

Preaching for the Family

July 20–26, 2008: Natural Family Planning Week

Rev. Richard B. Hilgartner, USCCB Secretariat of Divine Worship

Sunday, July 20

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A) (*Lectionary for Mass*, no. 106)

Jesus certainly knew well the challenges of human nature, for he was confronted constantly with signs of human weakness: the sick and infirmed came to him for healing, people asked questions because they didn't understand his mission, or still worse, he faced opposition from those who thought the gospel message was "too much" for them. The parable of the weeds among the wheat demonstrates once more Jesus' understanding of the basic human struggle of good vs. evil. While the parable is intended to tell us something about heaven and judgment ("The kingdom of heaven may be likened to..."), it also points out something we already know well, namely, that it is often difficult to discern right from wrong, and that temptation and evil are very much present in our lives. We know this truth well from the perspective of our own failed attempts at perfection: at work, at school, on the field/court, in relationships, and in trying to live virtuous lives. To accept the call to holiness is to commit to discerning between what is right and wrong—the wheat vs. the weeds—and to choose to do the right.

There are many varieties of flowers and plants that grow uncontrollably, and they often begin to look like weeds if they are not pruned. How does one differentiate the weeds from the flowers? It's not easy! The same can be said for many tempting choices in our lives. In a time when moral relativism seems to lead to permission for almost anything as long as it benefits me, it is understandably difficult to recognize that there are in fact weeds growing in our wheat. The pervasive secularized culture permits just about anything. Often those things which I "ought to" choose—those which are good and holy—are uncomfortable or unattractive. The message of the Gospel, on the other hand, sheds a clearer light that helps us to see that there is rich harvest of goodness and grace which needs to be tended with careful discernment.

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—using testimony from married couples—as well as its morally sound use within marriage. NFP is a natural means to enhance the possibility of conceiving a child as well as, with the proper intention, spacing children. It is, however, a gift largely unknown or even misunderstood by the average couple. This would be a great time to commit to learn more about NFP.

This week also marks the 40th Anniversary of Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae vitae*, which clarified and articulated well the Church's teaching on the transmission of life and contraception. The Church's position has often been portrayed as unpopular, unheeded, or irrelevant, but such opinions do not change the teaching. Pope Paul wrote, "the Church is not surprised to be made, like her divine Founder, a 'sign of contradiction' (cf. Luke 2:34), yet she does not, because of this, cease to proclaim with humble firmness the entire moral law." (*Humanae vitae*, #18). Like separating weeds from wheat, it is often difficult to discern and to choose the right, so the Church must continue to stand as a beacon, to help us to know and to embrace the Gospel of Life.

Married couples provide a living witness to gospel values of sacrificial love, to complete surrender, and to trust in God's will in their daily lives. This witness includes their approach to their openness to children and a healthy and holy understanding of physical and sexual intimacy in their relationship. The Church affirms this witness as the Lord "entrusts the task of making visible to men [*sic*]

the holiness and sweetness of the law which unites the mutual love of husband and wife with their cooperation with the love of God the author of human life.” (*Humanae vitae*, #25, §2)

Monday, July 21

Monday, 16th Week in Ordinary Time (II); St. Lawrence of Brindisi, priest, doctor

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.

Jesus speaks to the Scribes and Pharisees today of the Sign of Jonah, who spent three days and nights in the belly of a whale. This foreshadowing of Jesus’ time in the tomb recalls the gift of his death and resurrection, the source of our salvation. He himself is the something “greater than Jonah” that is in their midst because of his great love demonstrated in his passion and death. We discover opportunities to share in his passion in our own lives. As we reflect this week on married love and the gift of life, we pray for couples, for marriage is a call to die to self and give oneself totally to another in love. To do so in marriage is to surrender to God’s plan and to trust in his power to save.

