

“ALL NATURAL”

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

“GOOD FOR THE BODY. GREAT FOR THE SOUL!”

National Natural Family Planning Awareness Week

July 19-25, 2015

Rev. Robert Richard Cannon, MA, Med, MTh, JCL, Diocese of Venice

SUNDAY HOMILY NOTES

Note to homilists: The text that follows is to provide you with broad content as you consider how you would like to integrate Church teaching on marriage, conjugal love and responsible parenthood and the methods of Natural Family Planning into your homily. This text is not meant to be proclaimed in its entirety, although you may choose to do so. Each paragraph was designed to be complete. The text can easily accommodate additional homiletic content of your design.

Sunday July 19, 2015

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

First Reading: Jeremiah 23: 1-6

Responsorial Psalm: 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6

Second Reading: Ephesians 2:13-18

Gospel: Mark 6:30-34 (107)

Preliminary thoughts

As human beings, we rely on each other. We interact in layers upon layers of relationships, separated, as one study suggests, by only six degrees of separation. In fact our very lives depend, each day, on a huge number of people that we may never meet personally. Because of our dependence on each other, every level of human life requires a component of faithfulness and trust. When we purchase food that says it's certified organic, we trust that it is an all-natural product. In the readings that we have just heard, underlying each one of them contains wisdom about faithfulness, trust, and relationship. In fact, the constant social and moral teaching of the Church is based on Jesus' command to love and care for our neighbor as He has loved us.

Keep in mind these thoughts as we begin the celebration of National Natural Family Planning Awareness Week. During this week, July 19-25, the bishops in the United States ask us to shine a light on Church teaching regarding marriage, conjugal love and responsible parenthood, and the moral means to plan a family—the methods of Natural Family Planning. “Trust” and “faithfulness” are at the heart of these teachings. In addition, married couples need to know that following God’s plan for their married lives is best for them. As the subtheme of the 2015 slogan says, NFP is “good for the body” and “great for the soul!”

First Reading: Jeremiah 23:1-6

The Lord God would gather the flock and appoint new shepherds to care for it.

The prophet Jeremiah, in our first reading, uses the noble image of the good shepherd defending and caring for his sheep as the backdrop by which to judge the conduct of the rich and famous of his day. The immoral shepherds, the political and religious leaders of his time, had abandoned their responsibilities and betrayed God, demonstrated by the exploitation and sufferings of the poor and blatant idolatry. They had become unmoored from their faith in God. For all intents, they were living and acting like unbelievers. The country was falling apart. An invader was ready to destroy Jerusalem. Yet, they were preoccupied with enjoying the good life at the expense of the nation, abandoning the dictates of conscience, turning a blind eye to the needs of their neighbor. To make matters worse, prophets were proclaiming lies of assurance, “Don’t worry. All is well.” They knowingly deceived the people, rather than speak the truth, in order that they might convince the wayward to turn back to God and reform their lives.

In contrast to these self-serving shepherds, Jeremiah offers a vision of hope to those who felt forsaken, disheartened, and abandoned in the land, when he proclaims, “God will raise up a righteous shoot.” God will rise up a caring shepherd. When he appears, the people will be able to shout out with joy, “God our justice.”

Psalm: 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6

The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

The Psalmist reminds us that with a relationship of complete trust in God and in His faithful and providential care, we are able to face the ups and downs of life with deep inner peace and fearlessness. We can say with the Psalmist, “The Lord is my shepherd. There is nothing I shall want.” This interior posture is important for us all. It is especially necessary in marriage where husband and wife are called to be attentive to God’s plan for their marriage. This attentiveness includes a central gift in marriage—children.

Second Reading: Ephesians 2:13-18

For through him, we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

St. Paul, in our second reading, beautifully describes how Jesus has reconciled us with God the Father, not only reconciling us to God, but through his Spirit, we can experience healing of our inner brokenness, and have hope for the healing of all the divisions in the human family.

Gospel: Mark 6:30-34

They were like sheep without a shepherd.

