

Natural Family Planning and Married Love

Introduction

The Catholic Church's position on contraception is one of her most difficult teachings for our culture to understand and accept. It seems to suggest that every pious Catholic couple is consigned to have 12 children, spending most of their marriage running a sort of daycare. And although the Church has never denied that she is trying to take over the world by reproducing faster than everyone else, this is certainly not the reason for the teaching. The Church teaches what she does because of the nature of marriage and human sexuality.

As a sacrament, marriage becomes a sign in which a man and woman freely choose to make present in the world the overflowing love between Christ the Bridegroom and the Church, his Bride. Husband and wife even image the overflowing generativity and creativity within the Trinity! This is no casual task, and so marriage is treated with the greatest reverence by the Church.

Marriage is more than mere friendship. It requires two different people belonging to two different sexes. This personal and sexual difference is the basis for married love; we can only truly love what is different from us. What makes a marriage happen, however, is not just the vows; the marriage must also be consummated. Both the wedding vows and the sexual act speak of the same love: a love that is free, total, faithful, and fruitful.¹

Christ and the Church

This marital love draws its meaning from the love between Christ and the Church. Christ offers himself freely to his Bride, the Church. Each of us must *freely* chose to give ourselves to him or not. On the cross, Christ offers a *total* gift of everything that he is for our salvation. He will never forsake us – he is *faithful* as we are called to be. Finally, his love is *fruitful*. It continually brings forth new members of God's family. By receiving Christ's gift of himself (especially the Eucharist), the Church too is enabled to bear fruit that will last.

The Trinity

Marriage also images the free, total, faithful love within the Trinity which is the source of *all* fruitfulness. From this love comes the entire universe. In the example of the Trinity, we see a fundamental reality: love always exceeds itself; it is fruitful. This is the reason for the creation of the universe. And it is why God chose marriage – a relationship of love – to be the context for the continued creation of new life.

Sex and Married Love

So how does a sexual act within marriage express what married love is all about? Obviously, it must be free. Any coercion or violence negates a sexual act as an act of marital love and is gravely sinful. It must also (as much as possible) involve a total gift of self. It must involve both body and soul – the entire person. When one ceases to see sexual intercourse as expressing the person (and instead sees it as a simple biological action, or just a sort of “spiritual connection”) one has ceased making a total gift of oneself.

Marital sex is faithful – this should not need much explaining; infidelity ruptures the

1 Pope Paul VI, in his 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, identifies these four characteristics of married love.

exclusivity of the marriage covenant and betrays trust. But it is also fruitful, and this is where most of the misunderstandings arise. We will start by stating what the Church does, and does not say, regarding this.

The Church's Teaching

Every sexual act in marriage must possess both a unitive and a procreative meaning.² In other words, every sexual act must represent or symbolize both the union of the couple (in one flesh) and the creation of new life. Conception is not required for a sexual act to be morally acceptable or holy; what is necessary however is a sexual act that has not been modified so as to prevent conception. Any willful acting *against conception* means that the sexual act no longer keeps its procreative meaning.³

What the Church Does Not Teach

I have heard several misconceptions regarding the Church's teaching, mostly from Catholics who sometimes confuse certain old-fashioned opinions with Catholic teaching. The Church does not teach that every sexual act must be procreative, nor that procreation must be intended in every sexual act. Paul VI stated that for serious reasons, couples may “decide not to have additional children for either a certain or an indefinite period of time.”⁴ A sexual act by a married couple is still good “even when, for reasons independent of their will, it is foreseen to be infertile.”⁵

Being “open to life” does not mean that there must be some small chance of pregnancy in each sexual act. An infertile couple may have a 0% chance of conceiving, but their sexual acts are still called to *signify* the welcoming of new life (even though they may not bring it about). Likewise, the reason that Natural Family Planning (NFP) is permitted is not because it 'leaves a door open' – which is like saying that it is OK simply because it has a higher “failure” rate than contraceptive techniques (in many cases it is even more effective at avoiding pregnancy than the pill). The value of NFP does *not* lie in the fact that it is less artificial or effective than contraceptive methods. Its value lies in its ability to support married couples in growing in authentic Christian love.

The Difference between NFP and Contraception

There is often a tendency to ask: “What's the difference anyway? Isn't NFP basically just Catholic contraception?” First of all, we should clarify our terms. It could be true to call NFP a form of “birth control”, since it is a legitimate means of controlling the births of children. The most effective form of birth control is abstinence (it ensures 0 children will be

2 The Latin word used in *Humanae Vitae* 12 is “*significatio*” whose normal translation would be “meaning,” although the official English uses “significance” which is more problematic for English readers. Some authors have suggested “signification” might place more emphasis on the sign-value of sexual intercourse.

