

**September 3, 2017 A Simple Gift Homily:** There is an enchanting story told about the famous poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, an Austrian who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While residing in Paris in the first decade of the last century, he often passed a woman begging into whose hat tourists and many of the local citizens tossed coins. The astute poet could not fail to notice that the beggar was strangely unmoved by the charity shown her, as if she had no feelings at all. The lack of emotion disturbed the poet, a deeply compassionate man. So one fine day he is inspired to bring her a rose. And the moment he hands her the lovely flower, he is a witness to a remarkable transformation. Her face suddenly glows. He sees for the first time that she does have feelings. She smiles, and for a week she is no longer begging on the street, because someone... a stranger no less... has given her something more precious than money. Perhaps for the first time in her sad life, someone has finally captured her heart. In truth, the poet unwittingly sees her as Christ sees her, as a woman of infinite value and certainly worthy of a sublime act of love and affection. Rilke's story casts a warm, gentle light on the mystery of human love and the beauty of Christian marriage.

As we pause to reflect on the dignity of marriage, "a gift of the Lord", let us acknowledge that few things are more satisfying in life than to see first hand how a simple act of love and mercy can bring joy and a renewed purpose in life to the beneficiaries of our kindness and thoughtfulness. A person is giving most to another when he gives of himself, that is to say, the most precious gift he possesses, his own life. True love in marriage involves mutual self-giving and is grounded in the grace of Baptism.

If the institution of marriage suffers today, it is precisely because too few of us are willing to make the necessary gift of one's self in imitation of the one, Jesus Christ, who offered his life on the cross and who stooped down to wash the feet of his disciples on the eve of his death. As experience shows, for many married couples in the twilight of life, great sacrifices are demanded of them as they see their loved one enfeebled by old age or beset by a chronic or life threatening illness. The "gift" they made of themselves is of unsurpassable value and greatly esteemed even more than on their wedding day.

In his Apostolic letter, *Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love)*, Pope Francis writes of the wisdom of seeing others from a supernatural perspective. He states, "It is a profound spiritual experience to contemplate our loved ones with the eyes of God and to see Christ in them. This demands a freedom and an openness that enables us to see their dignity. We can be fully present to others by giving of ourselves and forgetting all else". (#323)

In the hugely entertaining and critically acclaimed show from the American Musical Theater, *Man of La Mancha*, the hero, Don Quixote, is portrayed as a fool, but one whose heart is pure and simple. He meets a prostitute named Aldonza. He sees in this woman what no one else sees, even Aldonza herself. He calls her "Dulcinea". In the song bearing her new name, the man of La Mancha sings to the woman he admires and loves in words that are unforgettable: "I have dreamed thee too long, never seen or touched thee but known thee with all of my heart. Half a prayer, half a song, thou has always been with me. Dulcinea, Dulcinea, I see heaven when I see you, and thy name is like a prayer an angel whispers, Dulcinea, Dulcinea".

It is, of course, unrealistic to expect a couple married forty or fifty years to see in each other the face of heaven, the face of Christ as they begin each day. But if, in their more reflective moments, they consider the gift they made of themselves to each other on the day of their wedding, they may come to the surprising realization that they assumed a new identity upon reciting their marriage promises. Each spouse is for the other a sign and instrument of the Lord, who never abandons us. They became Christ for each other.

Amen!