



NEWS ARCHIVE:

Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon

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National Marriage Conference held in Saskatoon March 19-20, 2010

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

Some 350 people attended a national marriage conference in Saskatoon March 19-20, reflecting on the theme “*A Time for Hope: Finally, Good News about Marriage.*”

Participants came from across the diocese, the province and the country, including delegates from British Columbia to Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

“There was just an incredible spirit of hope during this conference,” said Blake Sittler of the diocesan office of Marriage and Family Life, who led the diocesan committee organizing the event. “People are looking for good news – and they found it here.”

The conference began with presentations by historian Stephanie Coontz of Olympia, Washington, and sociologist Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge putting the story of marriage into context, Sittler said (*see articles below*). The academics cited history and statistics, dispelling myths about the state of marriage, both in the past and today.

Connecting marriage to the paschal mystery was the theme of a spiritually-focused presentation by Kathy and Neil Heskin of Illinois, a couple who have been active in marriage and family ministry for 32 years (*a report about their presentation can be found on Page 10*).

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National marriage conference MCs Sheldon and Gerry Scheck dressed up in wedding outfits marking the past, present and future of marriage during the March 19-20 event at the Sheraton Cavalier in Saskatoon.



Blake Sittler (at the podium) introduces members of the National Marriage Task Force planning committee, including former Saskatoon bishop Most Rev. Albert LeGatt (far right), who is now Archbishop of St. Boniface, Man.



A local panel described their personal experiences with a spectrum of marriage ministry happening in the diocese, including the work of the Marriage Task Force, divorce and remarriage ministry, marriage preparation, vocation awareness and Retrouvaille (see related article on Page 7).



A total of 350 people attended the national marriage conference March 19-20.

Dr. Richard Gaillardetz, a theologian and author who holds the chair in Catholic studies at the University of Toledo, offered a practical spirituality of marriage during his talk, presented at an annual Marriage Appreciation Banquet held in conjunction with the national conference (see article on Page 12).

Celebration of the Eucharist with Archbishop Albert LeGatt of St. Boniface, Bishop Bryan Bayda of the Eparchy of Saskatoon, and Bishop-elect Donald Bolen of the diocese of Saskatoon included a renewal of wedding vows for conference participants. "Couples described how looking into each other's eyes as they made that recommitment was truly a powerful spiritual moment," noted Sittler

In his homily, LeGatt reflected on the "long lingering look of love" that couples exchange in old movies. Jesus also has a look of love for each beloved child of God: including the woman caught in adultery in John's gospel, LeGatt noted.

"Jesus sees her for what God calls her to be, sees her for what she is in God's eyes: the beloved – as all God's children are the beloved," he said. "Jesus has trust, he has faith in her, and what her life can be if she allows the love of God to be the truth in her life: 'go and sin no more.'"



Saskatoon Bishop-Elect Donald Bolen, St. Boniface Archbishop Albert LeGatt, and Eparchy of Saskatoon Bishop Bryan Bayda celebrated Mass with participants attending the national marriage conference in Saskatoon.

When it is difficult to love, to get beyond hurt and resentment, our invitation is to be like Jesus, to choose to love, to trust and to reach out again, LeGatt said. In living this way, married couples "indeed are an icon, a reflection, of God's unending love for us," he said.

"You do it again and again and again as couples, in the way in which you continue to trust in each other, and you choose to reach out to each other in love. Within that you are truly a sacrament within the Church," LeGatt said. "What will give the strength to choose to see your spouse in that way? The Word of God... Within your hearts, have the crucified and risen Lord alive in you, and with you in your marriage."

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Marcy Millette with a Billings NFP display, one of several displays at the national marriage conference.

The committee, which was made up of couples from throughout the diocese, included Deb and Gilbert Chevrier, Wendy and Abel Desa, Darcie and Mark Lich, Kathy Lozinsky, Katarina and Shaun Nechvatal, Gerry and Sheldon Scheck, and Michelle and Dean Yurkowski.

