

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

It's time!

Say "Yes" to God's plan for married love!

National Natural Family Planning Awareness Week

July 23-29, 2017

Rev. Joel Wilson, Diocese of Trenton

SUNDAY HOMILY NOTES

Note to homilists: The text that follows is to provide you with content as you consider how you would like to integrate Church teaching on marriage, conjugal love and responsible parenthood and the methods of Natural Family Planning into your homily. This text is not meant to be proclaimed in its entirety, although you may choose to adapt as much of it into your homily as you deem best.

SUNDAY, JULY 23, 2017

SIXTEENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

Reading One: Wisdom 12:13, 16-19

"There is no god besides you who have the care of all.... Your mastery over all things makes you lenient to all."

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 86:5-6, 9-10, 15-16

"You, O LORD, are good and forgiving... Turn toward me, and have pity on me; give your strength to your servant."

Reading Two: Romans 8:26-27

"The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness... He intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will."

Gospel: Matthew 13:24-43

Three parables: the wheat and the tares; the mustard seed; the yeast.

Our lives are full of choices. Some choices are good and some problematic. Honest reflection reveals that some of our choices are grains of wheat and some are tares, or weed seeds. As the parable from the Gospel impresses upon us: early on, the two different plants look indistinguishable. Sometimes our choices too can seem neutral or inconsequential. Only later, with the benefit of hindsight and wisdom – when the field is mature – is it possible to see what was sown for good and what was sown for evil.

In 1968, when Pope Paul VI promulgated *Humanae vitae* (his encyclical on God's plan

for the transmission of human life), the modern world was under the impression that we would soon run out of the space and food to feed ourselves. Science suggested that humanity needed to curb its growth or face dire consequences. Pope Paul's message was different and he seemed out of step with the world, even with some advice he had received from inside the Church. Pope Paul warned that should humanity go down the path of accepting contraception, four dire consequences would result: 1) increased marital infidelity; 2) a general lowering of morality; 3) husbands objectifying their wives; and 4) governments enacting massive birth control programs on their people.

Now that 49 years have passed, as a society can we not see the wisdom of Pope Paul VI's predictions? Many rejections and even offenses to God's plan for married love are now epidemic: 1) After the birth control pill and no-fault divorce were introduced to American society, the divorce rate sky-rocketed, plateaued, then continued to remain high; 2) Cohabitation has emerged as an alternative to marriage with more and more men and woman rejecting marriage; 3) Sexually transmitted infections and diseases have risen to extremely high levels; 4) Pornography is a new plague especially affecting men, youth, and also a growing number of women; 5) Government leaders support forced contraception as has been seen in China's "one-child" policy; and, here in the USA, the recent HHS mandate forces religious organizations (e.g., the Little Sisters of the Poor) to pay for contraception for their employees.

It is time to reembrace our Christ-centered anthropological foundations. As a human community, it is time to honor the reality of how God made us, the blueprint of our humanity. We cannot pretend that our actions related to procreation do not have long-reaching consequences. Decisions to use contraception are not merely of a private matter to be decided between a husband and wife. That is the illusion of the evil one who sows weed seeds in the night. Rather, contraception has long-reaching implications for man and woman, the family, and for society as a whole. It is time to embrace God's plan for marriage by adopting the sound position of Natural Family Planning and rejecting contraception and sterilization.

When a family embraces the path that our good God has set for it, they are like the mustard seed and the yeast. Small almost hidden choices bear great fruit that leaven the whole loaf of the People of God, that lead to others taking rest in the shade of healthy branches.

If we have made mistaken or misinformed decisions in the past, the Lord is rich in mercy and kindness. As the Psalmist sings, "You, O LORD, are good and forgiving... Turn toward me, and have pity on me; give your strength to your servant." It is never too late to embrace the path of goodness, truth and freedom. With the Author of Wisdom, we believe that God has the care of all in his capable hands! The Holy Trinity is in charge of all things. And this "mastery over all things," enables our God to be "lenient to all." Mastery and omnipotence allow for mercy and kindness.

