

“NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING”
“IT’S WORTH IT! JOIN THE REVOLUTION!”

National Natural Family Planning Awareness Week

July 20-26, 2014

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HOMILY NOTES

Sunday 20 July 2014

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading: Wisdom 12:13, 16-19 (106A)

Though powerful, the Lord judges with mercy and governs with care. God teaches people kindness, hope, and repentance.

Responsorial Psalm: 86: 5-6, 9-10, 15-16

Lord, you are good and forgiving.

Second Reading: Romans 8:26-27

Paul reminds the Romans that the Spirit helps God’s people in their weakness and intercedes for them.

Gospel: Matthew 13:24-43 or 13: 24-30

Through parables (of the wheat and weeds, mustard seed, and yeast) Jesus encourages His disciples, assuring them that God’s saints will shine like the sun in the heavenly reign.

It is sometimes said that “Hurt people often hurt people!” In other words, people frequently wound others, drive them away, or even attack other people because they have themselves been the recipients of hurtful actions. Not that this excuses what they do, but it does explain, at least to some degree, the chain-reaction effect that failing to respect another’s dignity can have on a family. If we are honest, we have to concede that each of us is weak and struggles with worry, fear, doubt, discouragement and anxiety. At every Mass, following the Our Father, the priest acknowledges this fact and asks God to help us (including the priest himself): “Deliver us Lord, we pray, from every evil and graciously grant peace in our days. That by the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin and protect us from all distress, as we await with joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ!” Therefore, while life is tough, given that we are each wounded, have likely wounded others, and weak, we also have to trust in “joyful hope” that the grace of Christ will be there to sustain us. This is particularly true for married couples.

In both the first and second readings today from Wisdom and Romans, we hear of hope and healing in human weakness. In his Epistles, Paul speaks frequently of his own weakness, especially in 2 Corinthians: “I willingly boast most gladly in my weakness, that the power of Christ may dwell within me” (2 Cor. 12:9). In Matthew’s Gospel

today Jesus uses the parable of the ‘weeds among the wheat,’ wherein he notes that the world today is often replete with the fruit of God and the anti-fruit of the Evil One. Perhaps we could say the same of ourselves, as often our own lives are like a field of “weeds” and “wheat.” The weeds of worry, doubt, discouragement, fear, and anxiety frequently grow alongside of the joys, hopes, and consolations in our day-to-day lives, giving many of us a “mixed bag” of experiences on a weekly basis. We can often find ourselves in bed worrying about paying our bills or company lay-offs, and then sometimes, out of the blue, God will give us a simple sign, such as a tender kiss of a child, to let us know that He is still there and hears us. The key to being aware of God’s active presence in our daily lives is found in teaching ourselves how to hear him and to see him in small ways, but we cannot hear him if we are not listening. Often people will say to priests, “Father, I pray but God never speaks to me.” To which I usually respond, “Well I’m sorry, but you’re not listening then!” They usually don’t like that, but it is true nonetheless. While dryness in prayer is normal, the subtle voice of God is all around us every day but is only heard by those who can listen. A key challenge is that people often do not know *how* to listen.

I can say, without a doubt, in my experience over the years in counseling couples, no issue has caused greater turmoil and heartache for couples than the inability of the spouses to actively listen to one another. As Christ says in Matthew’s Gospel, “They have ears but they cannot hear, they have eyes but they cannot see” (Mt 13:10-17). It is impossible to overestimate the magnitude of this problem. Couples today are well “connected” with iPhones, texting, movies “on demand,” and plenty of other things to entertain, but many simply never learn to actively listen to one another emotionally, spiritually, and in their marital intimacy as well. Likewise, some spouses, after twenty years of marriage, have to re-learn how to listen to each other all over again, often because they know the arguments and “pressure points” of the other so well, and they learn what topics to avoid when “he’s in that mood again.” As the years pass, each person learns his respective “roles,” and some even spend years feeling like they are ‘walking on eggshells’ because they have learned that some issues cannot be discussed. One woman I know compared this phenomenon to “tap-dancing on ice!” But, Jesus tells us, “The truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32), and the truth is that actively listening to one’s spouse is a tremendous act of love and first begins with listening to God in prayer. As we shine the light of truth on our wounds and thus, when a couple learns to pray together, over time this has direct ramifications on their communication, problem solving, and, yes, sexual intimacy.