Hosted by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon, the conference was organized with support from a number of groups, including the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Saskatoon, Worldwide Marriage Encounter, Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools, Catholic Family Services, Queen's House, and St. Thomas More College, as well as a number of other sponsors and supporters, including the Bishop's Annual Appeal.

Opening speaker reflects on history of marriage

By Blake Sittler

Stephanie Coontz, author of *The Way We Never Were* and *Marriage: A History*, was the opening speaker for a national marriage conference held in Saskatoon March 19-20.

Coontz's research and writing maintains that there was never a period of time in history when marriage was the romantic, altruistic ideal often associated with a brief period in the mid-20th century.

"For thousands of years, marriage was not about love... throughout most of history, marriage redistributed wealth and services from the weaker members of society to the stronger... from women to husbands and children to fathers," Coontz reminded the audience.

In her research, Coontz found that most violence against women and children happened within their marriage rather than from outside the family.

The earliest historical practice of marriage was mainly a form of social organization –less about a relationship between a man and a woman than it was about forming alliances with other groups in order to create peace between factions divided over a territory or resource or simply to gain political influence or financial increase.



Stephanie Coontz

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“As strange as it may seem to us today...the main point of marriage throughout history was to get in-laws,” stated Coontz.

Coontz described the exceptional role of the Catholic Church as one of the first major institutions, political or religious, that gave a certain amount of personal choice to an individual to decide for themselves whom to marry or even to marry at all.

The Catholic Church raised the respect of being an unmarried and celibate person above that of a married couple and also recognized the legitimacy of a couple who chose to marry through mutual consent.

“For the first 16 centuries, Christianity defined the legitimacy of a marriage based on the couples’ personal intentions...whether given down by the haystack...or through a locked door,” said Coontz.

Coontz explained that the relatively recent development of marrying for reasons of love, challenged the old factors of financial and political stability. Those worried about the change wondered what would keep people in a marriage when the love disappeared.

“Love, they were warned, may be the death of marriage,” remarked Coontz. “There was an old European saying, ‘He who marries for love has good nights and bad days.’”

Changes that made marriage more loving and egalitarian also destabilized the institution, she noted. Marriage has become more about a personal decision based on the feeling of love than about the greater good of the community and particular families.

Coontz argued that the sexual revolution, civil rights reforms, lessening religious influence, women entering the work force and other factors have ensured that marriage will never again be the primary way that we organize our society.

However, Coontz also delivered the good news to be found in contemporary matrimony: the increasing number of people who marry of their own accord, growing equality between the genders and declining divorce rates. “When marriage can be made to

work, and it can... (it) has higher emotional expectations, is more fulfilling, more intimate and more beneficial for all its members than ever before in history,” she said.

“Parents spend more time with their children...domestic violence has fallen sharply, standards of fidelity and honesty are higher than ever,” she continued.

Coontz highlighted again that the factors that make marriage more about personal choice and fulfillment have made bad marriages more difficult to stay in, especially without the exterior social controls that existed only a few decades ago.

“Marriage is no longer the only game in town,” she warned. “We are going to have to live with the fact that some people will not marry and some people will not stay married.”

Coontz also addressed some of the most recent research about what factors point to the best marriages. These factors included men who had a more egalitarian attitude towards women, including their willingness to participate in basic housework, and the ability of couples to read and positively react to each other’s interests.

“My husband’s bid for attention is to laugh out loud when he reads the paper,” Coontz shared. “I used to react about 75% of the time but now I try to do that 90% of the time. When he laughs, he is telling me he has found something that he thinks I could use in one of my books.”

Coontz concluded by saying that the Catholic Church needs to remember its earliest concern that marriage can detract energy away from the needs of the extended community and even from a relationship with God. She noted an increasing tendency for couples to focus completely on their own life together, distancing themselves from any commitment to others in the community.

Rather than idealize marriage, Coontz proposed a need to encourage broader social ties beyond the couple, in order to both enrich public life and to stabilize private life by reducing the unrealistic expectation that spouses can be all things to each other.

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Bibby provides overview of latest marriage statistics

By Blake Sittler

Reginald Bibby addressed the participants of a national marriage conference in Saskatoon March 19-20, in a talk entitled "The Elusive but Persistent Dream: what nearly every Canadian wants from marriage".

