



## Nickels, Dimes and Family Size

***"At times, then, our justifications for avoiding a pregnancy may merit further reflection and scrutiny on our part."***



A few years ago, I spoke with a young man preparing to get married. His aunt told him that she thought he and his fiancée were too financially strapped to have a child, and that it wouldn't be fair to bring up a baby in poverty. Keenly aware of his joblessness and his minuscule bank account, he concluded she was probably right.

The young man and his fiancée were ready to tie the knot in a few months and they expected that she would be at the infertile phase of her cycle around the time of their honeymoon, so they would be able to consummate the marriage while avoiding bringing a child into the world. They agreed they would use Natural Family Planning (NFP) after that to avoid a pregnancy. A few years later when they felt financially secure, he told me, they would have their first child. He admitted, however, that he was conflicted about whether they were really being "open to life" in their marriage if they were going into it with this kind of forethought and intention of avoiding children.

In marriage, it can certainly be challenging to harmonize spousal love with the responsible transmission of life. Janet Smith and Christopher Kaczor, in an illuminating passage from one of their recent books, acknowledge this challenge

and point to the need for a "spirit of generosity" when it comes to procreation:

"Pope John Paul II spoke of 'responsible parenthood,' in which a couple uses practical wisdom, prayer and a spirit of generosity in determining how many children they should have. Some Catholics believe that the Church permits the use of NFP only for reasons that verge on the truly desperate, such as a situation where a pregnancy would threaten a woman's life or a family is living in dire poverty. Magisterial documents, however, state that spouses may have physical, psychological, economic or social reasons for needing to limit family size, using several different adjectives to describe those reasons: One can have 'just' reasons, 'worthy' reasons, 'defensible' reasons, 'serious' reasons and 'weighty' reasons. In short, the Magisterium teaches that spouses must have unselfish reasons for using NFP and limiting their family size."

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# Making Sense of Bioethics

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tions for avoiding a pregnancy may merit further reflection and scrutiny on our part. When it comes to “poverty,” for example, would our poverty, in the true sense of the word, mean that the child would be malnourished and without warm clothing, or would it simply mean that he or she would forego some of the latest hi-tech gadgets that other children in the neighborhood might be enjoying?

I recall what a father of seven children on a tight budget once told me in a conversation:

“Honestly, there’s always room around the table for one more, and with ‘hand me down’ clothing we always manage. And my goodness, isn’t it a momentous thing to receive that trust of preparing another soul for an eternal destiny with God?” His wife pointed out how the older children ended up helping with raising the younger ones, lessening the burdens on mom and dad, and turning it into a “team effort.”

The ancient Christian teaching on the two-fold purpose of marriage, namely, the “procreation and educa-

tion of children,” and the “mutual help and sanctification of the spouses,” accurately summarizes the inner order of marriage. As the future John Paul II wrote in his great 1960 book “Love and Responsibility,” radical personal openness to both of these purposes is essential to the success and meaning of any marriage. We should never enter into marriage with active opposition to the very ends for which it exists. If a couple is preparing to embark upon marriage with the immediate intention of avoiding offspring (even if they are using morally acceptable means such as NFP), they perhaps ought to consider delaying the exchange of their vows until they have resolved the various impediments, whether financial, career-related, or personal, that are leading them to be closed to the idea of having children.

I recall hearing about another family that had six children. They didn’t have two nickels to rub together. After the father came down with mental illness, the mother had to support the family single-handedly. A clear-thinking woman with an unflinching faith, now elderly and reflecting on her past, she memorably remarked to her neighbor: “I’ve never seen the Lord send a child

without also sending a lunch pail.” God, who is the very source of the immortal souls of our children, is a provident God who invites us to examine the heart of our marriages. He invites us to entrust ourselves to him, so that we might be courageous and authentically open to the gift of life he sends us in the midst of the marital embrace.

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