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The Dignity and Power of Marital Love and Family Life

February 14, known as Saint Valentine's Day, holds a special significance in the lives of people who are in love. According to tradition, Saint Valentine, a Christian and a priest, was martyred in Rome in the late third century. Tradition also holds that, during his imprisonment, Saint Valentine sent words of loving encouragement to his beloved fellow Christians. Thus the custom of sending "Valentine greetings" to loved ones is observed on his day.

In recognition of the sentiments of love which are most specially expressed at this time of year, it is appropriate for us to reflect on the gift of marital love, and on its dignity and power. We know from the beginning of creation, God blessed the union of man and woman, making it fruitful and fertile. As the Rite of Marriage so eloquently states: "Father, by your plan man and woman are united, and married life has been established as the one blessing that was not forfeited by original sin or washed away in the flood" (Nuptial Blessing A).

Marriage and family life have endured through the ages as the basis of a stable society. In times throughout history when the institution of marriage was weak, society and its morals too were weak. In our own day, we observe with grave concern the assaults on marriage and family life. Campaigns for the recognition of domestic partnerships and same-sex marriage, the disturbing trend of divorce, the more frequent reality of cohabitation, and a pervasive contraceptive mentality have greatly weakened the moral base and stability of contemporary America. The Church, and all who are her members, must be the voice of truth and the witness of love in upholding the dignity of marriage between man and woman, as well as the positive influence of strong family life.

The Second Vatican Council teaches: "Authentic married love will be held in high esteem, and healthy public opinion will be quick to recognize it if Christian spouses give outstanding witness to faithfulness and harmony in their love, if they are conspicuous in their concern for the education of their children, and if they play their part in a much needed cultural, psychological, and social renewal in matters of marriage and family. It is imperative to give suitable and timely instruction to young people, above all in the heart of their own families, about the dignity of married love, its role and its exercise" (Gaudium et Spes, 49).

Mindful of the need for proper formation of married couples, the Church goes to great lengths to ensure that couples are prepared for marriage to the best of their ability. Pre-Cana programs, sponsored by the Family Life Office of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia as well as by individual parishes, are offered at numerous sites throughout the year. These programs, taught by married couples with the assistance of priests, cover the topics of the spiritual nature of marriage, as well as communication, adjustments and intimacy. The FOCCUS test, a premarital inventory which facilitates open communication between couples, is administered as a tool to identify the strong points and weak points of which the couple should be conscious. Furthermore, our parish priests work with the couples, preparing them to assume the duties, responsibilities and joys of marriage and instructing them in the three goods of marriage: permanence, fidelity and children.

Worldwide Marriage Encounter

Diocesan and Parish Planning Initiatives locally and throughout the world have identified a deeper need and a greater desire for continuing faith formation among the laity. Various efforts have arisen in recent years which strengthen the faith life, practice and understanding of those committed to furthering their knowledge of doctrine, liturgy, spirituality and other faith-related topics. The same is applied to priests. Annually, the priests of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia participate in workshops designed for their continuing priestly, human and moral formation.

With this idea in mind, we can greatly appreciate the efforts of **Worldwide Marriage Encounter**. As identified in their mission statement, "Worldwide Marriage Encounter's mission of renewal in the Church and change in the world is to assist couples and priests to live fully intimate and responsible relationships by providing them with a Catholic 'experience' and ongoing community support for such a lifestyle." The encounter is led by couples and priests who wish to aid couples in deepening their marital love, centered on God, and supporting one another. What is applied to couples in their marital relationship is applied to priests in the exercise of their priestly ministry.

In the somewhat difficult times in which married couples are now living, the work of Marriage Encounter provides great hope, support and direction. Healthy communication, as recommended by the Encounter, will enable couples to grow deeper in love and intimacy and thus show the power and permanence of the marriage covenant to our modern world.

Since the early 1980s, Worldwide Marriage Encounter has sponsored the Second Sunday of February, closest to Saint Valentine's Day, as "World Marriage Day." Today, more than ever, we can appreciate the value of encouraging this effort as a means of reeducating the world in the dignity of marriage, the covenant of love between man and woman. Information on World Marriage Day may be obtained at the Worldwide Marriage Encounter web site: wmd.wwme.org or www.wwme-philly.org.

The Popes on Family Life

So much of the ministry of our late beloved Holy Father Pope John Paul II was directed toward the re-evangelization of culture, particularly through the renewal of family life. Following the 1980 Synod of Bishops on the Family, Pope John Paul II issued *Familiaris Consortio*, on The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World. This Apostolic Exhortation on Family Life inspires us to grasp the wonder and beauty of marriage and family life and to see how these institutions, by fidelity to their nature, build up the Church and strengthen society. Pope John Paul II wrote: "And since in God's plan it has been established as an "intimate community of life and love, the family has the mission to become more and more what it is, that is to say, a community of life and love, in an effort that will find fulfillment, as will everything created and redeemed, in the Kingdom of God. ... Hence the family has the mission to guard, reveal and communicate love" (no. 17). Pope John Paul II also noted that the Synod emphasized four general tasks of the family: forming a community of persons; serving life; participating in the development of society; and sharing in the life and mission of the Church (cf. no. 17).

His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI has taken up the theme of family life so dear to his predecessor. In his May 17, 2005 Letter to Participants in the Fifth World Meeting of Families to be held in Valencia, Spain in July 2006, our Holy Father wrote: "Today, if they are to give a truly human face to society, no people can ignore the precious good of the family, founded on marriage. 'The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring'"(can. 1055): this is the foundation of the family and the patrimony and common good of humanity. Thus, the Church cannot cease to proclaim that in accordance with God's plans (cf. Mt 19:3-9), marriage and the family are irreplaceable and permit no other alternatives."

In remembering Saint Valentine, let us recall that he was a martyr — a witness for Christ — whose faith, devotion and love were aimed towards the improvement of society and a view to the Kingdom of heaven. In the exchange of greetings of affection, may husbands and wives allow their love to be rooted in Christ and may all of our families be strong witnesses to truth, fidelity, permanence and life.

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