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## President's Page: NFP, Sex, and Children

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## President's Page



### *NFP, Sex, and Children*

Yesterday a grieving mother returned to my office. Because of ruptured membranes at 28 weeks of pregnancy I had referred her to a tertiary hospital. She carried her baby through four more anxiety-filled weeks, then underwent a Caesarean section because of bleeding. Her baby had lethal congenital anomalies and died eight hours later. Now, in the depths of her grief, she asked me, "How long will it be before I begin to feel better?" Fully recovered physically, she still felt crushed under the weight of her loss.

I tried to explain to her that the grieving process takes time, that her sense of loss would wax and wane over months and years, but that it would gradually become less painful. "You know," I said, "the baby you have lost is irreplaceable; I don't mean to suggest otherwise. But many women are helped through their grieving process if they have another baby soon. It's not so much to replace the baby you have lost, but to demonstrate, as only a new baby can, that life goes on, and that life is good. There is no reason why you cannot go ahead and become pregnant again now."

She hesitated a moment and then said, almost apologetically, "When they did the Caesarean, they tied my tubes."

I was stunned, and again expressing sympathy at her loss, I mentioned the limited possibility of reversing the sterilization, if she should ever want to try that. After she left, I felt a rising anger at the surgeon who had taken advantage of her vulnerability to obtain her consent in a time of crisis and who had deprived her of perhaps the greatest comfort she could have had in her time of grief. I was also angry at the society that takes for granted a mutilating operation which destroys the human procreative power, a fundament of marriage and in some sense the most divine of all human faculties.

## When to Use NFP

The above anecdote is far from unique. We are engaged in a great battle to preserve Western civilization for Christianity. Part of this battle is the struggle to make natural means of family planning available to those couples who need them. There is no longer any question of the efficacy of the natural methods. The question of *how* to use them has been adequately answered, and that answer needs only to be disseminated more widely. The question of *why* to use them in preference to contraception and sterilization is being answered with increasingly greater clarity and cogency. An example is found in the February, 1986 issue of the *Linacre*, in the magnificent lead article, "The Excellence of Chastity and Its Importance for NFP," by Rev. Ronald Lawlor, O.F.M. Cap. There is a further question, however, which, in our enthusiasm for the superiority of NFP over contraception, we sometimes neglect. That question is *when* to practice NFP.

Fr. Lawlor states, in elaborating on *Familiaris Consortio*, that "it is unrealistic in the world today to present the Church's splendid teachings on chaste self-possession if we do not also teach NFP." I agree. Later, however, Fr. Lawlor states, again in explanation of Pope John Paul's teaching, that "for most people today, because of economic and other considerations, it is necessary to have effective family planning of some kind." This statement, I believe, goes beyond the Pope's teaching that "every effort must be made to render such knowledge (of the bodily aspect and the body's rhythms of fertility) **accessible** to all married people and also to young adults before marriage . . ." (Emphasis added.)

It seems to me that, in our battle for chastity and against the deeply rooted contraceptive mentality of our society, we must not merely make NFP available as an alternative way to avoid children, but we must also question the underlying assumption of our materialistic society that it is routinely "necessary to have effective family planning of some kind."

A third alternative to contraception or NFP is accepting all the children God deigns to bestow, without conscious planning. It is unfortunate, in my opinion, that this option is seldom considered to be realistic. I believe, moreover, that this third alternative is preferred by the Church, is most conducive to marital stability and happiness, and should be considered the norm.

Pope Pius XII taught, and his successors have reaffirmed, that making use of the natural infertile periods while abstaining during the fertile times is allowable for grave reasons. This teaching has been extended by some, first to saying that NFP is *always* allowable, then that it is sometimes preferable, then that it should be practiced by every married couple, and finally that it should be a way of life for every woman, married or single, from menarche to menopause. These extrapolations of the Church's teaching are, I believe, untenable.

