

Love means more.

Highlights from the *Marriage: Unique for a Reason* Blog Archive

About the Nature of Marriage Series:

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Why is Marriage a Natural Institution?

12/18/19

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, marriage is “written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator” (CCC, 1603). [1] If this is true; if marriage is written in the nature of the human being, then despite the many variations that the institution has undergone throughout history, “These differences should not cause us to forget its common and permanent characteristics.”[2] Marriage’s basis is not in history, then, but in our God-given human nature. That means that marriage cannot be a purely conventional, political, or social institution, but a natural one. In this post, we are going to examine what it means for something to be a natural institution and why marriage is one.

Recall from our last three posts that the word “nature” is said in different ways. [3] We can talk about the whole world of nature and all the natural things that make it up. In this sense, we contrast natural things with artificial ones. Or, we can talk about the inherent natures of living things and the behaviors or activities that derive from and fulfill a thing’s nature. When considering whether a behavior or activity is natural, we must always look to the nature of the thing engaging in that activity. Remember our potato-chip eating beaver? With this refresher, we are now going to see how an institution can be natural.

The word institution has two different senses. Sometimes, it means an establishment such as a school or a financial organization. But it also means a practice or custom that has become thoroughly integrated into society. For example, the annual televised reveal of Punxsutawney Phil on Groundhog Day is considered by many to be a “national institution.” If someone were to try to cancel this event, there would be widespread objection. These two senses of “institution” mean that something has been established or put in place, and that we consider it to be important.

Now, both the financial organization and Groundhog Day are what we could call conventional institutions; a human being (or many human beings) started them and put them in place. On the other hand, to call something a natural institution implies that the institution was established or put in place by nature, not people. Now, remember that when considering if a behavior or activity is natural, we must consider the nature of the subject which undergoes the activity. An institution likewise is evaluated according to its subjects. The subject of marriage is, of course, the human being; I argue here that marriage is a practice that is rooted in and also fulfills human nature. This is why we say marriage is a natural institution.

Aristotle explains in his *Politics*[4] why the impulse to marry is a natural one. Men and women, like all other animals, desire sexual union with one another. This desire goes hand-in-hand with the fact that men and women in partnerships take care of each other and look out for one another. Each bring different strengths to their relationship that make their individual lives better. They help each other to live a good life. Of course, when a man and a woman become one in the sexual union, they have the potential to create new life. To nurture, protect, and educate their offspring is another natural impulse of the male-female relationship. This impulse is, of course, present not only in men and women, but also in most animals to various degrees. So, insofar as human beings are animals, they are inclined to sexual union and inclined to care for their offspring.

At this point one might object: but what do these things have to do with marriage? No other animal declares its love before a priest or a judge! And what about things like marriage licenses, wedding rings, and wedding ceremonies? It seems like people had to make a conscious decision to institute these practices, so they can't be natural. St. Thomas is helpful in answering this question. He says:

...the begetting of offspring is common to all animals. Yet nature does not incline thereto in the same way in all animals; since there are animals whose offspring are able to seek food immediately after birth, or are sufficiently fed by their mother; and in these there is no tie between male and female...; In man, however, since the child needs the parents' care for a long time, there is a very great tie between male and female, to which tie even the generic nature inclines...[5]

The institution of marriage arose in men and women in virtue of the complex and long-lasting needs of human children. Human beings are born in an incredible state of vulnerability; They cannot even walk on their own two feet for almost a year. Their demands are intense and constant. It does not take a highly developed intelligence to discern that human children need their parents.[6] Penguin mates do not get married, but neither do their children expect to move back in with them after college. Further, while it is true that people created and instituted certain marriage customs, we might say that these customs are actually just the expression or manifestation of a much more basic and foundational reality: the impulse to marry rooted in human nature. The customs surrounding a wedding are accidental to the essence of marriage. So, while the institution of matrimony and its various customs does not simply arise through nature, it is because of the human being's rational and free nature that the institution exists.

Can you think of other examples of natural institutions? Stay tuned for our next post on the sacrament of matrimony!

