

“LOVE BEYOND MEASURE”
NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

Supporting God’s gifts of love and life in marriage.

National Natural Family Planning Awareness Week

July 21–27, 2024

Homily Notes

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The sacrament of marriage symbolizes Christ’s relationship with His Church. What is this relationship but one of generous, self-sacrificing, passion-filled, and fruitful love! When married couples live their vocation according to Church teachings, especially regarding the transmission of life, many benefits can be reaped. Indeed, married couples who use Natural Family Planning (NFP) report that the benefits include growth in: understanding and appreciation of their fertility; emotional maturity—especially in their spousal communication; holiness; and respect for God’s gifts for married love.

The following notes are meant to aid the priest or deacon in planning his homily during NFP Awareness Week. The homily is not the place where details of NFP methodology are provided. The homily should include the core of the Church’s teachings that support NFP use in marriage with possibly some basic NFP information added.

We ask that pastors have NFP resources available in the church vestibule during NFP Awareness Week. Please contact your diocesan Office of Marriage and Family Life Ministry or the USCCB’s NFP Program (nfp@usccb.org) for assistance. It would also be helpful to ask NFP teachers or promoters to staff information tables after Mass. Again, contact your diocesan marriage ministry or faith formation staff for assistance.

For free resources, including short articles and two-page bulletin inserts for your parish, see usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/national-nfp-awareness-week. See also usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/new-nfp-resources for a complete list of USCCB NFP resources. If you have a parish e-mail list, consider inserting NFP information with a link to the USCCB NFP page (usccb.org/nfp) and your diocese’s website (usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/directory-diocesan-marriage-family-life-directors-and-nfp). And be sure to include the NFP Week bulletin insert for your Sunday bulletin (see usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/nfp-bulletin-inserts).

NOTE: Natural Family Planning (NFP) is the umbrella title for those methods of family planning that are based on fertility education. NFP methods can be used to either attempt or postpone conception. For avoiding conception, the use of NFP requires the married couple's integration of periodic sexual abstinence into their lives. No devices or drugs are used to harm God's design for married love. NFP methods call for husband and wife to learn, understand, and apply the information in their conjugal life. NFP methods are the only methods of family planning that support the married couple's relationship and the child who may come from them. NFP methods respect God's design for married love. Read more at usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/what-natural-family-planning.

NFP WEEK—HOMILY NOTES

Love Beyond Measure

Natural Family Planning ...
supporting God's gifts of love and life in marriage

Sunday, July 21, 2024

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Year B)

God Teaches through the Church out of Love

Lectionary:107

Reading 1: Jer 23:1–6

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 23:1–3,3–4, 5, 6

Reading 2: Eph 2:13–18

Gospel: Mk 6:30–34

If you have ever been to a large sporting event or have watched one on TV, you have probably seen someone holding up a sign that reads, “John 3:16.” This Gospel passage tells us that “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.” St. John emphasizes God’s love in 1 John 4:16, “We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.” God is love, and he loves each of one of us.

Today’s readings show us some of the ways God’s love for us is expressed. In the first reading, we are assured of God’s attentiveness to us and our needs. He comforts us in our fear and trembling and gives us security. This message is reinforced in the Responsorial Psalm. The Lord is our shepherd; he watches over us, guides us, and provides us. We can trust that he will never leave us. In the Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul assures us that in the Lord we find peace—for he is our peace; through him, “we have access in one Spirit to the Father.” Finally, in the Gospel, we are told that seeing “the vast crowd,” Jesus’ “heart was moved for pity... and he began to teach them many things.” In his love, He saw the needs of their hearts and was moved to care for them by teaching them.

In today’s world, this last expression of love, that of Jesus’ teaching, is one that is often overlooked or even dismissed. We live in a culture that emphasizes self-reliance and self-determination. We are encouraged to make up our minds for ourselves. As a consequence, many people forget to turn to the Church and trust her wisdom. However, Jesus continues to look on the needs of the world with pity, seeing our need for a shepherd, and in love, he continues to teach through his body on earth, the Church. Yes, as Catholics, we believe that it is Jesus himself teaching through the Church, and we believe that he teaches out of love for us.

Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 4:6) and that he came that we might have abundant life (John 10:10). The *Catechism* tells us the in God’s perfect love, he created us to participate in his own divine life and happiness (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1). In his revelation of himself, he has provided the “answer to the questions that man asks himself about the meaning and purpose of his life” (CCC 68). It is in following him that we find true happiness.

Today is the first day of this year’s celebration of National Natural Family Planning (NFP) Awareness Week, the week in which we celebrate the anniversary of St. Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humane vitae*. The theme for this year’s reflection is *Love Beyond Measure* and provides the opportunity to reflect on the Church’s teaching regarding marriage and responsible parenthood—especially how to live married love authentically.

Venerable Fulton Sheen said, “There are not over a hundred people in the United States who hate the Catholic Church. There are millions, however, who hate what they wrongly believe to be the Catholic Church.” Today, we could say that there are millions of people who think they know the Church’s teaching on married love and responsible parenthood and disagree with it. Many set the teaching aside as unrealistic or as a burden, yet the majority have done so without having had an open mind and really studying the whys or the how’s of the teaching and what is required to practice it or the high effectiveness of modern methods of NFP.¹

God’s plan for married love and responsible parenthood is based on the Lord’s love for us and his desire for us to live abundantly. Part of living abundantly is growing in the holiness to which each of us is called. It is “precisely because the love of husband wife is a unique participation in the mystery of God Himself” that the Church “has received the special mission of guarding and protecting the lofty dignity of marriage and the most serious responsibility of the transmission of human life” (*Familiaris consortio*, 29). It is because marriage, sexuality, and fertility are so good that the Church strives to protect our understanding of them and provides guidance on how to live in a way that respects and honors their God-given meaning. Living one’s marriage relationship according to God’s plan is a means to growth in both holiness and joy.

Marriage images the relationship between Christ and the Church (see Eph 5:21–32). In *Amoris laetitia*, Pope Francis writes,

Christian marriage, as a reflection of the union between Christ and his Church, is fully realized in the union between a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in a free, faithful and exclusive love, who belong to each other until death and are open to the transmission of life and are consecrated by the sacrament. (*Amoris laetitia*, 292)

In fact, the family is called the “domestic church” (see CCC, 2204; *Familiaris consortio*, 21; and *Lumen gentium* 11) and “...in a world often alien and even hostile

1. For information on NFP effectiveness see uscgb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/what-is-nfp/effectiveness.

to faith, believing families are of primary importance as centers of living, radiant faith” (CCC, 1656).

Married couples are called to “progress towards an ever richer union with each other on all levels—of the body ... character ... heart ... intelligence and will, of the soul” (*Familiaris consortio*, 19). NFP is a means by which a couple lives “the complete and limitless reciprocal love” to which they are called; as St. Pope John Paul II, taught when we speak of NFP we are not speaking of just respect for the fertility cycle. According to him, “In a much more complete way, it entails upholding the truth of the person’s profound unity of spirit, psyche and body” (John Paul II, Message to the participants in the International Convention on “Natural Regulation of Fertility and Culture of Life,” January 28, 2004, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2004/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20040130_conv-fertility.html). NFP evidences a profound respect and love beyond measure for one’s spouse in his or her totality, body and spirit, desiring not just good, but the best, for him or her.

As God loves the Church beyond measure, as he loves each of us beyond measure, we are all called to love beyond measure. And this is true in a particular way in marriage.

In God’s providence, different NFP methods exist, so that couples can find the one best suited to their particular situation. Obtaining qualified instruction and follow-up in a particular method allows a couple to use NFP regardless of where the woman is in her reproductive life cycle. The self-discipline involved “far from being a hinderance to love one another” is a source of spiritual blessings and “fosters in husband and wife thoughtfulness and loving consideration for one another. It helps them to repeal inordinate self-love, which is the opposite of charity. It arouses in them a consciousness of their responsibilities” (*Humane vitae*, 21). In other words, NFP helps a couple grow and love beyond measure as well as effectively planning their family.

Take time this week to let the Lord teach you. Explore what he says through the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or in the U.S. bishops document *Married Love and the Gift of Life* (see uscbb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/catholic-teaching/upload/Married-Love-and-the-Gift-of-Life-English-version.pdf). Trust the Lord and let him shepherd you, guiding you in his truth to the peace and joy that only he can give.

