

PREACHING FOR THE FAMILY

July 19-25, 2009: Natural Family Planning Awareness Week

Rev. David L. Toups, STD, Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, USCCB

A word to the preacher:

As you prepare to preach on the Word of God this week, especially in light of the context of the Church's celebration of "Natural Family Planning Awareness Week," allow yourself to be led by the Spirit of the Lord. This week provides an opportunity to deepen your own understanding of the Church's teaching on human sexuality and the wonder of marital love. It is a perfect occasion to explain to your people the riches of God's design for life and love in marriage.

Today among the People of God, there is confusion, ignorance and misinformation about Church teachings on human sexuality, chastity, marriage, conjugal love, responsible parenthood, and the moral regulation of births. Tragically, many of our people no longer remember that God entrusted men and women with the gift of procreation, that "children are the supreme gift of marriage" (GS, #50). Try to help your people by presenting the truth with love and wisdom in order to lead them to greater peace, understanding and freedom in the Lord.

National NFP Awareness Week offers a great time to commit to learn more about NFP. Please consider placing appropriate NFP materials in the church vestibule. Place the one page summary of Married Love and the Gift of Life in your parish bulletin (available at: <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/cathteach.shtml>). Your diocesan Office of Marriage and Family Life should be able to help you obtain NFP resources. The USCCB's NFP Program has free information that can be downloaded at: <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/index.shtml>. Hard copies of some brochures, such as "NFP Myths and Reality," can be purchased from the Respect Life Catalogue of the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities: <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/materials/index.shtml>.

Finally, I would like to invite all of us to sincerely pray and learn more about the Church's teaching about the moral regulation of births in marriage. Prayer opens our hearts to God's will. What appears to be foolishness in the eyes of the world is really a path to a deeper relationship of love within the Sacrament of Marriage. Let us help our married brothers and sisters embrace God's gifts of life and love!

Homily Notes:

Sunday, July 19

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

- Jeremiah 23:1-6
- Psalm 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6
- Ephesians 2:13-18
- Mark 6:30-34

Today begins the observance of "Natural Family Planning Week." The 2006 Pastoral statement of the Bishops of the United States, entitled *Married Love and the Gift of Life*, explains the gift of Natural Family Planning and its blessings. Consider using excerpts from it as you prepare your homily (see <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/MarriedLove.pdf>).

NFP is a natural means to enhance the possibility of conceiving a child as well as, with the proper intention, spacing births in marriage. It is, however, a gift largely unknown or even misunderstood by the average couple. Invite your people to learn more about NFP. Let your people know that the Good Shepherd himself has given you the privilege of shepherding this community of faith and that as a loving father and shepherd, you wish to share the fullness of the truth with them. Children are a gift from the Lord. He invites those who are married to bring life into this world. His first command after creating men and women was to be fruitful and multiply.

The prophet Jeremiah reminds us that God wants to invite us into a relationship of plenty: “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock from all the lands to which I have driven them and bring them back to their meadow; there they shall increase and multiply” (23:3). He desires our families to be fruitful, and thus he will Shepherd and care for all of our needs. He looks on us with love: “When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things” (Mk. 6:34). We often act as lost sheep. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, through the teachings of the Church, desires to lead us to the “table of plenty.”

There is much confusion as to what the Church teaches in this regard. Suffice it to say, that NFP is a path to a happier marriage, better communication, greater fidelity, and a deeper spiritual life. Does this sound like results that you might desire in your life and marriage? Trust and believe. “Christ is our peace” as we heard in the second reading, in fact, St. Paul mentions peace four times in these few verses. Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd who wants to “lead us to green pastures and give us rest.” Psalm 23 goes on to comfort our fears, “Even when I walk through a dark valley, I fear no harm for you are at my side; your rod and staff give me courage” (vs. 4).

Many people are filled with fear regarding letting God into the bedroom. He is the Author of Life and wants only good things for his children. Be not afraid. NFP protects the integrity of the gift of self in marriage. It reminds us of the awesomeness of the vocation to love, and the privilege of participating in creativity. To contracept is to withhold fertility and thus the marital act is no longer total or fruitful; it is a lie. One says with their body on the night of their wedding what was said at the altar earlier that day.