[1] Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1603. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops–Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Part One; Part Two; Part Three

[4] Politics I.1.1253a30.

[5] ST Suppl., 41, Ad.1, Co.

[6] Children raised in intact married families are more likely to attend college, are physically and emotionally healthier, are less likely to be physically or sexually abused, less likely to use drugs or alcohol and to commit delinquent behaviors, have a decreased risk of divorcing when they get married, are less likely to become pregnant/impregnate someone as a teenager, and are less likely to be raised in poverty. ("Why Marriage Matters: 26 Conclusions from the Social Sciences," Bradford Wilcox, Institute for American Values, www.americanvalues.org/html/r-wmm.html)

What is Sacramental Marriage?

1/17/20

In the last post, we discussed marriage as a natural institution. We explained how marriage is rooted in human nature—meaning that marriage is not a purely conventional, political, or social institution, but a natural one; one that human beings are made for.[1] In today's post, we are going to build upon our discussion of natural marriage, looking specifically at the Catholic Church's teachings on both natural marriage and sacramental marriage—marriage between two baptized Christians, elevated by Christ to the level of a Sacrament.

Recall from our last post that marriage is a natural institution because it is a practice instituted by nature itself. If we believe that God is the author of nature, then it is God who created the human being to be the kind of being that procreates sexually and whose offspring require parental involvement for their entire lives. Therefore, by creating man and woman in this way, it is God who instituted marriage. Marriage is written into His plan for creation, “written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator” (CCC, 1603).[2] Further, the Catholic Church teaches that God created the natural institution of marriage to be permanent. This is simply an acknowledgment of what love means—we do not say “I love you until the end of the month,” but rather “I love you forever.” This is why the Catholic Church recognizes even the marriages of non-baptized men and women as valid, lifelong, and binding, as long as certain basic elements are present. Why must all valid marriages be regarded as lifelong and binding? The natural impulse to marry is inextricably linked to the procreation and education of children. Children have the natural right to know their parents. So, it follows that a lack of permanence in marriage would do harm to the children.

It is in virtue of marriage's natural permanence that the Catholic Church rejects the practice of divorce. The Church follows what Jesus Christ says about marriage in the gospels. In response to the Pharisees, who ask him whether a man is ever permitted to divorce his wife, Jesus says, “from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and ... the two shall become one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let not man put asunder” (Mk 10:5-9; cf. Mt 19:4-9; Lk 16:18). Here, Jesus tells us (1) that divorce goes against the natural order of creation and God's plan for mankind, and (2) that marriage is permanent, in accordance with the natural law— “what God has separated let not man put asunder.”

Of course, divorce is a complicated topic that deserves a more detailed discussion than this post allows, but don't worry: we will re-visit it in another post!

Now, Catholics not only believe that God instituted natural marriage, but also that Christ elevated the natural institution of marriage to a sacrament, into a sign of His love for His Bride, the Church, and a source of sanctifying grace. Through the sacraments we receive in our soul the supernatural life of Christ and are helped on our journey to heaven. Now, the graces conferred in each Sacrament differ with respect to the ends of the Sacrament received. As such, the sacrament of marriage infuses the spouses with graces that are "intended to perfect the couple's love and to strengthen their indissoluble unity" (CCC, 1641). Jesus makes marriage a vehicle for grace, and "the grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity, and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life" (CCC, 1661). A quality willed by God from the beginning (permanence) takes on a new meaning—pointing to the union of Christ and the Church. As Cardinal Müller explains, "Through the sacrament, the indissolubility of marriage acquires a new and deeper sense: it becomes the image of God's enduring love for his people and of Christ's irrevocable fidelity to his Church."^[3] In other words, the marital relationship is modeled on the relationship between Christ and his Church, and the love of the spouses reflects the love that God has for us. It is no mere reflection, however. The marital relationship, enriched by its special gifts and graces, is "merged with the divine" and uniquely manifests and participates in God's divine love.

