

► Sunday, December 21, 2008, Fourth Sunday of Advent

II Sam 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16; Ps 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29; Rom 16:25-27; Lk 1:26-38

Week #18: Main Theme: Openness to life and the use of natural family planning.

In the Gospel today, Mary embodies the heights of Christian existence in her encounter with the angel Gabriel: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your Word.” Mary’s total surrender to God the Father’s wise and loving will may seem impossible for us, but we cannot be happy outside the path that leads to such holiness. Vatican II insists on the centrality of the call to holiness for Christian life. Holiness is doing the Father’s wise and loving will in every action of our lives: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done.” It is the Father’s will to carry out His eternal plan of loving goodness for the salvation and happiness of every single human being. It is the coming of Jesus that accomplishes this “mystery kept secret for long ages.” God calls us all to share His undying happiness. Who wouldn’t desire to follow this noble calling? But we have been taught by the culture of consumerism and sexual libertinism to settle for less—for much, much less. It’s scary, after all, to surrender our desires to God and trust that He will take care of us, trust that He will fulfill all our desires according to Truth and Love in a measure far beyond our most extravagant dreams. But it is precisely such a surrender that leads to the coming of the Kingdom in our hearts. God makes this surrender possible for us through the profusion of graces given in the sacraments. By God’s grace, we can say Yes to God, as Mary says Yes. This openness to God the Father’s will for our more abundant life allows His very Word to transform our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what the Father makes available at every sacrifice of the Mass. When we receive Jesus in the Eucharist worthily, our hearts grow in the power of true love. Mary’s Yes was the gate through which the Kingdom of God’s love became incarnate. We should remember to pray that she may form our hearts with a mother’s care so that we may be open to the life-giving action of the Trinitarian God in every aspect of our lives.

Husbands and wives, in particular, are called to surrender their bodies to God, to let him into the bedroom, so to speak. Can we trust that God’s will for our sexuality and our fertility is meant to bring us to happiness? The Church teaches us that we must be open to life in our sexuality if we are to be truly happy. Every act of sex says something: it says, “I love you forever, and I am willing to have children with you.” That is because sex, according to God’s wise design, is oriented to two things, babies and bonding (as Dr. Janet Smith puts it). God’s designs are always for our happiness; to go against His design for human nature is to go against our own happiness. Does God expect a baby from every single act of sex? Of course not! We know this because a woman is only fertile for about a week every month, and God made women that way! Sex, in other words, can be *non*-baby-producing; it doesn’t have to result in a baby every time. But it can’t be *anti*-baby-producing: we can’t tell God, “I won’t follow your plan for linking babies and bonding. I’m going to have sex while deliberately blocking the baby-producing aspect through contraception.”

So what if you have serious reasons, prayerfully considered, for seeking to avoid pregnancy at this time? In the design of the female fertility cycle, God has given couples a way to enjoy the full benefits of sexual bonding while avoiding pregnancy, by limiting sexual activity to the time in which a woman is not fertile. Then sex is *non*-baby-producing, but it is not *anti*-baby. This method is called Natural Family Planning, and it is about 98% effective when used for the purpose of avoiding pregnancy, as effective as the Pill but without the side-effects. A built-in feature of NFP, which indicates its harmony with God’s design, is that it strengthens marriages. Did you know that only about 2% of NFP-using couples divorce, compared with around 40% of the general population? Continence during that week or ten days around the time of female fertility can be challenging, but there are always rewards for living in accord with God’s wise will. Advent is an especially fitting time to recommit ourselves to living according to the Father’s wise and loving will—to living as faithful citizens of His Kingdom, which comes in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

[Note to homilists: It is possible that parishioners might inquire how NFP (when used to avoid pregnancy—NFP can of course also be used to achieve pregnancy) differs from contraception, because couples using either may have the same intention (to avoid having children at this time). One response would be to focus on the moral quality of the acts themselves, not on the intention to avoid having children, which may be perfectly reasonable. NFP involves continence (during the fertile time), which is not wrong; and sex (during the infertile time), which is not wrong. Neither act severs the two meanings of sex, babies and bonding. Sex with a contraceptive is a different act: it deliberately severs the two meanings of babies and bonding. No matter how good the intention, evil means cannot be used: good ends cannot justify bad means. For those who insist that NFP and contracepting the conjugal act are the same kind of thing, one might suggest good-humoredly that they try NFP, if it is simply the same thing as using contraception!]

Bulletin quote: “Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents.”

Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, #50

Suggested bulletin insert: “The Benefits for Marriage of Cherishing Fertility”