The prophet Micah preaches a stern reminder to the people what the Lord expects of them. The covenant is rooted in love: love of God and love of neighbor. “What does the Lord require of you? “Only to do the right and to love goodness...” It is in our pursuit of the good—our love—that we walk with the Lord. Often we get distracted and lose sight of this fundamental call of the disciple. Such love was a theme of St. Lawrence’s preaching. Sometimes our distraction takes the form of placing limits or qualifications on our love, as though love was something that could have limits placed on it. Christ’s love knew no limits. His love for his Father and for his people led him to the cross. While this kind of unconditional love might seem difficult to achieve, it is visible in our own lives: in parents who make sacrifices for children, in the faithful witness of the priesthood and the consecrated life, and particularly in the love of husband and wife in the Sacrament of Marriage. Speaking of human love, Pope Paul VI wrote in his encyclical, *Humanae vitae*:

[Conjugal love] is *total*, that is to say, it is a very special form of personal friendship, in which husband and wife generously share everything, without undue reservation of selfish calculations. Whoever truly loves his marriage partner loves not only for what he receives, but for the partner’s self, rejoicing that he can enrich his partner with the gift of himself. (*HV*, #9 §2)

Tuesday, July 22

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

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, with is recounted in today’s Gospel reading.

While at the tomb, Mary encounters the Lord, but she doesn’t immediately recognize him, because in her grief she has convinced herself that the Lord’s body had been taken by grave robbers. In essence, she creates her own blindness by refusing to see the signs of the resurrection for what they really are. How often for us does it happen that we don’t immediately see the grace of God in our midst, or the good

to which we are called? Pope Benedict XVI, during his pastoral visit to the United States earlier this year, preached often about the Christian pursuit of the truth—Jesus Christ—in a world that values relativism, which allows the individual to create his or her own “truth” based on circumstances or personal desires. Such false truths can blind us or prevent us from recognizing the *real* truth of Jesus and his call.

In today’s culture physical intimacy and sexuality are often subject to such relativism. Individuals see sex as something for their benefit and pleasure in such a way that physical intimacy is seen only as a means to personal gain. In doing so, we blind ourselves to the truth that the gift of sexuality is really something good that communicates a selfless and sacrificial kind of love. It is a sacred kind of love, as Pope Paul VI reminds us in *Humanae vitae*:

Conjugal love reveals its true nature and nobility when it is considered in its supreme origin, God, who is love, “the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.” (cf Eph. 3:15) (*HV*, #8)

The Church today looks to the example of Mary Magdalene, whose encounter with the Risen Lord opened her eyes and her heart. May her witness inspire all to be open to the Lord who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life!

Wednesday, July 23

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

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 Saviour (the “Bridgettines”).

The prophet Jeremiah understands that he is subject to God’s power, for it is God who knows him and created him. This knowledge inspires Jeremiah’s fidelity and response to the Lord’s call. This vision of the right relationship with God is the grounding of strong roots alluded to in Jesus’ parable of the sower. Only with a healthy understanding of our utter dependence on God for life itself can we expect to receive God’s Word and allow it to take root in us.

Such understanding and trust of God’s providence fostered St. Bridget’s devotion and faithful service. The Sacrament of Marriage demands the same perspective. Only when couples understand their need for the love of Jesus to enrich their lives and their relationship, can they live marriage as a true sacrament. In this they become a sign of God’s love for each other. In particular, the procreative aspect of marriage only makes sense when couples understand that they share as partners in God’s creative power. *Humanae vitae* reminds us of this important point:

... to make use of the gift of conjugal love while respecting the laws of the generative process means to acknowledge oneself not to be arbiter of the sources of human life, but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator. In fact, just as man does not have unlimited dominion over his body in general, so also, with particular reason, he has no such dominion over his generative faculties as such, because of their intrinsic ordination towards raising up life, of which God is the principle.” (*HV*, #13)

Thursday, July 24

Thursday, 16th Week in Ordinary Time (II); St. Sharbel Makhluf, priest

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.

The words of Jesus in today’s Gospel could frighten us off, that somehow because we do not have the privilege of seeing him work miracles or hearing him preach the way the disciples did we are at a disadvantage. Nothing could be further from the truth, for the sacramental nature of the Church allows us to see and to hear, to experience Christ’s presence living and active among us here and now. This is what draws us to worship in the liturgy. We stand with the disciples, and as the Church we are blessed for what we see and hear, that we encounter the living God in our worship and in our prayer.

