

Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A)
St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church
January 23, 2005
Fr. Derek Lappe

First Reading: Isaiah 8:23 - 9:3

Psalm: Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17

Gospel: Matthew 4:12-23

The Gospel of the call of the disciples reminds us that Jesus asks of all of his disciples a radical surrendering of our own desires and wants —a surrendering of our plans and ideas —for the sake of cooperating in his divine plan for the salvation of our souls.

We can imagine the surprise of those first apostles who were busy working their trade, fishing, cleaning and tending to their nets. Into their ordinary workaday life enters the Master with a call for them —Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men. All of their business plans and ideas, everything they had been working toward and hoping to accomplish is suddenly put into the background, surrendered for the sake of following that call. It is a message which is relevant not just to those with the vocation to religious life or to the priesthood but for every follower of Jesus Christ.

It is easier as a preacher and easier as a hearer if, when we talk about surrender to Jesus Christ, if we leave that as a sort of abstract, spiritual, and theoretical sort of surrender. But the fact is that Our Lord does not ask us to follow him just in our minds and hearts, but in our lives in the concrete and real circumstances of our daily life.

One of the places where Christ has addressed that call most insistently is in the area of marital chastity —sadly, it is a message which has often fallen on deaf ears. Thus, I would like to spend some time today preaching about contraception and try to explain why the Church teaches what it does.

In 1968, Pope Paul VI wrote a very brief encyclical entitled *Humanae Vitae* —On Human Life. It was a teaching encyclical simply meant to reaffirm what the Church and what all Christians had always believed about the moral wrongness of contraception. The Holy Father felt it necessary to write at that time for a number of reasons. Two of the most important reasons were these —the first reason was that beginning in 1930 with the Anglicans (and then followed by nearly all the other Christian denominations), protestant communities began to abandon the perennial Christian understanding of the meaning and purpose of marital love. The second reason was to counter certain claims which were being made in conjunction with the advent of modern contraceptives especially the birth control pill and the idea that through contraception and sterilization many of the world's problems would be solved or at least greatly relieved.

Led by people like Margaret Sanger, (<http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/sexuality/se0057.html>) the founder of Planned Parenthood, the world was being told that marriages would be strengthened by relieving the pressure of too many children and relieving the limitations on couples' opportunities to express their love through sexual intimacy. They were also predicting a dramatic decrease in unwanted and problem pregnancies —abortion, we were told, would practically disappear, and women would be freed from the burden of unwanted

pregnancies —child abuse would nearly disappear since every child would be a wanted child —poverty would be no more or severely curtailed by the curing overpopulation.

Paul VI certainly understood the good intentions and legitimate concerns for the emotional and physical well-being of married couples, who at times are overwhelmed by the responsibilities of parenthood —and also the concerns about the problems of poverty in nations where population is densest. Yet in the end, he had to reaffirm what the Church had always taught because contraception was not, and is not the answer to the problems the world faces.

When Pope Paul VI wrote his encyclical he made a number of predictions himself, and when you look at what has transpired over the past 36 years, it is hard to deny the prophetic vision of Paul VI and the wisdom of his teaching. He predicted that artificial contraception would result in lower moral standards, an increase in pornography, sexual activity before marriage, and adultery. He saw the reliance on artificial contraception bringing about a general weakening of marriage and family life. He saw a diminished respect for the human person and an increase in reliance upon abortion as back up for when contraceptive techniques failed. He even predicted what has actually occurred in China with governmental polices imposing abortion, contraception and sterilization.

I would like especially women to consider this quote from Pope Paul: Another effect that gives cause for alarm is that a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection. *(Humanae Vitae #17)*

With the higher and higher numbers of single-parent families, the doubling of the divorce rate to fifty percent, the pornography both on the computer, cable, and prime time, the consistently high levels of teen pregnancy and 1.3 million annual abortions one must at least admit that contraception has not lived up to its great expectations.

Why is that? Or we could ask, what exactly is the problem with contraception and sterilization? Well it comes down to this —God is the author and creator of marriage he made it and gave it as a gift to his creation —it is not ours to recreate or redefine. God is the author and creator of the marital act, he made it and gave it as a gift to his creation —it is not ours to recreate or redefine.