Please add the intention below in the Sunday Prayers of the Faithful:

That husbands and wives will open their hearts to a deeper understanding of God’s plan for marriage and embrace Natural Family Planning as a means to grow in their love for one another, we pray to the Lord ...

For additional intercessory prayers see uscbb.org/resources/Generic-NFP-Week-Petitions.pdf.

DAILY READINGS, July 22–27

THE SIXTEENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

Monday, July 22, 2024 / Love in Action

Feast of Saint Mary Magdalene

Lectionary: 603

Reading 1: SGS 3:1–4B or 2 Cor 5:14–17

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 63:2, 3–4, 5–6, 8–9

Gospel: Jn 20:1–2, 11–18

Today is the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene and through her example, we are called to reflect on our love for God. In the Gospel, we see Mary’s deep love for Christ. She can’t wait to go to the tomb to care for his body, going to the tomb while it is still dark. She is crushed when Jesus’ body isn’t there. You can hear her anguish when she responds to the angels, “They have taken my Lord, and I don’t know where they laid him” and in her pleading with the one whom she thinks is the gardener, “Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him.”

Mary demonstrates the passionate love for Christ that we are each called to: love beyond measure. This love is not just an emotional feeling; it involves action. In Mary’s case, we see her desire to care for the Lord’s body. This same kind of love is illustrated in both of the options for the first reading. One option is from the Song of Songs and shows the deep desire of the bride to find the one she loves, and her love moves her to search him out. The other option is from Second Corinthians and speaks of the impact the love of Christ has in our lives as disciples: it impels us to live for him. In the response of the Responsorial Psalm, love for the Lord is expressed through very physical experience of thirst.

In these readings we see that our bodies, our physical being and experiences, matter. The *Catechism* teaches that “the believer’s body and soul already participate in the dignity of belonging to Christ. This dignity entails the demand that he should treat with respect his own body, but also the body of every other person...” (CCC, 1004). St. Paul asks, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:19–20).

We are body and soul, and in the love of a married couple, “Sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman. In marriage the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual communion” (CCC, 2360). This physical intimacy, which is meant to unite the couple in deep intimacy, is also the means through which new life comes about. It is only when “each of these essential qualities, the unitive and the procreative, is preserved, the use of marriage fully retains its sense of true mutual love” (see *Humanae vitae*, 12).

In a recent research presentation about couples who use NFP, Mike Manhart, PhD, discussed results that demonstrate higher “levels of spiritual intimacy in their marriage, even when controlling for regular Mass attendance, and in turn these higher

levels of spiritual intimacy positively predicted higher levels of relationship satisfaction.” Manhart said that “NFP can be viewed as a theology in practice and understood as a dyadic level spirituality for couples in the church” (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdZsWMw4vBg&list=FLcqG1fMoGFsWY1YawLUwTQw).

We are called to love beyond measure. For married couples, this love “involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter—appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, the unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands indissolubility and faithfulness in definitive mutual giving; and it is open to fertility” (*Familiaris consortio*, 13). NFP provides the means to plan one’s family while respecting the fullness of what married love entails.

Loving the Lord means embracing his will for our lives, not just in our ideas or prayers but in our actions as well. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn 14:15). NFP is a means for a couple not only to enhance their own intimacy and unity but also to grow in their love for Christ.

Please add the intention below in the Sunday Prayers of the Faithful:

That all people will grow in their love of Christ and desire to follow him without limits, and that Natural Family Planning will come to be seen as means to grow in holiness within marriage, we pray to the Lord ...

For additional intercessory prayers see usccb.org/resources/Generic-NFP-Week-Petitions.pdf.

Tuesday, July 23, 2024/God's Will in Everything

Lectionary: 396

Reading 1: Mi 7:14–15, 18–20

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 85:2–4, 5–6, 7–8

Gospel: Mt 12:46–50

In today's Gospel, Jesus says "Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother." This is similar to the passage where a woman called out, "'Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!' But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it'" (Luke 11:27–28). What we see here is greater than the love between mother and child—it is the love of God. Essential to loving God is the desire to do his will.

