

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

LOVE, MERCY, LIFE

Opening the Heart of Marriage

National Natural Family Planning Awareness Week

July 24-30, 2016

Rev. Samuel A. Martin, STL, Diocese of La Crosse

SUNDAY HOMILY NOTES

Note to homilists: The text that follows is to provide you with content as you consider how you would like to integrate Church teaching on marriage, conjugal love and responsible parenthood and the methods of Natural Family Planning into your homily. This text is not meant to be proclaimed in its entirety, although you may choose to do so.

Sunday July 24, 2016

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading: Genesis 18: 20-32

Responsorial Psalm: 138: 1-2, 2-3, 6-7, 7-8

R. Lord, on the day I called for help, you answered me.

Second Reading: Colossians 2:12-14

Gospel: Luke 11:1-13 (111)

In today's day and age, longevity is generally considered a blessing. When referring to our future as senior citizens, we often repeat phrases such as, "the golden years." Although this can give us a sense of comfort, unfortunately, like many things in life, "old age" can actually become a mixture of blessings and crosses.

When aging gracefully, a person can experience some of the happiest years of life: freedom from the stress of work and unforgiving schedules; lots of time to spend with family and friends; and slowing down to "smell the roses." For others, however, the golden years can be a time of: non-stop cycles of sickness, slow recovery, relapse; the uncomfortable feeling of uselessness; and being a burden to our loved ones. Take, for example dementia. As the average life expectancy increases, more people we know or love live with dementia. This can be very difficult for both patient and loved ones. Thankfully, there may be days that include little hints of mental struggle. Other days sadly may not be as good since they may be filled with irrational words and behavior. For those of us who spend time with people who are so afflicted, we may

have to cut short a visit on a bad day, only to return another day when the time may be better for the patient. I say all this to point out how “timing is everything.”

Have you ever experienced what people often call a “perfect storm?” It’s when all of the circumstances conspire to make things come together in the worst way imaginable. Something like this happened in 1968 to Blessed Pope Paul VI when he issued the papal encyclical (letter) *Humanae vitae*. If you have heard of the encyclical, chances are what you’ve heard is not good. That could not be farther from the truth!

Humanae vitae is the modern papal encyclical that reaffirms Church teaching on married love, responsible parenthood, the good of children, and the moral prohibition of contraception. To put it mildly, that document landed like a lead balloon and was never really given a chance to be properly understood by the faithful (and some clergy too!).¹ Church teaching, however articulates God’s truth. And, the truth will prevail! It would not be until Pope St. John Paul II presented Church teaching in what is now called the “Theology of the Body,” that the faithful would be open to learning about the meaning of human sexuality, the nature of marriage, and the ethical regulation of fertility in marriage. Pope St. John Paul II correctly read the times and knew that what the Catholic Church teaches about human sexuality is good news for all people! This week we celebrate Natural Family Planning Awareness and providentially today’s readings show us a God whose timing is impeccable and whose pedagogy is remarkably patient and effective. Understanding a bit more about God’s providence and patience will help us to more deeply embrace what he teaches about marriage and the family.

God’s patience is certainly put to the test by Abraham in the today’s first reading. Any of us who have been pestered by another’s incessant questioning knows that we quickly reach a limit. Abraham even goes so far as to imply that God would be unjust if he were to “sweep away the innocent with the guilty.” We’ll come back to God’s patience in just a moment. First, let’s consider a couple dimensions of this story. At first glance we might conclude that God is very permissive—as long as we have good people around we can do whatever we want. But the truth is that neither Abraham nor God ever gloss over the fact that some are innocent and others are guilty. If anything, the dialogue is reminiscent of a line from Pope Pius XII in his encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*:

¹ Apropos of the idea that timing is crucial to how something is received, preaching on the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah might not be prudent at this time. Given the level of irrational discourse surrounding so-called “same-sex marriage” one must conclude that fruitful discourse is not likely for the time being. In imitation of Jesus, who generally refrained from provoking people, we do our duty to “hold the line,” which is to say we state clearly, patiently, and charitably that marriage is between a man, a woman, and God. Beyond that, we pray and wait for the day when we can once again be more assertive in sharing the good news of conjugal love and marriage with people who are both able and willing to listen.

This is a deep mystery, and an inexhaustible subject of meditation, that the salvation of many depends on the prayers and voluntary penances which the members of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ offer for this intention and on the cooperation of pastors of souls and of the faithful, especially of fathers and mothers of families, a cooperation which they must offer to our Divine Savior as though they were His associates (*Mystici Corporis Christi*, no. 44).