While not diminishing the importance and beauty of the spousal relationship in itself, we must remember that this intimate spousal relationship is essentially ordered to the procreation of children. The husband and wife unite totally in the conjugal relationship, body and soul. This is another way that the marital relationship is "merged with the divine": to be open to life is to participate in God's own love and creative work. The spouses' openness to children is an expression of their love for each other and of their cooperation in God's design. In this way, we see that the natural purposes of marriage, the good of the spouses and the begetting of offspring, take on new meanings when elevated to the level of a sacrament; aided by grace, the married couple, by loving and giving themselves to each other, participate in the love of God himself.

[1] See "Why is Marriage a Natural Institution?"

[2] All references to the Catechism taken from: Catechism of the Catholic Church, Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops–Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000.

[3] Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller . Testimony to the Power of Grace: On the Indissolubility of Marriage and the Debate Concerning the Civilly Remarried and the Sacraments. Vatican: the Holy See. Rome, 23 Oct. 1965. Web.

Chastity: The Married and the Single Person

3/6/20

What is chastity? Some think that to be chaste means simply to abstain from sex or sexual behavior. This misunderstanding perhaps stems from the fact that we most often hear about chastity vis-à-vis our dating relationships, wherein practicing chastity means to restrain our sexual desires out of respect for our partner and out of respect for the gift of sexuality itself. Or, we might even have been led to believe that sex in itself is wrong and dirty. However, while chastity certainly involves bodily restraint, chastity is much more than just bodily restraint, and chastity in no way supposes that sex is bad.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that Chastity is “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being” (CCC, 2337). The Catechism explains that chastity protects the powers of love and life (see CCC, 2338). In other words, the virtue of chastity helps us protect ourselves and others since it frees us to live our sexuality according to our state in life.

All people, whether they are single, dating, married, or consecrated (lay or religious), are called to a life of chastity. Married couples integrate their sexuality first by respecting themselves and God’s design for marriage. They live their individual gifts of sexuality by generously giving of themselves to each other as they vowed—faithfully, permanently, and open to life. Spouses protect the unitive and procreative nature of the conjugal embrace by keeping it whole and holy. That means that they reject contraception, sterilization, and abortion. When needed, chaste married couples use Natural Family Planning (NFP) to attempt to either achieve a pregnancy or postpone one. The chaste married couple mutually grows in their respect for each other, cherishes their gifts of sexuality and fertility, and never violate each other, their marriage, or God’s gifts. Chaste married couples reject anything that would harm these gifts adultery, contraception, abuse of any kind, including pornography.

Clearly, then, the virtue of chastity is not merely a prohibition against sex, or else married people would be called to a life of abstinence! Rather, chastity is the right ordering of our inherently sexual nature and the proper expression of sexuality in our everyday lives. But you might be thinking: What about unmarried people? What does it mean for single people to integrate their sexuality in life without engaging in sexual acts? Indeed, one might object that to integrate sexuality into one’s life without engaging in sexual acts

presupposes the very definition of chastity that we are rejecting: if “integration” for single people just means “not being sexual,” then to be chaste must mean, simply, to abstain from sex.

However, this objection assumes that the terms “sexuality” and “sexual acts,” have the same meaning, limiting the scope of sexuality to mere genital expression. As Dr. Theresa Notare, the assistant director of the bishops’ NFP Program notes,

“Today’s culture insists that genital activity is the most important aspect of human sexuality. This view holds that people have a need to be satisfied genitally in whatever manner makes them happy....This utilitarian view of human sexuality and sexual relations sees human sexuality as limited to the genital and treats the sexual partner as nothing more than an object to be used. It offers a greatly diminished understanding of human nature.”

Put differently, we must not assume that to be sexual means to engage in sexual activity. All people belong to one sex or the other; all people are born male or female. To be a man or to be a woman is to live one’s sexuality. If we grant that our sex influences the way that we think, act, and relate to other people, then our biological sex is integral to the way we behave in our daily lives. If we consider that human beings are by nature social creatures that seek community with others, then we see that there is an inextricable link between how we fulfill this aspect of human nature with the fact that human beings are essentially gendered. In the context of our social nature, the biological reality of sex and procreation takes on a deeper meaning. Notare is helpful again on this point: “Within the context of human nature, pro-creation also speaks of our need to be in relation to each other—to build family, to have community. If we hope to live in a sexually mature way, our basic challenge in life is to integrate our sexual feelings with all other aspects of being human.”