And what is God's will? We might think of prayer and following his commandments. We might think of active charity—living the corporal and spiritual acts of mercy. Another essential element of living God's will, one that can be overlooked, is that of fulfilling the duties of our state in life well. Everything in our life should reflect our relationship with the Lord. St. Pope John Paul II said, "The concept of holiness should not be thought of as something extraordinary, as something outside the bounds of normal everyday life. For God calls his people to lead holy lives within the ordinary circumstances in which they find themselves: at home, in the parish, in the workplace, at school, on the playing field" (John Paul II, To Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Scotland on their ad Limina visit, March 4, 2003, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/march/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20030304_bishops-scotland.html).

The decision about family planning is an element of everyday life where married couples have a tangible opportunity to trust the Lord and his teaching and choose to say yes to Him. Natural Family Planning is a means for a couple to grow in their love for one another and to grow in holiness. St. Pope John Paul II said that through NFP and the periodic abstinence required to avoid pregnancy a couple is led to "deepen their knowledge of each other and achieve a harmony of body, mind, and spirit which strengthens and encourages them on their journey together through life. It is marked by a constant dialogue and enriched by the tenderness and affection which constitute the heart of human sexuality" (John Paul II, Address to Participants of the Conference on "The Natural Regulation of Fertility: The Authentic Alternative" December 11, 1992, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1992/december/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19921211_fertilita.html).

Though many are fearful that the periodic sexual abstinence inherent to NFP will have a negative impact on marriage, research reinforces the Church's teaching that NFP is marriage building. In a recent research presentation, Mike Manhart, PhD, shared that analysis of the public National Survey of Family Growth demonstrates that people who have ever used NFP are significantly less likely to divorce than those who have used either contraception or sterilization (see [youtube.com/watch?v=IdZsWMw4vBg&list=FLcqG1fMoGFsWY1YawLUwTQw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdZsWMw4vBg&list=FLcqG1fMoGFsWY1YawLUwTQw)).

God gives us the grace to live that to which we are called. At times, there may be challenges in using NFP, but we know that our Lord said, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me”(Matthew 16:24).

As we strive for holiness, we experience temptation and sometimes we fall. “There is much in society that lures people away—sometimes intentionally—from the difficult yet profoundly satisfying quest for holiness” (John Paul II, Address to Participants of the Conference on “The Natural Regulation of Fertility”). The prophet Micah and the Responsorial Psalm remind us that when we fall, God is ever merciful and loving, he removes our guilt and pardons our sins, delighting in clemency. Whatever our sin, we simply need to repent and come to the sacrament of reconciliation with a contrite heart to experience the Lord’s forgiveness.

Please add the intention below in the Sunday Prayers of the Faithful:

That husbands and wives see the gifts of fertility and sexuality as means to grow in holiness and live with them according to God’s plan for married love.

For additional intercessory prayers see uscgb.org/resources/Generic-NFP-Week-Petitions.pdf.

Wednesday, July 24, 2024/God Has a Plan

Lectionary: 397

Reading 1: Jer 1:1, 4–10

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 71:1–2, 3–4a, 5–6ab, 15 and 17

Gospel: Mt 12:1–9

God had a plan for Jeremiah, and God has a plan for each one of us. Knowing what that plan is requires that we undertake an “an ever-clearer discovery” of our vocation and an “ever-greater willingness to live it so as to fulfill one’s mission” (*Christifidelis laici*, 58). St. Pope John Paul II explains, “It is not a question of simply knowing what God wants from each of us in the various situations of life. The individual must do what God wants, as we are reminded in the words that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, addressed to the servants at Cana: ‘Do whatever he tells you’ (Jn 2:5)” (*Christifidelis laici*, 58). The Gospel makes it clear that the soil of our hearts must be prepared to receive the seed of Christ’s call and bear fruit for his Kingdom. We prepare our hearts by following Mary’s direction and doing whatever he tells us.

One area where married couples need to be particularly attentive in preparing the soil of their marriage, is in their openness to life: “Sacred Scripture and the Church’s traditional practice see in large families a sign of God’s blessing and the parents’ generosity” (*CCC*, 2373). In the Order of Celebrating Matrimony, children are called the “ultimate crown” and “supreme gift” of marriage. This is in stark contrast to a commonly expressed perception of children somehow being an optional part of marriage or worse, seen as a burden.

