

**25th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
19 September 2021**

“Whoever receives one child such as this in my name...”

When I preached last month, we considered what happened when Jesus declared himself to be the Bread of Life. As John’s Gospel explained, “Many of Jesus’ disciples who were listening said, ‘This saying is hard; who can accept it?’ ...As a result, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.” Thus, they rejected Jesus’ authority. Today, I’ll return to that theme.

Just as in Capernaum 2000 years ago, that divine authority, which Jesus shared with his Church, has been rejected many times throughout history. Less than a century after the Ascension, St. Ignatius of Antioch observed that some Christians were already leaving the fold because they no longer believed in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Like the disgruntled disciples described in John’s gospel, they denied that Jesus was truly present as the Bread of Life in Holy Communion. Tragically, over two-thirds of American Catholics deny it today. Such denial of authoritative teaching has not been limited to controversies about Christ, but has also involved questions of moral behavior. For example, from the 15th through the 19th centuries, bishops, priests, and lay people in Europe and North America regularly ignored or willfully misinterpreted repeated papal condemnations of slavery.

Today’s Gospel passage from Mark points to yet another example of authority denied. After his disciples argued about who was the greatest, Jesus admonished them, saying, “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.” Jesus then took a child, “placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it, he said to

them, ‘Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.’”

Sadly, many American Catholics do not accept all of the children that Jesus places in our midst. Instead, they reject many unborn children through their support of abortion. Despite the constant teaching of the Church from the very first century that abortion is gravely immoral, 55% of American Catholics—more than half—favor legal abortion in all or most cases (Pew Research Center Report, June 17, 2021). Thus, these Catholics explicitly reject the authority that Christ gave directly to the Church’s Magisterium.

In October, we will celebrate Respect for Life Month, a time for the Church to boldly proclaim that all human life from conception to natural death is sacred. Today, however, I’d like to focus on another issue which has prompted many Catholics to either ignore authoritative Church teaching or to leave the Church altogether. This is also a case of rejecting the child whom Jesus wishes to place in our midst—not an unborn child, but rather the child who has yet to be conceived. I am speaking about the Church’s condemnation of artificial contraception.

In 1968, St. Pope Paul VI published *Humanae Vitae*, a re-affirmation of the Catholic Church’s ancient teaching against the use of artificial contraception. Throughout the world, however, this teaching has been overwhelmingly ignored by the Catholic laity. In the U.S., the rejection of this teaching by Catholics is even more definitive than the rejection of the Church teaching on abortion. In fact, 89% of American Catholics believe that artificial contraception is either morally acceptable or not a moral issue at all (Pew Research Center report, Sep 28, 2016). As a result of the widespread rejection of this authoritative

teaching, many clergy simply choose not to talk about it. However, St. Paul's advice to Timothy in the first century applies to today's clergy as well. Paul said, "I charge you [to] proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient..." So even though it may be inconvenient both for you to hear it *and* for me to preach it, allow me to cite the Catechism of the Catholic Church as it quotes *Humanae Vitae*: "every action which... proposes, whether as an end or a means, to render procreation impossible' is intrinsically evil" (CCC 2370).

Based on the overwhelming rejection of this teaching by Catholics, I suspect that I'm probably *not* preaching to the choir right now when I proclaim this Church teaching. I must confess, however, that I was not always a member of "the choir." In other words, I did not always believe in and submit to the Church's teaching against artificial contraception. As a young man, I took advantage of artificial contraception for years. I arrogantly assumed that my reasoning trumped that of Pope Paul VI, and was superior to all the popes and Church Fathers down through the centuries who had condemned it. I had the audacity to conveniently forget that when Jesus entrusted the keys of the kingdom to St. Peter, our Lord did *not* say, "Whatever you and Brian McCaffery declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever the two of you guys declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven." No. It was Peter who was given both the privilege and the burden to teach authoritatively and who was blessed with the gift of infallibility; I was not.

"But," you may ask, "don't I have the right to follow my conscience when it comes to such an intimate moral decision?" Yes, absolutely. The Catechism unequivocally declares, "A human being

must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience” (CCC 1790). That very same passage also notes, however, that your conscience can get it wrong, and in ignorance, “make erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed” (CCC 1790). Such errors occur when we fail to have a *well-formed* conscience.

In my case, I was guilty of such a failure. Regardless of what I might happen to feel or think about a particular moral action—that is, regardless of what my conscience seems to tell me—that conscience is neither certain nor well-formed unless and until I prayerfully and conscientiously seek to understand Church teaching about that action. The Catechism explains that “the education of conscience is a lifelong task” (CCC 1784) and “is indispensable for human beings who are subject to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teaching” (1783). Well, I was obviously “subject to negative influences” because I came of age amid the profound egotism of the sexual revolution. As a young man, I was full of myself, so I readily “prefer[red my] own judgment,” and given that the mantra of our age was to “Question authority,” it’s no surprise that I succumbed to the temptation to “reject authoritative teaching.”