Canadian sociologist Bibby presented his information on marriage statistics, based on findings divided into age categories: the oldest living generation or pre-boomers; the baby boomers born between 1945 and 1965; the post-boomers, also known as Generation X, and the emerging millennials who are now in high school.

Bibby painted a picture of dramatic changes that have taken place in the last thirty years. Cohabitation has increased 20-fold since 1975, though many of those living together still consider marriage as a part of their future. For the first time since this research began, the numbers of never-married individuals outnumber those who are married.

Canadians generally are not optimistic about the future of the family as a realm of influence even though a much larger percentage of them believe in the current importance of the family. In his broader research Bibby reported that Canadians



A wine and cheese reception was held after the conference opening address Friday, March 19.

believed the family decreasing in its ability to shape its members socially.

But Bibby's research also revealed a more positive counter-intuitive pattern of a decreasing social acceptance of certain practices like pre-marital sex and so-called open marriages in young people.



Reginald Bibby

"Back [in 1975], we see that 21 per cent of boomers thought pre-marital sex was acceptable... one-in-five, but look what happened over time...there has been a movement in the opposite direction," he pointed out on a graph, showing a larger percentage of young people today do not find pre-marital sex acceptable.

Bibby's information seemed to show that for all we hear about young people rejecting traditional family values, their values are actually more conservative than their parents in some areas.

"We think that teens are totally relativistic...but what the numbers reveal is that teens are not excited about the idea of pre-marital sex," Bibby pointed out. "These teens have seen the tragic outcome of extramarital sex and they don't want it".

Bibby compared what life was like in the 1950's and 1960's to the current attitudes towards certain litmus tests of pluralism and openness to diversity. He noted greater willingness to accept women working outside the home, mixed race marriages as well as homosexual relationships are on the rise in the younger generations.

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Bibby used many of his findings from his Vanier Institute for the Family study, entitled: “The Future Families Project: A survey of Canadian hopes and dreams”.

Some of Bibby’s research highlighted a shift in attitude towards marriage in which couples shifted the focus on staying married based on obligation to marriage that gives gratification.

“In the 1950’s, people were motivated by loyalty, obligation and duty...concern for the other person,” but Bibby explained that this is changing and compared the shift to his mother’s shopping pattern. “My mom had a pretty high level of loyalty to Eaton’s, that is, until Wal-Mart came to town,” quipped Bibby.

This movement from social or public loyalty to personal or self-gratification also affects attendance of church services, long-term friendships, and consumer trends.

When Bibby asked his students about what they wanted in a spouse he said the traits read like a shopping list of emotional and social skills aimed at pleasing themselves and at the top of the list is physical appearance.

Bibby was critical of the self-centered view of marriage, “Marriage has become the formal consummation of self-interest.”

Bibby compared that to the more Christian definition of love in marriage as “giving ourselves to another person for their own growth and development...the focus isn’t on the grocery list but on the other’s growth”.

Bibby hypothesized that a successful marriage necessitated more altruistic virtues.

“When you’re in a marriage you need a lot of grace and mercy,” professed Bibby.

Bibby then defined grace as receiving what we don’t deserve and mercy as not receiving what we do deserve.



Bibby concluded his talk with the simple statement that statistics do show that almost every Canadian wants to marry and stay married for their entire life to the same person.

“Marriage has changed but in the midst of all the diversity and change, a vast majority of Canadians cherish marriage and want it to work [and] are fairly traditional” said Bibby. “That’s not propaganda. That’s just good data.”

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Participants in a panel discussion at the national marriage conference in Saskatoon included (back row, left to right) Blake Sittler, Gail and Pat Fitzpatrick, Mary-Anne Kuin, and (front row, left to right) Mike and Celia Caswell, Mark and Darcie Lich.

Volunteers describe marriage ministries and outreach

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

A broad and comprehensive vision of marriage ministry in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon was highlighted during a panel discussion held March 20 during a national marriage conference at the Sheraton Cavalier in Saskatoon.

