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February 4, 2022

Pastoral Letter on Marriage and Family Life Bishop Mark E. Brennan, Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston

“Love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being” wrote Pope St. John Paul II.¹ As we are about to observe World Marriage Day, I offer you these reflections on the Catholic understanding of marriage and family life as “an intimate community of life and love.”² I do so as a priest who for many years enjoyed meeting with couples not only to plan their wedding but to consider, in the light of God’s revelation, the nature of the union they would form. I continue to have friendships with a number of families, observing how the spouses meet the challenges of marriage and enjoying seeing their children grow up.

Marriage and family life are the way God calls most of His children to live out their baptismal vocation, so it always deserves our attention but all the more so in our times, when the nature of marriage and the given-ness of sexual identity are challenged by dominant forces in our society. There is a radical sanity in the Catholic understanding of marriage and family life, which is a lifeline for a society floundering in a sea of uncertainty about these fundamental relationships.

At the very beginning of the Bible, God speaks of marriage and the family. After the man exclaims that the woman is *bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*, the sacred author comments: *this is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and the two of them become one body* [Genesis 2: 23-24]. Their union is the foundation of the family, for *God blessed them, saying: “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it* [Genesis 1: 28]. Marriage and families are directly willed by God and are hard-wired into our human nature. Only a special grace given by God can enable a man or woman to forsake marriage for a celibate life in service to others.

From God’s Word we learn some important truths. First, marriage can only be between members of the two sexes, not just one. God gave the command to a married couple to *be fertile and multiply*. Members of the same sex may have profound friendships with appropriate signs of affection and a true caring for one another, but they cannot produce children. Marriage is intimately tied not only to procreation but to the raising of children as well, because human children need years of care from adults before they are able to make their own way in life. The persons best suited to raise them are, in most cases, their parents, whose stable relationship and natural ties to their children ordinarily make them willing to make the sacrifices necessary to provide for their offspring.

¹Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, *Familiaris Consortio* 11

²*ibid.*, 50

So, are infertile heterosexual couples ineligible for marriage? No, because a deficiency in the reproductive organs is different from not having them at all. A medical intervention may correct the deficiency or a miracle cure it (remember Abraham and Sarah, and Zachariah and Elizabeth in the Bible). The point is: infertile couples have the bodily design necessary to create new life, but its parts are broken or diseased. Neither medicine nor God as He has revealed His will could cause a pregnancy between same-sex partners. Infertile couples do have life-affirming options such as adoption and teaching or coaching the young.

A second lesson from God's Word is the lifelong nature of marriage. Jesus taught, *What God has joined together, no human being must separate* [Mark 10: 9]. Children know they benefit from the stability of their parents' marital commitment. One evening in my former parish's religious education program, a boy and a girl from different families told me they were worried that their parents might divorce. Pope Francis echoes my experience: "Children not only want their parents to love one another but also to be faithful and remain together."³

But the husband and wife also benefit from a stable, loving union. St. Thomas Aquinas called marriage "the greatest form of friendship."⁴ Pope Francis says, "It is the very nature of conjugal love to be definitive. The lasting union expressed by the marriage vows is more than a formality or a traditional formula; it is rooted in the natural inclinations of the human person."⁵ If the husband and wife make a constant effort to love, a friendship may form that stands strong when the winds of hardship blow. In my first parish, a wife suffered a severe back problem that kept her bedridden for years. Her husband was a busy lawyer, but he made time to take care of her. Eventually her health improved – and then the husband fell ill with cancer. In a role reversal, she became his primary caregiver. Theirs was a friendship born of love and strengthened by God's grace.

Another benefit of a lifelong marriage is that each spouse brings personal qualities to the relationship that enrich the other: for example, a very patient spouse may help a less patient spouse learn patience. The spouses also bring to the marriage qualities that are typical of their sex. Men and women differ not only biologically but, as experience shows, they often think and express feelings in different ways. Yet, over a lifetime together, men may learn from their wives how to integrate some feminine qualities into their ways of thinking and feeling, while women do the same with male qualities. These are not absolute differences: some men exhibit ways of thinking and feeling more typically associated with women and vice versa; but "typical" means "more often than not" and that works for the good of marriages. It is good, then, that a couple remain together, barring atrocities such as domestic violence. Those who think divorcing and finding another spouse is the way to go should look at the divorce statistics for second marriages; most fail.⁶ It makes more sense, in many cases, to make the effort to work out their problems than for a couple to abandon their marriage.

³The Joy of Love, *Amoris Laetitia*, 123

⁴Summa Contra Gentiles, III, 123, quoted in Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 123

⁵ *Amoris Laetitia*, 123

⁶Divorce Strategies Group, June 22, 2022. 67% of second marriages end in divorce.