3 Many dissenting theologians have argued that not *every* sexual act must be open to life; what really matters is the overall orientation of the relationship as a whole. As long as the relationship is loving and accepting of children, individual acts need not retain their procreative meaning.

The problem with this reasoning is that if what matters is simply the “big picture” of the relationship and not individual acts, then there seems to be no reason why one could not have casual sex with other people, as long as it did not affect the overall orientation of the relationship. The fact is, there is something sacred and special about each and every sexual act. This is why no one, regardless of their philosophy, is happy to find that their spouse has cheated on them.

4 *Humanae Vitae*, 10.

5 *Humanae Vitae*, 11.

born), and we have all practiced it at some time in our lives. We should also note another common misconception, namely the term “artificial contraception.” The Church never uses this term. It was probably coined by people who misunderstood the whole contraception debate as an “artificial” vs “natural” issue which it is not. The problem is with contraception plain and simple.

The word “contraception” is a compact form of *contra* – *conception* (the Latin preposition *contra* means against, hostile to). It is a deliberate obstruction, a sterilization, of the sexual act. NFP does not involve changing the sexual act in any way, so it is not contraceptive. I have occasionally heard people say that NFP can be used “contraceptively.” While NFP may be used for selfish ends so that the couple does not practice what Paul VI calls “responsible parenthood,”⁶ comparing it to contraception simply reveals an ignorance of the profound differences that exist.⁷

An analogy may help to illustrate the difference between the two methods. Suppose I want to spend time with a friend who lives on his family's apple orchard. And suppose I am allergic to the pollen of apple blossoms. I could tell my friend that I cannot visit him unless he cuts down or poisons his apple trees. This way, I can visit anytime I please. Or, we could mutually agree that I may visit him in the summer, fall, or winter, but I will simply stay away during the spring months.⁸

The identity and integrity of the apple orchard (and my friend's identity as an apple farmer) is only respected and accepted in the second case. Likewise, NFP involves a total, integral acceptance of the whole person – fertility included. This acceptance of the *whole* person is the basis for a married love whose fruitfulness can reach out beyond the immediate family and touch the world.

Spirituality of NFP

Even people who see no moral difference between NFP and contraception all agree on at least this one point: NFP can be difficult to practice. Yet this fact is also a source of spiritual merit. Married love is about putting the other person before yourself. It is an opportunity to let your own desires die. If a couple has discerned that they ought not to conceive, then they have a difficult task: they must avoid intercourse precisely at the time of month when they feel the greatest natural desire for it. This is exactly like fasting – it is giving up something good (in this case, sex) in order for a greater good to come about. In the case of NFP, this

6 *Humanae Vitae*, 10.

7 I have also heard some people say that NFP can be used with a “contraceptive mentality.” The term “contraceptive mentality” originates in John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* n. 6, where he paints a picture of the difficult situation of the family in the world today. The term is not used in reference to NFP but to the prevailing mentality of contemporary culture, which is truly a “contraceptive” one. The careful respect of human nature and the self-sacrifice required by NFP, however, run in the opposite direction of a contraceptive mentality.

People who practice NFP may still be selfish and choose to restrict their family size in a selfish way (just like contracepting couples), but in this case the problem has nothing whatsoever to do with their use of NFP (which is morally good, or at worst, neutral). Their sin is not in any way a sexual sin (as in the case of contraception) but the sin of not trusting God and not following his plan for their lives. Because of the subjective nature of each case, however, no one has the right to judge another couple in this regard.

8 No analogy is perfect. The conception of a human life is certainly a greater good than seasonal allergies. Nonetheless, both are things which may be avoided for good reason, and at least on that level the analogy may be helpful.

“periodic abstinence” provides increased opportunities for communication, a deep awareness of the woman's body and cycle, and a great respect for the gift of fertility.

There can be no true love without the cross. This is especially true in married love which is called to reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church. If the greatest sign of love is the crucified Christ, we should not be surprised that as we grow in love we will be called to suffer, to die to ourselves. Making ourselves suffer for no reason would be sadistic, but with NFP we temporarily offer up our sexual desires for the greater goods of responsible parenthood and a deeper relationship with our spouse.

When we allow the married sexual relationship to be what it wants to be – an image of the free, total, faithful, fruitful love of God – the sacrament of marriage becomes energized and vivified with God's own life. It is marriages like these (and the families that come from them) that will transform our culture from one of death to life.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Fletcher', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Patrick Fletcher

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