

CHOOSING SEX: FREEDOM, DELIBERATION AND NFP

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Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to address you on the issue of Thomistic psychology and natural family planning.

Sometime around the year 1271 AD, St. Thomas Aquinas drafted the first twenty or so questions of the *prima secunda* of his *Summa Theologiae*. These hundred or so pages mark the core of a psychology which was to bear his name for the next 800 years, a psychology which -- though virtually abandoned in contemporary academies today-- offers to us, that is, those who may be involved in the discussion of family planning, a certain comprehensive sense of human action and decision making. Today, in this presentation I hope to offer some preliminary reflections on the major features of that psychology, that map of the interior life he was so carefully to chart with the conviction that the insights of St. Thomas are especially fruitful for those who consider the Church's vision of natural family planning and the question of marriage and family life in general.

For St. Thomas, following the inspirations of his predecessor St. Augustine, human beings are primarily lovers. We "hit the ground, running." To be a human being is to be a being in motion. You don't need to encourage a child to run around and explore . We are first and foremost people of desire. All human actions begin from desire, from the impulse at the very core of our existence to reach beyond ourselves in whatever way possible. To be a human being, St. Thomas would assert, is to be a being in motion, a constant becoming of something more than itself. Like the infant toddler who has just been snatched

by an attentive father, the legs continue to flail through the air, as if being removed from the earth is not enough to stop the desire, the impulse to move forward. We are in our adult lives not much more than that flailing infant, forever drawn in a steady pace to reach toward what is before us.

In this fundamental impulse of desire, the human person is no exception within the broader universe of existence. All of reality is an expression of both being and--more importantly for our discussion-- a becoming. Nature and the created order is never so much of a *stasis* as it is an *orexis*, never so much a mere thing as a thing pulsating. Animals, plants, -- even rocks themselves, St Thomas asserts, have at their core a dynamism of desire towards their own perfection, towards fullness of life. We have been made, to borrow from John the evangelist, that we may have life and have it to the full.

The simple consideration of a tree in the middle of a field might help. Caught in the penumbra of an evening twilight, such works of nature seen in silhouette reveal an incredible symphony of activity, an intensive strategy of action, a coordination of complex efforts organized around the single goal of gathering in the most of what lies within the range of its own perfecting existence.

Summer gardeners can marvel, if they can get past the frustration, at the tenacity of plant life (usually known as weeds) as they live out their existence, indeed even seem to flourish at times, in the merest crack in a sidewalk or rocky path. Such signs of tenacity, of a taking hold and running with one's existence is the mark of nature and all of the created order. "All you creatures, Bless the Lord!" the Book of Daniel exhorts, "frost and chill, rain and hail, praise and exalt him above all forever."

Amidst this symphony of desire, the human person is no exception, as he or she tenaciously ekes out an existence on this created pebble in space. Of course for St. Thomas, the similarity of human and animal flourishing only serves to highlight important differences. Human beings, he notes, participate in this buzzing phantasmagoria of reaching and striving, acquiring and possessing not through a kind of blind urge or instinct, but through intelligence and consideration, reflection and evaluation. There are, of course, aspects of human existence which simply mirror the habits of nature found elsewhere, nourishment and hydration, growth and general maintenance of our organic functions, within the human person merely replicate what is found in the non-human world. The gastric processes of human digestion at the close of a fine meal, merely echo the processes of digestion within the animal who supplied us with dinner. From the perspective of mere biological desire, there is a testimony to this impulse to complete existence at both ends of the fork; one victor, one vanquished.

Human desiring, however, or desiring in ways that are proper to humans, Aquinas asserts, reflects an altogether different level of participation in the general law of desire for perfection and flourishing. The dog, the hunter, and even the wood duck all approach the same field that morning in quest for flourishing and excellence. But only one enters the field deliberately, manifesting in his or her person a unique participation in the created order that marks their movement as human. Man is said to be made in the image and likeness of God, Aquinas notes, and such an image is said to mean an intellectual being who is free to judge what he shall do and has the power to act or not to act. This human person, in other words, while sharing in the "rites of spring" with the rest of

animated life, participates in such rites through the power of *deliberative intelligence*. Thus while caught in the ineluctable pull toward some kind -- indeed any kind of excellence or perfection, nonetheless, enacts that attraction, makes real that attraction to wholeness through intelligence and reflection.