When the Church calls married couples to exercise responsible parenthood the teaching does not mean “unlimited procreation.” The Church is not lacking in awareness of what is involved in rearing children. Rather the Church is calling for

[T]he empowerment of couples to use their inviolable liberty wisely and responsibly, taking into account social and demographic realities as well as their own situation and legitimate desires, in the light of objective moral criteria. (John Paul II, Letter to the Secretary General of the International Conference on Population and Development, March 18, 1994, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19940318_cairo-population-sadik.html)

In other words, responsible parenthood calls the couple to make a conscientious discernment regarding childbearing and that any means used to avoid pregnancy respect “objective moral criteria.” In other words, family planning is achieved through natural means.

One of the beautiful aspects of NFP is that if a couple discerns that God is calling them to try to achieve a pregnancy, they don’t just abandon a method of

contraception and hope for the best. Rather the same information that helped them avoid a pregnancy is now utilized to maximize their likelihood of achieving a pregnancy and there is a sense of awe and wonder as they come together physically. The love that brought them together in marriage overflows into love beyond measure into new life.

Admittedly, life is not always easy. There are many demands on the time and finances of couples. However, as the Lord encouraged Jeremiah to trust him, the Responsorial Psalm says to trust in God, and to be open to his plan for our lives, including the possibility of another child in married life. The readings challenge us to see the Lord as our security and to shape our lives according to his will: “Do whatever he tells you.” Live with love beyond measure.

Please add the intention below in the Sunday Prayers of the Faithful:

That husbands and wives grow in their appreciation of the gift of fertility and are ever more open to life.

For additional intercessory prayers see uscgb.org/resources/Generic-NFP-Week-Petitions.pdf.

Thursday, July 25, 2024/Discipleship in Marriage

Feast of Saint James, Apostle. Anniversary of *Humanae vitae*

Lectionary: 605

Reading 1: 2 Cor 4:7–15

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 126:1bc–2ab, 2cd–3, 4–5, 6

Gospel: Mt 20:20–28

Today we celebrate the Feast of St. James, Apostle, and in the Gospel, we hear about his mother seeking a position of honor for him. In response, Jesus makes his criteria for his followers clear: “whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave.” St. James learned the cost of discipleship and service in his life with Jesus. He eventually became a martyr.

Today we also celebrate the anniversary of the encyclical *Humanae vitae*, issued by St. Pope Paul VI in 1968. This encyclical is often referred to as the “birth control encyclical” but it is much more. While it does address the question of whether contraception or sterilization are ever morally permissible, this document is really a reflection on married love, and it includes a call to mission for married couples:

In humble obedience then to her voice, let Christian husbands and wives be mindful of their vocation to the Christian life ... the Lord has entrusted to them the task of making visible to men and women the holiness and joy of the law which united inseparably their love for one another and the cooperation they give to God's love. (*Humanae vitae*, 25)

Living married love authentically means loving beyond measure. The couple has the mission of living the spiritual reality that we hold the treasure of Christ's life within the earthen vessels of our bodies by keeping the love-giving (unitive) and life-giving (procreative) aspects of married love together. “But to experience the gift of married love while respecting the laws of conception is to acknowledge that one is not the master of the sources of life but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator” (*Humanae vitae*, 13). When we live according to God's plan, we are able to take this good news to others and help them live a deeper, richer love as well.

The experience of trials is part and parcel of the life of a disciple and a normal part of married and family life, and Christ is present in those trials: “Christ dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens ‘to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,’ and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love” (CCC, 1642).

Pope St. Paul VI acknowledged that “It is to be anticipated that perhaps not everyone will easily accept this particular teaching. There is too much clamorous outcry against the voice of the Church... But it comes as no surprise to the Church that she, no less than her divine Founder, is destined to be a ‘sign of contradiction’” (*Humanae vitae*, 18). Despite knowing that there would be resistance, the Holy Father

considered it the duty of the Church to proclaim “humbly but firmly the entire moral law, both natural and evangelical” and so contribute “to the creation of a truly human civilization“ (*Humanae vitae*, 25). Pope Francis states,

The Church’s teaching is meant to ‘help couples to experience in a complete, harmonious and conscious way their communion as husband and wife, together with their responsibility for procreating life. We need to return to the message of the encyclical *Humanae vitae* of Blessed Pope Paul VI, which highlights the need to respect the dignity of the person in morally assessing methods of regulating birth.’ (*Amoris laetitia*, 82)

Please add the intention below in the Sunday Prayers of the Faithful:

That husbands and wives trust God’s design for married love according to the consistent teaching of the Church.

