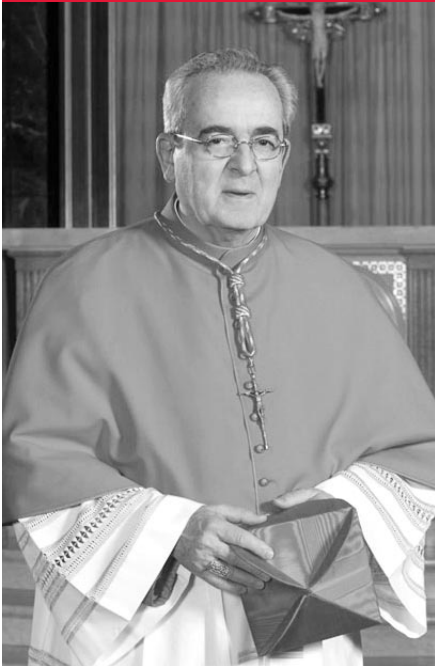


THE FOLLOWING COLUMN ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN THE CATHOLIC STANDARD & TIMES.



**On July 25, 1968,
Pope Paul VI issued
his Encyclical,
Humanae Vitae.
As the Church
prepares to
observe the
anniversary of its
promulgation,
Cardinal Rigali
reflects on the
landmark
document and
the meaning of
married love.**

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

MARRIED LOVE AND THE GIFT OF LIFE

The Gift of Human Love

Human love and all the fulfillment that goes with it are gifts of God. We give thanks for these gifts and for the marvelous way in which we have been created by God. We can call out with David, the Psalmist: “I praise you, so wonderfully you made me” (Psalm 139:14).

The mystery of human love is most clearly fulfilled in the commitment of a man and woman to one another in marriage. Two individuals give themselves to one another using words which are magnificent, poetic and even sobering because of their depth of meaning: “For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death!” In attempting to express this mystery in words, this is about the best we can do. It is the verbal expression of the marvelous interior reality of human love and the covenant two people enter into through the Sacrament of Matrimony.

In the marvel of creation, not only has God put within us the ability to love, He has also given to man and woman the ability to seal that love and commitment through their sexual union. One of the great tragedies of our age is the separation, in the popular mentality, of the sexual act from a commitment of love. This is tragic because it involves the use of our sexuality in a manner that was not intended by our Creator, and so it can never bring the enduring peace and fulfillment that every human person longs for. Even sexual expression within marriage has been affected by this misconception. “Our culture often presents sex as merely recreational, not as a deeply personal or even important encounter between spouses. In this view, being responsible about sex simply means limiting its consequences—avoiding disease and using contraceptives to prevent pregnancy.” In order to affirm, yet again, the intimate partnership between a man and woman found in



marriage, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops adopted and approved for publication the document I just quoted from: *Married Love and the Gift of Life*. Meanwhile the text itself is already available to all at www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/MarriedLove.pdf

Total Giving of the Spouses and Contraception

The ability of a human person to enter into a covenant of love with another person, and seal it with the most intimate of acts, reflects the glorious dignity with which God has endowed men and women from the beginning of creation. The Church reminds us that marriage is more than a mere civil contract; it is a lifelong covenant of love between a man and a woman. The living out of that covenant is meant to be a constant affirmation of the total giving of one to the other as promised in the exchange of marriage vows. In the course of expressing their covenanted love through the magnificent act of sexual relations, the couple also receives from God the possibility of bringing forth human life! In their ability to love one another, they reflect the love implanted in their hearts by their Creator; and in their ability to conceive children they are allowed to participate in the very act of God's creation.

Because these questions involve the natural law placed

within us, as well as the full Christian teaching concerning the meaning of marriage, the Church by her very nature has the responsibility of upholding the truth in its entirety. This is why the American Bishops have decided, yet again, to make clear the Church's teaching concerning contraception in this reflection on Christian marriage. They go on to say: "When married couples deliberately act to suppress fertility...it is no longer fully marital intercourse. It is something less powerful and intimate, something more 'casual.' Suppressing fertility by using contraception denies part of the inherent meaning of married sexuality and does harm to the couple's unity" (*Married Love and the Gift of Life*). I know that, for many different reasons, many of our Catholic people do not fully understand or appreciate the Church's clear teaching in this area. However, many of my brother priests tell me that when couples preparing for marriage have this teaching explained to them in all its integrity, they readily understand its beauty. They realize in the fullness of their human love that to make use of contraception, which means "against the beginning," introduces a false note into their married love. In no way does this mean that this is an easy teaching! A person can read this article but then go out into a society which often presents the exact opposite of

this Christian teaching both in its values and in the ease with which it can ignore this teaching.