Nonetheless, some marriages fail because the couple should never have married in the first place. Some factor or combination of factors renders that marriage invalid. God and the Church do not hold people to the impossible. Our Diocese has a court, called a Tribunal, much of whose work is handling annulment cases that Catholics and even non-Catholics submit. I have helped many persons through the annulment process, always trying to see if this was a “marriage in the Lord” or not. A Jewish psychiatrist who served on the Archdiocese of Washington’s Tribunal said that the Catholic annulment procedure was far more humane than civil divorce proceedings because it tried to get at the reasons for the marriage’s failure. *You will know the truth and the truth will set you free*, said Jesus [John 8: 32]. Knowing why a marriage failed should help the person who chooses to marry again. It is a myth that annulments can be bought or that only “important people” get them. Our Wheeling-Charleston Diocese does not charge any fees for annulments. I invite persons who have divorced to speak to our diocesan Tribunal personnel to see if we may serve you.

A third lesson from God’s Word is that married couples should take seriously God’s command to *be fertile and multiply*. In the Biblical story there are no other human beings when that command is given: therefore, *multiply*. That is obviously not the situation now. Nonetheless, *be fertile* means that the married couple should be open to having children and committed to raising them.

It is distressing that some couples today render themselves infertile by using artificial means of birth control throughout their marriage. This is a direct violation of God’s command and will likely be a source of sorrow to them as they age. Other couples have only one or two children owing to a medical condition that impedes conception or they may have married when the wife was near the end of her reproductive life. I find such couples grateful for the child or children they have. I never judge couples with few children because I do not know their circumstances. I only encourage them to be honest with themselves and God.

Yet God’s command to *be fertile* challenges couples to cooperate with Him in bringing forth new life. A couple I prepared for marriage told me, “We want to have just one child and give that child all of our love.” I asked them, “Have you ever thought of it from the child’s point of view? You will die some day and, because of your decision, your child will have no family left. Is that what you want for your child?” It is also the nature of parental love that it grows as other children are born. I have seen this in many families. Love does not shrink. It will be tested, but rarely does it break.

There is a benefit to children in having a number of siblings. In their own family they learn how to get along with one another, to play fair, to stick up for one another when others harass them. Friendships with siblings can last a lifetime. There is also a benefit to parents in having more children. Older children can help them take care of the younger ones. In addition, their children are the ones most naturally inclined to help their parents when the parents have difficulties, especially in their old age.

Having advocated for a couple to respect and embrace God’s command to be open to new life, I must add that there are circumstances that justify postponing having another child: a parent’s (especially the mother’s) serious illness, a severe loss of income, having several children

of young age, having one or more children with special needs. The couple must decide honestly what they can manage. If they decide that they are not in a position now to have another child, the Church assures them that they do not offend God by that decision.

The means to a worthy end must also be worthy. Many people, including many Catholics, see no problem with the use of contraceptives. Why does the Church still maintain that their use is wrong? Let me explain. Jesus said about marriage: *What God has joined together, no human being must separate* [Mark 10: 9]. The logic of his words applies not only to the lifetime union of the couple but to the act by which they may bring forth new life. Their sexual union has two distinct but related dimensions: the expression of their love for one another – called the “unitive dimension” – and the possibility of engendering and conceiving a child – called the “procreative dimension.”

The unitive dimension is always operative but the procreative dimension only periodically, when the woman is in her brief fertile phase. What artificial means of birth control do is to deliberately and forcibly separate the two dimensions when both are present. They separate what God has joined together. This is the crucial difference between contraception and natural family planning. The couple following NFP does not separate the two dimensions of their sexual union; they simply refrain from sexual intercourse during their fertile phase. NFP today is far more effective than the older rhythm method, just as modern medical care surpasses that available to our ancestors. NFP is based on real-time observations of changes in the woman’s body and gives accurate information so that the couple can decide to engage in or refrain from sexual relations. It can be inconvenient at times, but it avoids the medical problems associated with contraceptive use by some women and gives spiritual peace of mind. Does NFP always work? No, but neither do contraceptives. A woman pointed to her little child and said to me, “The pill didn’t work, thankfully.” A man fathered a child after a vasectomy! But if the couple is properly instructed and follows the NFP method carefully, it will usually postpone an untimely pregnancy.

Once formed, the family becomes a “school of love” and the “domestic Church,” the Church’s smallest social unit. Without pretending that family life can avoid all struggles and trials, it remains true that families are where we learn to care for other human beings and, in many cases, are introduced to faith in God. Pope St. John Paul II wrote: “Marriage and the Christian family build up the Church; in effect, within the family the human person not only is engendered and progressively introduced through education into the human community but through the rebirth of baptism and education in the faith is introduced as well into the family of God, which is the Church.”⁷

In the multiple relationships within the family – that of the spouses to one another, their relationships with their children, the children’s relationships with each other, plus grandparents, uncles and aunts and cousins – the love that places the other first must gradually overcome the family members’ natural self-centeredness. For the spouses, St. Paul writes: *Wives should be subordinate to their husbands, as to the Lord, but insists, husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church* [Ephesians 5: 21-33].