It is not only in the liturgy, however, that this presence of Christ is found. Christ is present in the world, too. Those who act with charity and work for justice, demonstrate the works of mercy and extend the compassion of Jesus for those in need to the world. St. Sharbel demonstrated this in his own simple and holy life. This week we highlight the importance of married life and chastity among spouses. When husbands and wives open themselves to one another and together trust in God’s grace in their lives, they demonstrate that God is living and active in their lives. Marriage is, therefore, not merely a human invention, but it is of God, and as one of the sacraments of the Church, Christ is present. *Humanae vitae* drew attention to this:

Marriage is not, then, the effect of chance or the product of evolution or unconscious natural forces; it is the wise institution of the Creator to realize in mankind His design of love. (*HV*, #8 §2)

Friday, July 25

Feast of Saint James, apostle

40th Anniversary of the Papal Encyclical, *Humanae vitae*

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.

Certainly James knew the cost of discipleship. His mother, however, like any parent, wanted good things for her sons. She asked Jesus, “Command that these two sons of mine sit, one at your right and the other at your left, in your Kingdom.” Parents are hopeful people. Even at baptism we recognize the joy of parenthood in seeing “the hope of eternal life shine” on children (see the Blessing of Parents, *Rite of Baptism for Children*). A complete picture of the Christian life includes both joy and sorrow, triumphs and challenges. Married life is no exception. Pope Paul VI stated in *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)

This day is the 40th Anniversary of the promulgation of *Humanae vitae*, in which Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the ancient teaching of the Church regarding a married couple's need to be open to new life, to children, and our moral opposition to the use of artificial contraception. Openness to children is an act of hope that at the same time is an act of surrender to God's power as the author of life. To do so is to face the challenge of the unknown, such as St. James demonstrated when he eagerly stated that he understood what it would mean to "drink the cup" with Christ. Certainly he didn't know what it would mean at the time. Neither do married couples know exactly how their lives will unfold when they "accept children lovingly from God" (see *Rite of Marriage*). In the witness and example of St. James, and in the witness and example of Christian parents, we give thanks for "the grace bestowed in abundance" which makes such witness and hope possible.

Saturday, July 26

Memorial of Saints Joachim and Anne, Parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary

It is fitting that this week of reflection on married life and the gift of love is concluded with a reflection on the lives of Saints Joachim and Anne, the parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary. They are the patrons of grandparents. Nothing about them is recorded in scripture, and it is only from tradition that we know even their names, but we do know them through their daughter. The fidelity and devotion of Mary is the fruit of their loving and God-centered home. How fitting today to pray for parents as they form their children in the faith.

Today's gospel is the same gospel passage that was proclaimed on Sunday, the parable of the weeds among the wheat. The master of the household in his wisdom allows the weeds to grow alongside the wheat so that the wheat is not damaged as it is growing. Patience and trust are necessary virtues for those who must wait and then discern the good from the bad. Jesus was rejected by many—his message was discarded as worthless—because they judged him by worldly standards. As people of faith, we know that his way is to be embraced above all others, for it is the one true good. Married couples, in particular, practice patience and trust as they raise their children. Couples sometimes find difficulty in conceiving a child, and with great patience and perseverance, often making use of Natural Family Planning to guide them, cooperate with God's plan for them. Patience and trust are virtues good parents demonstrate as they raise their children. Sometimes they have to allow their children to make mistakes in order to help them grow and learn. As difficult as that might be, parents are not unlike the wise harvest master who must with patience allow the weeds to grow with the wheat in order to allow the full growth and yield of the harvest.

Saints Joachim and Anne are known only by the fidelity and devotion of their daughter. May parents and grandparents, and all the faithful, learn from their example of patience as we look to the Lord's grace to be manifest in the Church and in our hearts.

Rev. Richard Hilgartner, a priest of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, serves as Associate Director of the Secretariat of Divine Worship at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.