For additional intercessory prayers see uscgb.org/resources/Generic-NFP-Week-Petitions.pdf

Friday, July 26, 2024/Grandparents have a Role

Memorial of Saints Joachim and Anne, Parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Lectionary: 399

Reading 1: Jer 3:14–17

Responsorial Psalm: Jer 31:10, 11–12ABCD, 13

Gospel: Mt 13:18–23

Today we celebrate the memorial of Saints Joachim and Anne, the parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Jesus' grandparents.

Pope Francis tells us,

The incarnation of the Word in a human family, in Nazareth, by its very newness changed the history of the world. We need to enter into the mystery of Jesus' birth, into that "yes" given by Mary to the message of the angel, when the Word was conceived in her womb, as well as the "yes" of Joseph, who gave a name to Jesus and watched over Mary. (*Amoris laetitia*, 65)

In reflecting on the "yes" of Mary and the "yes" of Joseph, we can appreciate the love of their parents who prepared them to respond to God's call wholeheartedly and in doing so become the parents of our Lord Jesus. Through the parenting they received, Mary and Joseph were prepared to be the ones who taught Jesus all that he needed to know as human. He grew in "wisdom and stature" (Lk 2:52) and "would even have to inquire for himself about what one in the human condition can only learn from experience" (CCC, 472).

In both today's first reading and the Responsorial Psalm, we hear about God's desire to gather his people, to guide and guard them. Isn't that what grandparents often do? They gather the family together, providing love and guidance as well as guarding it in prayer. As Pope Francis wrote, "Very often it is grandparents who ensure that the most important values are passed down to their grandchildren, and 'many people can testify that they owe their initiation into the Christian life to their grandparents.'" (*Amoris laetitia*, 192)

Even as they very often support their adult children in the demands of caring for their children and are a resource for their grandchildren, grandparents continue to be a resource to their own children. Though these children have grown up and are now adults and are parents themselves, they still need to be encouraged, particularly in regard to the living their Catholic faith fully. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to hear of married adult children who are encouraged by their parents to limit their family size—and to do something permanent so that they don't have to think about childbearing.

In his *Letter to Families (Gratissimam sane)*, St. Pope John Paul II recognizes the demands that a couple may experience in parenting, but he encourages them to see the child as a gift:

It is true that for the parents the birth of a child means more work, new financial burdens, and further inconveniences, all of which can lead to the temptation not to want another birth. In some social and cultural contexts this temptation can become very strong. Does this mean that a child is not a gift? That it comes into the world only to take and not to give? These are some of the disturbing questions which men and women today find hard to escape. A child comes to take up room, when it seems that there is less and less room in the world. But is it really true that a child brings nothing to the family and society? Is not every child a “particle” of that common good without which human communities break down and risk extinction? Could this ever really be denied? The child becomes a gift to its brothers, sisters, parents, and entire family. Its life becomes a gift for the very people who were givers of life. (*Gratissimam sane*, 11)

The Church does recognize the demands on families and that at times couples “find themselves in circumstances where at least temporarily the size of their families should not be increased” (*Gaudium et spes*, 51). In fact, *Humane vita* teaches that

With regard to physical, economic, psychological and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised by those who prudently and generously decide to have more children, and by those who, for serious reasons and with due respect to moral precepts, decide not to have additional children for either a certain or an indefinite period of time. (*Humanae vitae*, 10)

If a couple discerns the need to avoid a pregnancy, it is important that the couple recognize that “The two dimensions of conjugal union, the unitive and the procreative, cannot be artificially separated without damaging the deepest truth of the conjugal act itself.” Thus, the couple turns to NFP as the moral means to avoid pregnancy while enriching and strengthening their marriage.

It is here that the couple’s parents can provide a bulwark of faith in the face of cultural opposition to the Church’s teaching. Help your children receive the seed of God’s truth in the good soil of hearts prepared to say “yes” as both Mary and Joseph did. Help them clear away any rocks or thorns that are hindering that yes. Grandparents, know that your witness matters! Know that your prayers for your family matter.

