



Why Natural Family Planning?

A short testimony about the efficacy
and beauty of the Church's
teaching on Natural Family Planning

What is Natural Family Planning?

Natural Family Planning (NFP) is an umbrella term for certain methods used to achieve and avoid pregnancies. These methods are based on observation of the naturally occurring signs and symptoms of the fertile and infertile phases of a woman's menstrual cycle. Couples using NFP to avoid pregnancy abstain from intercourse and genital contact during the fertile phase of the woman's cycle. No drugs, devices, or surgical procedures are used to avoid pregnancy. NFP reflects the dignity of the human person within the context of marriage and family life, promotes openness to life, and recognizes the value of the child. By respecting the love-giving and life-giving natures of marriage, NFP can enrich the bond between husband and wife.

How does NFP work?

NFP instruction helps a couple identify the most opportune time to achieve as well as avoid a pregnancy. Understanding that intercourse or genital contact during the fertile time can result in pregnancy, couples using the natural methods must be clear regarding their family planning intention--that is, do they wish to achieve or avoid a pregnancy?

If a couple wishes to achieve pregnancy, they have intercourse during the fertile time. If a couple wishes to avoid pregnancy, they abstain from intercourse and any genital contact during the fertile time. No artificial methods are used during the fertile time. These would interfere with a woman's observation of her fertility signs.

Isn't NFP Just "Catholic Contraception"?

Each year on July 25th we celebrate the anniversary of Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*. Yes, I said celebrate. Contrary to popular belief, the Church wishes to celebrate the encyclical that affirms the long-standing and beautiful teaching that the sexual love between a husband and wife is meant for two purposes, to unite the couple more profoundly and to have their love take flesh in the form of new life.

Many believed that Pope Paul VI would allow for artificial means of birth control, and many still believe he should have. Still, there are others who say that the Church does allow for contraception under the name of Natural Family Planning ("NFP"), but is this true? Is NFP simply "Catholic Contraception"?

Pope Paul VI believed there was a significant difference, and St. John Paul II, building on his predecessor's teaching, articulated five main differences between NFP and contraception in his catechesis on human love in the divine plan that has come to be known as the theology of the body. In this series of articles, I will explain each of these differences.

The first difference can be called the "linguistic argument." In John Paul's view of the human person, the body is not just a collection of cells that happens to be connected to an invisible soul. Rather, the body is what actually communicates and makes visible the soul. The body makes present the invisible mystery of a person's maleness or femaleness, the two equal but different ways of existing as a human person. You might say that the body speaks a "language."

We recognize this truth in so many ways. In fact, nonverbal communication is incredibly powerful and, often times, reveals the truth of a situation far more convincingly than verbal

communication. Think of a child who tells his mom that everything is “fine,” but his body language communicates sadness through shrugged shoulders, a slumped posture, and a frown as big as a clown in face paint. Any good mother would not believe the empty verbal response of “fine” and but instead would believe what the rest of the body is communicating. We would say that the child’s body is revealing the truth of whole person.

Bodily gestures, like a kiss, communicate affection. This is why Jesus remarks to Judas that he is betraying the Son of Man with a kiss. A kiss is not meant to communicate betrayal and, in the case of Judas, is an ironic and false communication. In John Paul’s thought, body language can speak truths or falsehood in the same way that words do, so it is important to always speak the truth with our bodies. For John Paul, the conjugal act between a husband and wife says in a bodily way what the couple expressed in words at the altar on the day of their wedding. It is a renewal of their wedding vows each time the couple comes together to have this most “intimate conversation.”

In the wedding vows, the couple pledges to give the entirety of their lives to one another as a complete gift of self. The language of the marital act says the same thing, but through the language of the body.

With contraception, the language of the body goes from a language of giving everything to a language of withholding. What is withheld? When a couple contracepts, they say to each other, “I give you everything but my fertility.” Contraception makes the renewal of vows into a partial gift instead of the complete gift which was expressed at the altar.

