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Getting Beyond “I Can’t”

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NFP Outreach (www.nfpoutreach.org)

With an addendum of questions and answers
by Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, OFM Cap

We travel the entire United States of America proclaiming the Gospel of Life as it pertains to God’s plan for spousal love. This plan calls for a total gift of self to one’s spouse and the acceptance of the spouse’s total gift of self in return. Contraception (the choice to make one or more acts of sexual union infertile) makes such an unconditional gift impossible. Natural Family Planning (NFP) fosters and supports this gift.

Everywhere we go we find married couples asking, “Why won’t our priests address the issue of contraception and sterilization from the pulpit?” Having heard these frustrated questions many times, we think it is time to list the top eight excuses given by priests and our answers to them.

Common objections to promoting the Church's teachings on contraception and married sexuality:

1) "Talking about contraception and sterilization would scandalize the children in the congregation, so I can't deal with them at the pulpit."

But Jesus didn't have such reservations. When he was addressing large crowds he talked about sexual sins. Recall the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:27). Children are not offended by a teaching on God's plan for spousal love. Rather, they are the victims of silence at the pulpit. People get hurt when there is confusion about right and wrong, and there is a great confusion today about the moral evil of contraception and sterilization. Young children do not



understand the language we use when discussing capital punishment, euthanasia, or experimentation on human embryos. They take from a homily what they need. If they have questions, they can ask their parents for an explanation suited to their level of comprehension.

Refusing to address major moral issues at the pulpit, in effect, makes infants of the entire congregation, who often do not know that contraception and sterilization are wrong, and do not understand why they are wrong. As a result, we have many adults who are seriously immature in the development of their consciences.

avoided. We don't even shrink from killing (through abortion) thousands of innocent preborn lives a day in satisfying our convenience and appetites.

It's no exaggeration, then, to say that disordered sexuality is the beginning of what Pope John Paul II calls "the culture of death." In fact, we'll never build a culture of life and love without first restoring the true meaning of human sexuality. If the Church is so concerned about sex, it's because she seeks to defend the dignity of the human person and to safeguard the true meaning of life and love, which sexuality is meant to reveal.

6, *How can I preach against contraception and praise the virtues of NFP? As a priest, I'm not married.*

First, the truth is the truth, no matter who speaks it. Second, preaching isn't about the preacher; it's about the message. Third, in his promise of celibacy, a priest doesn't forget or deny his sexuality. Instead, he dedicates it to a different — but equally fertile — kind of fruitfulness. In other words, priestly celibacy is an affirmation, not a rejection; a strength, not a weakness. It's a "yes" to God, which enables us to understand and serve our people better.

Remember that marriage, religious life, the single vocation, and the priesthood are all designed to fit together and complement each other in the life of the Church. Each needs the other. Each, in its own proper way, fulfills the fundamental human vocation to give ourselves away in love. I think we priests often underestimate how effective our pastoral counsel can be on issues like contraception. People want and need the truth, and over time, the human heart naturally responds to it. But our people can't respond if they don't hear the message of *Humanae Vitae* faithfully and persuasively from their pastors. That's our job, and we should embrace it joyfully.

today's new procreative techniques treat human life as a product that can be manufactured — and in doing so, they violate human dignity. Again, the end never justifies the means.

Children aren't the only way a marriage can be fruitful. If God, in His design, closes one option for a couple, He will open another. Their love can find expression in adoption, foster-parenting, or dozens of forms of apostolic work. This kind of counsel, of course, is much easier to give than to willingly accept. I would never want to understate the real pain and loss felt by infertile couples. But I know, both from faith and from my friendships with married couples over the years, that if a husband and wife choose to trust God, their love will always be rewarded with fertility and new life — if not in the form of a child, then in the way they impact the world around them.

5. Why is the Church so obsessed with sex?

You know the old saying about the pot calling the kettle black — well, here's a great example. Questions like this one may very well be honest, but they conceal where the real obsessions lie. American society is drowning in a sea of disordered sexuality. In such circumstances, it's hardly an "obsession" for the Church to speak clearly and forcefully about how to swim. It's her responsibility and mission.

