



Married Love and the Gift of Life

Getting married. What a blessed and hope-filled time.

Men and women considering marriage yearn for certain things. They want to be accepted unconditionally by each other. They want their marriage to be filled with love and happiness. They want a family. In short, they want their marriage to be a source of joy and fulfillment their whole life long.

God's plan for marriage, from the time he first created human beings as male and female, has always included all this and more. The desire and ability of a man and woman to form a lasting bond of love and life in marriage is written into their nature.

In the *Rite of Marriage* (1969) a man and woman are asked if they will love one another faithfully and totally—in short, if they will love as God loves. “Have you come here freely and without reservation to give yourselves to each other in marriage?” asks the bishop, priest, or deacon. “Will you love and honor each other as man and wife for the rest of your lives? Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?” These are different ways of asking the same basic question: Are you ready to accept this person, and all that may come from your union, completely and forever?

The spouses seal their love and commitment through their sexual union. Many today find it difficult to understand how profound and meaningful this union is, how it embodies these promises of marriage. Our culture often presents sex as merely recreational, not as a deeply personal or even important encounter between spouses. In this view, being responsible about sex

simply means limiting its consequences—avoiding disease and using contraceptives to prevent pregnancy.

This cultural view is impoverished, even sad. It fails to account for the true needs and deepest desires of men and women. Living in accord with this view has caused much loneliness and many broken hearts.

God’s plan for married life and love is far richer and more fulfilling. Here sexuality is the source of a joy and pleasure that helps the spouses give themselves to each other completely and for their entire lives.

What does the Church teach about married love?

Marriage is more than a civil contract; it is a lifelong covenant of love between a man and a woman. It is an intimate partnership in which husbands and wives learn to give and receive love unselfishly, and then teach their children to do so as well. Christian marriage in particular is a “great mystery,” a sign of the love between Christ and his Church (Eph 5:32).

Married love is powerfully embodied in the spouses’ sexual relationship, when they most fully express what it means to become “one body” (Gn 2:24) or “one flesh” (Mk 10:8, Mt 19:6). The Church teaches that the sexual union of husband and wife is meant to express the full meaning of love, its power to bind a couple together and its openness to new life. When Scripture portrays God creating mankind “in his image” (Gn 1:27), it treats the union of man and woman as joining two persons equal in human dignity (“This one, at last, is bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh,” Gn 2:23), and as being open to the blessing of children (“Be fertile and multiply,” Gn 1:28).

What does this have to do with contraception?

A husband and wife express their committed love not only with words, but with the language of their bodies. That “body language”—what a husband and wife say to one another through the intimacy of sexual relations—speaks of *total* commitment and openness to a future together. So the question about contraception is this: Does sexual intercourse using contraception faithfully affirm this committed love? Or does it introduce a false note into this conversation?

Married love differs from any other love in the world. By its nature, the love of husband and wife is so complete, so ordered to a lifetime of communion with God and each other, that it is open to creating a new human being they will love and care for together. Part of God’s gift to husband and wife is this ability in and through their love to cooperate with God’s creative power. Therefore, the mutual gift of fertility is an integral part of the bonding power of marital intercourse. That power to create a new life with God is at the heart of what spouses share with each other.

To be sure, spouses who are not granted the gift of children can have a married life that is filled with love and meaning. As Pope John Paul II said to these couples in a 1982 homily, “You are no less loved by God; your love for each other is complete and fruitful when it is open to others, to the needs of the apostolate, to the needs of the poor, to the needs of orphans, to the needs of the world.”

When married couples deliberately act to suppress fertility, however, sexual intercourse is no longer fully *marital* intercourse. It is something less powerful and intimate, something more “casual.” Suppressing fertility by using contraception denies part of the inherent meaning of married sexuality and does harm to the couple’s unity. The total giving of oneself, body and soul, to one’s beloved is no time to say: “I give you everything I am—except. . . .” The Church’s

teaching is not only about observing a rule, but about preserving that total, mutual gift of two persons in its integrity.

This may seem a hard saying. Certainly it is a teaching that many couples today, through no fault of their own, have not heard (or not heard in a way they could appreciate and understand). But as many couples who have turned away from contraception tell us, living this teaching can contribute to the honesty, openness, and intimacy of marriage and help make couples truly fulfilled.

Why does saying “yes” to children at the altar mean never using contraception to close the act of intercourse to new life?

Some argue that if a husband and wife remain open to children throughout their marriage, they need not worry about using contraception occasionally. But practicing what is good most of the time does not justify doing what is wrong some of the time.

