

Session One: Marriage Is a Union of Love And Life



Reflect Together

The Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, "that all may be one. . . as we are one" (John 17:21-22), opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.¹

Congratulations on your engagement and upcoming marriage! It is a blessing to know that you are open to the grace that flows from the Sacrament of Matrimony and eager to receive it on your wedding day.

Getting married in the Catholic Church means that God has called you to a beautiful vocation. In John 13:34, Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, and that you also love one another." Loving like Jesus means to love completely and sacrificially. That's not easy! In fact,

¹ *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World from the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council) article 24.

without grace it would be impossible. But when we cooperate with grace, the struggle to transform our hearts and become more selfless is possible.

Jesus calls each of us to a vocation which is a particular “school of love.” If we cooperate with the grace of our vocation, we can grow in our ability to love like Jesus loves. Marriage is a very special school of love that challenges you to to love each other ever more completely and selflessly. Marriage also invites us to expand our romantic love into family love by having children and raising them in Christ’s love. Every step of the way we are given opportunities to become more Christ-like through a sincere gift of self.

When married love is total, faithful, permanent and fruitful, it fully represents the kind of love that Jesus has for us. That’s why marriage is meant to be a **covenant**. A covenant is a sacred bond that creates a family where no family existed before. **Sexuality** is an important part of covenantal love. **When we follow God’s plan and cooperate with the grace of the Sacrament of Marriage, sex draws us out of selfishness and into selfless love, and especially into family love.**

That is why sexuality is such an important part of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. Recall that a Sacrament is a sign of God’s love for humanity. Sacraments aren’t just symbolic acts. They’re fountains of grace. A Sacrament not only represents a specific action of grace, a Sacrament actually brings about what it signifies. **Thus, the Sacrament of marriage symbolizes God’s love for humanity- and makes it present to the world.**

How?

A Sacramental marriage gives the spouses the grace needed to create an environment of love where they and all new life they create can flourish and find joy. It opens the hearts of the husband and wife to expand their marital love and to accept God’s supreme gift of children. So in a very real way, married couples who cooperate with sacramental grace bring God’s love into the world through their sexuality.

Pray Together

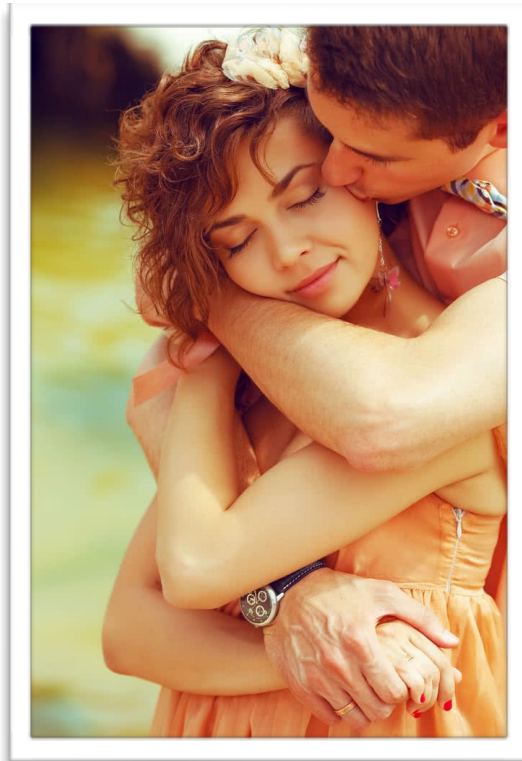
Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for calling us to the great gift of marital love. We acknowledge the beauty and the meaningfulness of your plan for us. We ask that you open our hearts to embrace the work, the sacrifice, and the effort your call will require. Give us your strength and your wisdom. Help us grow always closer to You as we grow closer to each other. Draw us out of selfishness and open our hearts to selfless family love. Give us hearts that are open to life. Give us a great love of marriage and family life. Help us to love you more. We ask this in the name of Your Son, who taught us what love really means. Amen.

