

The Role of Natural Family Planning in Marriage
By Michelle Davis, BSc, MDiv, CCBI Researcher

According to the Catholic Church the purpose of marriage is for the procreation and education of children and for the mutual support of the couple. Further, the Church's teaching on procreation and the regulation of births is that Natural Family Planning (NFP) is morally acceptable. NFP maintains the inseparability of the unitive and procreative aspects of the marital act, and is the only method of birth regulation which can do so. In order to understand the inseparability of these aspects a look at Church teaching will be helpful.

Pope Pius XII

In his "Allocution to Midwives on the Nature of Their Profession", Pope Pius XII reaffirmed the teachings of Pius XI that the ends of marriage consist of the procreation and education of children and the mutual support of the couple. Pius XII quoted from *Casti Connubii*, stating that "every attempt of either husband or wife in the performance of the conjugal act or in the development of its natural consequences which aims at depriving it of its inherent force and hinders the procreation of new life is immoral."¹ Therefore contraception is morally wrong.

Pius XII said that married couples could make use of periods of natural sterility in which to express their mutual love. They must observe "periodic continence", or abstinence, during fertile times, but they must have "serious reasons" for doing so. He wrote that "[T]o embrace the matrimonial state, to use continually the faculty proper to such a state and lawful only therein, and at the same time, to avoid its primary duty without a grave reason, would be a sin against the very nature of married life."² For Pius XII, serious reasons included: medical, eugenic, economic and social indications.³ Restricting the marital act to periods of natural sterility without serious reason would also be morally wrong.

The Second Vatican Council

The Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), confirmed that God is the author of marriage and it is an institution in which a man and woman "mutually surrender themselves to each other; for the good of the partners and of the children" that may be born.⁴

Furthermore, it stated that "marriage and married love are by nature ordered to the procreation and education of children"⁵ and that "married couples should regard it as their mission to transmit human life and to educate their children; they should realize that they are thereby cooperating with the love of God the Creator and are, in a certain sense, its interpreters."⁶

The Council recognized that, ultimately, it will be the decision of the married couple as to the number of children they will welcome. This decision is to be made with an informed conscience, one which "ought to be conformed to the law of God in the light of the teaching authority of the Church."⁷ In regulating births, couples must not use any means that are disapproved of by the Church such as contraception, sterilization and abortion.

The Council also stressed that marriage is not only for the procreation of children, but also for mutual love of the partners. The marital act is both unitive and procreative as God intended, and therefore these aspects cannot be separated.

Pope Paul VI and *Humanae Vitae*

In 1968, Pope Paul VI wrote the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (Of Human Life) which addressed the issue of regulation of birth, reaffirming the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Paul VI spoke about marriage, responsible parenthood, the meaning of the unitive and procreative aspects of the marital act, and the use of periods of infertility in regulating births. The term "responsible parenthood"

and the development of its meaning were introduced by Paul VI in this encyclical, following the teaching of the Council on the role of the married couple.

Marriage is an act of free will, a special form of personal friendship in which a man and a woman give themselves to each other, totally and exclusively, until death. The husband and wife “generously share everything, without undue reservations or selfish calculations. Whoever truly loves his marriage partner loves not only what he receives, but for the partner’s self, rejoicing that he can enrich his partner with the gift of himself.”⁸ This concept of total self-giving is important, and was also stressed in the writings of Pope John Paul II.

Responsible parenthood encompasses the understanding of the biological aspects of reproduction, the mastery over instinct or passion by the use of reason and free will, and takes into consideration the physical, economic, psychological and social conditions of the couple and their children. Paul VI stated that “responsible parenthood is exercised either by the deliberate and generous decision to raise a numerous family, or by the decision, made for grave motives and with due respect for the moral law, to avoid for the time being, or even for an indeterminate period, a new birth.”⁹

Furthermore, Paul VI stated, “The responsible exercise of parenthood implies, therefore, that husband and wife recognize fully their duties, towards God, towards themselves, towards the family and towards society, in a correct hierarchy of values.”¹⁰ By using the natural periods of infertility a couple respects the unitive and procreative aspects of the marital act.

