What does the Catholic Church really teach?
It is the belief of Christians that Jesus came to redeem us and to teach us the truth about love — God's love for each one of us and how we are to love each other. Jesus showed how fully love commits God to each one of us throughout our lives, how God loves and even pursues the sinner in order to embrace him again in the life of grace. “For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

Jesus sacrificed His life that we might share eternal life with him, and throughout the Gospel, Jesus teaches us that love is not always easy. He teaches that in married love man and wife are called to love each other until death. He shocked his listeners by declaring that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery (Mk 10:1-12), and at the Last Supper He gave us the new commandment, one that most of us find quite difficult: “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 13:35).

Yes. God really does love us and wants what is best for us. His commandments are commandments of Love. Keeping His commandments with a right heart gives us a peace and happiness that only God can give. On the other hand, Jesus promised not only eternal happiness to those who follow Him on the narrow way (Mt 7:14); He also promised a special peace and joy to those who really accept Him and his way. “He who seeks his life will lose it; he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Lk 9:24).

It is in the context of the full teaching of Jesus about discipleship and love that Christians must seek to understand the truth about married love that has been taught by Christ in and through his Church throughout the centuries. Thus, it is in the spirit of discipleship that Christians will review the questions of birth control and its related issues.

This pamphlet will emphasize the teaching of the Catholic Church for two reasons. First, the public media tend to identify opposition to unnatural forms of birth control with Catholicism. However, as will become clear, Catholic teaching on this matter was formerly held by all Protestant churches, and some Protestants still retain it. Second, because of the controversy over birth control, the Catholic Church has issued a number of statements which you can easily find. You can find further documentation in Chapters 16-19 of The Art of Natural Family Planning.
I. Catholic teaching about marriage and the regulation of births

What does the Catholic Church teach about marriage?

• **Marriage is a permanent relationship created by God and entered into by the free consent of man and woman.**
  
  “The intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws. It is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other, a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting one” (Gaudium et Spes, 48).

• **Marriage is a relationship of love and service.**
  
  “A man and a woman, who by the marriage covenant of conjugal love ‘are no longer two, but one flesh’ (Mt 19:6), render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions” (GS 48).

• **Christian marriage is a sacrament.**
  
  “Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state” (GS 48).

• **God created the relationship of marriage.**
  
  “God himself is the author of marriage. The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator. Marriage is not a purely human institution despite the many variations it may have undergone through the centuries in different cultures, social structures, and spiritual attitudes” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1603).

What does the Catholic Church teach about parenthood?

“Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents. The God Himself who said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone’ (Gen 2:18) and ‘who made man from the beginning male and female’ (Mt 19:4), wished to share with man a certain special participation in His own creative work. Thus He blessed male and female, saying: ‘Increase and multiply’ (Gen 1:28).

“Hence while not making the other purposes of matrimony of less account, the true practice of conjugal love, and the whole meaning of the family life
which results from it, have this aim: that the couple be ready with stout hearts to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Savior, who through them will enlarge and enrich His own family day by day.

“Parents should regard as their proper mission the task of transmitting human life and educating those to whom it has been transmitted. They should realize that they are thereby cooperators with the love of God and Creator, and are, so to speak, the interpreters of that love” (GS 50).

“… Conjugal love naturally tends to be fruitful. A child does not come from outside, as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfillment” (C 2366).

What is Responsible Parenthood?

“The responsible exercise of parenthood implies … that husband and wife recognize fully their own duties towards God, toward themselves, towards the family and towards society, in a correct hierarchy of values.

“In the task of transmitting life, therefore, they are not free to proceed completely at will, as if they could determine in a wholly autonomous way the honest path to follow; but they must conform their activity to the creative intention of God, expressed in the very nature of marriage and of its acts, and manifested by the constant teaching of the Church” (Humanae Vitae, 10).

“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 [first] when the family is generously open to new lives. [It also happens] 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.

“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” (Evangelium Vitae, 97).
Does the Church teach that a couple must have as many children as they physically can?

No. In decisions about family size, the married couple “will thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which may be foreseen. For this accounting they will reckon with both the material and the spiritual conditions of the times as well as of their state in life. Finally, they will consult the interests of the family group, of temporal society, and of the Church itself” (GS 50).

What does the Church teach about an ideal family size?

The Church has no specific teaching about an ideal family size. On the one hand, as indicated previously, couples may take many factors into consideration. On the other hand, there is a general Christian warning against decision-making based solely on materialistic factors. Life is a gift to be shared, and the Christian couple are called to be generous in the service of life according to their circumstances.

