Everything I have is Yours

UNDERSTANDING GOD’S PLAN FOR MARRIAGE AND THE GIFT OF LIFE

Archbishop J. Peter Sartain
Dear friends,

Preparing couples for marriage is one of the most enjoyable aspects of priestly ministry. I have had the privilege of helping prepare hundreds of couples, and my contact with them did not stop with their wedding. I have celebrated anniversaries with them, baptized their children, prayed with them in times of difficulty, and supported them in times of confusion. I see myself as part of each family, no matter how long ago their wedding or how far away they now reside. I have also learned many things from these families. They have taught me about love, sacrifice, forgiveness, and generosity. They have supported my ministry with words of encouragement and with prayer. They have inspired me by their love of God and their faithfulness to the Church.

Isn’t that the way it should be? If as St. Paul wrote marriage is a sign of Christ’s love for the Church, doesn’t it make sense that strong marriages and families enrich the Church and keep us close to Christ? Doesn’t it make sense that families who stay close to Christ will grow stronger and more loving?

I have prepared this booklet as a gesture of love and support for the engaged and married couples of the Archdiocese of Seattle. It is a reflection on marriage and the gift of life.

Each chapter ends with reflection questions and a simple prayer. I hope that couples will read this booklet together, taking time to reflect and pray together as you do. I hope you will find in these pages nourishment for your love, wise guidance from God, and encouragement in discipleship.

God bless you! May you always remember that God is the origin of your love.

Sincerely in Christ,

Archbishop J. Peter Sartain
Every mother and father knows that one of the first words a child learns to speak is “mine.” It’s a word typically spoken with quivering lips and the tenacious tug of little hands. “Mine” is a fighting word, rarely spoken in hushed tones.

Parents breathe a sigh of relief after a few years, when their children learn there are other people in the world, people worth loving, people with whom they want to share. It’s then that the child learns to say “ours.” “Ours” is a civil word, a family word, one that can hold us in pretty good stead through most of life.

But there comes a time — every husband and wife knows this, every mother and father knows this, every priest or religious knows this — when even “ours” can be a clenching, grasping word.

There comes a time when we must learn to say, “Yours.”

There’s a behavioral counterpart to this three-step process of growth. Let me use myself as an example. I can picture myself as a 7-year-old as if it were yesterday, sitting grumpily at the kitchen table, frustrated by the model airplane I was trying to assemble. My father tried to come to the rescue. “I can do it,” I snapped, cantankerously. Of course, I couldn’t. But I said I could.

Years later, fed up with frustration and sharp enough to know when I was licked, I began saying, “Will you help me?” It’s good to reach that stage, and I found that one can get through life quite nicely by asking for help.

But there came a time when, despite years of education and pocketfuls of well-honed skills, I learned that sometimes I had to say in all honesty, “I can’t do it. Will you do it for me?”
There comes a time, especially in our relationship with God, when, with empty hands open in poverty, we say only this: “Everything is Yours. I can’t do it. Will you do it for me and in me … as you always have?” This was a lesson many characters in the Bible had to learn, but one Mary seemed to grasp in her deepest heart of hearts from the moment she drew her first breath.

To say the least, Mary had been surprised by the visit from the angel Gabriel. Here she was, a nobody, living in a poor and insignificant Galilean village, told that she is “highly favored” by God and “blessed among women.” Never in her wildest childhood dreams did she think she would have a central role in the fulfillment of God’s promises to David, that she would be a jewel in the crown of the great King. So overtaken was Mary with what God had done for her that she glowed with mystery, and when she visited her cousin Elizabeth, Elizabeth’s baby leapt in the womb. Both their faces flushed in wonderment. “Blessed are you, Mary, because you have faith to say to God, ‘Everything is yours. Let it be done to me and in me for me’.”

One of David’s psalms, 61, puts reality in its proper light. He prayed, “On a rock too high for me to reach set me on high.” Mary let God’s grace do its work; she let him pick her up and place her on a rock too high for her to reach.

