

Family members and friends have learned by experience that when it comes to choosing the shortest line in a grocery store, at the State Fair or on a freeway on ramp, that I tend to choose the wrong line every time. In the end, it does not amount to much of anything, save a little extra time waiting. But in other respects, our choices have much more permanent effects, ones that do in fact count.

In today’s Gospel, we encounter Martha and Mary in a familiar story. Martha is very concerned with details of hospitality and may be likened to the proverbial pragmatic American, while Mary puts aside the details in order to give her full attention to the Person of Jesus. She was rewarded for choosing the better part. Both are admirable qualities, but one was ultimately more important. Today, I wish to speak with you about a key aspect in the Church’s theology of marriage that invites those who are living this sacrament to choose the right part, the better part, the most virtuous path.

Within marriage, there is an essential link between the way in which married couples welcome each other into their lives each day and the way in which they welcome children. Essential to married love is the gift of hospitality. I have met many generous married couples here who are welcoming of new life, even as they acknowledge that this approach requires trust, faith and additional sacrifice, and that it is not always easy. We pastors must acknowledge this reality.

In our first reading, Abraham and Sarah were promised the blessing of a new child by three men who acted as angels of the Lord. The couple welcomed this news, for the birth of a child was seen as a gift. Fast forwarding to the present, have we lost some of this sense of blessing with respect to new life? Without question we have.

I came across a powerful homily from the Archbishop of Louisville who stated: “In the days of Abraham and Sarah, seeing children as a blessing was so simple. Culture and faith supported this as obvious. However, in our own age, the responsibilities of bearing and raising children, true to be sure, have overwhelmed talk of blessing.”¹

To begin with, married couples are invited to see children as a blessing, not a burden– as a gift, not a right. This is foundational. The moment we see children as a right to which we have some claim, rather than a gift, it seems to me we have elevated our estimation of our rights into first place, ahead of children.

Forty-five years ago this Thursday, Pope Paul VI issued a most prophetic document in *Humanae Vitae* in which he laid out the essential rationale behind the Church’s truthful teaching about marriage. Noting that “as experience bears witness, not every conjugal act is followed by a new life²,” he clarified that, “For just reasons, spouses may wish to space the births of their children.”³ The document carefully outlines some of these serious reasons.

The encyclical also warns of embracing a culture in which contraception is seen as the modern day “answer” to all fertility questions, effectively separating marriage from children. In point of fact, it has done tremendous harm to the sacred institution of marriage, and we in the Church must do a much better job providing a solid and healthy formation in the virtue of Christian chastity for our young people, including engaged couples.

¹ Homily by Most Rev. Joseph E. Kurtz, NFP Week July 22, 2007 Archdiocese of Louisville

² *Humanae Vitae*, para. #11

³ If, then, there are serious motives to space out births, which derive from the physical or psychological conditions of husband and wife, or from external conditions, the Church teaches that it is then licit to take into account the natural rhythms immanent in the generative functions...and in this way to regulate birth without offending the moral principles which have been recalled earlier. Cf. *Humanae Vitae*, #16

I desire to share this good news with as many people as possible—despite the challenges, the stability of couples’ marriages who have chosen Natural Family Planning over contraception cannot be overlooked. This may be a great time to take a second look at NFP.

Married couples are not the arbiters of the sources of human life, but rather the ministers of the design established by the Creator.⁴ We in the Church stand ready to help all couples, engaged and married, to see the fullness of the truths of marital love and intimacy, even as we acknowledge that these truths are “sometimes accompanied by not a few difficulties and by distress.”⁵

Abraham and Sarah had great challenges in their marriage, but they responded to God’s call with faith and trust. Their faith was tested severely, as is the faith of not a few of our families today. Sometimes single parents find themselves in situations, not of their own making. Please know of my profound respect for your desire to live the fullness of marriage, and my continued promise of prayers. You are choosing the better portion, and that your fidelity to your vocation is uplifting to me as I seek to live my vocation.

To our young people present, you too must hear of my deepest esteem for your parents who have loved and welcomed new life into this world, including each of you. From their sacrifice you will learn that the pursuit of virtue requires work, that marriage is not an extension of dating, but a life-long commitment that brings tremendous joys, even as it carries its own challenges. Thank them for their openness to life, and reach out to assist them in regard to your little brothers and sisters. May God’s deepest blessings come upon all of our families, and may all remain open to God’s truth in the beautiful Sacrament of Matrimony.

⁴ *Humanae Vitae*, para. #13

⁵ *Humanae Vitae*, para. #1