The Church teaches that the two meanings of the marital act (unitive and procreative) are willed by God, and human beings have no authority to break this inseparable connection. Paul VI stated, “By safeguarding both these essential aspects, the unitive and procreative, the conjugal act preserves in its fullness the sense of true mutual love and its ordination towards man’s most high calling to parenthood.”¹¹

Paul VI reaffirmed previous Church teaching that the marital act must be open to new life. By separating these two aspects the true meaning of married love is distorted. The total self-giving of oneself to one’s spouse would be deprived of its true meaning. Separating these two aspects in any way contradicts the nature of both man and woman and contradicts God’s will.

Pope John Paul II

Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World), reaffirmed previous Church teaching and emphasized the meaning of total self-giving. In his exhortation, John Paul II said that all people have a vocation to love and that “Love includes the human body, and the body is made a sharer in spiritual love.”¹² The vocation to love can be realized through marriage, virginity or celibacy.

In marriage this total self-giving has a physical reality which includes fertility. John Paul II stated that conjugal love makes the couple “capable of the greatest possible gift, the gift by which they become cooperators with God for giving life to a new human person.”¹³ Further on, he wrote, “Fecundity is the fruit and the sign of conjugal love, the living testimony of the full reciprocal self-giving of the spouses.”¹⁴ John Paul II acknowledged that married love is not just for the begetting of children, but also for the mutual love and support of the couple. He wanted to stress that total self-giving is multifaceted and all encompassing.

John Paul II believed that contraception manipulates and degrades human sexuality and it contradicts total self-giving love.¹⁵ When using contraception, the couple is not open to new life. This, as the Pope stated, is “a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality.”¹⁶ The Pope endorsed Church teaching on the use of natural rhythms to regulate births, since, in this way, the unitive and procreative aspects of conjugal love are not separated. Periods of infertility can be used to express other forms of mutual love and support. During fertile times, if children cannot be welcomed, continence is

required. The Pope stressed the necessity of self control, telling us that conjugal chastity enriches the life of the married couple by promoting communication, tenderness and affection.

Before he became pope, Karol Wojtyla wrote *Love and Responsibility*, in which he emphasized the inseparability of the unitive and procreative aspects of the marital act. John Paul II believed that in the sexual relationship between a man and a woman two orders are met: the order of nature and the personal order. He stated that the order of nature has reproduction as its object. The personal order finds its expression in the love of persons, and aims at the fullest realization of that love.¹⁷ These two orders are interdependent and cannot be separated. John Paul II pointed out that sexual intercourse is “not just a union of persons, a reciprocal relationship between a man and a woman, but is essentially a union of persons affected by the possibility of procreation.”¹⁸

For married love to have its full meaning there must be a conscious acceptance of the possibility of parenthood. When the possibility of parenthood is completely excluded from the relationship, there is a danger that “there will be nothing left except ‘utilization for pleasure’, of which the object will be a person.”¹⁹ In stating this John Paul II is not saying that every marital act must be for procreation. It is sufficient for a couple to acknowledge that, by engaging in the marital act, they may become parents and are willing to accept this possibility.

John Paul II saw that periodic continence, although sometimes difficult, would be beneficial to the couple if it were seen as a virtue. Continence as a virtue is closely connected with love of the person, and can affirm the value of the person. This, in turn, can have positive effects on the relationship of the husband and wife.

Benefits of NFP

According to Church teaching, Natural Family Planning is a morally acceptable way for a married couple to regulate the size of their family, since it respects the unitive and procreative aspects of the marital act. Beyond that, does it have any other

benefits? Practitioners of NFP recognize several benefits, including practical ones and those which benefit their relationship as spouses.

Couples who use NFP believe it helps to promote communication, mutual appreciation, and spiritual growth, as individuals and as a couple. NFP is very effective in regulating births (99% if used correctly²⁰), is inexpensive, as there is little or no cost beyond start up materials, and is easy to learn and use. There are no harmful, physical side effects for either spouse, and it can also help couples achieve pregnancy through awareness of the signs of fertility.

