

THE NFP CHALLENGE

There are myths and misunderstandings aplenty when it comes to the Church's teaching on birth regulation. Most ministers, and even many priests, feel a responsibility to tell engaged couples about the good stewardship of using contraception to delay or limit the size of their families. Why, then, does the Church consider contraception a sin? The reason is that contraception prevents a married couple from being fully open to God's gift of children. God is the author and giver of life, which he gives the instant the man's sperm and the woman's egg unite. To block this process through artificial means, or to destroy the sperm and egg after they are joined, is to exclude God's right and part in the matter of procreation. Usurping his right reduces intercourse to a mere act of pleasure and eliminates the need of responsible stewardship of one's sexuality. By using contraception, men and women can enjoy promiscuity without procreation. Contraception, then, is inherently selfish. On the other hand, according to the experts--the husbands who partner with their wives to use natural, moral methods to plan or space their babies--the truth about natural family planning can transform a man's marriage, life, and faith.

For couples who dare to take the NFP challenge, here are some facts and fictions:

Myth: NFP increases the chance for a lifelong marriage. Fact: NFP doesn't just increase that chance, it knocks it out of the ballpark. NFP users have a 100 times better chance of staying married than the average American couple. "Once hailed as a boon to marriage, contraception is like a poison that eats away at love. Through contraception, the total self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid by an objective contradictory language. The act says, 'I'm yours,' but then you're adding 'except for that [your fertility].' And things start to deteriorate. When you lie with your body, it is at a level so deep and profound that it will affect everything." Rev. Richard H. Hogan.

Myth: With its charts and graphs, NFP makes marital relations a clinical exercise. Fact: NFP inspires awe between husband and wife. In NFP classes, "You learn a lot about how ovulation works, how the other forms of birth control work, how they affect the woman, and how they affect the unborn child, and that's a very important thing to me." Bill Johnson. He has learned, for example, that the contraceptive pill not only prevents ovulation but also can cause early abortions after life is conceived. What a man and a woman learn about each other through NFP gives them a glimpse of God. "The man discovers in a very significant way some very important hidden aspects of his spouse or his future wife, and she discovers something about him that she didn't know before." Rev. Hogan

Myth: NFP harms marriage through lack of physical intimacy. Fact: NFP helps marriage through increased delight in intimacy. According to a Family of the Americas Foundation (FAF) study, a worldwide organization that promotes the ovulation method of NFP, NFP couples have more frequent marital relations than those in the general population. "Contraception diminishes love, and less love means less interest. If sex for

pleasure is like dessert, after awhile, how much ice cream can you eat?" Rev. Hogan.

NFP husbands admit the regular periods of abstinence can be a challenge. But they say the constraint increases their appreciation for the marital act, making each occasion of embrace like a new honeymoon. In the meantime, they learn to show love in other ways. "Sex is not always just there at the drop of a hat for your own pleasure and your own gratification." Scott Lash Bill Johnson cites another unexpected benefit of practicing abstinence through natural family planning. He can make a convincing case for premarital sexual abstinence to his own children, some of whom will soon be teenagers. "It gives me a good feeling to know that I am practicing self-control. In terms of talking with my children, it is not like I'm asking them to do things that I'm not willing to do."

Myth: NFP is only for Catholic couples. Fact: NFP is for anyone who wants to be a better Christian. Rex Moses was a Protestant evangelical who went along with NFP to please his wife. A Baptist, she was not troubled with the moral aspects of birth control but was unhappy with the physical effects. One day, Moses happened upon a newsletter of the Couple to Couple League (CCL), which trains couples in the sympto-thermal method of NFP. Suddenly, Moses said he came to terms with the "profundity of the traditional Christian/Catholic doctrine on contraception." "When I realized virtually all of Protestantism had been washed out to sea [on the issue of birth control]...it caused me to come to grips with the possibility that it is the Catholic Church through which the Holy Spirit has preserved truth."

Myth: NFP users have larger families because the method doesn't work. Fact: NFP users have larger families because they want to. Both NFP and contraception can result in surprise pregnancies, although NFP and hormonal birth control methods like the pill have a better than 97% success rate when used correctly. Yet, compared to the average population, NFP users have larger families. In the FAF survey, three children is the most common number for NFP users, whereas two children is the most common for the average woman. Twice as many NFP users had four children than did the average woman (18% compared with 9%). By its nature, NFP assists couples in being generously open to life. "The self-giving love of husband and wife includes the possibility of children." Rev. Hogan. But, even when desired, that possibility is not guaranteed. People can actually have a problem not in thwarting conception but achieving it.

Myth. NFP is only for good marriages. Fact: NFP makes marriages good. There is always hope for a marriage that has started off wrong or gotten off track along the way. "Grace is incredibly powerful here. With God, you make one little baby step, and he's right there next to you. For some people, that step is a huge leap of faith." Rev. Hogan.

--Ellen Rossini, freelance writer, edited by Patrick J. Hession