

Marriage, Sexuality, and Contraception

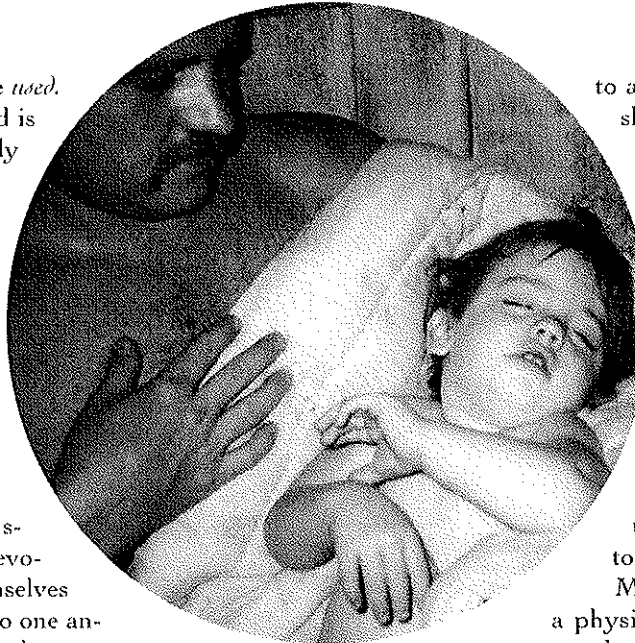
Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's [widow], and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; and raise up offspring for your brother." But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's [widow] he spilled the semen on the ground, lest he should give offspring to his brother. And what he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he slew him. ~ Genesis 38:8-10

IT IS an astounding truth that God has made each person in his own image (see Gn 1:27). Each human being is made by God to be *loved*, but never to be *used*. One way we image God is that each person, and only that person, can *give himself/herself* totally in the way that the three Persons of the Trinity each give themselves to the others. It is only with a complete gift of self that a person can find authentic joy and prepare for communion with God.

In marriage, the spouses, by their free and irrevocable consent, give themselves definitively and totally to one another so that they are no longer two, but "*one flesh*" (see Gn 2:24 and handouts on Matrimony and What is a Sacramental Marriage?). Marriage is the means of total self-giving by which most people are called to image God's intimate family life within the Trinity.

The Catholic Church has always taught that sexuality is good — that it is one of the greatest gifts from our Creator. The marriage act was designed by God for human joy, pleasure, giving, and gratitude. Yet it is more than merely biological; it involves the innermost being of each human person. Human love, rightly expressed within marriage, is an image of di-

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vine love: God is present in human passion, as he is present in all of creation. Human sexuality is created by God, designed by him to express mutual love and destined to allow men and women to share in his creative power to bring forth new life.

Conceiving a child is procreation (co-creating with God), not just reproduction as it is with other living creatures. Human procreation is God's way of creating new human beings who have an eternal destiny. It is within marriage that God intends children to be born and educated.

Marriage, therefore, is a physical and spiritual fulfillment and a source of perfection for the spouses, whose generous and unselfish love is poured out to each other in its totality, and whose generosity, when God so desires, results in children as the living expressions and fruit of their love. Properly expressed, human sexuality is sacramental — a source of life, love, and grace.

In today's world, however, sex is seen as intended *solely* for pleasure and sexual partners are seen as personal playthings, having no divine meaning. Therefore, our culture sees marriage as only one of many acceptable arrangements for sexual activity. Most people — sadly even many Catholics — think that



A child is always a blessing

artificial interference with conception is acceptable because, so it is supposed, human beings are mere biological beings. Yet Sacred Scripture teaches us that our bodies, like our souls, are holy to God: *"Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body"* (1 Cor 6:18-20).

Even people who accept that marriage necessarily involves having children (and fewer and fewer people think this way) do not view preventing conception at any given time by any available means as morally wrong. But *the prevention of conception by certain means outside of abstinence and natural methods — physical sterilization, using physical or chemical barriers to conception, avoiding completing the sexual act — is*

morally wrong and a grave evil. This has been the constant teaching of the Church from its beginnings, continuing an unbroken Tradition from Old Testament times. The Church has opposed contraception directly, deliberately, and vehemently in every age, even when the dominant secular culture condemned it as well, as it did, for example, in the United States in the nineteenth century.