Whether we pride ourselves on our successes, or judge ourselves insignificant in the vast scheme of things, there is something we can hand over to God which has the potential to affect our lives and the lives of others beyond our wildest imagining, and that is our obedience. We come to the point of deepest truth and say, simply, to God, “I am yours. Let it be done to me.” That confession brings to life in each of us the angel’s parting words to Mary: “Nothing will be impossible for God.”

This handing-over to God is not something reserved for the spiritual realm. In fact, to think that it is somehow only “spiritual obedience” that God asks of us is to assume that God has no interest in the rest of our life. We give everything to him: our souls, our work life, our family life, our sinfulness, our intellect, our leisure, our opinions, our hopes, our dreams. The goal? To desire what God desires. That is what makes us whole, that is what brings fulfillment. It begins with the recognition that everything we have and are comes from him and is destined for him.

In a meditation on the mystery of fatherhood, the late Pope John Paul II wrote: “I have decided to eliminate from my vocabulary the word ‘my.’ How can I use that word when I know that everything is Yours? Even if it isn’t You who give birth every time a human person is born, the one giving birth belongs to You. I myself am more ‘Yours’ than ‘mine.’ So I have learned that I may not say ‘mine’ of that which is Yours.”

“All things are yours, whether it be Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or the present, or the future: all these are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). “Mine” gets us nowhere. “Ours” may work for a while. Only “Yours” lasts forever.

For reflection:
In what ways do I still clutch what is “mine”? When did I first learn to start thinking of “us” and “ours”? Have I been able to hand over everything to God and say, “Everything is Yours”?

For prayer:
Lord, you know me better than I know myself. Teach me to be generous to others and to You. May I desire only what You desire. Amen.
We live in an age whose conventional wisdom promises many things. Unfortunately, that conventional wisdom often has “me” as its focus, “me” at the center of the universe. We read about such things as “self-actualization,” “self-esteem,” “self-fulfillment.” On the surface, there is nothing wrong with such concepts, as long as they teach me to see my life as a gift of God, to be a responsible person, and to be a steward of what God has given me. However, I wonder if at times they subtly give the impression that I can somehow fulfill myself — that simply by living to my full potential, making use of my talents, and doing what I choose to do, I will find peace and fulfillment.

Again, there is some truth in concepts of “self-fulfillment,” but they can take us only so far. The deepest truth is that I cannot fulfill myself! I was created to find fulfillment in God alone. Yes, God wants me to live to my full potential, and God wants me to make use of the talents he has given me; but only when I give myself completely to him and accept his invitation to intimate friendship with him will I know true fulfillment.

When couples fall in love, they often say that they have found their “other half.” The intimate love they share with one another brings them a kind of fulfillment they have not yet experienced. He might say, “She makes me whole.” She might say, “He is my soul mate.” The two become one; “mine” becomes “ours.” This experience of human love is just a taste of the fulfillment that comes to those who accept God’s hand in friendship and who deepen that friendship through prayer, the sacraments, and living a Christian
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is there such a thing as self-fulfillment

life. In fact, couples who together hand over their relationship to God find that their love for one another deepens in ways they could not have thought possible. The Sacrament of Marriage is all about “ours” becoming “Yours” (“God’s”).

God is much more than our “other half”; he is much more than a “soul mate.” We were made by God to know his love, to serve him and give him glory in this life, and to be with him forever in life eternal. We were made for God. It is “God-fulfillment” that we seek in our deepest heart of hearts.

One aspect of human love bears a uniquely intimate participation in the love of God — the creation of new human life in marriage. The Catholic Church has a beautiful teaching about the transmission of life, one that recognizes God’s creative power in every marriage and every act of sexual intercourse. In order to gain a full understanding of that teaching, however, we have to reflect on a number of themes which at first may seem unrelated to it. Thus, in broad strokes I will address these themes: the wisdom and providence of God; the wisdom of the body; the sacrament of marriage; responsible parenthood; and Natural Family Planning.

For reflection:
Where have I been looking for fulfillment? Have my personal goals been only about me, or have they included others and God? What could “God-fulfillment” mean for me?

For prayer:
“Probe me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts. See if my way is crooked, and lead me in the way of old” (Psalm 139:23-24). Amen.