Obviously, most couples who have contracepted did not intend to speak a language that contradicted their wedding vows. They most likely were a victim of the surrounding culture that offers contraception as the “only reasonable option.” Hopefully, this series of articles will dispel some of the myths about Natural Family Planning and allow couples to find a new hope and way to rejoice in the renewal of their wedding vows.

Many couples are changing the course of their marriage by reconsidering the choice of how to regulate births—and are looking into NFP as a reasonable option. If you have practiced NFP, chances are you know someone who has doubts about it. It is not always easy to have conversations about the beauty and gift that NFP can be to a marriage. Hopefully, this series of articles will better equip you to have meaningful conversations with friends and loved ones.

The truth is that NFP is a treasure that is waiting to be discovered and a source of good news for couples!

NFP: What's the "Use"?

In the last section recalled St. John Paul II’s first reason why natural family planning (“NFP”) differs from contraception. Namely, contraception speaks a “language” contrary to that of NFP. Contraception contradicts the “body language” of sexual union as a complete gift of self and a total reception of one’s spouse. Meanwhile, NFP speaks a language of openness to each other as husband and wife. With NFP, a total gift is given and received, which remains faithful to the language given in the marriage vows.

The second reason John Paul develops is similar, but he offers a further distinction based on his deep respect and understanding of human dignity. Because of their dignity as persons, men and women should never be used. The only proper response to a human person is love and acceptance. In the mind of the Holy Father, the opposite of love is “use,” not hate.

We understand this truth instinctively. Think about your reaction to a tragedy being exploited for political gain, or a family member performing acts of kindness simply to get written into the millionaire uncle's will. Situations like these make us angry, because we perceive that persons should be accepted and loved not merely for what they can do or produce, but rather for being who they are. If this is true in ordinary human interactions, how much more should this principle apply to marriage, the most intimate of relationships?

Obviously, spouses do not set out to "use" one another through the marital act. However, because the conjugal act is supposed to be a complete gift of self, to make a partial gift or to receive a partial gift where one's fertility is withheld or rejected is contrary to the full love and acceptance that one's spouse deserves. A contracepted union is not a true union. It reduces the attempted union of husband and wife to a mere activity where each is using each other for a pleasurable goal.

Surely we're not denying that the conjugal act is pleasurable. Yet, when it is divorced from the true union of the spouses, then it necessarily involves selfishly using each other. In other words, it places the focus on "what am I getting out of this" instead of "what can I give my beloved." It's beneath a person's dignity to give only a partial gift of self or to receive only a partial gift. The contraceptive mentality reduces love from the unconditional love that we all desire to a conditional love or use, which is the opposite of love. Using each other is not in keeping with our human dignity.

The beauty of NFP is that it opens up spouses to a greater respect and understanding of each other. NFP allows for the total giving and receiving of the gift. Speaking as a man, I can honestly say that learning the ups and downs of how my wife's body works has increased my respect for her and indeed, enhanced my respect for all women. I am in awe of how beautifully and wonderfully made women are. As I look out into the culture, it seems to me that there is a great lack of respect and understanding between men and women, and I wonder if that could be remedied somewhat if we were more open to the gift of NFP.

So why is fertility so integral to our human dignity?

NFP vs. Contraception: R-E-S-P-E-C-T

My wife Libby and I were married in the summer of 2003. The following spring we settled into a new job, and we moved from our little one bedroom apartment and into our first house. We decided the time was right to attempt the parenting thing.

Because we had been practicing NFP, we knew how to maximize our opportunity for conceiving a child. It was scary and exhilarating at the same time. We didn't know if we would be good parents or if we would even be able to conceive a child. Yet when we came together as husband and wife with the specific intention of conceiving a child, our marriage was deepened. The experience raised to a whole new level our respect for each other and our sense of awe at the greatness of God for His plan of sexual love. We discovered that our potential fertility was not merely an accidental part of the human experience, but rather expressed something amazing about us as persons made in the image and likeness of God.

