



Is NFP Good?

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The title of this booklet may seem strange. However, it is a question often debated among the Catholic instructors and users of natural family planning (NFP). Is natural family planning inherently good? While the questions discussed are very practical, they also involve serious moral decisions.

For example, a Catholic instructor couple teaching NFP to a man and a woman who are engaged to be married may learn (while helping the couple read their chart) that they have been engaging in sexual intercourse. Since the Catholic Church teaches against premarital intercourse, is the teaching of NFP in this instance “bad?” Should the Catholic instructor couple sever their teaching relationship with the engaged couple?

Another difficult situation arises when a Catholic instructor couple discovers that a married client couple does not ever plan to have any children whatsoever. In other words, the couple learning NFP desires to use their knowledge of fertility only to avoid a pregnancy. They never plan on achieving a pregnancy. Is the Catholic instructor couple, conscious of the Church’s teaching on the necessity of openness to children within marriage, obliged to discontinue teaching them since, in this case, NFP does not appear to be good for the couple?

Looking at the other side of the coin, let us examine those Catholic married couples already raising a child or children. What if such a couple takes into account all aspects of their life and concludes that they are able to support and raise properly another child, but they decide to apply their knowledge of fertility to avoid a pregnancy because they want a new boat, a second car, or some such luxury? Should a Catholic priest counseling them advise them to stop using NFP altogether because it is not good for them in this situation?

Furthermore, what about the Catholic teenager who is just beginning to “wake up” and discover the mystery of his or her sexuality? Does the Church advise that this teen may not be taught some of the underlying principles of NFP, that is, of human fertility, because he or she is too young?

These questions, and others of a similar nature, are indeed sticky, but they are questions which arise not infrequently in the “classrooms” of Catholic NFP instructor couples and in discussions among others interested in NFP. As the natural methods of family planning become more and more known and used, these and additional questions will be asked more and more by conscientious Catholics. Where can one go to find the principles from which moral answers can be deduced?

Christ and the Church

In searching for instruction about sexual morality, Catholics should always look to Jesus Christ. For a Catholic, every investigation of the truly important aspects of human living (and, certainly, human sexual activity is to be placed in this category) must begin and find its resolution in Christ. This is so because the Catholic believes that it is Jesus Christ who reveals to men and women the whole truth about themselves as agents of moral action.

But some might ask, “Where can we find Christ today? We know that he speaks to us in the recesses of our hearts, but where can we hear him speak aloud? Where can we listen to him as those of Israel did 2,000 years ago?” These are legitimate questions to which there have not always been given legitimate answers.

We can find the answers in the Church because the Church is Christ. It is his mystical person. “The Church looks at the world through the very eyes of Christ,” proclaimed Pope John Paul II on October 2, 1979, during his homily at Yankee Stadium in New York City.¹ In other words, the Church is not only a body which exists, it also acts. Acts of looking clearly involve understanding. The Church looks at the world and understands it the way Christ understands it. The Church does not look, as animals do, without knowledge. It looks as people (persons) do, that is, with a mind. But if the Church has the capability of seeing

with understanding, with the mind of Christ, then the Church is more than just the body of Christ. It is, in some sense, the person of Christ. A body alone could never act in any cognitive sense. But the Church does act in a cognitive sense, and therefore it is more than a body. It is a person, the person of Christ. Therefore, when the Church acts, it is Christ who is acting.

The pope's understanding of the Church as the person of Christ is absolutely faithful to St. Paul's teaching. In first Corinthians, St. Paul writes in the famous passage about charity, "If I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."² Obviously St. Paul does not use the word, body, here to mean only an attribute or an appendage of a person. Rather, body refers to the whole person. Earlier in the same epistle the Apostle writes, "The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by His power."³

At first in this passage, St Paul is speaking of the body, but then he switches to the personal pronoun, us. When the body is raised, it is we (us) who are raised. The body, for St. Paul, refers not just to a part, but to the whole, that is, to the person. "It is obvious that here it is not just the body which is meant, but the whole 'I.'"⁴ Generally, the Hebrews did not draw as sharp a distinction between the body and the person as Western thought does. For the Semites, a human being was one entity, body and soul, and either word could be employed to denote the whole. Thus, when St. Paul referred to the Church as the body of Christ, he certainly did not intend to exclude the image of the Church as the person of Christ, rather he was affirming the Church as the person of Christ.

However, it is obviously impossible to identify the Church with the physical Christ. One difference between the Church and the physical Christ lies in the elements of the union. In the Incarnation, it is the second Person of the Blessed Trinity who unites in Himself the divine and human natures. In the Church, it is the Holy Spirit who unites the baptized (persons) in Christ. Thus, the Incarnation is one Person (God the Son) in two natures and the Church is one Person (God the Holy Spirit) who unites many persons in Christ. A second difference between the Church and the

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physical Christ lies in the mode of union. The union of the two natures in Christ is accomplished in his Person, and the union in the Church is accomplished through sanctifying grace given to us by the Holy Spirit. A third difference between the Church and Christ lies in the differing resulting unions. In Christ, human nature is united to the divine Word (the hypostatic union). However, the members of the Church are not all united with the Logos, as though he were incarnate again in each of us. No, the union is not another hypostatic union. Nevertheless, the baptized are united with Christ in a mystical union. Thus, we refer to the Church as the mystical person of Christ to distinguish it from the physical Christ. The Church is a mysterious communion of persons (the baptized), which form the mystical person of Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit.⁵