God created our sexuality to be a sign in the world of His own life and love, and to reveal to us that we can only fulfill ourselves by loving as He loves. When sexuality becomes distorted, however, it's no longer able to communicate God's life and love. Empty of true love, life lacks meaning, and people soon seem disposable. Sex becomes a pursuit of selfish gratification at the expense of others. Children are no longer welcomed as the natural fruit of married love, but are seen as a burden to be

2) "It's okay to talk about these matters in RCIA and marriage preparation classes, and to provide pamphlets on these issues in the vestibule, but not at the pulpit."

This approach misses the point. "These times call for people who will look the truth in the eye and call things by their proper names, without yielding to convenient compromise or to the temptation of self-deception" (*Evangelium Vitae* 57). Important issues cannot be censored from the pulpit. If a message does not happen at the pulpit, it doesn't happen. There is great ignorance among Catholics about the morality of contraception and sterilization.



Fr. Habiger

Very few understand why these choices and acts are immoral. Many people think that if a topic is not treated at the pulpit, where it is heard by all, then it is not important and can be ignored. RCIA classes, marriage prep classes, and the pamphlet rack are good ways to supplement teaching from the pulpit, but they can never replace it. Teachers of these classes may not have been motivated to address contentious issues; encouragement by the pastor from the pulpit will empower them.

3) "These issues are contentious. They will produce strife and discord."

It may seem attractive to avoid contentious issues when preaching, but this means that the priest, as a moral guide, cannot provide moral guidance where it is most needed. If people already understand an issue, like slavery for example, and do not dispute it, then there is no need to address it from the pulpit. However, if many people are violating the 5th and 6th Commandments, but do not know it,

and can't understand why these acts are sinful, then we priests must address these issues. Not to address them is reprehensible negligence on our part. We must inform conscience by proposing moral truth. The approach we use is that of Jesus: we speak the truth in charity, and with conviction and forthrightness. If we allow the Gospel to be silenced because we refuse to accept criticism from those who reject Gospel values, then we fail in our priesthood. It is not our Gospel. We are not at liberty to decide what parts of the Gospel are too hard to accept and can be ignored. Contraception and sterilization are serious matters, and they are causing much harm to our marriages, our families and our young people. Here we need to learn from Jesus, who came not just to establish peace, but sometimes also division. (Lk. 12:51)

4) "Collections will go down."

The guiding principle must be that we do not surrender the pulpit to the dollar sign. "May your money perish with you..." (Acts 8:20) The collection could go down temporarily. But beyond that, we members of the clergy must anticipate the criteria our Lord will use to evaluate our pastoral care of the flock entrusted to our care. The main criterion will not be "Did you get all the bills paid and have a smooth running operation?" Rather, it will be, "Did you guide my people into a knowledge of my ways, my plan for creation and salvation, my Gospel, and into a love for the splendor of the truth?" Paying bills is not high on the list of pastoral success criteria. The qualities of a priest are not those of a CEO. Bringing people to the person, heart, and mind of the Lord is what is essential. God does not demand success from us in terms of our people's response to good moral teaching. He does demand that we faithfully propose and teach the values that comport well with our dignity as bodied persons. God's plan for human

which are hard to accept. Should we stop teaching the truth because it's difficult? Of course not. We have the joy and the responsibility before God to preach the truth lovingly in season and out of season.

The Church won't be renewed without a renewal of family life. And the family can't be renewed without a return to the truths taught in *Humanae Vitae*. Ignoring this issue can't be an option: In the long run, its cost is too high. Therefore, we should make every effort to better understand the importance of Church teaching in this regard, and witness to it boldly and with confidence.

4. In your pastoral letter, you said that the most intimate, powerful part of each person is his or her fertility. My husband and I are unable to have children. What does this mean for us?