“Sacred Scripture and the Church’s traditional practice see in large families a sign of God’s blessing and the parents’ generosity” (C 2373).

Pope John Paul II has noted that “decisions about the number of children and the sacrifices to be made for them must not be taken only with a view of adding comfort and preserving a peaceful existence. Reflecting upon this matter before God, with the graces drawn from the Sacrament, and guided by the teaching of the Church, parents will remind themselves that it is certainly less serious to deny their children certain comforts or material advantages than to deprive them of the presence of brothers or sisters who could help them to grow in humanity and to realize the beauty of life at all ages and in all its variety.”

What does the Church teach about methods of birth control?

“When there is a question of harmonizing conjugal love with the responsible transmission of life, the moral aspect of any procedure does not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives. It must be determined by objective standards. These, based on the nature of the human person and his acts, preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love. Such a goal cannot be achieved unless the virtue of conjugal chastity is sincerely practiced. Relying on these principles, sons
of the Church may not undertake methods of regulating procreation which are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the Church in its unfolding of the divine law” (GS 51; see also C 2368).

**Does the Church teach that all unnatural methods of birth control are immoral?**

Yes. In *Humanae Vitae*, the first-named form of illicit or unnatural method of birth control is abortion (HV 14). This also includes devices and drugs that can cause very early abortions. Such devices and drugs obviously include the abortion drug, RU-486. They also include the IUD (intra-uterine device) and every form of hormonal birth control — the Pill, implants such as Norplant® and injections such as Depo-Provera®. No one can say precisely how often these birth control devices and drugs act this way, but there is no question that all of them can cause a very early abortion in any woman in any given cycle.

Then, “equally to be excluded, as the teaching authority of the Church has frequently declared, is direct sterilization, whether perpetual or temporary, whether of the man or woman” (HV 14). This condemns tubal ligations, vasectomies, and, again, hormonal birth control.

“Similarly excluded is every action which, either in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible” (HV 14). Such unnatural forms include the Pill and other forms of hormonal birth control, the IUD, foams, diaphragms, condoms, withdrawal, mutual or solitary masturbation and sodomic practices.

**What method of birth regulation is morally acceptable?**

Natural family planning.

**What is Natural Family Planning?**

There are two distinctly different kinds of natural family planning (NFP). One is ecological breastfeeding. The other involves fertility awareness and is called systematic NFP.

1. Ecological breastfeeding was designed by God Himself and has been with us since the beginning of the human race. The key to spacing babies with ecological breastfeeding is mother-baby togetherness and frequent unrestricted suckling. (See www.ccli.org for the Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding.) On
the average, American mothers who breastfeed in this way will go 14 to 15 months before their first postpartum menstruation.

2. Couples use fertility awareness both to achieve and to avoid pregnancy. “Periodic continence, that is, the methods of birth regulation based on self-observation and the use of infertile periods, is in conformity with the objective criteria of morality” (C 2370).

Is Natural Family Planning just another name for Catholic birth control?

No. The Church teaches that a couple need a sufficiently serious reason to postpone or avoid pregnancy in order to make the use of systematic NFP morally good. In Humanae Vitae, Pope Paul VI used these terms to describe the conditions for the moral use of NFP: “grave motives” (n. 10), “serious motives. . . reasons which appear to be honest and serious. . . plausible reasons, . . . [and] just motives” (n. 16).

The Catechism teaches: “A particular aspect of this responsibility concerns the regulation of births. For just reasons, spouses may wish to space the births of their children. It is their duty to make certain that their desire is not motivated by selfishness but is in conformity with the generosity appropriate to responsible parenthood. Moreover, they should conform their behavior to the objective criteria of morality” (C 2368).

Thus, the same teaching of the Church which condemns the use of the unnatural methods of birth control explicitly approves of the use of Natural Family Planning (NFP) when there is a sufficiently serious reason to avoid or postpone pregnancy. With its emphasis on the necessity of a serious reason to use even the natural methods, the Church is warning against the selfish use of NFP.

Since both the natural and the unnatural methods of birth control have the purpose of limiting family size, aren’t they morally the same?

Not at all. The end does not justify the means; a common purpose does not make morally equal all the possible means of achieving that purpose. “It is not licit, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil so that...
good may follow therefrom” (HV 14). A prime purpose of the Ten Commandments is to teach us that we may not act against our created human nature in pursuing some purpose or pleasure. Thus, we may not murder or steal or commit adultery to “advance” ourselves. The Church affirms that efforts at birth regulation “must be done with respect for the order established by God” (HV 16).

