

**Thanksgiving Mass for Sacrament of Matrimony
Saturday 11 June 2011
Westminster Cathedral**

A few weeks ago, I was privileged to be at the Royal Wedding. What a wonderful occasion. And I had a marvellous seat, close to all that took place. It was a ceremony shared and appreciated by millions around the world.

During it there were two moments in which the cheering of the crowd outside the Abbey could be heard in the stillness inside. It was the sound of the joy and support of the people for what was taking place. The cheering was a startling recognition of the contemporary importance of marriage. Despite what many commentators might say, despite the trends and the pundits, this is what happened: There was a mighty public cheer when Prince William and Catherine Middleton completed exchanging their wedding vows. As she said, 'I will', a great cheer went up. The second cheer came when their marriage was solemnly proclaimed by the Archbishop of Canterbury. When he said, 'I proclaim you man and wife', the cheering was fantastic.

Why did that public reaction come at precisely those two moments? I suggest it was because there is an instinctive and profound public understanding of the nature and consequences of marriage itself. Here was a public recognition that with the exchange of these words, something radical had happened: these two lives would never be the same. Marriage, as a permanent, exclusive commitment between this man and this woman was welcomed, applauded. There was rejoicing in what the newly weds had just done.

Marriage, then, is a public good. Marriage is not simply something done in church by a few. Marriage is not a private arrangement. Rather marriage expresses our deepest longings and expectations for ourselves, for our children and for our society. Marriage is of our nature. It is not created by the Church, but blest by her. Christian marriage is a sacrament. In celebrating marriage, in defending marriage, the Church seeks to promote that which is good for us human beings, for our human nature and for our society.

Similar thoughts to these were expressed recently by the Prime Minister. Speaking about marriage and family life he said that he had 'an agenda to strengthen what I believe is the single most important institution in the country.' That is how he described marriage and family. He said: 'I think

families are immensely important. I am pro-commitment, I back marriage and I think it is a wonderfully precious institution.’ Then he added: ‘Do not think I have forgotten about our pledge to make this country the most family friendly in Europe’. He then went on to say that ‘if you want what is best for children you have to address not just children, but families and relationships too. We are thinking creatively about how we can do more to support family life and ensure that every child grows up in a stable, loving home.’

At the heart of the family is a key relationship: between the spouses, between those who give rise to the life of their children and ensure the stability and love within which children prosper. Attending to and supporting this relationship is vitally important. This is surely a task for our whole society. The witness you give today, so clearly and so eloquently, is that marriage is the proper and best framework for the relationship of love of a man and a woman to become faithful, fruitful and permanent.

Today we rejoice in your marriages and in your family lives. There is no crowd outside to express this joy in loud and unmistakable cheers. But there is a crowd in your hearts of all who share your joy and who support your love with theirs. And I am sure that for many of you there are families waiting to continue this celebration with you after our Mass is ended.

In the journey and joy of marriage, the blessing of faith makes such a difference. The commitment of Christian marriage brings with it a transforming blessing. The blessing is one of acceptance of the other for who they are. Many relationships today do not last because a partner fails to live up to the expectations of the other. When relationships are provisional, with an understanding that each can walk away, there is a sense in which each of the partners is always on probation. They are never fully accepted. This contrasts sharply to the real freedom found when marriage is undertaken seriously. This allows each person to acknowledge their weakness and failures without fear of rejection. The power of everyday loving kindness is one that can achieve a slow but steady healing and growth. In that love, each can accept the need to change one’s ways, to compromise for the sake of ‘we’, rather than insist on ‘me’. This is part of the miracle of marriage.

With the eyes of faith we see to the real depth, beauty and joy of married life and love. We see that your love is a sharing in the mystery of God, who is love. We see that your faithfulness is a proclamation of the

faithfulness of God, who is the Lord of the Everlasting Covenant. We see that your fruitfulness, your fertility, is an expression of the fruitfulness of God, the creator and giver of all life. This longing for new life and openness to it, is part of true love and so often finds fulfilment. Even when it is not achieved, the out flowing of creative love becomes a generous source of service to others, a nurturing of life in some other way, in some other expression.

Prayer, of course, is at the centre of a shared Christian life: prayer of the heart, a daily prayer that is both private and shared. Such prayer expresses that which is most treasured and important in our lives: our desire to live each day in the presence of our loving Father who reaches out to us in Christ, in the Church. So may I end with the prayer written by Prince William and Catherine Middleton as they prepared for their wedding day. It is heartfelt and authentic. I believe it can speak for you all on this happy occasion:

‘God our Father, we thank you for our families; for the love that we share and for the joy of our marriage. In the busyness of each day keep our eyes fixed on what is real and important in life and help us to be generous with our time and love and energy. Strengthened by our union help us to serve and comfort those who suffer. We ask this in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen.’

✠ Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster