

Love means more.

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

About the World Meeting of Families 2015 Catechesis Series:

The USCCB is excited about the World Meeting of Families (WMOF) being held in Philadelphia in September 2015. We are presenting a series of short articles focused on the WMOF Catechesis Love is our Mission: The Family Fully Alive and its implications for our daily lives.

Created for Joy

11/20/14

By Sara Perla, Secretariat for Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

The first chapter of the WMF Catechesis focuses on the universal call of love. Each of us is “created for joy” and the Lord desires us to be with Him forever. He wants us to be happy!

Pope Francis’s *Lumen Fidei* [LF] is quoted here: “Promising love forever is possible when we perceive a plan bigger than our own ideas and undertakings, a plan which sustains us and enables us to surrender our future entirely to the one we love” (no. 52). Many people today doubt the possibility of love lasting until death. They fear the risk of taking a vow; of committing themselves to an unknown future. It is, at its root, a crisis of faith. Do I believe in God? Do I believe He loves me? Can I, because of God, have enough faith in myself and in another person to say “yes” forever?

Flannery O’Connor wrote that faith is “trust, not certainty.” It comforts me that we can start small when we are practicing trust. In my relationship with God, I have needed many small steps of trust before undertaking any bigger leaps. The hard part, I find, is the seeming dissimilarity between human friendship and friendship with God. In human friendship, trust is built up as each person comes through for the other over time, but in

our relationship with God, it's more an act of conforming ourselves to Him and His will—because He is always there for us, just not always in the way we want or expect.

I trust God because He proved His love for me on the Cross—not because He gives me what I want when I want it. Likewise, I expect that when I, God willing, come before God to marry a man that I love, I will trust that man not because he conforms to my idea of who he should be, but rather because he has been given to me by God who is trustworthy. “God’s love is basic to our identity, and more fundamental than any anxieties, ambitions, or questions we may have” (LF, no. 16).

I have been created to love in trust: I have been created for joy!

“The Best Way”

12/22/14

By Theresa Notare, PhD, Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

My mother met my father as a teenager. They dated after high school. When he returned from the Korean War, they married. Like most Catholics at that time, they quickly had four children. As we grew older, and much to my mother’s embarrassment, my father liked to boast to us that they followed the Church’s teaching on birth control. Also he soberly added that there was only one choice in life, even when it came to sex—to follow God’s will and commandments. It wasn’t always easy, he said, but it was the best way.

My father was not theologically sophisticated, yet instinctively he understood God’s design for love and marriage. Dad “got it.” He knew in his heart that every man and woman has an inherent dignity. This understanding shaped his spousal relationship with my mother. The witness of my parents continues to speak to my heart of what it means to be made in God’s image and how that reality impacts the nature of married love.

These thoughts about my parents’ marriage filled my mind when I read Chapter Two of the official catechesis for the 2015 World Meeting on the Family. The theme is about God’s mission of love and how it is revealed in the conjugal relationship. To be made in God’s image speaks both of God’s invitation to share in His life and of the inherent gifts that God gives to each man and woman. The capacity and the vocation to love, just like God, is the foundation for all of human life. It is essential for marriage. And, the conjugal embrace is caught up in God’s divine plan of married love and life.

Scripture and Tradition reveal that God created marriage to be a life-long union between a man and a woman marked by fidelity, permanence, and fruitfulness (see The Code of Canon Law, §1055, *Humanae vitae*, no. 9). Marriage is a radical call to love like God.

When a man and woman become one flesh in marriage, sex is, by its nature, both unitive and procreative. Procreation is the invitation by the Lord of life to share in the wonder of conceiving children. This is why the Church teaches that children are the supreme gift in marriage (see *Gaudium et spes*, no. 50). This is also why the Church teaches that “when

married couples deliberately act to suppress fertility...by using contraception” they deny “part of the inherent meaning of married sexuality” and actually do harm to their unity (see Married Love and the Gift of Life, USCCB, 2006). This may seem like a hard saying in today’s world, but the burden is lifted when we realize who we are as made in God’s image and God’s vision for married love.

In one of my many conversations with my father, he once admitted that sometimes he had to go to his room, shut the door, pray and remember why he loved my mother. Doing the right thing, even with someone you deeply love, is not always easy. Both he and my mother lived their joint mission of married love, and my siblings and I knew that we were the primary recipients. We saw their joy, playfulness, and reverence for one another.

