

MIKE

Good Evening.

I am Mike Ferri and this is my wife Terese. We live in the Pembroke Diocese near Ottawa. Before His Grace, Archbishop Smith, came to you in Edmonton, he was our Bishop for five years. So we were very glad to come at his request to speak to you tonight.

His Grace has asked us to share with you “how the beauty of the Gospel, particularly as it finds expression in Pope John Paul II’s ‘theology of the body’, has inspired and guided us in our personal and family lives.”

Terese and I have found this a formidable task. For the first time in a very long time, we found it much more difficult to talk about a subject than to live it.

But this task has afforded us an opportunity to reflect upon God’s love for us, his many blessings and his continuous presence in our lives at every step along the way.

For this we are grateful and humbly submit our reflections for your consideration as you encounter the person of Jesus Christ.

Terese and I are approaching 33 years married. We have 14 children, eight daughters and six sons. Our oldest son is turning 32 shortly and our youngest is 9 years of age. Six of our children are married, one is engaged, one is discerning a religious vocation and six continue to live at home with us. We have 13 grandchildren born so far, and six more to be born in the next few months including our daughter Angela’s twin boys who are due any day now. We have lived in Pembroke for the past 11 years where I practice medicine as a specialist in psychiatry, and Terese is a lawyer practicing family law.

TERESE

Few of us understand as we approach the altar to give ourselves to each other in Holy Matrimony, the magnificence and full meaning of our vocation. We were no exception. Thirty three years ago we were a young engaged

couple on the threshold of our life together. We were filled with the worldliness typical of our generation. We had little experience in self-sacrifice and little insight into the power of Divine Providence. But what we lacked in maturity, we made up for, by the grace of God, in sincerity.

Like other young wedding couples, Mike and I had hearts for each other. When we pronounced our vows, to be faithful to each other, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love and honour one another all the days of our life, we grasped, at some basic level, that this signified “a great mystery”, a union reflective of that between Christ and his bride the Church, a oneness of flesh, mind, heart and soul. Thirty three years later we continue to probe the meaning of this mystery. It will take more than a lifetime to exhaust the gift of self it summons from us.

God is so gracious. He takes what we offer, little as it is, and he multiplies it as he did the loaves and the fishes, filling us with every good thing. Years later, we are profoundly aware that this God of Abundance continues to fill us with every good thing, to transform us and draw us to himself. In our lives, nothing has been more beautiful than this.

In 1968 Mike and I were 13 years old. We would not meet for several years but we shared a milieu. We attended school a block apart in an affluent town just outside of Toronto. It was a time of race riots and anti-war demonstrations. Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated that year. Nixon and Trudeau were elected. The Vietnam War raged on and Northern Ireland was erupting into civil war. The cold war hung like a frozen cloud over international relations. The world held its breath while the first man stepped onto the surface of the moon. “The Pill” was now in widespread use and an equally widespread revolution of sexual views and practices quickly followed. Divorce became common. Feminism and the New Left were burgeoning movements. Abortion was soon to be legalized. Time Magazine asked on a famous cover, “Is God Dead?” It was a time of intense change and turmoil.

It was to this restless world that Pope Paul VI issued his prophetic *Humanae Vitae*. The papal encyclical “On Human Life” which confirmed the Church’s constant teaching against artificial birth control, provoked an immediate outcry and the most public and widespread dissent against Church teaching in recent times.

Mike and I were old enough to be aware of the tumult. I was the second oldest child in a large family. I adored my baby sisters and felt very keenly the ridicule and condemnation of large families that sometimes accompanied the debate. It made a profound impression upon me.

Mike and I met in our final year of high school and dated periodically through university. Eventually we fell deeply in love. In accordance with the times, we were both relatively uncatechised, but there was one thing we came to know and love: *Humanae Vitae*.

It was there in those prophetic pages that we had our marriage preparation. There we learned that God himself, in the Trinitarian mystery of his life, is the primordial model of spousal love.

There, we discovered that we are gift to each other, that this gift is total and irrevocable, and that we cannot fully find ourselves except through the sincere gift of self.

There we began to comprehend that marriage is invested with the dignity of a sacramental sign of grace, representing the union of Christ and His Church; that as Christ brings his Bride the Church to perfection, our mutual gift of self would develop that union of persons in which we would perfect one another.

We were assured that this love, freely given, would survive the joys and sorrows of daily life, and would not only survive but would grow, so that we would become in a way one heart and one soul.

Finally, we learned that marriage is fruitful, that (in the words of Pope Paul VI) "...marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the procreation and education of children...[and that] children are ... the supreme gift of marriage and contribute in the highest degree to their parents' welfare."... *Humanae Vitae*

MIKE

As we prepared to wed, Terese and I realized that what the church held out to us regarding human sexuality and marriage was very different than many messages current at the time.