The Church stresses the value of children and the attitude of *openness*

to life which should characterize every marriage. The avoidance of children, even by licit means, is an exception to this norm. Therefore, the dissemination of information about NFP should not be an end in itself, but as a part of the work of evangelization, should be imbued with the fullness of the Church's teachings on family life, including the limitations on the use of NFP, and should especially emphasize the value of children. Unfortunately, this emphasis is sometimes lacking.

### **Nature Deceived**

*Fidelity*, a Catholic monthly devoted to the family, has recently run a series of articles and letters on whether or not NFP is appropriate for couples just beginning their marriages. One writer, who advises couples to avoid children for the first year or two of marriage, writes in a wistful, nostalgic way of the large Catholic families of the past, as if they were strange phenomena of an alien era, in no way a realistic model for today's families. In one sense, this impression has some truth to it. There was indeed a flaw in many of the large families of a generation ago, a flaw which has contributed to today's fear of children.

This flaw was the unnaturally short spacing between children caused by the failure to nourish infants according to God's plan, that is, to breastfeed until the baby achieved nutritional and emotional independence. The baby bottle and the jar of baby food, freeing mothers from the purportedly burdensome task of breastfeeding, severed the hormonal bonds between mother and infant, restored fertility long before normal, and in effect rendered women physiologically equivalent to the bereaved mother of a dead baby. God's natural mechanism, thus deceived, presented the apparently bereaved mother with exactly what she seemed to need most, but in fact needed least, another baby.

As this cycle repeated itself year after year, mothers were faced with a houseful of preschool children, each emotionally undernourished from early displacement from his mother's exclusive care, each slightly more a stranger from the mother than if he had enjoyed the prolonged bonding of the lactation period, and each resentful of the subsequent sibling who prematurely usurped his rightful place in his mother's arms.

It is a major miracle of God's grace and their own heroic virtue that more of the mothers of that generation did not end up in divorce courts, in mental hospitals, or on tramp steamers bound for Tahiti. However, some of these mothers could not help communicating to their children the feeling that motherhood is marked by tedium, frustration, and thankless exhaustion, relieved only by occasional evenings out or even vacations without the children. Nature's carrot and stick method of moral training, whereby naturally good acts are rewarded with material gain or emotional satisfaction, had been short-circuited. Instead of being rewarded with an abundance of maternal joy for their openness to life, women who experienced the rapid-fire superfertility associated with artificial infant

feeding received only more and more challenge with less and less reward.

It was inevitable that something had to give, and it has. The undervaluing of children in a purely earthly sense (that is, the lack of recognition of the natural joy they bring into a family), which was caused by their superabundance, has now, in this generation, led to their scarcity. Many young families are discouraged more strongly by their own parents than by anyone else from having more children. What a tragic rupture of the natural generational bond, in which mothers should be the chief exemplars, boosters and coaches for their daughters' confrontation with the responsibilities of womanhood! Those grandmothers who continue to encourage their daughters to commit themselves to family life are a marvel of human resiliency and a testimony to grace and virtue. Sadly, they seem to be the exception to the rule.

Thus, a prevalent flaw in the Catholic family life a generation ago has led not to the correction of the flaw in this generation, but to an even more serious defect. The artificially close spacing and the extremely large families of the last generation have been replaced only exceptionally by natural spacing and moderately large families in this generation. More often, the present generation is marked by a fear of children, by artificially small families, and by, as Samuel Blumenfeld calls it, the flight from motherhood.

### **Asceticism in Marriage**

It is in this context that some proponents of NFP advise newly married couples to avoid pregnancy for the first year or two of marriage. One writer argues in *Fidelity* that NFP is good training in asceticism. Then, if a couple should find it necessary to avoid pregnancy later, they will not have acquired a habit of self-indulgence which would prevent them from abstaining when necessary. This argument has several flaws. One is that it ignores or, even worse, implicitly denigrates the ardor of the newly married couple, an ardor which results in more frequent expressions of love in the marital act. It would be a serious mistake to equate the inevitable cooling of this ardor in later years with the acquisition of virtue and an equally serious mistake to see the presence of this ardor in the newly married as a sign of vice.