In the Gospel, St. Mark paints the pastoral scene of a large crowd of people wondering almost aimlessly in the countryside searching for Jesus. These forlorn people were like sheep without a shepherd. What were they hoping to find in Jesus? Perhaps they looking for the fulfillment of their deepest hopes and yearning or someone to lift them up and make lives seem worth living. Today, so many people are wondering through life, much like the people in the Gospel, searching and seeking meaning in their lives. They had questioning hearts like us all.

What is beautiful in this passage from Mark and in similar passages in the gospels is the transforming impact that Jesus had on people when they met him. By His compassionate, personal, passionate, presence, words and example, they felt different. They experienced a profound change in themselves. Perhaps they had a renewed sense of faith and trust in God's love. Maybe they caught a glimpse of the verdant pastures of truth and meaning promised by the prophets, wherein they could say with confidence once again, the words of the psalmist, "The Lord is my shepherd." In His person, Jesus made God's love touchable—real.

Sadly, there are millions of people who have not had a personal experience of Jesus. Jesus seems distant, remote, if not irrelevant to them. He is someone that they have heard of but do not know personally. Rather than wondering through fields, they surf the internet seeking answers to any question with a couple of clicks or taps on a smart phone, filling their days with activity and white noise morning to night, trying to satisfy their deepest longings of the heart with activity, entertainment, and what's trendy. Continually, people are immersed and beset 24/7 by secular ways of thinking, judging, and acting that leaves little or no room for God.

In a recent survey of young people, 27% say that they have never attended a religious service. Twenty-five percent in the survey identified themselves as religious, but without any particular religion. Part of this trend is placed on virtual communities of friends or interest groups. Organized religion goes against their individualism.¹ Some social commentators suggest that we are in a post-Christian period of human history.

Pope Francis lays much of the reason for this social trend on
*The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience.*²

So what are we to do?

¹ Twenge J. M., Exline J. J., Grubbs J. B., Sastry R., Campbell W. K. (2015) **Generational and Time Period Differences in American Adolescents' Religious Orientation, 1966–2014.** *PLoS ONE* 10 (5): e0121454. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0121454

² Pope Francis, *Evangelium vitae*, (*The Joy of the Gospel*), no. 2.

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, which I encourage all of you to read (you can download it free from the Vatican website), Pope Francis began his first encyclical by stating that each Christian must have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Simply having knowledge of him in the abstract is not enough. For each person, this personal encounter with Jesus is different, but the result is the same. Without this personal experience of Jesus, discipleship is hollow. But, when a person comes to know Jesus personally as Lord and Savior something miraculous happens. Their lives are transformed.

In our day and time, the evangelical call to reach out to those with the joy of the Gospel, who do not know the person of Jesus, is as important as at any time in human history.

St. John Paul II set a wonderful example of engaging the world with the joy of the Gospel. His entire pontificate could be called missionary from beginning to end. He urged each Christian to infuse the joy and love of Jesus into every human endeavor, nook, and cranny of our world. He challenged all people of good will to build a culture of life, especially in marriage and family life, and to work against any disregard for human life.

John Paul II explained how the family is at the heart of society wherein children are formed as persons of faith and virtue. The place where many people first come to know Jesus is in the family. He encouraged all parents to help foster in the home a place wherein love is lived, with spouses shepherding, loving, and caring for each other and their children.

In his Apostolic Constitution *Familiaris consortio* (*On the Role of the Christian Family in the World*), St. John Paul II said,

*It is, in fact, to the families of our times that the Church must bring the unchangeable and ever new Gospel of Jesus Christ, just as it is the families involved in the present conditions of the world that are called to accept and to live the plan of God that pertains to them.*³

When spouses entrust their marital covenant before God, they create a home that is open to life. They begin a family. All of the Church's beautiful teachings on marriage and responsible parenting are aimed at encouraging couples to celebrate and reverence God's vision of human sexuality, life, and love.

This week in July is NFP week. The 2015 theme is "All Natural! Natural Family Planning: Good for the body. Great for the soul!"

