

6th Sunday of Easter (Year B) – May 6, 2018

ACTS 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48; PS 98:1, 2-3, 3-4; 1 JN 4:7-10; JN 15:9-17

I'm a priest today because of **birth control**.

(I always like to see the reaction on people's faces whenever I say that.)

But what on earth does that *mean*?

Well, as I grew up in the late '70's and 1980's—**armed with an utterly inadequate understanding of my Catholic faith** like the rest of “**the CCD generation**”—I knew that the Church prohibited **contraception**. But I had no idea *why*.

Now, I can't remember **what** it was that motivated me to study this particular teaching nearly 20 years ago. But what I **do** remember—*vividly*—is that after reading **Blessed Pope Paul VI's** encyclical *Humanae Vitae*—in which this **soon-to-be-canonized-Saint** upheld the Church's *constant prohibition* of artificial contraception against huge opposition—I was **stunned** by just how *right* the Pope got it... and just how *wrong* society got it...on this contentious issue.

Discovering the Church's **profound wisdom** on such a controversial topic led me to fall in love with the Catholic faith to the point that I knew I could do nothing less than give my life to the Church as a priest.

As we know, up until the current battle over **gender ideology**—which, by the way, is a *logical consequence of what St. John Paul II referred to as the “contraceptive mentality”*—up until **gender ideology** reared its ugly head, **the Church's stance on birth control** was the *single most controversial teaching* in Christian history since Jesus declared that we had to “*eat [his] Body and drink [his] blood*” (cf. Jn 6:53) in order to have eternal life.

The sad irony is that, while **Jesus** lost a significant number of his followers over his teaching on the **Eucharist** (cf. Jn 6:66); today, a significant number of those who **reject the Church's teaching** and **use birth control**, nevertheless

insist on *taking* the Eucharist—*even though they receive no grace from the Sacrament while they persist in this grave sin.*

Here we do well to remember **St. Paul's** chilling words to the Corinthians about **unworthy reception** of Holy Communion:

Whoever...eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. (1 Cor 11:27-29)

That's the **bad news**.

The *good news* is that—*if* we have the **eyes to see**, the **ears to hear**, and **hearts open to the truth**—then the **words of Jesus** in today's Gospel—and **his example on the Cross**—will help us better understand the **divine wisdom** that underpins the Church's rejection of contraception.

But let's first consider some statistics on **marriage**.

Today, somewhere between **50-70%** of marriages end in divorce. And yet, we're so **desensitized to the disaster of failed marriages** in our society, that such a statistic barely phases people anymore...that is, until they are touched *personally* by the **tragedy of divorce**.

But what if there were a **way** to avoid that kind of catastrophic failure rate?

What if, instead of a divorce rate of **50-70%**, there were a way to reduce that divorce rate to *less than 5%*?

Well there *is* a **way**! And **that way** is to follow the **teaching** and **example** of the one who is *"the way, the truth and the life"* (cf. Jn 14:6)—**Jesus Christ**.

In **today's Gospel**, Jesus said:

This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. (Jn 15:12-14)

We may not notice it at first, but Jesus's words here—to love others *as he loves us*—is *significantly more demanding* than his earlier words in response to a question about **the greatest commandment**, posed by a scholar of the law, in **St. Matthew's Gospel**. Here's how St. Matthew describes that incident:

...a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Mt 22:35-39)

There's quite a bit of "**wiggle room**" in the commandment to "*Love your neighbor as yourself*" (cf. Lev 19:8) though it presumes, of course, a **healthy** love of self. If, for example, a person doesn't **actually** love himself or herself **much**—if *at all*—then that person's **ability** to love **others** will be severely **compromised**, to say the least.

But when Jesus says, "*love one another as I love you*" (cf. Jn 15:12)—well, that's a very **different**—and significantly *higher*—standard altogether. It's not a **subjective** standard, based on the **variance** in love from individual to individual. It's an **objective** standard, based on the **perfect, complete, self-sacrificial** love of Jesus.

For us to love in a **Christ-like** way—in a *self-sacrificial* way—we must **remain rooted** in Jesus' love. This is what Jesus meant when he said:

Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love... (Jn 15:9-10)

To remain rooted in Jesus' love requires obedience to his **teachings**—and not only his teachings that come to us directly through the **Scriptures**, but also his teachings that come to us through the **Church he established**, and which he entrusted to the care of his **Apostles** to **continue** his mission.

We know that *the Church teaches with Jesus' authority*, because Jesus himself said to his Apostles in **St. Luke's Gospel**:

Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." (Lk 10:16, NAB)

So, when we hear the **Church's** teachings, we hear *Jesus'* teachings—or at least we *should*. And even though we **do acknowledge** that the Church's teachings are Jesus' teachings, that still does not guarantee our **obedience** to those teachings. We must **choose** to keep Jesus' commandments.

A deeper reflection on just **how** Jesus loved **self-sacrificially** from the Cross can shed light on the **wisdom of Church's teaching on birth control** by revealing to us *why* those married couples who **remain in Jesus by obedience to his commandments** have an **almost nonexistent divorce rate**...even as most marriages around them are failing at an **alarming rate**.

[Meditation on Jesus' hands and feet]

God—in his wisdom—gives married couples a **natural way to plan their family** that actually *imitates Jesus' self-sacrificial love*. And this **way** not only enhances communication between husband and wife, it also honors and exalts **feminine dignity** by calling forth **masculine self-sacrifice** after the **pattern of Jesus on the Cross**. How so?

[Parallels between Jesus' restraint and spousal restraint]

In a **famous**—or depending on the viewpoint of the hearers...*infamous*—passage from **St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians**, the Apostle writes:

Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body. As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her... (Eph 5:21-25)

Without this clearer perspective we have (**hopefully!!**) gained from our reflection today on **Christ's self-sacrificial love** from the Cross, this passage might seem rather skewed in favor of the **husband**...who just has to “**love**” ... while the **wife** has to be “**subordinate**”.

But if “**subordinate**” is understood to mean “**supportive of the orders that the other is called to obey**”, and if the husband's *orders* are—as **St. Paul** writes—to *love his wife self-sacrificially after the example of Jesus on the Cross*—then the wife will discover first-hand what it means to have a husband who puts **his spouse's needs** ahead of **his own**.

Just as **my** eyes were opened to the beauty and depth of the Church's wisdom some 20 years ago, my hope is that **your** eyes have been opened a little more to the Church's wisdom on a “**hard teaching**” (cf. Jn 6:60) after considering what Jesus **really** meant when he commanded us to “**love one another as I love you**” (cf. Jn 15:12)—and how obedience to his commandments has far reaching implications for **individuals, families, the Church and society**.

Jesus **also** said in today's Gospel:

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. (Jn 15:11)

When we compare **divorce rates of 50-70%** among those who **reject Jesus' teachings** compared to the **virtually nonexistent divorce rates** of those who **faithfully adhere** to them, we know that Jesus really *means* it when he desires **his** joy to be *ours*.

A person can certainly **refuse** to comply with Jesus' **commandments**, but they cannot **refute** the *evidence* of what makes for a **joyful marriage**.

But such a **refusal** begs the question:

Considering what's at stake...why on earth would they **want** to?