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Natural FAMILY PLANNING

A Catholic Approach

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CATHOLIC TEACHING

Marital Love

God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying: “Be fertile and multiply” (Genesis 1: 27–28).

The creation story is a call to love. When we read the story of Adam and Eve before the fall, we understand God’s original call to us—a call not only of love, but also of beauty, a call in which we give ourselves completely to one another. And notice that God’s *first* command to humankind was to “be fertile and multiply.”

After the fall, Adam and Eve realized they were naked and tried to cover themselves. The original relationship was altered. That vision of the beauty of what God created us to be is now what we strive for in our relationships. We feel this in our deepest longings: to love and be loved. In this passage from Genesis, man and woman are created for unity. They become one flesh. This love is first of all fully human; that is, it involves both the body and the spirit. The man and woman join their hearts and souls as well as their bodies (Paul VI, Encyclical Letter on the Regulation of Births¹; *Humanae Vitae* [HV], 9) in the image of God. This special relationship is a choice both the man and the woman must be free to make.

Marriage between baptized persons represents the union of Christ and the Church (HV8). Marital love is to be total, faithful, exclusive, and indissoluble. During the Catholic Rite of Marriage, the couple is asked whether they are there of their own accord, whether they will be faithful until they die, and whether they intend to accept the children God gives them. That is, marriage is total self-giving *only* to one another and *for life*.

As Jesus stated, “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate” (Matthew 19:6.) Because we are images of God, and because God has created this relationship by his divine love, the Church looks on the relationship of a married couple as a vocation that is noble, sacred, and sacramental.

The sacrament of marriage is the original means of holiness for Christian married couples and families (John Paul II, *The Christian Family in the Modern World; Familiaris Consortio* (FC), 56).² The marriage bond isn’t to be viewed as a burden or something imposed by God upon us. The grace of the sacrament helps the couple live with each other, to follow Christ, to know joy, to endure sorrow and hardships, to forgive each other, and to nurture one another and their mutual love. The joy of their love and family life is a preview of heaven (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1641–1642).³

The Meaning of the Body

Pope John Paul II said the human body is representative of God and all his mysteries. God uses our bodies to reveal the truth of himself. Jesus teaches us that the meaning of life is in loving one another: “Love one another as I love you” (John 15:12).

How did Christ love us? He gave up his life for us. God’s love for us is made flesh in Jesus Christ. Christ’s love is a reality of the

body. Thus, in the gift of our bodies to one another, we act on our love as Christ loved us. The body alone is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and divine. The body reveals God's invisible mystery.

Married love, then, is different from any other love. By the very nature of the two becoming one, this kind of love is ordered toward God and one another; creating new life together is cooperating with God's design. Marital love is unitive and procreative, that is, love-giving and life-giving. Sexual acts between husband and wife are representations of God's love for his creation. God's love for us is never sterile. Thus, the expression of love that takes place between married people must never be intentionally sterile.

Children Are Gifts From God

Children too are a gift from the LORD, the fruit of the womb, a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children born in one's youth. Blessed are they whose quivers are full. They will never be shamed contending with foes at the gate (Psalm 127:3-5).

In general, those who argue for contraception start with the result, the fruit of marital union, a view in which children are seen as a negative. In our culture's ideal image, most families are pictured with two children, preferably one boy and one girl. Unplanned pregnancy occurs in 50 percent of couples who use contraceptives, and the solution always includes more contraceptives. Abortion is offered as the solution when contraception fails (Casey v Planned Parenthood, 1992).

The problem with approaching this issue from the direction of the result is that it leaves out discussion of causes and the decision-making or behaviors that led to the fruit.

The Church approaches the matter from the opposite direction, starting with the holiness of the marital act itself—what it means and what it was intended for. These two meanings, life-giving and love-giving, cannot willfully be separated any more than Christ’s sacrifice can be separated from our redemption.

Our culture of death calls pregnancy and children “contraceptive failures.” Generating new life and the beauty of God’s creation should never be thought of as a “failure.”

Intentions

Some would say that using contraceptives is no different than abstaining from intercourse during the fertile time because the ends are the same. However, the ends never justify the means. Couples using contraceptives willfully suppress their fertility. They are saying with their bodies, “I love you, but I don’t love all of you. I don’t love your fertility.” Couples who use NFP aren’t practicing contraception—by giving themselves completely to one another in body and soul, they’re preserving the integrity of the sacrament.

In God’s design, women are naturally infertile for many days of the menstrual cycle. The marital act during these times promotes bonding and yet is open to new life. There is no sin in abstaining from the marital act. In fact, on occasion couples choose to do just that...during times of sickness or stress, for example.

And what of those couples who have a serious reason to avoid pregnancy? Are couples supposed to leave their family size to chance? The Church has no expectation that couples do so. In addressing the issue of responsible parenthood (*HV 10*), the Church has said couples may choose to have a large family or not. That’s up to the couple alone. The Church encourages couples to make that decision in the spirit of generosity, but with responsibility to God, to each other, to the children already born, and to society.

Reasons to limit family size may include physical, economic, psychological, and social conditions with respect to moral law. God gave us the intelligence to regulate our fertility, but that decision must be made in a moral way.

Formation of Conscience

To avoid evil, we must make the effort to find out what is true and good; therefore, the Church calls on everyone to appropriately form his or her conscience. Conscience formation is a lifelong process. “A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful” (CCC 1783). It helps us make right judgments in accord with reason and God’s laws.

The Church is there to help us with our moral decision-making and to explain why some decisions are well-grounded and spiritually good and why others are not. Think of all the resources at our disposal: priestly advice and homilies, the sacraments, Catholic education, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Church documents, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

NFP As a Gift

NFP is a means for learning to live with fertility. Fertility isn’t a disease.

Many couples find that living an NFP lifestyle gives them a better understanding of their fertility, frees them from fear of medical side effects, increases their communication, encourages a greater sense of sharing and a generosity to life, fosters their sexual self-control, and gives them the peace of following their spiritual, religious, cultural, and/or ethical beliefs.

NFP requires couples to deeply revere each other, respect each other’s bodies, and develop additional ways of communicating their love. Periodic abstinence encourages couples to focus on

aspects of their relationship beyond the physical and results in a “honeymoon effect.” Holistic sexuality isn’t just physical—it has spiritual, emotional, and psychological facets. Neither spouse takes the other for granted.

The mutual cooperation and motivation NFP fosters often carry over to other areas. Couples find that when they can communicate about their intentions with NFP, it’s easier to discuss other issues such as finances, child-rearing, and family.

The most important benefit of NFP is that it allows spouses to live the mutual gift of self that is an essential element of marriage. The Church values marital sexual love. NFP allows us to be authentic in the expression of that love.

Notes

1. Paul VI. 1968. Encyclical Letter on the Regulation of Birth (*Humanae Vitae*). www.vatican.va/offices/index.htm (accessed April 3, 2009).
2. John Paul II. 1981. The Christian Family in the Modern World (*Familiaris Consortio*). www.vatican.va/offices/index.htm (accessed April 3, 2009).
3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 1994. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Inc. www.usccb.org/catechism/text/ (accessed April 3, 2009).