



« WITNESSES OF GOD'S LOVE »



Bishop François Thibodeau, C.J.M.

Introduction

I – graced with wonderful gifts

1. Spirit of Wisdom
2. Spirit of Intelligence
3. Spirit of Counsel

4. Spirit of Knowledge
5. Spirit of Filial Love
6. Spirit of Strength
7. Spirit of Worship and Praise

II – enlightened by a life-giving teaching

1. A Human Institution
2. Created in the Image of God
3. The Sacrament of Matrimony
4. Mutual Sanctification
5. Vocation to Holiness
6. The Unity and Indissolubility of Marriage
7. Fruitfulness of Marriage

III – guided towards a community of love

1. Communication
2. Affection
3. Forgiveness
4. Prayer
5. Family
6. Community
7. Commitment

Conclusion

Pastoral letter of François Thibodeau, C.J.M., Bishop of Edmundston
on the occasion of the feast of Pentecost 2004
on the vocation of Christian marriage

Witnesses of God's Love

Dear People of the Diocese,

Two days after the 1926 PENTECOST Sunday, Tuesday May 25, 1926, my father Hormidas Thibodeau and my mother Yvonne Poulin gave themselves to one another in marriage, in the parish church at Saint-Odilon, Québec. From this union there issued twelve children, fifty-four grandchildren, and eighty great-

grandchildren. Having received their love as a precious heritage I want, with all the members of my family, to express my deepest gratitude to God.

On this day of PENTECOST, 2004, united to all the couples in the Diocese of Edmundston who have entered into a Christian marriage, in union also with all those who were sealed with the Holy Spirit when they were baptised and confirmed, I thank God also for His love which He showered in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. In this my eleventh annual pastoral letter, I want to praise the Holy Spirit for all the gifts he constantly raises up in our Church. Saint Paul the Apostle was right in saying: "There are different gifts but the same Spirit, there are different ministries but the same Lord; there are different works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone. To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good... It is one and the same Spirit who produces all these gifts, distributing them to each as he wills" (1 Cor. 12:4-11).

Cries from the Heart

After having meditated together on the priestly vocation, in 2002 and on the vocation to consecrated life, in 2003, this year - as I mentioned at the beginning of the new millennium - I would like us to reflect together on the vocation of Christian marriage. It seems to me, in fact, that it is through a specific call of God that a couple celebrate marriage and are made in this way witnesses of Christ's love for humankind. The man and woman chosen receive the grace to show throughout their life together the Spirit they were given for the benefit of all. This divine Spirit accompanies every couple before, during, and after the celebration of their marriage commitment. He is the origin of all love. He binds together two altogether different beings in a communion of heart and mind. He makes the love exchanged and promised between them lasting.

In the first part of this pastoral letter I shall give thanks for the seven gifts of the Spirit in relation with the reality experienced by couples. I shall then reflect on seven points of the Church's teaching on Christian love and on seven ways of strengthening the community of life and love which binds the couple. At the end of each chapter, the witness of couples will tell us of the joys and hopes, sorrows and difficulties they have experienced. Questions are also asked throughout this letter, to help our reflection.

graced with wonderful gifts

Sacramental preparation gives us a very special opportunity to discover the richness of each of the sacraments. Wonderful work is being done in parishes to help the people better understand baptism, forgiveness, the Eucharist, and confirmation. However, there is often a long waiting period between the celebration of confirmation and matrimony. It is my hope that the following reflections bridge the distance between these two sacraments; I deem it of the utmost importance to clearly understand the vitality which the Holy Spirit has established in the hearts of every baptised and confirmed Christian.

1. Spirit of Wisdom

As we thank God for every gift received, we can discover how the seven gifts traditionally recognised by the Church are at work in every Christian marriage. The gift of wisdom helps us discern the presence of God at the heart of our lives. It is the gift that helps us welcome God as we welcome the sun's warming and life giving rays. It incites us to have an important place for God in our daily lives, and gives us a taste for God. It will sometimes take us months or even years to recognise the place of wisdom at the heart of our love. Holy Scripture shows us this presence at the very centre of Abraham and Sarah's marriage, the couple to whom was promised a posterity as numerous as the stars. It was the same with Rebekah and Isaac; the book of Genesis relates the story of this union which was willed by God, as well as other celebrated in the days of Isaac, Rachel, and Leah. According to God's word to Moses, the book of Leviticus has very severe prescriptions on married life: "I, the Lord, am your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you once lived... My decrees you shall carry out, and my statutes you shall take care to follow." The books of Wisdom, psalms, and of the Prophets shall repeat the sacred instructions. The book of Tobit has wonderful considerations on the place of God at the heart of every human union: "We are descendants of a holy people and we cannot come together like pagans who do not know God." After Tobias's prayer, Sarah prayed thus: "May we live together to a happy old age."

Reflection:

- At the time we were going out together did we ever feel the presence of God with us?
- How was this presence of God felt, at the wedding itself?
- Can I recognise God's presence in me, in my spouse, and at work in our life as a couple?

2. Spirit of Intelligence

The gift of intelligence is given first of all to enable us to understand the Word of God and to apply it to our daily lives. As the earth needs water, to bear fruit, the Christian couple welcomes the Word of God to help them grow and blossom. Holy Scripture helps us understand more and more the wonderful covenant which the Lord has concluded with humankind. To make us better understand these bonds of affection and friendship which the Lord develops with his children, Scripture sends us back to the image of the union of man and woman. We have only to recall the book of the Song of Songs which praises the love of man and woman, a sign of God's affectionate and passionate love for us. "My lover belongs to me and I to him. Set me as a seal on your heart... For stern as death is love, relentless as the nether world is devotion; its flames are a blazing fire. Deep waters cannot quench love." The book of Hosea helps us better understand God's relationship to His chosen people, in the guise of the beloved: "So I will allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart... I will espouse you to me forever: I will espouse you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy; I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the Lord."

Reflection:

- Is there any place for the Word of God, in us as a couple?
- Do we take time to read and meditate on the Word of God?
- Are there any words of Jesus to guide us in our journey as lovers and as a couple?

