

# Preaching for the Family—July 22-28, 2007 (Natural Family Planning Week)

By

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**July 22nd – SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME C  
(Lectionary for Mass, no. 108)**

Last November the Catholic Bishops of the United States issued a Pastoral Statement entitled *Married Love and the Gift of Life* [<http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/MarriedLove.pdf>] This booklet, in question and answer format, addresses the intimate and essential link between the way in which married couples welcome each other into their lives each day and the way in which they welcome children. Essential to married love is the gift of hospitality.

Today's scripture speak to this gift of welcome. First, there is the welcome of Jesus by Martha and Mary. The former is very concerned with details and may be seen as the typical pragmatic American; the latter, giving her full attention to the Lord on His visit. Mary puts aside things to concentrate on the person, in this case the Person of Jesus. Essential to the Lord's praise of Mary's priorities is this focus on the deeper nature of hospitality and welcome.

In Genesis 18 Abraham graciously hosts the stranger and finds that a gift is given, one for which he long had prayed, to the point of almost losing hope... the precious blessing of a child. The visitor announced as he was about to leave that within a year a great blessing would be granted them: Sarah would be with child. In the days of Abraham and Sarah, seeing children as a blessing was so simple. Culture and faith supported this as obvious. However, in our own age, the responsibilities of bearing and raising children, true to be sure, have overwhelmed talk of blessing. Even beyond this, as we reflect on the marriage of man and woman, in our culture there is rarely talk of marital love beyond a private matter between individuals. One might say that today marriage is what each couple wants of it. Devoid of openness to God's plan, unwittingly selfishness can creep in and before you know, problems. The great gift of marriage becomes not a blessed occasion for hospitality (of spouses for each other and together for children) but for a concentration of one's needs and whether these needs are being met.

Today begins the annual celebration of "Natural Family Planning Week." The Pastoral statement of the Bishops rightfully explains the gift of Natural Family Planning and its blessings as well as its morally sound use within marriage. NFP is a natural means to enhance the possibility of conceiving a child as well as, with the proper intention, spacing children. Yet it is a gift largely not known or, even worse, misunderstood by the average couple. This would be a great week to get more information. Rather than attempt to explain, allow me to mention the benefits of NFP. These quotes of actual couples who have discovered the blessings are excerpts from the pastoral statement, *Married Love and the Gift of Life*. One couple states:

*"[Natural Family Planning] has become more than a totally safe, healthy, and reliable method of birth regulation to us. The essential qualities of self-restraint, self-discipline, mutual respect, and shared responsibility carry over to all facets of our marriage, making our relationship more intimate."*  
(*Faithful to Each Other Forever*, 44)

Another speaks of the two essential elements of true hospitality: communication and commitment: *"NFP does require communication and commitment, but isn't that what marriage is all about? We have gained so much by using NFP and have lost nothing."* (*Natural Family Planning Blessed Our Marriage*, 18)

Couples who practice NFP have also found that it leads them to show greater attentiveness to and respect for each other. *"NFP has helped me mature, though I have a long way to go. . . . It has called me to cherish my wife rather than simply desire her."* (*Faithful to Each Other Forever*, 45-46)

Finally, the unselfish nature of the one who welcomes, seen in today's readings in Abraham and in Mary and Martha is at the core of those who practice NFP. One spouse said: *"NFP made our union different, more of a total giving. . . . Because we're open to life, we're giving everything."* (*Natural Family Planning Blessed Our Marriage*, 64)

This day we pray that married couples will seek to be men and women who welcome Christ into our lives as did Abraham and Mary and Martha. We also give thanks for married couples who show this unselfish welcome in their love of spouse and openness to children.

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### **July 23<sup>rd</sup> Monday Feast of Saint Bridget of Sweden, Religious**

A Mother of eight, St. Bridget was the foundress of the Order of the Most Holy Saviour ("Bridgettines"); her feast is timely during this week celebrating Natural Family Planning. Continuing the theme of hospitality from yesterday, her life echoes the openness to children and to strangers that appeared in Sunday's readings.