Thus, Christ speaks aloud today through his Church, specifically through the teaching authority (the magisterium) of his Church, namely, the Holy Father and the bishops in union with him. The entire Church is the continued and living presence of Jesus Christ in the world, and it is the magisterium which is the teaching voice of that living presence. Christ said to St. Peter and the Apostles, “He who hears you hears me.” Christ gave those men the charism of teaching the flock, of exercising his prophetic office by teaching what he taught. This charism is continued today by their successors, the Holy Father (St. Peter’s successor) and the bishops (successors to the Apostles). Thus, when we listen to the pope and those bishops united with him, we hear the very voice of Christ himself. The declaration of Christ, “He who hears you hears me,” is enfleshed in these contemporary men who speak within the framework of the Catholic Church.

Previous Magisterial Teachings and Theological Reflections

Since Catholics listen to the voice of Christ to resolve their moral questions, the answers to the moral dilemmas surrounding NFP are to be found in the voice of Christ, the magisterium of the Church. Therefore, we will examine recent statements of the Church regarding NFP, most

of which come from the teaching of Pope John Paul II. However, before we examine his pronouncements, it would be valuable to gain some background by surveying past magisterial teachings and the theological opinions which these occasioned.

It is quite clear that there has been a genuine development in the Church's teaching on marriage. In the Church's history, the teachings of the magisterium and theological reflections on them have focused on the purpose(s) of the marital act and what the spouses should intend in and through sexual intercourse. There have been three purposes of sexual intercourse suggested: procreation, the expression of conjugal friendship and fidelity, and the avoidance of concupiscence. Generally speaking, the procreative purpose was the first one put forward; sexual intercourse as a remedy for concupiscence was discussed and criticized very early; and only after some reflection was it possible to see that sexual intercourse could express conjugal friendship and fidelity. Corresponding to these three purposes, theologians responding to the magisterium have discussed what the spouses should intend. Most authors agree that there is some fault in using the marital act to avoid sinful desire, and it gradually came to be understood that spouses need not explicitly intend the other two purposes of the marital act.

The Patristic Age

In the patristic age, most were agreed that the marital act was for the procreation of children and that spouses should intend children when they engaged in sexual intercourse. On the one hand, the Fathers of the Church were responding to the sexual permissiveness of the pagan Roman culture which surrounded them. On the other hand, they were facing the Gnostic heresy. The Gnostics believed all matter to be evil. Thus, the human body and human sexuality were also evil. One should never bring more evil, that is, another body, into the world. For Gnostics, procreation was one of the greatest evils because more flesh came into existence. In response to the Gnostics, the Fathers of the Church emphasized the inherent goodness of new life, that is, of procreation. This emphasis also countered the sexual mores of the time. Human sexuality is not a plaything. Rather it is

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for the serious and awesome purpose of giving new life. The marital act exists to give new life, and spouses should intend to give life when they have sexual intercourse. The Fathers acknowledged that intercourse also could be a remedy for concupiscence, but they also held that this purpose is selfish. They taught that spouses who intend only this purpose sin, at least venially.

St Augustine

St Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo, taught that marriage and sexual intercourse were for procreation. Spouses should intend procreation when they engage in the marital act. He realized that sexual intercourse could be used as a remedy for concupiscence, but he taught that spouses who did this were guilty of a venial sin. Augustine does indicate at one point that marital relations can express friendship, and so it seems that he does leave the door open to intercourse as an expression of fidelity. This development pointed to what was to come.

Aquinas and Bonaventure

The flowering of theology in the medieval period brought with it a development in the theology of marriage. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure both taught that the marital act was for conjugal fidelity as well as for procreation. Spouses could choose to express their friendship to one another through the marital act. In other words, although procreation was clearly understood as one of the purposes of the marital act, spouses need not specifically intend this purpose when they engaged in sexual intercourse. They could intend to express friendship. Of course, these theologians maintained that the spouses could never exclude procreation, but they need not explicitly intend it. Recognizing that some thought the marital act was for the release of desire, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure taught that taking a spouse out of selfish desire was flawed.

Alphonsus Liguori

Finally, in the eighteenth century, Alphonsus Liguori, accepting procreation and fidelity as the purposes of sexual intercourse, taught that it was not necessary for spouses to intend explicitly the good of procreation or fidelity. It was

sufficient that they implicitly intended these purposes. As long as these two purposes were intended, at least implicitly, Alphonsus taught that there was nothing aberrant in enjoying the pleasure which accompanied the sexual act. Thus, Alphonsus Liguori united the two purposes of the marital act. Not only were both recognized as existing in reality (that had occurred in the medieval period), but now Alphonsus taught that both should exist in the intentional order at least implicitly.⁶

Throughout history, magisterial documents and the theological research stimulated by them have tried to teach what the purposes of marriage are and what the spouses should include in their intention. The procreative purpose was recognized at the beginning. The conjugal friendship purpose came to be appreciated as the Church reflected on the mystery of the marital act. Intercourse as a remedy for concupiscence was recognized and criticized. From the beginning, the spouses were to intend the procreative purpose of the marital act. When the conjugal friendship purpose was recognized, it was clear that spouses could implicitly intend the procreative purpose and explicitly wish to express their friendship. The final development occurred when Alphonsus Liguori taught that both intentions need not be explicit, but it sufficed if they were implicit. Finally, the whole tradition holds that spouses who intend only the satisfaction of their own desires sins, at least venially.