Even if I see myself as a truthful person “on the whole,” any occasional lie I tell is still a lie, and so is immoral. By such acts, I begin to make myself into the kind of person who lies. This is no less true when we falsify the “language of the body,” speaking total love and acceptance of the other person while denying an essential part of that message.

A couple need not desire or seek to have a child in each and every act of intercourse. And it is not wrong for couples to have intercourse even when they know the wife is naturally infertile, as discussed below. But they should never act to suppress or curtail the life-giving power given by God that is an integral part of what they pledged to each other in their marriage vows. This is what the Church means by saying that every act of intercourse must remain open to life and that contraception is objectively immoral.

“[Natural Family Planning] has become more than a totally safe, healthy, and reliable method of birth regulation to us. The essential qualities of self-restraint, self-discipline, mutual respect, and shared responsibility carry over to all facets of our marriage, making our relationship more intimate.” (Faithful to Each Other Forever, 44)

Are couples expected to leave their family size entirely to chance?

Certainly not. The Church teaches that a couple may generously decide to have a large family, or may for serious reasons choose not to have more children for the time being or even for an indefinite period (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 10).

In married life, serious circumstances—financial, physical, psychological, or those involving responsibilities to other family members—may arise to make an increase in family size untimely. The Church understands this, while encouraging couples to take a generous view of children.

What should a couple do if they have a good reason to avoid having a child?

A married couple can engage in marital intimacy during the naturally infertile times in a woman’s cycle, or after child-bearing years, without violating the meaning of marital intercourse in any way.

This is the principle behind natural family planning (NFP). Natural methods of family planning involve fertility education that enables couples to cooperate with the body as God designed it.

“NFP does require communication and commitment, but isn’t that what marriage is all about? We have gained so much by using NFP and have lost nothing.” (Natural Family Planning Blessed Our Marriage, 18)

What is natural family planning?

Natural family planning is a general name for the methods of family planning that are based on a woman’s menstrual cycle. A man is fertile throughout his life, while a woman is fertile for only a few days each cycle during the child-bearing years. Some believe that NFP involves using a calendar to predict the fertile time. That is not what NFP is today. A woman experiences clear, observable signs indicating when she is fertile and when she is infertile. Learning to observe and understand these signs is at the heart of education in natural family planning.

When a couple decides to postpone pregnancy, NFP can be very effective. NFP can also be very helpful for couples who desire to have a child because it identifies the time of ovulation. It is used by many fertility specialists for this purpose. Thus a couple can have marital relations at a time when they know that conception is most likely to take place.

Is there really a difference between using contraception and practicing natural family planning?

On the surface, there may seem to be little difference. But the end result is not the only thing that matters, and the *way* we get to that result may make an enormous moral difference. Some ways respect God’s gifts to us while others do not. Couples who have practiced natural family planning after using contraception have experienced a profound difference in the meaning of their sexual intimacy.

When couples use contraception, either physical or chemical, they suppress their fertility, asserting that they alone have ultimate control over this power to create a new human life. With NFP, spouses respect God’s design for life and love. They may choose to refrain from sexual union during the woman’s fertile time, doing nothing to destroy the love-giving or life-giving meaning that is present. This is the difference between choosing to falsify the full marital language of the body and choosing at certain times not to speak that language.

The Church’s support for NFP is not based on its being “natural” as opposed to artificial. Rather, NFP respects the God-given power to love a new human life into being even when we are not actively seeking to exercise that power. However, because NFP does not change the human body in any way, or upset its balance with potentially harmful drugs or devices, people of other faiths or of no religious affiliation have also come to accept and use it from a desire to work in harmony with their bodies. They have also found that it leads couples to show greater attentiveness to and respect for each other.

*“NFP has helped me mature, though I have a long way to go. . . .
It has called me to cherish my wife rather than simply desire her.”
(Faithful to Each Other Forever, 45-46)*

What has been the impact of contraception on society? On married couples?

Many would likely be surprised at how long all Christian churches agreed on this teaching against contraception. It was only in 1930 that some Protestant denominations began to reject this long-held position. Those opposed to this trend predicted an increase in premarital sex, adultery, acceptance of divorce, and abortion. Later, in 1968, Pope Paul VI warned that the use of contraception would allow one spouse to treat the other more like an object than a person, and that in time governments would be tempted to impose laws limiting family size. Pope John Paul

II called attention to the close association between contraception and abortion, noting that “the negative values inherent in the ‘contraceptive mentality’ . . . are such that they in fact strengthen this temptation [to abortion] when an unwanted life is conceived” (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 13).

These predictions have come true. Today we see a pandemic of sexually transmitted diseases, an enormous rise in cohabitation, one in three children born outside of marriage, and abortion used by many when contraception fails. A failure to respect married love’s power to help create new life has eroded respect for life and for the sanctity of marriage.