Belief in the wisdom of God runs through every page of the Bible. In the Old Testament, wisdom is sometimes personified as a woman who knows and understands all things and invites others to forsake foolishness and follow the right path. Solomon was sought out by thousands (including the Queen of Sheba, modern-day Yemen) because of his wisdom. The psalmist marveled at God’s wisdom and prayed to be led by its light. Certain books of the Old Testament are called “Wisdom Books” because they offer practical advice based on the ways of God. Many images are used in the Bible to depict wisdom, and each of them is based on the belief that true wisdom comes only from God.

In 1 Corinthians 1:23-25, Paul wrote that “we proclaim Christ crucified … Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.” Some in his day looked for signs, others thought philosophy was the path to knowledge of God; but Paul knew that God’s wisdom was most perfectly expressed in the cross. He added, “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16).

Jesus taught his disciples to pray to their heavenly father, “your will be done on earth as in heaven”; and faced with the agonizing inevitability of his death, he prayed, “not as I will, but as you will.”

God who created us and has counted every hair of our heads is the one to whom we look for guidance in all things. His wisdom is not “earthly wisdom” or “book wisdom,” but the wisdom of self-sacrificing love. We do not simply admire the wisdom of God, as we might admire a beautiful work of art; the goal is to submit ourselves to it, trusting that the one who created and loves us wants only
what is best for us. “What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (Luke 11:11-13).

All of us have dreams and plans. We go to school and seek a career, we plan our days, we organize our projects. We use our intelligence and our wits to look ahead and ask how best to get from point “A” to point “B.” That makes sense in practical terms, but it also makes sense in spiritual terms. Jesus encouraged us to be good stewards, and stewardship is not blind; in fact, he told parables of talents used and wasted, builders wise and foolish, armies well- and ill-prepared. God gave us brains, and he expects us to use them.

At the same time, Jesus taught that sincere stewards submit their plans to the test of God’s wisdom and providence and are willing to drop them at a moment’s notice if God reveals another, wiser, path. We are to use our wits, but they are best illuminated by God’s wisdom. The wisdom of God is not a quick fix (love never is), nor is it the path of least resistance (neither is love). The wisdom of God goes hand-in-hand with his love for us, and it takes trusting love to follow it.

Following God’s wisdom in forming our plans for the future, we discover how well his ways “fit” our lives — we were made to live out his wisdom! By the same token, many of us have had plans unexpectedly changed by life, only to discover that the surprising twist produced results better than if we had stubbornly clutched our own plans. As good stewards we had done our homework, and our openness to God allowed us to see his wisdom in unexpectedly changed circumstances.

God’s wisdom, God’s will, and God’s providence reveal his love for us. Those who remain open to him in all things find fulfillment. The goal? To desire what God desires. +

For reflection:
Where have I been turning for guidance and wisdom? Have I ever experienced an unexpected change in plans, only to discover that God had something much better in store for me? How is God’s wisdom an expression of His love?

For prayer:
“I bless the Lord who counsels me; even in the night my heart exorts me. I set the Lord ever before me; with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed. Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices; my body, too, abides in confidence. You will show me the path to life, fullness of joys in your presence, the delights of your right hand forever” (Psalm 16). Amen.
“Truly you have formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb. I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made; wonderful are your works. My soul also you knew full well; nor was my frame unknown to you. When I was made in secret, when I was fashioned in the depths of the earth.” (Psalm 139:13-15)

God’s wisdom and love bore fruit in creation, when he brought our world to life. The book of Genesis repeats a single refrain after its depiction of each of the six days of creation: “God saw how good it was.” Light, the sky, the earth, the sea, vegetation, the sun, the moon, fish, birds, and animals of all kinds — creation unfolded in wondrous, beautiful array, all of it good in God’s eyes. But the climax of creation came when man and woman were created, for finally there was something in creation made “in the divine image.” Having created man and woman, God handed dominion of the earth to them, and the refrain appears a seventh time: “God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.”

There could be no mistaking the important truth taught by Genesis: God made everything, including the crown of creation, man and woman. Fearfully, wonderfully made in his image, their very being displays his wisdom. The unique dignity of the human person is spelled out in a number of ways in the Bible: of all creation, only man and woman can know and love the creator; they alone are called to share, by knowledge and love, in God’s own life. A human being is not just something; he or she is someone, a person. Men and women are capable of self-knowledge and can give themselves freely in love and communion with other persons.

