

#### FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR—Year B

When I selected this date for my once-a-semester celebration of the Eucharist with you, I had not yet looked at the readings. When I did—especially the second reading (1 Cor 7:32-35)—my first reaction was to regret my choice, but I actually came to be pleased with it because I appreciated the challenge. The way this passage from First Corinthians begins is confusing. St. Paul first says that he wants all of his readers to be free of anxieties. He goes on to say that the unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord, while the married man is anxious about the things of the world—especially about how he may please his wife—and such a man is divided. Well, is Paul saying that he wants even the unmarried man to be free of his anxiety about the things of God? A few commentators think so, but since Paul claims that only the married man is divided—presumably divided between serving the Lord on the one hand and his wife on the other—it is more likely that Paul finds only the anxieties of the married person to be regrettable. This also seems to be in accord with what he had writes some verses earlier: that he wishes everyone would be as he is, unmarried, though he admits that this is unrealistic and not even willed by God.

In any case, this teaching surely had its influence on some later, very influential Christian thinkers like St. Augustine of Hippo, who taught that marriage was a state tolerated by God for the benefit of the human race through the procreation of children, but that sexual intercourse was so bound up with concupiscence that it could hardly be engaged in at all without some measure of sin. Somewhat more affirmatively, St. Thomas Aquinas did, in theory, find positive value in the joys of marriage, but he felt that, in practice, intercourse could hardly be devoid of some sinfulness because the intensity of its physical pleasure deprives one momentarily of the use of the highest human faculty, reason. A modern appreciation of the positive value of sexual love in marriage seems to have found its first solid base in the eighteenth century in the writings of St.

Alphonsus Liguori, for whom the purpose of obtaining pleasure was a legitimate reason for marrying, though even then only as an accidental end.<sup>1</sup>

Only in the twentieth century did attitudes really begin to change, first in the writings of Dietrich von Hildebrand in the 1920s, later in the Second Vatican Council's constitution on the Church in the modern world, where we find such positive statements as the following:

“Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ's redeeming power.... The actions within marriage by which the couple are united intimately and chastely are noble and worthy ones. Expressed in a manner that is truly human, these acts promote the mutual self-giving by which the spouses enrich each other.”

That sounds wonderful, but is it too good to be true? One of the ground-breaking books affirming its truth was titled *The Freedom of Sexual Love*, published in the late 1960s by a Catholic couple named Joseph and Lois Bird. Their book was quite likely influenced by that Vatican II document and would probably not have been written some years earlier. Their own experience as husband and wife convinced them that their intimate sexual union was for them something both physical and spiritual, a way of turning not only to each other but to God. They admitted, however, that this would not necessarily be the experience of the newly married. In their words, “Discovering the experience of Christ in the sexual union is a reward which is found not in a blinding flash of insight, but through gradual awareness, paralleling the growth of husband and wife toward the goal of mutual sanctity. It is the marriage, the total relationship, which must mature.”<sup>2</sup> But when that maturity is present, a woman might be able to echo the words of one wife quoted in the book, who said: “At the moment of climax, when I feel my husband flow into me, it's like a tremendous infusion of grace.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly this reflects a healthy

and laudable sense of oneness, not the division that St. Paul seems to have considered inevitable in what he said about the anxieties of the married man or woman.

It is also surely true—and those of you who are married could no doubt vouch for the fact—that the number of years a couple has been married is not at all necessarily a gauge of ever-increasing maturity. However, even when things have gone wrong, to the very point of threatening the ongoing existence of the marriage, there is always the possibility of turning things around. In a magazine that we received at the abbey a few months ago there was a truly inspiring article by a couple named Jim and Nancy Rizzi, now married for fifty years but not without some really serious struggles along the way. The husband wrote: “I entered marriage with a lot of expectations ... but life never turns out how we imagine it!... I started chasing after something difficult to attain and ultimately unfulfilling—accumulating wealth. Nancy and I settled into a routine; we were a married couple but living as though we had our separate lives.” His wife agreed, saying: “Over time we lost our priority of having God at the center of our marriage. The attitudes of our culture were affecting us, so we each started living for ourselves, running on parallel tracks.”

Obviously, theirs was a marriage in danger of falling apart. Their turning point was a Marriage Encounter weekend, which taught them a lot about communication—communication with each other and with the Lord. They began to take time to stop and talk to each other each day, to say simple prayers with each other, to ask for forgiveness when one of them had offended the other, to recognize that genuine love is not a feeling but a decision. As Nancy said, “We know now that the marriage vows are a reality beyond the words you say on your wedding day. It wasn’t until we went through trying times that the vows became flesh and called us to a deeper

commitment.” Her final words to couples were these: “Choose to love, to keep working, to keep letting go of negativity and see the goodness of the other. Ultimately, you will find joy.”<sup>4</sup>

Whether married or celibate, may all of us keep letting go of negativity, keep looking for the goodness in those with whom we live and work, and so come to experience something of the joy that our loving God wishes for every one of us.

1" This rapid survey is based on Msgr. J.D. Conway, Foreword to Joseph W. and Lois F. Bird, *The Freedom of Sexual Love* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 10-14.

2" Joseph and Lois Bird, 151.

3" Ibid., 148.

4 "Nancy and Jim: A Look at Marriage with New Eyes," *Imprint: A Publication of the Sisters of New Life* (Winter 2014), n. p.