

*The demands of charity
should be foremost
in decisions about family size.*

The primacy of charity in the question of family size

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■ Worldly and sacred spheres

The study of St. Thomas Aquinas' theology of marriage convinced me that married life was not seen as worldly to the exclusion of the demands of the sacred, nor was clerical and religious life seen as sacred to the exclusion of this world's needs, but rather both were sacred realities belonging to the Church as expressions of Catholic life, and both were meant to bear fruit for the Kingdom of heaven: marriage by helping spouses to beget and educate citizens of the Kingdom, the clergy and religious by teaching and feeding the faithful with spiritual goods (and often enough, material goods). Marriage itself would no longer exist in the heavenly Kingdom, but with the exception of Adam and Eve, who were fashioned directly by God, all who were in the Kingdom were the welcome fruits of marriage, and this was precisely its great dignity: to be the vivid, unsurpassable symbol and humble handmaid

of ultimate heavenly joy, an indispensable midwife to the glorious City of God.

For this very reason, marriage was likewise understood within the logic of the Gospel. It was not viewed as a worldly affair of self-determination and pleasure at one's will; it involved penance and self-control, even as clerical and religious life did. This accounts for the striking fact—striking, from our thoroughly secularized perspective—that during the Middle Ages Catholic spouses were routinely expected to abstain from marital relations many times during the year, including the whole of the Lenten season. Abstinence from the “use of marriage” appears to have been expected, if not obligatory, for a total of up to several months of each year. Such a promotion of sexual self-restraint amounts to a routine of periodic continence that we have not seen the likes of for hundreds of years, and a good case can be made that this loss has been

very much to the detriment of the married in their living of the Gospel (cf. 1 Cor 7:5; 7:35).

The main point is that marriage was recognized to be a true *via crucis*, a way to carry one's daily cross in the footsteps of Christ. For all their differences, the married state of life and the religious and clerical states of life enjoyed a profound unity—the unity of the Christian virtues, with charity as their queen mother. The love of man and woman, and their love for their children, had to be a love of charity, not a mere earthly affection. All the demands of supernatural charity, beginning with the very demand that it have primacy over all aspects of human life, were in force in the domestic church. This remains true today because, however much the beautiful face of Christendom has been disfigured by wars, plagues and revolutions over the last five hundred years, the nature of sacramental marriage, like that of all the sacraments, has not changed at all, nor have its lofty aims and requirements.

Sole standard of judgment

What significance do the foregoing observations have for us, here and now? To begin with, they mean that no abstract rule or law, by itself, can determine appropriate conduct in marriage. Abstract rules and laws there certainly are, and they are permanently valid at their level. Concretely, however, there is one measure of human action: the measure of charity as taught by the Church and modeled by the saints. We shall see shortly why this is so important in regard to the question of children.

Another important consequence was seen clearly by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *On the Perfection of the Spiritual Life*—namely, that all Christians are called to live out the essential meaning of the evangelical counsels, even if only a few embrace the counsels to their full extent in imitation of the Redeemer's way of life on earth. All Christians, those "living in the world" as much as those "dead to the world," must be poor in

spirit, pure in heart, and obedient to God's word and the word of the Church, but more specifically, too, they must strive to be frugal in bodily goods, ready for bodily continence, and obedient in the family structure.¹ In other words, poverty, chastity and obedience are to be lived, both in spirit and in flesh, by *all* Christians according to their states in life and the needs and demands of different stages in their lives. It is a tragedy that much of the teaching of Sacred Scripture on marriage and family has been discarded due to plain embarrassment or, worse, a modernistic view that the moral dictates of Scripture are culturally determined and hence replaceable by some more "enlightened" code. Guided by the Magisterium, true Catholics should not dare to ignore the ineluctable demands and mighty promises of the Word of God.

Competing standards of judgment

According to the Church's constant and unequivocal teaching, children are the greatest good of marriage, the good that defines it as such, and the very glue that holds it together. Without the intention to bear children for the Church, sacramental marriage cannot even be contracted, let alone continue as a means of sanctification. But one wonders what to make of the following mentality, which one does encounter, especially among young Catholic women who are trying to be serious in the practice of the faith: "If I am going to be married, and I've given up the best life (the nun's), then at least I should bear as many children as possible—this is my way to serve the Church." This view might be, in a subtle way, the guilty residuum of a kind of clericalism or a falsely-understood contrast between states of life, forcing a person to live by an abstract principle that may actually conflict with Christian charity.

