

Love, Naturally!

Is love something natural and part of being human? Of course, it is. Many of us may not be able to find the precise words to define love, but we know what it feels like when love is missing in our lives. We also know how satisfied we feel when we have love. And, even better—we know the deep fulfillment we feel when we offer our love to others and they accept it.

The natural ability to know, give, and receive love is a gift from God. As Scripture teaches, it is rooted in our nature, being made in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:27). How often have we heard this building block of our faith but have not thought about it? This basic truth of our humanity has profound implications for all human relationships, especially for those of us who are called to the vocation of marriage.

All are called to love

God has written the capacity to give and to receive love into the hearts of every man and woman. As St. Paul says, love is the greatest gift (1 Corinthians 13:13). Love is the foundation for other important characteristics such as gratitude, thankfulness, forgiveness, mercy, and selflessness, all of which foster good relationships.

One beautiful expression of God's plan of love is that He created us with sexuality—male and female. Being made male or female is the means through which we express love and form relationships. This can take many forms as we relate to neighbors, workmates, friends, and family members. It is precisely through human sexuality that husband and wife can form their family. These small “communions of persons” mirror the inner love of God as a Trinity of three loving persons.

Human sexuality—being created a man or a woman—is woven into our very bodies. This is true despite the many wounds to their sexuality that some people may experience. Human sexuality holds the powers of both love and life. The gift of fertility is a particularly awe-inspiring attribute since it enables participation in God's creation of new life. It is vital to be good stewards of these sacred gifts.

Chastity helps us to love well

In a world wounded by sin, the virtue of chastity strengthens us to express love in ways that are holy and genuine—whether we are married, single, celibate, or vowed in religious life. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, chastity enables us to maintain “the integrity of the powers of life and love” therefore helping us to respect ourselves and the personal boundaries of other people (2338).

Marriage and parenthood

Of the various profound forms of human relationships, marriage—or more properly, Holy Matrimony—was willed by God as a blessing. If you have forgotten that, look up the second chapter of Genesis (Genesis 2:18-25) of which Jesus Himself quotes in the Gospels when defending marriage to some Pharisees (see Mt 19:1-6). God did not want the man to be alone. God made a suitable partner for him. That partner is woman. She is equal to man in being made in God's image, and she is also very different. She complements him. Together, they make the one flesh union of marriage which has the potential to give life and create a family. God intended marital love to be total, faithful, permanent, and fruitful—accepting and nurturing the powers of love and life.

The nature of marriage calls husband and wife to sacred responsibilities. Within this vocation, a husband and wife are able to celebrate human sexuality in all its fullness. Their conjugal love is “meant to express the full meaning of love,” as willed by God, “its power to bind a couple ... and its openness to new life” (USCCB, *Married Love and the Gift of Life*, 4).

Being “open” to life does not mean that married couples have to intend to get pregnant every time they have sexual relations. It means that children are not a mere footnote to marriage—they are a gift from God. It is the responsibility of the married couple to respect God’s design and to be generously open to His call to receive and nurture new life. This is true despite the fact that some couples may not be able to have their own children.

How can husband and wife properly exercise their mutual stewardship over God’s gifts of love and life? Some may wonder if married couples are expected to leave their family size entirely to chance. The Church teaches that “a couple may generously decide to have a large family, or for serious reasons” (e.g., financial, physical, psychological, etc.), choose to postpone attempting a pregnancy temporarily or indefinitely (see *Humanae vitae* 10). That is where the methods of Natural Family Planning (NFP) enter.

NFP—cooperating with God’s design for married love

In marriage, when serious reasons arise, a husband and wife may need to limit the size of their family. The ever-present temptation is to use a form of contraception to limit or avoid having children. But contraception is not the answer since it harms God’s creation and rejects His good gifts. It does this by blocking human fertility. What are the moral methods of authentic family planning that couples can use?

Authentic family planning honors God’s design by supporting the love-giving and life-giving nature of sexual intercourse. It promotes openness to new life and the value of the child. And, it helps to enrich the marital bond between husband and wife. Authentic family planning builds healthy and holy families. Only NFP methods can boast of all these characteristics!

NFP methods make use of fertility education. NFP education teaches husband and wife about their fertile time (the time of the wife’s ovulation, when an egg is released from the ovary). NFP methods can be used to either attempt a pregnancy or to avoid one. When avoiding, couples simply abstain from conjugal relations during the wife’s fertile time. No drugs, devices or surgical procedures are used. Any woman, no matter the variety in her menstrual cycle, can use an NFP method. That’s because NFP methods help the wife to recognize her unique signs of fertility which she can observe on a daily basis.

Love, naturally

Take the time to learn, reflect, and pray about God’s marvelous plan for men, women, and Holy Matrimony. Answer the call to cooperate with God’s design for married love! Let these divine gifts “inform and transform” your marriage so that you and your family may flourish!

Learn more ...

Catholic teaching on human sexuality

www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/love-and-sexuality/index.cfm

Catholic teaching on married love and the gift of life

www.usccb.org/nfp/catholic-teaching/upload/Married-Love-and-the-Gift-of-Life-English-version.pdf

Natural Family Planning

www.usccb.org/nfp/what-is-nfp/index.cfm and www.usccb.org/nfp/what-is-nfp/nfp-basic-information.cfm.

Where to learn an NFP method

www.usccb.org/nfp/find-an-nfp-class.cfm

Useful websites: www.foryourmarraige.org and www.marriageuniqueforareason.org.

Can't find what you need? Contact nfp@usccb.org.



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