"Wow, we are attempting to cooperate with the Creator of the universe in the creation of new life that will exist forever! Who are we that we should be able to do this?!"

For St. John Paul II, fertility is not accidental, but existential. It is an expression of the human person. To withhold or reject fertility is to withhold or reject the whole person. While fertility can be studied through biology, it is not simply biological. Rather, sex and fertility are at the core of our entire being.

For anyone who has suffered the cross of infertility or knows someone who suffers with this cross, John Paul's perspective makes all the sense in the world. Very close friends of ours have carried the cross of infertility for a number of years. It is precisely because fertility is at their core that their suffering is so great. If fertility were merely accidental, it would not be so difficult. They long deeply to bring another child into this world as a reflection and permanent reminder of their married love. Their prayer is that they would have fertility to give to one another. They cannot imagine keeping it from the other.

As a parent, I feel a deep sadness when my son shares with me something that he does not like about himself. My daughter is only 4, and my prayer is that she always knows the truth of her beauty and goodness, especially when she reaches the teen years and is tempted to find flaws in the way she looks. To boil it down, contraception says, "I don't like my fertility, and I don't want to share it with you." Our heavenly Father sees fertility as a beautiful part of who He created us to be. It saddens the Heart of God when we don't appreciate how wonderfully made we are.

For John Paul, the difference between NFP and contraception involves two opposed concepts of the human person. Contraception views fertility as a disease, and therefore, must be suppressed. NFP views fertility as an integral part of the human person (see *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 32). Fertility is not something to be ashamed of or rejected, but joyfully embraced as a gift from God. NFP allows a couple to responsibly cooperate with the Creator in bringing forth new life. What an incredible dignity God bestows on us creatures in allowing us to participate in the creation of a person who will exist forever! NFP cultivates a respect for this human dignity not only toward our spouse, but also our children.

The respect does not stop there, though. NFP cultivates a greater respect and appreciation for every human person, because it fosters the realization that every person is made in the image of God.

As we watch the evening news and see war in the Holy Land, conflict between Russia and the Ukraine, and poverty on the rise here in the homeland, we are challenged to have a greater appreciation for human dignity. We may not be able to do extraordinary things to change the course of history on a large scale, but we can allow our own minds and hearts to be changed and softened toward our fellow humans. NFP is a path to foster mutual respect and soften us to see every person as our brother and sister.

Granted, it is a small step, but doesn't the journey of a thousand miles begin with the first small step? It seems too simple and not drastic enough, but if we are not willing to change as Christians, how can we expect non-Christians to have a greater respect for their fellow humans? To this point, St. Ignatius of Loyola said, "He who goes about to reform the world must begin with himself." Let's increase the level of respect in our own families and neighborhoods and do our part to build a culture worthy of our great dignity.

You Can't Give What You Don't Have

One of the common objections we hear to using Natural Family Planning ("NFP") is, "I want to be able to have sex whenever I want to, and the birth control pill allows me to do that."

The desire to be “one-flesh” with one’s spouse is understandable and even noble. In fact, God has attached the greatest of pleasure to sexual union because He wants married couples to engage in this most intimate of conversations. It may sound scandalous, but God truly desires that husbands and wives make love, and it brings Him great joy when they do so, provided their coming together is serving to bring them closer together and not driving them apart.

Given a choice, my four-year old daughter Maggie would have ice cream for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Most reasonable parents would never in a million years let their children have ice cream as their main food source. While Libby and I are not perfect parents by any stretch of the imagination, we are “reasonable parents” in this area. Maggie eats foods other than ice cream much to her disappointment. I hope she will thank us later. Everyone agrees that eating whatever you want and whenever you want will not make you happy in the long run. Ice cream can be a most enjoyable dessert on the appropriate occasion. It takes discipline to discover the right time and place to enjoy this delicious treat.

