



“May 14, 1988 is an important date for me. It was on that day I was ordained a priest. The longer I am a priest, the more I realize that the meaning of my priesthood goes well beyond the joy I experienced on May 14, 1988. It is more than just a particular date on a calendar. Underneath it is found the true meaning of it, for it has been through the good and bad times; the stress and disappointments; and the ups and downs of ordained service that have shaped and formed me in my quest to be a man of service and a person of hope in Christ Jesus. What is found underneath your wedding date? Is it merely a day to remember, once a year, or a definition of who you are as husband and wife? Let me introduce you to a married couple that recently challenged me to reflect more on the day we, as priests and married couples, received and entered into the grace of the sacraments of service.

Mike and Carolyn Shimek were married on June 28, 1980. Mike is a teacher and coach at St. Joseph Catholic High School in Victoria. They raised three children on a limited income and were still able to offer them a Catholic education. Mike and Carolyn worked side by side, especially in the lawn service they operated, to supplement Mike’s teacher salary. They mowed many yards together over the years. I remember them well, when I was first assigned to Victoria as a young priest. Everything changed in 2005, when Carolyn was diagnosed with Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. ALS is often referred to as “Lou Gehrig’s Disease,” and is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord. Motor neurons reach from the brain to the spinal cord and from the spinal cord to the muscles throughout the body. The progressive degeneration of the motor neurons in ALS eventually leads to their death. When the motor neurons die, the ability of the brain to initiate and control muscle movement is lost. With voluntary muscle action progressively affected, patients in the later stages of the disease may become totally paralyzed.

For ten years, Mike took good care of Carolyn. As Carolyn’s disease progressed, he had to hire others to assist him, but he never placed Carolyn in a nursing home; he never complained about having to put aside everything in his personal life, in order to work and then race home to care for her, sometimes receiving only a few hours of sleep a night. We could all see the toll it was placing upon him, but Mike never

exemplified self-pity and did his best to take care of his wife. Carolyn died a few weeks ago, on April 12th. Her ten year journey of carrying that particular cross ended. Her Vigil Service and Funeral Mass was one of celebration not only of Carolyn's life, but a celebration of the incredible marriage she and Mike shared.

As Gretchen Boyle, one of the teachers Mike works with at the Catholic high school, read at the Vigil Service, the evening before Carolyn's funeral, these past ten years were not only physically difficult for Carolyn, but emotionally as well. She could not speak, she could not move her body but she could operate a computer with the movement of her eyes, and it spoke for her. Gretchen wrote: "Carolyn fought with courage, and she fought unceasingly, but the most amazing thing about her battle was that she never allowed ALS to change her. Ask anyone who knew her, loved her, and spent time with her, and they will tell you the same thing: Carolyn never let ALS change her core of faith, hope, and love; that would have been a defeat. Regardless of the progression of the disease, or the grief over losing a certain ability, or the guilt of feeling like a burden to her loved ones, regardless of the many obstacles she faced, inconceivable to us and known to God alone, she never changed. The external, physical body had to change, but the inner spirit was never broken. She would keep loving God, keep being a good wife to her husband and keep being an inspirational mother to her children—all the things that she had been doing in both body and spirit. Now she would have to depend on her spirit a bit more."

As the disease progressed, and the only part of her body she could move were her eyes, Carolyn would speak to Mike, via the computer, and tell him she was sorry for being a burden to him. As Gretchen shared with us, "Whenever she had a weak moment, and she felt like a burden, Mike would look at her and say June 28, 1980. Carolyn knew what that meant. In sickness and in health. Warriors together, no matter what." Underneath that date, which was so special for them, was commitment, courage and the willingness to stand with one another in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. Carolyn and Mike loved and honored each other to the very last breath she would breathe.

June 28, 1980 was not merely a day they celebrated. It signified who they were as a couple and how much they would depend upon God for the grace to live their marriage vows, especially in times when it is difficult to do so. Yes, Mike would often remind himself and remind Carolyn, when she felt like a burden, what June 28, 1980 meant. That was all he had to say. If he felt self-pity or Carolyn felt like a burden, Mike would look at her and say, "June 28, 1980." As Gretchen shared: "People would often ask Mike, 'How do you do it? How do you keep yourself going?' His answer was always the same, 'I have no choice. Look at what she has to do. She had no choice, and she does it.' That is what defined Carolyn and Mike and their children. She never became bitter or self-pitying. She showed them how to get through it."

Yes, dates remind us of what took place at significant times in our lives, but faith

enables us to fulfill what we promised on those special days. My ordination date and your wedding date define who we are and the kind of spouse we want to be, as followers of Christ. Mike and Carolyn have taught me that even when I am at my lowest, and feel so overwhelmed by what is expected of me as a priest, all I have to say is "May 14, 1988" and pray for the strength to discover God's grace, which can always be found underneath that date!

May our Lord and Savior strengthen your marriage, as you choose to live your vows every day."