In the last years of his life, my mother nursed my father through a long illness. My father died at home in my mother’s arms. His last words to her were that she was the love of his life. Their love was easy and passionate. At times it was hard and sacrificial. They chose the best way, they lived God’s mission of married love.

The Meaning of Human Sexuality

1/15/15

Sara Perla, Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

As we continue to prepare for the World Meeting of Families, this month we reflect on the meaning of human sexuality, covered in chapter three of the catechesis. This chapter focuses on the meaning of the physical world for spiritual persons. Our bodies, in particular, speak of the human being's call to love. As noted in paragraph 43, referencing the Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Woman, sexual difference reveals the spousal call of the human person and is not merely functional for the continuation the species. The catechesis goes on to remind us that "man and woman are willed for each other" (no. 44) and that "we are never self-sufficient" (no. 45). There are two concrete ways of living out the call to love as a vocation: marriage and celibacy for the Kingdom of God.

At the end of college, I was privileged to see the complementarity of these two states in a visible way. My friend Erika got engaged her junior year. For most of us, it was the first engagement of a friend, and at the bridal shower we giggled as we played shower games for the first time and ate finger food. A few of the women at the shower were among a (strikingly high) number from that graduating class who entered religious life. Natalie and Terri, two of that number, told us about the different parts of religious habits that they would embrace while we were discussing Erika's wedding dress and their hopes for children.

I wondered if the wedding would make Natalie or Terri sad, since they would never have one, and all little girls dream about their weddings. While there may have been pangs that were hidden from view, they both seemed to enjoy every minute of the wedding weekend. They sang and danced, gathered flowers, prayed with Erika, and were generally just "normal" bridesmaids. After celebrating Erika and Todd and watching the happy couple drive away, the rest of the crowd gathered for a final party.

When I look around at that scene in my memory, I am overwhelmed by God's goodness. Natalie and Terri have become vowed religious in two different communities, and two of the young men became priests. Three other women at that party entered religious life, but discerned they were not called to it after a few years. Many of the group married and

have children. It has been over ten years now since that party, and there are no divorces, no broken vows. In an unusual way, my friends that summer gave me concrete examples of being willing to give your life completely back to Christ in marriage or in celibacy for the Kingdom, for life.

“Two Become One” Takes More than Romance

2/5/15

Theresa Notare, PhD, Secretariat for Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

One of my married friends likes to say that marriage is an unrelenting demand to put others first. That's because marriage is the union where a man and a woman –“the two”—become “one” (see Gn 2:24). Self-giving is at the heart of marriage. Chapter Four of the catechism for the 2015 World Meeting of Families (WMOF) shines a light on this biblical teaching.

Love, as many would agree, is central to marriage. “Married love,” however, is “more than romance” (no. 55). It's not that romance is bad; it's actually quite good, even exhilarating. It's just that romance does not represent the full reality of love. Romance is only a tiny fruit of love, more like the frosting on a cake. Love, as God intends for marriage, is more.

Married love calls husband and wife to move out of the tight confines of their individual egos and blend their lives, hopes, dreams, and desires. Marriage requires that spouses share the unique gifts of their masculinity and femininity. The Church recognizes marriage as a vocation. It is a specific call from God to love in a nuptial manner, that is, in a way that builds the one-flesh union and is in service to life.

Living married love well is not automatic. Husband and wife will need to rely on God's grace and consciously cultivate and live the Christian virtues, especially mercy and chastity (no. 62). It may be easy to see how mercy is part of marriage. After all, forgiveness is essential to all good relationships, especially marriage! The benefit of chastity, however, may not be so clear. The WMOF Catechism offers a helpful thought: “Chastity forms the good habits of self-denial and self-control, which are prerequisites for treating others with mercy” (no. 62). We can understand this benefit of chastity more deeply by looking to the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

The chaste person maintains the integrity of the powers of life and love placed in him [which]... ensures the unity of the person, it is opposed to any behavior that would impair it. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2338)

Chastity is that virtue which protects the whole person. It fosters respect and ensures that people do not treat each other as objects. Chastity helps people understand the meaning of human sexuality and the gift of procreation. It enables husband and wife to love each other with respect, joy and reverence since it assists in sexual self-control. It enables spouses to speak the nuptial language of the body (a language of total self-gift and openness to life).

