

“TO HAVE, TO HOLD, TO HONOR”

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

Supporting God’s gifts of love and life in marriage.

National Natural Family Planning Awareness Week

July 25–31, 2021

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The sacrament of marriage symbolizes Christ’s relationship with His Church. What is this relationship but one of generous, self-sacrificing, passion-filled, and fruitful love! When married couples live their vocation according to Church teachings, especially regarding the transmission of life, many benefits can be reaped. Indeed, married couples who use Natural Family Planning (NFP) report that the benefits include growth in: understanding and appreciation of their fertility; emotional maturity—especially in their spousal communication; holiness; and respect for God’s gifts for married love.

The following are meant to aid the priest or deacon in planning his homily during NFP Awareness Week. The homily is not the place where details of NFP methodology are provided. The homily should include the core of the Church’s teachings that support NFP use in marriage with possibly some basic NFP information added.

Pastors should have NFP resources available in the church vestibule and parish website (contact your diocesan Office of Marriage and Family Life Ministry or nfp@usccb.org). It would also be helpful to ask NFP teachers to staff information tables after Mass. For free resources, download short articles and two-page bulletin inserts for your parish, see usccb.org/nfp/natural-familyplanning/awareness-week/media-kit.cfm. If you have a parish e-mail list, consider inserting NFP Week information with a link to the USCCB resources (usccb.org/nfp/awarenessweek/index.cfm) and your diocese’s website (usccb.org/nfp/find-an-nfp-class.cfm).

NOTE: Natural Family Planning (NFP) is the umbrella title for those methods of family planning that are based in fertility education (sometimes NFP is referred to as “Fertility Awareness Based Methods” or FABMs). NFP methods can be used to either attempt or postpone pregnancy. When avoiding pregnancy, the NFP means is periodic sexual abstinence. No devices or drugs are used to harm God’s design for married love. NFP methods require husband and wife to learn, understand, and apply the information in their conjugal life. NFP methods are the only methods of family planning that support the married couple’s relationship and the child who may come from them. NFP methods respect God’s design for married love. Read more at usccb.org/nfp/what-is-nfp/index.cfm.

HOMILY NOTES

Sunday, July 25, 2021

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading: 2 Kings 4:42–44

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 145:10–11, 15–16, 17–18
The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs.

Second Reading: Ephesians 4:1–6

Gospel: John 6:1–15

The readings for today exhort us to be generous with what God has given us, to follow His truth, and to trust in God’s providential care.

In the first reading, against objections, the prophet Elisha trusts that God will provide for the sustenance of one hundred people with only twenty barley loaves. Prefiguring Jesus’ multiplication of the loaves and fishes in the Gospel, the first reading reminds us that when we place our trust in the Lord, offering generously what God has given us, He will provide for us in abundance.

Likewise, the responsorial psalm for today reminds us that it is the Lord, not ourselves, who feeds us and answers all our needs. The Lord is just, hearing us if we call upon Him in truth, satisfying our deepest desires. We need not be anxious about many things, only diligent in calling upon the Lord in truth, confident that He will be with us to provide for our needs, even in times of hardship.

In the Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul writes from prison, exhorting those who receive his letter to live in a manner worthy of the call they have received as Christian disciples. He exhorts the Ephesians, and us, to practice the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience, and love in our dealings with one another, as we live in the Holy Spirit, united in the one faith we have received from the One God—the God who is truly in control because He “is over all and through all and in all.”

In the Gospel today, we are told that a large crowd follows Jesus across the Sea of Galilee because they saw him healing the sick. Through these healings, Jesus, who is the truth that sets us free, shows that God truly does hear and answer all our needs. Jesus continues to provide evidence of God’s providential care when, prefiguring the inexhaustible gift of the Eucharist, he multiplies five barley loaves and two fish into more than enough food to feed five thousand people. The twelve wicker baskets full of leftovers show God’s desire to provide in superabundance for those who trust and follow Him.

The messages to be generous, to follow the truth, and to trust in God that emerge from today’s readings are appropriate for this Sunday, which is the beginning of Natural

Family Planning Awareness Week—a week during which married couples are encouraged to be generous with the love God has allowed them to share, to embrace the truth of God’s design for the life-giving love of marriage, and to trust in God’s loving care for those who follow His ways.