Casti Connubii (On Christian Marriage)

The next stage in the development of Catholic teaching occurred with Pope Pius XI's encyclical, *Casti Connubii*. It is important to remember the context in which this encyclical was written. First, by the 1930s scientists had made some progress in their investigations into human fertility. For the first time, it was possible for spouses artificially and effectively to thwart procreation. The procreative purpose could be excluded both in the physical and intentional orders. Spouses could now temporarily suspend their fertility and attempt to express their friendship while blocking the procreative purpose of the marital act.

Through a natural method, it was also possible for them to know with some accuracy when they were fertile. Thus, without artificially altering themselves, that is, without

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physically blocking the procreative purpose, they could engage in the marital act knowing that they probably would not conceive a child. With greater probability than ever before, they could intend not to have a child while engaging in the marital act.

Second, in the year of the publication of this document, the Anglican Church had altered the constant teaching of the Christian Churches regarding the procreative aspect of sexual intercourse. The Anglican Church accepted contraception and taught that couples could physically exclude procreation and not even implicitly intend conception. This was a radical departure from the previous tradition. The medieval and modern theologians had spoken of spouses not explicitly intending procreation every time they engaged in sexual intercourse. They never allowed procreation to be excluded in the physical or intentional orders. With these developments, new questions were raised. Could the spouses exclude procreation physically and intentionally? Was the knowledge that conception was improbable an exclusion in the intentional order? Pius XI wished to reaffirm the Catholic tradition, giving some guidelines to the faithful about the new methods and responding to the Anglican position.

Pope Pius XI affirmed most strongly the Catholic teaching that the direct frustration of procreative purpose was gravely sinful. Spouses could not physically or intentionally exclude procreation. Spouses should intend procreation at least implicitly. However, in conformity with Catholic tradition, he did allow spouses to engage in non-procreative sexual intercourse (which they now could do with the new scientific knowledge of the natural cycles of human fertility) for sufficient reasons. In the judgment of the magisterium, recourse to the infertile periods was the equivalent of not explicitly intending procreation, but still accepting it and intending it, at least implicitly, as a purpose of the marital act.

The common interpretation of this teaching in the United States at least in the 1950s and 1960s, was that procreation was the chief purpose of the marital act and any non-procreative sexual intercourse was at least suspect. It seemed that we had returned to the patristic age. The Fathers of the Church had emphasized the procreative purpose of

intercourse because the conjugal friendship purpose was not yet clearly seen. By the end of the eighteenth century, the two purposes of intercourse were joined in thought and it was sufficient if the spouses intended both at least implicitly. But in our era, a new possibility arose. It was possible to eliminate the procreative purpose of the marital act. With this attack, the Church felt compelled to reaffirm procreation. Less was said about conjugal friendship. The result was that Pius XI appeared to be returning to the position of the patristic era. The Fathers had emphasized procreation because they did not clearly recognize any other legitimate purpose of intercourse. Pius XI emphasized procreation because it was denied in so many quarters. But the emphasis on procreation in *Casti Connubii* (directly attributable to the questions that the Pope was answering) led some to the false conclusion that the Church regarded procreation as more important than conjugal friendship. Nothing could have been more false. Pius XI did not deny any of the developments of the previous centuries.

In the next three and a half decades, there developed a new appreciation of the human person and the immense gift which one spouse makes to another in marriage. Within Western culture, there was an emphasis on conjugal friendship and a gradual de-emphasis on giving new life. From this new context questions arose which became more and more urgent. Why was it impossible for spouses to express their fidelity and frustrate procreation? Was procreation the only good thing in the sexual act which counted? Why could not spouses choose to express their friendship and avoid procreation, especially when another child would place such burdens on the marital relationship that it would injure the conjugal unity? These questions became more and more pressing as the means for regulating conception, both natural and artificial, became more and more sophisticated.

It was in this context that the Second Vatican Council met. The Council spoke of marriage as a “partnership of marriage and of love.”⁷ While it affirmed that marriage was ordered to the procreation and education of children, it recognized and applauded the mutual self-gift of both spouses to one another. However, since Pope John XXIII had established a special commission to study the question of

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contraception, and this had been confirmed and enlarged by Pope Paul VI, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council did not directly treat the question of contraception. That was to be handled by the Holy Father after receiving the findings of the commission.

Humanae Vitae (On Human Life)

Of course, we all know the outcome. The commission reported to Pope Paul VI and he issued the famous encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. The encyclical clearly reaffirms the teaching of the Church that the procreative purpose of the marital act cannot be excluded physically or intentionally. Anti-procreative intercourse is seriously sinful. But non-procreative intercourse is permitted. Thus, Paul VI allows couples to have recourse to the infertile times for “serious motives.”⁸ In allowing couples to engage in non-procreative intercourse, he acknowledges that the implicit openness to children is sufficient intention. In these positions, Paul VI is in complete conformity with the Catholic tradition. However, before the Holy Father introduces these doctrinal points, he speaks of marriage as the personal gift of the two spouses to one another. He teaches that all marriage finds its origins in God. He recognizes that marriage is a total gift, a very special friendship. In other words, the Holy Father accepts and makes his own, that is, the Church’s own, some of the new personalism which had developed over the previous decades. Paul VI is responding to some of the criticism leveled against Pius XI. He clearly points to the conjugal friendship purpose of the marital act.

