

Marriage as an Antidote to Lust?

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“To those not married and to widows I have this to say: It would be well if they remain as they are, even as I do myself; but if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. It is better to marry than to be on fire.” These words of St. Paul to the Corinthians might sound as though the Apostle of the Gentiles is justifying marriage as a lawful end to satisfying selfish sexual desires at the expense of one’s spouse.

John Paul II offers his own insights to the words of St. Paul through his personalistic view of the human person. John Paul II teaches that God places in the heart of man and woman a desire for true love that focuses on the “value” of each person. In other words, the object of the heart’s desire is the person, not the body. This desire for true love is meant to lead us into a communion of persons; to the union of man and woman in marriage. Within marriage, true love bears the characteristics of faithfulness, total gift of self and fruitfulness. True love is a self-less love. It is a loving-kindness that is freely given and received and that nurtures intimacy within the marriage relationship.

A sexual desire contrary to true love would be one that flows from concupiscence. John Paul II describes this false love as a kind of fire... “flaring up in the man, it invades his senses, arouses his body, draws the feelings along with itself, and in some way takes possession of the ‘heart’”. The object of the heart’s desire becomes the body of another person that is taken for personal sexual gratification. It is a fire that can never be satiated: the more the carnal desire is fed, the more it wants.

The state of marriage does not protect couples from this kind of false love. Probably the biggest obstacle to overcoming carnal desire today is the practice of contraception in marriage. Contraception not only works against conception, but against the characteristics of true love because it can never reflect the total gift of one’s self to the other. When spouses withhold their fertility from each other, their heart’s view of the value of the person easily becomes distorted. Contraception enslaves a husband (or wife) to use the body of his wife (or husband) as a mere object of personal sexual gratification because there is no responsibility for their actions. They may think, “I do not have to control my desires or worry about having a baby.” Under these conditions, marriage becomes in the worst sense a remedy for concupiscence.

So what does St. Paul mean by marriage as a remedy for concupiscence? The Sacrament of Marriage is meant to be a growth in holiness. Through the sacrifices and obligations of married life, a couple is called to mature as a person in virtue. Marriage is a remedy that heals our disordered passions and transforms them into a sexual love that is centered on the person. By asking for and receiving the graces of Christ’s Redemptive Act, husband and wife can experience a profound change of heart that allows each other to see the dignity of the person, the gift of the body.

The practice of Natural Family Planning can be a means for couples to allow this transformation to take place in their married life. NFP is not just about a moral means of planning one's family. More importantly, it is about learning to order our sexual desires towards self-giving rather than self-getting. Couples who practice NFP know and understand the tremendous power of their sexual impulses and learn to subdue them in order to direct their conjugal acts towards the unitive and procreative meanings of married love. This practice of the virtue of chastity protects the heart from an attitude of using and moves it towards an attitude of loving kindness. It allows both husband and wife to mature as sexual beings, a journey that takes time, effort and perseverance. It allows marriage to be, in the best sense, a remedy for concupiscence.

Chastity lived in all states of life point us towards our most high calling. It makes us capable of loving as God loves because it allows us to see others as God sees them. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that "the 'pure in heart' are promised that they will see God face to face and be like him...Even now, it enables us to see according to God, to accept others as 'neighbors'; it lets us perceive the human body – ours and our neighbor's – as a temple of the Holy Spirit, a manifestation of divine beauty."

For more information on Natural Family Planning go to www.fargodiocese.org/NFP. For more on chastity, see paragraphs 2337-2359 in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

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