Why is the Catholic Church opposed to unnatural birth control?

The basic reason for the Church’s opposition to any sinful action is that such action is contrary to the nature God has given us. All sexual sin runs contrary to the way God calls us to love one another.

Jesus said about marriage, “Let no one take apart what God has put together” (Mk 10:9). This can also be applied to the act of sexual intercourse which has been called “the marriage act” for centuries of Christian history.

In the natural act of completed marital sexual inter-course, there is a symbolic unity of man and wife. However, in every form of unnatural birth control, there is a positive effort to destroy the procreative potential of the act that God has given us as a unique sign of married love.

Look at it this way. The marital embrace is meant by God to be a symbolic way in which a couple are called to renew, at least implicitly, their marriage covenant. As John Paul II has written, “In the conjugal act, husband and wife are called to confirm in a responsible way the mutual gift of self which they have made to each other in the marriage covenant.” In this bodily union, they are called to affirm anew their original promises of married love, to take each other for better and for worse, to be as one until death separates them.

On the other hand, the body language of contraception clearly says, “I take you for better but not for the imagined worse of possible parenthood.” Contraception contradicts the built-in meaning of the marriage act.

“Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to each other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality” (Familiaris Consortio, n. 32).
Is there a biblical basis for the Church’s teaching against contraception?

Yes. The 38th chapter of Genesis tells the story of Judah, his sons, and Tamar. One of the sons, Onan, practiced the sin of contraception — withdrawal in this case — with Tamar, and the Bible tells us that God slew him because he had done an abominable thing (Gen 38:10).

It is recognized today that Judah, Onan, and another brother were all guilty of violating an ancient Near Eastern brotherhood law called the Law of the Levirate. However, the punishment for violating that law was very mild and is spelled out in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. Judah himself admitted his guilt (Gen 38:26). It is therefore clear that the special punishment meted out to Onan was not just for the violation of the Levirate but rather for the way in which only he had sinned — his contraceptive behavior of going through the motions of the covenantal act and then “spilling his seed” (Gen 38:9).

This interpretation is backed up by the only incident in the New Testament where immediate death is the punishment for sin — the deaths of Ananias and Saphira who went through the motions of a giving act but defrauded it of its meaning (Acts 5:1-11).

The booklet Birth Control and Christian Discipleship provides more on this and related questions.

Does the Bible have anything to say about human love and sexuality?

Yes. There is simply no doubt that the entire biblical notion of human love points to the fact that man is called to subordinate “eros,” erotic love, to “agape,” self-giving love. While not referring specifically to the issue of birth control, St. Paul’s most famous discourse on love is still applicable to this discussion. It is noteworthy that he begins and ends on the two aspects of love that are needed for the happy practice of natural family planning. “Love is always patient and kind … it is always ready … to endure whatever comes” (1 Cor 13:4, 7).

On the night before his death, Christ told

Ecological breastfeeding requires lots of self-giving, and there is no question that the practice of natural family planning with its ... certain amount of sexual self-mastery fits well within the Christian biblical tradition.
all Christians to love one another as He loved them, a statement that has obvious overtones about self-giving love (Jn 15:12). Christian husbands are told to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her (Eph 5:25). St. Paul also tells his listeners that the fruits of the Spirit are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” He reminds them that they cannot really belong to Christ unless they “crucify all self-indulgent passions and desires” (Gal 5:22, 24).

Ecological breastfeeding requires lots of self-giving, and there is no question that the practice of natural family planning with its necessity of a certain amount of sexual self-mastery fits well within the Christian biblical tradition.

**Wouldn’t it be helpful if the Bible contained condemnations of contraception that are more explicit and more frequent?**

Not really. The lack of multiple references doesn’t disturb the person who has a sense of theological realism. Such a person is aware that the Bible could hardly be more explicit in its condemnation of homosexual behavior (e.g. Romans 1:26-32), but those who want to justify homosexual behavior simply dismiss the biblical texts as not relevant to today or interpret St. Paul to mean “promiscuous” sodomy although St. Paul makes no such distinctions. Even if the Bible were filled with explicit condemnations of abortion, sterilization, and contraception, the same approach would be used on such texts by those who wish to justify such behavior as compatible with biblical Christianity.

Thus it is the belief of the Roman Catholic faith that Jesus did not leave us with only a book subject to everyone’s personal and sometimes contradictory interpretations but first established his Church as an authoritative teacher guided by the Holy Spirit. The constant teaching by the Church on a matter of faith and morals is called Tradition.