This particular week is designated Natural Family Planning Awareness Week because it was fifty-three years ago on this day that Pope Saint Paul VI issued his encyclical *Humanae Vitae (On Human Life)*. In this papal letter, Paul VI provided instruction on the responsible transmission of human life, describing the nature of married love as designed by God and reiterating the Church’s unchanging teaching on the immorality of contraceptive behavior. Many people disagree with this teaching, but this is not surprising in a society that has grown forgetful of God’s plan for human sexuality and has readily accepted and promoted contraception as a form of liberation. However, in her teachings the Church simply preserves and proclaims God’s beautiful design for married love. According to this design, married love involves a total mutual gift of self between a man and a woman, and the totality of this mutual gift means that their love is permanent, faithful, and fruitful. This includes having a disposition of openness to new life and trust in God’s providence to support new life. This is a sacred responsibility, since from the beginning the Lord God entrusted husband and wife with the gifts of love and life!

When a husband and wife express their total, self-giving love for each other in the marital act, their bodies speak a “language” of mutual self-donation. Because the marital act is designed to express marital love, a husband and a wife are to give and receive all that they have to offer, including their fertility. Spouses should want to reverence God’s design for their love and speak “the language of the body” in truth.

This is where natural methods of regulating fertility differ strikingly from contraception. Natural Family Planning, or “NFP,” allows a couple to work responsibly with God to either achieve or avoid conception, while reverencing both the dignity of each other and the nature and dignity of the marital act. NFP allows a couple to give all of themselves, including their procreative potential, to each other in every marital act. If there is a reason to avoid a pregnancy, couples practicing modern methods of Natural Family Planning are able to identify when they are fertile and refrain from the marital act during that time. So, whenever a couple practicing NFP engages in the marital act they always speak the “language of the body” in truth.

The theme of this year’s Natural Family Planning Awareness Week is “To Have, To Hold, To Honor.” Because NFP allows married couples to speak “the language of the body” in truth, it allows them fully to have, to hold, and to honor each other by supporting God’s gifts of love and life in marriage.

Following the message of today’s readings, married couples are encouraged to trust in God’s design for their love, and not be afraid to be generous in welcoming new life into the world. New life renews the marital relationship and the world! Abiding in God’s truth, husband and wife have nothing to fear, and can have confidence that whatever effort is required to live according to the truth, God will make it worthwhile. Speaking the “language of the body” in truth will provide husband and wife with a deep

sense of peace, knowing that they never lie to each other in the most intimate form of communication possible between two human persons. God calls husband and wife to live in a manner that is worthy of their call as spouses who are married in the Lord, relying on the Holy Spirit to live lives of virtue. And, as they seek to follow the Lord and His plan for their love, they can be confident to know that God has pledged that He will provide for their needs. If married couples follow God's plan for their love, they have no reason to doubt that God will reward them with unexpected blessings.

Optional notes—please adjust per the needs of your parish

If you would like to learn more about Natural Family Planning, please pick up resources we have available in the vestibule on the information table (or in the display stands) . You can also visit our diocesan website (*insert your web address here*) or that of the U.S. bishops' conference at usccb.org/nfp to learn more. or the parish website.

Today we have couples with us who teach and use NFP. They will be in the vestibule after Mass to answer your questions. I encourage you to visit with them!

Let us support each other in generously trusting in God's design for married love, and proclaim the truth of that love, knowing that God will not be outdone in generosity.

DAILY READINGS

Monday, July 26, 2021

MEMORIAL OF SAINTS JOACHIM AND ANNE, PARENTS OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Reading: Exodus 32:15–24, 30–34

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 106:19–20, 21–22, 23
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

Gospel: Matthew 13:31–35

In the first reading from the Book of Exodus we hear the well-known story of the Israelites sinning against God by worshipping the idol of a golden calf. Instead of trusting and adoring the God who led them out of slavery in Egypt, they craft a false god for themselves. In reality, we all need to examine ourselves for the false gods that we sometimes worship.

As this is Natural Family Planning Awareness Week, it is appropriate to encourage married couples to abandon the false god of contraception—which tempts husband and wife away from reverencing God’s original plan for married love. The psalm for today reminds all of us to “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.” Married couples can thank God for the gift of their love, trusting in the goodness of God’s plan for the marital act.