In other words, the salvation of many depends upon the goodness of a few! God's providence is such that goodness, even when vastly outnumbered by evil, is greater and will always win out in the end. In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah God neither condones their sinful actions nor does He give up on the good that is still in their midst. In fact, God believes that good people, though they are so few, will be enough to spare the punishment deserved by the many people who are evil. On some level we might believe that too, except that our experiences so often belie this. Examples from the 20th century alone challenge the thesis that good always prevails over evil; depravities such as the Holocaust, eugenics, and rampant terrorism call into question how God can permit such horrors and still expect us to trust Him, to believe in Him. When Pope Benedict XVI was elected he meditated on this point:

We suffer on account of God's patience. And yet, we need his patience. God, who became a lamb, tells us that the world is saved by the Crucified One, not by those who crucified him. The world is redeemed by the patience of God. It is destroyed by the impatience of man (Benedict XVI, Homily, Mass of the Imposition of the Pallium and Conferral of the Fisherman's Ring for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome, April 24, 2005).

God shows His forbearance to Abraham by sparing the people. All these centuries later we know now that this prefigures how God would definitively save His people from a punishment that was all but inevitable. What we really wanted was "A God without wrath (who) brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross..." (H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, NY: Harper & Row, 1959, p. 193). As St. Paul points out in the second reading, what we got instead was a God who was willing to die so as to nail our sins to the cross.

Some time ago I came across a nugget that convincingly explains how Jesus was the one whose perfect goodness obliterated the guilt of us all:

"It is finished," (Jn. 19:30). Those three English words are, in the original Greek of the Gospels, just one word: *tetélestai*. Scholars got more insight into the meaning of the expression a few years ago after some archaeologists dug up in the Holy Land a tax collector's office that was almost intact, with all the tax records and everything. There were two stacks of tax records and one of them has the word 'tetélestai' on the top. In other words, 'paid in full.' These people don't owe anything anymore. So when Jesus said, "it is finished," what is finished? It

is the debt we owe God by our sins. It has been paid in full (Rev. Munachi Ezegu, CSSP, **Homily for Good Friday** at: <https://justmehomely.wordpress.com/2012/03/31/good-friday-of-the-lords-passion-year-b-2>).

As in the story of Abraham and the rampant sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, God does not turn a blind eye to evil. Rather, he continually shows us the path to true love, mercy, and life. In the Gospel Jesus goes to great length to prove His Father's goodness—how he would never give us a snake when we ask for a fish. Of all the things Jesus taught, perhaps one of the most recurrent is that His Father is perfectly trustworthy. And while it is relatively easy to say “In God we trust,” it's generally very difficult for us to live this claim. God knows this better than we do, so he waits until the time is right. When teaching about the Eucharist, Jesus knows many will leave Him—he gives his Apostles permission to do the same. He does this to make it perfectly clear that he wants us to come to him freely. Over the centuries, the Church, as Christ's bride, has striven to do the same. As Pope St. John Paul II once put it, “the Church proposes; she imposes nothing.” (Pope St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 1990, no. 39). And so we come full circle to the patience of God, and we see how he waits until we're ready to receive. Years ago Pope Paul VI proclaimed the beauty of conjugal love by speaking of its innate freedom, fidelity, and openness to life. What was rejected then is more palatable these days as many of our young people study and live the Theology of the Body. And, while the Gospel extols the value of human persistence, when it comes to imparting the truth no one comes close to God with regard to determination.

From 1979 until 1984 St. John Paul II spent the majority of his Wednesday audiences explaining God's plan for love and marriage. Fundamentally the Pope taught that no person should ever be used or manipulated—sadly, this happens much more frequently when the human heart is opened to a contraceptive mentality. The Holy Father cited the Second Vatican Council document, *Gaudium et spes* by reminding us that we can only discover who we really are through a sincere gift of ourselves (see GS, no. 24). As made clear in *Humanae vitae*, such a sincere gift must be freely given, it must be a total gift of self that proves itself by fidelity and a fruitfulness so tangible that we even have to give it a name (see HV, nos. 9, 10). These days countless couples are striving to live God's plan for marriage and the results are obvious: more noise in church and even more chaos once Mass is done, but a lot more happiness and a brighter future too!

Now that Pope Francis has rightly intuited that many are understandably concerned with nature and the many manipulations thereof, it's no wonder that our young people find Natural Family Planning to be attractive: no chemicals, no unhealthy manipulation of the body, no permanent negative side effects. Because Blessed Pope Paul VI prophetically predicted many of the results of the contraceptive movement, many today are more suspicious of claims that we can wantonly make our body serve our boundless desire for pleasure. And while old habits die hard (and some have compared contraception to other sundry addictions), the truth of God's plan for conjugal love is proving to be more resilient and attractive than was thought two generations ago.