It may seem strange to many couples to hear that their prayer, or lack thereof, would have consequences on their marital intimacy. This is partially because we live in a culture which tends to understand sexuality solely in terms of reproductive organs and the conjugal act only as a physical release. One of the beauties of Natural Family Planning is that it both teaches the couple (i.e. not just the woman) about the true depth of human sexuality, but also how to actively listen to one another as well. There are over 7,000 languages in the world today and in every one of them it is impossible for one to actively listen to another person if one is entirely focused on oneself. Contraception, for instance, prohibits a couple from truly “listening” to the emotional, spiritual, and intimate

“language of the body,” as St. John Paul II termed it, because it keeps them subjected to sexual narcissism (*Theology of the Body*, Jan. 5, 1983). Contraception is somewhat akin, then, to going out for a romantic dinner with one’s spouse and then constantly chatting on the phone to a friend while the other is sitting there tapping her foot. Simply put, we need to “hang up” and listen. Natural Family Planning (or NFP) teaches a couple how to listen to the fertile cycle of the woman, but as is common with God’s wonder, it never stops with that one issue. Over time, as many couples have informed me, their communication, stress management, time management, and prayer as a couple increases exponentially as well. Most couples, at some point, remember a time in their dating or marriage when they simply enjoyed each other’s presence for the pure joy of being physically near the other. Over time, with the many stresses in life and work, it is very easy for couples to lose this simple, but extraordinary, beauty. NFP helps to foster a perception within the spouses where they genuinely appreciate, or in some cases rediscover, the beauty of love with the other for the pure beauty of it, not because the other person merely satisfies a sexual need. As the couple actively learns how to “listen” verbally, emotionally, and spiritually to one another, this almost always translates into conjugal “listening” as well; that is, growing in a more profound awareness of the other’s body, physical needs, and how to become consciously attentive to them. If St. Thomas Aquinas is right in his dictum, “Love wills the good of the other,” then the couple steadily grows in a conjugal maturing, whereby the act itself expresses unitive love and an openness to the possibility of new life, should God choose to bless them (CCC#1766). We cannot, however, “will the good of the other” in love, if we simply haven’t learned to “listen” to the other first.

It rarely occurs to people in much of western culture that there are actually couples that *want* to conceive children. In our society of sexual gratification “on-tap,” for a couple to actively seek a pregnancy is altogether counter-cultural. Furthermore, one child may be tolerated, but any more than this and others tend to look at them like they are either irresponsible or simply ignorant regarding modern contraceptive methods. Yet, there is something deep within a human being that pushes him/her to want to pour his love into a child, to teach her, to guide her, and even to protect her. When I ask people to explain their desire for children to me, I usually get, “I don’t know Father, I just love kids!” In promoting Natural Family Planning, the Catholic Church is not saying that a couple absolutely has to have as many children as they possibly can; rather, we are saying that authentic conjugal love always includes God and he may or may not decide to bless them with a child. When the couple excludes God from their marital union by contraception, inevitably they run the risk of slowly excluding God from other aspects of their lives as well. This direction can ultimately find them at a point whereby they expect their spouse to fulfill a “god-like” role in taking the place of God, which, of course, he/she cannot do. As a result, greater stress is placed on the other to fill in the former place of God, which, quite frankly, is a recipe for disaster. In this week dedicated to Natural Family Planning, we recall that NFP truly helps the couple maintain a proper reliance on God alone, in addition to assisting them with the practical points of their marriage such as communication and problem solving.

As the Scriptures inform us today, all of us are weak, and there are “weeds” of worry, fear, doubt, discouragement, and anxiety which often grow up in our day-to-day lives. Some of this is simply unavoidable. For instance, telling a mother not to worry about her child is a little like asking her not to breathe! Nonetheless, as couples train themselves to listen to each other by first listening to God in prayer, they will alleviate many of these “weeds” from their daily lives. Jesus’ teaching here, then, is eminently practical for couples and, believe it or not, for conjugal love in marriage as well.

