LOVE, SEX, AND STERILIZATION

One afternoon early in my mothering days, I found myself at the end of the preschool pickup line making small talk with another mom. One toddler orbited her feet while she switched a baby seat from arm to arm.

"So," she gestured to my newborn daughter cradled in a car seat, "you guys done now?"

I blinked in surprise and smiled nervously, "Um..."

She rushed, "We're definitely done. This is our last. I'm making sure."

At that moment, the door swung open, a small stampede of tiny humans and Popsicle stick art issued forth, and the moment passed in a sea of sticky hands and shouting voices. We collected our 3-year-olds and trudged to our minivans, never again to exchange more than a handful of pleasantries.

I don't know whether she ended up getting her tubes tied, or if she scheduled her husband's vasectomy, but that's because I never found the courage to continue the conversation.

And I feel that I failed her.

"Let's fix this."

I wish I'd been quicker on my feet that afternoon. I wish I had looked her sincerely in the eyes and admitted how very hard it is to have small children. I wish I would have confided that I knew just how she felt, that it was perfectly understandable to be overwhelmed and fearful of the future. Most of all, I wish I'd acknowledged how tempting it can be to make life-altering decisions in difficult times.

Couples sometimes find themselves considering permanent sterilization after bringing home a new baby. It's a time of dramatic change, mind-numbing exhaustion and, yes, also joy. The temptation is understandable. Many new parents want to grasp control of a seemingly chaotic situation and say, "Never again, this is simply too much." Sterilization is seen as the safe way out, the proverbial "fix" to the problem of fertility.

But what if fertility isn't a problem in the first place? What if our capacity to conceive and bring forth new life from our marriages isn't some kind of cosmic liability, but a very real participation in the creative work of God himself?

That's how the Catholic Church sees human love. That's her view of marriage: the awe-inspiring, life-altering power to share in God's own creative capacity.

Good? Yes, very. Safe and predictable? No, not always.

But Jesus calls us to something beyond safe and predictable, and he has been issuing that same call for over 2,000 years.

Setting the Record Straight

There seems to be some confusion about the Church's millennia-old teaching on openness to life within marriage. Married couples are called to embrace the great dignity of their married mission, to assist one another on the path to heaven, and to welcome their God-given children generously.

This does not mean "Have as many kids as physically possible," nor does the Church fail to take into account the real hardships of life in the modern world. Indeed, the process of prudentially and prayerfully determining whether to seek, postpone, or avoid pregnancy at a given time lies with each married couple.

What we shouldn't do is separate the life-giving aspect of sex from the love-making aspect. That's not how God designed us; we are made to give of ourselves completely through sex with our spouse, and holding back our fertility is holding back a part of our being. When we reject God's design for us, we not only reject his plan—which is always for our ultimate happiness with him—we reject God himself, who loves us more than we can possibly fathom.

"Is God trustworthy?"

For many of us, the idea of being open to children can be a scary prospect. Even though the Church's teaching on sterilization is clear and unchanging, many couples struggle to live it out in their marriages, or even turn away from it deliberately.

The temptation to ignore the Church's teachings is as old as the book of Genesis, and is the same as Adam and Eve's temptation and then fall: *Lord, we don't trust you.*

Not with something this big. Not with life itself. What if fertility really is a curse and not a blessing? What if this is more than we can handle?

If God has called us to marriage, he has also called us to be open to life. It will look different for every couple, but the call is identical: total, faithful, and fruitful love. By its very nature, married love is open to the possibility of children, whether or not God decides to send them.

Made for More

The sexual act is meant to renew the marital covenant, repeating over and over again, "I give myself to you entirely, unreservedly, holding nothing back." Sterilization and contraception sever the procreative from the unitive aspect of sex, thereby rejecting one of the three characteristics of married love— fruitfulness. This means every time a couple comes together, either using contraception or having been sterilized, their bodies are speaking a kind of half-truth to each other, unable to give full expression to the love they have for each other.

Being open to life doesn't mean we are necessarily trying to conceive a new life, but it does mean we should not interfere with any sexual act's openness to the *possibility* of new life.

This is where Natural Family Planning comes into play. It is 100% safe and natural, completely in line with human nature and the teachings of the Church, and recognizes that the normal, healthy way our bodies work is not a problem to be fixed. NFP can be up to 99% effective at postponing or avoiding pregnancy, and there are numerous scientifically-rigorous resources available, even from secular sources, as more women demand safe, authentically humane methods for naturally and healthily spacing their children.

Yes, NFP can be difficult to practice, especially as a couple is first learning. However, married love isn't separated from the Cross, nor is any other vocation. In fact, it is through self-sacrificial love that our marriages are strengthened and we become closer to our spouses and to God. Practicing NFP can also strengthen a marriage for many other reasons—one of which is that it offers opportunities for couple communication, which can lead to deeper marital love.

"Can we do this?"

To be invited to participate as co-creators with the Creator himself is a fearfully awesome thing. There are hard times of real struggle over the fear of the unknown, the desire to grasp control, and oftentimes the temptation to mitigate risk with a little snip here, a little cut there.

But the benefits of respecting our bodies as they are, and of following Christ's call to imitate him in completely self-giving love, far outweigh the risks. If there is one thing I've learned in the Christian life, it's this: If we ask him, Jesus will be with us every step of the way, giving us the grace we need. And his plans are wildly more fulfilling than we can imagine. So the next time we're asked "Are you done?" we can say, "We don't know yet. God's not finished working with us."

My husband and I have our fourth baby on the way, and I've never been more at peace with God's plans for our life. I couldn't have said that two kids ago, and the newly-married me would have been terrified at the prospect of four kids.

But as each baby has arrived, so has the grace and the generosity necessary to make room, both in our hearts and in our home. Our God is faithful, and his plans for us are good.

The author writes and speaks on the Catholic Church's teachings on sex, marriage, and Theology of the Body. She and her husband are raising their young family of four.

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