3. Spirit of Counsel

Among the varied and wonderful gifts which the Spirit gives us, there is the gift of counsel which helps us choose what we must do in order to live according to the Gospel, especially in those more difficult moments of life. The Christian couple chooses from the many influences which nourish them, and needs to use the gift of counsel especially when the time comes for making important decisions. This does not mean the Spirit directly whispers answers to our deepest interrogations, or that he clearly indicates the path to follow, in life. However, he puts into our hearts and along our paths all that is required for us to discern correctly regarding our choice of lifestyle and careers, and our daily decisions. By becoming aware of all the qualities, powers, talents, and attitudes the Lord has put in us, by becoming aware of the needs and expectations of our milieus, through prayer we gradually come to determine along which paths the Lord is leading. The Lord is not untouched by the prayer of his Church, nor by the humble prayer of the lovers.

Reflection:

- Do we take the time to seek the counsel of a parent, a friend, a confidant, or a priest?
- Do I pray for my partner and for the other lovers?
- Do we pray for those who could be true guides in Christian life?

4. Spirit of Knowledge

If in the Garden of Eden there were strange and mysterious trees - especially the tree of knowledge of good and evil which our first parents were forbidden to eat, such is not the case in the Church. The gift of knowledge which the Spirit gives us helps us understand life's true meaning and answer the important questions which plague man and woman: Why death? Why suffering? Why love? This gift of knowledge helps us enter more deeply into God's intimacy. It really helps us better understand the meaning of life, and the place of God in the midst of our life's adventure in Church and world. The prophet Micah puts it this way: "You have been told, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: only to do right and love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mi. 6:8). This gift of the spirit helps us better understand our Father, one another, and others; it helps us see ourselves and others generally as Christ himself sees us, and to look at our brothers and sisters with his eyes, listen with his ears, and love with his heart. In such a context, the way a lover looks upon his beloved and the way the beloved listens to the voice of the lover are part of a wonderful exchange.

Reflection:

- Do I take the time to get to know my beloved? To get to know others?
- Does this knowledge change with seasons and events?
- How do we see God in times of trial, illness, separation, and mourning?

5. Spirit of Filial Love

The Pharisees asked Jesus about the greatest commandment, and he answered: You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments the whole law is based, and the prophets as well” (Mt. 22:37-40). Far from opposing one another, love of God and neighbour attract one another. Saint John even says: “ Love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten of God and has knowledge of God. The man without love has known nothing of God, for God is love” (1 Jn. 4:7-7). We must ever keep in mind that the source of all love between man and woman is God, and that this love is a manifestation of God's own love. The gift of filial love moves man to love woman day by day and week by week , and woman to love her spouse in good times as bad.

Reflection:

- Do we truly believe that nothing can separate us from the love of God?
- How do we show in our daily life that our commitment to one another is meant to continue growing?
- What do we do to grow in love of God and in our own love for one another?

6. Spirit of Strength

This is perhaps the best-known and most sought-after gift! This is the gift which helps us courageously make decisions, overcome obstacles along the way, and change course if necessary. This is the gift which is attached to the duration of love, so that a couple continue to love one another even more intensely after five or sixty years of marriage, than on their wedding day. It is the gift which allows a couple to “last” despite adversity, trial, illness, and the major changes which occur in time. Every couple experiences growth pains. In order to grow while respecting each other's charisms and pursuing their vocation as a couple, the gift of strength is what is needed. So many examples come to mind when I think of couples who have been through major problems and have overcome them without mutually destroying one another. When the most beautiful dreams are broken because of illness, the death of one's beloved, loss of work, or accidents, fires, paralysis, or betrayal, so much strength is needed. The Spirit can give the gift of strength to start anew, to a couple that feels weak, powerless, and sometimes unfaithful. Today more than ever, the couple needs extraordinary strength to witness to its faith and hope, to its convictions and values. The gift of strength enables the couple to witness at all time to Christ's love for humankind.

Reflection:

- As a couple are we ready to witness to our Christian values before society?
- Are there really any obstacles that we cannot overcome, with strength from the Spirit?
- Do we know any couples that are “strong” with the strength of the Spirit?

7. Spirit of Worship and Praise

Worship and praise is such a wonderful gift! It is the gift which enables us to acknowledge God in all confidence when He makes himself known to us, to pray to Him in simplicity, and to thank Him for the wonders He works on our behalf. It is an extraordinary gift which enables us to say “Thank you” to God and to our brothers and sisters, a gift which allows us to experience awe for the love that God has for each and everyone of us, and for the love we bear one another. In accepting life and love, there is a breath of well-being and of freedom which calls the couple to gratitude and prayer. Sister Emmanuelle, the Rag-Picker of Cairo, had this prayer: “Lord, help me look into the sun-drenched face of each one I live with. It is at times so hard for me to overlook their irritating defects rather than focussing on the living qualities they have and which I enjoy without my being aware of them. Help me also, Lord, to look into your sun-drenched face even in the worst events. There is not one person who cannot be the source of some goodness still hidden from me.” It is really a grace to work only for the good, the beautiful, and the real; it is a grace to seek in every human being - especially in one's spouse - the spark placed there by God in creating us in His image. It is a exalted gift that opens us to the invisible reality, so that nothing shakes the optimism of those who believe and hope in God and in their fellow brothers and sisters.

Reflection:

- Can we experience wonder and thank God for the gifts and strengths of our couple?
- How is it possible for us to react against forgetfulness, indifference, ingratitude, and even contempt?
- How much time do we reserve for prayer?

Testimonies

1. A Commitment to Mutual Support

My wife Sandra and I were very happy to receive acknowledgement of our thirty years of marriage in the eyes of the Lord. Back in 1974, we were married by Father Normand Thibodeau, O.F.M. at St. Ann's Parish in Tobique First Nation. We are more than happy to share with others why we believe our union has lasted. First, coming from a strong Catholic community, we had the support of our families. This was very important. They supported us but they also had the wisdom to stay at arm's length so that Sandra and I would be able to work through difficult times. Many couples run to their respective families to gain support each time they have a disagreement, which to us only complicates reconciliation. Our parents would say: "You made your bed, you lie in it." We took that to mean that our disagreements didn't need outside interference. Secondly, we strongly believe in our marriage vows. The vows state that we support each other in good times and bad, whether we are rich or poor, in sickness and in health, until death do us part. Thirdly, we believe that the Holy Spirit and the gift of the Catholic faith enriches our lives. Today, in 2004, our marriage has shaped our emotional, spiritual, mental and physical beings as humans. We are more caring and respectful of our responsibilities as parents and grandparents. Each year we make a pilgrimage to Saint Anne de Beaupré with our grandchildren and other community elders to give thanks to Saint Anne for her intercession, and that of her husband. We realise that this trip is a historical venture by First Nation people. We see the importance of carrying on this tradition by showing our offspring the basilica in the hope that they will carry on long after Sandra and I are no longer able to continue our pilgrimage. Lastly, commitment to our marriage has made us stronger throughout the years. There is a saying that "there is more strength in numbers." Our immediate family - children and grandchildren - totals nine, and we are very proud of this."