If we do not understand the implications of our decisions, we can take the time to learn and appreciate more deeply the teachings of the Church on the human body and God's plan for marriage. In the meanwhile, we can trust that the Holy Spirit will intercede for us. If we have open hearts, if we desire to do God's will, St. Paul assures us that the Spirit will pray on our behalf with "inexpressible groanings." The Spirit will aid us in our weakness and "intercede for the holy ones according to God's will."

When presented with the option, it is more prudent and wise to trust the teachings of the

Church, built on the deep understanding of who we are created to be, rather than simply embrace the ever-changing winds of popular cultural notions. Modern science has a lot to offer and indeed, has given men and women the modern methods of Natural Family Planning. However, when certain applications of science and technology contradict God's design (especially with regard to the value of human life, the nature of human sexuality and marriage, etc.), we must be wise and reject what is false. We must embrace God's plan for married love!

So this week, I invite you to more deeply consider that it is time to say, "Yes!" to God's plan for marriage by taking a deep look at Church teaching on married love and responsible parenthood and the methods of Natural Family Planning.

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WEEKDAY HOMILY NOTES

Monday, July 24, 2017

SIXTEENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading: Exodus 14:5-18

Responsorial Psalm: Exodus 15:1bc-2, 3-4, 5-6

R. Let us sing to the Lord; he has covered himself in glory.

Gospel: Matthew 12:38-42

In our walk of faith, God continually invites us to a deeper and more confident trust. Today, we hear the moving account of the Israelites fleeing before Pharaoh's army. The Jewish people show how much they still need to grow in faith and in confidence when they lament: "Were there no burial places in Egypt that you had to bring us out here to die in the desert?" Fearing for their lives, they fail to trust in the Lord. Moses promises, "The LORD himself will fight for you; you have only to keep still." His promise falls on deaf ears.

How much will it take for us to believe that God is God – that he is the Lord of our lives – and that he has everything in hand? When everything is going great, this is easy to believe. When events and trials surface, it can be easy to cry out like the Israelites. It can be easy to seek a sign: "Jesus, we wish to see a sign from you!" When the events of life get rough, it can be a real trial for believers to keep faith that the Lord is the Lord of Life.

In the Gospel today, Jesus points to the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba, who – despite not being part of the people of Israel – were responsive to God's word. Those outside the Chosen People showed themselves responsive to God's invitation to conversion and to wisdom.

This week is National NFP Awareness Week (July 23-29). This year's slogan is: "It's time!" Could it be time to trust more deeply in God's plan for your lives, and for you who are married – for your marriage? Shouldn't we want to stand tall in faith and trust, believing that we are not the lords of our own existence? It is our Good Lord, who having carved us in the palm of his hand, has a beautiful plan for our lives. It is a plan that requires, not the seeking of signs, but the trust of those who believe themselves to be children of God.

Tuesday, July 25, 2017

FEAST OF SAINT JAMES, APOSTLE / 49TH ANNIVERSARY OF HUMANAE VITAE

Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:7-15

Psalm: 126:1bc-2ab, 2cd-3, 4-5, 6

R. Those who sow in tears shall reap rejoicing.

Gospel: Matthew 20:20-28

In the common conception, to rule means to be in control. Jesus sets this notion aside. In its place, he intimately links two realities: leadership and sacrifice. To sit in the place of honor in the Kingdom will require great sacrifice. The chalice of suffering goes hand-in-hand with ruling, for the ruler bears not only his own concerns and burdens, but also the burdens of those for whom he is responsible. The true leader is the one who is willing to take the lowest place, the place of service – even the place of the slave.

