



This Christmas included an extra gift under the tree for our family as our daughter Shannon became engaged. It was not a big surprise to Mary Jo and me since they had been talking about looking for an engagement ring for a while now and her fiancé had come to me a couple of weeks earlier to have “the Talk”, that is, to ask for my blessing and permission to seek Shannon’s hand in marriage. While some may consider this as rather old-fashioned and even outdated, we have always told our girls that a true man, if he really loves and respects her, should also show respect for her parents by seeking their permission and blessing before proposing. Needless to say, the talk went well and Shannon and Dan became engaged on Christmas Eve. While they are planning on a longer engagement, we look forward to welcoming Dan into the family most likely sometime in 2017.

As usual we had my entire extended family at our home for the Christmas day celebration. It was very refreshing to see Shannon and Dan together, basking in the glow of their engagement and being able to share that joy with the aunts, uncles and cousins. Young love can be, and should be, exciting, joyful and contagious. You could feel that in the two of them and it was particularly heart-warming to see Dan with a big smile on his face the entire time and so obviously in love with our daughter. I think that when you see two young people very much in love, it is refreshing, and it is a witness of God’s goodness and love for us. It provides a reminder that yes, that is the way love should be.

While Mary Jo and I rejoice in the happiness of the newly engaged couple, I also know that love takes on various forms as our lives move forward. I am reminded of this when I reflect on the relationships right within our own family.

We can see the shape that love takes as a couple matures in their relationship in the years following the wedding. Our oldest daughter Caitlin has been married for over six years now and her and Steve’s love has now overflowed with the blessing of two beautiful little boys becoming part of their family. As they make their home a place of love and joy with their children, the love they share is no less real than that of an engaged couple. Rather, it is a more mature love simply due to the passage of time and the difficulties they have endured together during their early years of marriage. They are now busy with the everyday family matters of schooling for their oldest child, buying their first home and all the responsibilities

which go along with that. Even as they move through these first years of marriage and family life, they have learned and continue to learn to place their trust in God's mercy and his plan for their life together. It is a beautiful thing to see and a blessing to witness this growth in love.

I see the next shape that love can take on as I reflect on where Mary Jo and I currently find ourselves. This past year we have become empty nesters and of course we continue to enjoy the fruits of our marriage through our children and grandchildren. After thirty-four years of married life and raising a family along with the struggles that sometimes accompany that, and now with my retirement and all our children being out on their own, we now have more time than ever before to devote to just the two of us. That is a wonderful thing and certainly a blessing to give thanks for. There are the many beautiful years of family life to look back on and cherish the joy-filled times together. There is a deep satisfaction and appreciation I feel when I think of all the blessings God has given us, and continues to bestow on us. While I pray and hope that we may have many future years together to make more of those memories, I am so grateful for those which we already have to cherish.

Finally, I can see the form that long-term loves takes when I look at my own parents, or the parents of some good friends of ours, both of whom have been married for over sixty years. There is a deep-rooted sense of commitment to one another that seems to permeate those long-term love relationships. After sixty years of married life together, I imagine couples know just about every little detail and idiosyncrasy of one another. Even with all these exposed, or perhaps because of this, love can still survive and flourish. There can be a deep, unbreakable devotion to one another which is stronger than any heartache or trial which the many years may have brought their way. Such examples of love cannot fail to enkindle hope that yes, love can continue to grow through the years. As St. Paul reminds us in his first letter to the Corinthians, love can and does endure until the end.

As I reflect on all the various shapes that love and marriage take on through the years, from the initial giddy days of engagement, to the wedding day, to the early days and years of marriage and family life and having children, to being married for over thirty years and being empty-nesters and grandparents, until the golden years of growing old together, I am struck with awe by the beauty of it all. Each stage has its own joys, its own challenges and its potential to grow to become what God truly intended love to be. God certainly has such a beautiful plan for marriage. A union of heart and soul, mind and body, which ultimately will see its true fulfillment in the life to follow, by our final union, forever in glory with the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.