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Still, when he comes to give reasons for his doctrinal points he relies heavily on natural law principles, for example, “the conjugal act...capacitates them (the spouses) for the generation of new lives, according to laws inscribed in the very being of man and of woman...”⁹ For some, the dichotomy between the new personalism and the natural law arguments was most frustrating. In defense of Paul VI, it must be remembered that the encyclical was written at a time when the personalistic arguments were not as developed as they are today. What would we have had him write? Also, it must be remembered that, to his credit, he asked theologians to continue to work on this problem. He viewed the encyclical as a beginning of a new dialogue regarding

the defense of the Church's teaching. He did not see the arguments he presented as the last words on the subject.

Humanae Vitae suffered from the same context as *Casti Connubii*. The encyclical, especially with the development of the birth control pill, was centered on the question of anti-procreative intercourse. Therefore, the Pope emphasized that the procreative purpose of the marital act could not be excluded. But in his attempt to recognize the other purpose of sexual intercourse (a response to the critics of *Casti Connubi*), the Pope spoke of conjugal friendship and procreation as "two meanings."¹⁰ The necessary emphasis of the encyclical on procreation and its language of "two meanings" led many to separate, at least in thought, the two purposes of the marital act. But the entire tradition testifies to the gradual understanding that conjugal fidelity and procreation are inseparable in the one act. The irony is that Paul VI's very point (that the procreative purposes could not be eliminated) depended on the entire Catholic tradition of the inseparability of the two purposes. But the previous tradition did not answer the new question. The previous tradition had responded to the questions: "What is included in the purposes of the marital act?" and "What must the spouses intend explicitly and implicitly?" The new question was: "Is it possible to exclude procreation from the marital act in reality and in the intentional order?" A new theological framework was necessary to answer the exclusion question and still preserve the integral unity of the marital act. This new theological framework was not yet in place when Paul VI wrote *Humanae Vitae*. The Pope was in an impossible position.

A New Theological Construct

The Church's teaching was on tentative ground. The Church had to respond to those who would exclude (physically and/or intentionally) the procreative purpose of the marital act, and the Church had to do this without eliminating (or seeming to eliminate) the conjugal friendship purpose (Pius XI's difficulty) and without separating the two purposes (Paul VI's difficulty). The answer lay in somehow recovering the attitude which prevailed at the

time of Alphonsus Liguori who saw that spouses should include physically and intentionally (at least implicitly) both procreation and conjugal friendship when engaged in the marital act. But this tradition now needed a new context because of the new question. The recovery occurred through Pope John Paul II who developed a new theological construct which responds to the exclusion question. John Paul II began by asking, “What is love?” But since, of necessity, marital love includes conjugal friendship *and* procreation, this question responded to those who would exclude procreation, and it reunited what was conceptually broken apart. This question also opened the way to the new personalistic arguments because love only exists between persons. Thus, to understand love, one must understand personhood.

John Paul II brilliantly summarized his new approach in *Familiaris Consortio* (*The Apostolic Exhortation on the Family in the Modern World*). Article 11, the first article of the second part of the document, deserves to be quoted in full:

God created man in His own image and likeness: calling him to existence *through love*. He called him at the same time *for love*.

God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.

As an incarnate spirit, that is a soul which expresses itself in a body and a body informed by an immortal spirit, man is called to love in his unified totality. Love includes the human body, and the body is made a sharer in spiritual love.

Christian revelation recognizes two specific ways of realizing the vocation of the human person, in its entirety, to love: marriage and virginity or celibacy. Either one is, in its own proper form, an actuation of the most profound truth of man, of his being “created in the image of God.”

Consequently, sexuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such. It is realized in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which

a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death. The total physical self-giving would be a lie if it were not the sign and fruit of a total personal self-giving, in which the whole person, including the temporal dimension, is present: if the person were to withhold something or reserve the possibility of deciding otherwise in the future, by this very fact, he or she would not be giving totally.

This totality which is required by conjugal love also corresponds to the demands of responsible fertility. This fertility is directed to the generation of a human being, and so by its nature it surpasses the purely biological order and involves a whole series of personal values. For the harmonious growth of these values a persevering and unified contribution by both parents is necessary.

The only “place” in which this self-giving in its whole truth is made possible is marriage, the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God Himself, which only in this light manifests its true meaning. The institution of marriage is not an undue interference by society or authority, nor the extrinsic imposition of a form. Rather it is an interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love which is publicly affirmed as unique and exclusive, in order to live in complete fidelity to the plan of God, the Creator. A person’s freedom, far from being restricted by this fidelity, is secured against every form of subjectivism or relativism and is made a sharer in creative Wisdom.