Contraception separates sexual intimacy from its natural result, the possible creation of new life. Contraception is a form of lying — "I give you everything of myself, except my fertility." By separating the good and happiness of the spouses from the procreative purpose of marriage, contraception violates the inner truth of married love, which is the total gift of each one to the other, and therefore violates the marriage covenant. By encouraging the spouses to *use each other sexually* rather than *give themselves to one another*, contraception also violates their human dignity.

Pope John Paul II taught that "there exists in contemporary culture [an] ... attitude which leads people to think that they can control life and death by taking the decisions about them into their own hands" (*The Gospel of Life* 15). When, through contraception, a married couple removes from their act of making love its potential procreative capacity, they usurp the power to decide when a new human person will come into existence, a power that is God's alone. They exclude God from the very act that symbolizes and transmits his creative love. They deliberately reject cooperation in God's creative power and take upon themselves the ultimate and awesome rights reserved to God alone, who is the very source of human life.

Even when the spouses do not believe they are doing wrong, the objective evil of contraception silently corrodes marriages, and it is a significant factor in the high divorce rate we see in today's society. Moreover, the contraceptive mentality leads to other

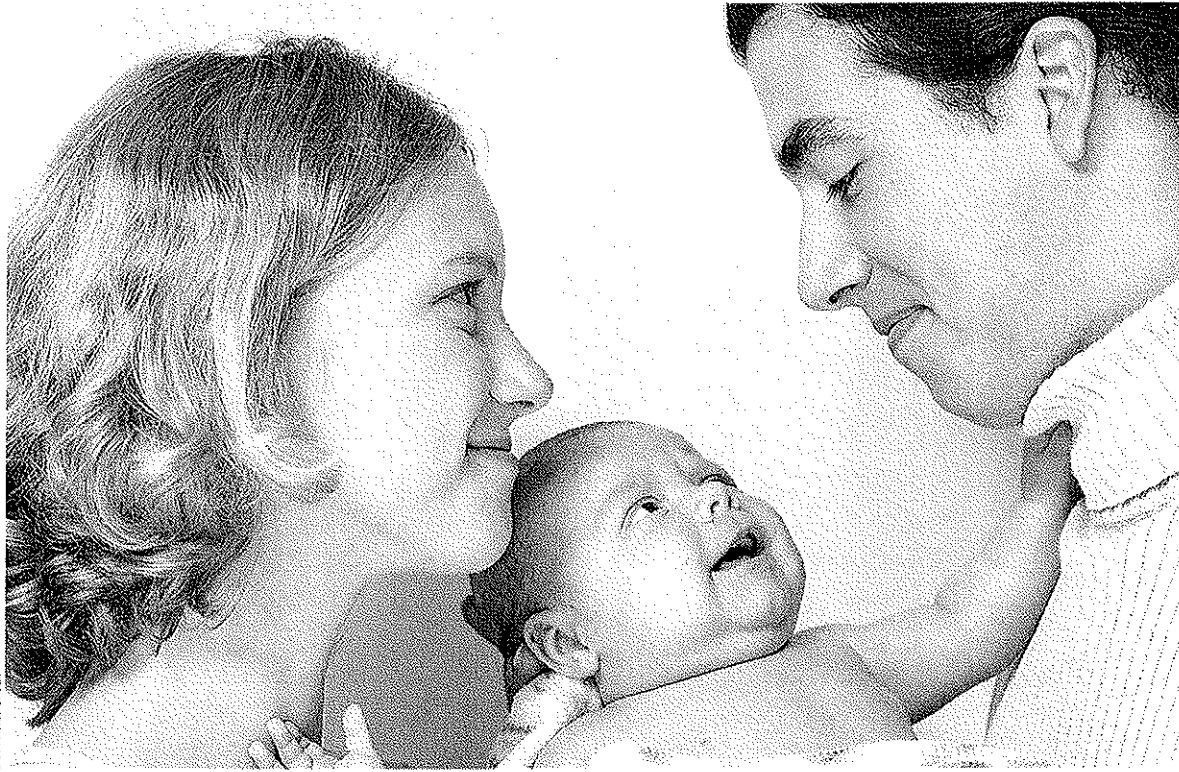
grave social ills: premarital sex, promiscuity, increased homosexual activity,

pornography, and abortion. In these ways, contraception is not only destructive of human dignity but contributes as well to the destruction of the fabric of society.