We humans are also “body and soul.” “Soul” refers to the innermost facet of our being, what is of most value in us, that by
which we are most especially made in God’s image, our spiritual principle. The human body also shares in the divine image; in fact, what makes our body “human” is precisely the fact that it is animated by a spiritual soul. The unity of body and soul in the human person forms a single nature, “human nature.” The whole human person — body and soul — is saved by Christ and designed to become a temple of the Holy Spirit. The soul is immortal; it separates from the body at death, but the two are destined to be reunited at the final Resurrection.

The very fact that God’s Son assumed a human nature in the Incarnation shows us God’s love and respect for the human body. Christians do not look upon the human body as something to be disdained or discarded, as if it were a source of difficulty; it is to be respected and cherished. We have a responsibility to take care of our bodies, and medical science has a responsibility to find the best ways to keep them in good health and help them function properly.

The human body is a special work of God, reflecting his infinite wisdom. It is God’s work of art, beautiful to behold and beautiful to understand, and it has a certain wisdom all its own. The balanced interplay of its systems and organs is a delicate but determined dance programmed into us, working to keep us alive and well without our even knowing it. The body’s ability to take in nourishment, to transform that nourishment into energy and growth, to attack harmful germs that invade it or heal parts that are injured; its ability to breathe in oxygen which enriches the blood coursing through arteries and veins, to grow bone and marrow and muscle that enable us to walk and work — this is all God’s design.

Medical researchers, doctors, and nurses study this fascinating divine design and never stop learning something new. Understanding the body, they can help it function better and perhaps find new cures for disease. And as they learn about the body’s “wisdom,” they are actually getting a glimpse of the wisdom of God.

Body and soul are a unity, and the soul “gives life” to the body in human nature. Thus the body is holy — created by God, operating according to his artistry, joined to his creative purposes, destined for glory. God knew what he was doing when he created the human body, and we live well when we know and respect the wisdom of the body. He left nothing out of his design, nor did he forget to provide anything we human beings need for full life and health.

Awed by God’s wisdom at work in the intricate systems and organs of the human body, and knowing that it is holy and destined for glory, doesn’t it make sense that we would want to respect the body’s design and not hinder its proper functioning in any way?

For reflection:
How does society regard the human body? In what ways does modern science help and hinder the “wisdom” of the body? Do I care for my body as I should?

For prayer:
“O Lord, our Lord, how glorious is your name over all the earth! When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you set in place — what is man that you should be mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him? You have made him little less than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor” (Psalm 8). Amen.
My parents were married at 7 a.m. on September 19, 1942, in St. Mary Church in Jackson, Tennessee. They chose the early hour so they could receive Holy Communion at the nuptial Mass, since fasting was required from midnight on, and so they could catch the train to Memphis for their honeymoon after a breakfast reception at my grandparents’ home. I doubt there are 7 a.m. weddings any more; trains are no longer the most common means of transportation in this country; and Memphis is not among the top ten honeymoon spots for today’s newlyweds. But even though wedding customs have changed since the early 40s, the meaning of marriage has not.

Growing up I did not reflect much on my parents’ marriage commitment, but I nonetheless experienced it daily and lived securely in its embrace. As the youngest of five children, I was the fruit of my parents’ love and God’s love; I was reared in a faith-filled home; and I was the beneficiary of a sacrament whose grace spilled over to far more people than my mother and father.

Part of what it means to be made in God’s image and likeness is that we are capable of freely and consciously giving and receiving love. This loving give-and-take is a mirror of and a participation in the life of the Holy Trinity. It would not be enough to say it is a “mirror,” because alone that word could mean human love is just an artificial imitation of God’s love, a poor forgery of the real thing. We also say “participation,” because we would have neither the desire nor the capacity to love if we were not made in God’s image. Moreover, the love we share with others does not have its origin in us; it comes from God. He freely shares his love with us, and it is his love we give to others. In fact, love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.
Because we were not made for selfishness or egoism, they cannot bring us happiness. Maturing as a human person involves learning to put love and sacrifice into practice, finding the path on which God calls us to live out our fundamental vocation “to love.” Whether single, married, religious, or priest, our deepest happiness lies in loving in the image and likeness of God.