In today's scriptures, the first reading from Exodus recalls the Power of God that parts the Red Sea and ensures the safety of the chosen people. In the Gospel Jesus speaks of the Sign of Jonah, who spent three days and nights in the belly of a whale. This foreshadowing of Jesus' time in the tomb recalls the gift of Christ's death and resurrection, the source of our salvation. That dying and rising in Christ we experience in our daily life. Continuing our reflection on married love and the gift of life, we pray for couples that they have the faith and courage to seek God's plan in their lives and to trust in His power to save. Those who have discovered the true gift of marriage and have come to know Natural Family Planning are often the very ones whose marriage and family has this spirit of trust and confidence in the Lord. One couple quoted in the Bishops' Statement, *Married Love and the Gift of Life*, captures this spirit: *"NFP made our union different, more of a total giving. . . . Because we're open to life, we're giving everything."* (*Natural Family Planning Blessed Our Marriage*, 64)

### **July 24th Tuesday Feast of Saint Sharbel Makhluf, Priest**

Echoes of the Easter Vigil are heard in the first reading in the response of the chosen people to the Lord's power as they sought freedom from the hands of Pharaoh: "I will sing to the Lord, for he is gloriously triumphant; horse and chariot he has cast into the sea." The theme of trust in God as the true path to freedom continues in the Gospel as Jesus calls all who do the will of His Father as His brother, sister or mother.

Seeking God's will characterizes today's saint, St. Sharbel. A celibate hermit of the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned from riches and comfort to poverty, self-sacrifice and prayer. The life of this "Hermit of Lebanon" leads married couples to envision the true nature of their commitment to each other. The recent statement of the US Bishops' *Married Love and the Gift of Life* states it well: "Marriage ... is a lifelong covenant of love between a man and a woman. It is an intimate partnership in which husbands and wives learn to give and receive love unselfishly, and then teach their children to do so as well." (p. 3)

### **July 25th Wednesday Feast of Saint James, Apostle (Anniversary of the Papal Encyclical, *Humanae vitae*)**

James the "Greater" is one of the Twelve who in the Gospels was on Mount Tabor and in the Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus at privileged moments. Today's Gospel passage from Matthew 20 has him joining in the apostles' reply to Jesus' question: "Can you drink the cup which I will drink?" Together they say out loud: "We can!" How brash is their promise and yet how powerless they are with grace to accomplish it! The second reading from St. Paul's 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians speaks of our being earthen vessels, fragile and imperfect, though possessing the treasure of God's power within.

As we continue our reflection on the gift of marriage this week, we can only recall the bold reply of the couple on their wedding day proclaiming to each other and the world: "I do!" Such promise too requires the power of the Lord at work in their fragile and imperfect lives as they live their marriage vows.

This day is the 39<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *Humanae vitae*, in which he reaffirmed the time honored teaching of the Church regarding a married couple's need to be open to new life, to children, and he opposed the use of artificial contraception. The bold and far reaching teaching and his pastoral tone are described in *Married Love and the Gift of Life* (p. 14):

In 1968, Pope Paul VI warned that the use of contraception would allow one spouse to treat the other more like an object than a person, and that in time governments would be tempted to impose laws limiting family size. Pope John Paul II called attention to the close association between contraception and abortion, noting that "the negative values inherent in the 'contraceptive mentality' ... are such that they in fact strengthen this temptation (to abortion) when an unwanted life is conceived" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 13).

Through the intercession of St. James, may married couples embrace God's grace to live their "I do" and, though imperfect and fragile earthen vessels, may they embrace Church teachings as they seek to love each other and be open to children.