And so human action, or action which displays what is distinctively human, is a kind of dance, if you will, between a fundamental desire for perfection and completeness and reflective intelligence. It is a kind of symphony between meaning and motion.

Intelligence, reflection, or deliberative judgment in other words, channels and gives direction to, that more basic river of impulse toward fullness of life which lies at the heart of all of created nature. Lacking such channels and directive commands, the waters of impulse either quickly dissipate into a meandering stream, a witless pool of stagnant, brackish back waters, or they converge into a raging torrent of self destruction. In either case, such desire or love (lacking intelligence or truth) results in either boredom or violence. Is it any wonder, then, in this age of misunderstanding the role of truth and intelligence in human desire, that educators of young men and women are faced with the daunting task of directing the desires of their students between the Scylla of suburban boredom and the Charybdis of a self absorbing, flight to consumption? Without the function of intelligence or truth, giving order to the flow of our impulses, our desires simply dissipate into a desert of meaningless ambitions.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church confirms this notion of what it means for human beings to act in a truly human way, when it states that the human person, created in the Divine image, is called to "know and to love God."

This rather simple, almost self-evident claim, in truth, masks a fundamental feature of what it means to be a human being.

This capacity for knowledge and love establishes the two great pillars upon which the edifice of human excellence, psychological wellness, wholeness, or holiness--to speak in the fullest of terms, are founded. In this portrait of the person our ability to know and to love form the most basic disposition or stance one takes before the world as a creature created by God. All sound moral psychology begins here, with the affirmation that the human person is made for God, is attracted toward what is infinitely true-- not, it needs to be emphasized as a moth might be attracted toward the flame, or the steel to the magnet, but drawn toward God precisely through knowing and loving. In this our the ground of our perfection consists; in this our wholeness is found; and in this context a conception of what constitutes a psychologically healthy individual is to be found.

It might be wise to note, several things.

First, that my use of the term "psychology" here reflects virtually nothing of multiple senses in which the term may be employed in the academy today. I would say "secular" academy today, but it should be said that even in Catholic centers of higher learning, Psychology has largely lost its theological bearings. However, human psychology from the vantage of the Thomist, or one who is dedicated to the vision of St. Thomas Aquinas, outlines those aspects of the human person concerned with desire and intelligence, in so far as that person is ordered in his or her very being toward fullness of life in God. And it is precisely this conception of the fullness of life in God as the fundamental goal or telos of

all men and women which separates most of what I am saying today from more contemporary secular uses of the term.

Second, to claim that the person finds his or her perfection only in God was not for St. Thomas a particularly religious claim. Sound reason and philosophical evidence could point one in the direction of such a conclusion. Contemporary Catholic psychologists might take solace in the fact that the recognition of God as the source of human perfection and wholeness does not constitute for the Thomist a particularly religious conviction. It is the data of philosophical reasoning, not revelation. To the extent that current schools of psychology banish a consideration of God from the analysis of the person under the pretense that by so doing they preserve the strictly rational grounds of their disciplines, they misconstrue in the minds of the Thomists either the nature of rational inquiry or the God as the end of that inquiry. But in either case it is not rationally warranted to jettison the idea of a supreme being as the necessary complement to human excellence, despite one's attempts to proceed along the lines of reason alone. Assent to the notion of the existence of God for the Thomistic psychologist is not limited to Christian believers alone.

Third, allied with this abandonment of the notion of God from any consideration of human wellness and wholeness, lies the more devastating-- because the more subtle --evisceration of evaluative language itself. By evaluative language I mean all those terms employed to express the moral worth of another person or act. The loss of the conception of God as the telos or proper complement of human desire not only impacts the place of theological reflection and tradition within the broader academy. Rather, what I am pointing to is the more systematic evisceration of any teleological, that is purposive, conception of

human existence itself. Without a ordering telos or goal to all of our human striving and perfection, one loses any sense of what constitutes excellence and its approximations as a whole.

