

MASS OF THANKSGIVING FOR MATRIMONY - VIGIL OF PENTECOST 2010

Welcome from His Grace the Archbishop of Westminster, Most Rev. Vincent Nichols

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

I extend to each of you today the warmest welcome to this celebration of our Mass of Thanksgiving. I salute all who are living Catholic marriage today. In particular I welcome those of you who are celebrating significant and jubilee anniversaries during 2010. Your presence represents all couples across the diocese who bear witness to the Church's vision of authentic married love.

This year's front cover of the souvenir booklet shows the beautiful icon: **Notre Dame d'Alliance – Our Lady of the Wedding Ring**. Mary is shown embracing the married couple who acknowledge Christ as the heart of their relationship. The ring is the symbol of the never ending Love of the Trinity and communion of persons in Christian marriage. Above is the finger of God's right hand –symbol of the Holy Spirit - who proceeds to bless the union. The Veil of the Shekinah above the scene is the sign of the presence of God, just as Mary said yes to becoming the spouse of the Holy Spirit upon hearing the Archangel announce 'and the power of God will cover you with His shadow.'

We are reminded of this hovering of the Spirit by the *baldacchino* or canopy above the altar in the sanctuary. Like the veil it represents, figuratively-speaking, the canopy of God's blessing over the marriage bed. It means that the altar of Christ's sacrifice is closely connected to the unconditional love of the spousal union. St Mechtilde, a German mystic of the 13th century, echoed the same idea when he wrote that Christ's "*noble nuptial bed was the very hard wood of the Cross on which he leaped with more joy and ardor than a delighted bridegroom.*" That is why the Church holds the bond between husband and wife in such high regard because it is truly one of thanksgiving to God. That is to say, it points to the generous and reconciling power of Christ's love so clearly present in the Mass. In the Eucharist we receive Christ and He receives and transforms us. So too husband and wife are called to mutual transformation by God's grace in their loving embrace. This transforming grace makes it possible for husband and wife to persevere in all the daily unending acts of sacrificial love which make their home a fragrant offering to God and which makes it possible for us to be proudly called *the domestic church*. And like the Church, the Christian marital home must be nourished. And so in the corners of the icon you can see the signs of the 'food' of Christian Marriage: The Scriptures, the Holy Eucharist of Christ's Body and Blood and the Oil Lamps which represent the life of prayer. Note too how Jesus holds the hand of the bride and that of the groom in different ways. This is a celebration of sexual difference as central to God's plan. Femininity as gift, with its inherent receptivity, makes it possible for the wife to trust her husband in and through Christ. Masculinity, something which must be placed firmly in the grasp of the Lord, empowers the husband to willingly serve his wife and give himself up for her.

Today I ask the Holy Spirit to be poured out afresh on your marriages, your families and homes. May you be renewed and strengthened in your love for one another. May your marriages be the lifeblood of our parishes, constantly affirming and encouraging our priests and bringing spiritual sustenance to us all.

✠*Vincent*