

NACFLM CONVENTION-2010

Welcome to Cincinnati. The humidity is bad this week. Things could be worse. Cincinnati was once nicknamed Porkopolis because of the large number of pigs running loose in the streets. At least you can't step in the humidity. Longfellow dubbed Cincinnati the Queen City of the West. That was when white folk were still sparse across the Mississippi, and Cincinnati was the fourth largest city in the United States.

St. Peter in Chains Cathedral, which unfortunately will not be the site for our Eucharist tomorrow, was dedicated in 1845, yes, 1845, as a symbol of Catholic pride and determination in the face of virulent Nativism. Catholics were not welcome. Of course, we are along that tectonic plate called the Mason-Dixon Line, where slaves swam the Ohio River desperate for freedom but still fearful of being rounded up and sent back. That's how the laws worked then.

Those of you who claim connection with New York may be aware of the present sesquicentennial of the Brooklyn Bridge. I cannot help but mentioning that Cincinnati's Suspension Bridge is the predecessor of that East River icon, designed and built by John Roebling as the first permanent bridge cross the Ohio River, before he moved east.

If you are wondering why the Bishop of Steubenville is so exuberant about our host city, it is because I was born here, as the result of God's love and that of my parents. I was also reborn in Christ Jesus here, educated in Catholic schools for twenty-one years, ordained to the diaconate and priesthood, and served as a priest of the Cincinnati Archdiocese for twenty-five years.

As a matter of fact, I was conceived a short drive from this hall, and within a month of my parents' wedding. That is a tribute to my mother's unfailing efficiency and my father's ability to take advantage of opportunities at hand. Now, in childhood, I think I would have been happy if my mother had ceased being so efficient and father so opportunistic. But five siblings followed. I must admit that my life has been much more interesting as a result.

Now in their sixty-third year of marriage, my parents are fortunately in generally good health, albeit a little less efficient and opportunistic. They are still quite impressive on the dance floor, however. If you are thinking that I couldn't really be that old, please continue in your self-deception.

I think over the years that my parents have found their parish to be supportive of their marriage in many ways. But, they have been able and ready to be co-workers in the effort. Nevertheless, their marriage has not been perfect. Nor have their children. We would all be happy to tell you about each other.

Jesus tells his disciples to be perfect as his heavenly Father is perfect. And that passage from First Corinthians, oft proclaimed in conjunction with weddings, speaks of love as never failing. Because marriage is a reflection of the union of the Holy Trinity, certainly perfect, never failing love is the ideal.

Yet, as the bishops' pastoral letter, "Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan" realistically acknowledges, "Couples are still themselves, with all their personal faults and failings. Sacraments, each in their own way, really do configure us to the love of Christ revealed in his Passion, Death, and Resurrection..., but they do not bring instant perfection."

St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians provides remarkable personal insight into his vocation as an apostle. The struggles it reveals are not pretty. Imagine a husband writing to his wife. Paul had promised to come home to Corinth very soon. He professes to love her dearly. However, pressing business, in fact, outright threats to his life have kept him in Macedonia. Corinth is not convinced. Is this Paul just being fickle, yes one minute, no the next? Paul is desperate to prove his sincerity to Corinth, while framing it within his larger apostolic mission.

So, St. Paul admits to many of the faults that Corinth has complained about. But, hey, he says, you have no idea how tough things are for me here in Macedonia. "We are treated as deceivers and yet are truthful; as unrecognized and yet acknowledged; as dying and behold we live; as chastised and yet not put to death; as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor yet enriching many; as having nothing and yet possessing all things."

In the end, Paul patches things up with his beloved spiritual children in Corinth. He is not perfect, nor are they. Life is not easy, especially fulfilling the work of discipleship and kingdom-building. So it is with marriage. As Paul could not imagine fulfilling his apostolic vocation without the support of others, married couples require a network of support. Those who belong to the Church need marriage-building parishes and dioceses.

You have come together this week because of your intense and unwavering commitment to God's plan of marriage. Thank you so much. Since most of you are married, or have been married, you know at a personal level that marriage is blessing that keeps on challenging.

There are unique challenges at the ecclesial level and even greater ones at the cultural level. We could easily apply the little quotation from Second Corinthians to fit the current circumstances of marriage: "We are treated as deceivers and yet are truthful; as unrecognized and yet acknowledged; as dying and behold we live; as chastised and yet not put to death; as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor yet enriching many; as having nothing and yet possessing all things."

Marriage is one of God's greatest blessings for his human children. Christ so valued this blessing, central as it was to his own earthly life, that he made it a sacrament, one of the seven special ways in which those who accept him as Lord can be transformed by his divine life and configured to him. His Church, his communion of faith, has an obligation to promote, nurture and defend the vocation of marriage. We must be a marriage-building Church, for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, for the sake of married people and children, for the sake of the world.

My parents' marriage and the marriages of good friends and those of hundreds of parishioners I have been able to serve over the years inspire me to be a marriage-building bishop. In our pastoral letter, we bishops teach that the faithful communion of spouses "becomes a participation in Jesus' everlasting spousal love for his Church. By symbolizing and sharing in Christ's purifying and sanctifying love for his Church, married couples are called to an ever deeper holiness of life, just as Christ calls his Church to an ever deeper holiness of life."

As the song says, you can't have one without the other. The love of Christ, the holiness of the entire Church and the holiness of married couple are inextricably bound together. They form the path to perfection in an imperfect world, an imperfect Church and imperfect marriages. As St. Paul understood, no matter how it seems, in Christ we do possess all things.