Chastity fosters generosity. It helps spouses avoid any action that would assault their persons or the nature of marriage. So, for example, the chaste couple does not use contraception or pornography. Contraception falsifies the nuptial language of the body and assaults the gift of fertility, while pornography degrades their persons and mocks God's design for married love.

In considering the nature of married love it is important to remember my friend's words—marriage is an unrelenting demand to put others first! The nature of married love insists that husband and wife give themselves to each other, selflessly, totally, and for the whole of life. Building a strong marriage is a life-long process and the human ego can be difficult to tame. That's why practicing the Christian virtues can be helpful to ensure that "the two" will "become one!"

Parenting with the Strength of God

3/3/15

By Tim Roder, Secretariat for Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

“Parenting is demanding” (no. 79). I don’t know anyone who would disagree with this statement. In fact a typical response, even from an adolescent, would be, “No kidding!” As a parent (father), of many children, the word “demanding” often seems like an understatement. Parenting is not for the faint of heart, nor is marriage. Marriage and children are great gifts, and can bring untold joy, yet they do not come without their challenges. St. Francis de Sales wrote: “The state of marriage is one that requires more virtue and constancy than any other: it is a perpetual exercise of mortification.” Of course I do not want to dis-sway anyone from getting married and having children, but I think it is good to be aware before going into it. Before you get married, you should humbly recognize that you and your future spouse cannot make marriage work all on our own, but instead see that “with God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26). Christian marriage and family life is about being open to “God’s grace in daily life ... even in the midst of fatigue and domestic chaos” (no. 79). It is indeed in those very moments, of the ordinary, mundane, little, and the seemingly insignificant circumstances of life, that we as parents are able to experience “divine love” in a way that is unparalleled.

My wife and I had two children, and greatly desired another. After several months of “trying,” we were elated with the wonderful news that my wife was pregnant. This elation was soon replaced with intense anxiety from numerous threats of miscarriage. My wife was put on bed rest for the first three months because that seemed to be the only way to maintain the pregnancy. It was a stressful time for me, balancing care for her and our two young boys, keeping the house relatively clean, and working full time. But all of this became grace-filled. Those months, and others like them, served as a constant reminder to me and my wife that, as St. Paul taught, “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10). I found myself often meditating on the preceding verse, “My grace is sufficient, my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). I knew that I could not do it on my own. As an imperfect parent I certainly “need help and strength from God, family, parish, and friends” (no. 80). My wife and I received this aid through great outpourings in the least expected ways, from meals to babysitting to—my favorite—friends who cleaned our home for us. These memories are treasures we share with our children and hope they pass on to theirs. How will you allow your domestic routine and life be “places where the Spirit shines through” (no. 80)?

Eventually my wife was taken off bed rest, the pregnancy progressed nicely and we were blessed with the birth of our third son—who had to be induced, somewhat ironically, two weeks past his due date.

All Love Bears Fruit

4/1/15

By Bethany Meola, Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

All love bears fruit: this is the theme of chapter six of the World Meeting of Families catechesis.

Fruitfulness is part of the very definition of love: “It is the nature of love to overflow, to be life-giving” (USCCB, *Marriage: Life and Love in the Divine Plan*, p. 13). True love is never closed in on itself, seeking its own interests. Instead, love goes out, seeking the good of the other.

This truth about love – that it is always fruitful – is particularly meaningful for married couples like me and my husband, who have not, so far, been blessed with children.

Every child is a living, breathing, walking, talking billboard proclaiming loud and clear: “Love Is Fruitful! Marriage Is Fruitful!” According to St. John Paul II, children are a “living reflection” of their parents’ love (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 14). And yet a child – the “supreme gift” of marriage – is not the only fruit of married love.

In fact, the first fruit of marriage is the marriage bond itself (*World Meeting of Families catechesis*, no. 105). When my husband and I said “I do” on our wedding day, a new family was born. In that moment, we were no longer two individuals, but became a union – a “we” – shaped by and also striving toward God’s own way of loving: total, faithful, and fruitful.

What does the fruitfulness of a childless marriage look like? In many ways, the same as that of a marriage with children: spousal love expressed in many different ways, such as forgiving each other after being hurt, making small daily acts of generosity, praying together, affirming each other, and opening our home to those in need of community.

