

ETHICS & MEDICS

A Commentary of The National Catholic Bioethics Center on Health Care and the Life Sciences

FAMILY PLANNING AS NATURE INTENDED

A family should be planned. Many people incorrectly think that Catholic teaching is “to breed like bunny rabbits” and would even wrongly invoke God’s command in Genesis 1:28 to “go forth and multiply.” Pope John Paul II stated that, “unfortunately, Catholic thought is often misunderstood on this point, as if the Church supported an ideology of fertility at all costs, urging married couples to procreate indiscriminately and without thought for the future. But one need only study the pronouncements of the Magisterium to know that this is not so.”¹ A married couple has a serious task in deciding just how many children to responsibly bring into the world.

Deciding to Have a Child

The Second Vatican Council, in its document *Gaudium et spes*, gives the couple some helpful advice:

Let them thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which the future may bring. For this accounting they need to reckon with both the material and the spiritual conditions of the times as well as of their state in life. Finally, they should consult the interests of the family group, of temporal society, and of the Church herself. The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God.²

John Paul II also provided guidance to husbands and wives:

In deciding whether or not to have a child, [spouses] must not be motivated by selfishness or carelessness, but by a prudent, conscious generosity that weighs the possibilities and circumstances, and especially gives priority to the welfare of the unborn child. Therefore, when there is a reason not to procreate, this choice is permissible and may even be necessary. However, there remains the duty of carrying it out with criteria and methods that respect the total truth of the marital act in its unitive and procreative dimension, as wisely regulated by nature itself in its biological rhythms. One can comply with them and use them to advantage, but they cannot be “violated” by artificial interference.³

Responsible parenthood means that the parents take into consideration their physical, economic, psychological, and social conditions when deciding how many children to have and when to have them.⁴

Physical conditions include the couple’s bodily health and capacity to raise a child. It might be that the spouses are young and in their physical prime and in good health

and thus decide that it is prudent to try to have a child. In other situations, there may be maternal or paternal health factors (such as the need to recover following a major debilitating illness or the discovery of metastatic cancer) which could lead the couple to decide to postpone having children for the present time or even indefinitely.

Economic factors may lead a couple to recognize that they have been blessed by economic prosperity and desire to go against a mentality that often overemphasizes pleasure and well-being to the detriment of the sacrifice inherent in having a child. Or if a couple is suffering from severe financial hardship or is in an instable transitional period (such as spouses in graduate school), then the couple might decide that they cannot responsibly bring another child into the world at this time.⁵

Psychological reasons may encourage a couple to have more children—perhaps the couple sees that having another child would be to the psychological benefit of an existing offspring. Or there are instances where having another child could bring excessive anxiety to the family, for example, if the mother or father are already overburdened or are already caring for children with special needs, or if they suffer from the “debilitating stress that can arise from having a large family in societies where large families are no longer valued.”⁶

Social factors concern the cultural environment, which could be blooming and thus encouraging a couple to bring forth new life. Or it may be that the social conditions are unsuitable, such as a state of war or severe shortage of food.

All of these conditions need to be considered so that the couple can make an informed decision to have another child or to delay childbearing for the foreseeable future.

Modern Natural Family Planning Methods

The basic principle underlying natural family planning is that the female body naturally follows a biological rhythm consisting of monthly cycles and that a woman is fertile only at certain times during each cycle. There are

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certain changes in a woman's body that can help her to know which stage of her cycle she is in: most noticeably, that her body temperature rises prior to ovulation and that the consistency of her cervical mucus becomes thinner during the fertile period.

The secret of natural family planning is to determine when the woman is fertile and when she is not; thus most of the methods are known as fertility-awareness-based methods. There are six generally accepted natural family planning methods: basal body temperature method, Billings Ovulation Method, Two-Day method (this is a new method that is still under evaluation), Sympto-thermal Method, Standard Days method, and Lactational Amenorrhea Method. Temperature observation is the basis of the basal body temperature method. The Billings Ovulation Method and the Two-Day Method rely on observations of the changes in cervical mucus. The Sympto-thermal Method involves observation of both temperature and cervical mucus. The Standard Days method calculates statistically when the woman is known to be fertile (on days eight through nineteen of her cycle). The Lactational Amenorrhea Method relies on the natural period of infertility during breast feeding post-partum. Planned Parenthood even notes that, when used correctly, natural family planning methods are 95 percent to 99.6 percent effective.⁷

Advantages of Natural Family Planning

It is possible to misuse natural family planning methods by having a "contraceptive mentality," for example, when a couple avoids the birth of a child for selfish reasons. But when used correctly, natural family planning methods are a way of spacing births that the Church wholeheartedly approves. Thus it is important to educate couples about these methods so they can responsibly plan their families and have the number of children they desire.