Worse, I rejected that authoritative teaching without ever seeking to truly learn and understand it. The Catechism notes that, “In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path” (CCC 1785), but I scarcely read the Scriptures in those days. The passage continues, “We must also examine our conscience before the Lord’s Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others, and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church.” But I did none of those things when I came of age

sexually: I did not humble myself before the Cross, I did not actively seek the gifts of the Spirit, I solicited moral advice from no one but myself, and I explicitly rejected Church authority. Thus, it is little wonder that my poorly-formed conscience led me into grave sin.

I had read *Humanae Vitae* in high school, but later when it mattered, I never referred back to it. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, I reveled in ignorance as St. Pope John Paul II unveiled his beautiful Theology of the Body. His teaching makes clear that conjugal love should be a mutual and total gift of self to one's spouse, rather than a gift rendered incomplete and imperfect when chemicals or artificial barriers come between the spouses. I ignored the Church's teaching that in God's plan, intercourse has both a unitive meaning and a procreative meaning. Thus, God desires that every act of sexual intimacy fulfills both meanings—drawing spouses together in mutual comfort and pleasure, while also sharing in the mystery of God's creative power by being open to the possibility of new life. Most importantly, I never invited the Lord into my romantic relationships in a self-sacrificing and chaste way. Instead, I intentionally kept Him at arm's length, allowing three of the deadly sins—sloth, lust, and pride—to warp my conscience.

Ultimately, however, after years of denial and hidden guilt, I was finally blessed with remorse and a clear recognition of my sinfulness. I at last went to confess my sins and seek absolution in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Even there, however, I encountered an obstacle because at first, my confessor tried to convince me that my sin was not a sin. By that point, however, I *knew* that I had done wrong, and I also knew that the priest was wrong to try to convince me otherwise. I persisted in my confession and, somewhat grudgingly, he granted me absolution. After

years in the wilderness of sin, I had at last come home and thrown off the crippling burden of ego, arrogance, and self-deception. In their place, I finally experienced the blessed peace of mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Like the father of the Prodigal Son, the Lord welcomed me back and blessed me with his precious healing graces.

He longs to do the same for you. If your experience was anything like mine, if you resisted opening your heart, mind, body and soul to God's will regarding sexual intimacy, then come to Confession. If in the past, you closed yourself off from sharing in God' creative power, then now is the time to open yourself up to His saving power. Unburden yourself by seeking the Lord's mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. If you practice artificial contraception now, or if you did so in the past, know that the Father is ready to run down the road to meet you, to forgive you, to celebrate your return, and through the Sacrament, restore you to the intimacy of his blessed family.

Now, I'd like to speak to couples who are considering a future together, those who are engaged, and those married couples who are still in their child-bearing years. I ardently urge you to explore, if you haven't already done so, the blessings of NFP—Natural Family Planning. The Catholic Church acknowledges that there are legitimate and serious reasons for spacing out the births of your children and for limiting the size of your family. In recognition of this, the Church approves the use of NFP when such a decision is not made for merely selfish reasons. Studies have shown that NFP is as effective at preventing conception as the Pill and the IUD, but it is a morally permissible approach which respectfully takes account of the natural

rhythms of fertility while remaining open to God's gift of life without the risks of chemical manipulation or physical barriers.

Does NFP take more commitment, care, and self-sacrifice than artificial contraception? Yes, it certainly does, but ideally, those loving attitudes should always characterize everything about our marriages. In addition, the benefits of NFP extend beyond just the moral and the medical. A recent study has confirmed that couples who practice NFP have a significantly lower divorce rate than couples who do not (Fehring, R. J. 2015, *Linacre Quarterly* 82:273-282). Couples practicing NFP also often report better communication between the spouses, greater emotional intimacy, and even increased sexual satisfaction. With such diverse potential benefits, not to mention the spiritual blessing of knowing that you are conforming to God's natural law, why *wouldn't* you at least consider exploring Natural Family Planning?

Last month, the diocesan *Catholic Herald* featured an article about one of our recently-ordained deacons, his wife, and their family. Their incredible journey was summarized well in the article's title, *From sterilization to NFP: It all started with a simple yes*. I urge all of you to read their amazing story about how blessings multiply when we say "yes" to God and keep Christ at the center of our lives, even in the bedroom. Let's not be disciples who refuse to accept the children God wishes to place in our midst; instead let's accept the unborn and the yet-to-be conceived with open and welcoming hearts. Let's not be disciples who complain that our Lord's teachings are too hard to accept, and then walk away. Rather, let's be disciples who respect his authority and who dare to embrace his toughest teachings, knowing that they are for

our good and that they spring from his great and unrelenting love for each and every one of us.

<https://www.usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning>

<https://superiorcatholicherald.org/news/local-news/from-sterilization-to-nfp-it-all-started-with-a-simple-yes/>