When preparing couples for marriage, I always ask how they met. Needless to say, I have received a wide variety of responses! It is a helpful exercise for them to discover how God was at work in their meeting, their courtship, the maturing of their love, and their decision to marry. It helps them see that God’s role in their marriage does not begin the day of their wedding; he has been present all along, and he called them to marriage. It is his love they share, and it is he who will sustain their marriage in times good and bad. Blessed are those couples who never lose sight of the origin of their love.

The Bible begins with accounts of the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God and ends with St. John’s vision of “the wedding feast of the lamb.” In between, its pages are filled with the imagery of marriage, the example of holy couples, practical lessons in family life, and the invitation to explore the spiritual meaning of marriage. In particular, the Old Testament depicts God’s relationship with Israel as a marriage covenant, characterized by exclusive and faithful love. Although Israel sometimes strayed from its part of the covenant, God was always faithful. The image of marriage provided the backdrop for understanding God’s love for Israel, but the depth and faithfulness of his love also illuminated the true nature and demands of marriage.

God’s faithful covenant with Israel paved the way for the new and everlasting covenant in which God’s Son gave himself completely for us; he united us to himself in the Incarnation and saved us by his death, preparing for the “wedding day of the Lamb,” when the reign of God begins (Revelation 19:7). St. Paul wrote that husbands’ and wives’ mutual self-giving is a mysterious foreshadowing of this marriage of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:21-33). The sacrament of marriage both signifies Christ’s eternal covenant and communicates its grace to husbands and wives.

Just as God is the creator of man and woman, he is also the author of marriage. Christian marriage is an unbreakable commitment precisely because it is an image of and participation in God’s never-ending love. In calling them to love, God gives joy to husbands and wives, as they care for one another, protect one another, anticipate one another’s needs, and sacrifice for one another. They discover the joy of giving oneself completely, without reserve, holding nothing back (the meaning of “sacrifice”). It is within that embrace of committed self-giving that they find courage and patience in time of trial; for when spouses trust one another’s commitment and remember the origin of their love, they can tackle every difficulty together.

Marriage is also a way of discipleship and conversion. Newlyweds soon become aware of one another’s faults and blemishes, but by following the Lord Jesus, they can learn to trust, to overcome self-absorption, and to forgive. They are disciples not only as individuals; together they give their marriage in discipleship and in doing so discover joys that would otherwise remain hidden to them. They give themselves to each other, and together they give their marriage to God.

In an often-quoted and often-misunderstood section of the letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul begins a passage about wives and husbands with these words: “Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21ff).

In the late fourth century, St. John
Chrysostom suggested that young husbands should say to their wives: “I have taken you in my arms, and I love you, and I prefer you to my life itself. For the present life is nothing, and my most ardent dream is to spend it with you in such a way that we may be assured of not being separated in the life reserved for us. … I place your love above all things, and nothing would be more bitter or painful to me than to be of a different mind than you” (Homily on Ephesians 20,8).

John captured well Paul’s teaching that wives and husbands are to be subordinate to one another — in other words, they are to consider the other’s good as of greatest importance, they are to sacrifice for one another as Christ himself has done, and as a couple they are to see themselves as subject to Christ. The concept of mutual subordination is a way of expressing the particular kind of love which characterizes Christian marriage, which is a “union of loves” so complete that two become one. ♦

For reflection:
What do I know about my parents’ wedding? How did their marriage bear fruit? What does it mean to give one’s marriage in discipleship?

For prayer:
“How can I ever express the happiness of a marriage joined by the Church, strengthened by an offering, sealed by a blessing, announced by angels, and ratified by the Father? How wonderful the bond between two believers, now one in hope, one in desire, one in discipline, one in the same service? They are both children of one Father and servants of the same Master, undivided in spirit and flesh, truly two in one flesh. Where the flesh is one, one also is the spirit.” — Tertullian, third century A.D.