There are also many benefits to the couple who uses natural family planning in their marriage. Archbishop Antonio Ledesma, SJ, of Cagayan de Oro, Philippines, offers ten advantages of using natural family planning methods:

1. Normal intercourse is preserved. Couples can plan the size of their families and space births the natural way. They do not resort to artificial means.
2. NFP is morally acceptable to people of all religions and cultures. It does not separate the love-giving and life-giving dimensions of the marriage act. The unitive and procreative ends of marriage are kept whole.
3. There are no inherent health risks in NFP methods. No pills, drugs, injections, devices or operations are used. A healthy body does not need this kind of "medical" treatment.
4. Modern NFP methods are effective and reliable. They are based on scientific studies and are time-tested. Simplified methods are easy to learn. Some NFP methods may be combined to reinforce each other.
5. There is no cost involved once the method has been learned. Couples are empowered not to rely on health centers, donor agencies, or drugstores. NFP is pro-poor, and not for profit of outside companies.

6. NFP becomes sustainable from generation to generation. Mothers can readily pass on the practice of NFP to their daughters.

7. NFP involves a joint decision by the couple. Neither partner feels being used by the other. It is an ideal way of exercising shared parenthood. A "contraceptive mentality" is avoided.

8. NFP engenders sexual discipline for the spouses through periodic abstinence. The practice of NFP manifests a conscious familiarity with the natural rhythm of the human body, mutual caring between the spouses, and the development of self-control that is carried over in the upbringing of the children.

9. Couples who use NFP seldom or never resort to abortion. They manifest an innate respect for human life. They welcome every child as a gift from God—even in the eventuality of an unexpected pregnancy.

10. Couples who use NFP seldom or never end up in separation or divorce. NFP enhances communication between spouses and promotes a wholesome family life.⁸

The New Evangelization

Much ignorance surrounds natural family planning. Just ask any body to name even one *modern* method of NFP; most people probably cannot name any. (And do not give them a point for "the rhythm method," because it was introduced in the 1930s.) Most medical, nursing, and theology schools give scant attention to natural family planning. No wonder it is a rarity, then, to find a serious and credible NFP program in a hospital, community health center, or parish. Sadly, many international organizations ignore natural family planning and instead put billions of dollars into spreading contraception. It is hardly surprising that only a minority of Catholic couples are using natural family planning as a means to plan their family.

What is needed is a renewed effort. Perhaps we could even consider it part of the new evangelization to provide education regarding the various methods of natural family planning. Until this occurs, the vast majority of Catholic couples will continue to think that the only way to plan the size of their family is to use contraception.

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¹John Paul II, "Parents Are God's Co-workers," Sunday Angelus meditation, July 17, 1994," *L'Osservatore Romano*, English ed., July 20, 1994.

²Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes* (December 7, 1965), n. 50. See also, Paul VI, *Humanae vitae* (July 25, 1968), n. 10.

³John Paul II, "Parents Are God's Co-workers."

⁴Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, n. 10.

⁵See "Reasons for Postponing a Pregnancy: More on Ventilator Care," *Zenit*, June 30, 2010, <http://www.zenit.org/article-29757?l=english>.

⁶See *Ibid*.

⁷Planned Parenthood website, "Fertility Awareness-Based Methods (FAMs)," <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/health-topics/birth-control/fertility-awareness-4217.htm>.

⁸Antonio J. Ledesma, "Pastoral Guidelines and Core Values in NFP Promotion," *Pastoral Companion* (blog), April 30, 2009, <http://archbishopledesma.blogspot.com/2009/04/pastoral-guidelines-and-core-values-in.html>.