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Chastity, A Facilitator in Natural Family Planning

Rev. Joseph E. Hogan, C.M., Ph.D.

Father Hogan comments, regarding this article, that "the thrust is more on formation than information in the matter of natural family planning. To some extent, it has been suggested by my reading of Familiaris Consortio and also the importance of the lived experience of married couples both before and after their nuptials that the virtue of chastity provides. I have found over the years — and this is a given — that to convert someone to anything, it is most important that they be convertible. This service of making people disposed toward the techniques and methodologies of natural family planning is most effectively provided by the acquisition of the virtue of chastity."

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The function of a facilitator is to accomplish difficult tasks pleasantly, easily and accurately. This expertise is acquired after considerable effort and exposure to various situations. In a certain sense, this quality may be called a virtue, that is, a good habit which is directed to the performance of human activities.

Chastity is listed as part of the moral virtue of temperance, and the possessors of this quality are called virtuous. In its widest acceptance, virtuous persons possess and exhibit a certain forcefulness or strength of action, a vigorous use of their talents and resources in a properly ordered pattern of behavior. What is quite noticeable and appealing about this style of behavior is that it appears effortless and enjoyable. We often hear the remark, "they make it seem so easy" in reference to the performance of a trained athlete, a skilled musician, or a seasoned actor!

A similar facility is communicated to us by the virtue of chastity in the area of human sexuality. In this area, chastity not only moderates

our desire for sexual pleasure according to the principles of faith and right reason, but also enables us to respond in a positive way to true love. It neither disdains the sexual nor makes an absolute of it. However, it does insist on a reverential response to human sexuality in ourselves and in other persons. Just as sex is the messenger of human love, so our reverent attitude in the treatment of this messenger attests to the source of true love — the community of love known as Trinity. Nowhere is this loving union of the three divine persons in the Trinity more vividly portrayed than in the bond of sacramental marriage. There man and wife, joined in the act of conjugal love, may bring forth another child made to the image and likeness of God. Now as father and mother they participate in the creative activity of birth; they share in the divine life of the sacrament and their chaste love integrates both the unitive and the procreative purposes of this loving union.

As an operative virtue, chastity is neither a “holy ignorance” nor a “sexual initiation” into the so-called structural and functional facts of life. Furthermore, it is not a “laundry list” of sins against chastity, but a thoughtful and sensitive awareness of its demands and disciplines is necessary.

At this point there is an important transfer value to its enabling force to natural family planning. Although it is not my purpose to concentrate on the past history of this program in responsible parenting, yet, without doubt such a program must be seen predominantly as an asset to conjugal love and family life — and not simply as another method of birth control. We are aware of the tremendous strides made in discovering ways of working with nature and still preserving the twofold character of each act of conjugal love — from the days of the rhythm method to the various methods listed by referral centers. Moreover, we are greatly indebted to and appreciative of the apostolic zeal of trained couples, as well as that of doctors, counselors and many priests and religious who have made these techniques available to married couples who react favorably and enthusiastically to such support groups.

Knowledge Should Lead to Self-Control

However, this knowledge of methods, vital and efficient as it is, should lead to self-control. Enter again the facilitator — the virtue of chastity. Pope John Paul II says on this point: “In the Christian view, chastity by no means signifies rejection of human sexuality or the lack of esteem for it; rather it signifies spiritual energy capable of defending love from the perils of selfishness and aggressiveness, and able to advance it toward its full realization” (*On the Family*, no. 33). In that same section he observes how his predecessor, Pope Paul VI, with wise

and loving intuition voiced the experience of many married couples when he wrote in *Humanae Vitae*:

To dominate instinct by means of one's reason and free will undoubtedly require ascetical practices, so that the affective manifestations of conjugal life may observe the correct order, in particular with regard to the observance of periodic continence. Yet with this discipline which is proper to the purity of married couples, far from harming conjugal love, rather confers on it a higher human value. It demands continual effort, yet thanks to its beneficent influence husband and wife fully develop their personalities, being enriched with spiritual values. Such discipline bestows upon family life fruits of serenity and peace, and facilitates the solution of other problems; it favors attention for one's partner, helps both parties to drive out selfishness, the enemy of true love, and deepens their sense of responsibility by deeper and more efficacious influence on the education of their offspring (no. 21).