DAILY READINGS

Monday 21 July 2014

Weekday, green/white (St. Lawrence of Brindisi, Priest and Doctor of The Church)

Reading: Micah 6:1-4, 6-8

Responsorial Psalm: 50:5-6, 8-9, 16BC-17, 21 and 23

To the upright I will show the saving power of God.

Gospel: Matthew 12:38-42

- Many people are surprised to hear that the ‘Big Bang Theory’ was conceived of by a Catholic priest, Msgr. George Lemaître (d. 1966). He worked closely with Popes Pius XII, John XXIII, and even Albert Einstein, with whom he shared a close friendship. He also served as head of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 1960. Both Lemaître and Einstein tried to explain how the universe came into being and how far it may possibly expand.
- For the human mind, trying to understand eternity, such as eternal life in heaven, is a little like trying to imagine where the universe stops. It can’t be done. At night, when we look up at the vast blackness of the universe in space, it’s impossible for our minds to imagine that it possibly keeps going and going further out. Lemaître did his best to explain this, and his magnanimous efforts deserve great credit.
- The fact is, however, that the human soul is worth more than the entire universe. As beautiful as it is, one day the cosmos will come to an end, whereas the human soul is immortal. A human being is made in God’s image and likeness, though the cosmos is not. In the first reading from Micah today, we hear about the body and soul and their importance. While trying to imagine that our souls will never go out of existence is a little like trying to imagine how far the universe expands, it does give us great hope to know that Jesus Christ has assured us of an eternity with him for all who believe in him.
- As we begin National Natural Family Planning Awareness week, we are reminded in the Book of Micah that each person, as a body and soul composite, is sacred and to be

honored. This is because each is made in God's image and likeness and is, like us, made for eternity with God. NFP, you may not know, is the title of many different methods of authentic family planning which respect God's plan for married couples. These methods can be used either to attempt to conceive a baby or, after prayerful discernment, to postpone a pregnancy. What many people may not know is that the practice of these methods can help couples to better recognize this beauty of humanity on a bodily and spiritual level and to better encounter that beauty in their spouse as well, especially within the joy of marital intimacy.

Tuesday 22 July 2014

Weekday, white (St. Mary Magdalene)

First Reading: Micah 7:14-15, 18-20

Responsorial Psalm: 85: 2-4, 5-6, 7-8

Lord, show us your mercy and love.

Gospel: John 20:1-2, 11-18

- It is often forgotten that there were three saints at the Crucifixion of Jesus, other than the Mother of Jesus and St. John the Apostle. St. Dismas, the 'Good Thief,' had a "deathbed conversion" of sorts as he hung on his own cross next to Jesus. As if receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Dismas is given absolution by Jesus himself prior to dying, as he tells Dismas: "This day you will be with me in paradise!" (Lk 23:43). St. Longinus, the centurion who stabbed Jesus with the spear, also became Christian and gave witness to the faith. Near the high altar of St. Peter's Basilica today a large marble statue of him bears testimony to his great witness. And then, the saint whose feast day we celebrate today, St. Mary Magdalene, a woman whom the Church has come to know as the "apostle to the Apostles," also became a witness of heroic sanctity on behalf of Christ, who cast seven demons out of her (Mk 16:9) and completely transformed her life.
- In today's Gospel, Jesus asks Mary Magdalene a simple question, one which most of us can identify with: "Why are you weeping?" Sorrow is part of the human experience. Clearly, Mary was weeping because she missed Jesus, though she did not recognize that it was he who was speaking to her. Once recognized, her tears of sorrow are transformed into tears of great joy, as she runs to tell the disciples of the Resurrection!
- During this week as we raise awareness of the Church's teaching on married love and Natural Family Planning, we remember that there are many couples who struggle with the pain of infertility, often shedding tears of sorrow as well. Frequently this struggle includes years of hope, as a new month comes and the couple tries again to conceive, only to be followed by discouragement as their pregnancy tests then come up negative. As one can imagine, this cycle can be emotionally, spiritually and physically draining for both husband and wife.