To become the best of lovers according to God's design is why the Church supports the various methods of Natural Family Planning (NFP). Couples have a noble vocation to embody God's love in their marital gestures of life and love, for the good of each other, their families, and the larger society. The methods of NFP respect God's design for married love. NFP offers a natural healthy moral choice to steward the gift of fertility and responsible parenting.

³ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (*On the Role of the Christian Family in World*), no. 4.

The Church's beautiful teaching on marriage and responsible parenting stands in stark contrast to the shallow secular understanding of marriage that de-emphasizes children, permanency, and fidelity. The essence of the Church's teaching is to encourage couples to celebrate and join their love with the creative spirit of God, to embody God's love.

In the recently published encyclical letter, *Laudato Sí, Mí Signore (Praise to you my Lord)*, Pope Francis beautifully describes how there is a harmony in creation that points to God himself, which demands our respect as stewards of creation. How beautifully God's design in creation is reflected, when spouses steward their fertility according to God's delicate and profound design for creating life doing nothing to harm or destroy the gift. How deeply sacred is the conjugal embrace, becoming one flesh in mutual support with open hearts and bodies to the life that God would create.

During the last World Youth Day in 2013, Pope Francis encouraged young people:

*[T]o swim against the tide ... to rebel against this culture that sees everything as temporary and that ultimately believes you are incapable of responsibility, that believes you are incapable of true love.*⁴

The Holy Father's encouraging words to youth should encourage us as well. Through the joy of the Gospel, it is possible to "swim against the tide" of our secular culture and not to be seduced by practical secular humanistic values and mores. Enlightened and strengthened by the spirit of Christ, we have the courage to stand up for life, respect for human sexuality, marriage, and family that has been continuously undermined and relentlessly assaulted in a post-Christian secular world. As members of the Body of Christ, we are challenged daily to swim against the tide.

Jesus announced the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of goodness, righteousness, mercy, and love to those who were like sheep without a shepherd. As Jeremiah prophesized, Jesus is the fulfillment of our most heartfelt longing. As St. Paul proclaimed, through the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ, the wall that has separated us from God and each other has been healed. When we encounter Jesus personally, our lives change. In Jesus, we are filled with an inner joy that this world cannot give. Let us renew your relationship with Jesus daily, so that we have the strength and inspiration to live as his disciples joyfully in the world, faithful in our relationship to God and to each other.

⁴ **Meeting with the Volunteers of the XXVIII World Youth Day, 28 July 2013.**

National NFP Week 2015 DAILY READINGS

Monday July 20, 2015

Exodus. 14: 5-18; Matthew 12: 38-42

Throughout salvation history, individuals have questioned God's wisdom. In the Book of Exodus, the Hebrew people complained to Moses about God's plan to save them. In the Gospel, people wanted clear proof of a "sign" from Jesus. Today, there is a tendency to question so much of Church teaching, especially on reverencing God's vision of human sexuality. Related to this, many ridicule the Church's teaching on conjugal love and responsible parenthood. People do not understand that the conjugal embrace is designed to be both unitive and procreative and that contraception and sterilization harm God's plan. They have forgotten that marriage, sexual relations, and procreation are interwoven by God Himself. God is the architect of marriage. In this context, the methods of Natural Family Planning are supported by the Church because they respect God's design for married love.

Petition: Let us pray for all couples who need support to accept God's design for responsible parenting in their marriage.

Tuesday July 21, 2015

Exodus 14: 21-15:1; Matthew 12:46-50

In our readings today, we have the powerful symbol of the outstretched hand. In the Book of Exodus, Moses stretched out his hand to save the Hebrew people from the chariots and charioteers of the pharaoh. They worshipped the God who saved them, because they had witnessed God's power over pharaoh. Jesus, when asked the question about who were members of his family, extended his hand to identify those who do the will of his heavenly Father. We renew our commitment of baptism to follow the Lord every time we pray the Our Father. We pray for the strength to be faithful.

During this week devoted to education about Natural Family Planning, let us open our minds and hearts to the Church's teaching on conjugal love and responsible parenthood. If you have not read the papal letter *Humanae vitae* (Of Human Life) by Blessed Pope Paul VI which beautifully articulates these teachings, visit the Vatican's website to download it. Or go to the U.S. bishops' NFP page on their website at www.usccb.org.

Petition: Let us remember all married couples who are struggling, perhaps considering divorce. May they rediscover their love for each and trust in the hand of God to continually bless their covenant of life and love.

Wednesday July 22, 2015

Exodus 16: 1-5, 9-15; Matthew 13: 1-9

Today, once again we hear how the frustrated, tired and hungry Hebrews lost their faith in God. They were fed up. They were fed up with Moses and with God. Life was tough in the desert. It was so bad that they preferred slavery in Egypt. Miraculously, God supplies food in the middle of the desert. In the gospel, Jesus uses the parable of the sower to provide an example of various degrees of openness to receiving and doing God's will. To follow Jesus takes courage and trust. It requires an open and humble heart to be faithful in the midst of life's struggles. For instance the practice of Natural Family Planning by married couples, takes personal discipline, trust, and real faith to live out this part of the vocation of spousal love. There are many times when the love of celebration is reflected in the love of restraint. Daily faithfulness to God, regardless if a person is single, marriage, or celibate, requires sacrificial love.

Petition: Today, let us remember all of those couples who are unable to have children. May the Lord inspire them to share their love with those who need their love.

Thursday July 22, 2015

Exodus 19:1-2, 9-11, 16-20b; Matthew 13: 10-17

Imagine if you were on of the Hebrews in the desert and had the experience that was just read. It must have stunned all. God was made visible to them in sights and sounds. Scripture scholars call this experience, a *theophany* or a wondrous manifestation of God. In Jesus, the power of God is hidden. Jesus' call to discipleship is an invitation based on love, not fear and trembling. One of the reasons Jesus spoke in parables was to encourage people to be moved by the truth of what he said, not by his power as the Son of God. So much of what we believe as Christians requires a docility of mind and heart that is contrary to the values and ways of this world. This is especially true regarding Church teaching on human sexuality and Natural Family Planning. Yet, this is what spouses are asked to do, to be open to a mystery and a truth that lies below the surface waiting to be discovered.

Petition: Lord God, there are so many ways that we are blind to your presence in our lives. We pray for couples that they may discover the hidden treasure buried in your divine plan for married love. Help more couples discover the beautiful of Natural Family Planning as a wonderful gift that they offer to each other and to you.

Friday July 24, 2015

Exodus 20: 1-17; Matthew 14: 18-23

The phrase, *I am the Lord your God*, was the singular thread that bound the Hebrew people together as a nation. The Ten Commandments was the binding legal structure to form them as a society. In the Old Testament, we see how the betrayal of God's commandments eventually led to the destruction of Israel. The Gospel again describes the blessings to those who are open to doing God's will. Such lives will produce an abundant harvest. Maintaining a mindset to be open to God's will is challenging but it will give us the deepest joy!

Petition: The Ten Commandments are only the foundation of living a life of holiness and goodness. May spouses reflect goodness in all of their actions, to form the lives of their children in virtue. Help them to be faithful to each other and to you.

Saturday July 25, 2015

I Corinthians 4: 7-15; Matthew 20-28

The essence of being a follower of Christ is to admit that we are empty vessels. When we are filled with the Spirit of Christ however, we are able to endure all of the demands of discipleship with a strength that we know comes from the power of God working within us. When we realize that we can do very little on our own, we find ourselves empowered by God. Pride then slips away. We recognize that we are merely servants, our true identity. This was apostolic vocation that St. Andrew learned by following Jesus. Likewise, when we push our prejudices aside to find God's truth, we can lead a deeper life of discipleship.

As we come to the end of National NFP Awareness Week, I would like to challenge you all to take the time to do some reading about the Church's teaching on human sexuality, marriage, conjugal love and responsible parenthood and the methods of Natural Family Planning. Please visit the U.S. bishops' NFP page on their website at www.usccb.org. There you will find all pertinent Church teaching as well as basic information about the methods of NFP.

Petition: Lord may our hearts be humble. Help us to be servants to each other, especially to those in need. Bless all married couples called to support each other as spouses and in their willingness to bring new life into the world as parents in the service of life.