One difference is that we are relatively more available for acts of service and hospitality than are couples raising children (WMOF catechesis, no. 103). For example, my husband and I look after an elderly widow without local family. We bring her groceries every week and check in frequently. And we're involved in various ministries in our local church. Could we do this if we had children? Possibly. But the fact is, our time is not taken up (rightly) by the needs of children. And on the flipside, we need people to serve, to live out our marital fruitfulness in concrete ways!

And then there is the profound, and often hidden, fruitfulness of suffering. Every marriage – and every person – will travel through the “valley of tears” at some point. The world may say that suffering is sterile, but Jesus teaches us the opposite: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (Jn 12:24). Jesus also said, “Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit” (Jn 15:5). True sterility, then, is not the absence of children; it is the deliberate closing off of one's marriage from the fruitfulness of the Holy Spirit and openness to the will of God.

May we all live “in active readiness for God's will” as it unfolds in our own lives (WMOF catechesis, no. 102) so that we can be the “rich soil” ready to receive the word of God “with a generous and good heart” and bear much fruit: “a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold” (Mt 13:8).

The Celibate Life: An Encounter with Beauty

4/15/15

By Madeline Watkins, Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

The beauty of a life of chastity is the answer to a culture that has normalized “hooking up,” sex before marriage and cohabitation. Young adults have been inundated with the message that chastity and celibacy are outdated, unattainable, and even abnormal or unhealthy, but this is simply not true.

I want to focus on one of Pope Francis’s favorite words – “encounter” – as the remedy to this cultural problem. When we encounter authentic beauty, it strikes a chord deep within us, or as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said, it “wounds” us (check out Benedict XVI’s 2009 Meeting with Artists for more about that). The world is in need of an encounter with Christ, the truly Beautiful One, who “fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22). The world needs Christians to show the joy and beauty of the Gospel, the true freedom found in following Christ and His teachings. This is the way to reach young people who accept the cultural norms without reflection—showing them concretely what the alternative is, and that it is better.

As the WMOF catechesis says, celibacy includes “not only priests and vowed religious, but all those who are chaste outside of marriage....” (no. 99). I had a profound encounter with people living this way through the Catholic student center on my college campus. The fruit of the love and life of the priests, sisters and lay students I met there was unmistakably good. Their joy was palpable, attractive and infectious. As the WMOF catechesis states, “the possibilities for life which young people find imaginable depend on the examples they see and the stories they hear” (no. 108). I am grateful to God for placing these witnesses in my life in my college years, for my encounter with them opened my eyes to the incredible vision of the human person that the Church gives us and invites us to live.

I think also of my life the past few years as a 20-something and the friendships I have been blessed to have, and I recognize with great gratitude how fruitful they have been through His grace. To have a group of friends who are intentionally trying to live virtuous lives as they discern their vocations, and who support one another through prayer and

fellowship, is an incredible gift. Single young adults need this type of healthy community, “an alternative space” (no. 101). Weary of what the impoverished culture has offered us, my friends and I desire more in and from life: more depth, authentic beauty, love, joy and freedom, and this is what we have each found in Christ. Encouraging one another in our relationships with Christ helps us to walk with the Lord toward whatever vocations we may be called to down the road.

The experience of encounter is necessary for understanding something different from what we know. My encounters with those who are celibate in the family of God, be they religious or lay faithful, have encouraged me in my own journey to follow Christ more fully, and to pray for the grace to be a faithful witness to Christ and his Church through virtuous living. Celibacy is truly a beautiful way of life that demonstrates that the richness and depth of a life lived with Christ is what we all desire and are made for.

Light in a Dark World

5/1/15

By Bethany Meola, Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

The images of light and darkness have long been used to convey the contrast between good and evil. Light is a prominent theme throughout Scripture, starting with the very third verse: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'" (Gn 1:3). Jesus described himself as "the light of the world" and said, "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8:12). Christians are described as "children of [the] light" (Lk 16:8, Jn 12:36, Eph 5:8, 1 Th 5:5).

In contrast, darkness is used to represent chaos ("The earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss" [Gn 1:2]), Hell ("Cast him into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth" [Mt 22:13]), and the antithesis of Christ's Kingdom ("He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" [Col 1:13]).