- Natural Family Planning helps the couple be attuned to when the fertile periods of the month are and which are optimal for child bearing. It likewise helps them be attentive to being an emotional and spiritual support for their spouse as they try again to conceive. We can be assured, however, that even if they do not bring forth biological life, their union will continue to be fruitful. As St. John Paul II said:

You are no less loved by God; your love for each other is complete and fruitful when it is open to others, to the needs of the apostolate, to the needs of the poor, to the needs of orphans, to the needs of the world. (John Paul II, Homily, 1982)

Wednesday 23 July 2014

Weekday, green/white (St. Bridget, Religious)

First Reading: Jeremiah 1:1, 4-10

Responsorial Psalm: 71:1-2, 3-4A, 5-6AB, 15 and 17
I will sing of your salvation.

Gospel: Matthew 13:1-9

- Our Catholic faith teaches us that at the moment of conception every human being receives two things which are immortal, or can never die: an immortal soul and an immortal guardian angel to look after that immortal soul. Because the soul comes from God, it is to God that it also returns at the moment of death. Every human being knows this truth in the depth of his being, though many deny, ignore, or drown this truth with other things to gratify them. As many recovering addicts will attest, all these false “truths” inevitably fall short of authentic happiness found only in God. Thus, St. Augustine’s famous dictum: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, Oh God!”
- In our first reading from Jeremiah, God informs the prophet that long before he was conceived in his mother’s womb, the Lord made plans for him; what Catholics refer to as a vocation. God notes: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born I dedicated you!” Although there are roughly 7 billion people on the planet, God has a plan for each of them and loves each of them deeply. One day each of them will return to the Source from which he/she came, as we hear every Ash Wednesday: “Remember, that you are dust and unto dust you shall return.”
- One of the beauties of Natural Family Planning is that by *its* very nature it works with *man’s* nature! In other words, NFP takes account of the fact that, like Jeremiah, God has designed and “dedicated” each of us from our mother’s womb, and the couple invites God to be present with them during the entire parental process from conception on.

- Simply put, NFP is fitted to the nature of man because we are by nature communal and are oriented towards community with others; namely, our spouse and family. When the Lord God creates a “helper” for the man, the man realizes this communal orientation with the presence of the woman: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” (Gen 2:23). NFP, then, builds on this fact and helps the couple mature in their marital relationship and conjugal union.

Thursday 24 July 2014

Weekday, green/white (St. Sharbel Makhlūf, Priest)

First Reading: Jeremiah 2:1-3, 7-8, 12-13

Responsorial Psalm: 36:6-7 AB, 8-9, 10-11

With you is the fountain of life, O Lord.

Gospel: Matthew 13:10-17

- Americans love their pets. Most of us, at some point, have had a dog that chases its own tail, going around and around in circles trying to finally catch it. And as we shake our heads in disbelief that the animal could be so foolish, the truth is that sin causes man to spiritually do the same thing. In sin, we become blind to truth, as Jesus so often condemned the Pharisees and the Sadducees for doing. In the gospel today he makes note of the blinding nature of sin for each of us: “While seeing they do not see and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Mt 13:13). For his part, the Psalmist notes: “The fool has said in his heart there is no God above, he so flatters himself in his own mind that he knows not his guilt” (Ps 36:2). Sin, therefore, steadily makes man into a person who is obsessed with catching the “tail” of his own wants and ego, and yet true peace is never found this way.
- At every Mass we hear of the authentic formula for true peace, and yet, ironically, we often don’t listen to it: “Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your apostles, ‘Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you,’ look not on our sin, but on the faith of your Church, and graciously grant her peace and unity in accordance with your will.” Peace, then, comes with bringing our will to coincide with the will of God, even when that happens to be difficult. If we get down to brass tacks, perhaps we could say this: The more we sin and go against how God actually designed us, the more we will be unhappy. Even the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes note of this fact: “Either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy” (no. 2339).
- Natural Family Planning teaches married couples many things, but one of the often overlooked benefits is the virtue they learn together. Because the man and woman grow together in the knowledge of their bodies and the beauty of their fertility, they learn the cardinal virtue of temperance, from which chastity emerges. As a result,

they also grow in a much deeper sense of God's presence in their communication and time spent together, and later, they more clearly see God present in their conjugal union as well. This new "vision" of truth is the antithesis of the blinding character of sin which Jesus warns us against.