**Do non-Christians have similar teachings?**

Yes, some do. It is difficult to find specific moral teachings in some of the non-Christian world religions. However, there is no doubt that the most famous Hindu of modern times, Mahatma Gandhi, was completely opposed to unnatural birth control. He called for self-control, and his statements in the 1920s have many similarities to the statements of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968.
Is the Christian doctrine against unnatural birth control a new teaching?

No. The question of birth control has been raised many times for almost 20 centuries of Christian life, and the Church has always responded with a firm and universal negative to abortion, sterilization and all unnatural forms of birth control. The encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 simply reaffirmed this universal Tradition.

Does this constant teaching have any special significance?

Yes. At the Last Supper, Jesus promised repeatedly that the Holy Spirit would lead his Church into the fullness of the truth (John, chapters 14-17). When a teaching has been taught by the Church with such unanimity and constancy throughout the centuries, those who believe in Christ and his Church have every reason to believe that such a teaching is the work of the Holy Spirit and therefore is true. Some theologians believe that this constancy of teaching fulfills all the requirements set forth by Vatican II for an infallible teaching by the universal ordinary teaching of the Magisterium of the Church.\(^\text{10}\)

Will the Catholic Church ever change this teaching?

No. The Church is guided by the Holy Spirit to teach the fullness of the truth no matter how unpopular that truth may be. The Church will never teach that it is morally permissible for married couples to use unnatural forms of birth control in an act of marital love.

“The Church’s teaching on contraception does not belong to the category of matter open to free discussion among theologians. Teaching the contrary amounts to leading the moral consciences of spouses into error.”\(^\text{11}\)

“In a word, contraception contradicts the *truth* of conjugal love. Contraception is to be judged objectively so profoundly unlawful as never to be, for any reason, justified.”\(^\text{12}\)

Have Protestant churches shared this Tradition?

Yes. Before 1930, no Protestant Christian church accepted contraception, sterilization or abortion. However, in 1930 the Church of England accepted contraception. In 1931, the Federal Council of Churches in the United States followed the lead of the Anglicans. After some initial resistance, most Protestant churches accepted unnatural forms of birth control.
Have churches that accepted contraception also accepted abortion?

Tragically, almost all churches that accept contraception also accept abortion. In practice, a rationalizing process that looks primarily at a person’s intention cannot say a firm “NO” to any imaginable behavior. This has been shown repeatedly with the acceptance of contraception, abortion, and sodomy.

“But despite their differences of nature and moral gravity, contraception and abortion are often clearly connected, as fruits of the same tree” (EV 13).

What is the religious significance of priests or theologians who appear confused or not to believe the official teaching of the Church?

First, people need to distinguish between the authentic teaching of the Church and that of some theologians. The Canadian bishops made this clear in 1973.

“‘To follow one’s conscience’ and to remain a Catholic, one must take into account first and foremost the teaching of the Magisterium. When doubt arises due to a conflict of ‘my’ views and those of the Magisterium, the presumption of truth lies on the part of the Magisterium … And this must be carefully distinguished from the teaching of individual theologians or individual priests, however intelligent or persuasive.”

Second, such priests or theologians need the prayers of the faithful. “If any confessor or pastor of souls, which may God forbid, lead the faithful entrusted to him into these errors [of accepting contraception] or should at least confirm them by approval or by guilty silence, let him be mindful of the fact that he must render a strict account to God, the Supreme Judge, for the betrayal of his sacred trust, and let him take to himself the words of Christ: ‘They are blind and leaders of the blind: and if the blind lead the blind, both fall into the pit’.”

II. The Solution: Natural Family Planning

Has God provided any morally acceptable methods of birth regulation besides total abstinence?

Yes. God, the Author of Nature, has given woman several bodily signs that identify her fertile and infertile times, and these signs are the foundations for systematic Natural Family Planning. God also made woman in such a way that the right kind of breastfeeding provides a natural spacing of babies.
Does the Catholic Church encourage breastfeeding?
Yes. In 1941 Pope Pius XII urged all mothers to breastfeed their babies: “… Except where it is quite impossible, it is more desirable that the mother should feed her child at her own breast. Who shall say what mysterious influences are exerted upon the growth of that little creature by the mother upon whom it depends entirely for its development.”

In 1995, Pope John Paul II encouraged extended breastfeeding. He noted “two major benefits to the child: protection against disease and proper nourishment.” Then he added: “In addition to these immunological and nutritional effects, this natural way of feeding can create a bond of love and security between mother and child, and enable the child to assert its presence as a person through interaction with the mother.”