⁷*Familiaris Consortio*, 15

As Pope St. John Paul II wisely noted, a husband cannot love his wife if he is selfish. He must, like Christ, subordinate his own plans and preferences to her good; she does likewise by respecting and caring for her husband even when it costs her.⁸ Love always has a sacrificial dimension. Marriage and family life are truly a school that teaches that lesson.

Parents are the first and most important educators of their children in all things, including the faith. With respect to the faith, parents should have their children baptized soon after birth so that the life of grace may grow in them from an early age as their bodies and minds grow. Parents should see to the adequate preparation of their children for First Eucharist, Confirmation and the Sacrament of Penance and should seek the Sacraments of Initiation themselves if they have not received them. When parish programs ask parents to be involved in their children's religious education, it should not be seen as an imposition but as an opportunity to join with their children in penetrating more fully the mysteries of our Catholic faith. At home, parents can teach their children basic prayers and pray with them; I still remember fondly my parents praying with me when I was a little boy. Family meals give parents the opportunity to ask their children how things are going and will often, if the parents listen closely, give the parents guidance on how to guide their children's spiritual and moral formation.

As for formal education, I can only admire those parents who home-school their children, while recognizing that this is beyond the ability of many parents. I urge parents who choose to send their children to school to give serious consideration to sending them to a Catholic school, where such a school exists. There they will receive a regular formation in the faith to supplement – not replace – what the family gives at home. Paying tuition is a challenge for some families, but if a Catholic education is seen as an investment in the children's future, then the sacrifice is worth it. Some tuition assistance is available from the Diocese, usually from the school itself and sometimes from the family's parish.

Children should respect their parents for all they do for them and obey them, unless this would lead them into sin. The commandment, *Honor your father and mother*, refers first of all to the obligation of adult children toward their elderly parents but, by extension, it encompasses the duty of children to listen to and cooperate with their parents. Children, even teenagers, benefit from having clear rules, even if they chafe under them at times. But in raising children it is prudent to follow St. Paul's advice: *Fathers, do not provoke your children, so they may not become discouraged* [Colossians 3: 21]. Unreasonable demands put upon a child or adolescent can wound their spirit. As children grow, they should be given more responsibility (e.g., taking care of pets, helping with household chores), be rewarded when they perform well and be gently corrected when they fail. One bit of advice I gave to adolescents who complained that their parents did not trust them, was: "Show your parents you are worthy of their trust by acting responsibly. Before long, your parents will notice and begin to trust you more."

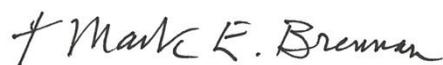
⁸Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 24 (1988)

The Church must help married couples and families. The Diocese is hosting a “Together in Holiness” Conference on February 12, 2022, in Charleston, which will also assist parishes to form small groups of couples for ongoing formation and support. As a Diocese we will participate in World Family Day, June 22-26, 2022, in different locations. Movements such as Marriage Encounter and the Apostolate for Family Consecration strengthen families. Our beautiful Camp Carlo near Elkins provides a rich experience of faith and outdoor activities for children, while efforts to bring back Teens Encounter Christ retreats are ongoing as a supplement to youth programs that some parishes have. Campus ministry is flourishing at some of our universities and we will be trying to extend it to more campuses.

There are many more topics relating to marriage and family life, too many for me to address in this letter. I encourage you to read Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)* for a fuller discussion of this most important matter. It is available at the Vatican website and in printed form from The Word Among Us Press, 7115 Guilford Drive, Frederick, MD 21704.

Some who read these reflections may judge them to be out of touch with the reality of contemporary life and the many alternative ways people understand marriage and families. I would counter that the Catholic approach to marriage and family life constitutes a radical sanity in a world that has lost its bearings on these fundamental relationships. In the Catholic faith we are able, like *the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old* [Matthew 13: 52], to offer something of perennial value in new clothing. We have new ways to prepare couples for marriage and to assist them in living a grace-filled family life while emphasizing the old and authentic teachings of the Church as the foundation of their relationships. In doing that, we respond appropriately to the needs of married couples and their children and offer our Catholic vision of marriage and family life as a model for the world.

Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, look on our families with kindness and love. Strengthen them in the truth of their vocation and give them the confidence that, with God’s grace, they can live it with love and joy! Amen.



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