We were surrounded then, as now, by a culture which is often narcissistic. We were indoctrinated with an idea of sexuality based on a superficial and exploitive view of the body, divorced from the person. The more I loved Terese, the more I desired to discard this distorted image. I wanted to be good to her and to treat her with dignity and tenderness. This was all God needed to lead me. And I was led to *Humanae Vitae*.

Some years later Pope John Paul II would beautifully illuminate the church's teaching in his "Theology of the Body". But the essential elements were already clear in *Humanae Vitae* and it was to us a light and a rock in times that were often dark and shifting.

What, then, is this "gift of persons" of which the church speaks? How do we give the mutual gift of ourselves to each other? These were not questions, I must confess, that burned within me as a young man. But after I met Terese and came to know her better, faint embers of interest began to take hold and I wanted the answers to these questions.

Humanae Vitae answered my questions. I began to see that Terese was made in the image and likeness of God; that she was God's beloved little girl. I wanted to be good for her and to give myself completely to her. Guided by *Humanae Vitae*, I understood that the sacrament of matrimony was the way I could make this gift of myself to her.

I wanted my gift to be total. I grew up with a strong belief in fidelity and permanence in marriage. My parents taught me that. But as I came to understand that God had created Terese, this unique person, this beautiful woman, I deeply understood that marriage is forever. My total gift was to be an irrevocable gift.

Terese and I chose Genesis, Chapter 2 as the first reading on our wedding day:

... "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called woman, for out of her man this one has been taken. That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and the two of them become one body."

Jesus confirmed that this is an unbreakable union of two lives when he told the Pharisees as recorded in Matthew 19:6: "...they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together no human being must separate."

We were, by the grace of God, able to see that what the church offered was true and beautiful. Young and unprepared as we were, Terese and I put our hearts and minds and strength into this teaching. We embraced what we recognized as true and promised that we would always live it. We had some sense that God would provide the necessary grace and he has. Through the years, as we have waded through the revelation of each other's faults, sinfulness, weaknesses and warts, we have been comforted and strengthened in the knowledge that we are one flesh, one body. G.K. Chesterton captured this movement from two to one flesh when he wrote to his fiancée, Frances Bloggs, "Here ends my previous existence. Take it: it led me to you."

This journey together has given rise to mutual words of encouragement, especially when the going is tough, as it sometimes is. "Stick with me, sweetheart," I would say, and Terese would respond, "To whom shall I go?" "You are mine, my love..." "I am yours forever..." And over the thirty three years of our life together, basing our marriage on these two pillars, fidelity and openness to life, has been to us a great treasure. Like a new set of eyes, it has allowed us to penetrate the other's personhood, soul and body. What has been revealed speaks of awe and mystery...and we say, "Thank you, God, for you have given us more than we could imagine."

TERESE

We were married on May 1st 1976, the feast of St. Joseph the Worker and the first Saturday of the Marian month of May. Eleven months later our first child was born.

I remember clearly the day we brought him home from the hospital, carrying him up the three flights of stairs to our tiny apartment. Mike was finishing his undergraduate degree in biology. He would start medical school that fall. We were as poor as could be. I remember the two of us unbundling our tiny child and crying with joy and awe as we pondered him. Like every mother and father of every age we looked upon that which we had made with God and saw that it was very good!

Many children were to follow, and each has evoked in us the same awe, the same realization that they are truly a gift, unique and unrepeatable. In his Letter to Families, 1994, the Holy Father Pope John Paul II asks:

Could this frail and helpless being, totally dependent upon its parents and completely entrusted to them, be seen in any other way? The newborn child gives itself to its parents by the very fact of its coming into existence. Its existence is already a gift, the first gift of the Creator to the creature.

MIKE

“Will you accept children lovingly and willingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?” The celebrant posed this question to us during the Rite of Marriage, as it is posed to every couple. I was aware as I answered “yes” that we stood before a “great mystery”, before the very creative power of God.

We had entered this covenant with a deep desire to live it in truth and love, to give ourselves to each other totally and to accept each other totally. We sensed that our conjugal union needed to reflect that desire and speak that truth. I understood that this total gift of self, most evident in our physical union as “one flesh”, implied an openness to life which would likely result in us having and raising a large family.

Conjugal union implies a “special responsibility”, we are told by Pope John Paul in his Letter to Families. Terese and I were led to understand, that we were called to cooperate in this mystery of creation, bringing into existence a new human person, not merely a body, but a *person* bearing the divine image and likeness and destined, like us, for eternal life.

Now, with our first child, we stood face to face with this “great mystery”, hidden in the form of a tiny child, which we experienced even then, as a gift and a blessing.