Can breastfeeding really space babies?
Yes. The Author of Nature has created a complementary mother-baby relationship. When a mother nurses her baby, she gives him the best nutrition and emotional care. In turn, her baby’s frequent suckling provides a natural postponement of fertility.

In the developing world, more pregnancies are postponed through breastfeeding than through all other efforts at birth regulation. However, this is true only of “ecological” breastfeeding in which mothers are constantly with their babies who in turn suckle frequently. This natural form of pregnancy postponement is morally acceptable. The usual spacing of babies with ecological breastfeeding ranges between 18-30 months. (For documentation, see “Does Breastfeeding Really Space Babies?”)

What about “Rhythm”?
The first type of Natural Family Planning based on periodic abstinence was Calendar Rhythm. This was used during the 1930s. It could be just as effective as the barrier methods then available (condoms, diaphragms) if the woman had regular cycles and if she was properly instructed. However, because of a combination of cycle irregularity and generally inadequate instruction, Calendar Rhythm was unreliable for many couples. It must be emphasized that the modern methods of Natural Family Planning are very different from Calendar Rhythm.

What about systematic Natural Family Planning?
Systematic Natural Family Planning is based on an awareness of a woman’s present signs of fertility or
infertility. While Calendar Rhythm was based only on past cycle history, modern systematic NFP is based on current history.

**How does systematic Natural Family Planning work?**

In the most complete and cooperative form of systematic NFP, a, the wife observes and records her cervical mucus sign and changes in her cervix, and her husband records her waking temperatures. They use these signs in a crosschecking way to know when she is fertile and infertile.

Couples seeking to achieve pregnancy have coitus (sexual intercourse) at the most fertile time. Couples seeking to postpone or avoid pregnancy have coitus only during the infertile times and avoid genital contact during the fertile time.

**Does NFP require extended periods of abstinence?**

Usually not. The average is 8 to 10 days, and most couples will have not have more than a 12 or 14-day period of abstinence — identical to the practice of Orthodox Jews for approximately 3,000 years. With the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, many couples find that the abstinence of NFP is not a drawback but a definite asset for their growth as a married couple.

**How effective is systematic NFP?**

Systematic NFP is highly effective when properly used. The most complete form can be used at the 99% level of effectiveness in avoiding pregnancy. It is also very helpful for couples of marginal fertility seeking to achieve pregnancy.

**How can I learn Natural Family Planning?**

The most complete book on the subject is *The Art of Natural Family Planning.* The most widespread NFP education service is The Couple to Couple League. For further information about learning NFP or establishing a CCL Chapter, contact the League at an address at the end of this pamphlet.

**III. The Marital Effects**

**How does the use of unnatural forms of birth control affect marriage?**

In general, it has a negative effect. The growing use of unnatural birth control since 1913 has been accompanied by a 500% rise in the divorce rate. Among
Catholics, the divorce rate formerly was much lower than the national average, but the divorce rate has risen sharply since the mid-1960s when Catholics began using unnatural birth control at about the same rate as the rest of a culture that is no longer Christian.\textsuperscript{18} Even if other factors have contributed to the breakdown of family stability, there are ample indicators that the use of unnatural forms of birth control has been a significant factor.

**How does the use of Natural Family Planning affect marriage?**

The general effect is positive. Many couples who leave unnatural methods of birth control find an improved marriage relationship with NFP. This has been confirmed by scientific social studies\textsuperscript{19,20} and by informal surveys showing an extremely low divorce rate — under 5% — among couples practicing NFP.\textsuperscript{21}

Improved communication, absence of feelings of being used, development of non-genital courtship, peace of conscience, and no fear of the dangerous effects of some unnatural methods have all been mentioned as contributing to the improved relationship. In addition, NFP helps to develop the same character strengths that are necessary for marital fidelity and life-long marriage.

**Summary.** God is love and the Author of life and human sexuality. Authentic religion is concerned with sexual behavior because sex is part of God’s plan for life and love. God is truth, and it is Catholic belief that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in teaching the truth about love — including sexual love.

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

— Jn 8:31-32

— John F. Kippley

**References**

\textsuperscript{2} Vatican II, *Guadium et Spes* or *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. English translation: Walter M. Abbott, S.J., General editor, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966). Subsequent references are solely within the text and use the initials GS from the first words of its Latin text, *Guadium et Spes*. References are to numbered sections in the official text. For more about the permanence of marriage, see “Until death do us part,” a leaflet published by Foundation for the Family, Box 111184, Cincinnati OH 45211.  
\textsuperscript{3} *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. English translation © 1994 by the United States Catholic Conference, Inc. All subsequent...