Aristotle was among the first in Western culture to argue that language of excellence is dependent upon a notion of fundamental purpose. A good tomato fulfilled the function of a tomato--namely, to produce more good tomatoes. A good horse was one which fulfilled its function, namely to make more good horses. Christian culture embraced this notion of purpose in life as the ground for judgments concerning what is good, or by contrast what is evil, adding, of course the notion that God or union with God is the purpose of our lives. Thus all determinations of good and evil are assessed from that vantage of how they fulfilled their purpose.

To speak in a context more directly related to today's audience, the good marriage, good sexual relations, the good family, the good husband, the good wife, all betray a commitment to what constitutes some kind of perfection for each of these.

With the loss of any ordering telos to human desire, the classical framework upon which so many of our notions of what constitutes the good man, the good woman, the good marriage, etc. is eviscerated. While the terms remain, the reality towards which such terms traditionally pointed has been disemboweled of any transcendent or teleological significance.

For those working in the field of natural family planning, your efforts toward contributing to the "good marriage," toward good, or healthy, or integral sexual relations among spouses, are not only met with resistance rooted in hesitations concerning church teaching, but even among those who might find

the church's teachings on sexuality and contraception somewhat attractive, there is the deeper problem of not recognizing how in our ordinary discourse about our lives, we have lost the substantive meaning of what is good or excellent about anything, much less marriage and sexual relations.

It is in this context that an attempt to re-capture what is truly "natural" about natural family planning becomes essential. The "naturalness" of nfp does not express the mere absence of chemical interventions or technological tools and instruments. All of this is, of course, true. But pitching the benefits of nfp from this vantage runs the risk of being counter productive. In the first place, contemporary methods of fertility awareness draw upon the latest in technological and scientific advancement the medical world has to offer. Research in the areas of natural family planning and fertility awareness is conducted among the most sophisticated medical venues available. To emphasize nfp as an entirely "natural" phenomenon certainly appeals to some, but we might be better served by reminding ourselves that this approach is wholly consistent with and entirely dependent the latest and the very best in medical research. It's true that a "natural" approach might draw some who may be suspicious of current scientific advances and the technological culture in general, it strikes me, however, that Americans especially, when push comes to shove, are interested in the promises of "hard science" when it comes to matters intimately connected to their well being. "Natural" is to be preferred in terms of bottled water or iced tea, but when it comes to matters of personal well being and family health, hard science and technology are still the most favored allies.

But in what sense is natural family planning to be understood as natural, if one does not wish to emphasize its chemical free properties? How is one to

understand the sense of what is "natural" about natural family planning, if we do not emphasize the fact that it relies entirely on the natural rhythms of the body?

Here it seems, we run directly into the problems I discussed earlier about the loss of an objective order to humanity and human nature. Speaking from the vantage of Thomistic psychology, natural family planning is correctly identified as "natural", precisely because of its inherent capacity to invite couples to order their marital relationship in a manner that is consistent with the excellence of their created human nature. The natural, here in this sense, then does not identify its particular relationship with "man made" technologies, but rather identifies the truly person-centered approach to sexual relations and marriage in general. In this sense, "natural" family planning might be better understood to be "personal family planning," "human family planning," "integral family planning," or perhaps even "feminine family planning." These newer themes emphasize what is truly human at the heart of methods of family planning, the truly deliberative intelligence which marks the best of human flourishing. Methods of fertility awareness are authentically "natural" then, when they are consistent with what we've come to profess about human nature, a human nature which exhibits through its actions a dialectic of love and intelligence ordered toward a supreme and perfecting good.

This is the sense in which NFP contributes to the "good" marriage. Notice here that by good I mean not merely the good marriage understood as the effective cooperation of material assets among consenting adults, or the mutual interplay of feelings directed toward some therapeutic equilibrium among significant others. Rather a truly person centered family planning is an ordering of one's sexual relations within marriage in accordance with the dignity of their

human nature, their human nature as manifested in their deliberative choices, their intelligent loving of one another as creatures ordered toward God.

For this reason, nfp ought not to be seen as merely a kind of "back to nature" movement within an otherwise contraceptive culture. NFP, properly understood, recognizes that men and women are perfected by those means which are in accordance with their nature, that is, those means which are said to be properly human.