The cornerstone of Pope John Paul II’s recovery of the Catholic tradition—that the marital act and its results form one integral whole—is given in the very first sentence of the above quotation. John Paul II reminds us that man is made in God’s image and likeness and therefore is called to do what God does, that is, love. In this brief sentence, there are two profound truths which need some analysis. First, it is necessary to understand what it means to be made in God’s image and likeness. Second, it is vital to know how God loves, if we are to imitate him. The first task includes a study of the interior and exterior aspects of the human person. For our purposes, we are primarily interested in the exterior (physical) aspects, and this is what John Paul II calls the theology of the body. He has approached the second area in many different books, articles, and speeches, and it might be called the theology of the family. Natural family planning

(fertility awareness) is best examined as a means of revealing the profound mystery of the human person (theology of the body), and responsible parenthood is the application of the theology of the family by a particular family in its concrete situation.

Theology of the Body

It is important to note that the theology of the body (and therefore NFP) is a prerequisite to the theology of the family. It is very difficult to understand John Paul II's recovery of the meaning of the marital act without the theology of the body. Of course, the theology of the body is an independent study in its own right. However, for our purposes we are chiefly interested in it as a stepping stone to a further understanding of his recovery of the Catholic tradition on marriage.

As is apparent in the above quote, the theology of the body begins with the affirmation in Genesis that we are images of God. God is a personal God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A person is a being with a mind and a will. We reflect God primarily because we are persons, that is, because we have minds and wills, the powers of thinking and choosing. Further, we are the only persons in the universe with bodies. Therefore, we also reflect God in and through our bodies. We are the only beings who can express personhood in a physical way. God cannot express His Divine Persons in a physical way because He does not have a body. (Of course, Our Lord Jesus Christ is God, and he has a body. However, he has a body because he assumed human nature. It is as a man that he has a body, not as God.) The angels cannot physically manifest personhood because they do not have bodies. Only a human being is able to express his personhood physically. This is the point of John Paul II's third paragraph.

However, we do not only express our persons, we also reflect the divine Persons through our bodies. Since we are like God, we are invited to act as God acts. When we act as God acts, and this action is expressed outwardly, we not only express our own persons through our bodies, we also reflect the divine Persons. When the person acts as he should

When the person acts as he should (as God acts), and this act is expressed outwardly, the body becomes a mirror reflecting God.

(as God acts), and this act is expressed outwardly, the body becomes a mirror reflecting God; the body becomes a sign or sacrament, a physical image of the divine Persons. As embodied persons, we are called to a wonderful task. We are each called to reflect God in our interior and exterior activities. We are each of incredible value and dignity before God because in every aspect of our being, we are invited to be a mirror image of Him.

The human body is the sum of its biological functions, and, at the same time, it is more than these. Through these apparently understandable functions, the mystery of the human person finds expression. Thus, in themselves, these biological functions are intriguing. If they were not, they could not express the mystery of each human being. The body fully expresses the person when it participates in the most proper activity of the human person, that is, love. Love is the most notable human activity because it is the most God-like. The bodily expression of this love occurs through our sexual powers. These are the most fascinating of our bodily capabilities because through them the human person reveals himself most fully as an image of God.¹¹ Thus, our sexual powers express the human person more deeply than our physical powers. As John Paul II wrote in the fifth paragraph of the earlier quote (*Familiaris Consortio*, 11), “sexuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such.” Our sexuality is, in a sense, a window to the soul.

The Role of NFP

The study of our sexual powers could be called the practicum of the theology of the body which reveals the profound mystery of the human person. This study is undertaken by the teachers and students in the natural family planning movement. NFP examines our fertility; it investigates our sexuality, the window to the soul. In NFP classes, couples are taught about their own fertility; they learn fertility awareness. There is a distinction between

knowledge of fertility and its application. Married couples may use NFP (fertility awareness) in planning their family, but this is distinct from NFP as such. The use of NFP by spouses comes under the rubric of responsible parenthood, which we will consider later within the context of our discussion of John Paul II's new insights into conjugal love.

This pope desired that every couple learn NFP because it teaches fertility awareness. Since it is the study of our sexual powers, the window to the soul, NFP reveals the profound mystery of the human person. In studying their sexual powers, men and women will see the mystery which is expressed in and through these faculties. Men and women will perceive the dignity of the body and its sacramental value as a physical image of God. People will begin to respect the body and hold it in awe and reverence. John Paul II believed that fertility awareness is the means to teach the world the incomparable dignity of the human body as the expression of the human person. When men and women understand the truth about themselves, they will be more inclined to act responsibly, that is, in accordance with their truth and value. But it is impossible to act responsibly if one is unaware of the truth. NFP teaches the truth about fertility. As such, NFP will usually lead to virtue. Thus, the Holy Father encouraged its use as a means of developing a holy life. Pope John Paul II elevated NFP to an apostolate, a tool for people to use on the path to holiness.¹²

It is indeed ironic that NFP has become the means of teaching us about the mystery of our own existence. Many have advocated contraception as a means of giving spouses the freedom to be themselves. However, it seems that the very opposite of contraception—NFP—is the true embodiment of the new personalism. It is NFP—fertility awareness—which truly reveals the profound mystery of the human person. It is the study of human fertility, of sexuality, which shows the individual that he or she is truly an image of God and made to love as God loves. NFP probes the uncharted and infinite depths of each individual human person. It gives people a sense of their own worth and dignity.