- Tim and Sandra

2. God at The Centre of Our Life as a Couple

It was in 1982 that our adventure took root. One was still studying and the other was at the other end of the country: our love grew through letter writing. Not an easy way to start a relationship! That is why we firmly believe that God has been with us at each stage of our lives. It was only at the end of my studies - that is, four years later - that we decided to marry. We reached this decision because of our desire to know one another better, to share a common life and establish a family. Who among us does not have challenges to take up, at some time? Jules and I believe that our biggest challenge, the one which convinced us of the strength of the love we had for one another, was to see this love grow and develop despite the physical distance separating us. This, to us, was the biggest obstacle we had to overcome. Through force of circumstance we have had to move several times to look for a good job to support our family's needs. We have had to face precarious financial situations. And who among us is immune to illness? One of us has already been afflicted by illness for over a year. The loss of loved ones was another difficult time of trial. The Holy Spirit gave us strength and courage, and thanks to our union with God, thanks also to dialogue which is most important in our life as a couple, and to what we were taught by our parents regarding joy and sorrow, we, too, have learned to thank God for His wonders and the splendour of His creation all around us. He has graced us with two beautiful children whom we dearly cherish. When we take the time to look around us and we see separated couples, unhappy children and broken families, it frightens us and makes us think. It is up to us to nourish our life as a couple, for our family life to continue to grow. We know that we are aware that the future has other stages for us to go through, but through the sacrament of matrimony we have learned that by placing God at the heart of our couple He will always be there to guide us, support us, and enlighten us. Let us make room for Him! To God we are His children, and he loves us.

- Jules and Nicole

3. With Aging, Our Love Has Grown

I would pray every day for the ideal husband. My intention had always been to have a family because I loved children very much. After meeting Gilbert, frequenting one another for two years helped us get to know and love one another. At the time there were no marriage preparation courses, but there was prayer. During the five months we were engaged we promised to pray every day the "Prayer for Engaged Couples" and to make a weekend retreat: both of us wanted our marriage to be successful. We were married in 1952. I was 20, and Gilbert was 21. It was a marriage of love. The vow made before God to love one another despite adversity was sincere. Times were rather hard, at first, but the birth of our first child was greeted as a gift from heaven. My husband had to go to the United States to find work in the woods. We had a great trust in God who helped us through difficult times. Our greatest sorrow was the death of our eldest son at age 5, hit by a car before our eyes, on Easter Sunday of 1960. This was a difficult cross to bear, and the pain is still there. Faith in God and love of one another helped us through and live for our other children. Our greatest joy is our 8 surviving children, 18 grandchildren, and 4 great-grandchildren. We would love to see them grow in the faith and in the

love of God, but our materialistic times often make them forget the essential. We place our children in the hands of the Lord and continue to pray for them, welcome them, and set an example. With aging, our love has grown. It is possible to still love one another today because God has pride of place in our lives and we are always able to forgive one another. All along the way we have kept the flame burning through prayer and spiritual weekends: Marriage Encounter, couples meetings, Bible study, and Cursillos. We have also been Grey Nuns Associates for a number of years, with a special commitment to the needy. In this way we share with others: this is our way of giving thanks to God.

- Lorraine and Gilbert

4. Giving without Counting the Cost

We became children of God at baptism, at birth and, therefore, disciples of Christ Jesus. This was the outstanding point of departure of our lives. Through the years, God has been an ever-attentive Father to us. His Son has never ceased to guide us in our life projects, and the Holy Spirit enlightens us with his wisdom and gifts. We are very much involved in life while trusting in the unconditional love of God and our beloved Mother Mary. In this way we have the tools necessary to help our brothers and sisters when needed. We humans form the mystical Body of Christ. We cannot leave our brothers and sisters in ignorance when we feel that we can help them. It would not be fair for us to keep for ourselves what life has given us. If we believe that we have received in abundance, we must also pay in kind. This is what being disciples of Christ means to us. "Giving without counting the cost, joining in the struggle without fear of being hurt, working without seeking rest, spending oneself without expecting any other reward than knowing that we are doing the will of God." This is our commitment as a couple, and it is in us to stay.

- Isabelle and Lionel

5. With Love and Conviction

When we began going out together we were attracted and called to the vocation of marriage. We met and courted one another, we got to know each other and our love grew quietly. There was a period of reflection and prayer on both our parts, after we got engaged, to discern whether our love was strong enough to take us through 40, 50 or 60 years together as a couple. This means that our commitment had already ripened during our courtship. We got married, but it has always been a "ménage à trois:" the husband, the wife, and God. God has always been with us through trials, difficulties, and joys as a couple. There were times when trials were harder, and this Third Force which is God, was much needed. We know that without Him we could not have pulled through. It is easy to communicate with God. He knows everything, He sees everything, so we don't need to do any explaining. Speaking to Him in prayer, we already feel our burden getting lighter, less heavy. We are still praying, we are practising Christians, totally committed to serving the Church. God has done and continues to do so much for us that what we do for Him in return is very normal. What we do is done with love and conviction. There are times, as in illness, fatigue, and the pressures of everyday life, when, as baptised and confirmed Christians, we need the fruits of the Holy Spirit to keep us from hurting one another: for example, patience, understanding, respect. Some days, it is more difficult. As a couple, it is each day that we must live our union. We could say that one of the hardest things to do, and to do each day, is to forgive, to acknowledge our faults, our weaknesses, and to forgive them as God does to us. There is a special power in the sacrament of matrimony we received, a power which helps us and which strengthens our love of one another. Careful, though: it does not solve our problems in the blink of an eye! No, the special power is given to us in the form of graces to help us have understanding of the other and discernment in difficult daily situations. Without God's presence at the heart of our couple, I don't know whether we would have been able to go through forty years of life together, with everything that went with it. We must always work to make our love grow, and not take anything for granted. Love and kindness are at the heart of our couple.

