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The Natural Methods for the Regulation of Fertility: At the Heart of the Culture of Life

by

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In *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II responds to the contemporary culture of death by asking to replace it with a culture of life. While looking at all aspects of life and clearly expanding one's view of the life issues, His Holiness challenges us to look again at the very foundation upon which a culture of life can be built. No issues are raised more frequently in *Evangelium Vitae* than those related to the natural methods for the regulation of fertility, human sexuality, human procreation and the virtue of chastity. We must commit ourselves to examining more closely these most important issues and understand their significance in relation to the building of a culture of life.

"It is frequently asserted," says Pope John Paul II, " that contraception, if made safe and available to all, is the most effective remedy against abortion. The Catholic Church is then accused of actually promoting abortion, because she obstinately continues to teach the moral unlawfulness of contraception. When looked at carefully, this objection is clearly unfounded. It may be that many people use contraception with a view to excluding the subsequent temptation of

abortion. But the negative values inherent in the "contraceptive mentality"--which is very different from responsible parenthood, lived in respect for the full truth of the conjugal act--are such that they in fact strengthen this temptation when an unwanted life is conceived. Indeed, the pro-abortion culture is especially strong precisely where the Church's teaching on contraception is rejected. Certainly, from the moral point of view, contraception and abortion are specifically different evils: the former contradicts the full truth of the sexual act as the proper expression of conjugal love, while the latter destroys the life of a human being; the former is opposed to the virtue of chastity in marriage, the latter is opposed to the virtue of justice and directly violates the divine commandment 'You shall not kill'."¹

"But despite their differences of nature and moral gravity, contraception and abortion are often closely connected, as fruits of the same tree. It is true that in many cases contraception and even abortion are practiced under the pressure of real-life difficulties, which nonetheless can never exonerate from striving to observe God's law fully. Still, in very many other instances, such practices are rooted in a hedonistic mentality unwilling to accept responsibility in matters of sexuality, and they imply a self-centered concept of freedom, which regards procreation as an obstacle to personal fulfillment. The life which could result from a sexual encounter thus becomes an enemy to be avoided at all costs, and abortion becomes the only possible decisive response to failed contraception."²

"The close connection which exists, in mentality, between the practice of contraception and that of abortion is becoming increasingly obvious. It is being demonstrated in an alarming way by the development of chemical products, intrauterine devices and vaccines which, distributed with the same ease as contraceptives, really act as abortifacients in the very early stages of the development of the life of the new human being."³

"...The *body* is no longer perceived as a properly personal reality," says the Holy Father, "a sign and place of relations with others, with God and with the world. It is reduced to pure materiality: it is simply a complex of organs, functions and energies to be used according to the sole criteria of pleasure and efficiency. Consequently, sexuality, too, is depersonalized and exploited: from being the sign, place and language of love, that is, of the gift of self and acceptance of

another, and all the other's richness as a person, it increasingly becomes the occasion and instrument for self-assertion and the selfish satisfaction of personal desires and instincts. Thus, the original import of human sexuality is distorted and falsified, and the two meanings, unitive and procreative, inherent in the very nature of the conjugal act, are artificially separated: in this way the marriage union is betrayed and its fruitfulness is subjected to the caprice of the couple. Procreation then becomes the 'enemy' to be avoided in sexual activity: if it is welcomed, this is only because it expresses a desire or indeed the intention, to have a child 'at all costs', and not because it signifies the complete acceptance of the other and therefore the openness to the richness of life which the child represents."⁴

The medical approach, in the contemporary world, to human fertility has become one of **suppression and destruction**. The concept that fertility can be meaningfully regulated by an understanding of the natural phases of fertility and infertility has been lost in the greater world. **And yet, scientific evidence continues to build on its scientific foundation and effectiveness.**

Contraception is not merely a physical or mechanical means of avoiding pregnancy. It is, more importantly, **a denial of the fundamental truths of the relationship between spouses**. It strangles the core of their psychological and spiritual well being. It erodes their attitude toward life and, because it emphasizes in an unbalanced sort of way the genital expression of sexuality, it places communication barriers between the spouses and the children who are born.

In 1978, the first baby was born as the result of in vitro fertilization (IVF), a process whereby the sperm and the egg are united in a petri dish and inserted into the uterus after early embryological development. This new technology for the treatment of tubal infertility has brought contraception, sterilization and abortion full circle. The reality is that in contemporary society, we manage nearly everything related to human reproduction in ways which **separate love and life**.