In conclusion, if the salvation of many still depends on the holiness of a few, we can be certain that the Holy Spirit is speaking to the hearts of many in the Church and inviting us to open our hearts to God. While there are many benefits of Natural Family Planning, possibly its greatest attribute is that it demands sacrifice and communication. So does true love. The time is right not only to hear this good news, but also by the grace God gives us in the Sacraments, to live it more fully and courageously. The late Father John Harvey put this well when he wrote:

Everyone needs love—and tragically, many may find little or no true love in this life. This is because there are many counterfeits of love. Some are simply insincere, like manipulations or narcissistic projection, which is self-love looking like love for someone else. Other counterfeits are more sincere and honest enough, but they are not true love. They may be sympathy or indulgence or even affection built on mutual concern and attraction, but they fall short of being true love. For as St. Paul reminds us, love never fails (1 Cor. 13:13). Love seeks not its own but rather bears all things, endures all things, hopes all things (*The Homosexual Person*, Ignatius Press, 1987, p. 11).

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WEEKDAY HOMILY NOTES

Monday July 25, 2016

SEVENTEENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

Feast of Saint James, Apostle (Lectionary: 605)

First Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:7-15

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 126:1BC-2AB, 2CD-3, 4-5, 6

R. Those who sow in tears shall reap rejoicing.

Gospel: Matthew 20:20-28

Mickey Mantle once famously said, "If I'd known I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself." Little do we know the significance of things as they're taking place; generally it's when we look back that we realize the full import of what we experienced.

The Gospel scene is one fraught with meaning. At the time, the meaning would have been wasted on James and John. They could not know what they were agreeing to when they declared, "We can," to Jesus' question of whether they could drink from the chalice that he would drink. So it is with us. Some days we may be tempted to look back and wonder about the choices we've made with regard to our life's vocation: Did we hastily answer 'yes' to marry or enter religious life? How could we have known how many challenges we would face? At the same time, we can thank God for our vocations because a vocation is God's call to each person to live love in the best way that leads to Heaven. God was the one who gave us the gifts to answer our vocational calls. He knows how best to guide us; after all, he shares everything with us! St. Paul alludes to this in the first reading when he writes, "We hold this treasure in earthen vessels."

God is lavishly generous with his children. This is evidenced by the things he shares. For example, the power to create a new life is properly a divine power, and yet for those who are parents, God allows them to share in his procreative power. Similarly, for priests the ability to forgive sins is truly the Lord's power. Due to God's generosity, we can confess our sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and experience true forgiveness. God has given us so much!

The Church teaches us how to praise and honor God by using our God-given gifts according to his inscrutable design. This week we remember that Natural Family Planning opens marriage to God's will. When husband and wife accept God's will, their marriage becomes a blessing for both the couple and the entire community.

Petition

On the anniversary of *Humanae vitae* we beg for conversion of heart so that we may refrain from contraception, sterilization, and abortion.

Tuesday July 26, 2016

SEVENTEENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

Memorial of Saints Joachim and Anne, Parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Lectionary: 402)

First Reading: Jeremiah 14:17-22

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 79:8, 9, 11, 13

R. For the glory of your name, O Lord, deliver us.

Gospel: Matthew 13:36-43

“Before I was afflicted I strayed.” (Ps 119:67) For many of us, this line from Psalm 119 describes, in part, the spiritual journey. Many of us only turn to God when all other options have been taken away. But for the grace of God, some of us would still be the weeds Jesus refers to in the parable in today's Gospel. Thankfully, God's grace changes everything! It was Blessed Cardinal Newman who observed that, “To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.” (See, Newman, *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, Chapter 1, Section 1, no. 7; available at: <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/development.>) As we celebrate the feast day of Saints Anne and Joachim, the parents of the Blessed Mother and grandparents of Jesus, we're reminded of one of the greatest catalysts of change at our disposal: intercessory prayer.

When asked about the most spiritually influential person in their life, many young people may point to their Grandmothers or Grandfathers. Statements like, “Grandma prays the Rosary every day,” or “Grandpa never misses daily Mass,” remind us of how spiritually potent our elders become as they grow closer to God. The World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia had a picture commissioned of the Holy Family and it uniquely included both of today's saints in the background. Family life is enriched when we recognize how it is passed on generation after generation—and it's often our Grandparents whose deep faith in God makes them “the righteous” who “will shine like the sun.”

Today we praise God who permits the “weeds” of evil to grow only so that our hearts may be opened to the grace he gives to those who trust in him. May our focus this week on Natural Family Planning open our hearts to God's gift of married love, mercy, and human life. May this deepen the bonds between God and the human family!