- Pierre and Fernande

6. The Lord Has Worked Wonders

At the time it was the natural thing for us to enter a Christian marriage. For forty-four years we have had the certainty the sacramental grace has been our constant support. We have always felt God's presence in times of happiness and times of anguish, and in more difficult situations. We had the happiness of having two sons, the joy of our lives, and three grandchildren who are the sun of our lives. Their birth came as beautiful gifts. They are our riches and our hope. As with everyone else, life has brought us both good and bad surprises. Our love has always been our strength. We thank the Holy spirit for this grace of always seeing His light and feeling His protective hand over our home. We often say that we are blessed. We were blessed in our parents, our family, our friends. Yes, the Lord has worked wonders for us! And we thank Him.

- Paul and Thérèse

7. In the Way of Trust and Forgiveness

We got to know one another at a very early age and were married at the age of 15 and 18 respectively. Our

decision to commit ourselves to such a project was nevertheless thought out, and our decision to start a family together was a conscious decision offered to God. Common prayer, Sunday mass, putting into practice the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians (“Love is patient, love is kind,” etc.), communication, forgiveness and starting over again have been our faithful friends, over the years. We quite often consulted with a priest who guided us in the way of trust and forgiveness. Our young love and five children brought us many joys, as many reasons to continue to build our life’s project of community together despite the normal but sometimes difficult times of life. Like all couples, we have been through all kinds of periods. Years of happiness and joy together, with our small family. There were so many beautiful trips, picnics, camp fires in the back yard, and Sunday drives - what memories they bring back! In other words, small joys of life which unite and build a strong, healthy, united family. All of these little nothings have helped develop bonds of friendship, mutual understanding, and love, in our life as a couple. The birth of grandchildren brought our love to a new high, and we have been blessed by these heaven-sent gifts to us. We have also had more difficult moments, in our married life. We want to mention this because it is only in books that we read about rose-coloured marriages! Every normal couple is composed of two distinct beings who change a bit every day, over the years: to keep the fire of their love burning, the couple must remarry every morning! Prayer and forgiveness are wonderful ways of doing this. The happy life of a couple is made of eternal beginnings. We continue our journey together, with the Spirit of God leading us on.

- Louise and Ghislain

II. Enlightened by a Life-Giving Teaching

In this part of the pastoral letter on the vocation of marriage, in seven points I would like to recall the Church’s invaluable teaching as formulated by the Second Vatican Council, the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Family *Familiaris Consortio*, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and the pastoral messages of our Church, especially those of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB).

1. A Human Institution

The Canadian bishops reaffirmed in September, 2003 that marriage is a human reality, a natural institution which predates social, legal, and religious systems. Marriage has existed since time immemorial. Marriage predates our present government or any other, as well as the founding of the Church. Marriage is not the creature of State or Church, and neither a government nor the Church has authority to change its nature. This form of life for couples has always been valued and protected as an institution because of its unique character, its way of ordering human relationships, and its procreative potential. Marriage between a woman and a man constitutes a unique good for all society. It has a fundamental and irreplaceable role in building societies and civilizations. The social value of marriage comes from its role as a stabilizing force for the family, which in turn is the basic unit of society. The conjugal partnership of a man and a woman has always been considered to be the basis of the family, providing a stable and positive environment in which to care for children and so educate future generations.

Reflection:

- Is there a common understanding of the traditional definition of marriage, in our milieu?
- How do people view marriage, in our milieu?

2. Created in the Image of God

The biblical text on the creation of the world in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis uses poetic imagery to convey fundamental truths about humanity. Two major points can be taken from this text which offer profound understanding of the conjugal state. First, God gives human beings freedom, fertility, power, and the stewardship of all the earth and everything that inhabits it. Secondly, human beings are created in God’s image: “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). This is the wellspring of the dignity, meaning and life of the human being. The image of God is manifested in both a personal and a conjugal way. In Genesis 1:31, this image of god is the pinnacle of creation which leads to its fullness: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” The image and likeness of God is not only in the very nature of the couple, but also in their power to give life through procreation.

Reflection:

- What are the consequences of such a faith vision?
- Is this vision adequately promoted in education and the media, today?

3. The Sacrament of Matrimony

In the eyes of the Catholic Church marriage is of prime importance because Christ elevated it to the dignity of a sacrament. Even if love between a man and a woman is imperfect, it is always called to manifest in a tangible way what Jesus revealed abundantly: the irrevocable love of God that is forever linked to our humanity. Married couples share in this mystery. They become its living signs. The sacrament of matrimony is a sign of the union between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:31-32). As the icon of God's love, the sacrament of matrimony is also the icon of human dignity and greatness. The key image of creation reflected in the richness of the masculine and feminine dimensions of the heterosexual couple. The fact that human beings are created female and male, in God's image, and that procreative power flows from their union are two fundamental aspects of marriage. The social and conjugal unit - by its binding love, by its inherent ability to bear children, and by the social responsibility of father and mother to care for their children - not only enriches society but is its very cornerstone. For Christians, marriage marks a new page in the sacred story that began at baptism. It is a new moment of salvation history when the couple, forming a community of life and love, becomes a sign of Christ's love for his Church. The marriage bond is thus a covenant to be lived, an unconditional promise between two people that also involves the community.

Reflection:

- What does a sacrament consist of?
- Are the basic elements of marriage sufficiently understood, today?
- How is a couple's life a sacred history?

4. Mutual Sanctification

In his Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, Pope John Paul II states that the sacrament of matrimony is the specific source and original means of sanctification for Christian married couples and families. It takes up again and makes specific the sanctifying grace of baptism. By virtue of the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, conjugal love is purified and made holy. This love the Lord made worthy of special gifts, healing, perfecting, and exalting gifts of grace and charity. The gift of Jesus Christ is not exhausted in the actual celebration of the sacrament of matrimony, but rather accompanies the married couple throughout their lives. This fact is explicitly recalled by the Second Vatican Council when it says that Jesus Christ abides with them so that, just as he loved the Church and handed himself over on her behalf, the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-bestowal. For this reason, Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. By virtue of this sacrament, as spouses fulfill their conjugal and family obligations, they are penetrated with the Spirit of Christ who fills their whole lives with faith, hope, and charity. Thus they increasingly advance towards their own perfection as well as towards their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God.

Reflection:

- In your own words, how would you describe the mission of the Christian couple today?
- How is Jesus part of the equation?