Furthermore, arguing for NFP as an ascetic practice ignores the fact that the couple whose marriage is always open to children and who express their love without conscious deference to the ovulatory cycle have many occasions to practice abstinence. The couple with a large family may even practice more abstinence than the couple who avoid children with periodic abstinence. Parenting is a demanding life. Both spouses are frequently tired. The marital bed is often the family bed, with one or more little ones tucked in between the parents. Children get sick; parents get sick; the alarm clock is always just about to ring. It is naive to think that a couple with children are free to express their love through the marital act

whenever the mood strikes. More often, the only possible expression of love is a sleepily mumbled, "Good night, honey."

In addition, the attitude that NFP is a good ascetic practice for newly married couples betrays a deeply negative attitude towards the marital act. The marital act is not essentially an act of self-indulgence. It may be the act which among all human acts is most divine. "God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them." The juxtaposition of "the image of God" and "male and female" is not accidental. The comparisons of the spousal relationship to the mutual love of the three Divine Persons and to Christ's love for His Church are recurrent themes in scripture, Magisterial teaching and theology.

Furthermore, the marital act is a sacramental act. That is, it is not merely a sign of the unity in one flesh of husband and wife; it is an effective sign of that unity. St. Paul writes that, when a man goes to a prostitute, he becomes one flesh with her. Such a union is, of course, fatally flawed, but it forms, nevertheless, an intimate, permanent, and personal relationship.

Marriage is rooted in love, the self-sacrificing love of total mutual self-giving. Essential to this love are both the marriage vow, by which the partners pledge themselves to a permanent, exclusive, fecund union, and the consummation of that union. The vow and the consummation are equally necessary. If either is lacking, there is no marriage. Each is an essential component of the communication of self which effects the bond of love.

Just as words have meaning, the marital act has its own meaning, independent of the intention of the person who performs it. The person who says, "I love you," when he does not love, is a liar. The person who has sexual intercourse outside the permanent, exclusive, fecund union of marriage is no less a liar, even if he is verbally honest and, for example, denies that he wants "to get involved." His act speaks for itself. This is why there are so many broken hearts among the sexually "liberated."

This is also why contraception is wrong. The marital act says, "I give you myself totally, permanently, exclusively, including my fecundity." It *cannot* say, "I give you myself, but I withhold my fecundity." Thus, even spouses who mutually agree to use contraception are lying to each other.

But the union of spouses in marriage is not perfected by a single vow and a single consummation. Marriage is a lifetime of intimate communication, of continual self-revealing and self-giving and of being nourished by the self-revealing and self-giving of one's spouse. This ongoing process requires frequent renewal of both the verbal commitment, the words "I love you," and of the marital act which, like the words, continues both to symbolize and to effect the commitment of love.

This is not to say that the marital act is always available to the spouses. Even sitting down for a serious talk is often a luxury for which parents must carefully set aside a few brief, infrequent moments. There is no doubt that an attitude of self-denial must characterize every marriage. Each spouse should make himself available to the other, while neither

should demand intercourse from the other. But abstaining from either the word or the act from *necessity* is very different from abstaining from either by *plan*. The latter would seem to require more serious justification. And abstaining from either the word or the act must be recognized as the deprivation of a good, not as a good in itself.

As serious as it is, however, the deprivation from the marital act is not the most serious deprivation of NFP. Far more serious is the deprivation from children. Here is a deprivation so severe that I do not believe it is an exaggeration to compare it to the amputation of a limb, another material evil which is allowable only for a proportionate reason, that is, to avoid a greater evil. Such an evil might be death, for example, or grave illness. It seems to me that to recommend planned abstinence for the avoidance of children to a newly married couple as an ascetic practice is almost like recommending self-mutilation as an ascetic practice. Both are perversions of healthy asceticism. If an engaged couple has a reason grave enough to practice NFP, it might be better for them to postpone marriage.