Perhaps the most gripping way light and darkness is used in Scripture is the depiction of the Final Judgment, when God "will bring to light what is hidden in darkness" (1 Cor 4:5). This verse answers the question: Who would prefer darkness to light? Who would rather have the black of midnight rather than the glowing light of dawn? Precisely the person who wishes his or her deeds to remain secret and in the shadow of darkness. "People preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil" (Jn 3:19).

All sins seek darkness and hide from the light. One of those sins is pornography, usually coupled with masturbation. Both are addressed in chapter seven of the World Meeting of Family catechesis, and for good reason. By any measure, pornography use is widespread, including among Catholics and married persons. And despite the claim that pornography is harmless fun ("adult entertainment"), it is clear from both testimony and research that pornography harms the user, his or her spouse (or future spouse) and children, not to mention the men and women used and degraded in its making. As the WMOF catechism says, "Pornography catechizes its consumers in selfishness, teaching its users to see other people as objects to satisfy our appetites" (no. 121).

Pornography thrives on darkness and secrecy. The Internet promises anonymity; users tend to hide their habit from a spouse, fiancé, or romantic partner; young people seek hidden places to look at it. This shame and the desire to hide from the light should tell us something.

But there is hope. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1:4). For those who are struggling with pornography use or addiction, Jesus brings healing. In the Sacrament of Confession, what is hidden in darkness is exposed to Christ’s merciful, healing light. There are also many ongoing supports available to men and women who want to live in the light of chastity and true love, not the darkness of sin and lust.

One of my favorite movie scenes is in *The Two Towers*, the second part of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The exhausted company of men, elves, dwarves and hobbits is on the verge of defeat. They have been battling all night and the army of Orcs is bearing down with renewed force. And then, the dawn breaks, and there on top of the ridge is Gandalf the White with a new regiment of riders. The embattled defenders are filled with joy and the tide of the battle turns. At dawn, hope comes anew. “His mercies are new every morning” (Lam 3:23).

Why the Church Does Not (Cannot) Endorse So-Called Same-Sex “Marriage”

5/15/15

By Tim Roder, Secretariat for Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

Advocates of same-sex “marriage” can only make a case for its recognition by “premising marriage as mainly erotic or emotional satisfaction” and not as a social institution for the sake of uniting a man and a woman to each other, and children to their parents (134). Emotions run deep on this subject.

As the catechesis *Love is Our Mission* points out, the truth about marriage has been obscured in our culture so much so that it is barely recognizable. As contraception, sterilization, abortion and divorce have become socially accepted and even commonplace, accepting same-sex sexual relationships seems a “plausible next step” (134).

Once the core elements of marriage are separated—the unitive and procreative purposes—the line of what counts as a marriage is easily erased and redrawn. What’s morally acceptable becomes whatever people are comfortable with, or whatever “two (or more) consenting adults” agree on. Once established, this relativistic view is difficult to uproot.

Six adults raised by two people of the same sex submitted amicus curiae briefs at the U.S. Supreme Court in support of man-woman marriage laws. I find the stories of these men and women compelling because they witness to the truth of the human heart: every person has an innate desire to know and be raised by their own mother and father. Children suffer when this does not happen, even if it is for a very good reason. We know this not only from these six people, but also from the experiences of adopted children, children of divorce, and children of artificial reproduction. These experiences and situations are not the same, but they do show us that whenever possible, children should be with their own mother and father in a stable, loving home.

The witness of these six adults and of others points to the deeper question: What is marriage? The only definition of marriage that upholds the dignity of the child is the

union of a man and a woman—a union grounded in sexual difference and open to life. Even when the gift of children is not possible due to infertility or age, marriage does not lose its meaning.

Marriage in society is not about affirming adult romantic desires; it's about bringing men and women together to become fathers and mothers of the next generation and recognizing the contribution that spousal love offers to society.

As a Sacrament, marriage is further about drawing men and women close to Christ in a mutual gift of self that mirrors and participates in His relationship with the Church.

A Home for the Wounded Heart

6/23/15

By Paul Jarzembowski, Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

While working as a young adult minister at a parish several years ago, I had the opportunity to meet a married couple in their late 20's at our summer Theology-on-Tap series. They wandered into the event, uncertain of what to expect, and, because they did not know any other young adults there, quietly slid into a booth near the back of the restaurant. Noticing their uneasiness, I discreetly sat next to them so that they would have someone to talk to. After some pleasantries and basic introductions, I asked them what brought them there ... and eventually I found out that they were struggling with a number of issues: economic uncertainty, living from one paycheck to the next, but also infertility and frustrating relationships with their parents and extended families.