During the Rite of Marriage, every couple is asked: “Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?” As that question is answered affirmatively; let us pray that it also be affirmed in their hearts. There are many fears that sneak into our hearts, especially the seeming financial burdens and security, but in St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says:

Do not worry... If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? ... But seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides. Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. (Mt. 6:30, 33-34)

Monday, July 20

Monday, 16th Week in Ordinary Time (I)

- Exodus 14:5-18
- Responsorial: Exodus 15:1bc-2, 3-4, 5-6
- Matthew 12:38-42

Today's readings invite us into greater trust in the Lord. We heard in our first reading, "Fear not! Stand your ground, and you will see the victory the LORD will win for you today" (Ex. 14:13). Jesus desires for us to live with peace in our hearts and not fear. He will fight our battles for us; He will win the victory. There is much fear in the hearts of couples when they think of letting go and practicing Natural Family Planning. However, NFP is very effective in both achieving pregnancy or in spacing children for the needs of the family, so on a natural level it works; it is simply the way God designed the nuptial union to function within marriage. Secondly, it is right. It is the right way to live in the marital bond as it is what the Church calls us to. Fear not, be strong, the Lord will deliver from any harm.

Parents, please teach your children from a young age about the gift of human sexuality, chastity and about NFP at age appropriate moments, and witness to it in your life. Grandparents, invite your grandchildren to fall in love with the Church and trust her teachings, your witness of love and fidelity is so important. Finally, pray for conversion of hearts to be open to this gift. In today's Gospel (Mt. 12:41) Jesus speaks to those who are not open to his word: "At the judgment, the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and there is something greater than Jonah here." May all who hear the Word of the Lord be brought into a deeper conversion and relationship of trust with him and his Church.

Tuesday, July 21

Tuesday, 16th Week in Ordinary Time (I); *St. Lawrence of Brindisi, priest, doctor*

- Exodus 14:21-15:1
- Responsorial: Exodus 15:8-9, 10 and 12, 17
- Matthew 12:46-50

The Lord Jesus desires not our harm, but our salvation. Just as God delivered the Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea from their slavery, so too does he free us from the bondage of slavery and sin that the world so readily promotes. "When the water was thus divided, the Israelites marched into the midst of the sea on dry land, with the water like a wall to their right and to their left" (Ex. 14: 21-22). If there is any form of slavery to sexual sin, God desires to deliver us into freedom. The world wants us to hear that the "spirit of the world" offers more liberation than the Holy Spirit of God who parted the waters. Trust that God, and the Church he gave us, will never lead us astray with regards to faith and morals. Even when you take a step in faith not fully understanding, know that the Lord God is with you.

To be members of a household means that we follow the "rules of the house." Parents, I know that you can appreciate this! Jesus has invited us from the moment of our baptism to be members of the Household of God. In the Gospel today he reminds us that it is not enough just to say we belong, but to live as such in accordance with the will of the Father: "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mt. 12: 49-50). I invite us to pray as a daily Mass community for young families to be ever more open to the gift of life, to listen to the reasonableness of the Church's teaching against artificial contraception, and for the conversion of our

society to the Gospel of Life. Our prayers here at [name of the parish] are very powerful indeed as we unite our hearts with the Eucharistic Heart of Christ everyday on the Altar.

[Saint of the Day: Lawrence of Brindisi (1559–1619) was a Capuchin friar who studied Scripture. He was known and a brilliant scholar and a great preacher of God’s love. He was renowned as a peacemaker and a diplomat, and served as a chaplain of the army of the Holy Roman Empire. In his ministry he embodied the love he preached, and others, especially his fellow Capuchins, took note of his goodness and wisdom.]