In my judgment, these two statements encapsulate the inner strength of natural family planning. As I indicated above, it is not simply a method of birth control, but the adaptation of a new lifestyle in which married couples witness to the Christian perspectives and values of conjugal love. It is a growth process in which each couple, little by little, perfects their love for one another and deepens their married life in Christ. Gradually, the negative aspects of periodic continence give way to an awareness that the loving relationship is enhanced by self-control rather than weakened. It is refreshing to listen to and read about couples who liken this period of restraint to their days of courtship and engagement, or how it opened up for them new avenues of displaying tenderness and affection for each other, or how they looked forward to the resumption of intercourse as a "real honeymoon" every month.

One cannot avoid being impressed when the practitioners of this method assert that it becomes a positive means of increasing communication in marriage. Since both must become aware of the woman's fertility cycle and share equally in the responsibility for this fertility, the woman no longer becomes a "sex object." She almost always expresses a joy-filled sense of liberation since now the responsibility is not hers as it had been in the past days, weeks, months and years of contraceptive practices. It is still a vivid memory of mine when I recall past workshops on natural family planning and the tremendous expressions of relief uttered by married women who had used varied assortments of artificial methods of contraception for long periods of time. They rejoiced not only in their new-found peace of conscience, but also in the relief that they were now freed from the chemical and mechanical assaults on their bodies.

With this reaction against contraceptive technologies, couples found a new confidence and control in learning more about their own and their partners' needs and inclinations. I submit the following response of a couple to the claim that the time of a woman's greatest desire is

during the fertile time and that it is unusually difficult for her to abstain during that time:

The mystery of a woman's sexual desire is that it is more closely bound to conditions of mutual affection than a man's is. . . . His tenderness to her with physical signs and gestures, which accompany his verbal appreciation of what she has been to him, opens her heart to him and her body like a flower, replete with all the richness of a woman's spirit and her physical being. We would not believe it initially but our experience has time and again proved that the physical desire of a wife, when aroused from spiritual and emotional causes, results in a richness of her inner being, through characteristic reactions, far greater than any peak of the biological mucus symptom can foster. . . . A woman in love desires her husband always (*International Review of Natural Family Planning*, IV, 1, Spring, 1980, p. 41).

In addition to this self-growth between the partners there is an escalation of their understanding of responsible parenthood. It is much more than the narrowed scope of coition, fertilization, implantation, pregnancy and finally the delivery of a living child. The planning of a family does not begin with intercourse and end with the birth of a child. It extends far beyond the delivery of the child to the nurturing, educating and supporting of that child physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually to the point where the child, now become an adult, can carry on his or her own cycle of responsible parenthood. As we are all so aware this is not being accomplished too successfully in the only natural community structured for this purpose — the family. However, the chances for children maturing in the full sense of this term are greatly enhanced by a home life aglow with the true meaning of life and love, the importance of values and interpersonal relationships, and the security instilled in them by their lived experience of parental concern and commitment to each other and to them.

Perhaps I may appear to have overextended the role of chastity. In my judgment, however, the virtue of chastity within the perspective of Christian marriage enables all the members of that familial community to find fulfillment in each other and in Christ. This is a legitimate extension of the virtue of chastity beyond the genital, but to the truly sexual needs and inclinations of human beings. I am referring to the manifestation of filial love and affection between parents and their children; the expressions of love and affection among brothers and sisters; the demonstration of affection and warmth which relates to friendship — to the whole task of growing up in a world of men and women — “male and female he created them” (Gn. 1:27).

What a wonderful way for children to be formed in chastity — by the chaste love of the father and mother for each other, “since in chaste love, the Christian, whether his vocation be to marriage or to celibacy, expresses love for God Himself” (*Human Life in Our Day*, no. 9).