I have no recollection of who spoke at Theology-on-Tap that evening or the topic discussed, but I do remember that couple. Hearing their story, listening to their concerns, and inviting them to stay in touch in the weeks, months, and years afterwards was the important part of the night for me. It is a blessing to my ministry that I still hear from this couple to this day.

It was this incident that came to mind while I read chapter eight of *Love Is Our Mission: "A Home for the Wounded Heart."* It reads, "To grasp the Church's ministry of teaching correctly, we also need to consider her pastoral nature," reminding us of Pope Francis' beautiful image of Church as "a field hospital after battle" (no. 151). The young couple I met had been going through a hard battle against economics, infertility, and family strife – and they sought refuge at their local young adult gathering.

Their story is not unlike other young couples' stories—or indeed, singles as well. From debt, careers, and economic crises to abuse (verbal, physical, psychological) and neglect, as well as feelings of inadequacy, depression, and difficulty balancing time, many young people(single, dating, engaged, and married alike) are struggling – often hiding their angst in public. Yet in the midst of their woundedness, they are seeking Christ.

The couple I met that summer night was wounded. They came to Theology-on-Tap to get away from their problems for an evening, but had no one approached them, those same struggles would have been unchanged the next morning. When they walked in, I was tempted to talk their heads off with all the great opportunities waiting for them at the church – but something told me to shut up and listen. And that made all the difference in the world.

Every couple, whether they are dating, engaged, or married for many years, has a story – and all are wounded in some way, even beaten down by a variety of frustrations. To be a home for the wounded, sometimes it is best to simply listen, to offer them refuge from the pain and angst, and to share the presence of Christ Jesus, who says to them and to all of us in our struggles: “Come to me ... and I will give you rest.”

Mother, Teacher, Family: The Nature and Role of the Church

7/22/15

By Dr. Andrew Lichtenwalner, Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

What's in an Image?

The ninth chapter of the World Meeting of Families preparatory catechesis, "Mother, Teacher, Family: The Nature and Role of the Church," begins in the following way: The Church has institutional forms because she must work in the world. But that does not exhaust her essence. The Church is the Bride of Christ, a "she," not an "it."

What do we think of when we hear the Church described as "Bride" and "Mother"? What's our first impression? Does it have anything to do with us?

My mom and dad raised me in the Catholic faith and encouraged a love for the Church from my earliest years. I don't recall them speaking about the Church as "Mother" at home the way they talked of God as "Father," but I think they conveyed that sense to me very naturally and practically in the way they lived the faith—love for Christ and love for the Church go together.

I remember during grad school coming across the work of Henri de Lubac, a French Jesuit theologian who was later made a Cardinal by Pope St. John Paul II. De Lubac had a great love for the image of the Church as Mother. In seeking to perceive and grasp the nature of the Church, his personal experience led him to describe in a simple, childlike way "the first of all words: the Church is my mother." He said that the two words "Mother Church" (*Ecclesia mater*) express "the very reality of Christian life."

How can the very reality of Christian life be conveyed by calling the Church our Mother? Because the Christian life is conceived and generated by her and lived in and through her. There is no Christian life without the Church.

To call the Church our Mother, which Pope Francis himself has done on many occasions, is not a mere pious expression or sentimentality. Christian discipleship hinges on the Church being our Mother, and the Church is only Mother because she is first the Bride of Christ. Encountering and following Jesus depends first and always on grace, which we receive from the Lord through the Church. The Church can only be fruitful in discipleship and truly a Mother if she is united to Christ, close to Him as His Bride. Without Him, we can do nothing.

The Church was loved into existence by Christ. The Fathers of the Church saw the Church being formed like the New Eve, drawn out of the pierced side of Christ on the Cross. The Church is not a haphazard byproduct or afterthought of the saving work of Christ but the intended fruit of Christ's mission of redemption manifest with the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The world was created for the Church, the Bride of Christ, who as Mother would be the place of re-creation and regeneration in the Spirit.

In other words, Christ and the Church are inseparable. A Christian artist has expressed it well, saying that in Christ's words: "You cannot care for Me, with no regard for her. If you love Me, you will love the Church."

