance, but generosity, gentlemanliness, graciousness, grace-ful-ness. Courtesy is shorthand for not just “do[ing] unto others what you would have them do unto you,” but really “lov[ing] one another as I have loved you” (Luke 6:31). You cannot love someone in a *gracious* way without *grace*! I see in each of you all the different parts of this virtue. Yes, politeness and civility to each other, and respect and concern for your spouse, but deeper than any of that, below all of that, lies the grace of Christ that has allowed you to love each other – sometimes well, and sometimes inadequately – but to keep choosing love nonetheless, and this is certainly the height of courtesy. To love your wife as if she were a queen; to respect your husband as if he were a king.

Today, as we celebrate God's gift of matrimony in the context of this Mass, we turn to Our Lord's Gospel given to us today. Widely considered one of the most obscure of the parables that Jesus told, we have before us the parable of the unjust steward, a crooked man who steals from his master to protect his future. How can we learn from such a character? Jesus explains it with the somewhat cryptic line: *"I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones"* (Luke 16:9-10). This is the takeaway from the parable: to emulate the unjust steward not in his stealing, but in his planning for the future. Jesus is commending the steward's method, but not his solution. Perhaps Jesus was hoping that his disciples were at least that resourceful when proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom of God. Will they make good use of material possessions to advance fidelity to God? If so many take pains to save money for the inevitable leaky roof, or the education of their children, or their retirement, should we not give more attention to the wealth that lasts into eternity?

Each virtue that we allow the Lord to build in our hearts ... each day that we persevere in Love ... every time you dedicate yourselves anew to your

spouse, your family, or our God ... every act of courtesy ... these are the little investments in eternity that God promises to reward with joys that we can only imagine.

Virtue needs to be kept in practice as much as any skill we may have in life. A pianist cannot learn to play a concerto without practicing. We cannot grow in faith, hope and love unless we practice these virtues on a day-to-day basis. Small acts of kindness, justice and faith are not insignificant to God. The mystic Julian of Norwich tells us that God notices not only great deeds, but also those that are small and simple, because not even the least of our good deeds will be forgotten. Virtues, like vices, are cumulative. They gather a momentum of their own. So our little daily acts of goodness become embedded in us and develop into a habit of grace, just as negative habits can become an unconscious but deadly habit that prevents grace from flourishing in our lives.

To all you couples here who have witnessed to us these virtues, *keep choosing them!* God never stops giving us the grace to be saints! *Every* day of our lives is a chance to grow more in His image and likeness. And to all your family and friends here, I invite you also *to make the choice for heaven today.* Choose virtue. Find someone you can persevere through life with. Risk dedicating yourself to a vocation that will cost you everything. Do not settle

for an earthly courtesy, but treat one another with the dignity of another son or daughter of God.

Fifty years ago, the number one song was Don McLean's "American Pie." The recorded version ran 8 minutes and 42 seconds, holding the record for almost fifty years for being the longest song to reach number one before Taylor Swift's ten-minute version of "All Too Well" broke the record in 2021. So I will not sing the whole song for you, but I note this line in the middle of the song that asks,

*Did you write the book of love
And do you have faith in God above
If the Bible tells you so?*

Indeed, the Bible tells us about faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13). Placing our trust in the Lord, let us now share in this Eucharist, giving thanks for the great gift of God's love.

May God give us this grace. Amen.