Catherine Bolger, a Toronto woman well known for her support of the fullness of Catholic teaching on sexuality and marriage, and a long-time promoter of NFP, wrote an unpublished manuscript on what she saw as the benefits of NFP.²¹ Her purpose in writing this work was to incorporate insights from the fields of medicine, psychology, theology and philosophy in the area of marriage and human sexuality, bearing out her thesis that NFP, if used correctly and for the right reasons, could have many benefits. She saw its practical benefits: that it is effective, cost efficient, and has no side effects.

In reverse, NFP can actually help a couple conceive once they are able to recognize fertile times. Many couples today have difficulty conceiving and, by understanding NFP, it may help them to conceive the child they wish to welcome into their family.

Catherine Bolger’s insights included recognizing that communication between couples would improve, since decisions about family size and how to achieve that have to be equally shared, with equal responsibility for applying the method. She observed that open communication in this area would lead to better communication in other areas of the marriage. She also felt NFP promotes deep respect and dignity of one’s spouse. She believed spiritual benefits could also be derived when periodic continence was practised. For Catherine Bolger, NFP is not just a method but a way of life that includes the physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the married couple.

Julie Hanlon Rubio, assistant professor of moral theology at Saint Louis University, more recently has pointed out many of the benefits of NFP already mentioned by Catherine Bolger. She observes that NFP enhances the sexual relationship, promotes shared responsibility, and benefits the couple spiritually.

NFP enhances the sexual relationship since, as Rubio sees it, each cycle can be viewed as a courtship and honeymoon phase which keeps the relationship interesting. During fertile times, when continence is required to avoid a pregnancy, the couple needs to find other ways to communicate and express their love. NFP requires the active participation of both the husband and wife and therefore the decision to increase their family is a shared one.

Couples who use NFP see openness to procreation as openness to God and the Divine will. NFP couples believe that their practice leads to a deeper willingness to sacrifice, which can lead to greater

intimacy and spiritual growth. These couples place total self-giving at the centre of their lives. Rubio notes that those who accept fertility accept the whole person. This allows for a total oneness, and this one flesh union embodies the Triune God.²²

The Catholic Church recognizes the benefits of NFP and promotes its use to all married couples. All marriage preparation courses in the Catholic Church are to include information about NFP and its benefits.

July 25, 2008 will mark the fortieth anniversary of the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Past anniversaries of *Humanae Vitae* stirred up the debate over NFP and contraception. Perhaps this anniversary should be seen as an opportunity for education on NFP, giving us a chance to focus on its benefits for enriching the lives of married couples.

¹ Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* (December 31, 1930) quoted in Pius XII, "Allocution to Midwives on the Nature of Their Profession." (October 29, 1951), par. #21.

<http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldocs/p511029.htm>.

Accessed on November 19, 2007.

² Pius XII, "Allocution to Midwives on the Nature of Their Profession." (October 29, 1951), par. #33.

<http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldocs/p511029.htm>.

Accessed on November 19, 2007.

³ *Ibid.*, par. #34.

⁴ Austin Flannery, ed. *Gaudium et Spes*, In *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1992), #48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, #50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, #50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, #50.

⁸ Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (Boston, MA: Daughters of St. Paul, 1968), #9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, #10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, #10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, #12.

¹² Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (Boston, MA: Daughters of St. Paul, 1981), #11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, #14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, #28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, #32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, #32.

¹⁷ Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willets (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 226.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

²⁰ The Couple to Couple League, *Advantages of NFP* <http://ccli.org/nfp/basics/advantages.php> Accessed on November 12, 2007.

²¹ Catherine Bolger, Unpublished Manuscript, on loan to CCBI

²² Julie Hanlon Rubio, "Beyond the Liberal/Conservative Divide on Contraception: The Wisdom of Practitioners of Natural Family Planning and Artificial Birth Control," *Horizons* 32 (2005): 289.

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416-926-2335 * bioethics.usmc@utoronto.ca

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