Just as ice cream should be enjoyed at the right times and for its intended purpose, so should the sexual union of husband and wife. Sexual union is not intended to be an “on demand” feature of the married relationship. Unfortunately, our culture has developed an “on demand” mentality for all sorts of things: music on Spotify, movies on Netflix, television shows on the DVR, and Google with information. The pervasive “on demand” thread of the culture can penetrate the fabric of the married relationship. Contraception fosters the “on demand” mindset because its underlying assumption is that “sex is just another activity that my wife and I do, and therefore, we should be able to do it whenever we want.”

Much like my daughter, Maggie, is being shortsighted when she wants ice cream at every meal, “on demand” sex is not good for the health of a marriage. The truth is that sex is not just another activity, but it is the most intimate of conversations that involves the entirety of the spouses; it is a total gift of self. An “on demand” attitude reduces the meaning of sex to self-gratification.

NFP fosters the necessary virtues that help couples realize the true gift of the marital embrace. The fostering of virtue is the fourth reason why St. John Paul II believed that NFP is different from contraception.

With NFP, the couple has the opportunity each month through conversation with God and each other to ask the question, “Is this the right time to come together?” NFP allows the couple to know the woman’s fertility, and therefore, if the couple has discerned that it is not the right time to have a child, then they abstain from the sexual union during the fertile time. If they have discerned that it may be the right time to bring a child into the world, then they come together during the fertile time.

NFP maintains the proper respect for the dignity of the spouse because it allows the couple to maintain the discipline of coming together when the couple has mutually agreed to do so. In other words, sometimes the couple has to say “no.” Contrary to pop culture’s belief, saying “no” is possible, and even good under some circumstances, as it communicates to the spouse, “You are worth waiting for!”

I’m certainly not saying that couples should limit their sexual union unnecessarily, but NFP does open the couple to the possibility of saying “no” for the good of the other. JP II was convinced that NFP helps build the character of the couple and in particular helps spouses grow in self-mastery. Why was self-mastery so important to him?

Because self-mastery leads to greater freedom! In the eyes of the world, freedom is doing whatever you want whenever you want, but true freedom lies in the ability to do what is good. When a husband learns to temper his desires for sexual union because his wife is unable to come together, JP II would say he grows in possession of himself. Only when one possesses himself can he make a true gift of himself out of love.

Think about it in these terms: I can only give something I possess; I can't give what I don't have. NFP teaches me as a husband to always think and do what is best for my wife. It makes me a better man. If I am unable to say no to a sexual urge, then am I truly a free man? Only slaves and addicts are unable to say no.

And if I am unable to say no, what does my "yes" really mean?

Contraception leads a couple down the road of slavery and addiction where they are not free to focus on what is good for the other. Instead, it builds a culture of instant gratification within the relationship.

Our culture rightly puts a high premium on freedom, but we must be careful as to how we define this important word. Fortunately, we do not have to settle for a counterfeit version of freedom. JP II invites married couples to embrace the fullness of genuine freedom offered by NFP—a freedom expressed in mutual, sacrificial love that seeks the true good of our spouse.

To Know or Not to Know?

On January 21, 2005, my wife and I left St. Joseph's hospital in St. Paul, MN with our newborn son, Isaac. The adventure was about to begin both literally and figuratively. Literally, we were venturing out into a Minnesota snowstorm, and figuratively, we were venturing into the world of parenting. We survived the literal journey home and the jury is still out on whether we will survive the figurative one. I remember thinking when we left the hospital, "So . . . they are just going to let us take him home, eh?"

That question was a sign of the insecurity that Libby and I had about the world of parenting.

However, when we made it to our house, I remember turning on the stereo and listening to Frank Sinatra sing the song from Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*. The title of the song is "Soliloquy," and it is all about a new father and his optimism, excitement, and pride for the future of a newborn son. As I danced around the living room holding my son and singing as loudly as I could to the blaring music, I could summarize my feelings as, "This fatherhood thing is new, but I like it!" In the midst of the chaos, I found a new confidence in myself and a desire to do whatever possible to sacrifice for the good of Libby and Isaac.