Panel participants described powerful personal experiences in a range of marriage-related ministries, from marriage preparation and enrichment to divorce and remarriage ministry; from vocation awareness to Retrouvaille, a program for marriages in difficulty.

Blake Sittler of the diocesan Office of Marriage and Family Life began the discussion with a reflection on

what a “perfect Christian married couple” might look like, and then asked those present to reflect on the less-than-perfect, and at times wounded, reality found in the homes and hearts of the families that make up the Christian community.

“What we are attempting to do as a diocese is two-fold: to react to the needs of God’s people and to create a vision and plan for our diocese,” Sittler said. This vision calls for age appropriate and sound vocation preparation; challenging and positive marriage preparation; nurturing, dynamic and diverse marriage enrichment opportunities; pastoral outreach to couples whose relationship is struggling; and care to those who have been wounded by the experience of divorce or the death of a spouse, he listed.

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Gail and Pat Fitzpatrick described their years of work in marriage preparation ministry, and in the development and implementation of a remarriage ministry known as Encore.

“Six years ago our diocese established a curriculum for marriage preparation,” described Pat. “Our program covers such topics as communication, conflict resolution, becoming life giving, Natural Family Planning and living marriage as a sacrament.”

Young couples who come for marriage preparation are often reluctant, attending only because it’s a requirement of the Church before marriage, described Gail. Happily, most leave admitting they got much more out of it than they expected, she said, sharing testimonials from couples about the program and the welcoming and acceptance they felt from the faith community.

In some instances, marriage preparation sessions have even prompted couples to rethink their decision to get married, noted Pat, suggesting that ideally, marriage preparation would be undertaken early on, perhaps even as a prelude to engagement.

The Fitzpatrick’s experience of entering into a second marriage proved helpful to couples they met faced with similar issues. That led to the development of Encore, a ministry that addresses the needs of those preparing for marriage after divorce or the death of a spouse, as well as those coming to marriage after a previous long-term relationship; or who are bringing children into a marriage.

“It’s an opportunity to share with others the good news that their new marriages can and should be successful, strong and God blessed,” said Pat, challenging a world view that looks at blended families with skepticism or sees them as second-rate. “We need to show the world that such families are loved, valued and belong in our faith communities.”

Gail pointed to the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph as a blended family to be emulated. “The challenge is to see Jesus Mary and Joseph

in the world around us,” – in particular in the blended families in our community, she added.

Encore, which is available to all marriage preparation teams in the diocese, includes two modules: one on deciding to love again, and another about the “joys and complications” of creating blended families.

“My expectations of marriage did not die with my first marriage,” Gail related. “I know that our God is a God of second chances, and through the healing process of annulment, I found peace, forgiveness and the understanding that I deserved to be loved in a marriage that helped me to grow to be the woman that God designed me to be.”

Panel participant **Mary-Anne Kuin** then described her experience of divorce and how for a time it left her feeling abandoned and disconnected from God and from her Catholic faith family. “I felt helpless, rejected, lonely, angry, afraid, depressed and outcast,” she listed. “I believed I had no one to turn to, no one I could trust to share my hurt with.”

Relating her own journey of hope and healing, Kuin described God’s voice whispering to her his unconditional love and forgiveness, and her renewed connection to her faith community. “Divorce ministry has been part of the Saskatoon Roman Catholic diocese since the early 1980s,” she noted, listing what is presently in place, including a weekly support group, and two 12-week programs: Divorce and Beyond for those recently separated or divorced; and Transitions, for those who have already started their healing journey.

As individual stories are related and heard with acceptance and empathy, growth and healing begin within these ministries, which are led by those who have lived through similar experiences, Kuin said. “Wholeness becomes more than just a dream.” Participants have said that through the ministry they have “felt safe to seek, to share and to heal, they felt solidarity in their suffering and hope for the future; they felt friendship, healing and laughter, even when sharing their pain or tears,” Kuin related.



Mark and Darcie Lich, the co-chairs of the diocesan Task Force on Marriage established seven years ago by Bishop Albert LeGatt, related an overview of ministry and projects undertaken by the leadership group. Encouraging a wide range of marriage enrichment is one goal, a concept that has grown to include less structured enrichment efforts that are flexible, personal and meaningful.