Many couples bear a great cross because, despite their openness to life, they're unable to have children. But marital love is *always* life-giving when spouses give themselves honestly to each other, even if a child isn't conceived. Only when husband and wife intentionally withhold their fertility, or abuse their sexuality in some other way, can we speak of a "life-less" act of intercourse.

Spouses' self-giving in one flesh remains the most intimate, powerful and life-giving expression of their love for one another, even when nature, or some problem of nature, prevents new life from being conceived. Medical technology can sometimes correct a physical problem, allowing a child to be conceived by the loving embrace of parents. This is a proper and wonderful use of technology. However, couples should remember that, as creatures themselves, they're not the arbiters of human life. Ultimately, no one is free to manipulate the conception of a human person. No matter how sincere a couple's intentions, many of

artificial but not immoral. So it's important to realize that the Church doesn't oppose artificial birth control *because* it's artificial. Rather, what the Church opposes is *any* method of birth control which is *contraceptive*, whether artificial devices, pills, etc., are used or not.

Contraception is the choice, by any means, to *sterilize a given act of intercourse*. In other words, a contracepting couple chooses to engage in intercourse and, knowing that it may result in a new life, they intentionally and willfully suppress their fertility. Herein lies a key distinction: Natural family planning (NFP) *is in no way contraceptive*. The choice to *abstain* from a fertile act of intercourse is completely different from the willful choice to *sterilize* a fertile act of intercourse. NFP simply accepts from God's hand the natural cycle of infertility that He has built into the nature of woman.

Regarding the issue of intention: Yes, both couples may have the same *end* in mind — to avoid pregnancy. But the *means* to achieve their common goal are not at all alike. Take, for example, two students, each of whom intends to excel in school. Obviously that's a very good intention. With the same goal in mind, one studies diligently. The other cheats on every test. The point is, the end doesn't justify the means — in getting an education, in regulating births, or in anything else.

3. I'm a priest. If I preach about what's wrong with contraception, I'll lose people.

Let me turn that around: If priests *don't* preach the Church's message about contraception, *heaven loses people*. Don't be afraid. When Jesus preached the truth, He lost people. But, little by little, He gained even more people. Take courage in the Lord. It shouldn't surprise us that people find this teaching hard to accept. *Every* Gospel-based life has things

sexuality, marriage, and family is an essential part of the Gospel of Life in these times.

Priests who have consistently preached and taught the values of *Humanae Vitae, Familiaris Consortio and Evangelium Vitae* will tell you that their collections have not collapsed. Instead, the parish has learned the meaning of a spirit of generosity, and that is reflected in parish contributions as well as volunteer service to various parish organizations. Couples who practice NFP are very often the most generous donors and volunteers in the parish. Couples open to life are also open to giving their children to the priesthood and religious life. If they are caught up in the selfish contraceptive culture, then they will likely not be generous with God by encouraging their sons and daughters to be responsive to God's call.

5) "People will go to another church because they don't want to hear this."

Sad to say, not every parish is on the same page when dealing with matters of sexuality, marriage and the family. Some parishes simply embrace only whatever is comfortable or politically correct. They allow dissenting elements within the parish to determine what parts of the Gospel can be proclaimed there. This, in turn, means that forces within the secular society exert an influence over some parishioners, who bring that to bear upon the entire parish. Instead of being counter-cultural, such a parish becomes a mere reflection of the secular culture that has such a corrosive effect on faith and family life.

But this is the land of the free and the home of the brave. What is there to prevent a clergyman from proclaiming God's beautiful plan for human love, life, marriage and family? We are not to worry about those who may reject the truth and leave. Our Lord did not change his teaching about the Eucharist when many

in His audience found this a hard saying and walked away. He respected their freedom and let them walk. But they also had to respect His freedom and His responsibility to proclaim the message the Father gave Him, which is for the life of the world. If all the clergy were clearly teaching good moral principles, then our people would not go shopping for the preacher who suits their ears.

6) “When the bishop talks about it, I’ll begin to talk about it.”