This emphasis on the interpersonal aspect of human sexuality is what Karol Wojtyla deemed a personalistic approach rather than a sexological approach to sexual ethics. By personalistic sexuality, Wojtyla means that sexuality is, primarily, a term for the relation between the sexes; the conjugal act itself is understood in context of the former.[4] By contrast, the sexological approach to sexual ethics places the conjugal act at the heart and center: we understand human nature in terms of sex, not sex in terms of human

nature. This personalistic expression of our sexuality is especially clear if we remember that the virtue of chastity should be understood in relation to theological virtue of charity or love. Love is not merely a sensual or psychological phenomenon whereby we desire another person insofar as they give us pleasure. Rather, love is willing the good of another and seeing them as a whole person in themselves, not as an object for us.

By understanding sexuality as, primarily, a social relation between people of the opposite sex, we can see how the single person's sexuality is no less than the married person's. It is tempting to think of marriage as the fulfillment or culmination of sexuality, that everyone's sexuality is incomplete or lacking until it finds expression in the conjugal act. This is not true. It is especially important for the single person to realize that their sexuality is not diminished because they cannot have sex. The single person's sexuality is not merely a diminished or immature form of married sexuality. Rather, the single person's sexuality is good in itself because it is an expression of the more fundamental reality of sexuality: the interpersonal relation between men and women. Without downplaying the significance of the marital union, getting married and having sex is just one way of expressing this interpersonal relation.

For the single person, every time you treat someone of the opposite sex with kindness and respect—that is a chaste expression of your sexuality. Every time you express your unique, God-given strengths and gifts (especially in a way that benefits your community)—that is a chaste expression of your sexuality. Every time you thank God for your sex and revere the different but complementary aspects of men and women—that is a chaste expression of your sexuality.

[1] By “unmarried,” I mean dating or even engaged couples, as well as lay or religious people who have taken vows of celibacy. While the vow of celibacy is a unique way of expressing the call to chastity (in effect, one consecrates his/her life to a nuptial relationship with God), and while the celibate person practices chastity in an importantly different way from the single person who hopes to marry, the broader question with which I am concerned is: what does it mean to be a sexual person while abstaining from sex?

[2] Theresa Notare, "Sex and the Single Person," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, April 3, 1998, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/abortion/sex-and-the-single-person.cfm>)

[3] Notare, "Sex and the Single Person."

[4] Karol Wojtyla, "The Problem of Catholic Sexual Ethics," in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, vol. 4 (Peter Lang, 1993), 282.

Catholic Marriage: Infertility vs. Impotency

4/24/20

I'll admit it: at one point, I was confused about the Catholic sexual ethics of infertility. On one occasion, I was having coffee with a secular friend who asked me all kinds of questions about what married couples could and could not do, Josephite marriages, the difference between infertility and impotency, and even bizarre hypotheticals like "what if one of the spouses developed a disease that made having sex fatal for six months?!" While I can't promise that this post will answer that last question, hopefully it will make the Church's teachings on impotence and infertility a bit clearer.

The Catholic Church teaches that those who are impotent—that is, those who are incapable of having sexual intercourse—cannot marry. (I know, to the modern ear, like my friend, this might sound odd and even harsh). Because procreation and unity are the two natural ends of marriage, and because both of these ends are fulfilled in the sexual embrace, it follows that the sexually impotent cannot marry. As per the Code of Canon Law No. 1084, §1: "Antecedent and perpetual impotence to have intercourse, whether on the part of the man or the woman, whether absolute or relative, nullifies marriage by its very nature." By "antecedent" and "perpetual," it is meant that one cannot be impotent either before marriage (antecedent) or permanently during marriage (perpetual);^[1] this means that one is considered impotent if they cannot have intercourse at all or if they cannot have intercourse specifically with his or her spouse.