I had a level of self-knowledge that I never had previously. My lived experience was matching up to St. John Paul II's fifth reason for the difference between natural family planning ("NFP") and contraception. Let me explain.

John Paul's first few arguments for maintaining the integrity of the unitive and procreative dimensions of the marital act certainly make sense on a natural level, but he also argues that NFP is confirmed through divine Revelation. What does that have to do with my newfound confidence and self-knowledge? Specifically, John Paul points to Genesis 4:1, which is the passage where Adam comes to know his wife, Eve, and they conceive and bear a son. John Paul points out that this "knowing" is not merely a euphemism for having intercourse, but rather involves a much deeper knowledge of self and one's spouse. It is exactly the kind of knowledge

I experienced after we brought Isaac home.

To put it simply, a whole new level of who I am came alive when I became a father.

It is like opening a door to a room that I didn't know existed. I opened the door, and I began to explore the wonder of the room.

Isaac's birth also opened the door to see a whole new side of Libby. I saw my love for her deepen in a way that I didn't know was possible. To use the same analogy, Isaac was the key that opened the door to a new room in Libby's heart. I discovered her tender and gentle motherly compassion that never had an outlet before Isaac came into our lives.

The gift of parenting also opens our eyes to the knowledge of how important we are in God's plans. We discover the dignity of being called to cooperate in the creation of new human life. We realize that when God commands Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply," it is not just to populate the earth. Rather, it is one of the ways that God reveals the depth of His love for us. He commands us to do what is good for us and what we will find truly rewarding and joyful.

John Paul cites this biblical passage to illustrate the importance of connecting sex and babies. NFP gives hopeful couples the great knowledge of how to maximize their fertility and conceive a child "with the help of the Lord" as Adam and Eve did.

When we disconnect sex from babies, it is too easy to miss the beauty of God's goodness in both the conjugal act and the gift of children. We can take for granted and miss the tremendous blessing of both. The Church does not want anyone to miss the goodness of God, and that is the motive for all her teachings. Love for her children is the interpretive lens through which we should view any difficult teaching of the Church. The motivation is never, "I want to ruin someone's fun."

For me, I know that I always want people, especially my children, to give Libby the benefit of the doubt in everything. My default position is, "if they only knew Libby like I know Libby," they would understand why she is doing or saying that." Our kids don't always accept it initially, but after they have time for her discipline to sink in, they realize that their mom loves them very much and is acting in their best interest. My spousal knowledge inclines me to assume the best in her.

The same principle is true of Christ and His spousal relationship to the Church. God wants all of His children to love the Church like He does and trust that she always has our eternal happiness in mind.

As I have tried to explain over the past few weeks, the Church certainly has good reasons for her support of NFP and for insisting that contraception is not good for a relationship. First, NFP allows a couple to speak a language of truth to one another through the language of the body. Second, NFP respects the great dignity that couples have as humans made in the image and likeness of God. Third, NFP allows a couple to respect their fertility as an integral part of who they are. Fourth, NFP builds the character of the couple who use it. Lastly, NFP is consistent with biblical Revelation.

Pope John Paul II spent much time in his early priesthood with young married couples. He was a keen observer of the many joyful marriages he witnessed. He once remarked that he "fell in love with human love." Even though JP II was one of the most brilliant theologians and philosophers in the 2,000-year history of the Church, some of his greatest insights and contributions to the Church came from spending time falling in love with human love and witnessing firsthand the beautiful gift of married love lived well.

May we as the Church learn about authentic human love from JP II and not settle for a counterfeit

version.



About the Author

Brad DuPont is a consultant for the Office of Marriage and Family Life for the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas. He credits Dr. John Grabowski's talk at the 2014 Theology of the Body Congress, "Something Old, Something New: Tradition and Development of Doctrine in the Theology of the Body's Teaching on Marriage" for inspiring this series of articles.

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