One can understand why a priest or deacon would hesitate to take the initiative in teaching values that have been largely ignored since 1968. We have a right to expect our spiritual fathers, the bishops, to lead by their example in addressing these serious matters. This is their duty as moral guides and spiritual leaders of dioceses. They are to be the good shepherds for their dioceses. But what happens if they do not speak out? Is the pastor justified in keeping silent? When we priests die, the Lord will not ask you, “What did the bishop do?” He will ask, “What did you do? You are the pastor of your people.”

Our priesthood ultimately comes from the Lord. Our obligations are to the Lord. God holds us accountable for what we do, for our choices and actions, and for taking responsibility for ourselves and our people. True leadership means that we address the real needs of our times, regardless of what others are doing or not doing.

Reprehensible negligence does not justify additional reprehensible negligence. Perhaps what needs to be done in a diocese where the bishop chooses not to address these issues is to have a group of the clergy give him their assurance that they will support his giving a public teaching. Perhaps the bishop is concerned that if he takes any initiative in these matters, then his clergy will

control and every other matter. But that’s not where the problem lies. *The problem lies in the formation of one’s conscience.* A conscientious person seeks to do good and avoid evil. Seeing the difference between good and evil, though, can sometimes be difficult. As Pope John Paul II has said, the basic moral law is written in the human heart because we’re created in the image and likeness of God. But we bear the wounds of original sin, which garbles the message and dims our ability to judge and act according to truth.

Truth is objective. In other words, it’s real, is independent of us, and exists whether we like it or not. Therefore, conscience can’t *invent* right and wrong. Rather, conscience is called to *discover* the truth of right and wrong, and then to *submit personal judgments to the truth* once it is found. Church teaching on the regulation of births, like all her moral teachings, is a *sure guide* for forming our consciences according to the truth. For we have the certainty of faith, as Vatican II reminds us, that the teachings of the Church on matters of faith and morals are “not the mere word of men, but truly the word of God.” (*Lumen Gentium* n. 12)

Too often, we use “conscience” as a synonym for private preference, a kind of pious alibi for doing what we want or taking the easy road. We only end up hurting others and ourselves.

2. I still don’t see the big difference between a couple using “artificial” birth control and a couple using “natural” family planning. Don’t both couples have the same intention, and isn’t this what determines morality?

It’s hard to see the difference when the emphasis is placed on “artificial” versus “natural” methods. People rightly point out that many things we use are

our people, which may involve suffering occasional rejection and criticism. The Gospel is one of life, as well as of love. Because He loves us, Jesus was willing to lay down his life for us so that we could have life to the full. Are not we priests, then, to foster life and greater life among our people, in an age which is characterized as a culture of death? We should not be contracepting the Gospel of its life-giving dimension.

We priests may think it will be difficult for our people to give up contraception and adopt pure spousal love. But will it not also be difficult for us to give up our contraceptive approach to the Gospel? With God's grace, and with an openness to conversion, all of this is possible.

It has been said that the greatest lies are told in silence. There are no reasons today that can justify continued silence at the pulpit about matters of sexual morality, especially in the areas of contraception and sterilization. Begin your search for good reading and reflection materials. Integrate these values into your own spirituality, and then you will develop your own way to articulate them in your preaching, teaching, and counseling.

Addendum

What follows is a set of questions and answers that Archbishop Charles Chaput published in his diocesan newspaper after he issued his pastoral letter *Of Human Life* in 1998. They provide some excellent material for reflection, and you might even consider using some of Archbishop Chaput's quotes from the pulpit.

1. Isn't a couple's method of family planning a matter of personal conscience?

Yes it is. Catholics, like all people, are *always* obligated to follow their consciences — on birth

publicly refuse to comply, as happened when *Humanae Vitae* was first promulgated. Everyone admires leadership, but where and when will leadership arise? We think that the good Lord expects all of us to be spiritual and moral leaders.

7) "I'm not prepared to speak about these issues because I wasn't trained in the seminary for this."