In modern culture, the Church's teaching on contraception is more often misunderstood than understood. *To act with an informed conscience, a couple considering or entering into marriage is responsible to ensure that they fully understand the Church's teaching.*

"Contraception is a form of lying."

"The objective evil of contraception silently corrodes marriages."



While the Church teaches that married couples are to be generous in creating new life, it also realizes that there may be times when, *for serious and just reasons only*, childbearing must be postponed. For these situations, the morally acceptable form of family planning is **natural family planning**, which uses God's gift of periodic female infertility to avoid (not prevent) conception. Because a couple can determine the few days each month when a woman is fertile, they can abstain from sexual intimacy on these days. At other times of the month, even though sexual intimacy is unlikely to result in conception, sexual relations are permissible for the good and happiness of the spouses, who do nothing to frustrate the nature of the sexual act and remain "open to life," willing to joyfully welcome a child that God might nevertheless send to them.

Unlike contraception, natural family planning does not put the health of either spouse at risk. Furthermore, there is no risk of abortion, unlike intrauterine devices (IUDs) and, sometimes, "the pill."

And, used properly, natural family planning has a success rate at least as high as the most commonly used contraceptives.

Natural family planning must be learned (from teachers, not books), and it takes both spouses to make it work. Yet couples who periodically abstain from sexual intimacy find ways beyond this intimacy to express their love for one another. Natural family planning also teaches self-mastery, strengthens marital chastity, improves communication between the spouses, and increases responsibility and thoughtfulness toward each other. Couples who use natural family planning rarely divorce, and in today's society that alone is powerful evidence for the fact that *natural family planning, when used rightly to fulfill and not thwart the purposes of marriage, strengthens and safeguards marriages*. Natural family planning is not as easy as "popping a pill," but rightly used and used with right intent, it is completely healthy, completely safe, as effective as "the pill," and *holly*.

(CCC 1604, 2361-2363, 2366-2371)

Matrimony

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled.

~ Hebrews 13:4

THE FIRST BOOK OF THE BIBLE tells us that God created humankind *"in the image of God... male and female"* (Gn 1:27) and then established the institution of marriage when he blessed

them and commanded them to *"be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth"* (Gn 1:28). Scripture is filled with images of marriage and family that help tell the story of salvation (see Ru 4:11-15; Song 2:8-13; Song 4:9-16, 5:1; Is 62:3-5; Hos 2:16-20; Tb 8:4-8). Jesus' first miracle was at a wedding (see Jn 2:1-11), and he himself is the Bridegroom (see Mk 2:19-20). St. Paul explicitly links marriage to the mystery of Jesus' bond with his Church (see Eph 5:31-32). United as one family in Heaven, we are invited to the marriage of the Lamb to his Bride, the Church (see Rv 19:6-9; Rv 21:2, 9).

The desire that a man and woman have to love one another is *"in the image and likeness of God."* When love is expressed between a man and woman in marriage, their love images and is in the *"likeness"* of God's love for each individual. Thus, marriage, like God's love, must unite them completely and forever to such an extent that the man and woman become *"one flesh"* (Gn 2:24). Marriage, like God's love which gives life and care to all things, must also give life and be caring through the procreation and education of children (see Gn 1:28).

The institution of marriage is the *"natural union"* between man and woman, that is, the way God created men and women to come together in love. Jesus elevated this natural institution to a sacrament at the wedding feast of Cana, where he performed his

first public miracle at his Mother's request (see Jn 2:1-11). Because of this elevation to a sacrament, marriage is now not only an *"image and likeness"* of God's love for his people, but also an image of Jesus' spousal relationship to his Bride, the Church (see Eph 5:32). The proper name for this sacrament is Matrimony (see also hand-out on *What is a Sacramental Marriage?*).