It is important, however, to clarify what being impotent does not mean. Impotence is not infertility. While impotence means the inability to have sex, infertility means the inability to conceive children. Thus, impotence and sterility/infertility are not the same. The Church does not consider infertility as an impediment to marriage, and married couples who suffer from infertility have marriages just as natural and valid as those who are able to conceive children.

But one might object: how can an infertile couple fulfill the procreative end of marriage if they cannot conceive children? In answer to this question, the Church maintains that a couple can be infertile but nonetheless remain open to life. How can this be, knowing that their marital embrace will not result in conceiving a child? If we remember back to our earliest posts on the meaning of nature, we established that human beings possess a distinct human nature, one impulse of which is an inclination to procreate. Like all

mammals, human beings are endowed with the complimentary sex organs in order to carry out this task. These sex organs have an end or a purpose: to facilitate procreation.

Sometimes, there is a defect in the sex organs that makes the fulfilling of this end impossible: if the sex organs are constructed such that a man and a woman cannot properly unite, then this would be a case of impotence. However, sometimes the impediment is not due to the functionality of the sex organs, but due to other factors that make conception impossible. In other words, if a couple is capable of having intercourse, then they are still capable of using their sex organs for their natural purpose, even if they know that the procreative end of the sex organs cannot be achieved.

We encounter these kinds of scenarios in our day-to-day lives all the time. For instance, it does not betray the natural end of the digestive organs to eat one when is not hungry. I can enjoy a piece of cake even if I know it won't nourish me because eating in general is the natural function of my digestive system. The fact that my body is not nourished by the cake does not mean I have done something wrong. However, imagine now that I eat an inordinately large portion of cake for the express purpose of purging it later. This would be an abuse of my digestive organs, if I intentionally used my organs for a purpose contrary to their nature.

In this way, couples who affirm the natural end of the sex organs while struggling with infertility are nonetheless open to life despite for some reason not being able to have children. They do nothing to make intercourse sterile but give themselves to each other as they are. By having intercourse, the couple affirms the natural end of procreation in itself. They affirm that the sexual embrace between husband and wife is naturally designed for the procreation of children. We can think about it this way: an infertile couple may know with almost complete certainty that they will not conceive a child. But the infertile couple is still open to life in the sense that if, against all odds, sexual intercourse did lead to conception, the married couple would be open to this new life. Why? Because this is what sexual intercourse was designed to do.

This is also the same logic behind Natural Family Planning. Unlike the couple suffering with infertility, a married couple may decide that a certain time is not practical for conceiving a child, so they reserve intercourse to the infertile time when conception is unlikely. However, the married couple is still open to life in the sense that if they were to

conceive a child during this time, they would nonetheless be open to children. They do nothing to sterilize an act of intercourse by abstaining from sex at that time.[2]

Again, couples that struggle with infertility are no less open to life than couples who have no problem conceiving, and their marriages are no less valid or fruitful. As St. Pope John Paul II said in a message to infertile couples in a 1982 homily, “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.”[3]

In our next post, we will continue to discuss infertility and the licit methods for treating it. We will see that some methods of treating infertility, even certain technological ones, are perfectly licit, while others are gravely immoral.

[1] By the way, this comment is merely a logical distinction. It in no way affirms that people ought to have sexual intercourse before/outside of marriage.

[2] The same logic is behind Josephite marriages (an extremely rare example). If a married couple decides (together!) that they are called to abstain from intercourse, this does not render their marriage invalid, since they are still capable of having intercourse and are thus open to life. The Josephite couple recognizes and affirms the natural end of the sexual embrace, and it is still an integral part of their marriage even if they are not actively trying to conceive children

[3] Pope John Paul II, “Homily at the Mass for Families During the Apostolic Pilgrimage to Nigeria, Benin, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea” (Rome, 13 February 1982)

http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1982/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19820213_onitsha-nigeria.html

Treating Infertility: In Vitro Fertilization

6/1/20

In our last post,[1] we discussed the difference between infertility and impotence, stressing that infertility is not an impediment to marriage and that infertile couples can still be fruitful and open to life. We ended our last discussion by considering the fact that some methods of treating infertility may be perfectly acceptable and even praiseworthy, while others are seriously immoral. In this post, we will consider one such treatment: In vitro fertilization (IVF). While it has become a commonplace treatment for infertility, IVF is not compatible with the ends of marriage nor the human good as such.