Please add the intention below in the Sunday Prayers of the Faithful:

“May grandparents return to being a living presence in the family, in the Church and in society” and “may grandparents continue to be witnesses of unity, of values founded on fidelity and of a unique love that gives rise to faith and the joy of living,” we pray to the Lord...

(NB: The quote is taken from Benedict XVI, To participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family on the theme Grandparents: Their Witness and Presence in the Family, April 5, 2008, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080405_pc-family.html).

For additional intercessory prayers see [usccb.org/resources/Generic-NFP-Week-Petitions.pdf](https://www.usccb.org/resources/Generic-NFP-Week-Petitions.pdf).

Saturday, July 27, 2024/The Weeds of Contraception

Lectionary: 400

Reading 1: Jer 7:1–11

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 84:3, 4, 5–6a and 8a, 11

Gospel: Mk 6:30–34

Jeremiah had a challenging job! He had to call the people of Israel to repentance and not just on a few points. He asks them to thoroughly reform their ways and deeds, and we all know that it is hard to change people's minds so that they change their behaviors. What could give these people the strength to reform? Love of the Lord, seeing the beauty of the life to which God was calling them, was their motivation, as we see as in the Psalmists expression of yearning for God and the beauty of living with Him.

The Church holds a prophetic role for our times. It calls us all to look to the Lord's plan for marriage and family life. Some say that it is the Church that should change its teaching on birth control, that the prohibition on contraception and sterilization are unrealistic and outdated. St. Pope John Paul II disagreed. He affirmed:

[T]he “signs of the times” which we see today are providing new reasons for forcefully reaffirming that teaching (responsible parenthood). Saint Paul, himself so attentive to the pastoral demands of his day, clearly and firmly indicated the need to be “urgent in season and out of season” (cf. 2 Tim 4:2), and not to be daunted by the fact that “sound teaching is no longer endured” (cf. 2 Tim 4:3)... the Church will not only not abandon “sound doctrine,” but will proclaim it with renewed vigour, seeking in today's “signs of the times” the incentive and insights which can lead to a deeper understanding of her teaching. (*Gratissimam sane*, 12)

In today's world, it can be difficult to appreciate and embrace God's plan, yet a brief reflection on St. Pope Paul VI's predictions of the impact of widespread contraception should give us pause. He anticipated increased marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards, particularly among the young. He also anticipated that husbands would objectify their wives and that governments would enact coercive birth control programs (see *Humanae vitae*, 17).

This is like the situation in today's Gospel when some asked, “Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where have the weeds come from?” When couples marry, they have hopes and dreams for their marriage and families. There is a desire for love, respect, and unity. What isn't always understood is that the decisions made regarding family planning are choices about whether to plant weed or to plant wheat. Contraceptive use plants weeds in the marital relationship, while NFP plants wheat. Our world has difficulty acknowledging that something that seems to have the same purpose can have different impacts on the marriage. It has difficulty imaging that there is objective truth. Nevertheless, contraception and NFP are fundamentally

different, involving “irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality” (*Familiaris consortio*, 29). And this fundamental difference impacts husband and wife—both individually and as a couple.

While today’s gospel tells us that the weeds cannot be pulled up without uprooting the wheat, contraception can be discontinued. Couples can imitate Israel—repenting and reforming their lives to correspond to God’s truth as proclaimed by the prophetic witness of the Church just as Israel responded to the prophet Jeremiah. Change can be challenging, but good things often require effort, especially at the outset. With a good course of instruction and follow-up in one of the methods of NFP, couples are often surprised at how much sense NFP makes and how it really does enrich their marriage.

Please add the intention below in the Sunday Prayers of the Faithful:

That husbands and wives be comforted and healed by the by Holy Spirit and that they seek greater unity through greater understanding of and surrender to God’s plan for their marriage, let us pray to the Lord ...

For additional intercessory prayers see usccb.org/resources/Generic-NFP-Week-Petitions.pdf.

©2024, Janet McLaughlin. Mrs. McLaughlin has a Masters in Pastoral Studies with a concentration in Marriage and the Family. A wife, mother, and grandmother as well as a former teacher trainer of SymptoPro, a method of Natural Family Planning, she lives in the Diocese of Baker in Oregon. These NFP Week homily notes are used here with her permission. You have permission to use these homily notes for preaching during NFP Awareness Week, July 23–29, 2023. Questions? Contact nfp@usccb.org