The image of the Church as the Bride of Christ, in addition to the image of the Church as the Body of Christ, powerfully conveys the mystery of the intimate union between Christ and the Church. The image of the Church as Mother conveys the fruitfulness that comes from being united in and with Christ. These images not only concern us but are about us. We are the Church in a real way. We are called to bear Christ to the world. As St. Augustine said to encourage Christians to live up to their identity: Be the bride.

As sinners, we know that we are in need of grace and do not always live up to the gift of holiness which marks the Church. The images of the Church as Bride of Christ and Mother encourage us to "press towards the mark" and to understand Christian discipleship as inseparable from loving the Church.

Even if we haven't given the images of the Church as Bride of Christ and Mother much thought before, if we love the Church as Christ does, we are already living those images.

Choosing Life

8/19/15

By Dr. Theresa Notare, Secretariat for Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

Happiness in life requires courage and work. Happiness comes at a price. Want to play the guitar like a rock star? You will have to take music lessons and practice for hours daily. Want to have a strong, lean body? You will have to eat healthy food and exercise regularly. The list is endless. Hard work and sacrifice are a prerequisite to true, mature happiness.

As people of faith, we know that happiness arises from living a life that is in harmony with God's will and leads us to fulfill our purpose. Chapter Ten of the catechism for the World Meeting of Families highlights this when it says that: "God made us for a reason... to love as He does" (no. 189). When we "understand that love is our mission," this truth will "shape many other areas of life" (Ibid.). This can be clearly seen in marriage and family which, when founded on Christ, is a school of love.[1]

The vows in a Catholic marriage speak of the self-gift that the husband and wife make to each other in Christ. This requires "dying to self" as the two put aside "I" to become "we." Married love, including its sexual expression, is holy. When lived in accord with God's plan, conjugal love should "reverence God's vision of human sexuality." [2] This requires that the couple trust in God's plan for their marriage, including whether and/or when they are able to have children. It may also ask for courage since Catholic couples will have to reject contraception which does harm to God's design.

Many married Catholics do not realize the deep happiness that they can have in their marriages when God is at the center of everything. They can express God's love for one another while they also honor His design, including their sexual lives. Sexual intercourse, as willed by God, is a holy time for husband and wife. It fortifies their union and is the worthy place for receiving new life. Honoring God's will does not mean that couples can't regulate the number of children in their families. When they need to postpone or avoid pregnancy, they may continue to honor God's design by practicing one of the methods of Natural Family Planning (NFP).

NFP methods respect God's gift of fertility by learning about it in a thoughtful way. No drugs or devices are introduced into the conjugal act; rather, the bodies of both man and woman are fully respected in their life-giving potential, and "listened" to. If a couple needs to avoid a pregnancy they refrain from sex when they are fertile. When they realize that God may be calling them to have a child, because of their knowledge of NFP they would also know the best time to attempt a pregnancy. This, of course, takes study

and practice (most NFP methods require charting the signs of fertility). All NFP methods also require self-discipline since periodic sexual abstinence is the NFP means to avoid pregnancy. This can be very difficult, but it is doable with the help of grace and the habit of self-discipline which is common to all virtues.

When couples persevere in learning and using NFP, they reap many benefits. All NFP methods are effective for both attempting to achieve or avoid pregnancy. They are also good for the body since no devices or drugs are used. In fact, NFP methods are the "organic" way to live with human fertility—they do not pollute the environment. Most importantly, NFP methods teach married couples to understand their bodies and to communicate with each other about their fertility and their relationship. These conversations can foster deeper couple communication that can improve their relationships. NFP research confirms this benefit showing that NFP couples feel respected by their spouses.[3] NFP helps married couples commit to real happiness—the deep happiness of living life according to God's plan!

[1] See the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1657.

[2] Committee for Pro-Life Activities, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Human Sexuality from God's Perspective, *Humanae vitae* 25 Years Later," (1993); available at: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/catholic-teaching/upload/Human-Sexuality-from-God-s-Perspective-Humanae-Vitae-25-Years-Later.pdf>.

[3] L. VandeVusse, L. Hanson, R. J. Fehring, A. Newman, J. Fox, "Couples' views of the effects of natural family planning on marital dynamics," *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 35, no. 2 (2003):171-176.