Darcie reflected on an image from Rev. Ron Rolheiser about how marriage and family life can be viewed as an ongoing series of “monastic bells” calling us to love, to duty and to holiness. “Vocation means I’m not in it for me, I’m in it for we.”

Mike and Celia Caswell described their experience with Retrouvaille, which began with an inaugural weekend in 2007 that led to renewal and growth in their own marriage, and prompted their involvement on the provincial board of the organization.

“Retrouvaille means rediscovery. This program is designed for hurting couples who are considering separation or divorce, or who may already be separated or divorced, but are considering reconciliation,” said Celia.

During their initial Retrouvaille weekend, couples learn about four stages of marriage: romance, disillusionment, misery and awakening; and are introduced to the four cornerstones of marriage: love, commitment, trust and forgiveness. “Love is a decision, commitment is a decision, trust and forgiveness are decisions,” Mike said, noting that communication techniques are also taught to couples as a way to promote health and intimacy in a marriage relationship.

The Caswells shared the pain and discord that existed in their own relationship, and the healing and renewal they experienced by actively engaging in the Retrouvaille process.

“Retrouvaille gave me the opportunity to focus fully on our relationship and find the tools to communicate and express my love for Celia more effectively. It also gave me information on conflict resolution and hope that we could change and restore intimacy,” said Mike.

“There are many other ministries, groups and people who could have been up here this morning,” Sittler said of the panel discussion. “Ranging from pro-life organizations to teachers of Natural Family Planning, people working with the elderly and widows. The list goes on and on, and they too are part of this plan.”

Blake Sittler stressed the long-term nature of the vision for marriage ministry in the diocese. “We are looking forward to the horizon and looking forward to a time when our children know that marriage means commitment, respect, unity, love and justice in the world; when young people avoid cohabitation and hold out for the more rewarding relationship of marriage, and that these same young people desire to live out their sexual lives in a way that will not only please God, but will deepen and strengthen their marriage.”

There is good news about marriage into the future, Sittler concluded, inviting his listeners to become involved in their own communities and families.

“Be a witness to the world that marriage is one of the most visible signs of God’s life-giving presence in the world. God doesn’t advertise on the radio, TV or the Internet. We are his billboards, we are his commercials, we are the plan, we are his good news to the world about marriage.”

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Neil and Kathy Heskin reflect on the paschal mystery in marriage



The Heskin presentation at Marriage Conference

By Blake Sittler

A couple involved in marriage ministry for some 32 years reflected on “The paschal mystery in marriage: a journey of love” in a recent presentation to an audience of 350 at a national marriage conference in Saskatoon.

Speakers Kathy and Neil Heskin of Illinois connected marriage to the paschal mystery as experienced in the days before the resurrection.

“Holy Thursday asks the couple: ‘What does it mean to wash one another’s feet?’ Good Friday asks: ‘How do we prepare for the difficult times that will come to us?’ and Holy Saturday asks us: ‘How do we hold each other when our hearts are breaking?’” reflected Kathy.

The Heskins articulated that it may be easy for couples to stand beside each other in the good times, but that the paschal challenge of love is whether or not a husband and wife can stand beside each other in the difficult times: standing beneath the cross of each other’s imperfections, through sickness and the bad times that all couples experience.

“Loving unconditionally is not common in our world day-to-day,” said Neil. “Abundant love does not put conditions on the other. It’s not the kind of love that we see on TV but it is the kind of love that transforms us.”

Kathy pointed out that the lessons of how to love another are taught first in the home. Family life and parenting are how parents can share with their children a Christian mentality of self-giving love.



Kathy and Neil Heskin

“When our boys came back from a date, we’d meet them at the door...and ask them, ‘did she have a good time?’ because we wanted them to know, even in dating, the emphasis is on the other,” said Kathy.

Neil spoke about the importance for young couples to create their own story as they start off their married life. At one point, he asked the couples to share with each other the stories that they held sacred about each other.