So, what is IVF? In vitro fertilization is the process by which several human eggs are aspirated from a woman's ovary, mingled with her partner's (or someone else's) sperm, and then grown in a petri dish (in vitro is Latin for "in glass"). When conception takes place, the embryos are then implanted in the woman's womb in the hope that at least one of the embryos will survive. This process is gravely immoral for several reasons.

First, IVF bypasses the conjugal act between husband and wife. The embryo is not "generated" through an act of love; instead, it is "generated" through a highly controlled laboratory procedure.[2] The doctors and lab technicians are the agents of conception, while the husband and wife merely supply the sperm and egg, the necessary "ingredients." The husband and wife watch the conception of their child "from a distance," so to speak, and the act of conception thereby becomes a thoroughly un-intimate and impersonal process.

Secondly, the means by which the "ingredients" for IVF are obtained are gravely immoral. The sperm is often collected by masturbation, which is in itself a serious abuse of the reproductive organs and an act of unchastity. It is not uncommon that clinics provide pornographic materials to those providing sperm samples. In this way, pornography and masturbation become normalized, viewed as a part of a medical procedure. Furthermore, if the man who provides the sperm is the woman's husband, masturbating (especially with the aid of pornography) is also an act of adultery.

Thirdly, because the doctor aspirates multiple eggs from the woman's womb, multiple embryos – each a human life – are grown in the petri dish. The doctors and technicians generate multiple embryos because they know that most if not all of the embryos will die inside the womb. Many women also freeze extra embryos, which are often disposed of later. These extra embryos exist as “insurance” in the event of embryonic failure, but they are not valued in themselves; they are not seen and cared for as the individual human lives that they are. Because the conception of a human life is the goal of IVF, participants may feel that they view human life as extraordinarily valuable. In reality, however, IVF is radically anti-life. When multiple embryos are generated, the participants are full of hope and value each embryo as a “potential human being.” When an embryo dies, however, it becomes “useless,” and the participants suddenly cease to view the embryo as valuable. After the process is complete, they may convince themselves that only the successful embryo was a human being all along. There are also cases in which multiple embryos are successful, but the husband and wife only want one child. This is called “selective reduction.” In this case, the participants may choose which of the babies they want, and the doctor then kills the “extra” or “undesired” babies.

The participants of IVF essentially deem some embryos human beings and not others; they only care about the successful embryo, but they do not effectively value human life as such. And if more than one embryo is successful, some participants may also arbitrarily decide which baby is worth keeping. In both cases, the participants think their personal discretion is what determines whether the embryos or fetuses are human beings.

In a word, IVF reduces the procreative end of marriage to a technical process whereby many human lives are discarded. Rather than elevating or helping the natural process of conception, IVF eliminates it. The husband and wife's desire for children, while natural and praiseworthy, does not justify the immoral means by which they achieve this end. With this being said, we cannot understate the inherent dignity and value of children conceived through IVF. All children, regardless of how they were conceived, are made in the image and likeness of God. However, the means by which a child is conceived may not always respect the child's right to be born of a loving marital act of a husband and wife.[3]

[1] Infertility vs. Impotency

[2] Check out this Church document for a more detailed discussion of this point. “The child has the right to be conceived, carried in the womb, brought into the world and brought up within marriage: it is through the secure and recognized relationship to his own parents that the child can discover his own identity and achieve his own proper human development. The parents find in their child a confirmation and completion of their reciprocal self-giving: the child is the living image of their love, the permanent sign of their conjugal union, the living and indissoluble concrete expression of their paternity and maternity.” Also check out this list of resources from the USCCB on reproductive technology.