Spouses must be willing to ask themselves soul-searching questions: Are you ready and able to have such a large family, with children so closely spaced? Are you realistically able to bear, nurture and educate all of the children

you have conceived or plan to conceive? What if a certain number or the spacing of offspring begins to take a toll on your health, your mental equilibrium, the care and attention you can give to each of the children and to your spouse? Yes, these are subjective questions, and, given the nature of things, they have to be subjective. God deals with dogs only as dogs, as instances of the species; he deals with human beings as individuals, as personal subjects. God might not particularly care if Rover dies, as long as dogs remain, but God cares very much when Peter, James or John dies.

The only ever-valid, universally binding law—the one altogether objective law—is the law of charity, which immediately confronts the subjectivity of each person with a question which only that person can answer. No one else has the right to judge this answer, assuming always that any answer reached does not represent a capitulation to sin, such as contraception, which has already been judged as intrinsically sinful by Jesus Christ through his holy Church. The Lord views each one of us with a father's love, and he asks of each what each is ready and able to offer his Church and the world. Thus it is a genuine lapse from charity, for example, to judge a woman for "failing" to have as many children as she might have been biologically capable of bearing. It is, in a profound sense, not her business, but God's.

Honest is as honest does

Do we have as many children as the Lord sends us, without any planning? Do we postpone the next child until we feel more ready, using some form of natural family planning? Do we postpone the next child, but meanwhile remain continent, instead of using NFP? Do we take up a longer period of continence in order to devote more time to prayer, study, teaching, hospitality, or some other ministry for which a desire has been planted within us by the Lord?²

In regard to any particular option or path to follow, there is only one criterion of dis-

cernment and judgment: Does this option—thinking about it, choosing it, living it—have the effect of increasing my charity for God and spouse and family, bringing me closer and making me more responsive to them? Does it make of me a more prayerful and a more loving person? This is a question that has to be asked constantly by all Christians, since it is the ultimate examination of conscience. It must be asked above all whenever a person is puzzled or bewildered, uncertain of what to do; when spouses are discussing future possibilities; when a decision has been reached and when it is being implemented.

The ancient tradition of the discernment of spirits, so brilliantly condensed by St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*, has a crucial role to play in the performing of this continual self-evaluation, to ensure simple honesty. "Honesty" comes from *honestum*, meaning the noble, honorable, dignified good. Let the examination of conscience begin: Am I being noble and honorable in my intentions and aims? If I am, then the sign will be a growth in charity and the effects of charity. According to St. Thomas, the effects of love are a deeper union and mutual adherence, spiritual ecstasy (standing outside oneself in acts of love for the other), increased zeal, a reshaping of one's desires that can be compared to being wounded, and a unification of other aspects of life around the beloved.³ All these effects should be present in regard to one's spouse, but they can attain a perfect and plenary form only in regard to God. In addition, the effects of charity are joy, peace, mercy or compassion, doing good deeds, giving alms, and offering fraternal correction.⁴ If, on the contrary, I am not being consistently noble and honorable in my intentions and aims, I will certainly experience growing difficulties in my relationships, I will suffer dismay, despondency, and surprising regressions, I will feel trapped within myself, I will lack peace of soul. These are always signals that urge us to reconsider our choices and especially the motives for our choices.

Seeing NFP for what it is—and is not

Returning to the question of family size, there is an area that particularly deserves a mentality adjustment among Catholics who are quick to judge motives. Although selfishness or false priorities are at the root of both an abusive reliance on NFP and a choice for contraception, nevertheless NFP, even when chosen for selfish reasons, cannot be or be called contraceptive in an unqualified sense. In its moral species, contraception is intrinsically or *per se* immoral because it directly and categorically opposes one of the defining goods of marriage. NFP is more ambiguous. Of course, NFP can be used with an evil mentality as (so to speak) a weapon of selfish negation, but in and of itself it is not doing anything to thwart the procreative end. The Church has consistently taught that to have intercourse during infertile periods is in no way an act of violence against the generative powers of the human person, since these powers themselves, by divine design, are sometimes capable of leading to conception, and sometimes not. Neither the act (or better, the “non-act”) of abstaining during fertile times nor the act of coming together during infertile times violates the procreative nature of the sexual act as intended by the Creator, whereas the use of contraception obviously does. For that reason contraception, inasmuch as its very name implies taking steps to interfere with a natural process, cannot avoid being against the natural, whereas NFP, at least as far as the objective scenario is concerned, is always in line with the natural, since periods of fertility and infertility are themselves entirely God-given rhythms of the woman’s body.

