

Are You Man Enough to Take The NFP Challenge?

by Ellen Rossini

Mention Natural Family Planning (NFP) in a typical group of Catholic men and you can expect one of three responses:

1. Silence. ("I don't know what it is, but I am pretty certain I don't want to talk about it.")
2. It's too difficult. ("All that abstinence...")
3. It doesn't work. ("Joe uses NFP and he has six children!")

There are myths and misunderstandings aplenty when it comes to the Church's teaching on birth regulation. But according to the experts – the husbands who partner with their wives to use natural, moral methods to plan or space their babies – the truth about natural family planning can transform a man's marriage, life and faith. "It has really been an incredible blessing," says Scott Lash, a member of Father George council 3758 in Wayzata, Minnesota, who now lives in Vermilion, South Dakota. "My wife and I have always known, really sensed that natural family planning has helped our relationship to blossom." The Knights of Columbus provides grant funding to the US bishops' Diocesan Development Program for natural family planning. In Canada the order supports the Catholic Organization for Life and Family, which includes among its programs promotion of natural family planning. Pro-life and pro-family programs in Mexico and the Philippines have also received the Order's support.

Facts and Fictions

For men who dare to take the NFP challenge, here are some facts and fictions:

Myth: NFP increases the chance for a lifelong marriage. Fact: NFP doesn't just increase that chance, it knocks it out of the ballpark. NFP users have a 100 times better chance of staying married than the average American couple according to the latest survey on NFP and marital happiness. In a study commissioned by Family of the Americas Foundation (FAF), a worldwide organization that promotes the ovulation method of NFP, just .02 percent of NFP users had divorced. By comparison, approximately 22 to 23 percent of American marriages end in divorce, according to Mercedes Arzu Wilson, president of FAF.

Comparing 505 middle-class American women trained in the ovulation method of NFP with large populations of women from two government-funded surveys, the study showed that divorces among NFP users were also much less common than among Catholic women generally. Of Catholic women who have married, 13 percent were divorced. Four percent of the Catholic women were separated, while none of the NFP users were. Bill Johnson of Moorhead, Minn., said he realized too late the subtle effect of contraception on his first marriage, which ended in divorce and was annulled by the Church. "We tried to have God in our lives, we went to Sunday Mass, but it was a selfish marriage," he recalled. "A lot of my friends got divorced too. Contraception turns the marriage into a 'me' thing."

Once hailed as a boon to marriage, contraception is like a poison that eats away at love, said Fr. Richard M. Hogan, who has written extensively on Pope John Paul II's "theology of the body," and gives 30 NFP parish missions a year. He is a member of Fr. William Bloom Council 3656 in Crystal, Minn. "Through contraception, the total self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid by an objective contradictory language," said Fr. Hogan, citing *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul's 1981 apostolic exhortation on the family. "In other words, it's push-pull. The act says 'I'm yours,' but then you're adding, 'except for that [your fertility].' And things start to deteriorate. When you lie with your body, it is at a level so deep and profound that it will affect everything."

NFP by the Numbers

Myth: With its charts and graphs, NFP makes marital relations a clinical exercise. Fact: NFP inspires awe between husband and wife. Johnson said he and Roberta, his wife of 15 years, have gratefully accepted their five children and have not tried to space pregnancies. But when Roberta decided she wanted to understand the physiology of

her fertility, the two attended NFP classes. It's been an eye-opener. "You learn a lot about how ovulation works, how the other forms of birth control work, how they affect the woman and how they affect the unborn child, and that's a very important thing to me," Johnson said. He has learned, for example, that the contraceptive pill not only prevents ovulation but can cause early abortions after life is conceived. What a man and a woman learn about each other through NFP gives them a glimpse of God, added Father Hogan. "The man discovers in a very significant way some very important hidden aspects of his spouse or his future wife, and she discovers something about him that she didn't know before," he said.

Abstinence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

Myth: NFP harms marriage through lack of physical intimacy. Fact: NFP helps marriage through increased delight in intimacy. According to the FAF study, NFP couples have more frequent marital relations than those in the general population. This statistic doesn't surprise Father Hogan, who said that contraception diminishes love, and less love means less interest. If sex for pleasure is like dessert, he noted, "After awhile, how much ice cream can you eat?" NFP husbands admit the regular periods of abstinence can be a challenge. But they say the constraint increases their appreciation for the marital act, making each occasion of embrace like a new honeymoon. In the meantime, they learn to show love in other ways.