NFP and the Theology of the Body

Some would object that the specific knowledge of one's own fertility is little better than the sex education programs advocated by Planned Parenthood, SIECUS, and other secular organizations. How can the Church urge the establishment of such programs? Clearly, NFP—that is, fertility awareness—can become simply a very technical individualized biology lesson or experiment. John Paul II warned us against this. He did not wish NFP to be taught in this way. However, he did wish it to be taught in the context of the theology of the body. It is absolutely necessary to teach the students of NFP the theology of the body. The theology of the body must be presented, otherwise the fertility awareness classes of the NFP movement would indeed be little better than sex education classes. As John Paul II taught us:

In the common viewpoint, it frequently happens that the “method,” separated from the ethical dimension proper to it, is put into effect in a merely functional and even utilitarian way. By separating the “natural method” from the ethical dimension one no longer sees the difference between it and the other “methods” (artificial means) and one comes to the point of speaking of it as if it were only a different form of contraception.¹³

It is possible to imagine married and engaged couples taking NFP classes, where the theology of the body is presented, and not accepting the value system offered. Some do come only to discover their own fertility. Is it necessary to ask them to leave the classes? Absolutely not! While logically and theoretically it is better to examine the principles and then apply them to the practical order, this is not always the best approach pedagogically. Theoretically, the theological underpinnings of fertility awareness should precede the technical aspects, but practically, it often works the other way. For many, many people, the profound mystery of their own personhood, their own creation in the image and likeness of God, reflected also in their bodies, is only revealed to them after they have accepted their own fertility. It is the practical study of their own fertility (charts and all the rest) which reveals to them the wonder of their humanity. At that point, these people can be taught why they are unique and

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wonderful, that is, they can be taught the theology of the body. Fertility awareness leads to a consciousness of one's own dignity and value which, in turn, opens the mind to an explanation of the "whys" of human existence.

It is because NFP does reveal the mystery of the human person and opens the mind to further truths that John Paul II advocated knowledge of the fertility cycle for young people, even those not yet married. In article 33 of *Familiaris Consortio*, the Pope wrote:

"The necessary conditions (for marriage) also include knowledge of the bodily aspect and the body's rhythms of fertility. Accordingly, every effort must be made to render such knowledge accessible to all married people and also to young adults before marriage, through clear, timely and serious instruction and education given by married couples, doctors, and experts."

Obviously, the Pope saw that the understanding of one's fertility, as taught in NFP courses, is essential.

Some might still object that young people may apply their knowledge of their own fertility improperly. They would suggest that premarital sex will increase together with many other evils. But this should not happen because, as people come to know their own dignity and value they will act in accordance with their new sense of self-worth. NFP encourages virtue. This was the Holy Father's theoretical principle which has found confirmation in the lives of the unmarried and married. Is NFP (fertility awareness) good? This can only be answered with a resounding "yes" if it is taught in the context of the theology of the body. For some, the value system will come first. For others, it will work the other way, but it makes little difference.

Through NFP (fertility awareness), men and women come to understand the wonderful value and dignity they have. NFP is the visible and practical face of the theology of the body. John Paul II clearly envisioned NFP and the theology of the body as a preparation for married love. It is only when we understand our own infinite worth that we can give ourselves to another. The one who gives should know and understand the gift. In this case, since the gift is of the self, one needs to know oneself. This self-knowledge can be achieved through the theology of the body and NFP. Second, it is only when we know the value of the human person

that we can truly comprehend the self-gift of another to ourselves. The theology of the body and NFP are important preparation for married love because they teach the dignity and value of the human person.

Theology of the Family

The new questions demanded a new theological construct which would at one and the same time answer the questions and yet preserve the integral unity of the purposes of the marital act.

In addition to the theology of the body and NFP, it is also necessary, if one is to love, to understand what love is. Pope John Paul II made a significant and most important contribution to the Church's reflection on married love through his theology of the family. As we noted above, he recovered the Catholic tradition that the marital act and its results form one integral whole. This concept was lost earlier in the 20th century. Throughout 19 centuries, the primary questions were: "What is included in the marital act?" and "What should the spouses include in their intentions?" With the new contraceptive developments, the questions were: "What can be excluded?" and "Can the spouses intend to exclude one of the purposes of the marital act?" These were different questions. Once these questions were asked and the Church responded, the older tradition no longer served. It had answered different questions. In answering the exclusion questions, the Church first (Pius XI) emphasized procreation (which resulted in criticism) and then (Paul VI) taught that there were "two meanings"¹⁴ (which meant that the concept of the unity of the purposes of the marital act was lost). The new questions demanded a new theological construct which would at one and the same time answer the questions and yet preserve the integral unity of the purposes of the marital act.

John Paul II gave us the new theological construct in the theology of the family. He answered the exclusion questions without splitting apart the purposes of the marital act. In the second paragraph of article 11 of *Familiaris Consortio* quoted earlier, the Pope wrote, "God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being." This paragraph reveals the heart of the new theological construct.

Love: A Self-Gift

Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God to do what God does, that is, love. Thus, man's love must be an image of God's love. God's love is a unified whole. It is a total self-gift, a self-surrender (the model for conjugal friendship), which is, at the same time, life-giving. In his creative act, God loves us by sharing existence with us. Since we describe God as simply being or existence, when he shared existence with us, he gave us himself. To give oneself is to love. Therefore, in creation, God loved, gave himself to us, and that love gave us life. Similarly, when God redeemed us from our sins, he gave himself on the cross. In other words, he loved us. That divine love was life-giving. Christ's love on the cross gave us God's own life; this grace enables us to be happy with God forever in heaven. When God loves, it is total self-gift which gives life. There are not two, or three, or four things, but only one: love, a self-gift which gives life.¹⁵ With this new vision, John Paul II recovered the concept of the unity of the marital act and at the same time answered the exclusion question. Human love must mirror God's love, and God's love is not split apart. There are not two or more realities or purposes. It is one reality without divisions.