*“NFP made our union different, more of a total giving. . . .
Because we’re open to life, we’re giving everything.”* (Natural Family Planning Blessed Our Marriage, 64)

Is it true, as some claim, that some methods of birth control can cause an abortion?

Some methods of birth control are aimed at preventing the union of sperm and egg and therefore act only as contraceptives. These would include barriers such as condoms and diaphragms.

By contrast, hormonal methods such as the Pill may work in several ways. They can suppress ovulation or alter cervical mucus to prevent fertilization, and thus act contraceptively. But they may at times have other effects, such as changes to the lining of the uterus. If the contraceptive action fails and fertilization takes place, these hormonal methods may make it impossible for a newly conceived life to implant and survive. That would be a very early abortion. Medical opinions differ on whether or how often this may occur. Currently there is no way to know precisely how these drugs work at any given time in an individual woman.

Concern about the risk of causing an early abortion is stronger in the case of pills taken after intercourse to prevent pregnancy (“emergency contraception” or “morning-after pills”). In

some cases these pills are taken when sperm and egg have already joined to create a new life, in which case the drug could not have any effect except to cause an early abortion.

Conclusion

By using contraception, couples may think that they are avoiding problems or easing tensions, that they are exerting control over their lives. But the gift of being able to help create another person, a new human being with his or her own life, involves profound relationships. It affects our relationship with God, who created us complete with this powerful gift. It involves whether spouses will truly love and accept each other as they are, including their gift of fertility. Finally, it involves the way spouses will spontaneously accept their child as a gift from God and the fruit of their mutual love. Like all important relationships with other persons, it is not subject solely to our individual control. In the end, this gift is far richer and more rewarding than that.

You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Cor 6:19-20, RSV)

Living God's design for human sexuality in marriage can be difficult. But husbands and wives have not been left alone to live out this fundamental life challenge. If you have failed to do so in the past, do not be discouraged. God loves you and wants your ultimate happiness. Loving as Christ loves is a possibility opened to us by the power of the Holy Spirit, as a free gift of God. Through prayer and the sacraments, including Reconciliation and the Eucharist, God offers us the strength to live up to this challenge. Recall the words of Christ, repeated so often by John Paul II: "Be not afraid!" The Church's teaching on marital sexuality is an invitation for men and women—an invitation to let God be God, to receive the gift of God's love and care, and to let this gift inform and transform us, so we may share that love with each other and with the world.

WHERE TO LEARN MORE

The following list of resources begins with practical assistance and brief articles, and it concludes with books and major Church documents that explore the Church's vision of responsible parenthood at a deeper level.

Web Site

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/ (offers information on church teachings on conjugal love and responsible parenthood, methods of natural family planning (NFP), where to find local classes, and which NFP organizations offer home study programs).

Articles from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Respect Life Program

Bruchalski, John T. "The Contraceptive Revolution and its Fruits" (1997),

www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/97rlpbru.htm.

Doerflinger, Lee Ann. "Natural Family Planning: An Unexpected Grace" (2002),

www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/leedorf02.htm.

Notare, Theresa. "Sex: What Do Women (and Men) Really Want?" (2004),

www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/04notare.htm.

Schu, Rev. Walter J. "Contraception and Abortion: The Underlying Link" (2005),

www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/Schu05finaleng.pdf.

Popular Books

Doyle, Fletcher. *Natural Family Planning Blessed Our Marriage: Nineteen True Stories*.

Cincinnati: Servant Books, 2006.

West, Christopher. *Good News About Sex & Marriage*. Cincinnati: Servant Publications, 2000.

Theology Books

García de Haro, Ramón. *Marriage and the Family in the Documents of the Magisterium*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993.

Hogan, Richard M., and John M. LeVoir. *Covenant of Love: Pope John Paul II on Sexuality, Marriage, and Family in the Modern World*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985.

Shivanandan, Mary. *Crossing the Threshold of Love: A New Vision of Marriage*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999.

Smith, Janet E. (ed.). *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993.

West, Christopher. *Theology of the Body Explained*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2003.

Church Documents

Pope Benedict XVI. Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love)*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006.

Pope John Paul II. Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae (On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life)*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1995.

Pope John Paul II. Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio (On the Family)*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1982.

Pope Paul VI. Encyclical *Humanae Vitae (On the Regulation of Birth)*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1968.

Pope John Paul II. *Letter to Families*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994.

Pope John Paul II. *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997.

Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd ed.), nos. 369-373, 1601-1666, 2360-2379. Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000.

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