### **July 26<sup>th</sup> Thursday Feast of Sts. Joachim and Anne, Parents of the Blessed Virgin**

How blessed in a week which honors married life and the gift of love is this feast of Saints Joachim and Anne. The parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Anne and Joachim serve as guides and intercessors for parents and grandparents alike. Although sacred scripture gives no detail of their lives, we know them through their child. The virtuous life of Mary is the fruit of their loving and God-centered home. How fitting today to pray for parents as they form their children in the faith.

Today's Scripture from Exodus 19 recalls the mighty event of the Lord's descent on Mt. Sinai. Through the offspring of Joachim and Anne, the summit of God's descent is achieved in the Word-made-flesh.

Jesus says in the Gospel: "Blessed are your eyes for they see and your ears for they hear." Often parents fulfill their important role in Christian formation without seeing the "finished product." By prayer, encouragement and good example, they form their children and prepare them for their vocation in life. The conclusion of "Married Life and the Gift of love" is worth quoting for it gives support to all parents who struggle to be good parents: "Recall the words of Christ, repeated so often by John Paul II: 'Be not afraid!' The Church's teaching on marital sexuality is an invitation for men and women .. an invitation to let God be God, to receive the gift of God's love and care, and to let his gift inform and transform us, so we may share that love with each other and with the world."

May Saints Anne and Joachim, patrons of grandparents, intercede for all parents and grandparents as they form their children in the way of Christ.

### **July 27<sup>th</sup> Friday of the 16<sup>th</sup> Week**

The family is fertile ground and parents, like good farmers, plant and water and nurture but it is God Who makes the growth. We continue the theme of married love and the gift of love this week with these timely scripture readings that relate to Christian formation of children by parents. First there is the Decalogue .. the ten commandments which, together with the beatitudes and precepts of the Church, comprise the third section of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on moral life. Some mistakenly see the Law as stifling but the law, with openness to God's grace, is life giving. It is fertile ground for the seed of God's Word to grow.

The Gospel tells of the abundant harvest for those good seeds that are well cared for. Parents today need such advice and encouragement. Often asked to provide love and care and discipline through times that appear to be filled with drought, parents may easily be tempted to give up. Training of children in the life of virtue is a life long task, often with little indication of success at times. However, the conviction that the Lord is guiding the process and has promised an abundant harvest is a source of great encouragement to parents.

Today we pray for parents that they may continue on the long road of fidelity to their children and we embrace that vocation, mentioned at the blessing of the father concluding each baptism: "You and your wife will be the first teachers of your child in the ways of faith. May you also be the best of teachers."

### **July 28<sup>th</sup> Saturday of the 16<sup>th</sup> Week**

Today we conclude our week long reflection on married love and the gift of life. This annual celebration of "Natural Family Planning Week" is a great spiritual occasion to pray for married couples and their families and to promote the teaching of the Church on marriage and family, so little understood today.

The readings offer two lessons for families. The first reading from Exodus recalls the old saying: "A family that prays together, stays together." This passage of Exodus describes the covenantal rite of

Israel in which the pledge to obey the Lord is ratified by a sacrifice of praise. For Catholics, Sunday Mass is that central act of prayer: the one sacrifice of Jesus, fulfilling the covenant of the Old Testament, and drawing families together. So many statistics point to the overwhelming effects that the practice of participating in Sunday Mass has on a family. Families who worship together tend to stay together, know and put into practice the teachings of the Church, and enjoy the blessings of a close family. One very positive effect of this week of prayer for families might be the renewed practice of Sunday participation at Mass as a family. Though great effort is required, the reward of participating at Mass as a family will far outweigh the sacrifice.

The second lesson flows from the first. The Gospel tells of patience: God's patience in allowing the weeds to grow alongside the wheat. The parable is one that gives hope to all of us who are imperfect and in need of conversion. It is not too late to turn back to God. So too families need patience with each other. As God is patient with them, so too they must practice that same patience.

Finally, I urge married couples and those preparing to marry to read the Bishops' Pastoral Statement, *Married Life and the Gift of Love*. Together we will uncover the richness of the Church's teachings on marriage and, with God's grace, put them into practice.

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