I d'like to use an analogy to illustrate the point. When I was in school in Rome I had the use of an old Ford four-door car. One Christmas three other seminarians and I decided to drive this car to France for vacation. We spent Christmas day in the city of Lyons and then were going to drive north to the city of Ars on pilgrimage to the place where St. John Vianney had spent his life working as a parish priest. We stopped for gas and I asked one of the guys to put gas in the car while I went in and paid, and then we began our trip. But about a mile from the gas station all of the sudden the car just sort of stopped. It was running, kind of, but really rough, sort of rattling. It would go about 15 or 20 miles per hour but that was about it. So I pulled over and asked Jason what he had put in the car —he assured me it was gasoline, but when we drove back to the station we realized that he had put in, not gasoline, but rather a sort of gasoline and oil mix that was meant for motor scooters, not for cars. Our first plan was just to keep driving until we ran the fuel through. But after a drunken Frenchwoman rear ended us we decided that wouldn't work. Then we decided to siphon the gas oil mix out into containers, but that

didn't work, it only resulted in Jason Labbe and I swallowing fuel and throwing up for the next two days. So we finally had to call a mechanic to drain the tank and then refuel with gas.

The analogy is that when Ford manufactured that car, they made it so that it runs on gasoline, if you maintain the car, put gasoline in it, it will function the way that it is supposed to. When you put something else in, like a gas and oil mix, the car might bang along and kind of get there but not without great problems and difficulties. And when God made marriage he created it a certain way. He created marriage to be an intimate communion between a man and woman held together by promises of totality (i.e., it is life-long), fidelity, and openness to children. And he gave them the gift of the marital embrace for the purpose of renewing those vows in a way which is both unitive and procreative —love and life go together. When you exercise marriage and conjugal union in the way that God created them, they work the way that they are supposed to work; when you put try to run them in any other way, it just doesn't work.

God made the sexual act, and it needs to be respected and exercised in the way He intended. In sharing with us the power to give life, He joined it to an intimate expression of self-giving love. To interject a barrier or chemical to separate the act of love from its possible life-giving effect is to tamper with and seriously violate a sacred design of God.

And thus anything, whether it's adultery, pornography, contraception, sterilization, in-vitro fertilization, artificial insemination that is not aiming toward those three goods of totality, fidelity and openness to children, or that separates the loving and life-giving nature of the sexual act is contrary to the divine plan for marriage and sex, as communicated by the constant teaching of the Church.

The common response at this point is then, so what is everyone supposed to do —have twelve children?

Well, no, not necessarily —but, I would say that every couple should have as many children as God wants them to have. There has to be a desire, first of all, amongst couples when making decisions about family size to have the children that God wants them to have, to generously make themselves available as co-creators with God. There does need to be a presumption toward generosity.

However, there are also many good reasons that one might postpone pregnancy as Pope Paul VI points out —physical, economic, psychological factors which might make it prudent for a couple to decide through prayerful reflection to avoid pregnancy.

The last 36 years have brought about great scientific advancement and refinement in Natural Family Planning methods that provide a morally acceptable means for couple to make responsible decisions, while being respectful of the natural link between love and life in sexual intimacy. The scientific effectiveness of Natural Family Planning, when a couple believes it is best for their marriage and family to make choices to avoid a pregnancy is impressive. The less than five percent divorce rate for couples using NFP speaks volumes about how NFP improves a couples communication, intimacy and mutual respect. The many previously infertile couples that have been able to conceive a child assisted by the knowledge of the fertility cycle and hormonal treatments are an important part of the good news of NFP.

When the encyclical was released there was a well-orchestrated protest and condemnation of the Church's teaching by theologians (many of whom have since left

the church) by lay people and even by priests. The problem is that many of the people who have rejected the Church's teaching have never really understood, nor taken the time to understand what the Church teaches or why. Since the time of Pope Paul VI, God has also raised up another great prophet in John Paul II who has spent much of his pontificate teaching on and defending the dignity of the vocation of marriage and the high call to holiness which is made to every married couple. He has been asking that all of you rediscover the great dignity of your vocation to the married life and the sanctity of the marital act as the expression of that vocation.

As St. Paul talks about in his letter to the Corinthians (see Second Reading above), the Gospel is not preached through human eloquence, which I take to mean that it is not my job to convince you of these truths, as if I can convince anyone of anything. It is your responsibility, as disciples and followers of Jesus Christ, to be open and faithful to the teaching of the Church. I'll admit it is a very difficult teaching for many, but those who have embraced God's plan for marriage and family —it is a source of great joy and peace, even with the struggles. For those who are hesitant, I would invite you to very prayerfully and openly begin the process of study and thought about how Jesus is calling you to change your life —to surrender your own plans and ideas for his plan for your life.