We find that many clergy are woefully unprepared to address these issues. They have not kept up with their reading and personal ongoing formation in the areas of human sexuality, chastity, and marriage. But this is not an acceptable excuse. What other profession would be excused from professional ongoing formation—keeping abreast of contemporary developments in their profession? If medical doctors did not keep themselves updated, they would lose their license to practice medicine. Should it be any different for the clergy?

There are excellent materials available today to help us understand the beauty of God's plan for human love, and especially marital love. There are great resources for explaining Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*; there is Christian Personalism (e.g., *Love and Responsibility* and *The Acting Person*). There are the writings of reliable moral theologians. There are the writings, CDs, and videotapes of Prof. Janet Smith. There are the testimonies of thousands of married couples who have discovered the blessings that these values have brought into their marriages and families. Two readily available sources for materials on Natural Family Planning and the harms of contraception and sterilization are *One More Soul* (www.OMSoul.com) and the *Couple to Couple League International* (www.ccli.org). CCL provides three-day clergy conferences twice a year in Covington, Kentucky.

NFP Outreach (www.nfpoutreach.org) helps design and conduct clergy conferences for entire dioceses on the topic of “How to Present the Values of NFP from the Pulpit.” There are many good Catholic doctors who are willing to bring their expertise to these conferences. And there are hundreds of married couples who are willing to testify about the benefits NFP has brought to their marriages. *One More Soul* keeps a *Directory of NFP-Only Physicians and NFP Teachers* in nearly every part of the country who can serve in this way (see www.omsoul.com/nfponly.php).

Ignorance has never been a good excuse for justifying neglect. And it will not wash today in areas that are so vital to good marriages and happy families.

8) “The recent clergy sex scandals make it impossible for me to talk about sex today. I have no credibility.”

Discrediting Catholicism, and especially our clergy, is very much the intent of some forces in the secular society, which want to muzzle the pulpits on matters of sexual morality. They don’t want us to teach about God’s plan for human sexuality. But there is no such thing as a moral vacuum. If good morality is not being taught, then other varieties of sexual ideology will be taught. We see it today in the push for acceptance of same-sex marriages, in safe sex for our young people, and in trivializing committed relationships.

The clergy sex scandals call for greater (not less) emphasis on sexual morality. If there had been greater clarity on these matters from the pulpit in the past, then everyone would know the standards (which apply to everyone), and we would have been spared much grief. Our young people would not have been victimized; dioceses would not be in danger of bankruptcy; respect for the clergy would not be at an all-time low; and bishops would not be faulted for their lack of oversight. Scandals erupt when there is no clarity of moral

teaching coming from the pulpit. Our times call for more moral teaching from the pulpit, not less.

Both the clergy and the laity have to clean up their act. The abuse of young people by 4% of the clergy (see www.catholicnews.com/data/abuse/abuse04.htm) is indeed a great scandal. The abuse of sexuality by the 80% of Catholic couples who are using birth control or are sterilized is also a great scandal. Before one group can throw stones at the other, they must first clean up their act. God is chastising his people because of violations against His sexual code. He chastises the clergy by not providing vocations to religious life and the priesthood. He chastises the laity by weak marriages, a 40%+ divorce rate, lots of unhappiness, and children who bear the brunt of their parent’s selfishness. So, both the clergy and the laity need to hold each other accountable. We are not beating up on each other; rather, we are helping one another follow God’s life-giving way.

The responsibility of clergy and religious is to hand on the deposit of the Faith as preached by the Apostles, which includes teaching moral truths. We must explain why God’s plan is so good for us and so deserving of our efforts to comply with it. The responsibility of the laity is to integrate good moral principles into their lives and actions. Then they are to take these values out into the broader society and help shape the culture with these Gospel values as part of the new evangelization.

In Conclusion

Perhaps it could be said that contraception also applies to us priests today. We speak about the love-giving dimensions of the Gospel, but not its life-giving dimensions. We know, however, that love without life is sterile. And we know that real love is demonstrated by our willingness to be totally “for”