Wednesday, July 22

Memorial of St. Mary Magdalene *(The first reading is taken from the current weekday)*

- Exodus 16:1-5, 9-15
- Psalm 78:18-19, 23-24, 25-26, 27-28
- John 20:1-2, 11-18

Every day in the *Lord’s Prayer* we petition “give us this day our daily bread.” What is this daily bread? The early fathers of the Church emphasize the Eucharist itself as the “daily bread.” The actual word in Greek is most authentically translated as “super-substantial bread.” This is certainly a deeper and more spiritual meaning than the simple provision of our daily needs, which of course, our Father desires to give to us as well. It is about the spiritual sustenance that the Lord pours out upon us at every Eucharistic celebration. How blessed we are to come so regularly throughout the week to receive the gift of Christ Himself. Our first reading foreshadows the true “Bread from Heaven” (cf. John, Chapter 6) as manna comes down upon the Israelites: “I will now rain down bread from heaven for you. Each day the people are to go out and gather their daily portion” (Ex. 16:4). We are so blessed to receive this treasure daily.

The Lord gives us the portion that we need to be sustained spiritually to get through whatever comes our way. The Mass is our highest form of prayer, praise, and petition. Jesus desires us to unite our hearts to His, that His desires may be ours. Part of our mission here today is to pray for those who are not striving to follow the Lord or His Church. The Eucharist is total communion with Christ, who loves us and gave up His life for us. The Sacrament of Marriage is the privileged sign and symbol of Christ’s love for the Church. Couples are called to image this love to the point of laying down their lives. In all of our Christian vocations we must remember that it is in losing ourselves that we save ourselves. As this is Natural Family Planning Week, let us unite our hearts with the intentions of the Sacred and Eucharistic Heart of Jesus who desires His children to follow Him in all things. As we receive our “super-substantial bread” today, may we be like Mary Magdalene who experiences the Risen Lord at the tomb and then runs to her friends to share the Good News, “I have seen the Lord” (Jn. 20:18).

[Saint of the Day: Mary Magdalene was a disciple of the Lord. She is first encountered in the gospel as the woman from whom demons had been exorcised (see Luke 8:3), but she is often erroneously identified as the woman caught in adultery. Mary Magdalene was present at Jesus’ crucifixion, and she was the first to encounter the Risen Lord at the empty tomb, which is recounted in today’s Gospel reading.]

Thursday, July 23

Thursday, 16th Week in Ordinary Time (I); St. Bridget of Sweden, religious

- Exodus 19:1-2, 9-11, 16-20b
- Responsorial: Daniel 3:52, 53, 54, 55, 56
- Matthew 13:10-17

Have you ever heard the phrase, “let’s raise the bar”? Now we are not talking about going out for a drink, but rather asking *more* of people. It is about believing in the human capacity to do better, like the person who does the high jump in the Olympics. The Church desires more for each of us in our relationship with God, and at times this might feel like we are being stretched beyond our capacity. However, as God asks us to follow Him, He gives us the complimentary grace to accomplish it. After all, as St. Paul says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). God is constantly raising the bar in order for us to lead us to greater freedom, charity, and love, just as we heard in today’s first reading: “He summoned Moses to the top of the mountain” (Ex. 19:20).

Any journey up a mountain entails sacrifice and trust. God invites couples in their marital love to trust Him and follow Him to the heights of sacrifice and trust. The Paschal Mystery that He invites us into is one that always leads to greater life. Jesus tells us “I came that they might have life, and have it to the full” (Jn. 10:10). The journey up the mountain with Christ is not one that we take alone or one that exhausts us; rather it is an exhilarating adventure. Not all understand this profound reality or have ears to hear it as Jesus says in our Gospel of the day: “This is why I speak to them in parables, because ‘they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand.’ Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says: ‘You shall indeed hear but not understand you shall indeed look but never see. Gross is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and be converted, and I heal them’” (Mt. 13:13-15). With regards to love and fertility, let us pray that Catholic couples respond to the Christian adventure of holiness; the fullness of life in Christ. May they listen to the Lord who “summons them to the top of the mountain.”

[Saint of the Day: St. Bridget led a full life that was consistently marked by love, charity, and holiness. She was the daughter of a prince and governor in Sweden, where she received a good education. She married and raised eight children. At the same time Bridget devoted herself to the care of the poor, the sick, and the needy. After the death of her husband, she gave away her possessions and moved to a monastery. She continued her service to the poor and advocated for justice in numerous writings. She eventually moved to Rome where, among other things, she founded a religious community, the Order of the Most Holy Savior (the “Bridgettines”).]