Thus, since marriage images both God's love and Jesus' love and has been elevated to the sacrament called Matrimony, any sins against marriage are particularly serious. One effect of sins against this sacrament is that they lie to the world about divine love. For example, divorce seems to say, *"God's commitment, care, and love are only passing."* Other sins against Matrimony are adultery, prostitution, polygamy, birth control, artificial insemination, sterilization, premarital sexual relations, free union, trial marriage, pornography,

masturbation, homosexual practices, incest, rape, and abortion.

What is the Purpose of Matrimony?

The twofold purpose or end of marriage is the good of the spouses (unitive love) and the transmission of life (procreation). For Matrimony to be lived out as God intended, this twofold purpose must never be separated. The *"good of the spouses"* refers to the mutual sanctification and fulfillment a husband and wife are to give to each other in marriage. They are to help each other live and grow in holiness to become saints. Marriage also fulfills each spouse's de-



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sire to love someone and be loved by someone. In particular, this purpose is done by demonstrating

to each other an unconditional, permanent, and total love that images the love that God has for each of us.

Furthermore, just as God's love gave life to humanity in creation and salvation, so marriage is also for the "transmission of life," particularly by the procreation and education of children. Married couples must be open to receiving children from God, and with this supreme gift of children, it is their responsibility to care for and educate them, both physically and spiritually. The family is the first place that children hear about Jesus. For this reason, the family is called the "domestic church." It is the special duty and privilege of parents to help their children embark on a life of holiness.

This twofold purpose of unitive love and procreation is manifested most clearly in the conjugal act. Every time, in this act, the spouses give themselves completely to each other, including their fertility, they become "one flesh." Thus, their marriage is necessarily forever (indissoluble, unbreakable bond), exclusive (fidelity), and open to life (procreative), similar to God's love (see Gn 2:24; Mt 19:6; Mk 10:2-13; 1 Cor 7:10-11). A husband and wife who truly live out their vocation to love each other give to each other and their family a foretaste of life in Heaven.

Preparation for the Sacrament of Matrimony

Preparation for marriage is first done by parents when they provide a daily example of God's plan for marriage and family for their children. Those who come from broken and dysfunctional families are at a

great disadvantage when they contract their own marriages, because they have not had the privilege of seeing

a good and holy marriage. Tragically, these situations are increasingly common. For this and other reasons, many dioceses and parishes require those preparing for marriage to do additional preparation such as taking marriage preparation classes, meeting with married couples, and making a retreat together.

The goal of these preparations is to ensure that those seeking Matrimony understand what married life is all about in the eyes of God and are capable of living out God's plan for marriage. Without exception, they must recognize the purposes of marriage, and that these purposes can only be lived out by following Christ. Couples who do not understand these essential aspects of marriage are not able to freely give their matrimonial consent.

The Rite of Matrimony

Any baptized man and woman able to give their consent freely to one another may receive Matrimony. Mixed marriages and marriages between a Catholic and someone unbaptized may also be contracted if the couple receives permission to do so from the proper authority, usually the bishop. In these latter cases, the Catholic promises to practice his Catholic faith and to baptize and raise the children as Catholics.

Unlike the other sacraments, which are usually conferred by a bishop or a priest, Matrimony is conferred by the spouses on one another in their consent to the sacrament. The role of the priest or deacon at the celebration of the sacrament is to receive their matrimonial consent in the name of the Church and



to give a blessing, which seals their marriage with the Holy Spirit in order to assist them in living out their commitment.

Those who are to be married should have no grievous sin on their conscience at the time of reception of the sacrament. In order to be spiritually ready, the couple may choose to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before the celebration of Matrimony. When both parties are Catholic, Matrimony should be celebrated within the context of Mass, which is when Christ gives himself to his Bride, the Church.