Petition

That the Holy Spirit may comfort married couples who are wounded and deepen the unity we experience in family life.

Wednesday July 27, 2016

SEVENTEENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME
(Lectionary: 403)

First Reading: Jeremiah 15:10, 16-21

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 59:2-3, 4, 10-11, 17, 18

R. God is my refuge on the day of distress.

Gospel: Matthew 13:44-46

If you've ever seen a hidden 3D image (what is called a "magic eye stereogram"), it quickly becomes clear that there is truly more than first meets the eye. When viewing such an image, I initially could not see the hidden images. There are some tricks to the trade however, and eventually I was rewarded for my efforts. I've used that experience to illustrate that just because we can't see something does not mean that it's not there.

We believe in a God who reveals himself but he can only be received according to the mode of the receiver. And, that's where, for most of us, there's work to be done. For Jeremiah, the truth of God's will was accessible and convincing, but he alone could grasp it. Thankfully, the veracity of something is not reducible to its popularity. Pope Liberius said as much in the 4th century: "The truth of the faith is not lessened by the fact that I stand alone." (Quoted by Archbishop Charles Chaput in *Render Unto Caesar*, p. 197). Jeremiah's plight foreshadows that of the Church as she labors to teach her children the ways of God (whose ways are not our ways).

This week we are commemorating the Church's teachings which support Natural Family Planning (or NFP) use in marriage. While NFP is catching on more than ever before, it seems the vast number of couples (Catholic included) employ some form of contraception. Pointing out that contraceptive behavior closes the heart to God's will is rarely a popular message. Husbands and wives can only hear God's truth by the power of the Holy Spirit. As in the Gospel, the Church has discovered the treasure and the fine pearl of God's design for married love. Not to share this truth with a skeptical world contradicts our mission and our very identity as followers of Christ.

The alternative to God's will regarding human sexuality, marriage, conjugal love and responsible parenthood is not a rosy picture. As aptly pointed out by the novelist P. D. James:

All our brightly minted social reforms, the sexual liberation ... the guilt-free divorce, the ending of the stigma of illegitimacy, have had their shadow side. Today we have a generation of children more disturbed, more unhappy, more criminal, indeed more suicidal than in any previous era. The sexual liberation of adults has been bought at a high price and it is not the adults who have paid it. (P. D. James, *Time to be in Earnest: A Fragment of Autobiography*, 2001.)

As the 2016 theme for National NFP Awareness Week proclaims, let us strive to open our hearts to true love, mercy, and life as God has willed for marriage!

Petition

Grant us purity of heart, Lord, that we may see You and believe in Your holy will for our lives.

Thursday July 28, 2016

SEVENTEENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME
(Lectionary: 404)

First Reading: Jeremiah 18:1-6

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 146:1B-2, 3-4, 5-6AB

R. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob.

Gospel: Matthew 13:47-53

“The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” (Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956*). So claimed the famous Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn and frankly this fits well with our understanding of how original sin left each and every one of us wounded but not destroyed. God gives us a choice in this life and ultimately we choose good or evil.

As indicated in the Gospel, God will honor our choice when he comes at the end to judge the life we’ve lived. It was C. S. Lewis in his book *The Problem of Pain* (p. 127) who observed that evil has the capacity to corrupt so thoroughly that the “gates of hell are locked from the inside”—in other words, its inhabitants have no intention of ever leaving! Jesus came to convince us that we could know the truth and that it alone would set us free. And, history shows that when the truth is taught patiently, charitably, and convincingly remarkable conversions can happen. The recent conversion of former Planned Parenthood executive Abby Johnson (detailed in her book, *Unplanned*) demonstrates the splendor of the truth and how it heals our spiritual blindness. The Church, like Jeremiah, has been given a prophetic voice so that the world may come to know and believe in the only-begotten son of God. Proclaiming this truth is rarely easy and many have given their lives as witnesses to the truth of the Gospel. For example, when the Church teaches that contraception closes the heart to God’s will, some scoff and others engage in predictable ad hominem attacks. We do well to remember the patience of God, so beautifully on display in Jeremiah’s image of the potter. Sometimes we become what God never intended by living in fear and selfishness. We do well to remember that God is never outdone by sin and that in the end his grace will show itself by healing the wounds of sin and death in each one of us.

This week we thank God for the prophetic witness of married couples who have remained open to God’s will through the practice of Natural Family Planning!

Petition

May the Divine Physician heal the wounded hearts of the many who have fallen prey to the counterfeits of love that cause sadness and shame.