[3] Check out *Life-Giving Love in an Age of Technology*, esp. 13-14.

NFP and God's Design for Married Love

7/21/20

It's National Natural Family Planning (NFP) Awareness Week! In this post, we continue to discuss what it means to be "open to life." Last time, we discussed a fertility "treatment" that is contrary to the good of the spouses and the good of human life: In vitro fertilization. This month, we're going to switch gears and talk about Natural Family Planning, the only authentic way of family planning that respects God's design for married love. We will explore what makes Natural Family Planning "natural" and why it is oriented towards the good of the spouses and their children.

What is NFP? NFP is a term that encompasses certain methods of family planning that can be used to achieve or avoid conception naturally. NFP methods are based on observing the naturally occurring signs and symptoms of the fertile and infertile phases of a woman's menstrual cycle.[1] This is one sense in which NFP is "natural": NFP does not rely on drugs, devices, or surgical procedures to plan or prevent pregnancy. In another sense, NFP is natural because it complements and supports God's design for human nature and God's design for marriage, which is written into human nature itself.

Let's take a closer look at the nature of marriage and God's design for married love. Marriage is both a natural and a supernatural reality. [2] This means that marriage is written into God's creation, "in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator" (CCC, 1603) , and that this natural relationship has been elevated by Jesus Christ to a sacrament. Marriage is a sign of God's love for His Bride, the Church, and it is a source of sanctifying grace.[3]

The marriage bond is a lifelong and indissoluble commitment. In marriage, man and woman are united as one flesh, one heart, and one soul. At the heart of the one-flesh union is the sexual embrace. The spouses integrate God's gift of human sexuality into their relationship by giving themselves to one another entirely. This entails that the married couple be open to children. The married couple recognizes that sexual intercourse is "ordered ... toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children" (CIC, c. 1055 §1) . The good of the spouses is called the "unitive" end of sexual intercourse, while the "procreation and education of children" is called the "procreative end." It is crucial that these two ends or purposes are not severed or separated from each other.

How does NFP work in harmony with God's design for marriage? NFP acknowledges that the human body reflects both the unitive and procreative ends of marriage. Man and woman's bodies are complementary; only a man and a woman, through their distinctive otherness that is ordered to each other, can fully unite in the conjugal embrace. NFP also affirms that our reproductive systems were designed for a distinct end or purpose: procreation.[4] NFP is designed to support this reality, and its methods do nothing to interfere with the purposes of our reproductive organs. To prevent or postpone a pregnancy, a couple that practices NFP will abstain from sexual intercourse during the wife's fertile window. By contrast, a couple that uses contraceptives prevent pregnancy by deliberately inhibiting the proper purpose of their sexual organs.

Deliberately inhibiting conception is different from consciously limiting intercourse to one's infertile window. A couple that practices NFP may decide that now is not the right time to have another child but still want to experience the unity and intimacy of sexual intercourse. This is a good thing! Limiting sexual intercourse to the times when conception is unlikely does not mean that they have rejected the procreative nature of sexual intercourse. Because the couple has consciously accepted that God's design for marriage entails the procreation and education of children, the NFP-practicing couple effectively say to themselves, "We are not trying to have a baby right now, but if we were to conceive we are open to that life!" By contrast, a couple that uses contraceptives (so that they can have sex at any time) separates the unitive and procreative ends of the marital act as if to say, "I only want the pleasure and intimacy of intercourse right now, and an openness to children is not part of this experience."

NFP educates the married couple to consider not only their own relationship and personal desires, but also those of their children! This is called responsible parenthood.[5] Planning one's family responsibly does not simply mean avoiding pregnancies; rather, it is about encouraging couples to make decisions about the size of their families in ways that benefit the spousal relationship and the spouses' relationship with their children.

