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Fifth Sunday of Easter Matrimony

It's that time of year again: wedding season! When was the last time you attended a wedding? For many people, their wedding is the most memorable day of their lives. Months of preparation go into making the event just right. Couples invite the most important people in their lives to celebrate their special day. It is a joyous occasion, and it always concludes with a delicious wedding banquet or, as we often refer to it, a "reception."

In this Easter Season, as we reflect on the seven sacraments, it is this wedding banquet which can provide a helpful lens through which we can view the Sacrament of Matrimony. In the Sacrament of Matrimony, the ministers are not the priest or deacon or members of the wedding party. It is the bride and groom themselves who confer this sacrament upon each other. In their pledge of commitment to each other, the bride and groom become a sign of Christ's love for his Church. It is very appropriate, then – almost an essential part of the event – that there be a reception afterward (could you imagine going to a wedding that does not end with a celebration?).

Obviously, people like to have a good time, eat, and dance! But more importantly, that gathering of people around the new bride and groom is a beautiful reminder of the eternal wedding banquet to which we are all invited.

In these days of Easter, it is important to remember that it is Christ who invites us to this feast, the eternal wedding banquet he inaugurated with his death and resurrection. Through original sin, we had, in a sense, declined the invitation. But with his resurrection from the dead, Jesus sends us a second chance.

Today's Second Reading from the Book of Revelation speaks of this reality with beautiful language: "Then I, John, saw a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1). Jesus has come to renew all things and present them to the Father. Though we do not know what life will be like after the general resurrection from the dead, we know that we shall be like God, "for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). This reading from Revelation speaks of "the holy city, a new Jerusalem": this is Biblical language for the Church, the gathering of all the nations. This holy city is "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."

This image of the Church as the Bride of Christ has captured the minds of Christian writers from the very beginning. Even in our day, the bishops at the Second Vatican Council spoke of Christ as the bridegroom of the Church. Echoing Saint Paul, the Council sees Christ as loving the Church to the end. In turn, husbands are exhorted by Saint Paul to love their wives "even as Christ loved the Church and gave his life for her" (Eph. 5:25). Our own Archbishop Chaput adopted this passage as his episcopal motto.

In this Sunday's Gospel, we find Jesus telling his disciples that the mark of their identity as Christians is love. "As I have loved you," he says, "so you also should love one another." The

word for love here is *agape*, which refers to a deep, self-sacrificing love. It is a love “to the end,” which is willing even to give its life for the beloved. Marriages often begin because of another’s beauty or warmth. But Christian marriages are called to transcend this, so that they can be places where *agape* is lived.

But an inseparable part of matrimony is the raising of children. Amazingly, God allows the couple to cooperate with Him as co-creators of men and women. But these children are destined for something greater: through Baptism, they too become members of the Christian community which is the Body of Christ, risen from the dead.

The Church has been talking so much about the role of the family recently, and we must continue to do so, because it is critically important to our Church and our larger society. We all remember the exciting World Meeting of Families and the visit of Pope Francis to our area in September. I can think of no better way to end this discussion of marriage and family than with the Holy Father’s words from the Festival of Families:

When the man and his wife made the mistake and distanced themselves from God, God did not leave them alone. There was so much love, so much love that He began to walk with humanity. He began to walk with His people, until the fullness of time arrived, and He gave the greatest sign of His love, His Son.

And His Son, where did He send Him? To a palace? To a city, to start a business? He sent Him to a family! God came into the world in a family.

~Rev. Eric J. Banecker