But how, specifically, does the reliance on methods of fertility awareness, the use of periodic abstinence manifest the excellence of human nature, as co-participators in the divine image? What is it, specifically, about the use of natural family planning, now understood as person centered planning, truly manifest the excellence of human action, human relationships?

To arrive at an answer one has to probe deeper into the themes of human freedom and human action, specifically the relationship between human freedom and intelligence, or truth. The Holy Father has written extensively on the relationship between freedom and truth. Today, I would prefer to limit my remarks to St. Thomas' account of that relationship -- I believe those of you familiar with the Holy Father's reflections will notice striking similarities.

Recall earlier the notion that for St. Thomas, human beings are creatures of desire, that at our core is the impulse to reach beyond ourselves. Here in this context the question of human freedom naturally arises for us. As creatures of desire, freedom is seen primarily as that capacity to achieve what we set out to achieve. Freedom, it would seem, is primarily the ability to do what we want.

But for St. Thomas, freedom is much more. For while it is true that freedom entails the ability to do what one desires; desire itself needs to be more

carefully circumscribed. And it is at this point, with a consideration of human desiring, that Thomistic psychology has something constructive to offer to natural family planning.

From the vantage of Thomistic psychology, in matters of human acting and decision making, it is one thing to act on what one wants, and quite another to act freely. This is one of the most important distinctions in St. Thomas' account of human action, and serves the project of natural family planning quite well.

Simply to reach toward whatever one wants, is not, for St. Thomas the expression of an authentically human action. And it is not, therefore, an expression of our authentic human freedom. Drug addicts and the slovenly, children and imbeciles, are said to reach for what they desire. An addict truly wants his fix, the alcoholic his liquor. But these are not properly human acts, acts of authentic freedom, for they lack what is essentially crucial in authentic human action: they lack the character of *deliberative* desiring.

It is one thing, in Thomistic psychology, to want something and it is quite another to deliberately choose it. The first is an example of a merely voluntary act (in which all animals participate to some degree) the second, the instance of deliberately desiring, deliberately choosing, entails a much richer and more profound engagement of what is authentically human.

In choosing, the human person takes what is the object of his or her desire and places it within an intelligent horizon of considerations. In choosing, as opposed to merely wanting, the agent engages in elements of true deliberation, a consideration of the options and the ramifications of what is placed before them as desirable.

It is not merely a matter of wanting, then, nor simply the matter of being able to enact or pursue what one wants, then, that human excellence, indeed human freedom is manifest. Rather, truly, authentically human action, as I indicated earlier is the symphonic performance of desire and intelligence, interest and deliberation. This is what is meant in the fullest expression of human choosing. And it is in such choosing, not merely in our wanting, that our moral character is shaped or mis-shaped, judged worthy or contemptible. For it is in choosing deliberately that we manifest the true excellence of what it means to be human.

All desiring, in order to display the best of human existence, must be brought up into the higher realms of deliberation. And in this sense the distinctively human is brought to light.

In matters of sexual desire, then, one can begin to see from the Thomistic vantage, that simply to act upon what one desires is not an authentic expression of human action. Rather, one must, if one wishes to love and act in a truly human fashion, bring these desires under the influence of deliberative thought. It is this capacity to bring our embodied desires under the light of truth, or intelligence, that makes our actions distinctively human.

The desire for food is perhaps an easy example. All human cultures display distinctively human patterns about consumption of food. We eat as humans, not simply to satisfy the desire for nutrition. Indeed, for most of our adult lives, there are occasions on a daily basis that the desire for food is postponed until dinner time, and at the same time, dinner is consumed in company, even though the desire itself may not be present.

Even the most primitive desire to preserve one's life, can be, in heroic circumstances brought under the light of deliberative intelligence and thus be made an occasion not merely of wanting, but of choosing--in the instance of the heroic sacrifice, of choosing to forego the most basic desire for life itself: in war and martyrdom.

In all of this the human person stands unique in creation as being not merely a creature who loves, who desires its own perfection, but is able to bring that desire for what is beyond itself under the control of deliberative intelligence. Indeed, failing to bring such desire under the control of deliberative intelligence manifests an utterly inadequate human act. Indeed, simply to act on what one wants is to fail to choose, to fail the act in a manner that authentically human.