In this National Natural Family Planning Awareness Week, I urge you to revisit Church teaching on married love and responsible parenthood. Church teaching reveals God's design for married love. In marriage, the husband makes a gift of his life to his wife. And, the wife does the same for her husband. This mutual love and sacrifice spills over into family life. When a new baby arrives, for example, mom and dad, the heads of the household, become the servants of the newest addition. Dirty diapers, night-time feedings – personal sleep and comfort handed over for the sleep and comfort of the little helpless one. New parents realize very quickly that their lives are not their own – but what joy this invitation to sacrifice brings! It builds the family!

In family life we can see that God gave every person the capacity to love just like him. Taking the example once more of new children being born in a family, it is not just the parents who give of themselves to the new baby, but the whole family joins in as well, making some adjustments. Each member realizes that there is someone needier than themselves. Welcoming new life teaches that love is giving of oneself. Love includes sacrifice. Love and sacrifice (other-centeredness) go hand-in-hand!

Wednesday, July 26, 2017

MEMORIAL OF SAINTS JOACHIM AND ANNE, PARENTS OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Reading: Exodus 16:1-5, 9-15

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 78:18-19, 23-24, 25-26, 27-28

R. The Lord gave them bread from heaven.

Gospel: Matthew 13:1-9

The sower is lavish. The sower may even be a little bit crazy! Who in their right mind would scatter precious seeds on plots of ground that had not been especially prepared for planting? But God is lavish. God is generous. He does not sparingly dole out his grace and love and mercy. The sower sows the seed everywhere, for who can predict exactly where each and every seed may take root and blossom?

How many of us have seen flowers growing from most unlikely places? Dandelions rebelling in the middle of asphalt parking lots. Orchids clinging to cracks in the wall. Even trees can seem to have been planted on boulders. Nature is beautiful. Nature is bountiful. Nature is enormously fecund. Experts say there are one-to-five thousand seeds in each square meter of topsoil. Another sign of the bounty of the Divine Sower!

We are created in God's image and likeness. As his creations, we are invited to reflect the generosity of our good God. For some this may mean signing up for a late night holy hour, for others volunteering in a soup kitchen, or committing to teach religious education. For married couples, generosity takes a particular form of being open to life, to the plans that our lavish God has in store. Perhaps the image of our generous God beckons you as husband and wife to greater generosity. In this week of awareness of Church teaching on married love and the gift of life as well as the methods of Natural Family Planning, let's consider the words of Saint Teresa of Calcutta: "How can there be too many children? That is like saying there are too many flowers." Perhaps it is time to cooperate more fully with the ways of God, who shows himself to be so generous, lavish and fruitful!

Thursday, July 27, 2017

Reading: Exodus 19:1-2, 9-11, 16-20b

Responsorial Psalm: Daniel 3:52, 53, 54, 55, 56

R. Glory and praise forever!

Gospel: Matthew 13:10-17

C. H. Dodd offered the classic definition of a parable: "[A] parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."¹ Parables are not meant to be immediately understood. We should chew on them, ruminate and probe. Parables are fodder for deeper thought. They are stepping-stones to wisdom.

Jesus uses parables today in the Gospel because he surmises that his audience has eyes but cannot see, has ears but cannot hear. Something is closed that prevents appreciation of his teaching. It could be that even their hearts are hardened. And his puzzling words are the tools of a locksmith set on regaining access to that which is closed off.

Today, we have a wealth of understanding about so much in life that often our hearts may be closed off to God's life-giving word. Human knowledge may in fact fool us into thinking that we can manipulate all of human life and still flourish. But this could not be further from the truth! As with the wisdom hidden in one of Christ's parables, the Lord God has written into the very bodies of every man and woman a blueprint of his plan—a nuptial or spousal meaning. He has given us the capacity to love, to form friendships, and, for a man and a woman, to form marriage where children can be conceived, born, and nurtured.

Within God's divine design, husband and wife are called to be stewards of their marital love and the new life that God may wish to give them. They therefore ought to oppose anything that counters the meaning and beautiful integrity of the marital act and God's call for life (e.g., contraception, sterilization, pornography, IVF, or surrogacy). This may not make immediate sense to many people because Church teaching has not been well understood in recent times. But, indeed, this is the hidden truth, the pearl of great price that God has provided. During this week of awareness about Church teaching on marriage and the methods of Natural Family Planning, make a commitment to learn more so that your eyes may see and your ears may hear!

