

How are children a blessing?

The Church's teaching on contraception is not just a prohibition but a calling to the joy of parenthood. Procreation of children, far greater than an obligation, is an outpouring of God's love to spouses, who in turn pour out their love to their children. Parents accordingly become mediators, instruments, and ministers of God's love. This sharing in God's love of His children, as is true of all instances in which we share in the administration of God's gifts, heightens our dignity, conforms us to Christ, and deepens our self-knowledge.

The transmission of human life is a prerogative so cherished by God that it has been entrusted only to the covenantal union of man and wife. That is why openness to procreation is essential to the *vocation* of marriage.¹ Yes, marriage is a vocation raised by Christ to the level of a sacrament. Like all the sacraments, marriage is an encounter with Christ that nourishes one's own earthly pilgrimage as God's life and love (grace) is poured into one's soul. Yet God in his abundance fills the soul to overflowing, surging beyond our boundaries so that we become vessels of his love. In so doing, we become living images of Christ in the world.

Children are the incarnation of married love; the material overflowing of two becoming one. Love is *always* life-giving, *always* open to the other, *always* expansive. Those who love find no greater joy than to extend love to others. Children are the natural extension of the love of spouses—the visible sign of the fruitfulness of self-emptying love—and a means of ever deepening joy in marriage.

This is not to say that having children will create a perpetual state of marital bliss. Children involve sacrifice, *but* sacrifice is the fuel of love. It

¹ The blessing of this openness is available even to childless couples. "Spouses to whom God has not granted children can nevertheless have a conjugal life full of meaning, in both human and Christian terms. Their marriage can radiate a fruitfulness of charity, of hospitality, and of sacrifice."

authenticates love, purifies its motives, and makes it more Christ-like. Indeed, the self-emptying love that is *necessary* for the raising of children is not only an imitation of Christ's self-offering, but a real participation in it. The procreation of children is an exercise of our common priesthood: like Christ, who offered himself as priest and victim, we offer ourselves as a gift to our spouse and children for their good *and* for ours. For by offering ourselves to others we learn who we really are: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Mt 10:39)

The Crucifix that hangs above the marriage bed of so many Catholic households takes on new meaning in this light. In the same way that the cross effected a self-emptying offering that literally produced children for God, the marriage bed effects a sharing in this once-for-all sacrifice to produce children for God. It is no mere metaphor that Christ refers to his Church as His bride and to Himself as the Bridegroom. On Holy Thursday, Christ proclaimed his marriage vows—"This is my body which will be given up for you"—and on Good Friday He consummated the marriage on the Cross. For this reason two of the Doctors of the Catholic Church, St. Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross, likened the Cross to the marriage bed. Jesus formed a union with the people of God, He consummated it on the cross to bring forth divine progeny, and He appointed marriage as the sacramental sign of this marvelous offering (cf. Eph 5:25-32).

That the rearing of children engenders self-sacrificial love in parents is an essential element of the marriage vocation but children must be seen not only in their benefits to the marriage. On the contrary, a child is a supreme good in and of himself (cf. John Paul II *Letter to Families* No. 11). What gift is more precious than life itself? Into the marriage is sent a new person who did not exist before, an immortal soul created by God through an intimate expression of love between

husband and wife. A child is the consummate instance of God's miraculous intervention in the lives of his people. How can we not welcome such a magnificent blessing? How can we refuse such a generous calling?

That children are the "supreme gift" of marriage and an essential element of marital love has been the subject of a number of Papal audiences from Pope John Paul II:

God's blessing is at the origin not only of marital communion, but also of a responsible and generous openness to life. Children really are the "springtime of the family and society"...It is in children that marriage blossoms: they crown that total partnership of life which makes husband and wife "one flesh"; this is true both of the children born from the natural relationship of the spouses and those desired through adoption. Children are not an "accessory" to the project of married life. They are not an "option," but a "supreme gift," inscribed in the very structure of the conjugal union. The Church, as you know, teaches an ethic of respect for this fundamental structure in both its unitive and procreative meaning. In all this, it expresses the proper regard for God's plan, sketching an image of conjugal relations that are marked by mutual and unreserved acceptance. Above all, it addresses the right of children to be born and to grow in a context of fully human love. In conforming to the word of God, families thus become a school of humanization and true solidarity. (*Sunday Homily, Jubilee of Families*, October 15, 2000)

In choosing marriage as our vocation, we accept, prospectively, the gift of children. In fact the vows taken in marriage require our assent to "accept children from God lovingly and bring them up according to the law of Christ and His Church." This is a sacred pledge to God and spouse before witnesses—a vow that if kept produces new life that quickens our will to love and enlivens our outlook. Pope John Paul II spoke poetically to this point in an October 14, 2000, address to families:

Do not children themselves in a way continually "examine" their parents? They do so not only with their frequent "whys?", but with their very faces,

sometimes smiling, sometimes misty with sadness. It is as if a question were inscribed in their whole existence, a question which is expressed in the most varied ways, even in their whims, and which we could put into questions like these: Mama, papa, do you love me? Am I really a gift to you? Do you accept me for what I am? Do you always try to do what is really best for me?

These questions perhaps are asked more with their eyes than in words, but they hold parents to their great responsibility and are in some way an echo of God's voice for them.

Children are a "springtime": what does this metaphor chosen for your Jubilee mean?

It takes us into that panorama of life, colors, light, and song which belongs to the spring season. Children are all of this by nature. They are the hope that continually blossoms, a project that starts ever anew, the future that opens without ceasing. They represent the flowering of married love, which is found and strengthened in them. At their birth they bring a message of life, which, in the ultimate analysis, refers back to the very Author of life. In need of everything as they are especially in the first stage of life, they naturally appeal to our solidarity. Not by chance did Jesus invite his disciples to have a child's heart. Today, dear families, you wish to give thanks for the gift of children and, at the same time, to accept the message that God sends you through their existence (*Third World Meeting with Families*).

Jesus taught, "Let the children come to me and do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Lk. 18:16). Children are the model of a kingdom people. They are the living symbol of hope, innocence, and life itself. Indeed, Jesus came to us as a child, bearing in his infancy a new beginning for humanity. How fitting that our restoration would be revealed to us in the new life of a tender little baby. Every newborn child reminds us of our capacity for renewal and our unique ability to shape the future of God's kingdom.

This pamphlet is drawn from Chapter 8 of *Called to Give Life* by Jason T. Adams. Jason is a theology teacher at Carroll High School in Dayton, Ohio, where he resides with his wife, Linda, and their two children, Timothy and Bridget. Jason and Linda have used Natural Family Planning to successfully postpone and achieve pregnancy throughout their marriage, and have shared their testimony to its benefits in Pre-Cana, RCIA, young adult/youth groups, and other venues.



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by Jason Adams, MA
Subtitled: *A Sourcebook on the Blessings of Children and the Harms of Contraception*, this is a collection of resources for pastors and other pastoral leaders to help present the ancient and powerful wisdom of the Christian church on married sexuality. It includes a collection of

homilies addressing these concerns; background from the Church fathers, Scripture, and magisterial teaching; and practical pointers for transmitting this wisdom.

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THE BLESSINGS OF CHILDREN

from *Called to Give Life*

by Jason T. Adams