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A Year of Marriage and Family

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After more than a year of planning, the Diocese of Fargo will enter into a “Year of Marriage and Family” beginning on Dec. 28, the Feast of the Holy Family. The idea for this special year was first proposed to me very soon after my ordination as bishop, and apparently had been developing for some time before that.

I recognized immediately that this would harmonize nicely with the two Synods of Bishops that Pope Francis had summoned, which also would deal with the subject of the family. And next September, the World Meeting of Families will be held in Philadelphia with Pope Francis himself in attendance. Furthermore, unfolding current events make this observance even more opportune.

As a priest and bishop, I have worked with many couples preparing for marriage, and I have been blessed to know many wonderful couples and families through my parish assignments.

Some of my happiest experiences as a priest and bishop have involved opportunities to know and spend time with spouses and their families.

It is sometimes said that a parish priest becomes a member of every family, and I found that to be very true.

But, I also have to admit that some of the most heartrending moments of my priesthood involved working with couples and families that were struggling or even breaking down. And, even those families that enjoy stability and harmony face greater and greater challenges and pressures in our day.

One very troubling development is the trend towards redefining the meaning of marriage itself.

Traditional marriage under fire

Same-sex unions have been elevated by judicial decrees and the media to an equal status with marriage, or, as marriage has always been understood in Western culture.

An appeal to equality and tolerance has gained such traction in the public mind that traditional marriage is no longer regarded as immutable or even necessary. And, the recent surveys conducted in preparation for the Synod of Bishops revealed a certain lack of understanding of the Church’s beliefs about marriage.

For some years now, the bishops of the United States have recognized the serious challenges facing families, and they chose to emphasize the strengthening of marriage and family life as a priority. This cause is certainly a priority for me as well, and I am hopeful that this coming year focused on marriage and family life will be a time of grace for our diocese.

Very early in his pontificate, Pope Francis too made the pastoral care of the family a priority. He affirms clearly that “the family is the principal setting for the growth of each individual, since it is through the family that human beings become open to life and the natural need for relationships with others.”

The pope has stressed the “educative mission” of the family, noting how every vocation is rooted in this fundamental relationship. The family is the “primary place for education,” he said, since it is the “community of love and life in which every person learns to relate to others and to the world.”

He added, “All vocations make their first steps in the family.”

Furthermore, the Holy Father recognizes that the Christian family is founded upon “the stable union of man and woman in marriage. This union is born of their love, as a sign and presence of God’s own love.”

Marriage is essentially a mutual gift of life and love between spouses, and the Pope invites all husbands and wives to situate their gift of self within God’s own plan for them. “Promising love forever is possible when we perceive a plan bigger than our own ideas and undertakings, a plan which sustains us and enables us to surrender our future entirely to the one we love.”

Over thirty years ago, after another Synod of Bishops had reflected on the importance of marriage and family life, Pope St. John Paul II made this subject a constant theme of his teaching ministry. He went so far as to declare that, “The future of humanity passes by way of the family.”

And, the foundation of a Catholic family is Christian marriage. In fact, at his canonization last April, Pope Francis declared that “Pope St. John Paul II was the pope of the family.” His teaching and attention to marriage and family life is still an inspiration and offers a goldmine of insights to Christian spouses and families who strive to navigate through the current challenges and difficulties.

Resources will be provided

In the months to come, various themes and resources related to marriage and family life will be offered for reflection and prayer in our parishes and in our homes. Hopefully, these tools will prompt a deeper consideration of God’s plan for all of us and the Gospel teachings on marriage and family.

And next October, a diocesan celebration of marriage and family will be held in Fargo so that we as a Church can join together in prayer and thanksgiving for these great vocations.

This diocesan Year of Marriage and Family is not only meant for a select few, but for all who belong to the family of God. Whether we are married, widowed, single or consecrated to God through religious vows or Holy Orders, the realities of marriage and family life touch all of us.

Rather than merely adding more structures and offices in our diocese or in our parishes, this observance should deepen our personal understanding and appreciation for this great gift that God has given his people. It should also be an occasion for prayer and initiatives that will strengthen and support married couples and families in our parishes and communities.

It is my sincere hope that all of us - bishop, priests, deacons, religious and faithful laity - will enter into this year-long event with joy and hope, and that it will be a time of blessing for all of us. I close with a prayer that I offer to our entire diocesan family for this Year of Marriage and Family:

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph, may the example of your holy life help us to live our vocation to love. Be with us during this Year of Marriage and Family as we celebrate, strengthen, and witness to the gift of married and family life. Help all married couples to rediscover the beauty and sacredness of God’s plan for them and to deepen their covenant of life and love. Guide our families to be domestic churches, where we experience comfort and healing, and are formed to be saints through prayer, generosity and forgiveness. Holy Family of Nazareth, protect us and hear our prayer. Amen.”