False Promises

It would be interesting to do a study of some of the literature issued in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the birth control pill was becoming more available. It came with some promises. This is what they were: 1) Availability of the birth control pill would make every child a “wanted child.” 2) The divorce rate would decrease since couples would be free to express their love within marriage without the “fear” of conception. The very terms that were used, “wanted child” and “fear” should tell us that, as our young people would say: “There’s something wrong with this picture!” The other thing that was wrong was the prediction. I do not need to draw attention here the statistics we can easily observe concerning the failure of these “promises.”

The Church, however, seeks to condemn no one. She seeks only to proclaim and explain the full truth of married love for the good of the individual and of society. Her desire is that individuals freely embrace the truth, not out of fear but out of understanding. Pope John Paul II expressed the truth concerning life and marriage on many occasions. In one of his most helpful summaries, he stated:

“In particular, responsible fatherhood and motherhood directly concern the moment in which a man and a woman, uniting ‘in one flesh’, can become parents. This is a moment of special value to both of them for their interpersonal relationship and for their service to life: they can become parents—father and mother—by communicating life to a new human being. The two dimensions of conjugal union, the unitive and the procreative, cannot be artificially separated without damaging the deepest truth of the conjugal act itself. This is the constant teaching of the Church, and the ‘signs of the times,’ which we see today, are providing new reasons for forcefully reaffirming that teaching. Saint Paul, himself so attentive to the pastoral demands of his day, clearly and firmly indicated the need to be ‘urgent in season and out of season’ (cf. 2 Tim. 4:2), and not to be daunted by the fact that ‘sound teaching is no longer endured’ (cf. 2 Tim.4:3). His words are well known to those who, with deep insight into the events of the present time, expect that the Church will not only not abandon ‘sound doctrine’ but will proclaim it with renewed vigor, seeking in today’s ‘signs of the times’ the incentive and insights which can lead to a deeper understanding of her teaching” (*Letter to Families*, February 2, 1994).

Accurate predictions

In response to the claims and speculation of the 1960s concerning the use of contraception, Pope Paul VI issued the famous encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. In this fulfillment of his pastoral responsibility, Pope Paul VI was called to endure misunderstanding and rejection from many quarters. In maintaining the constant teaching of the Church concerning the openness to love and life, the Holy Father offered some predictions of what could take place as a result of a misuse of the gift of human love and sexuality. In particular, he asked the faithful to consider “... how easy it will be for many to justify behavior leading to marital infidelity or to a gradual weakening in the discipline of morals....[E]specially the young, so susceptible to temptation... need to be encouraged to keep the moral law.” He went on to say: “...it is to be feared that husbands who become accustomed to contraceptive practices will lose respect for their wives. They may come to disregard their wife’s psychological and physical equilibrium and use their wives as instruments for serving their own desires” (*Humanae Vitae*, 17). I am sure Pope Paul VI took no satisfaction in seeing his predictions come true.

What to do?

In this matter, which has such great pastoral significance and is so relevant to our time, it must be made clear that the Church does not expect couples to leave their family size to chance. While the Church encourages couples to take a generous view of children, she understands that serious circumstances may cause them to delay the birth of their children. It is perfectly permissible for couples to make use of the naturally infertile times in a woman's cycle. This is the principle behind Natural Family Planning (NFP) methods, which have been so greatly perfected in recent years. Natural Family Planning does not limit itself to the use of a calendar to predict the fertile time. Rather, it involves observing the clear signs which a woman experiences that indicate the fertile and infertile periods. When used

properly, this method has been so effective for so many people, while at the same time respecting the natural process of the human body. "When couples use contraception, either physical or chemical, they suppress their fertility, asserting that they alone have ultimate control over this power to create a new human life. With NFP, spouses respect God's design for life and love" (*Married Love and the Gift of Life*).

At times, this can certainly be a challenging teaching. Even those who try to be faithful to it may be tempted to give up. We are so proud of the many couples who have faithfully applied this teaching to their own marriage, and who are able to testify how it has helped them to grow in deep mutual conjugal love and to be totally renewed in their commitment to one another. How fortunate we are that many of these couples are willing to share with young people prepar-

ing for marriage what they themselves have experienced in the generosity of their love.

At this time it is useful to recall that Jesus did not limit His message to easy teachings. In the sixth chapter of Saint John's Gospel, with reference to Jesus' promise to give to the world His own Body and Blood, some of His own disciples said: "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" (John 6:60). But, as men and women created by a loving God who has imprinted His love within your hearts, you, dear married couples, are given the gift of expressing your loving covenant in an act of sublime beauty that is meant to be both love-giving and life-giving. As you strive to live faithfully, according to God's law, all the requirements of Christian married love, you can turn to Jesus, as Peter did, saying: "You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

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