Discuss Together

Together, discuss all of these questions. Then, choose one of your responses to share with your NFP instructor. Please submit your response before completing the next session in the course.

1. In what way do you believe that God's plan for love and sex can draw you out of selfishness and into selfless love?
2. What does it mean to cooperate with Sacramental grace? How can sacramental grace help you be more joyful in your marriage?
3. How do you see your marriage as a vocation (a calling from God to love HIM)?
4. How can you enter more fully into the Sacramental nature of marriage?

Session Two: The Importance of Embracing God's Loving Plan for Sex and Marriage



Reflect Together

[S]exuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such. It is realized in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death. The total physical self-giving would be a lie if it were not the sign and fruit of a total personal self-giving . . .¹

The Hebrew word for “sin” came from an archery term that meant “to miss the mark.” This is a great understanding of sin. Sin isn’t just

¹ Familiaris Consortio (Apostolic exhortation “On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World” by Pope John Paul II) article 11.

something that makes God angry. **To sin means that we miss out on the full goodness that God has planned for us.**

In our last reflection, we talked about God's plan for marriage. First and foremost, marriage is a Sacrament that makes God's love a reality in the world. Recall that human beings are created for love - to love God first of all and also to love each other. True love means the choice to offer ourselves to others for their good. "Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self². When you marry sacramentally, you are given the opportunity to learn to love as Jesus loves.

God's plan for our sexuality is closely tied to His plan for love in marriage. In general terms, our **sexuality is our ability to give and receive love as a man or as a woman**. Sexuality therefore affects all aspects of the human person. It is our way of relating and being open to others. **Sexuality has love as its intrinsic end**. More precisely, sexuality is love as donation and acceptance, love as giving and receiving. It finds its ultimate expression in the giving and receiving of physical love between a husband and a wife.

Sexuality is elevated and acquires a truly human quality when it is oriented to selfless love and integrated into the human person. The **virtue of chastity** helps us to do exactly that. It helps us to exercise our sexuality according to God's plan.

But **when sexuality is not used according to God's plan it can lead to selfishness, isolation, and sadness**. The desire for sexual pleasure can even move us to use our spouse as an object of pleasure rather than as the person we vowed to love. Personal pleasure becomes more important than self-giving love. Romantic feelings become more important than family love.

What do we mean by using sexuality outside of God's plan? The most obvious answer is to have sex outside of marriage (whether you're single or married). Sexuality can also be abused when contraception is

² Gaudium et Spes (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World from the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council) article 24.

used to prevent the act from causing a pregnancy. Whether it creates a physical barrier between spouses or shuts down a healthy fertility system, contraception keeps the act of sex from being an exchange of gifts. Couples who contracept find it easy to engage in the pleasure of the act without the worry of getting pregnant. It therefore overemphasizes sexual pleasure while discouraging couples from thinking about creating new life. Again, this orients the couple's sexuality away from self-giving family love and toward a selfish pursuit of pleasure.

Even though our culture has normalized contraception and sex outside of marriage, there is ample evidence that these abuses lead away from true love and toward sadness. **They are sins because they miss the mark - the full goodness that God intended for married sex.**

But like most things in the Christian life, living God's plan for sex and marriage is a constant process. Even when we are not committing any direct sins against His plan, we can always live it more completely. **Married love is a constant process of learning to love each other more perfectly, as Jesus loves us.** Our sexuality is part of that process.

Pray Together

Lord Jesus, you made marriage a valuable treasure by making it a Sacrament and a vocation. We thank you for the gift of our sexuality. We ask that you will open our hearts to your plan for our sexual relationship. May your gift of sexuality make us open to the complete gift of each other so we can learn to love more like you. May we be open to the gift of life, seeking your will as we exercise both generosity and responsibility in welcoming new life. We ask you to expand our love for each other into family love. May You be at the center of our love, of our marriage and of our family. Amen.

