

Natural Family Planning: Why and What

by *Theresa Notare*

When it comes to sex and birth control, you may have heard that the Catholic Church says a resounding “NO!” This myth couldn’t be further from the truth. Catholic teaching on love, sex and “responsible parenthood” is a resounding “YES!”—to God’s plan for men and women.

Natural family planning is part of this “Yes” because it respects God’s plan for married love. Let’s take a look.

—God’s plan for married love

God designed married love to be total, fruitful, faithful and exclusive. It mirrors God’s own Trinitarian love. This means that husband and wife offer themselves to each other as a gift. There is no “taking” here, just “offering” and “receiving.”

There is no exclusion of God’s gifts, like denying God’s will, the nature of marriage, one’s person or fertility. Anything that counters the meaning and integrity of the marital act and God’s call for life is avoided (e.g. artificial contraception, sterilization, pornography, in vitro fertilization or surrogacy).

God willed that married love involves the entire person, including reason, a well-formed conscience in God’s truth and fertility. It also means that husband and wife understand that openness to new human life is not an “add on” but an essential element of married life—indeed God himself entrusted husband and wife with the gift of life.

This is true whether a couple is fertile or not. When discerning if God is calling them to bring new life into the world, this also means that married couples ought not treat it casually.

What does all this have to do with natural family planning (NFP)? Catholic teaching on the nature of human sexuality, marriage, conjugal love and responsible parenthood reflects God’s loving design.

The significance of NFP is that it is the instrument to help husband and wife live that reality. NFP respects God’s plan, doing nothing to obstruct his design. That is why the Church supports NFP use in marriage.

—NFP science

NFP is the general title for the scientific and moral methods of family planning that can help married couples either achieve or postpone a pregnancy. NFP methods provide fertility education that is informative and practical.

The facts of human reproduction form the basis of all NFP methods. Specifically, NFP methods attempt to identify the fertile window of husband and wife.

The fertile window is the combination of information about the woman’s day of fertility (ovulation, which occurs only within a 12-hour to 24-hour period) and that of the man’s fertility (sperm, which can live in a fertile woman’s body for up to five days).

When a woman is fertile, her reproductive hormones will send messages that yield specific and observable signs. Recognizing the pattern of those physical signs forms the basis for most NFP methods.

—NFP methodology

NFP methods provide guidelines to help couples pinpoint their “fertile window.”

Most methods teach couples how to track this information. How well a couple follows their method’s

guidelines will determine the effectiveness. When a couple discerns that God is calling them to conceive, they may use the fertile window for conjugal relations.

Conversely, when spouses discern that it is time to avoid a pregnancy, they will abstain from sex during this time. Periodic sexual abstinence is the NFP means to avoid a pregnancy. No drugs, devices or surgical procedures are ever used.

Does NFP work?

Any couple can use NFP. The key is to learn the method well, be aware of your family planning intention (achieving or avoiding pregnancy), cooperate with each other and apply the guidelines consistently.

NFP does not depend upon a woman having regular menstrual cycles. That said, sometimes couples may need help when they can't easily interpret their fertile signs or are in a special reproductive circumstance, such as breastfeeding. In those cases, NFP teachers can assist.

When looking for an NFP method to learn, you should know that there is no "best method." All NFP methods are based on solid science. Choosing a method depends upon how much fertility information a couple needs and can live with!

—Who's who?

Each NFP system is organized according to the information that they teach.

There are methods that teach how to interpret only the cervical mucus sign. Others teach multiple fertility signs (sympto-thermal). Still others are called sympto-hormonal because they include information from a fertility monitor. And a few do not teach the signs of fertility but instead rely upon mathematical formulas of real NFP charts.

In the United States, there are a number of NFP providers. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website provides a list of these providers (www.usccb.org/nfp/awareness-week/nfp-providers.cfm).

—Give NFP a chance!

NFP provides sound fertility education. It is environmentally safe and has no harmful side effects. NFP education is also economical. Most providers charge fees for instruction and any resources—that's it!

Most important, NFP respects God's plan for marriage. It promotes spousal respect, chastity and mindfulness of God's will. It may not always be easy, but if a couple perseveres, NFP can help to strengthen their relationship with each other and God.

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