5. Vocation to Holiness

Pope John Paul II continues his teaching by saying that Christian spouses and parents are included in the universal call to holiness. For them, this call is specified by the sacrament they have celebrated and is carried out concretely in the realities proper to their conjugal and family life. This gives rise to the grace and requirement of an authentic and profound conjugal and family spirituality that draws its inspiration from the themes of creation, covenant, cross, resurrection, and sacramental sign. Christian marriage, like the other sacraments, whose purpose is to sanctify people, to build up the Body of Christ, and finally, to give worship to God, is in itself a liturgical action glorifying God in Jesus Christ and in the Church. By celebrating it, Christian spouses profess their gratitude to God for the sublime gift bestowed on them of being able to live in their married and family lives the very love of God and that of the Lord Jesus for his bride, the Church.

Reflection:

- What link is there between Christian marriage, the call to holiness, and building the Body of Christ?

6. Unity and Indissolubility of Marriage

The love of spouses requires of its very nature the unity and indissolubility of the spouses' community of persons, which embraces their entire life: "so they are no longer two, but one flesh" (Mt. 19:6). They are called to grow continually in their communion through day-to-day fidelity to their marriage promise of total mutual self-giving. Conjugal love requires the inviolable fidelity of the spouses. This is a consequence of the gift of themselves which they make to each other. Love seeks to be definitive, it cannot be an arrangement "until further notice". The intimate union of marriage as a mutual giving of two persons, and the good of the children, demand total fidelity from the spouses and require an unbreakable bond between them. The deepest reason is found in the fidelity of God to his covenant, in that of Christ to his Church. Through the sacrament of matrimony the spouses are enabled to represent this fidelity and witness to it. Through the sacrament, the indissolubility of marriage receives a new and deeper meaning, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches. It can seem difficult, even impossible, to bind oneself for life to another human being. This makes it all the more important to proclaim the Good News that God loves us with a definitive and irrevocable love, that married couples share in this love, that it supports and sustains them, and that by their own faithfulness they can be witnesses to God's faithful love. Spouses who with God's grace give this witness, often in very difficult conditions, deserve the gratitude and support of the ecclesial community.

Reflection:

- Is it possible today to reaffirm the unity and indissolubility of marriage?
- How could we explain it today?

7. Fruitfulness of Marriage

Vatican Council teaches that by its very nature the institution of marriage and married love are ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring. Furthermore, children are the supreme gift of marriage and contribute greatly to the good of the parents themselves. God himself said: "it is not good that man should be alone" (Gn. 2:18), and from the beginning he made them male and female, wishing to associate them in a special way in his own creative work. God blessed man and woman with the words: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gn. 1:28). Hence, true married love and the whole structure of the family life which results from it are directed to disposing the spouses to cooperate valiantly with the love of the Creator and Saviour, who through them will increase and enrich his family from day to day. Married couples should see it as their mission to transmit human life and to educate their children; they should realize that they are thereby cooperating in the love of God the Creator and are, in a certain sense, its interpreters. This involves fulfilling their role responsibly as human beings and Christians, judging matters correctly in a spirit of obedient respect for God, and reflecting and working together; it also involves taking into consideration their own well-being and that of their children already born and yet to come.

Reflection:

- How is it possible today to encourage having children?
- What are the causes of a lower birth rate, today?

It is not always easy to assimilate the Church's complete teaching on marriage. This requires time and an availability to take these precious elements to heart. It would be important, in marriage preparation, in meeting with couples, or in family and couples meetings, to review these different elements together. In doing so we shall discover their wisdom, the fruit of long centuries of reflection and experience. If questions and doubts arise, it would be pertinent to deal with them individually in the light of human and Christian experience.

Testimonies

8. Our Marriage is a "Ménage à Trois"

We met one September 1, on a first day at work. After rubbing shoulders together in the workplace for some two years, there rose in us a desire to live together: that was when we decided to join one another for life. However, what kind of union would it be? We wanted one in which our love could grow, a simple, honest love consistent with our religious beliefs. So we chose to be married in church. This was such a beautiful gift to one another! Our love continued to grow and is still growing because we give one another the opportunity to blossom in our given missions, and we respect one another in what we are. We have also grown biologically and have been blessed with two beautiful, healthy children. Things didn't happen by themselves, though: that is why we turn to our good Friend, God! We call on him any time, any place, in any situation. We are assured

of his listening ear and, besides, if we listen to him, he answers us. Isn't this wonderful? As I mentioned at the beginning, there are three of us: myself, the other, and God. The three must be present, and there must be much communication between them, if we are to succeed in the grand love project which is Christian marriage. P.S. Here is a secret: our Friend's cell phone number is 1-800-PRAY!

- Françoise and Donald

9. For one Another, and through one Another

Our love story began 38 years ago. We were engaged for four years and got to know one another and to seek the other's presence, while keeping ourselves pure for our marriage vows. We were married July 13, 1970. Coming from two families where Christian values were very important, we did not even question our union before God. It was what we wanted, we wanted God to bless our love, and we wanted him to be at the heart of our union. In order to further deepen our life together we had the opportunity, the first years of our marriage, to facilitate marriage preparation meetings. This allowed us to share together on points we had not discussed before. We recommend these meetings to every couple that plans on getting married. Three beautiful children were born of our union; they are our joy, and we are very proud of them. Like all couples, we have had our highs and lows. We believe that we were able to get through the hard times thanks to the respect we have for one another. We can honestly say that forgiveness is always present in our lives. We believe that forgiveness is possible only with God's grace. Our secret is to never go to sleep without asking one another's forgiveness. We must always protect our love, and we must both look in the same direction. Since our last child is in college, the two of us are now alone together. We have also discovered another dimension of our love: we live for one another, and through one another. What is wonderful is that we can still be in awe of one another! We can also say that the more our love is deep, more also do our faith and hope in God increase. We thank God every day for the graces he showers on us. May we grow old together as united as we are now, and may God reserve a small place for Gaëtan and Lucille in his Kingdom!