1. Charles Harold Dodd, *The Parables of The Kingdom* (New York: Scribner, 1961), p. 5.

Friday, July 28, 2017

Reading: Exodus 20:1-17

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 19:8, 9, 10, 11

R. Glory and praise forever!

Gospel: Matthew 13:18-23

The “Ten Commandments” narrative is one of the most famous passages in all of Scripture. We memorized them as children and often they are the tool used to examine our consciences before Confession. In Confession, folks spend most of their time on numbers five to ten, or maybe three to eight. No matter. The Lord our God is most interested in the First Commandment: “I alone am the Lord your God and you shall have no other gods besides me.” No idols. No false gods. Nothing before God. This prohibition can be restated positively: “You shall love the Lord your God with all heart, all mind, all soul and all strength.” It is a great challenge to live this for even one hour.

When we dig deeper, we can acknowledge that there are many idols in our lives. Many aspects of our lives overshadow the genuine focal point of our whole life: the one true God. It could be power or wealth or passions or appearances. Often our greatest idol, upon deep examination and reflection, is our “self.”

Often, in the secret of our hearts, in hidden ways, in disordered affections, we have made ourselves into a god. This can be seen especially in the specific ways where we have disregarded God’s gifts, as for example in the use of contraception in marriage. During these last days of National NFP Awareness Week, I urge you to read Blessed Pope Paul VI’s great encyclical, *Humanae vitae* (see http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html). There you will learn about God’s gifts of life and love to men and women in marriage. Only by setting things aright and by placing God first, including his gifts, can our lives have the true and blessed order that God established for them!

Saturday, July 29, 2017

MEMORIAL OF SAINT MARTHA

Reading: Exodus 24:3-8

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 50:1b-2, 5-6, 14-15

R. Offer to God a sacrifice of praise.

Gospel: John 11:19-27 or Luke 10:38-42

Martha is such a deep woman of faith. She is often depicted as the “all-action” sister, while Mary is devoted to “all-prayer.” But how can a woman without deep faith, without a deep well – developed in prayer – state so plainly, “I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day,” and again, “I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.” These are two profound professions of faith that Martha utters.

Yet Lazarus has died. She has lost her dear brother, taken in the prime of life. What a heart-breaking loss! And in this loss, she is consoled by Jesus’ presence and the confidence she has in the resurrection. She does not say, but it is as if she says, “Oh Lord, I look forward to seeing him again!” She is confident in the future life that will never end, when her family will be reunited.

What a trial to bury a sibling! But the most gut-wrenching heartache is the task of burying your child. Walking with parents through the loss of a baby has been a humbling and

hopeful experience for me. So much pain and so many unfulfilled dreams. Whether it is a sudden accident or a protracted illness makes little difference. A life has been lost before the fullness of years. But there are pictures and memories that hold up and support the grieving parents, along with the hope of reunion. Anyone who believes in Jesus will never die, our Lord promises. Take hope. We can place our hope in him.

A more hidden longing and a more silent grief – even sometimes shame – can exist between a couple who is infertile or who has miscarried, or suffered through a series of miscarriages. Accompanying such couples has been trying and humbling in its own way. Some are afraid to speak about their loss, fearful of an unspoken stigma. There can be even less to hold on to: usually no pictures, much fewer memories. In each case, we can say with Martha, “I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day,” and “I so long to hold him!”

As a parish family, I encourage you to be on the lookout; be ready to comfort those who are grieving the loss of a family member. As we end this week focused on openness to new life through awareness of Church teaching and Natural Family Planning, I encourage you in a particular way to accompany those struggling with infertility and miscarriage. We must dispel the stigma and help to shoulder the burden with our love and support.

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