Friday, July 24

Friday, 16th Week in Ordinary Time (I); St. Sharbel Makhluf, priest

- Exodus 20:1-17
- Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11
- Matthew 13:18-23

In 1968 Pope Paul VI (*Humane Vitae*) prophesied that if artificial contraception became wide spread marital life would suffer and that there would be a general lowering of morality throughout society. Looking back forty years, we can see that what was seen by many to be reactionary proved to be visionary. That is truly the way it is with all of God’s commandments as we heard proclaimed in the first

reading from the twentieth chapter of Exodus. The commands of the Lord lead to life, not death, greater freedom, not imprisonment. So much of what a “contraceptive mentality” has fostered goes directly against the Ten Commandments: adultery, murder through abortion, coveting, and lust. Our prayer today is that members of the Church sing out with us the words of the responsorial psalm “Lord, you have the words of everlasting life!”

God invites each of us to sow seeds of life and truth wherever we go. May these seeds fall upon rich soil as we share with friends and family that mutual self-giving in marriage is “free, total, faithful and fruitful.” “But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold” (Mt. 13:23). The path of life *is* through fidelity. Let us bear eloquent witness to the Gospel of Life by our words of counsel and loving encouragement to young people in our lives. As today is Friday, the day we commemorate our Lord’s passion and death in a particular way, it is good to remember that the Cross and difficulties we encounter always lead to life. The Christian’s path is not always the easiest, but it is the most beautiful and fruitful. I would like to close with the words of Pope Paul VI from *Humanae vitae*:

We do not at all intend to hide the sometimes serious difficulties inherent in the life of Christian married persons; for them as for everyone else, “the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life.” But the hope of that life must illuminate their way, as with courage they strive to live with wisdom, justice, and piety in this present time, knowing that the figure of this world passes away (HV, #25 §3).

[*Saint of the Day: A celibate hermit of the 19th century, Joseph Zaroun turned from riches and comfort to poverty and prayer. He took the name Sharbel when he entered a Maronite Catholic monastery. The life of this “Hermit of Lebanon” is a witness to charity and devotion. St. Sharbel taught the value of poverty by his example of simplicity and devoted prayer.*]

Saturday, July 25

Feast of Saint James, Apostle

41st Anniversary of the Papal Encyclical, *Humanae vitae*

- 2 Corinthians 4:7-15
- Psalm 126:1bc-2ab, 2cd-3, 4-5, 6
- Matthew 20:20-28

As we listen to the first reading today, it is striking that St. Paul notes that “the life of Christ is made manifest in our body” and again he emphasizes this manifestation in our “mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:10-11). What a profound reality that Christ wants to become present through us, and not just our words and personalities, but through our flesh. Nowhere is this more clearly spelled out than in the “Theology of the Body” as enunciated by Pope John Paul II. He taught that it is in the self-gift/self-sacrifice of one spouse to the other, that Christ bears abundant fruit. This is what the conjugal life of the Christian couple is meant to be – totally life-giving. This life-giving nature is not a mere matter of offspring, though children are a big part of it, but also life-giving for the couple as they completely unite themselves in Christ. Experience shows that couples who practice Natural Family Planning have an extremely low rate of divorce and find greater joy in their marriage and in their relationship with the Lord.

NFP entails sacrifice, again “selfless loving,” but isn’t that precisely the message of Christ? “There is no greater love, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn. 15:13). If two spouses stay focused on the needs of the other, physically and spiritually, this is the path to genuine happiness in

marriage. Jesus says in today's Gospel: "whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve" (Mt. 20:26-28). Christian marriage calls for such love and sacrifice, which always leads to greater life.

[Saint of the Day: James and his brother, John, the sons of Zebedee, were fishermen who were called by the Lord to follow him as his apostles. Along with Simon Peter, they were often identified as being with Jesus at several significant moments in his ministry: they were present at the Transfiguration and they accompanied Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane after the Last Supper. Tradition holds that St. James was the first of the apostles to witness to Christ in martyrdom, having been beheaded in 44 AD by order of Herod Agrippa I.]

Rev. David L. Toups, STD, a priest of the Diocese of St. Petersburg, serves as Associate Director of the Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.