The Rite of Matrimony normally consists of the following elements: 1) introduction and questions, 2) matrimonial consent, 3) blessing and exchange of the rings, 4) the nuptial blessing, and 5) the solemn blessing. Of these, the nuptial blessing provides great insight into the mind of the Church. By this the marriage is sealed with the Holy Spirit. There are five different texts that can be used for this blessing. The blessing begins by recalling God's plan for marriage and what marriage signifies, and then seeks the Lord's blessing on the couple to help them live out the sacrament. Following is the text of one nuptial blessing:

"Holy Father, you created mankind in your own image and made man and woman to be joined as husband and wife in union of body and heart and so fulfill their mission in this world. Father, to reveal the plan of your love, you made the union of husband and wife an image of the covenant between you and your people. In the fulfillment of this sacrament, the marriage of Christian man and woman is a sign of the marriage between Christ and the Church. Father, stretch out your hand, and bless N. and N. Lord, grant that as they begin to live this sacrament they

may share with each other the gifts of your love and become one in heart and mind as witnesses to your presence in their marriage. Help them to create a home together (and give them children to be formed by the Gospel and to have a place in your family). Give your blessings to N., your daughter, so that she may be a good wife (and mother), caring for the home, faithful in love for her husband, generous and

kind. Give your blessings to N., your son, so that he may be a faithful husband (and a good father). Father, grant that as they come together to your table on earth, so they may one day have the joy of sharing your feast in Heaven. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen" (*Rite of Marriage* 120).

What are the Effects of Matrimony?

When a baptized couple gets married, they establish an unbreakable bond between each other, which God himself seals with the Holy Spirit, marking them and their marriage as his own. In other words, the husband and wife are joined together not only by their own commitment but also by God. For this reason, no one, not even the spouses themselves, is

able to divide the marriage bond. It is indissoluble.

When the marriage is blessed by the Church in Matrimony, the spouses are given unlimited grace to love each other as Christ loved the Church. In this way, they are enabled to help each other to become holy and to create in their home a "domestic church," a school of prayer and holiness for their children. The grace of Matrimony also strengthens their indissoluble unity. Knowing that the marriage vows are at times difficult to live, husbands and wives should never forget that God has provided them with every means to live out their married life.

(CCC 1534-1535, 1601-1658, 2685)

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What is a Sacramental Marriage?

And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to put her away." But Jesus said to them, "For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." ~ Mark 10:2-12



SACRAMENTAL
marriage is
a covenant-
al bond de-

signed by God between baptized persons that is an intimate, faithful, indissoluble communion of life and love freely entered into by a man and a woman for their own good and for the procreation and education of offspring (see also handout on Matrimony).

Covenantal bond: Because marriage is an exchange of persons, where each pledges to give himself or herself entirely to the other, it is more than a contract; it is a holy *covenant*. Throughout the Sacred Scripture, we are taught that God's covenantal relationship with his people is viewed in terms of a marriage (see, for example, Is 54:5-8; Jer 2:1-3; Ez 16:8-22; Hos 2:14-20; Mk 2:19; Rv 19:6-8). Marriage is the best image we have been given by God to understand his unbreakable and complete love and fidelity to us, and the sacrament of marriage is intended to image God's relationship to us.

Designed by God: We learn in the story of creation that Adam greeted Eve with joy: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gn 2:23), and the immediately following verse says: "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother

**"Marriage is more than a contract;
it is a holy covenant."**

and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gn 2:24). We are told that each is designed for the

other, and that we are designed for marriage. This "nuptial meaning of the body," as Pope John Paul II termed it, is written into us by God, and we may not change it. No "marriage" is possible between two members of the same sex.

Between baptized persons: Only two baptized persons may enter into a sacramental marriage. Their marriage is a sign of the mystery of Christ's union with his Bride, the Church (see Eph 5:31-32). Pope John Paul II said that "by means of baptism, man and woman are definitively placed within the new and eternal covenant, in the spousal covenant of Christ with the Church. And it is because of this indestructible insertion that the intimate community of conjugal life and love, founded by

the Creator, is elevated and assumed into the spousal charity of Christ, sustained and enriched by his redeeming power" (*The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World* 13).