When husband and wife honor God’s plan for their marriage, they will be agents of spreading the Kingdom that Jesus talks about in today’s Gospel. Jesus provides images of the Kingdom of Heaven, likening it to the smallest of particles that end up having a disproportionately enormous effect. If married couples set aside the idol of contraception, with its false promise of control, and instead embrace God’s liberating plan for their love, like yeast in dough, their love will be a powerful agent of expanding the reign of God in our world!

Petitions for the Prayer of the Faithful

Merciful Father, help us to reject the idols in our lives, and in particular help married couples to cast aside the idol of contraception, and to honor Your plan for married love.

Gracious God, give married couples the grace to always give thanks to you for the gift of married love, and free them from fear and self-reliance so they can embrace the gifts of life and love in their marriages.

Tuesday, July 27, 2021

Reading: Exodus 33:7–11; 34:5b–9, 28

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 103:6–7, 8–9, 10–11, 12–13
The Lord is kind and merciful.

Gospel: Matthew 13:36–43

Both the first reading and the psalm for today remind us that the Lord is gracious and merciful. He is a loving Father who has compassion on His children who fear Him. To be a child of God who fears the Lord does not mean being fearful or afraid of God, as if He were a giant “bogey-man” from whom we should run and hide. Instead, to fear the Lord means to exist in a disposition of reverence and awe before Him, to acknowledge and tremble at His greatness and our littleness.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus likens the good seed that the Son of Man sows to the children of the Kingdom. These children are those who avoid sin and the influence of the Devil. During this Natural Family Planning Awareness Week, we should remind ourselves that being children of the Kingdom means rejecting the evil influences of our culture that tempt us to reject God’s gifts of life and love in marriage. Married couples need to stand in reverential awe before God and His beautiful design for married love. In doing so, married couples will avoid the fate of the weeds in today’s Gospel. Our gracious God, who is slow to anger and rich in compassion, will always reward those who fear Him.

Petitions for the Prayer of the Faithful

Merciful Father, grant us all an increase in the gift of the fear of the Lord. In particular, help married couples to adopt the disposition of reverence and awe before You and Your life-giving plan for their love.

Gracious God, help all of us, especially married couples, to reject the influence of the culture of death, and embrace Your gifts of love and life.

Wednesday, July 28, 2021

Reading: Exodus 34:29–35

Responsorial Psalm: 99:5, 6, 7, 9
Holy is the Lord our God.

Gospel: Matthew 13:44–46

In today’s Gospel, Jesus continues His explanation of the Kingdom of Heaven by comparing it to buried treasure or fine pearls that are worth selling everything we have so that we can acquire them. Each of us needs to be willing to give everything we have, and everything we are to enter God’s Kingdom, which is the only place we will find true

happiness. If we give everything to enter the Kingdom, we will enter into God's presence, and become radiant with His holiness, as Moses did.

During this Natural Family Planning Awareness Week, married couples are encouraged to consider how they can give fully of themselves to enter God's Kingdom. Married love is a beautiful, yet demanding love. It is a love that requires a mutual and total gift of self, which sometimes entails sacrifice, or in the language of today's Gospel, "selling all we have." When the self-giving love of marriage is expressed in the conjugal act, married couples give and receive the totality of themselves, holding nothing back, including their procreative potential. We are not our own. We belong to a God of love, and this loving God has made the marital act to unite a man and a woman in a mutual gift of self that is open to life and love.

We need to trust in God's beautiful plan for married love, and trust that if we follow it, this plan will lead to true happiness and freedom. In reality, true freedom is only found when we choose to live according to the truth that comes from God, so that we may enter into His Kingdom. Walking in the way of truth may not always be easy, and it may cost us all that we are, but it will always be worth it!

Petitions for the Prayer of the Faithful

May married couples give all that they are in the service of God's Kingdom.

May married couples recognize the treasure that they have in each other and in God's gift of the life-giving love of marriage.

Thursday, July 29, 2021

MEMORIAL OF SAINTS MARTHA, MARY, AND LAZARUS

Reading: Exodus 40:16–21, 34–38

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 84:3, 4, 5–6a and 8a, 11

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

Gospel: John 11:19–27

The first reading recounts how Moses prepared the tabernacle in which the Ark of the Covenant was kept. This was the dwelling place of the Lord as the Israelites journeyed through the desert en route to the Promised Land. Today, we have an even greater tabernacle in our midst, one in which Jesus himself resides in the Blessed Sacrament—body, blood, soul, and divinity. This is the same Jesus in whom Martha professes faith in today's Gospel, proclaiming Jesus to be the Son of God who has the power to raise her brother Lazarus from the dead. This Jesus, who is in our midst, always seeks to raise us to new life, not just at the end of time, but now. He desperately desires to help us conquer sin in our lives and to give us the fullness of life in his love.