Their union bears fruit

In the Roman Catholic Church, it is ordinarily understood that husband and wife are ministers of God’s grace and confer on one another the sacrament of matrimony by declaring their consent before the Church. They are chosen instruments of God in one another’s lives — and not just the day of the wedding, but “until death do us part.” They are literally to help one another get to heaven! Moreover, their vocation entails not only being one in love for each other, but also being God’s instruments as a couple, most especially instruments of his creative power in giving life to children. Their love looks beyond itself and seeks to raise up new lives.

These two meanings or values of Christian marriage — the “unitive” and “procreative” — are intimately, inseparably linked; they cannot be divided without affecting the couple’s spiritual life and compromising their marriage and the future of their family. In fact, if a person enters marriage with the deliberate intention to exclude children from the marriage, the consent is invalid. Just as the Persons of the Trinity are “fruitful” in love for one another and in creation, so the love of husband and wife is intended to be fruitful in love and offspring. Married couples are cooperators in the love of God the Creator and are, in a certain sense, its interpreters.

Being “cooperators” and “interpreters” of the creative love of God carries both extraordinary joys and extraordinary responsibilities. An especially intimate and personal responsibility of every couple is making decisions about the regulation of births. Just as the crown of creation was human life, so the supreme gift of marriage is a human person, and
the vocation of husband and wife entails honoring this capacity of their love with special care.

The Church does not teach that couples should have a certain number of children, but it does offer teaching about responsible parenthood, which can be summarized in these five points:

1. Husbands and wives have a responsibility to understand and honor the “wisdom of the body,” including its biological processes. I have discovered in marriage preparation sessions through the years that many young people are not well informed about the biological aspects of human reproduction.

2. Humans share certain instincts and passions, and Christians are to guard and control them through reason and will.

3. Taking into consideration the physical, economic, psychological, and social conditions of their marriage, couples exercise responsible parenthood by a prudent and generous decision to raise a large family, or by a decision (for serious reasons and made according to the moral law) to avoid a new birth for the time being, or even for an indefinite period.

4. Responsible parenthood has its roots in the truth about “right and wrong” established by God, and spouses have a duty to inform their consciences and make decisions according to this truth. Husbands and wives recognize their duties toward God, themselves, their family, and society and are called to maintain a proper set of priorities.

5. Offering their marriage in discipleship to the Lord Jesus, couples do not make purely arbitrary or subjective decisions regarding becoming parents but use the wisdom of God as their guide. As in every other aspect of their lives, Christian couples always remain open to God’s wisdom and providence regarding family life, including the size of their particular family. Since God brought them together and shares his love with them, he will always guide them along paths that are best for them.

Interwoven among these aspects of responsible parenthood is the understanding that the two great meanings or values of marriage — the “unitive” and “procreative” — are never separated. A love that is complete and faithful, a love which holds nothing back from the other, will remain open to God’s creative plan. After all, it is God’s love in the first place.

For reflection:
How can spouses help one another get to heaven? What are some of the ways I want my marriage to be fruitful? What did I know about the Church’s teaching on responsible parenthood before now?

For prayer:
Father of all that is good, keep us faithful in serving you, for to serve you is our lasting joy. Amen.
We have reflected on God’s wisdom, how he providently watches over us, and how he expects us to use our talents and intelligence while submitting them humbly to his wisdom. We have seen that there is a deep hunger within us to desire what God desires, because he desires only what is good for us.

We have also called to mind that man and woman are the crown of creation, the image and likeness of God; that human nature is made of body and soul; that the body is loved and respected by God, has been created with an intricate and mysterious wisdom of its own, and is destined for glory. God left nothing out of his design of the human body, and by respecting it ourselves we learn of his ways and his loving plan.

We recalled that one aspect of being made in God’s image and likeness is that we are capable of freely and consciously giving and receiving love, and those called to the sacrament of marriage are to love in God’s image and likeness — joyfully, wholeheartedly, sacrificially, selflessly, and permanently. Husbands’ and wives’ mutual self-giving is a mysterious foreshadowing of the marriage of Christ and the Church, and together they offer their marriage in discipleship.