“The story of the life, [death] and resurrection of Jesus is the story that binds us together as the People of God...our married lives parallel the Paschal Mystery of Jesus... couples are called to be faithful to the pain and darkness and to believe in the possibility of joy through the hard times,” said Neil.

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Kathy and Neil both shared examples of how the things that they first loved about each other, over time became frustrations in their marriage. Neil loved Kathy's exuberance and ability to meet people but this often meant she was visiting with people when he wanted to leave. Kathy loved Neil's confidence but early on she found out that his confidence also made it difficult for him to ever admit he was wrong.

"We have to be faithful through the dry times and accept each other where we are [while still] helping them to grow," said Kathy.

"When we choose to live [the paschal] mystery, then we witness how much God loves humankind," she continued. "God is nuts about us... our passion for each other needs to reflect that."

Risking conflict was an important part of marriage that the Heskins said strengthens intimacy and trust. Learning how to be vulnerable to each other is a special time when couples can forgive and heal each other. This exercise is difficult for most individuals, Kathy explained, because this exchange usually calls for one or both partners to change for the better, which means leaving pettiness behind.

Heskins gave several opportunities in their reflection for couples to share with each other at their tables. One of the major themes was the concept of foot washing in marriage. Heskins reflected on feet on the journey of Moses, Jesus, and the disciples, and compared them to the journey of a married couple.

"Foot washing is the sacrament for families... from the time we count toes on our children to the ways we care for our bedridden parents," Kathy said. "Feet can stay toasty warm in bed or they can go to the kitchen to make coffee," said Kathy. "Kindness moves that journey."

"After a crushing fight, lying together alone in bed, separated by silence, sometimes a toe sneaks over to ask forgiveness," Kathy said to a round of applause and laughter. "Our hearts can be stone, but feet are humble."

The couple connected the love that drew Jesus to the cross to the love that needs to exist in strong marriages.

"Love invites us to be there for one another, which is another way to say that love calls us to die for each other," said Neil. "This is how we work out our salvation together."

"An insight for Easter is that forgiveness is always possible. Neil and I 'Easter' each other when we reach back into our lives and heal the things that hurt us growing up," said Kathy.



"The only reason that we enter into the Paschal Mystery is to allow ourselves to be transformed by each other's love," she concluded.

Kathy teaches Theology and Pastoral Ministry at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois where she directs a bachelor's degree in Pastoral Ministry and a Master's degree in Family Ministry. Neil is the Business Manager for Ascension Parish in Oak Park, Illinois.

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Conversion and companionship emphasized by keynote speaker at Marriage Appreciation Banquet



By Blake Sittler

An energetic and humorous presentation by theology professor and author Dr. Richard Gaillardetz was the final address of a national marriage conference held in Saskatoon March 19-20.

Gaillardetz has written several books, including texts on ecclesiology, as well as *A Daring Promise*, a book on marriage discipleship. However, he observed that the language of theology is not familiar to most Christian couples in their lived experience of marriage.

“If you’re married for 20 years, and you finally get the kids to bed, and you’re feeling a little frisky, you don’t say to your wife, ‘Would you like to go upstairs and become living icons of Christ’s love for the Church?’” he said. “It’s not the way we talk.”

Gaillardetz shared many personal experiences from his marriage to Dianne, his wife of 20 years, and about the difficulties they faced with children and the early years of studying with little money and less sleep.



Richard Gaillardetz

“If they’re married long enough, every couple looks into the abyss,” Gaillardetz said. “We have to make a connection between the lofty teaching, theology, and the abyss... I don’t think we do that well enough”.

Gaillardetz addressed the current cultural context of marriage and how we view marriage. “We live in a culture in which media, especially movies... encourages romance,” said Gaillardetz.

“My students know these movies aren’t realistic but when I ask them what they are looking for in a spouse... this is their narrative arc of romance and marriage; that love conquers everything... and it creates some very unrealistic expectations,” stated Gaillardetz.

Gaillardetz also explored the influence of a consumer culture on our modern marriage theology. From cell phones and computers to cameras and clothes, consumerism necessitates an evolution of new needs. “A marketing industry develops that says once you buy the thing you desire, you are no longer happy with it... your desire needs to be nomadic,” Gaillardetz noted.

