

TO HAVE TO HOLD TO HONOR

Natural Family Planning

*Supporting God's gifts of
love and life in marriage*



To have ... God has given each man and woman an abundance of gifts and marriage is one of them!

What would you think of a person who has an amazing gift, a gift that brings lasting happiness, but doesn't open it? Even more bewildering, what if the gift is in plain sight, but the person still does not open it? Sounds strange? Not really. For a variety of reasons, from distractions to presumptions, from insecurity to arrogance, from fear to foolhardiness, people can easily miss a gift. This all-to-common human inclination to not see the forest for the trees can make us laugh or cry depending upon what it is that we missed. With this in mind, let us remember that as people of faith, we don't want to miss God's gifts to us—they are, after all, from the Lord God Himself. And, they are given to us for our ultimate happiness! Let's take a look at these gifts, especially that of marriage and the family.

God, the great gift-giver, is the one who gives life to every man and woman. This life is directed to the fullness of joy and eternity since the Lord God made men and women "in His image" (see Genesis 1: 27). God's gift of life is multifaceted. The gift of life unfolds to reveal many related gifts, all willed by God, including personhood—one's identity as a precious child of God; human sexuality (created as male or female) with its fertility—the ability to co-create with the Lord of all creation; the capacity to love like God, to forgive, empathize, and form small communions of persons in families, friendships, businesses, citizenships, and so forth. Finally, as if all this were not enough, God crowns His creation with His ultimate gift of salvation through His son Jesus—"For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son so that everyone

who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Added to this abundance is God's gift of the universal vocation to holiness and union with Him. Within it, God calls each man and woman to specific vocations which, hopefully, they will discover in their life's journey. A central vocation for many (but not all), is the call to marry and form a family. Since "humanity passes by way of the family" (*Familiaris consortio*, 86), marriage and the family are important to everyone. In fact, and as St. Paul VI taught,

"Marriage ... is far from being the effect of chance or the result of the blind evolution of natural forces. It is ... the wise and provident institution of God the Creator, whose purpose was to effect in man His loving design" (*Humanae vitae*, 8).

God, as the author of marriage, willed that man and woman would be joined in such a way as to help each other to grow in holiness (the "one flesh" union that Scripture reveals) and to protect and nurture new life within their covenantal union. Pope Francis reminds us that in the center of the home, "we see the father and mother ... with their personal story of love ... embody the primordial divine plan clearly spoken of by Christ himself: 'Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female?' (Mt 19: 4)" (*Amoris laetitia*, 9). Marriage and the procreation and nurture of children speak of God's promise of love and life!

To hold ... is to understand, accept, and embrace God's gifts!

When we consider God's gifts to us, we respond in gratitude and joy. At the same time, we also have a responsibility to seek understanding, to deepen our knowledge about God's gifts so that we can accept and embrace them more fully in our lives. Over the centuries and through the guidance of

the Holy Spirit, Catholic teaching on God's gift of human sexuality, marriage, and family have done just that—they reveal God's truth. And so, we can rejoice that ...

- God created humanity as two sexes—"Male and female He made them" (Gn 1: 27)—with different but complementary gifts. This mutuality in difference is especially seen in the distinctive and unique fertility of the husband and the wife, where they must unite in the conjugal act in order to bring new life into the world. And, "That is why a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body" (Gn 2:24).
- "Marriage is the icon of God's love for us" (*Amoris laetitia*, 121). St. Paul compares the love of a husband to wife as Christ's love for His Church (see Ephesians 5: 32). Marital love, therefore, is marked by faithfulness, permanence, and openness to life (see *Humanae vitae*, 8–9).
- God made marriage for one man and one woman who freely give consent to each other for "the whole of life and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring" (Canon 1055; see also *Gaudium et spes*, 48–50; *Humanae vitae*, 8–12).
- Children are gifts from God and contribute to their parents' welfare (see *Gaudium et spes*, 50).
- God willed that the "essential properties of marriage are unity and indissolubility, which in Christian marriage obtain a special firmness by reason of the sacrament" (Canon 1056). This means that since the baptized Christian is part of Christ's body, it is the Lord who fortifies the marital bond.
- The acts in marriage by which the union of the spouses takes place "are noble and honorable; the truly human performance of these acts fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude" (*Gaudium et spes*, 49).
- God willed that the marital act is for the union of husband and wife AND procreation.

The last point above needs some reflection. It is a mistake to think that Catholic teaching means that every time a husband and wife have conjugal relations it is only for the purpose of conceiving a child. Spouses should engage in the conjugal embrace to give of themselves to each other to fortify their spousal union. At the same time, and as St. Paul VI warns,

They are not free to act as they choose in the service of transmitting life as if it were wholly up to them to decide what is the right course to follow. On the contrary, they are bound to ensure that what they do corresponds to the will of God the Creator" (*Humanae vitae*, 10).

To honor ... God's gifts we must protect them and live them following God's design!

There are many ways to honor God's gifts of marriage and family. Husband and wife honor their marriage by living faithfully with each other and doing nothing that will divide their marital union. As they make decisions about their lives, they no longer think "I" but "We." They honor their marital communion when they express to each other tenderness, compassion, generosity, and self-sacrifice. They share this life-giving love with their children, extended family, and friends.

Within the context of marriage, the methods of NFP stand as a real support. That is because they do nothing to harm God's gifts. Instead, NFP teaches spouses to understand their fertility and work with God's design. The wife learns how to observe her biological signs of fertility and she and her husband work together to understand whether God is calling them to become pregnant or not. If postponing conception, they simply refrain from the marital act during the fertile time of the wife's menstrual cycle. No drugs or devices are used. In this way, they do not reject God's gifts but rather respect and honor them.

When husband and wife accept, understand, and embrace God's gifts for married love, they honor God. They can maintain the "integrity of the powers of life and love" placed in them by the Lord (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2338). And, in doing so, husband and wife ensure the unity of their persons and marriage (*Ibid*).

Through the use of the methods of Natural Family Planning, spouses can "experience the gift of married love while respecting the laws of conception," thereby acknowledging that they are "not the master of the sources of life but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator" (*Humanae vitae*, 13). Married couples who wish to fully live God's gifts to them set their feet on solid ground where they can live their wedding promises as God intended—to have ... to hold ... to honor!

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