- Gaëtan and Lucille

10. The Love and Goodness of God

Both of us are from poor families, financially, but so very rich in human and Christian values such as faith, charity, helping one another, and love. At age ten Julie read the book, *Enfants de Fatima* ["Children of Fatima"]. The book had a strong influence on her. She prayed the Blessed Virgin that she would meet the right party. In 1976 we made each other's acquaintance in Edmundston. Julie was teaching at the Académie Conway and I was working for Canada Manpower in Edmundston. We met in the Grand Central Hotel where each of us boarded. We knew one another as friends for six months before we started going out together. Our relationship developed on the good foundation of friendship, before developing into love. We feel that this later promoted good communication in our life as a couple. Having done religious studies with Father [later, Archbishop] Donat Chiasson, Julie felt ready for marriage. Likewise, Paul's studies at Collège de l'Assomption in Moncton gave a solid basis to the sacrament of matrimony. Like most couples, we give one another the sacrament of matrimony to continue our life's journey in Jesus Christ. The Great Day was June 30, 1969, at Cheticamp, Nova Scotia. With time and a deeper understanding of marriage, we became aware that it draws us more and more to Jesus Christ who is the source of our love. We realise that he invites us as persons and as a couple to love as he loves us, a welcoming, forgiving, fruitful, respectful love in a spirit of service and freedom. With marriage preparation meetings and our involvement as facilitators, we were able to deepen our understanding of the sacrament. We felt ourselves become a visible sign of the love of Jesus and God for others, by being signs of union, promotion of fidelity, and fertility. It has made us realise that in order to live our matrimony every day, we had to get involved at the family, parish, diocesan, and social levels so that others would discover God's love and kindness through our love. By living these human and Christian values, we are convinced that with time our life as a couple has become more and more stable and lasting. Couples who decide to commit themselves to each other in marriage inherit the mission of being witnesses of the love of Jesus Christ for humankind.

- Paul and Julie

11. Bound to Love

The golden rule of every action is based on the word "love." One's success in life is based on love. It is the foundation, the heart, the home port, the starting point of everything. We are neither priests nor bishops. We say that the sacraments are there for man and woman. Many people have no knowledge of the sacraments. There are couple relationships that are strong because they are founded on love, respect, listening, and forgiveness. Without knowing anything more, they know that there is a God in whom they believe. This is what makes a true society. It is not a matter of appearance, masquerading, parading, or copying, but it is authentic and real. These couples are bound together in love, a love that comes from within. Nineteen years ago we walked up the church's central aisle to make our vows and pledge to love one another forever. Marrying in church was very important to us because it was the "tradition," but I also needed it. I truly loved in my head and heart, and it was to be right in my conduct that I wanted it so. With time, with years of experience, we

set aside the books and start observing and thinking, in order to learn that life as a couple is a matter of loving sincerely and truly, and believing in a God whose only desire is our happiness. Blessed are they who experience true love: it makes them grow. Without knowing the Bible and its ramifications too much, we live in love, in a love that brings well-being and blossoming forth in openness to the other, the spouse, and his / her happiness. This means to love and love even more. Happy are those who truly love, they shall see God, no matter who they are, where they are, or how they are. True love is inexplicable and impossible to describe... it can only be lived!

- Daniel and Julienne

12. A Commitment before God

We decided to get married for three reasons: the example of our parents, giving a name to our children, and the mutual desire to share together the same values of life. Considering that my husband was Canadian and I was American, faith was about the only thing we sometimes had in common. Attending church together was often a way of going out together. God has blessed us with two beautiful, healthy daughters. We have had to face many challenges together, my husband and I, and we still do: a period without work or money, times when one of the spouses was ill, the new responsibility of raising two children, living the simple life without giving in to material temptation, balancing our finances, and being happy oneself as an individual in order to bring something positive to our lives as a couple. After the "honeymoon" of the first years, our love has become more solid and is founded on real and honest values. We appreciate what we have built together, when we see marriages fail. For us, the sacrament of matrimony is a commitment before God, like a contract we have together. We must make an effort to remain faithful to this commitment. The sacrament of matrimony is a plus value we share together, when compared to other forms of marriage. It is like a tool to help us succeed our marriage.

- André and Christine

13. He Was the Centre of Our Love

We met at the Université de Moncton; Myriam was beginning her first year and Alain already had his bachelor's degree, but he decided to go on for another year. That is how we found ourselves in the same study establishment and fell in Love with one another, Love with a capital L. After only a few weeks Alain knew that he would wed the charming Myriam, and she, too, felt the same about him! We were convinced that we were made for each other as much as we know our own parents. For us this falling in love was a clear response from God. From her earliest youth Myriam prayed every night, asking God to bring her a husband who could love her deeply and who would be an outstanding father to her children. And here he was! The years of study that followed were more difficult for us, because we were away from each other. Myriam continued her studies, and Alain had just been given a teaching position in his home town. By the way, we are both from the same region, but it was only after we got to the university that we met one another. Surprising, isn't it? I suppose that this was meant to be the time. A priest friend has reassured us that our love would grow since our desire to be together was obviously strong, and that God would protect our love. He was right. We were engaged three years later. About a year before we were married we attended the wedding of one of Alain's friends, and we remembered something very special that the priest had told them, at the time. He has said that for a marriage to succeed it had to be a "ménage à trois," a three-way affair: man, woman, and God. This reassured us because we already had faith in God and we knew that he was already there at the heart of our love. We have now been married nearly ten years. With two good children, by God's grace our love burns as brightly as it did then. We pray as a family nearly every evening, and we know that God guides and protects us, because we are in good health and happy... even in the midst of the difficulties we encounter. Busy as we are as parents, it is quite a challenge to nourish our life as a couple, but being nourished by the Word and the presence of God is also a pleasure to be experienced marriage is therefore very important to us since it is a commitment before God, and we firmly believe that he is always there to help us keep our marriage strong and lasting. As we ourselves had our parents for role models, so do we want to pass on to our children this extremely important value which is fidelity to our commitments made before God. Finally, we are convinced that the sacrament of matrimony contributes to the unity and well-being of our beautiful family.

- Myriam and Alain

III. Guided to a Community of Love

Graced with mutual love and enclosed in God's love, spouses aim at responding as adequately as possible to the call to give life and spread love. They are aware that faced with life's difficulties they owe it to themselves to continually reinforce their love. Alone, a couple can easily feel as vulnerable as David before the giant Goliath. That is why it is so important to have a solid plan for preserving and strengthening their love. I offer here seven possible paths which, however, are not exclusive. Each couple is invited to determine the means it employs, in promoting the growth of their love.

1. Communication

Among those elements conducive to making love grow, communication holds an important place. We have access to all possible means of communication, including the internet and the cell phone. If everything can become communication, do lovers sufficiently understand that their whole being, too, is a "message," if they are truly open to one another? Way beyond communication techniques, there is a quality of being which must be guaranteed: truth and credibility in one's words and actions. If sulking is the chosen path, it can have disastrous consequences. Transparency, on the other hand, can be the royal way, if it is directed by tactfulness. It is not necessary for issues to be aired publicly, it is not necessary that everything be known to the whole family. Some events and secrets are best kept between the two lovers. Even between a couple it is not necessary to relate in minutest detail all the comings and goings of each one. If such were the case, an unhealthy atmosphere could develop which would take on the features of disagreeable investigations. Mutual growth in understanding promotes gradual and quality communication.