### **“Blessed Is the Womb . . .”**

Proponents of NFP resent the implication that some users may be infected with a “contraceptive mentality.” It is unfair, they say, to accuse someone of a contraceptive mentality when he is not using contraceptives. Fair enough, but how many of us have completely escaped the “anti-child mentality” of our age? Even if we do not share it, might we take a bit more lightly than we ought? In this age of horrors, this age of abortion, pornography, perversion, and promiscuity, it is hard to be shocked by almost anything. Have we perhaps allowed a little of the anti-child mentality to rub off on us? Do we share in the biblical attitude of unalloyed delight in children? Do we really accept them as God’s fondest blessing? Do we understand in our hearts and in our bones that a destitute family with eight children is infinitely richer than a couple with two cars, two careers, and no children? Are our priorities straight when we agree with a young couple who chooses a house in the suburbs or private schooling in place of another child?

Christ’s hearers must have been shocked when He foretold an age when it would be said, “Blessed is the womb which never bore; blessed are the breasts which never nursed.” Are we shocked when we realize that that age is upon us?

To advise a newly married couple to avoid children, even temporarily, is to steer them toward the joyless, fruitless, self-negating pleasures of materialism and away from the fullness of their vocation from God. Generosity in the service of life is a far more healthy and more truly ascetic way of life than the flight from parenthood, which is a participation in the collective suicide of a society lost in materialistic despair.

### **Sowing Bitter Fruit**

Perhaps the cruelest hoax perpetrated on young couples is the

assumption that fertility can be taken for granted. There are few tragedies of family life as heart-breaking as the unfulfilled desire to have children. Fertility cannot be assumed to be readily available from menarche to menopause. As many as one of every seven couples is totally sterile, even in the absence of the Pill, abortion, and venereal disease. In the presence of those factors, sterility may affect one in every four or five couples. Among the remaining couples, a significant proportion are hypofertile and may achieve only one or two pregnancies. Furthermore, about one in every four or five pregnancies ends in miscarriage. For some women, about fifty per cent of pregnancies miscarry, and for a few, all pregnancies miscarry.

Fertility is highest in the late teens and early twenties and gradually declines through the late twenties and the thirties. Even if one believed that limiting family size were a good idea, limitation should not begin until the desired number of children are born. Advising couples to avoid pregnancy in the first year or two of marriage may very well deprive them of their only chance ever to have children. One who gives such advice is sowing bitter fruit. Unfortunatley its bitterness will be tasted not by him but by those who heed his advice.

### **"The Most Natural Family Planning of All"**

But hope for wholesome Catholic family life is not lost, even in the contemporary United States. There is a small sub-culture, a remnant, in which the norms of nature in family life are respected. With a wholesome attitude toward pregnancy and childbirth, often based not on religious belief but on personal experience of the rewards of unmedicated, family-centered childbirth and complete, prolonged breastfeeding, this remnant continues to have all the children God sends them. (Because of child-spacing through lactation, this may be only a half-dozen, more or less.) The women of these families embrace motherhood with joy, even with relish, not merely from a sense of moral duty, but because of its manifest rewards.

It is these families who should be sought out by parochial and diocesan officials to be the teachers and exemplars of young engaged and married couples. It is these families who will be able to communicate the deep joys of openness to life and the rich fruits of sacrificing material advantage for the sake of a large family. It is these families who should be encouraged in their commitment by Catholic physicians.

NFP is indeed a great blessing for those families who truly need it. It deserves our most vigorous efforts to make it accessible to all who need it. It can be a way out of the hopeless, joyless trap of hedonistic, mechanical sex. It can be a stepping stone to a rediscovery of the goodness of self and the ineffable gift of one's spouse. But if couples stop at the rediscovery of themselves and each other, if they do not take the final step of allowing their love to overflow with the shared creative power of God, if they draw back from having children, then their liberation is incomplete, and their



joy will never be as full as it might be.

Let us be promoters, then, not merely of "NFP" but of what Daria Sockey calls "the most natural family planning of all," that is, with trust in God's providence, and with the help of child-spacing through breastfeeding, just naturally planning to have a family.

— William G. White, M.D.

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### ***Are You Moving?***

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