Finally, we recalled that one extraordinary grace of marriage is that couples are called to cooperate in God’s work of creating new life. Their mutual love, and their calling to be instruments of creation, go hand-in-hand. As responsible parents, they take into account the physical, economic, psychological, and social condition of their marriage; and as in every other aspect of their lives, they
seek God’s wisdom regarding family life, including the size of their family.

How, then, does a couple make a responsible and prudent decision about the number and spacing of their children in a way that is faithful to their vocation? The answer rests in believing in God’s wisdom, cherishing and preserving the spiritual meaning of marriage, loving one’s spouse wholeheartedly without holding anything back, giving one’s marriage in discipleship, respecting the wisdom of the body, and trusting in God’s providence. For God who calls couples to marriage and participation in creation built into creation itself a loving design for planning families.

Catholic teaching about human sexuality is unashamedly positive. We understand this gift as something to celebrate because God has given us a joyful and pleasurable way of expressing married love. Because it is a particularly intimate part of each person, sexuality also calls for the deepest respect and reverence. Sexual intercourse is a complete giving of oneself to another in physical expressions of love, designed by God for the creation of new life. It is thus destined for marriage alone, where wholehearted love and commitment, permanence, and the call to give life are linked. Any expression of sexual intercourse outside marriage is dishonest and cheap, because it is not a physical expression of a total gift of self that the couple has already made to one another in marriage. It is not truly “unitive.”

It is possible for an act of sexual intercourse to lack both its unitive and procreative aspects — and then it is something worse than cheap. It is abuse. Likewise, the blatant commercialization of sex degrades both men and women, insults their deepest dignity and injures their sense of worth.

Even within marriage, in order for each act of sexual intercourse to be authentic, it must embrace both its unitive and procreative aspects; it must be an expression both of loving union and openness to God’s plan for the creation of new life. In fact, a sexual act, even within marriage, which deliberately and completely excludes its procreative aspects, is not truly unitive — the couple has not made a genuine and complete gift of themselves to each other. That is why the Church teaches that any direct action which tries to render procreation impossible — either in anticipation of sexual intercourse, or once it has occurred — is immoral. This includes the direct sterilization of men and women as well as contraceptive pills, treatments, and devices. As Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver has written, contraception “is the equivalent of spouses saying: ‘I’ll give you all I am — except my fertility; I’ll accept all you are — except your fertility.’” (Of Human Life: A pastoral letter on the truth and meaning of married love, no. 12).

If the unitive and procreative aspects of human sexuality are thus separated, the spiritual meaning of the couple’s marriage is compromised. It is also for this reason that medical procedures which seek to achieve pregnancy but separate the unitive and procreative aspects of sexual intercourse are immoral.

The term “procreative” does not mean that, in order to be authentic, each act of sexual intercourse in marriage must result in the conception of a child; instead, it means that each act must be open to life, faithful to the meaning of the act. The Church does not teach that husbands and wives must have as many children as they physically can. After all, God himself
A crucial part of the Catholic marriage preparation process is the completion of the “Pre-Nuptial Questionnaire,” in which the priest or deacon asks the engaged couple to answer a series of questions about their understanding of marriage and their intentions as they prepare to marry. Do they understand the nature of Christian marriage, and do they intend to enter a marriage that is fully in accord with the Church’s understanding of the sacrament?

Implicit in the questions is the understanding that those entering Christian marriage do so without conditions or reservations. The questions are important because they encourage the couple to examine their deepest intentions regarding married love — a lifelong, faithful, whole-hearted and complete gift of self, with no strings attached, and no conditions.

Do the future spouses have any reservations which they have not yet verbalized or discussed adequately (“I love her, but she had better stop drinking, because it worries me”)? Do they hold a condition regarding the permanence of their marriage (“I love him, but if it doesn’t work out, we can get a divorce”)? Has one of them asked the other to make an engagement-breaking promise (“I will marry you only if you promise we will never leave Washington”)? Have they signed a pre-nuptial agreement, which foresees that in the event of divorce, their assets will be divided a certain way? (Pre-nuptial agreements anticipate the possibility of divorce and thus signify that the engaged are not giving themselves to each other unconditionally and permanently.) Have they placed restrictions on one another regarding the number of children (“If we get married, you must promise we will have no more than two children”)?