Still, as we know, such “naturalness” is not the only relevant aspect to consider. There is a properly moral question that is often enough ignored by enthusiastic proponents of the virtues of NFP: Is this natural approach to regulating family size being used for a good reason or for a bad reason? When used in circumstances that are not defensibly serious in comparison to the primary end of the great

vocation of marriage in the Church, NFP is abused and can thereby turn sinful, even mortally so, for the couple. A newly married couple who want to enjoy each other’s bodily comfort for some time prior to shouldering the burden of children, or spouses postponing children because both wish to pursue doctorates simultaneously, would be examples of what the poet Cowper calls “pampered appetite obscene,”⁵ because in neither case is the intention honorable when weighed against the serious obligations of the state of life that has been entered into. The doctorate-seeking couple, for instance, would have been better off spiritually to postpone or even forego marriage if their scholarly careers were of such importance that they could not be interrupted, even in some cases canceled out, by a sacrament whose fruitfulness is the primary form of their sanctification. It amounts almost to a sacrilege to set the chief good of marriage at a level below that of personal ambitions and private goods, however legitimate in themselves.

As Donald Ascii carefully explains in his unsurpassed treatment of this topic, NFP can be bad only due to intention, i.e., a circumstance of the act. In its moral species it can never be evil, but the motivation behind it can be evil.⁶ There will be a moral imperfection, a sin, only if there is an anti-life will—in other words, if the conception of a child is actually repudiated. One easy way of seeing if this will is present is to formulate the question: If you did conceive a child, would you welcome the child from God? If one can honestly answer “yes,” then even the avoidance of conception via NFP is not the expression of an anti-life will. If one would answer “no,” or feel uncertain of the answer, we are most likely dealing with the sin of a contraceptive intention.

Carried away on the pendulum

Etienne Gilson once remarked that human beings seem incapable of facing an antinomy without worshipping the extremes. Put differently, our opinions and feelings tend to be like a pendulum, swinging now to one extreme,

now to the opposite, but never resting in the golden mean. So it is with marriage and children. More traditional Catholics often speak and act as if the default in marriage is to have as many children as possible—as if there is no other good, no other measure for the attainment of sanctity than number of children, even within a homeschooling family in which the mother is already maxed out and feels increasingly burdened and demoralized by having to do far more than any one woman was ever expected to do in a traditional society with its extensive family networks and close-to-home work opportunities for husbands. At its worst, this mentality seems to have more in common with the production-line mentality of Henry Ford than with a Catholic vision of marriage and family life as we find in the saints of our Church.

Yet the response sometimes made to this admittedly simplistic view is equally, if not more, disturbing, swinging as it does to an opposite extreme. Some years ago I followed a dispute conducted in the pages of a bulletin from a Catholic university in which the Catholic teaching on family size was equated with the application of the virtue of “prudence,” which was then tied to assumptions of an upper-middle-class American lifestyle (e.g., an annual expensive vacation, the ability to pay in full for college tuition) and worldly considerations that would be far more appropriate to single people, such as the mother’s career outside the home or her continuing education. What we are seeing here is an attempt, doubtless unintentional, to make Catholic marriage a comfortable and slightly self-serving institution—something it has never been and, especially in the modern world, could never be.

How do we navigate all this controversial territory? What is the golden mean, the middle ground? What is the higher principle by which we judge what to do or not to do? Above all, we must ask about the fulfillment of our vocation: the love of one’s spouse, the education and rearing of one’s children, the

love of God throughout. This is where prayer and discernment and spiritual guidance are needed. There is no “one size fits all” solution; we are not machines produced on an assembly-line that differ only by serial numbers. We are persons and God deals with us personally. The loving answer for one couple may be the wrong solution for another. With something as momentous as having a child or another child, there cannot be a simple rule of thumb. Consider the following advice, which, though probably few would phrase it so bluntly, is by no means rare in traditional Catholic circles: “When you get married, you agree to have children as God sends them. The most perfect response, the response of perfect generosity, is to accept as many children as are given, assuming normal conjugal relations. If you feel you need extra time between children and so you postpone the next, or after four children you feel completely maxed out and unable to have any more, that would be imperfect. I don’t say sinful, but imperfect. On the other hand, were you to go blindly forward regardless of your feelings or your state of mind and body, that would show perfect resignation and abandonment to divine providence, and so God would bless you with all the graces you need to get by.”

Three points must be addressed. First, such advice is tainted with the sin of presumption and the tempting of God. A mother should not, as it were, become “the blind feeding the blind.” Parents have to be clear-sighted about themselves, they need some level of reliable self-knowledge; God expects that maturity of them. Second, Christian life is more than just “getting by.” That is because, thirdly, Christian perfection and imperfection are measured in reference to charity, not in reference to any quantity or other extrinsic measure. The “heroism” of any family is obviously connected to its size, but the inner source of that heroism must be love, or there is nothing heroic about it. When the Congregation for the Causes of Saints evaluates the double cause of a married couple, the first thing they ask is not, “What’s

the total number of children they had?" but rather, "Did this couple live the Christian virtues heroically, did their lives exhibit the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit?" To say someone has done something heroically implies that he or she has done something admirable, that he or she is admirable. Can we admire these parents, their attitudes, behavior at home, nurturing and educating of their children?

