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## **Living Reflections of God's Love**

Bishop John T. Folda

For the past ten months, the Diocese of Fargo has been celebrating a Year of Marriage and the Family. This has coincided with the Synod of Bishops on the family, which concluded in Rome on October 25. In the face of challenges to marriage and family life, the Church has given renewed attention to these two foundational institutions of our culture and society. And here, in the Diocese of Fargo, we held a special celebration of marriage and family called "Living Reflections of God's Love." It was a marvelous occasion for nearly 1,500 people from throughout our diocese to gather together to pray and to celebrate marriage and family life, two of the greatest gifts God has given his people.

A few themes from the conference seemed to capture the message of this entire year. We were blessed to hear Monsignor James Shea of the University of Mary speak on our response to God's call to love. He reminded us that all vocations are rooted in God, who is love itself. He also observed that we are all called to be "great lovers." Unlike any other creature, the human person is made in the image and likeness of God, so we were each created to learn to love. We are made to love. The call to marriage is thus an intense way of being trained in the inner life of God, a life of love. God is a Trinity of persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - united in a perfect bond of love. The call to marriage and family life reflects in a beautiful way this same divine love lived in a human fashion.

Monsignor Shea also pointed out that this way of love is possible, and the saints prove it. St. Maximilian Kolbe was a humble Polish priest who gave his life in exchange for another prisoner's in the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz. He was truly a martyr for love. And we all know about the profound love of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who spent her life caring for the poorest of the poor. She was known for her simple but potent wisdom, and she once said that "a life not lived for others is not a life at all." This then is the key to understanding the Christian vision of marriage and family. Each is a life lived for others, a reflection of God's own inner life of love.

Jeff and Emily Cavins also spoke on the reflection of God's love in marriage and in the family. Jeff, who is a renowned biblical scholar and author with ties to the Diocese of Fargo, spoke on the Christian understanding of suffering as an expression of love. He told the gathered crowd that marriage and family life elicit from us a willingness to give up everything, to sacrifice everything for the sake of those we love, especially our spouse and children. In this sense, these two great vocations draw us into close communion with Jesus who showed us how to love most powerfully from the cross.

Emily, a scholar and author in her own right, reminded us that love is shared not only in great things but also in the small gestures of everyday life. Pope Francis has made very similar comments in his recent addresses on family life, noting the importance of simple expressions like "please," "thank you," and "may I." Little courtesies can create an atmosphere of respect and mutual reverence between spouses and family members. They teach us not to take one another for granted but to always treat one another with kindness. Pope Francis has also remarked on the place of forgiveness in families, urging us to let go of past hurts so we might always live together in peace.

Emily further told us that the family is where we pass along faith, truth and love. In the family, we form our children and prepare them to become the family we hope they will be. Once again, this echoes the mind of Pope Francis who frequently highlights the role of the family as a school of faith and love. It is most often within the family that the faith is first received and lived, and by their very vocation parents have an indispensable role in passing along the faith to their children.

As if to underline this point, Pope Francis just canonized as saints Louis and Zélie Martin, the French couple who were the parents of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, the "Little Flower." This is the first time that a married couple has been canonized together, and it expresses the fact that spouses have a special responsibility to help each other grow in holiness. In fact, they must help one another to become

saints! Louis and Zélie were ordinary, faithful spouses and parents, but they lived their faith in an extraordinary way, passing along that faith to their children, who offered themselves to Christ by entering religious life. These two humble saints now demonstrate to us that holiness is attainable to all, especially to those who live the married vocation faithfully.

As we approach the conclusion of this Year of Marriage and Family in December, I am hopeful that its fruits will endure. Let us continue to pray for all those who are married and have families. Let us encourage parents to be models of virtue and to pass on the faith to their children. Let us support with our compassion those families who struggle. And, as those who are created in God's image and likeness, let us strive always to be living reflections of his love to one another.