Reflection:

- How could we promote more communication in our life as a couple?

2. Affection

The saying goes, "Say it with flowers." If the rose has more or less become the symbol of affection, it only repeats the human lessons given by the Little Prince:

"We see well only with the heart. The eyes cannot see what is essential. What makes the rose so important is the time you have spent for it..." Affection isn't just a vague feeling, it is the expression of deep love communicated in word and gesture. In a world so marked by violence of all kinds, lovers have the exalted mission of living and communicating affection, for affection cannot be an object of communication if it is not first found deep in the couple relationship. This feeling gesture which is difficult to describe in all its aspects is a response of the heart in the presence of a loved and lovable one. The Song of Song counsels: "were he to offer all he owns to purchase love, he would be roundly mocked" (Song 8:7b). The same applies to affection: love and friendship are not best expressed by mountains of gifts! Simplicity has much better taste: the simple attention of a loving gaze speaks much more than countless passing gifts.

Reflection:

- Are there any instances of affection (words, silence, gestures) that we can share with those we live with?

3. Forgiveness

If communication and affection are major components in a community of life and love, there is another component that is absolutely essential, and that is forgiveness. The more humans know one another, the more can they identify their mutual strong and weak points as well as their limits. They do not take one another for someone else! However, this does not necessarily mean that they can forgive one another's faults and failings against one's word, not living up to the other's expectations, or one's not responding appropriately to the common project. Without leading to scrupulosity, daily forgiveness can be a wonderful way to an intense communion of life. If a couple can forgive one another every day, all the negative which has crept into the day dissipates without making a drama or being the subject of endless reminders. Turning to grace of God contributes to the couple's welfare. The future once again looks bright, to the couple!

Reflection:

- When has forgiveness been the most difficult for us to give?
- How did that make us feel?

4. Prayer

While some describe prayer as a simple trusting conversation with God, others find it more difficult, more complicated, and more of an effort. Sometimes prayer becomes a quiet, daily habit, a period of recollection set aside morning and evening for prayer. It is sometimes a silent activity, an exchange between lovers on things religious. Prayer leads to a real meeting with the Creator, the Saviour, in the Holy Spirit. It takes much tact for a couple to get to pray together since the values and beliefs of one are not necessarily the same as the other's. However, for those who believe and who respect one another, meeting in prayer can become one

of the day's highlights. For people who have had a Christian marriage, it is once again the wedding at Cana, because Jesus is a guest at this intimate moment, and one who can transform everything into the greatest love affair. Prayer is not necessarily made up of words and formulas, but it is a real faith encounter with God.

Reflection:

- What are the first steps we could take, to pray together as a couple? As a family?
- What form would this prayer take? What benefits could we draw from it?

5. Family

At a time when every couple forms a family unit, sometimes close but often apart from other members of their respective families (parents, grandparents), it is pleasing to realise that new ties can be created according to the most varied interests, whether cultural, sports, social, or religious. If it is not good for man and woman to be alone, it does not necessarily follow that it is good for a couple to always be alone. In this era of globalization, no one can be isolated from others. Quite the opposite. While respecting their intimacy as a couple, it is important that ties be created with one's milieu. Couples and members of the family unit are not only the first implicated in this affair, they are also the first to benefit from it. Through the days and seasons, parents and grandparents will discover new roles to play with their children and grandchildren, while safeguarding their traditions and customs. Intergenerational relationships can be most beneficial to both couple and children, as well as to those of the preceding generation who live only for them.

Reflection:

- What positive attitudes and gestures do we share with the other family members?

6. Community

One's fellow citizens also form part of one's immediate family. Civil, provincial, and federal authorities are involved in the welfare of every family, If the couple must entertain good relationships with others, social and community leaders have serious obligations not only towards the environment, housing, revenue, leisure, transportation, education, health, and justice for all citizens, but more especially for families which are the basic, vital unit of society. Pope John Paul II has often called for a charter on family rights; he has even drafted an outline of it in his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*. The Church openly and vigorously defends the rights of the family against the intolerable claims of both State and society.

Reflection:

- Do we know about this "charter of family rights" proposed by the Church?

7. Commitment

The couple must not isolate itself from others and turn in on itself. It must also show solidarity with its milieu. Temporary or permanent commitments can be made within the larger or at least the local community, according to the needs expressed and the couple's aptitudes. This is one way for a couple to return to the milieu what it gets from it. Such commitments are very beneficial, if there is balance between one's personal life and life as a couple. One can sometimes be committed too much to one thing for the health of their couple relationship or family life. Double commitments are getting to be more and more necessary, in the Church; mutual help between couples, and family catechesis or religious education, are the two main components of family ministry. Is there any better support to a couple than that of another couple? Can there be better catechesis and religious education of one's children than that given by the parents themselves? This is a very demanding commitment, but it is really a mutual and very stimulating enrichment, most of the time.

Reflection:

- What commitments do couples in our milieu take up, mostly?
- Are they given any kind of training and follow-up, in this?

14. Much Agreement between the Couple

We have been one before God in the state of matrimony for 45 years, now. At the time, the sacrament was a life-long contract. The commitment we made before the priest was taken seriously. We were convinced that with God's grace it would be possible for us to journey together through life. Before deciding to marry - even if it was the Great Love Affair - we turned to God with much prayer. We also took marriage preparation courses in order to have all the chances on our side, to succeed this grand project we held so dear. If we are still together today it is because God has always been with us. He has guided us, sustained and protected us because of our trust in him. He himself promised it: "I am with you always, to the end of time." The Lord is there, but we as a couple must do our share to keep this love alive and growing. This is not always easy because of all the worries, concerns, and difficulties of life. We went through the same stages as today's young couples. We had three children. I worked outside the home and my husband worked away, at first, and would be home only weekends; later he got a job closer to home and did shift work. I was pleased with this because we could now share tasks. There must be much agreement between the couple, to be able to work together: looking after the house, preparing meals, looking after the children's homework and lessons, and to be involved in activities with our children, especially weekends. Even when we were very busy we took time to attend church together as a family, every Sunday. It was there that we renewed ourselves and received the help needed to carry out our mission. With our differences and our weaknesses, it is quite a challenge to live together in harmony, as a couple. One must learn to give in to the other; one is never totally right nor completely wrong. One must learn to accept the other's ideas, and dialogue together, to reach an understanding. We have always been concerned with not leaving misunderstandings go on. It is important for each individual to feel accepted, loved, understood. There must be space for one to experience life without being smothered by the other. One must also learn to respect the other's ideas without having one's enthusiasm stifled. It is here that we must learn to turn to God. He knows our good will as well as our weaknesses. Since he loves us and his heart is stronger than the whole world, we must not give in to fear because we know that he comes to the aid of our weaknesses and is always with us. We have had our highs and lows. If we had not solved our differences at the time they appeared, we, too, could have gone our separate ways. However, I don't believe that this thought ever crossed our minds: we always reconciled and started anew. Today we are happy and proud to still be together for our children who are now parents, and for our grandchildren.