Choice, then, is the expression of what is truly the finest in man, as a deliberative being capable of drawing any number of considerations into the realm of impulse and desire. And thus if I were to summarize the great and human project of natural family planning down to a simple injunction it would be this: CHOOSE SEX.

It is not, in other words, from the vantage of the Thomist, enough for couples to account for their sexual relations simply from the position that they desire sex, for the simple reason that human excellence is not manifest in those circumstances of merely acting upon what one desires. It is not enough, in other words, to desire sex; one must, if one is going to engage in authentic human love learn to choose it! That is, one must in the process of human maturing learn to bring such primitive desires under the guidance and order, indeed the fresh air and light, of intelligence itself. Failure to do so is a failure to enact in one's life an authentically human plan.

Natural family planning, then, with its insistence upon fertility awareness, the appeal to periodic continence and the overall considerations of the circumstances of responsible parenting, necessarily contributes to human excellence and thus wholeness, by demanding that couples who engage in such practices draw their primitive urges toward sexual intercourse and pleasure under the guiding directive of intelligent consideration. Whether to achieve or to avoid pregnancy, the employment of fertility awareness and the attending directives concerning the timing of one's intercourse, the use of natural family planning is an authentically human enterprise for it draws into the light of intelligent reflection the otherwise primitive, unreflective impulse toward sexual pleasure.

Contraceptive intercourse, by contrast, is fundamentally a betrayal of what constitutes authentic human action because it is precisely ordered toward the affirmation that the participants are themselves unwilling (not incapable) of bringing their sexual desires under the guidance and rule of human intelligence. It is a kind of sexual bulimia, in which the effects of the pleasures of consumption are viscerally rejected. It is particularly pernicious in my mind, in that while it is certainly true that it is often difficult to bring such desires under the guidance of human reason and freedom (David and Bathsheba remind us of that) the employment of many contraceptive devices suggests a certain premeditated abandonment of what is the best of what it means to be human. A lapse of authentic freedom due to the over-influence of passion can be excusable, but a premeditated and planned, a reasoned and strategic engagement of that same lapse of authentic freedom, in other words, to anticipate in the cool light of reason the impending occasion in which one's deliberative intelligence is to be

set aside and ignored--which is what is essentially happening when a man or woman decide to employ the pill-- is a fundamental contradiction and an assault on what it means to love in an authentically human fashion.

It is not, I might add, an occasion in which human beings let their "animal passions" get the better of them. It is often popular to defend to the need for contraceptives, owing to the so-called influence of our animal passions. But this is not quite true. Animals, one needs to be reminded, never engage in contraceptive intercourse. Indeed, most animal species times their intercourse to periods of abundant fertility. It is a misunderstanding to say that human beings need access to contraceptives because they often fall prey to their animal instincts. Indeed, if we were to truly fall prey to our animal instincts, we would limit our intercourse not to its infertile times, and it is most certainly the case that we would not be engaging in contraceptive intercourse. Rather we would strictly limit our intercourse to those times when we were confident that procreation is especially possible!

Only man is capable of contraceptive intercourse; only man is capable of living a lie. At the same time, only man is capable of ordering sexual activity according to the principles of human intelligence and truth, otherwise known as responsible parenting, and thus only man is capable of making his sexual activity an authentic expression of human freedom, human choosing, human love, in short, a complete gift of self.

Natural family planning, then, draws the unreflective impulse of sexual desire into the warming light of deliberative consideration. By demanding that the couple consider their desires from the vantage of the overall authentic good of the family, it moves the couple along the path of human maturity, drawing

their adolescent stirrings into the world of mature, because reflectively considered, gift. It is therefore, on this path that authentically human love is made manifest. By its very structure it draws the couple into the symphonic character of human love, where will and intelligence, desire and truth, find in each other their necessary complement and perfection.

By demanding that couples order their desires in light of their vocation as man and woman, natural family planning draws the individual person into the best of what is authentically natural, what is authentically excellent in human loving.

"Today I set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse, *choose* life that you and your descendants might live." (Dt. 30: 19)

Thank you and god bless your work.

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