Discuss Together

Together, discuss all of these questions. Then, choose one of your responses to share with your NFP instructor. Please submit your response before completing the next session in the course.

1. What will be your next step as a couple to live God's plan for your sexuality more completely?
2. How will having children change the nature of your love for each other?
3. How might having children and becoming parents change you for the better?

Session Three Using NFP to Cooperate with God and His Plan for Love and Life



Reflect Together

Fecundity (fertility) is a gift, an end of marriage, for conjugal love naturally tends to be fruitful. A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfillment.

Called to give life, spouses share in the creative power and fatherhood of God. Married couples should regard it as their proper mission to transmit human life and to educate their children; they should realize that they are thereby cooperating with the love of God the Creator and are in a sense its interpreters (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2366-7).

Married love is a constant process of learning to love each other more perfectly. Love, as lived by Jesus, is the ability to will the good of the other. Everything within marriage, including sexuality, has to be brought under the influence of love. In other words, sexuality has to become an expression of selflessness.

Couples who practice Natural Family Planning learn how to exercise selfless love on a regular basis. The focus of NFP is to order your physical desire for the greater good of your spouse, your marriage and your family. The practice of NFP expands and strengthens your ability to love authentically. When you do come together in the sexual embrace, your sexuality is much more likely to be a person meeting a person rather than just a body meeting a body.

Natural Family Planning contributes to greater mutual understanding, appreciation and respect for shared fertility and the sexual act. Couples who practice grow in the awe of God's amazing design. Through the communication and cooperation that NFP fosters, spouses also build a healthier relationship together.

Couples who practice Natural Family Planning also have the opportunity to build family love, even before they have children. By cooperating with your shared fertility, you align your heart and your mind to God's gift of life rather than treating your fertility as a disease to be prevented or a danger to be blocked. This attitude toward life contributes to the environment of family love.

Needless to say, the practice of a natural method of family planning requires self-control and sacrifice. Many couples often think that self-restraint is unhealthy for a marriage. In reality, it is an important virtue needed for the exercise of authentic love. While God built a lot of pleasure and enjoyment into marriage, we need to be careful not to let pleasure and enjoyment make us selfish. Using your spouse as an object for your own pleasure is lust, not love. That's why it is important to consider which is more damaging to a marriage - self-restraint or lust? Realizing that self-restraint is actually good for marriage, we can also recognize that Natural Family Planning offers great exercise for this important virtue.

Practicing Natural Family Planning is a wonderful way to keep God's beautiful plan for marriage, life and love at the center of your marriage. That's probably why Catholics who get married in the Church and who

use Natural Family Planning have a divorce rate much, much, much lower than the general population¹. Practicing Natural Family Planning is one way to cooperate with the Sacramental graces of Holy Matrimony to transform the romantic love you share with each other into something greater.

Pray Together

Holy Spirit, you are the Lord of Life. We invite you into our Sacramental marriage and into our married life. Inspire us to love each other more and more perfectly throughout our marriage. Inspire us to generosity in welcoming new life, even while we plan our families responsibly to make sure we can care for our family effectively. We want to do your will in our marriage. But we can't do it without you. Open our hearts to selfless love. Open our minds to living according to your plan, even in our sexuality. Open our marriage to accept new life according to your plan for us and for our family. We are excited to enter into the adventure of this vocation to marriage and family life. We want to start now by seeking your will and your help. Amen.

¹ See some of the latest research on divorce rates at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4536625/>

Discuss Together

Together, discuss all of these questions. Then, choose one of your responses to share with your NFP instructor. Please submit your response before completing your final exam.

1. What role will Natural Family Planning play in your marriage?
2. If you are choosing not to use Natural Family Planning in your marriage, what is keeping you from doing so? If you are going to use Natural Family Planning in your marriage, what might you find difficult about it? What plans can you make now to make it easier (for example, how will you show love to each other in times of abstinence)?
3. What can you do to open your marriage to God's will and to greater selfless love?