With the introduction of the artificial reproductive technologies, basic research in trying to further understand the natural phases of fertility and infertility, except for some rather significant and notable exceptions, has stopped within the medical sciences. The unity of the married couple has been destroyed and highly abortive technology has been introduced. **Human fertility in all of its aspects is now**

managed by separating love from life and life from love. But by understanding the natural methods for the regulation of fertility, love and life can be reconnected again and the very foundation for the culture of life can be restored.

In *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II calls for the implementation of appropriate and effective programs of "support for new life." He points out that "This involves a patient and fearless work of education...it requires a continuous promotion of vocations to service...it involves the implementation of long-term practical projects and initiatives inspired by the Gospel."⁵

On no less than *four different occasions* he calls for the development of centers for the promotion of natural family planning and its related services:

- "At the first stage of life, centres for natural methods of regulating fertility should be promoted as a valuable help to responsible parenthood, in which as individuals, in the first place the child, are recognized and respected in their own right, and where every decision is guided by the ideal of the sincere gift of self."⁶
- "There can be no avoiding the duty to offer, especially to adolescents and young adults, authentic education in sexuality and in love, an education which involves training in chastity as a virtue which fosters personal maturity and makes one capable of respecting the 'spousal' meaning of the body."⁷
- "The work of educating in the service of life involves the training of married couples in responsible procreation. In its true meaning, responsible procreation requires couples to be obedient to the Lord's call and to act as faithful interpreters of His plan. This happens when the family is generously open to new lives, and when couples maintain an attitude of openness and service to life, even if, for serious reasons and in respect for the moral law, they choose to avoid a new birth for the time being or indefinitely..."⁸
- "The moral law obliges them in every case to control the impulse of instinct and passion, and to respect the biological laws inscribed in their person. It is precisely this respect which

makes legitimate, at the service of responsible procreation, the use of natural methods of regulating fertility. From the scientific point of view, these methods are becoming more and more accurate and make it possible in practice to make choices in harmony with moral values. An honest appraisal of their effectiveness should dispel certain prejudices which are still widely held, and should convince married couples, as well as health care and social workers, of the importance of training in this area."⁹

What is so profound about work related to natural procreative education is its ability to reach to the very foundation of the origins of human life and the cooperation which exists between spouses and the Supreme Creator in that physical action. In human procreation, the spouses come together in a way which physically touches God. The spouses provide the biological material upon which a new child is created but they touch God as God infuses the eternal soul into that new human creation and **together create a human person with inherent dignity and eternal life.** The profoundness of this action of human procreation and our ability to perceive it and understand it gives us a full meaning to the very concept of the sacredness of human life.

In addition, by having an understanding of the natural procreative phases, one can better be of assistance to women in ways fully respectful of their human dignity. In fact, as natural family planning has grown and developed over the last several years, it has earned a place very specifically in the medical care of women which is effective and safe. This broadens the ability of natural family planning to be used not only to avoid pregnancy but also in a variety of other reproductive health care situations such as infertility, repetitive miscarriage and a variety of gynecological illnesses. Indeed, the new reproductive science of **NaProTechnology** allows us to provide a full range of Catholic Reproductive Health Services which are both morally and professionally acceptable, as well as generally more effective than the artificial reproductive technologies. It is not something that we need to be apologetic about but rather something that we need to learn more about, understand better and then proclaim properly in ways which will allow people to better understand the Church's concerns in these areas.

His Holiness points out to us that "In transforming culture so

that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a 'new feminism' which rejects the temptation of imitating models of 'male domination' in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation."¹⁰

The natural family planning movement is well underway. The scientific foundations of the natural methods are well established although certainly more will be learned. Empirical evidence still needs to be gathered relative to the positive changes in the psychodynamics of relationships and the building of strong marriages and healthy families. Service programs need to be expanded to reach the people in all corners of the world. Natural family planning, it can be argued, is at the very foundation of this "new feminism." And this is at the very foundation of the culture of life.

It is a truth that can no longer be ignored!

REFERENCES

1. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, Encyclical Letter, (25 March 1995), paragraphs 13, 23,24.
2. Ibid, p. 24.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, paragraph 23, 41-42.
5. Ibid, paragraph 88, 156.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid, paragraph 97, 172.
8. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 172-173.

10. Ibid., paragraph 99, 176.