TERESE

There are, as the world so often reminds us, many difficulties and burdens associated with these gifts of life. There are moments, many in fact, when the wonder and awe of their creation is eclipsed by the weariness of daily challenges. Children are a formidable responsibility. They impose great demands upon us.

Every mother, when holding that new born baby in her arms, understands that the ability to give life is an awesome privilege, and that her child is a tremendous blessing. Few experiences bring us closer to the God of the universe who condescended to take on the nature of man; few experiences permit us to glimpse the love he has for us like the love a mother and father feel for their child.

And yet, we experience this blessing also as a burden, because giving life demands that we die to ourselves. In our fallen condition, it is hard to serve others in preference to ourselves, to be a gift to others.

At times, the demands have seemed overwhelming. I have come face to face with my own deficiencies and my own sinfulness. Our children have a way of holding a mirror up to us. Raising them reveals our flaws as few other experiences do. I am conscious that at times I have failed them and it has caused harm.

But in spite of our frailties, in spite even of our failure to fully appreciate the sublime blessing that our children are, God continues to work in our

depths, using our simple fidelity as the basis for building a great love for him and each other, in our hearts and in our homes.

MIKE

Fidelity (true faithfulness) is the foundation of a true love: love of God, love of neighbour, particularly love of spouse.

We live in a milieu awash with suggestive messages and provocative images. It seems that our society is particularly adept at presenting sex in a most dehumanized manner. Young men are taught that a woman's body is an object to be exploited for personal pleasure. Young women learn that men cannot be trusted to love and protect.

Jesus proposes a different view. He says, as recorded in the gospel of Matthew (5, 27-28),

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

This level of faithfulness can seem an impossibility. It must have to the disciples of Jesus who first heard it who were known to answer at times, “who then can be saved?” In the beginning, it seemed so to me. But little by little, I began to see that this call to faithfulness in marriage is a call to purity. What was required of me was the conviction that it is possible, the desire to acquire it and trust in the healing and transforming power of Christ.

Jesus condemns lust as wrong. But more importantly, he tells us it is possible to love with a pure heart. We *can* love faithfully, but only with the love of His heart which he gives us through the graces of the sacraments and particularly the sacrament of marriage.

Purity gives us eyes to see the total person. As my relationship with Terese has developed through the years, I see more completely and more clearly the person she is and the person she has become. I see her beauty, her goodness, and yes, her imperfections... but even these as an integral part of

her personhood. I can say with my whole heart that there is nothing more beautiful than my bride, my little girl to whom I give my total fidelity.

TERESE

How utterly beautiful is this gift! How it summons from me the gift of myself!

It is no accident that Christ chose to begin his ministry at a wedding feast at Cana. There he poured out his divine life like wine, sanctifying and transforming the vocation of marriage into a sacrament.

From the beginning to be sure, matrimony had grandeur and dignity. With Christ, the excellence of marriage in the natural order is transformed into something infinitely greater: *a sacrament*. Married love becomes the very means by which divine life is infused into the souls of the spouses.

The significance of this call is humbling. Mike and I are to be nothing less than Christ to each other. And this, in the ordinary tasks of life.

Little wonder that the Holy Father draws our attention to St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians which he aptly christens a "hymn to love" and the "Magna Carta of the civilization of love."

Love is patient, love is kind...It is not jealous, nor rude; it does not put on airs. Love does not seek itself, nor brood over injuries. Love rejoices in the truth, trusts all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

The commission here concerns the smallest and most intimate details of daily living. Here love is at its grandest... and here, also, we are at our most frail. "Man cannot find himself except through the sincere gift of self."

How many times Mike and I have struggled to be gifts to each other! To be patient and kind and encouraging and enduring. How many times we fail! We are, after all, fallen creatures in need of redemption. And it is true. There is much in the daily struggle that is difficult and wearisome.

Yet there are moments, many moments, in the course of very ordinary days, that I become aware and see clearly what a sublime gift Mike is to me.

Sometimes it is in the very smallest things, like when he brings me coffee or starts my car in the cold. Sometimes it is a word, a gesture, a touch, a look.

In those moments, the treasure, usually hidden beneath the busy-ness and burdens of daily life, obscured by laundry or dishes or legal files... in those moments the treasure becomes visible. The radiance of the Gift, the "great mystery" of our union, shines with a brilliance that blots out the mundaneness of ordinary life. In those moments, I find myself astonished at his goodness. I comprehend how much he loves me... and I love him with all my heart. In this love, freely given, our conjugal covenant is redeemed, day by day, year by year. By it, we transform the other and we are transformed.

MIKE

The beauty of the gift, like the realization of our weakness has, many times, brought us to our knees. Early in our marriage we began to attend mass daily. Not long after, we began to say the rosary together every day. Mass, the rosary, morning prayer, grace before meals, regular confession: these became the pillars upon which we hung our daily work. This was not always easy. Getting little ones up and ready to go to an early morning mass or gathering everyone together for the rosary often took great effort and tested the limited capacity of their parents for patience. But little by little, what began as a discipline has become a deep joy and consolation. I cannot put into words how vital this has been to us.