NFP also helps the married couple to strengthen their sacramental marriage bond, and it strengthens their receptivity to the special graces that they receive. The Church teaches that "Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state" (GS, no. 48) . NFP requires

communication and cooperation between husband and wife. By practicing NFP together, the married couple grows in intimacy, communication, and perseverance while learning about God's design for both the human body and for married love. NFP is designed to help the married couple fully integrate into their lives God's design for marriage.

During this year's NFP Awareness Week, let us continue to celebrate the truth and beauty of God's plan for married love! To learn more, read the NFP FAQ's, the USCCB's "What We Believe" on Love and Sexuality, check out the Made for Love Podcast, or visit the FAQ's on the Marriage: Unique for a Reason website.

[1] <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/>

[2] To read more about natural marriage: [Why is Marriage a Natural Institution?](#)

[3] To read more about the sacrament of marriage: [Sacramental Marriage](#)

[4] To read more about human nature and natural ends: [Nature Part One, Part Two, Part Three, Part Four](#)

[5] <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/what-is-nfp/responsible-parenthood.cfm>

Reflecting on the Nature of Marriage Series

8/31/20

We began the “Nature of Marriage” blog series by discussing the basic philosophical concept of nature: why? For the past year, we have discussed the Catholic Church’s teachings on marriage, sexuality, and the family – tackling some tricky ethical questions in the process. Just to name a few, we have discussed the ethics of contraception, divorce, chastity, and in vitro fertilization. It was the purpose of this blog to explain how a proper understanding of human nature is essential for answering such questions. As Catholics, we believe that human nature is the grounding for certain truths about the human person. For instance: that mankind was created male and female, that the human being is ordered toward procreation and family life, and that the human being is by nature a social creature. It is impossible to understand what is good for us, our families, and broader society without knowing who we are and who God designed us to be.

One idea stressed in this blog was that the human being holds a unique place in the whole of God’s creation. Today, it is common to appeal to “nature” without considering the uniqueness of human nature. That something occurs “in nature” does not necessarily mean that it is good for us. There are many activities that may be natural to, say, a beaver, bird, or fish that are not natural for human beings.

Our human nature is the standard against which we judge whether or not an activity is good. In fact, the ability to deliberate about activities is a defining trait of human nature. Human beings are not mere animals but rational animals. Natural reason means, among other things, that we have the ability to guide ourselves in our actions and lead a good life.

But, as Catholics, we believe that human nature is caught up in the divine. What does this mean? First, consider the fact that human beings are the creation of a wise and loving God. We are able to recognize that each and every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. From this, we know that each and every human person has inherent dignity and deserves to be treated as such. Second, we believe that all human beings naturally seek God Himself insofar as human beings naturally seek the truth, desire to understand their place in the world, and wonder about what they must do to be

a good person. In the words of Pope Saint John Paul II, “No one can escape from the fundamental questions: What must I do? How do I distinguish good from evil? The answer is only possible thanks to the splendour of the truth which shines forth deep within the human spirit...”[1]

St. Thomas Aquinas, whose ideas we discussed in this blog series, also recognizes the certain divine quality of human reason. St. Thomas teaches that God designed human reason pre-programmed, so to speak, with the basic moral principle to do good and avoid evil. This is written into our human nature. The predisposition to seek goodness is a way in which we “participate in the wisdom and goodness of the Creator” (CCC 1978). Interestingly, then, the division between the natural and the divine is not so cut and dry. This blog has sought to explain that Catholic moral teaching on the issues of marriage and family life is founded upon the notion that mankind was created by God for a unique purpose and that God cares about who we are and what we do.

Of course, this blog didn’t and can’t cover every issue pertinent to Catholic moral teaching, and new challenges face us every day. But I hope that this blog laid a foundation for approaching a wide array of ethical questions that one may face as a Catholic person in the modern world. To reiterate the introduction to this blog series: it is more important than ever to understand and promote the true nature of the human person and the true nature of marriage. It is more important now than ever to remember that nothing in God’s creation is arbitrary, that (in the words of Aristotle) “nature does nothing in vain”—to remember that not only is marriage unique, it is unique for a reason.

[1] Pope John Paul II. Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 6 August 1993. http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html