Friday 25 July 2014

Weekday, red; (St. James, Apostle, feast); Anniversary of *Humanae vitae*

First Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:7-15

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

Those who sow in tears shall reap rejoicing.

Gospel: Matthew 20:20-28

- Many within our culture understand contraception as a sort of universal panacea for much of the world's troubles. For instance, condoms are distributed in droves within most public schools and universities, even by the United Nations. There are contraceptive methods of many types, and to even remotely question their use in the public forum is often considered socially "intolerant," or at best, naïve.
- Today we celebrate the beauty of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, published by Venerable Pope Paul VI on this date in 1968. Though often referred to colloquially as simply the "birth control encyclical," the truth is that it actually speaks less to the issue of contraception and more about the nature and beauty of conjugal love in marriage. This very pastoral pope was speaking as a caring father, not sending edicts "from on high" to be blindly followed, but rather as a spiritual *pater* who sincerely wants his children to experience the beauty of God's love in marriage. To say that the document was counter-cultural at the time is undoubtedly a huge understatement, as much of the secular and entertainment media, universities, and even some Catholic clergy flatly rejected it. We should thank God for Pope Paul VI's magnanimous defense of truth in the face of tides of cultural opposition.
- The first words of the Bible and John's Gospel begin with, "In the beginning." It is telling to note that that the word contraception literally means "*against* the beginning." The contracepted act of a couple literally sets itself "*against* the beginning" of authentic love within the conjugal union, but also against God's plan for mankind. Pope Paul VI, in a very non-condemning way, notes that the unitive and procreative love of a couple is always spiritually fruitful for them as they grow closer to one another and to God as the source of their love.
- In this week dedicated to the beauty of Natural Family Planning, we recall the joy of conjugal love that this great Pontiff helped to guide couples to experience in marriage. As the spouses encounter this joy, it ultimately has long-term ramifications for the whole Church as well.

Saturday 26 July 2013

Weekday, white (Saints Joachim and Anne, Parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Memorial)

First Reading: Jeremiah 7:1-11

Responsorial Psalm: 84:3, 4, 5-6A and 8A, 11

How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord, mighty God!

Gospel: Matthew 13:24-30

Let them both grow until the harvest time.

- For the second time this week, and again today, we hear in Matthew's Gospel of Jesus speaking of the "weeds among the wheat." In the Gospel, Our Lord makes it clear that the "enemy" sows the weeds (Mt 13:28) among the fruit of the wheat, which Jesus himself sows within the world. As the saints inform us, we cannot be naive about the fact that we do spiritual battle with the "enemy" who sows the "weeds" of evil in our lives. For his part, St. Peter warns: "Be sober and vigilant. Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1Pt 5:8). While we should avoid paranoia regarding the "enemy," or the Devil, we also should have a healthy sense of prudence regarding his attacks as well. As St. Paul notes in Ephesians: "Our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens" (Eph 6:12). When dealing with the Devil, then, we strive for the balance of prudence without paranoia. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* informs us, this is the meaning of the last line in the Our Father (no. 2851): "Deliver us from evil."
- On this memorial of the parents of the Virgin Mary, Joachim and Anne, we recall that as they faced the many day-to-day challenges of providing for their family, they also sought strength from God in their marriage and family. I often tell couples that when they teach their children to pray, they are actually teaching their grandchildren to pray, because their grandchildren will first learn about God from their children. Just as Jesus "grew and became strong" in the Spirit over time (Lk 1:80) as their grandchild, the holy influence of Joachim and Anne on Mary ultimately impacted Jesus' own life as well.
- As we conclude this week dedicated to the beauty of Natural Family Planning, we recall the example of Saints Joachim and Anne and their dedication to one another. NFP helps to teach a couple the profound gift of their spouse, the faith, and even their own sexuality as God created it. Over time the couple learns to have the marital hearts of Joachim and Anne as they recommit their lives to each other again every day, "In good times and in bad, in sickness and in health." Sts. Joachim and Anne, pray for us!

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