Sitting at the feet of Jesus, drinking in the words of eternal life, nourished by him daily with his very Body and Blood, touched by him, with his healing touch... How many times we have found ourselves saying, "Lord, create a new heart within me, a heart after yours... Lord, if you but *will* it, you can make me whole." And how often we have, in these daily and, in many ways, very ordinary encounters heard him answer us, "Of course I will it... be healed... I will remove your heart of stone and put within you a heart of flesh."

We are aware that, over time, family prayer and the sacraments have transformed our family, bringing about a deep communion of persons, and preparing us to ride out into the world as witnesses to Life.

“Families! You are Gaudium et Spes, Joy and Hope” Pope John Paul II exclaimed. And he challenged us to “become what we are!” (PJP St. Peter’s Square, Oct 9, 1994) And just what *are* we? Nothing less than this: bearers of a new springtime of hope, a true civilization of love.

Surely we are charged with an immense task. But the Holy Father reminds us that it is no different than the task that families face every year and every day. “Be not afraid.” Over and over we heard those encouraging words from Pope John Paul and now from Pope Benedict, echoing the words of our Saviour.

TERESE

But our society is a tragic irony. “Words such as ‘freedom’, ‘sincere gift’, ‘person’ and even ‘love’ no longer convey their essential meaning. (Pope John Paul II, Letter to Families) Saturated with pornography and other forms of sexual exploitation and manipulation, society is nevertheless desperately searching for true meaning and real love. And it is, without the guidance of a formed conscience and mature judgement, extremely vulnerable to counterfeits.

One of the saddest features of our time is that true love, “love freely given”, has been recast as “free love”. Real love places demands upon us. It requires that we *give* ourselves.

But modern sensibilities rebel at the notion of self-sacrifice. It seeks a “love” severed from responsibility, a “free love”. What it finds is neither free nor love. Turned in on itself, it cannot find itself. Rejecting responsibility, it loses the ability to respond. It becomes isolated and embittered.

Mike is a psychiatrist and I am a family law lawyer. Both of us have witnessed the terrible pain and catastrophic loss of hope that follows in the wake of such a lifestyle, both for the person who embraces it, and the victims they leave behind.

We are called to be *Gaudium et Spes*, joy and hope to this wounded generation. We cannot be otherwise. By its nature, true love creates the good and communicates it to others. As St. Thomas put it, "Good is diffusive of itself." It demands to be shared.

Do not be conformed to the world, St. Paul counsels us in his letter to the Romans. The call to holiness, which is the call to each of us in our particular vocation, is always a call to a kind of opposition. Living our vocation with fidelity, generosity and tenderness, we will be for the world signs of both contradiction and promise.

MIKE

On our wedding day, we received as a gift from an older and wiser couple, a painting which still hangs in our home. It depicts two children, a boy and a girl crossing a grassy meadow together towards a small boat beached on the shore. Behind it, the glittering waters stretch to a distant horizon under a vaguely threatening sky.

We have often reflected upon it, remembering how young and trusting and full of expectation we were when we set out on our journey together. We are keenly aware that, unlike the lives of many we know, we have not encountered great storms. God has, in his infinite mercy, and no doubt because of our incapacity, spared us great trials to this point. Ours have been little crosses, sometimes many little crosses, and we don't always carry those well!

Though we cannot say what lies ahead, we have come to know that the God who teaches us to be faithful and tender and generous with each other will continue to be so with us. Whatever he asks of us, he will be there with us.

Striving to live our vocation in truth and love, we will draw many graces from the Living Waters, and this will be for us the source of profound and enduring happiness. Already here and now we have begun to taste the 'peace the world cannot give'. As the psalmist says (128, 3-4):

"Like a fruitful vine your wife within your home, like olive shoots your children around your table- Just so will they be blessed who fear the lord."

And now our olive shoots are producing olive shoots of their own! The love our children have for one another has been a source of joy for Terese and me. This is more so as we watch our married children and their spouses truly cherish one another and as they welcome their own children.

But it is my bride, the one to whom I gave my heart, who is the greatest source of happiness to me. With the author of Song of Songs (4; 9-10) I say,

“You have ravished my heart my sister, my bride; you have ravished my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one bead of your necklace; how beautiful is your love my sister, my bride.”

There is nothing more beautiful than to encounter Christ in the person of another, in her body and soul. To all who have embraced this beautiful vocation, may you be granted the grace to live it faithfully, generously and tenderly.

Finally, we pray that our humble reflections tonight may be a little “salt and light” for you in your beautiful encounter with Jesus Christ.