The "martyr complex"

Of course, any Christian vocation involves suffering. This suffering is a gift from God for our sanctification and we should trust his judgment entirely. Child-bearing and child-rearing, though not without their great joys, are always accompanied by great sufferings, too, and these should be borne in a spirit of patient love and reparation. One should not plan things overmuch, for Jesus tells us not to be anxious about tomorrow; Christians are not calculators but lovers. Clearly we are dealing with the fundamentals of the Gospel.

There is no serious Christian life without its share of sufferings to be offered up in union with Jesus; there is no family life, however large or small the family may be, which does not demand great sacrifices from parents who are doing their job well; there is no successful exercise of reason and free will which does not already presuppose an implicit or explicit trust in divine providence. We should not have a simplistic view of sanctity, as if it must, concretely, take the same shape for everybody—"one size fits all." God calls each person, each couple, each family down a unique path, and though every such path will be the narrow way of the Gospel, they will be fitted to the capacity and the needs of their travelers. For one married couple, this will mean bearing the cross of barrenness. For another couple, it will mean the special heroism of rearing a large family. For another couple, it may mean heroic charity exercised in the circle of a small family.

The exaggerated martyrial view is an understandable reaction against the per-

verse and pervasive contraceptive mentality, which itself is founded upon a flight from responsibility, from suffering, from inconvenience. Modernity seeks to master nature in order to overcome pain and suffering and give man complete power over his destiny. Still, the rejection of this false view does not entail a cult of suffering, or, in order to be fully "natural," a mindless drifting along the waves of instinct into potential shipwreck. What is required of us is a cult of charity, for this is the Christian religion. Love involves bearing suffering with patience and fortitude, but love is not identical to suffering. That would indeed be a horrible caricature of the Gospel. For men and women to be fully natural is for them to live in accordance with their nature—their created nature as rational animals who exercise free will illuminated by the light of reason, and their "re-created" nature as adopted children of God, who gives a share of his divine life through baptism and the other sacraments.

So, for the love of God, let us remember that we must always "do the truth in love," as St. Paul reminds us. It is our privilege to defend the perennial truths of the Gospel and of natural law by insisting, in season and out of season, on the first principles that can never be abandoned without crippling and deadly consequences. It is also our duty to call men and women back to communion with the Church and to basic human sanity by gently and persuasively presenting the moral truths that modernity repudiates. But it is our responsibility to do all this in a way that does not impose more than is demanded or specify a single right way of acting in areas that are indeterminate and allow for multiple determinations. We are not to bring in judgments about particular situations to which we have no access or over which we have no jurisdiction. Acting in such ways can, in the long run, have the effect of discrediting the truths we hold and can cause us not to make wise discernments and perceive the real differences that Christ permits. I can

think of no better way to conclude than these words of our Holy Father:

Each person finds his good by adherence to God's plan for him, in order to realize it fully: in this plan, he finds his truth, and through adherence to this truth he becomes free (cf. Jn 8:32). To defend the truth, to articulate it with humility and conviction, and to bear witness to it in life are therefore exacting and indispensable forms of charity. Charity, in fact, "rejoices in the truth" (1 Cor 13:6). All people feel the interior impulse to love authentically: love and truth never abandon them completely, because these are the vocation planted by God in the heart and mind of every human person. The search for love and truth is purified and liberated by Jesus Christ from the impoverishment that our humanity brings to it, and he reveals to us in all its fullness the initiative of love and the plan for true life that God has prepared for us.⁷ ■

End notes

¹ On the Gospel requirement of "factual frugality" for all Christians, see Thomas Dubay, S.M., *Happy Are You Poor: The Simple Life and Spiritual Freedom* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002).

² The history of the Church has offered numerous examples of saintly couples who have lived their married life in continency; I myself know couples for whom such a life has proved immensely fruitful in spiritual goods. Most modern Catholic writers on marriage view this kind of married life as a perverse holdover from Manichaeism, when in fact it is a legitimate way of life *if* the Lord is calling the spouses to it. To assert that married couples *must* continue their procreative uniting is a purely arbitrary assertion that fails to take into account the mysterious working of the Spirit in the sanctuaries of his temples.

³ See *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 28.

⁴ *Summa Theologiae* II-II, qq. 28–33. As St. Thomas consistently teaches, no one, short of a special divine revelation, is able to know for certain whether he has charity or not, but he may judge of this from probable signs in himself, such as these effects of love and charity.

⁵ *The Task*, Book I, line 104.

⁶ See Donald P. Ascii, *The Conjugal Act as Personal Act: A Study of the Catholic Concept of the Conjugal Act in the Light of Christian Anthropology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002).

⁷ Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* §1.



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