Further, if either the total self-gift is denied physically or intentionally (for example, an individual does not commit himself to permanence), or the life-giving potential is thwarted physically or intentionally, then it is not love any more. There is no love without the potential of new life. There are not two or more ways of loving. There is only one way. Love without a total self-gift, which is at least potentially life-giving, is not love.

John Paul II developed his theology of the family extensively in many of his addresses, documents, and books. It is only briefly sketched here. However, it does represent a new theological framework which recovers the tradition and yet answers the modern questions. It also sheds some light on the question of responsible parenthood.

Responsible Parenthood

Responsible parenthood is not NFP. NFP is fertility awareness. Responsible parenthood signifies the virtuous choice made by a married couple either to strive to procreate or to try to avoid conception while engaging in the marital

act. This choice is virtuous, that is, good, when it is in accordance with love. Since human love is a mirror of God's love, the choice by the spouses to strive to conceive or not to conceive is responsible when it is a reflection of God's generous love. Couples learn of God's generous love in the school of the theology of the family. Thus, the theology of the family can teach couples the norms for making virtuous choices regarding family size. The theology of the family is to responsible parenthood what the theology of the body is to NFP. There are then three stages or moments which point toward responsible parenthood: the theology of the body, NFP, and the theology of the family. These three can be taught and should be taught. But no one can *teach* responsible parenthood. These are the decisions which couples make in the privacy of their own homes in accordance with their own consciences.

Pope Paul VI has spoken of the "serious motives"¹⁶ which couples should have for avoiding a pregnancy. It is crucial to note that this need for "serious motives" does not apply to NFP (fertility awareness). Rather, it pertains to responsible parenthood. The Church has never taught that serious reasons should exist to teach people the truth about the world and themselves. Rather, people have a right to the truth. NFP is the transmission of the truth about human fertility. At the proper age, men and women have a right to this truth. Thus, NFP instructors do not need "serious motives" for teaching NFP to people, regardless of their marital status. Far from restricting their teaching, they are engaging in an apostolate which must be expanded to include as many people as possible.

It is also interesting that in *Familiaris Consortio* John Paul II did not use the phrase "serious motives" when speaking of responsible parenthood. In the past the magisterium has taught that couples, who have recourse to the infertile periods only, should have "serious motives." But this is not the usual language of John Paul II. Rather he saw the natural regulation of births as fidelity to "the Creator-person."¹⁷ In another passage, the Holy Father wrote that "responsible fatherhood and motherhood, understood integrally, is none other than an important element of all conjugal and family spirituality."¹⁸ John Paul II saw responsible parenthood as the fruit of a genuine familial

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spirituality, a familial holiness which is encouraged and developed through the theology of the body, NFP, and the theology of the family. Studying the profound mystery of the human person as an image of God, both in the person's individual existence (theology of the body and NFP) and in the family, a reflection of the Trinity (theology of the family), spouses will come to know themselves and God. They will know the truth about themselves as images of God. They will come to know something of the profound love which God has for them. Spouses will realize that they are called to act as he does. They will strive to respond to each other and to God with the same love and fidelity which he shows them. Gradually, a familial spirituality will develop in the spouses. Responsible parenthood flows from the familial spirituality which is developed through knowledge of the truth about man and God (theology of the body, NFP, and the theology of the family). As in so many other areas, John Paul II elucidated and clarified what lay behind previous magisterial teaching on responsible parenthood. If the language of "serious motives" has almost disappeared, it is because the Holy Father knew that these motives will exist as a matter of course if families respond to his challenge to learn the theology of the body, NFP, and the theology of the family.

Couples who have developed a familial spirituality and who are acting responsibly in planning their families will always accept the potential for new life while engaging in the marital act. If a responsible couple has decided to avoid a pregnancy for a time by having recourse to the infertile periods only, they still implicitly accept procreation as a purpose of the marital act. If a pregnancy should occur during an apparently infertile time, they will accept the child as a precious new life given by God.

The Church's constant teaching is that the procreative purpose may never be excluded in the physical or intentional orders. It must be accepted at least implicitly. While teaching that procreation can never be excluded, the Church also encourages responsible parenthood and the spacing of children through the application of fertility awareness. Therefore, the Church realizes that it is possible for couples, who have recourse to the infertile periods only, to accept, at least implicitly, the procreative purpose of the marital act.

The contracepting couple, on the other hand, has

excluded procreation physically and intentionally. Such a couple has said “No” to new life. The responsible couple has said to God, “We do not think this is the time, but if you wish a new life, we will accept that life.” There is a radical difference in these intentions. Not only do the natural methods of fertility regulation differ from the artificial means physically speaking, they also reflect radically different intentions. Contraception is not only anti-procreative in the physical order, it is also anti-procreative in the intentional order. As we have noted, those who have recourse to the infertile periods only should still at least implicitly intend procreation. In other words, those who use the natural methods and positively exclude life in the intentional order are not acting responsibly or virtuously. Theirs is a contraceptive mentality.