- Jacqueline and Philippe

15. Always Kindling the Fire of Our Love

No one really knows what one is getting into at the time of marriage, especially not when one is twenty. Everything is focussed on the person and what that person is ready to do, to succeed his or her life in a couple relationship. We took a course and got to know oneself before getting to know the other. We need to have basic good manners, which are gradually disappearing from our schools: respect, trust, sharing, politeness, etc. Love means sacrifice. As Jesus gave himself out of love to save us, we call it a sacrifice of love. When one makes a sacrifice for the sake of the other, it makes one happy to know that the other is happy. Then all is focussed on the love we have for the other, wanting to share everything and to give of oneself for the sake of peace and harmony. One gets a sense of self-worth in knowing that one has had a hand in bringing happiness to loved ones. We must deny ourselves for the sake of our children. We do not always feel to go here and there for them, but we do it in love. Love means looking together in the same direction. Love is not jealous. We both know that Jesus is love, and it is in him that we draw our love. It is therefore very important for us two to unite ourselves before God. We have always continued to grow in faith and in love of Jesus. Attending church is one of our priorities, and praying together before bedtime is part of our daily ritual. We have great trust in one another, and make decisions together: dialogue is very important in a couple's life. It is all the small things of the day that keep our love healthy: helping one another, thanking one another, never going to bed with a misunderstanding between us, never bringing up past issues. We must always go forward and remain aware that we are lucky to be loved and to have someone to love. We must never assume that the other is our property. We must always kindle the fire of our love. For us, our marriage was a promise to always be there for the other in good times and in bad, and in respect of one another. It is still like that today, and we are always honest with one another.

- Bernard and Adeleen

16. With God's Great Dream

Our beautiful love story started in 1986. We were engaged for five years. Then, one fine day we decided to get married in a religious ceremony. Why? We could have chosen to live together without benefit of marriage, but as we were both devout believers and wanting children, it was natural for us to be joined in matrimony before God and our families. We wanted to make a statement to the people of our milieu that what we were getting into was not for one night but for an entire lifetime. We knew that with God in our hearts and lives it would be easier for us to love one another, to support one another in difficult times, to educate and cherish our children, these treasures of God, and to progress together along the path of faith in the God of Hope. When God is present, he guides us and helps us live beautiful moments of happiness filled with small daily

joys. We were married in church because we were convinced and believed that we could grow more harmoniously together with God's great dream that all humans live in love, happiness, and peace.

- Monique and Rino

17. We became a Foster Family

We were married July 1, 1977. It was through La Rencontre Movement that we received the call. We had our Rencontre Weekend in 1975 and then continued as part of a weekly prayer group. I eventually became facilitator of the group and Adrien worked in the technical area. Our marriage was a religious celebration filled with love and with songs we sang at the Rencontre. We were surrounded by our friends. When I was pregnant for our first child in 1979 we attended a mini-Rencontre outside Québec City. Our child was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and we called her Marie Angie because she really looked like an angel; to us she was a gift of heaven. After the birth of our first child we became a foster family. I wanted deprived children to have a family that loves them and helps them grow. My husband agreed to this, and together we built a beautiful family. Through the years we have been foster parents to 39 children. Today we still have two teenagers with us, besides our three beautiful daughters. We adopted 8 of our 39 foster children. We are their family and their children's grandparents. Our daughter grew up helping the children we were caring for, and she wants to dedicate her life to relieve human misery and the suffering of the needy. I sincerely believe that whatever we do to the least of his children, it is to Jesus that we do it. We have always been involved in volunteer work and committees, in our parish. We have a deep faith; however, we are human and make mistakes. We want to continue attending church and taking communion, because we need that. Please pray for us.

- Pierrette and Adrien

18. The Village Church

I cannot remember exactly the song to Saint Ann we used to sing at weddings, but one of those songs that really affected us was the [French] song, "Clocher de mon village" - "My Village Church." It really described everything going on in our community. "Beloved village church which witnessed my birth and where I was baptised, village church which watched me run about, grow, and witnessed my wedding. Beloved church, attached to life as heart is to body and love is to country..." The church was an important witness of our loves and labours: it was the symbol of our lives. When we were married in 1965, the parish centennial album noted that there were, that year, 88 baptisms, 37 weddings, and 22 funerals... Following a one-year engagement, fully trusting in life we were married June 19, 1965. My husband and I have always worked outside the home, he on construction and I as a cook. We have four children who were real gifts of God to us, and who are our happiness. There have been difficulties, but love had the better of it every time, and I would dare say that my husband loved me twice as much, then! Faith has helped us through the greatest difficulties possible, especially the death of one of our children and a house fire. We are now the grandparents of six; we watch over them and share their joys and hopes with them.

- Germaine and Ralph

Conclusion

In closing I want to thank all those - especially the couples - who helped me illustrate this important letter on the vocation of Christian marriage. I am deeply grateful to you all, and I offer this song and prayer to all couples, present and to come.

You are life of my life, to me
The joy of my joy, the heart of my heart.

My beloved, you have seduced me
And you have prevailed.

My beloved, you have led me
And I have let myself be led.

My beloved, you are mine
And your word lies deep in my heart.

My beloved, I am yours
And in you I blossom.

My beloved, you live for me
And your affection fulfills me.

My beloved, I live for you
Yes, my happiness is loving you.

My beloved, you shall love me
Day after day and year after year.

My beloved, I shall love you
In days of sorrow and days of joy.

"We pray for you always that our God may make you worthy of his call, and fulfill by his power every honest intention and work of faith. In this way the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and you in him, in accord with the precious gift of our God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thes. 1:11-12).

+ François Thibodeau

+ François Thibodeau, C.J.M.
Bishop of Edmundston