Intimate: Marriage involves the complete "opening up" of one's entire being to the spouse, holding nothing back physically, spiritual-



ly, or psychologically. It is a self-surrender by each to the other so total that the two spouses sacramentally image the interior life of the Trinity.

Faithful: The very nature of marriage requires that the fidelity of each to the other never be broken; they must always be faithful to each other not only in behavior but in the deepest recesses of their hearts as well.

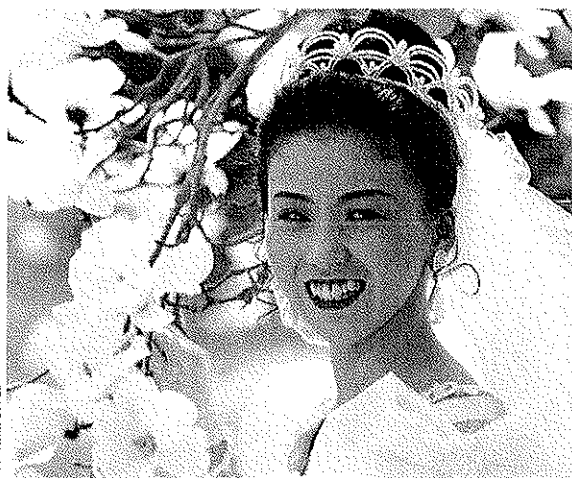
Indissoluble: Once having freely consented to marriage, the spouses are irrevocably joined so long as both live. The marriage is made before God, and by God (see Mk 10:9), and following the consummation of the marriage in the marriage act, it can never be dissolved. Divorce is not possible, for the consent given is irrevocable. In cases where the good of at least one of the spouses requires separation, the Church permits this but continues to recognize the marriage as valid. These situations demand the surrender of the spouses in humility and faith to the goodness of God's teaching even when experiencing great anguish. Annulments are also given for non-sacramental but valid marriages, under certain conditions.

Communion of life and love: Marriage is a union of individuals of equal personal dignity. St. Paul admonished wives to *"be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord"* (Eph 5:22) and admonished husbands to *"love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her"* (Eph 5:25). Each is to submit to the other in complete *mutual* self-surrender. By doing so, neither is submerged in the other; on the contrary, as Jesus promises us, *"whoever loves his life for my sake will find it"* (Mt 16:25). Complete self-giving is the only path to becoming most completely who God meant us to be.

Freely entered into: The free consent of the spouses is the indispensable element that makes a marriage. This free consent includes not only both being free to marry (for example, neither is already married), according to the laws of the Church, but also that neither is under any form of coercion or threat.

By a man and a woman: The complementarity of the sexes is essential to marriage. There is such widespread confusion today about the nature of marriage that some seek to extend the "right" to marry to two persons of the same sex. But the very nature of marriage makes such a proposition impossible.

For their own good: "[T]he man and the woman... help and serve each other by their marriage partnership; they become conscious of their unity and experience it more deeply from day to day.... Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is directed and enriched by the redemptive power of Christ and the salvific action of the Church, with the result that the spouses are effectively led to God....



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spouses are penetrated with the spirit of Christ and their whole life is suffused by faith, hope and charity; thus they increasingly further their own perfection and their mutual sanctification, and together they render glory to God" (Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* 48). Those who are called to the vocation of marriage and have entered into a sacramental marriage help each other to holiness and Heaven.

And the procreation and education of offspring: Too many people enter marriage today thinking that children are optional to their union, but spouses who choose not to have children violate the very meaning of marriage. God has built into the very structure of marriage the capacity and opportunity to create new living love, imaging the Holy Spirit, the very essence of divine love. This creative capacity, to cooperate with God to bring into existence a soul that is immortal, is an awesome grace — a gift beyond understanding. The joyous and generous welcome of children is the sign and the fruit of the genuine self-giving love of the spouses for each other. The Fathers of Vatican II declared that "by its very nature the institution of marriage and married love are ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory" (Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* 48). The spouses also have the privilege and responsibility to educate their children, preparing them to be both members of the human community and future citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

(CCC 1625-1629, 1638-1641, 1643-1653)