"Sex is not always just there at the drop of a hat for your own pleasure and your own gratification," said Lash, who has been married for 10 years to his college sweetheart, Joelle. "We've lived a lot of abstinence throughout these several years. Even though we were always kind of frustrated about it, we've really sensed that it has helped us." Vincent Dever of San Pedro, Calif. calls abstinence "an education in virtue." His wife Faith teaches NFP. They will always remember a couple saying that during times of abstinence, they offer it up for priests and nuns who abstain for life. Bill Johnson cites another unexpected benefit of practicing abstinence through natural family planning: He can make a convincing case for premarital sexual abstinence to his own children, some who will soon be teenagers. "It gives me a good feeling to know that I am practicing self-control," Johnson said. "In terms of talking with my children, it's not like I'm asking them to do things that I'm not willing to do."

NFP Converts

Myth: NFP is only for Catholic couples. Fact: NFP can make couples Catholic. Rex Moses of Corpus Christi, Texas, was a Protestant evangelical who went along with NFP to please his wife, Valerie. A Baptist, she was not troubled with the moral aspects of birth control, but she was unhappy with the physical effects. One day, Moses happened upon a newsletter of the Couple to Couple League (CCL), which trains couples in the sympto-thermal method of NFP. Suddenly, Moses said, he came to terms with the "profundity of the traditional Christian/Catholic doctrine on contraception." He and his whole family eventually entered the Catholic Church. "When I realized virtually all of Protestantism had been washed out to sea [on the issue of birth control]... it caused me to come to grips with the possibility that it is the Catholic Church through which the Holy Spirit has preserved his truth," Moses said. For cradle Catholics, NFP has the power to strengthen their faith and religious practice. "Our faith as Catholics is a real love relationship with God," said Lash. "I've never had any jobs that have made a whole heck of a lot of money. By most of society's ideas and standards, what we do goes completely against the grain. But God has always blessed us with a great house, a car that most of the time doesn't break down, and there's food on the table."

Family Size Matters

Myth: NFP users have larger families because the method doesn't work. Fact: NFP users have larger families because they want to. Both NFP and contraception can result in surprise pregnancies, although NFP and hormonal birth control methods like the pill have a better than 97 percent success rate when used correctly. Yet compared to the average population, NFP users have larger families. In the FAF survey, three children is the most common number for NFP users, whereas two children is the most common for the average woman. Twice as many NFP users had four children than did the average woman (18 percent, compared to 9 percent).

By its nature, NFP assists couples in being generously open to life. "The self-giving love of husband and wife includes the possibility of children," said Father Hogan. But even when desired, that possibility is not guaranteed. The Devers have used NFP more to achieve pregnancy than to avoid it, yet have only two children. "One thing I think [fertility challenges] have taught us is to avoid a kind of extreme judgmentalism," said Dever. "People can actually have a problem not in thwarting conception but achieving it." Moses and his wife have six children, ages 21

to 5. "God must have had David Michael [8] and Brendan [9] in mind before the world was created, because it is impossible to imagine it having been completed without them" Moses said. "Without NFP, they would not be here. Creation would, to that extent, be unfulfilled." The Lashes have been blessed with five children, God's answer to their father's prayer for a happy family life. "The kids are beautiful kids, they're wonderful kids" Lash said. "I couldn't have ever imagined that we would have such great kids."

A Real Marriage Saver

Myth: NFP is only for good marriages. Fact: NFP makes marriages good. Mercedes Wilson, John Kippley of the Couple to Couple League, and others who have taught NFP for years are accustomed to what they call conversion stories, couples who say NFP restored their marriages. "It's so commonplace that you forget about them," said Kippley. "One lady told me she was folding laundry and she heard my radio show," said Wilson. "She and her husband had been on the brink of divorce, and the pill was giving her problems. She bought my book [on NFP] and has been using it ever since. She told me, 'You saved my marriage.' There are lots of stories like that."

Father Hogan said there is always hope for a marriage that has started off wrong or gotten off track along the way. "Grace is incredibly powerful here. With God, you make one little baby step, and he's right there next to you," he said. "For some people, that step is a huge leap of faith."

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