

MARRIAGE

one flesh, given and received

Natural Family Planning

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



One of the most joyous occasions in life is the celebration of a wedding. A man and woman come together to join their lives together so that “they are no longer two but one flesh” (see Matthew 19:11). Religious or not, Catholic or not, most people understand marriage as

a lifelong commitment in which husband and wife are faithful to one another. Most people also take for granted that marriage is based on love—not just any love, but the kind of love where a person will sacrifice for the beloved. As Catholics, it is important to remember that Jesus sanctified marriage and elevated it to represent His love for the Church—marriage “in the Lord” mirrors the very love of our Lord. Let’s reflect on this mystery of a love that will sacrifice for the beloved.

Spousal Love

Where did this idea come from? Some might argue that it is a natural human understanding. That is partially true because we all know that the experience of loving another person is part of the fabric of human life. Our Christian faith tells us more however. We know through the eyes of faith that God, who is love, created us for love and to love!

While love is experienced throughout life in family relationships and with friends, married love is unique. Created in God’s image, husband and wife become “one flesh” (see Genesis 2: 24) and are called to live a love that is faithful, selfless, generous, and everlasting. God established marriage as an original blessing, not only to

spouses but also to the world. Through it, God builds up families and society.

Despite the first sin and its harm to God’s original plan for man and woman, especially as He willed for marriage, marriage still reflects God’s love in the world. This is true regardless of the individual religious faith of each spouse. However, in Christian marriage—the marriage of a baptized Christian man to a baptized Christian woman—God exalts Christian marriage beyond the dignity and value of natural marriage and gives spouses the privilege of reflecting Christ’s love for his bride, the Church (see Ephesians 5: 31–32). They witness to something that many do not believe is possible: free, total, faithful, permanent, fruitful love. This is the love our hearts long for. This is the love husband and wife are called to in marriage. It is a love made real in Christ precisely because He is both present with husband and wife in the sacramental reality of the marriage and because marriage reflects His spousal love for His Church.

Marriage is a Gospel

In God’s original plan for men and women, the mutual love of spouses “becomes an image of the absolute unending love with which God loves man” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1604)—this is good news! Despite humanity’s fall from grace and the ensuing brokenness, the Lord God continued to invite His children to accept His design for marriage which reveals the love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Pope Benedict XVI taught this truth when he wrote:

[M]atrimony is a Gospel in itself, a ‘Good News’ for the world of today, especially the dechristianized world. The union of a man and a woman, their becoming ‘one flesh’ in charity, in fruitful and indissoluble love, is a sign that speaks of God with ...force and an eloquence... Marriage, as a union of faithful and indissoluble love, is based upon the grace that comes from the triune God, who in Christ loved us with a faithful love, even to the Cross.

(Homily of Pope Benedict XVI, October 7, 2012, St. Peter’s Square)

The love of Christ is expressed in His Passion, in His total gift of self on the Cross. The Eucharist is the memorial of what Christ has done for us, “the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice, in the liturgy of the Church which is his Body” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1362). In this great sacrament of love, the Lord, entrusted “to His Beloved Spouse, the Church...a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1323). Christ freely offers Himself in a self-gift of total, permanent, faithful, and fruitful love for the Church and for each individual in the Eucharist.

Eucharistic Communion and Marital Communion

In receiving the Lord in Holy Communion, we enter into an intimate union with Christ. As Jesus said, “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (Jn 6:56). Pope Benedict also reminded us that

There is nothing authentically human—our thoughts and affections, our words and deeds—that does not find in the sacrament of the Eucharist the form it needs to be lived to the full...to permeate every aspect of our existence.

(Sacramentum Caritatis, 71)

In other words, we are called to respond to the Lord’s gift of Himself with an open heart. And in receiving His gifts, likewise, respond with our own gifts: striving to receive Him with love, thanksgiving, and surrender; relying on the strength He provides to persevere in and deepen our relationship with Him; and to give our neighbor the love that He gives us. This is the Christian life.

In the deep intimacy of the marital act, the one-flesh union of spouses, we can find humble parallels to the above mystery. The marital embrace is “meant to express the full meaning of love, its power to bind a couple together and its openness to new life” (*Married Love and the Gift of Life*, p. 2). Husband and wife are called to be ministers “of the design established by the Creator” (*Humanae Vitae*, 13), embracing the “inseparable connection, established by God” between the love and life-giving aspect of the marital act (*Humanae Vitae*, 12). In doing so, spouses allow the Eucharistic Christ to permeate this most intimate aspect of their lives through understanding, appreciating, and cooperating with the Creator in their shared fertility.

Responsible Parenthood and Natural Family Planning

God invites married couples to be stewards of their fertility through “responsible parenthood.” If a couple discerns that, for just reasons, they should avoid a pregnancy, rather than turning to contraception or sterilization, they can turn to Natural Family Planning.

Natural Family Planning (NFP) methods are based on the biological fact that while men are fertile all the time, women are fertile during only part of their cycle. NFP methods teach couples how to accurately identify a woman’s fertility by learning how to observe, chart, and interpret the signs of fertility. With this knowledge, the couple freely chooses whether or not to engage in sexual intercourse based upon their family planning intention. If they want to avoid pregnancy they abstain; if they desire to achieve pregnancy, they come together.

These methods can be used effectively to manage fertility regardless of the woman’s cycling pattern or stage of life (such as postpartum, pre-menopause or with irregular cycles). There is no need to use contraceptives or sterilization to plan one’s family.

Blessed, Strengthened, Consecrated

Though periodic sexual abstinence can be challenging at times, this challenge is itself a blessing. St. Paul VI wrote, “far from being a hindrance to their love of one another,” this self-discipline “transforms it by giving it a more truly human character” (*Humanae Vitae*, 21) and the lived experience of many couples testifies to the truth of this statement. They find not only that in this sacrifice their love, mutual respect, appreciation, and trust is enhanced but also that their relationship with the Lord is strengthened as well.

And husband and wife are not left alone in the challenge. Through the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony, they are given the grace to live out all that God asks of them and are “strengthened and... consecrated for the duties and the dignity of their state” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1638; cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1134). The Lord is with them: “Then let them implore the help of God with unremitting prayer and, most of all, let them draw grace and charity from that unfailing fount which is the Eucharist” (*Humanae Vitae*, 25).

Learn More

Catholic teaching on love and human sexuality

usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/love-and-sexuality

Catholic teaching on married love and the gift of life

usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/catholic-teaching/upload/Married-Love-and-the-Gift-of-Life-English-version.pdf

Natural Family Planning

usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/what-natural-family-planning

Where to learn an NFP method

usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/find-nfp-class

Useful marriage-focused websites

foryourmarriage.org; marriageuniqueforareason.org

Cannot find what you need? Contact nfp@usccb.org.

©2023, Janet McLaughlin. Mrs. McLaughlin has a Masters of 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. This article is used here with her permission. You can reproduce this article for educational purposes. Please include the text “Used with permission, ©2023, Janet McLaughlin. All rights reserved.”