During this Natural Family Planning Awareness week, married couples are urged to not be afraid of approaching Jesus to ask Him to renew the life of their marriages. If

some couples have fallen into the practice of using contraception, do not fear approaching our Lord to ask Him for help to overcome this behavior! Instead, profess anew your faith and your trust in Jesus by seeking His healing and strength in the Sacrament of Confession. Commit to embracing His plan for your love and experience the resurrection of your marriage. Let us all commit to following Jesus' plan of love in our lives so that we may experience the resurrection!

Petitions for the Prayer of the Faithful

May married couples renew their faith in Jesus and allow Him to renew their love for each other.

May married couples embrace Natural Family Planning as a means of welcoming Jesus into their lives.

Friday, July 30, 2021

Reading: Leviticus 23:1, 4–11, 15–16, 27, 34b–37

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 81:3–4, 5–6, 10–11ab
Sing with joy to God our help.

Gospel: Matthew 13:54–58

Today's Gospel recounts Jesus' reception in His hometown. The people there thought they knew Him, and they took offense at the one whom they assumed was simply the carpenter's son when He proclaimed the good news among them. They lacked the faith to see beyond their own presuppositions and assumptions, and therefore they missed the opportunity to receive the joy that Jesus wanted to give them.

During this Natural Family Planning Awareness Week, we need to make sure we do not take offense at Jesus because of His teachings. When we hear the Church's teachings on conjugal love and responsible parenthood, we are hearing the loving voice of Jesus beckoning us to live in accord with God's beautiful plan of life-giving love. Instead of taking offense at these teachings, all of us, and especially married couples, should rejoice in them and "Sing with joy to God our help," as the Israelites did on many of their major feast days. All of us need to resist the voices in our culture that cause us to doubt who Jesus is, and therefore cause us to doubt His love for us. We need to listen to the truth that sets us free—the truth of life-giving love.

Petitions for the Prayer of the Faithful

May married couples grow in their understanding of and embrace God's plan for married love.

May we open our ears, our minds, and our hearts to receive the good news about the life-giving love of marriage that Jesus teaches through his Church.

Saturday, July 31, 2021

MEMORIAL OF SAINT IGNATIUS LOYOLA, PRIEST

Reading: Leviticus 25:1, 8–17

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 67:2–3, 5, 7–8

O God, let all the nations praise you!

Gospel: Matthew 14:1–12

In the first reading for today, God instructs His people through Moses about how to commemorate the jubilee year. At the end of this account, we see one of the themes from Tuesday’s readings making another appearance—the fear of the Lord. God tells His people, “Do not deal unfairly, then; but stand in fear of your God.” The psalm for today also prays, “May God bless us, and may all the ends of the earth fear him!” The Gospel for today recounts how John the Baptist met his end. For John, fear of the Lord and zeal for God’s truth clearly governed his life more than did fear of Herod or any other worldly power.

On this final day of Natural Family Planning Awareness Week, let us pray for an increase of the gift of fear of the Lord, so we can stand in awe and reverence before God and His awesome design of the human person who is “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14).

God has made man and woman to complement each other with their own unique gifts. This complementarity is so intense that a husband and a wife can express their love for each other in a certain way, and nine months later they may have to give that expression of love a name! How beautiful, how awe-inspiring, how wonderful!

Reverence for God’s design for human love and for the marital embrace is essential for couples to live truly happy marriages, and for society to flourish. Natural Family Planning promotes reverence for God’s plan and safeguards the dignity of spouses and spousal love. May we all be filled with the zeal for God’s plan for married love and proclaim it through our words and our actions!

Petitions for the Prayer of the Faithful

That God will increase in married couples the gift of fear of the Lord, so they may live out God’s plan for their love instead of absorbing society’s false influences.

That married couples will reject contraceptive lifestyles and embrace Natural Family Planning as a way of living God’s plan for spousal love.

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