Conclusion

This point brings us back to the questions which began this booklet. In the second case, the NFP instructor couple were teaching a married couple who never intended to have any children. In the way the case was stated, the married couple was positively excluding procreation. Apparently the married couple was planning to use the natural methods in a contraceptive way, that is, they were intending to exclude children. The question was whether or not the NFP instructor couple could continue to teach them. Of course, the answer is clear because the instructor couple is merely teaching knowledge, i.e., fertility awareness. This is a truth which always should be taught. But perhaps more importantly, it is vital to remember that knowledge of this truth will usually encourage and develop virtue. If the NFP instructor couple is teaching fertility awareness in the context of the theology of the body and if they are giving some insights into the theology of the family, then the learner couple will, after a time, probably change their minds. They will come to know the truth about themselves and God and respond to that truth. They will no longer exclude procreation. Therefore, the instructor couple should always teach such couples.

The same answer could be given in the first case. An engaged couple taking an NFP class is involved in premarital

sex. First, the couple should know the truth about themselves. Second, this truth, if taught within the context of the theology of the body and of the family, will usually lead them to act more responsibly. Again, the instructor couple should continue to teach such couples.

The third case is similar to the first. A married couple with children has decided to avoid another child for irresponsible reasons. The question was whether a priest should counsel them against using the natural methods. Such advice would be more irresponsible than the couple's own action. The priest should teach the couple a little about the theology of the body and of the family. It would seem that their knowledge of fertility awareness was given without the proper context, that is, without the theology of the body and family, or that this particular couple did not understand that context. The priest should strive to introduce (or reintroduce) the theology of the body and of the family. It could also be that this particular couple rejected the theology of the body and of the family. But, if they come to ask the priest about their situation, it would seem that their attitudes may have already begun to change. This is all the more reason for him to teach them about the theology of the body and of the family. Of course, there will always be some who use the natural methods irresponsibly by excluding children in the intentional order. This failure is on the part of the irresponsible couples, not on the part of the instructor couples. Further, the best way to encourage these couples to act more responsibly is to teach them about themselves because, as we have seen, the truth leads to responsibility.

The last case concerned teenagers and whether fertility awareness should be taught to them. Clearly, it should be taught because knowledge of human sexuality taught in the context of the theology of the body and of the family will most often encourage virtue.

Before we conclude, one further point is essential. NFP does not require a Catholic instructor couple or a Catholic context. It should be taught together with the theology of the body and the theology of the family, but both of these depend on our creation in God's image, not on specifically Catholic doctrinal points. They can be presented to all men and women because all are created in God's image and likeness.

In light of the entire tradition of the Church, it is possible to see Pope John Paul II's significant contribution to the theology of marriage. Through his emphasis on human love as a reflection of God's love, he has taken the teaching of Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* and given it a new theological framework, which allows the unity of the purposes of the marital act to be again clearly understood. In addition, his theology of the body and of the family (the study of man as an image of God in his individual and communal existence) clarifies Paul VI's teaching on fertility awareness (NFP) and responsible parenthood. Is NFP good? Of course!

(Footnotes)

¹ See Pope John Paul II, "Jesus Christ, Living Peace and Living Justice" (Homily of His Holiness at the Mass in Yankee Stadium on October 2, 1979), *The Pope in America* (St. Paul: The Wanderer Press, 1979), p. 25.

² See 1 Corinthians 13:3.

³ See 1 Corinthians 6:13.

⁴ See Heribert Muehlen *Una Mystica Persona: Die Kirche als das Mysterium der heilsgeschichtlichen Identität des Heiligen Geistes in Christus und den Christen: Eine Person in vielen Personen*. Third edition (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schoeningh 1968), p. 117. The original reads, "Es ist offensichtlich, dass hier...nicht der blosse koerper gemeint ist...sondern das ganze 'Ich.'"

⁵ The above three paragraphs are substantially the same as a similar discussion in Hogan and LeVoir, *Covenant of Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), pp. 145-147.

⁶ For this historical discussion, we have relied heavily on the survey given in Lawler, Boyle, and May in *Catholic Sexual Ethics: A Summary, Explanation, and Defense* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1985), pp. 31-56.

⁷ See Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)*, no. 48.

⁸ See Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, no. 16.

⁹ See *Humanae Vitae*, no. 12.

¹⁰ See *Humanae Vitae*, no. 12.

- ¹¹ For a similar discussion, see Hogan, *The Wonder of Human Sexuality* (St. Paul: Leaflet Missal, 1985), pp. 9-12.
- ¹² See Hogan and LeVoir, *Covenant of Love*, pp. 259-260.
- ¹³ See Pope John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, no. 121, September 5, 1984: "Responsible Parenthood Linked to Moral Maturity," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition), vol. 17, no. 37.
- ¹⁴ See *Humanae Vitae*, no. 12.
- ¹⁵ See Hogan, *The Wonder of Human Sexuality*, pp. 19-20.
- ¹⁶ See *Humanae Vitae*, no. 16.
- ¹⁷ See Pope John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, no. 120, August 28, 1984: "A Discipline that Ennobles Human Love," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition), vol. 17, no. 36.
- ¹⁸ See Pope John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, no. 122, October 3, 1984: "Prayer, Penance and the Eucharist Are the Principal Sources of Spirituality for Married Couples," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition), vol. 17, no. 41.