Interesting questions which deserve careful attention by every engaged and married couple, and by every priest or deacon who prepares them. Marriage is a call to love unconditionally, and like any human person, husbands and wives come
face-to-face with the selfishness and stubbornness that can burden love. “I’m not going to apologize to her if she’s not going to apologize to me.” “I’ll never speak to his parents again.” “I’m not going to ask how her day went until she asks about mine.” “I’ll show him — I’ll do the same thing to him that he did to me.”

Why do I mention this in the context of Natural Family Planning? Because NFP is about the whole-hearted, unselfish love and sexual expression a husband and wife give one another and, together, to God — holding nothing back from one another or from him, not even their fertility. Natural Family Planning is not the “Rhythm Method” of generations past, which was unscientific and ineffective; instead, it involves advanced techniques of identifying the days in a woman’s menstrual cycle when she is fertile and could conceive a new child. The couple decides to have intercourse on those days if they are hoping to conceive, or abstain from intercourse if they are postponing conception. There are several NFP methods, and all are highly effective.

But isn’t this still “birth control,” and doesn’t the Church say birth control is immoral? Every couple is called to responsible parenthood, one aspect of which is planning their family. Since the Church doesn’t say how many children a couple should have, each couple must decide — taking into consideration their psychological, economic, and social circumstances and using moral principles in tune with God’s wisdom — how many children they would like to have. When they decide for good reasons to space the births of children by reserving sexual intercourse for infertile periods, they are observing the wisdom of the body in a cycle God himself created.

Because NFP is based on the identification of those times when God has made a couple fertile, it does not seek to separate the unitive and procreative dimensions of sexual intercourse. Every act of intercourse can maintain its full meaning of total self-giving to one another and God. God is always in charge. By the way, since NFP is an effective method of family planning it is possible to use it in a selfish way, if for example a couple is not open to children and uses it as a means to permanently exclude them.

Couples who use NFP speak enthusiastically of how it enriches their marriage. They submit themselves to God’s loving wisdom; their sexual relationship maintains its full integrity; they learn new expressions of tenderness; they learn to communicate about one of the most intimate aspects of their lives, and this communication enriches other areas; husbands gain a better appreciation of their wives’ fertility and their role as partners and co-creators with God; they grow in respect for one another; they learn never to take for granted the gift of their sexual relationship. Most importantly of all, they grow spiritually.

Some couples experience the tremendous sadness of not being able to conceive; theirs is still a fruitful marriage, whose grace spills over to the lives of many. With God’s guidance, some couples have decided to have large families, others smaller families. We should celebrate the fruitfulness and respect the intimate and personal makeup of each.

For reflection:
Have I placed any conditions or reservations on commitments of love, especially my commitment to my fiancée or fiancé, or my spouse? How might I become more whole-hearted in love? What do I still need to learn about love?

For prayer:
“Look with love upon this woman, now married in Christ to this man. She asks your blessing. Give her the grace of love and peace. May she always follow the example of the holy women whose praises are sung in the Scriptures. May her husband put his trust in her and recognize that she is his equal and the heir with him to the life of grace. May he always honor her and love her as Christ loves his bride, the Church”
(from the Rite of Marriage).
To desire what God desires, to put ourselves at the disposal of his will — that is what brings us fulfillment. We were made for God! And only following his wisdom will bring us true happiness.

Married couples have a blessed opportunity to participate in God’s creative power. As with everything in life, they are but stewards of the gift of sexuality. To see sexuality as “mine” is selfishness; to see it as “ours” can be equally selfish; but to understand that it is “Yours” — “God’s” — opens us to his loving, creative wisdom. There is no wisdom greater than his.
FOR MORE INFORMATION:
In the Archdiocese of Seattle, we are blessed with a growing number of couples trained as Natural Family Planning instructors; they offer classes in both English and Spanish throughout the Archdiocese. I urge engaged and married couples to learn about Church teaching on married love. For more information, contact the Office of Catholic Faith Formation, (206) 382-4096 or visit www.seattlearchdiocese.org/nfp.