Friday July 29, 2016

SEVENTEENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

Memorial of Saint Martha (Lectionary: 405/607)

First Reading: Jeremiah 26:1-9

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 69:5, 8-10, 14

R. Lord, in your great love, answer me.

Gospel: John 11:19-27

Admonish the sinner: in this Jubilee Year of Mercy, we've been invited to live more fully the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. The Book of Revelation states that God chastises those whom he loves (see, Rev 3:19). We are asked to do the same, though we do best to first examine our own lives to make sure we are living the Gospel.

As a kind of teacher, the prophets had a duty to correct the faults of the people (from King to pauper). Jeremiah's life was a difficult one. Remember he was the one who openly complained to God that, "You duped me Lord, and I was duped." (Jer 20:7) And in the spirit of "No good deed goes unpunished," after summoning the people to conversion of heart, for his trouble Jeremiah was threatened with death. Correcting others is rarely met with open arms! Thanks be to God for people who have accepted constructive criticism!

In the Gospel today, Jesus admonishes Martha because he loves her. This is to say that he wants what is best for Martha. And, Martha is just like us in that she settles for less than God wants to give her. Martha embraces a life of constant activity when Jesus wants her to "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)

The Old Testament sense of God being a jealous God comes from the reality that he wants our best and that he alone will not settle for anything less. We thank God for this truth because we tend toward the path of least resistance, giving God only what's left over and not our first fruits (remember Cain and Abel?).

The Catholic Church has a prophetic voice, one that has often received the same treatment given Jeremiah in today's first reading. In 1968 Blessed Pope Paul VI stuck his neck out to defend God's plan for conjugal love, knowing that it would not be fully appreciated at the time. When we see someone do something unpopular, we do well to wonder what motivates them. Might it be true love that wills only our good? Consequently, married couples who teach and live God's plan for marriage and family deserve our gratitude and prayers not only this week, but always.

Petition

We thank God for sending us shepherds after His own heart who love us enough to challenge us so that we might become truly holy.

Saturday July 30, 2016

SEVENTEENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME
(Lectionary: 406)

First Reading: Jeremiah 26:11-16, 24

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 69:15-16, 30-31, 33-34

R. Lord, in your great love, answer me.

Gospel: Matthew 14:1-12

On the surface one would never have suspected Sophie Scholl of the heroism she would ultimately display. When confronted with the depravity of Hitler, Sophie and her brother Hans knew that the world was being duped by a man who in no way represented the nobility and goodness of the German soul. So began the White Rose Revolt against Hitler. Sophie and her likeminded friends made leaflets that denounced Nazism and began to distribute them as widely as possible. Hitherto, Hitler's authority had raged unchecked but now it would find its first open resistance in the form of a 21-year old girl.

The ripple Sophie's audacity sent across Germany gave courage to a nation that was quickly falling to despair. When Sophie was caught and arrested she was put on trial, found guilty of treason, and immediately put to death. When asked why she dared to defy Hitler she stated, "Somebody, after all, had to make a start." Sophie's courage is seen in today's Gospel. St. John the Baptist's defense of marriage seems especially germane today as we live in the shadow of *Obergefell vs. Hodges* (the Supreme Court decision that changed the definition of civil marriage in U.S. law). God's ancient foe never tires and his incessant attacks on marriage and family are as predictable as they are potent. Nevertheless, the Church stands with Christ in defense of his plan for spousal love. On a Saturday, we do well to remember the role of the Mother of God. As Pope St. John Paul II made so evident, a true devotion to Mary grants one courage and resiliency in the spiritual battles that Our Lord predicted would rage on until he returns in glory.

By aligning ourselves more intimately with the Mother of God we too will be witnesses of hope and instruments of peace. Beatified just ten years ago, Blessed Bishop Von Galen also had the temerity to speak early and often against the wickedness of Hitler. His sense of the Church's role comes out in one of his most memorable quotes:

At the moment we are the anvil rather than the hammer. Other men, strangers, renegades are hammering us the anvil cannot and need not strike back: it must only be firm, only hard. However hard the hammer strikes, the anvil stands firmly and silently in place and will long continue to shape the objects forged upon it. If it is sufficiently tough and firm and hard the anvil will last longer than the hammer. ("The Anvil Sermon," quoted by J. G. Lawler in *First Things*, Nov. 2005; at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2005/11/hitlers-hammer-the-churchs-anvil>.)

For all married couples who have courageously lived God's plan for family life, we salute you! And for our young couples learning and living Natural Family Planning, we thank you and support you with our prayers.

Petition

Help us to have true devotion to the Mother of God that we may be docile to God's will and forgiving of our enemies.

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