

HOMILY FOR MASS WITH MARRIED COUPLES, FEBRUARY 2019

If, over the last three years, you've been to this Mass before, you might remember that near the end of my homily I've asked those present to speak positively to young people, at every opportunity, about the beauty of marriage. Because so many young people, as you all know, are frightened of this commitment. I've encouraged married couples of all ages to speak personally and honestly to young people about the help, the grace, that God has given them in their married lives; and about the faithfulness to each other which God helps to make possible, however tested at times it can be; and about the joy, happiness and fulfilment that can be experienced and lived out in married life.

As you know, I'm encouraging all of us in our schools, parishes and chaplaincies, over the next three years, to think about our relationship with God in these terms, of Encounter, Discipleship and Missionary Discipleship.

Today, I ask you to think about what you would say to young people about the spiritual themes of Encounter and Discipleship as you have experienced them in your married life. Don't worry about these words; try to get behind them. So first of all, Encounter. I would like everyone in the diocese to discover, or discover more deeply, that they are each personally loved by God, that God desires that they each truly Encounter Him and his personal love for them; that he really wants an ongoing and ever deepening personal relationship with each of us, without exception; and that Christ desires our daily response to this personal encounter, and not just at Mass, so that we can become more and more his disciples, in the way we live out our lives each day. If you're tempted to dismiss this language and thinking, as a bit evangelical, a bit protestant, please don't. Just listen to this teaching from the Roman Catholic General Directory for the teaching of the faith:

"The Christian faith is, above all, conversion to Jesus Christ, full and sincere adherence to his person and the decision to walk in his footsteps. Faith is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, making of oneself his disciple. This demands a permanent commitment to think like him, to judge like him and to live as he lived." (53,54)

So, drawing upon your own rich and varied experience as married couples, what would you wish to say about this to young people? I really want each of you to think about this but, by way of some suggestions, I would ask you to reflect on this truth, that growing in your relationship with each other as a married couple

and growing in your relationship with God are inseparable; that many of the same necessary disciplines which help you to deepen your relationship with one another will also help deepen your relationship with God. I offer just a couple of simple examples to help get you thinking about your own experiences. You know, that in a marriage, you have to keep both talking and listening to each other if you wish to get to know each other better. But you also know it's so easy to get busy and distracted, maybe even by the needs of the children, and to begin to take each other for granted; maybe even arrogantly, over the years, to believe that you know all the important stuff about each other, and so communication, that essential regular time of encounter with each other, gets put on the back burner, or reduced to 'what's for dinner?' or 'what's on the Telly this evening'. In the busyness of everyday survival, getting to know each other better can appear unimportant. So, as you also know, regular communication, times of encounter with each other, has to be a discipline and a passion on the part of both of you. It's a discipline when you say to yourself, 'even though I'm feeling really tired, I'm going to talk and listen. It's a passion when you say to yourself, 'I'm not content with keeping the relationship the way it is now. I want to know more about my spouse, I want to get closer. And it's exactly the same in our relationship with God, is it not? I put it to you that, as married couples, you have a wealth of experience about the necessity of encounter, to help young people grow in their understanding and appreciation of encounter in their own close relationships, in their relationship with God, and in the beauty and benefits of it in marriage.

The second spiritual theme is discipleship, and the earlier quotation from the Catechetical Directory spoke of it in this way, as 'conversion to Jesus Christ, full and sincere adherence to his person and the decision to walk in his footsteps'. Husbands and wives are called to care and to show love for each other, to pool the finances, to share the daily tasks, to listen to each other, especially when the other is frustrated or anxious, and you could each add so much more to this list. But ultimately, the most important thing you will do for each other as a married couple is to care for the good of each other's souls. As a married person, your Christian discipleship, your daily way of following in the footsteps of Christ involves praying for one another, praying with each other, maybe dragging the other at times to Mass, to Confession, especially when they're being lazy or dragging their heels a bit. It involves setting a good example for each other, encouraging each other with gentleness and humility, and not getting into bed each night without first forgiving and praying for each other. It means asking God for the grace you need to help the other to stay faithful to God and, indeed, to grow in their relationship with God. I put it to you, as married couples that

you have so much experience and wisdom to share with young people about what encounter and discipleship looks like in marriage and the joys that it brings, and so how important it is in each of our lives. Please do help young people to appreciate the challenges and the joys of married life. Congratulations to each of you as you celebrate another year of your marriages, and may the Lord continue to bless you with his love and his grace as you quietly prepare now to renew your wedding vows. Amen!