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# A Boost for NFP

by

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As a seminarian, I became aware that God's plan for human sexual love was not an arbitrary list of "do's" and "don'ts" but an integrated tapestry that must be seen as a whole. At the center of God's plan is the teaching expressed so well in the papal encyclical, *Humanae vitae* (1968), regarding the nature of sexual intercourse as unitive and procreative. This nature must never be separated. In order to preserve the dignity of the spouses and their sexual expression, each and every act of sexual love must both foster their unity as husband and wife and be open to the possibility of new life. This simple yet profound teaching is what most people do not understand, yet it is what most people need in order to live a fuller life.

Through God's grace, at the beginning of my priesthood I began to see that if I was to offer real assistance to the People of God, it would be essential that I teach the Church's faith about the unitive and procreative nature of sexual intercourse. Beginning with my first parish, I insisted that couples seeking to marry would have to take an *entire* NFP course. With few exceptions, couples have accepted this requirement and most have expressed appreciation for their exposure to the course. I am not naïve enough to think they all have put it into practice, but at least their horizons had been expanded and I have planted good seed. Through my experience with counseling engaged couples, I began to think of how to "plant better seed." I found my answer when I began to study the Holy Father's teachings known as the Theology of the Body. This approach to Church teachings offers a comprehensive and inspiring way to see God's plan for human love. It can give both Church teachings and NFP a real boost!

The Theology of the Body is based not on the Natural Law but on Scripture and on every person's experience. The Holy Father starts his work with the dialogue Jesus has with the Pharisees in Matthew 19:3ff regarding the indissolubility of marriage. On two occasions in this dialogue Jesus refers to God's original plan for man and woman, the plan revealed "in the beginning" (see Genesis 1 & 2). Before sin disrupted their unity, our first parents lived their union in awe and gratitude for the gift each one was to the other. This gift was freely given and joyfully received. They had no fear of being reduced to objects of sexual pleasure or being rejected by the other. It would not have occurred to them to use their sexual love to manipulate or seek to dominate the other. Adam wasn't concerned about losing his independence and Eve seldom experienced "headaches."

The respect, mutuality, trust and openness in the sexual relationship before the Fall is summed up in Genesis 2:25: "the man and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame." We know that these qualities changed as soon as they both fell into sin. But because of the redeeming work of Jesus, there is hope for us all. As the Holy Father points out, the nature of our first parents, who were made in God's image and likeness, remained unchanged. God's plan for each human being remains the same even though we must contend with sin in order to achieve it. This plan is summarized in the Vatican II document called the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in*

*the Modern World (Gaudium et spes):*

Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, “that all may be one. . . as we are one” (John 17:21-22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself. (#24)

We can highlight three basic points from this passage. First, the love between spouses is intended to be a mirror, an icon of the love which exists between the three persons of the Godhead. More specifically, the Pope argues that it is in their sexual union that spouses reflect to each other, as much as is possible in this life, the perfect union of love in the communion of persons of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Secondly, human beings are created to freely donate themselves in love to another. In fact, we can not fully realize our human dignity unless we do so. Finally, inscribed in our very bodies as male and female, is our complementary need for another. Man is incomplete in his maleness without woman and visa-versa. This is the *nuptial meaning of the body*.

As a pastor who works constantly with married couples, I am deeply indebted to John Paul II for giving us a new and inspiring way to get couples’ attention and take a closer look at NFP. In his biography, *Witness to Hope*, George Weigel says that the Theology of the Body is a ticking time bomb set to go off sometime in this century. What the Holy Father has given us is a profound treasure that will take some time for the Church to assimilate. Once that process is in motion, we can expect many people of all faiths to be listening very carefully as the Church’s voice rises above the din to proclaim the truth. In the meantime, we all can set about the process of learning and enriching ourselves with these teachings. The Theology of the Body is a breath of fresh air for all of us who want to serve God’s people and turn their hearts towards the Author of Love. May it be a boost to all of you!

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