

Natural Family Planning

by Sebastian R. Fama

Natural Family Planning (NFP) seems to be the Catholic Church's best-kept secret. It was never intended to be a secret. However, the message just does not seem to get out. So, what is NFP? NFP is the licit alternative to contraception. NFP is all natural and it works in harmony with a woman's body. With NFP there are none of the complications or side effects usually associated with the different contraceptive methods. And unlike some contraceptives, it causes no harm to the environment. Furthermore, it is just as effective as any method of contraception. And unlike contraception, it does not conflict with Catholic teaching.

NFP is not the Rhythm Method. The Rhythm Method is dependent on the regularity of a woman's cycle. Many women don't have a regular cycle and so this method may not be very reliable by itself. NFP does utilize the Rhythm Method but it goes two steps further. NFP measures and senses the approach of ovulation. This is accomplished by monitoring three conditions in a woman's body. These are basal body temperature, cervical mucus, and the timing of a woman's cycle (the Rhythm Method). By charting a woman's fertile times, a couple can know on what days of the month she can get pregnant. If their goal is to limit their family size, they would abstain from intercourse on these days.

The Church has always taught that every act of sexual intercourse must be open to life. However, since times of infertility are a part of God's design, it is perfectly acceptable to have intercourse during these times. But some ask, what is the difference? Why would God care if we practiced NFP or used contraception? The end result is the same. But it is not about the end result. You would not say that going out and stealing money is the same as earning it just because the end result is the same. The same principal applies here. It is all about the way we accomplish our goal. In our example, stealing is intrinsically wrong. And in family planning, contraception is intrinsically wrong.

Sexual intercourse is a gift from God. Consequently, it needs to be respected and used in accord with its design and purpose. Let me illustrate my point with an example. Suppose you were having dinner at a friend's house. After the main course your friend brings out some cheesecake. You really love the taste of cheesecake, but you do not want the calories. The proper thing to do is to pass on the cheesecake. There is nothing wrong with not eating cheesecake. However, it would be wrong to take some cheesecake, chew it, enjoy the taste, and then spit it on the table to avoid the calories.

If you abstain from sex during the fertile times, it's like not eating the cheesecake. If you use contraception during fertile times, it is like chewing the cheesecake and spitting it out in front of your host. That is because in both cases you have performed the first part of what is by nature a two-part process. The purpose of food is to taste good and to nourish. The purpose of sex is to communicate love and to produce offspring. Contraception is wrong because it separates sexual intercourse from its procreative function. Thus, sex can become an end unto itself. The result is mutual selfishness. Making love should never be reduced to a means of relieving oneself. Making love was designed by God to be a profound expression of love.

NFP respects the procreative function of intercourse. Couples become aware of and develop a respect for the woman's fertility. Several surveys have shown that the divorce rate for NFP couples is between .2% and 4%. That is a big difference from the 50% rate of the general population.

It does not get much press, but oral contraceptives have a negative impact on the environment. In an interview with Columbia Magazine, Dr. James J. Joyce noted:

Hormonal contraceptives are removed from the body through the kidneys and make their way into the waste water systems in each community. These contaminate the water since they are not filtered or chemically removed from the water that we drink. The US Fish and Wildlife Department has reported that all areas of the country that have been tested have streams with endocrine disruption (hormone overdose) in fish and amphibians. This syndrome has affected the ability of these

populations to reproduce. Although about 10 percent of couples in the United States experience infertility, it has not been established whether this is related to the contraceptive hormones in the water we drink.

In an article appearing on LiveScience.com, Wynne Parry got into more detail. He said:

EE2, a synthetic hormone, is only one of a cocktail of natural and synthetic hormones that humans excrete into wastewater, including other estrogens. EE2 has a potent biological effect at low levels. "Animals are exquisitely sensitive to it," Jobling told LiveScience. The body of a fish or a frog reacts to EE2 as if it were a natural estrogen, "demasculinizing" male animals and creating a condition called intersex that interferes with an animal's ability to reproduce, Jobling said. Intersex males often produce eggs in their testes. It's not yet clear if levels of EE2 found in waterways affect mammals' reproductive cycle, she said (*Water Pollution Caused by Birth Control Poses Dilemma*).

At the very least this threatens the existence of the affected species. But the question remains, when the tainted water flows out to the ocean, does it have a similar effect on sea life. Or as one author asked: "Are we putting sharks and whales on the pill?"

It is true that some couples may struggle with periodic abstinence. But as with most things perseverance produces results. Professor Janet Smith notes that NFP data suggests that periodic abstinence increases passion and revitalizes romance. According to a study commissioned by the "Family of the Americas Foundation," NFP couples have more frequent marital relations than those in the general public. Also, because cooperation is needed, NFP enhances communication. When a couple works in harmony with what God has created, they develop a deeper respect for one another. And according to the Couple-to-Couple League: "NFP users report less irritability and depression, and an increased sex drive."

A comparison of both methods illustrates the superiority of NFP.

Contraception

1. 97% effective
2. Sex is primary focus
3. Dangerous side effects
4. Promotes selfishness
5. Can result in abortion
6. Weakens marriages (Higher divorce rate)
7. Inconsistent with Scripture
8. Costs thousands of dollars over a lifetime
9. Less frequent sex (on average)

Natural Family Planning

1. 99% effective
2. Relationship is primary focus
3. No side effects
4. Promotes mutual responsibility
5. Never results in abortion
6. Strengthens marriages (Lower divorce rate)
7. Consistent with Scripture
8. Costs nothing once learned
9. More frequent sex (on average)

NFP promotes true intimacy. I say true intimacy because all too many people equate intimacy with sexual relations. And to a certain degree that can be true. But it is possible to experience sexual union totally devoid of any intimacy. Intimacy is an emotional closeness that goes beyond the physical. The physical can express or enhance it but it is not automatic. When the sex act is an end unto itself, it becomes easier to view the other person as a mere object. Once a person is an object to be used true intimacy is diminished or even eliminated. And of course, that doesn't bode well for any couple.

When a couple chooses NFP over artificial birth control they end up being in harmony with God, nature and each other. Couples interested in learning more about NFP should contact the Couple-to-Couple League of Cincinnati (www.ccli.org) or the NFP office in their diocese.