Consumerism, as a cultural perspective, lends itself to being a society of people who compare and value human beings in the same way that we compare and value objects and services.

“Marital commitment has never been easy, but it is harder today and one of the reasons is that we have become habituated to comparison shopping... about upgrading what we have,” Gaillardetz stated.

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“The commitment we make to our spouse on our wedding day is not that difficult because we know what we’re getting,” he noted, but added that the wedding vows are a radical decision to devote oneself to an unknown future. “We are committing ourselves to the mystery of who our partner will be, recognizing that we can’t predict that.”

When faced with the “abyss” of marriage difficulties, it will be a common vision, and not common interests, that will most often pull a couple through the dark times, he suggested. “We can only do it out of a commitment that we share a common vision, and more importantly as Catholic Christians, that this vision is grounded in our faith, and in our faith in the grace of God being with us through that.”

Gaillardetz explored a concept of marriage as an ascetic vocation, since it is about freely embracing limits and discipline. This asceticism also includes loneliness.

“There is a loneliness that at some level is inevitable in a marriage at one point or another... We can never be fully sated in any human relationship,” he said.

The concept of a “soul mate” or that there is always one “right”, even “God-chosen” spouse for each person is a relatively new and problematic romantic idea that has crept even into Christian theology, Gaillardetz said. “I think it creates some problems, and we need a different way of thinking about providence and vocation.”

At every moment of our lives, God puts out an invitation to love in the midst of many choices, Gaillardetz asserted. “Now some may be bad choices... but I don’t think it follows that there is only one choice.”

For instance, he suggested that if his wife had chosen a different spouse, it could still have been part of God’s plan.

“There would have been different blessings, there would have been different crosses to bear. They would have looked into the abyss at a different moment in their lives, occasioned by a different crisis,” he said. “God says to us ‘choose, and make that choice a loving choice, and I will walk with you on that journey.’”

If we accept the delusion that there is only one right person for us, when that person changes, or when there are problems in the relationship, the temptation will be to conclude that this has been the wrong person all along, Gaillardetz added. “At some point in life it will always appear as if we’ve married the wrong person. And maybe the most unhelpful question that couples can ask is ‘was this the right person?’ The only important question that married couples need to ask is ‘are we sharing a vision in which we are able to love one another and put our love to the service of the world?’”

Gaillardetz recommended the scriptural word “companion” as a description of the marriage relationship, noting the origin of the word as “someone with whom you share bread” – an image with rich resonance in the biblical tradition, from the Old Testament story of the daily bread of manna in the desert to the Lord’s prayer in the New Testament, from the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves to the Lord giving his body in the broken bread.

“What does it mean for married couples to be companions? It means that we learn to receive the gifts that our spouse has to give,” he said.

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“It is about learning the daily discipline of asking what are the gifts that my spouse is giving me that I’ve not noticed, because they weren’t what I was looking for” and then acknowledging those gifts in gratitude.

“Companionship is a practices, a discipline, a decision each day to share bread: to receive the bread our partner offers us, and to allow God’s grace in a spirit of gratitude to replace that consumer comparison-shopping ethos that’s part of our larger culture,” Gaillardetz said.

Ultimately, marriage is an ongoing vehicle of conversion, Gaillardetz stressed, quoting the observation of writer Nancy Mairs: “my spirit has been schooled in wedlock.”

“Conversion in Christian marriage is the call for us to always look at... how God is changing us through this relationship,” Gaillardetz said.

“Marriage is a crucible of grace in which God is the hammer and blow by blow throughout our marriage is forging each of us in our relationship with our spouse and children to become something new, something noble, something of God,” Gaillardetz concluded

Gaillardetz’s talk was presented as part of the eighth annual Marriage Appreciation Banquet hosted by the diocese of Saskatoon’s Marriage Task Force and Worldwide Marriage Encounter, which this year was held in conjunction with the two-day national conference. The keynote was sponsored by by Gene and Adele Dupuis.

The event concluded with an auction and a dance.

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