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## *Marriage and Natural Family Planning and why it matters: a Pastoral Letter*

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Feast of the Visitation

“What do you call a couple who practices Natural Family Planning?” goes an old joke. The answer? “Parents!” While intended to be a humorous yet sarcastic statement about the effectiveness and purpose of Natural Family Planning (NFP), it actually captures an essential truth about marriage and family. Marriage fundamentally and essentially includes children produced by a man and woman. True, there are couples who marry who, for a number of physical reasons, are not able to conceive a child. Likewise, older couples who are beyond child-bearing years are not likely to conceive children. Through the nature of their bodies as male and female, however, it is possible. Only a man and a woman can enter a relationship that totally fulfills what is expected in a marriage. NFP is a means to assist married couples, not only to space when they are having children, but also provide them an effective and morally acceptable method to plan a family. It is a means to help a couple fully embrace the sacramental character of marriage.

I offer this pastoral letter because of the confusion in today’s society about the nature of marriage and family, especially with regard to its sacramental character. I also offer it as a reflection on the procreative dimension of marriage as a sacrament. It is no big secret that many people in the Church have difficulties with the Church’s teaching with regard to contraception within a married relationship. I believe it is important to understand what marriage truly is and why it is important to uphold a true understanding of marriage within a society that seems to want to change its definition or limit its requirements.

Catholics, as members of this society, are not immune from the influences that consistently spread through society. Scientific studies as well as the nightly news demonstrate a loss of understanding of what marriage is. While Catholic teaching on marriage remains as solid as ever, many Catholics view the meaning and purpose of marriage, not only as changing, but changeable.

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I offer this letter as a catechetical instruction primarily for engaged couples in preparation for the sacrament of matrimony. At the same time, I believe any Catholic would benefit from it. As a sacrament, matrimony is a holy relationship between one woman and one man, but this relationship, as sacrament, necessarily includes Christ. Because there are certain expectations required for the relationship to become sacramental, it is important that an engaged couple be fully aware of what these expectations are. Many of these expectations are presented during pre-Cana sessions prior to the wedding. Unfortunately, a presentation on NFP is often times limited or ignored.

From the perspective of the Holy Scriptures and for people who embrace a Judeo-Christian notion of marriage, it is a holy institution ordained by God between a man and a woman. The Book of Genesis affirms that marriage between a man and a woman is a part of human nature: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called ‘woman’ for out of ‘her man’ this one has been taken” (Genesis 2:23). The New Testament likewise reflects the nature of Christian marriage between a man and a woman, e.g., Matthew 19:1-6 and Ephesians 5:21-32. The Scriptures consistently portray marriage solely between male and female. The Church calls marriage a sacrament when a man and a woman unite in a sacred bond in Christ and intend and are able to fulfill the requirements for marriage for it to be valid and fruitful.

Within this context, it is important to know what Catholic teaching actually says about contraception and why it proposes NFP as the proper means to plan a family. It seems that, for a number of years, those responsible for proposing the Church’s teaching on this aspect of marriage have been in a slumber state. Many Catholics have never heard or known that contraception is considered a moral issue. If an individual or a couple was taught the Church’s position, it is likely that they were not provided much direction on how to follow the Church’s teaching. Given the extent to which Catholic married couples have utilized contraception and the level by which contraception has been ignored for years from the pulpit, it should not be surprising to discover that many couples have a diminished sense of culpability. It is also likely that Catholic couples can become perplexed or even angered when a concern is voiced by bishops over the issue. Finally, I suspect that many a Catholic, especially women Catholics, have received erroneous advice from fellow Catholics (or even priests) that contraception is really nothing to be all that concerned about.

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I offer a brief review. Marriage anticipates the real possibility of new life to spring forth from the couple itself. In a word, true marriage is not solely about the love and affection that is between a couple it is also procreative in nature, especially if it is to be understood as sacramental. Not all marriages in a society are sacramental nor do all couples see themselves in this way. For Catholics, however, marriage is a key sacrament of the Church and one in which the majority of Catholics embrace as their vocation from God.

The Vatican II “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes*) provides a significant treatment of marriage as it should be lived within our modern world. It affirms that marriage is an intimate relationship between a man and a woman that “...has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws. It is rooted in the conjugal covenant (i.e., pertaining to the total union of the couple) of irrevocable personal consent” (#48 GS). Further it states, “Marriage and conjugal love are by *their nature* (italics mine) ordained toward the begetting and educating of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage...” (#50 GS).

Several years following the conclusion of the Council of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI issued his famous encyclical ‘Of Human Life’ (*Humanae Vitae*). There were many who rejected the teaching of Pope Paul VI in the encyclical, perceiving it to be solely teaching against the use of “artificial” contraception. I suspect that many Catholics today, especially those in their teens through fifties are not even aware of what Pope Paul VI taught in *Humanae Vitae*. As a teaching document of the Church, it is far more about the true nature of marriage than a teaching against the “artificial” means of birth control. Since *Humanae Vitae*, other teaching documents have been issued by various Popes that have reinforced its teaching. Noteworthy are documents issued by Pope John Paul II: “On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World” (*Familiaris Consortio*) is an apostolic letter that followed a universal synod on the family; “The Theology of the Body” is a compilation of a series of talks from general audiences by Pope John Paul II from 1979 to 1984. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also has an entire section on the Sacrament of Matrimony. And, of course, there are the writings of Holy Scripture (the Bible) which treat marriage as a sacred institution.

What does the Church in our day teach about marriage? First of all, it is unitive by nature. A couple joined together in marriage form an intimate community. As Jesus states in the Gospel of Matthew when questions about divorce, “Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall

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become one flesh?’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate” (Matthew 19:5-6).

When a man and a woman are attracted to each other and spend quality time together, they frequently become romantically involved. This is a natural part of being a healthy human being. As they spend more quality time together and discover more about each other, they become more and more attached to their relationship. This often leads to a decision to marry. Their eventual wedding is an event that celebrates their surrender to each other and their commitment to live as husband and wife. Their hope is to find ongoing joy and support as they share life as one. In order to provide an assurance to each other, they exchange sacred vows by which the Church recognizes each partner’s free consent. As a sacred vow witnessed by the Church, and because they are fully members of the Church through baptism, confirmation and eucharist, their relationship becomes a sacrament in which they are united to each other in Christ. Immediately prior to the vows they share, they affirm that they are committing themselves to a permanent relationship with each other in Christ. They promise to remain faithful to each other as spouses and to remain faithful to Christ who is the foundation of their faith. They affirm that, as a couple within a conjugal relationship, they will be open to the possibility of new life through the children they hope to bear. This, at least, is what is intended.

Couples preparing for marriage generally desire and expect to have children, though they may not fully understand that procreation is an essential element to the sacrament of marriage. When I state that procreation is an essential element to marriage, I am referring to the conjugal covenant as described in the document *Gaudium et Spes*. Catholic married love always includes an openness to the possibility of new life. The belonging of a couple to each other is meant to be so total and complete and a reflection of God’s own creative design, that new life is its natural consequence. This doesn’t mean that it always happens or even that it is required to happen, just that there is an openness to it happening. In other words, married love, as lived within a sacrament, is inseparably unitive and procreative.

When spouses give themselves to each other in marriage, they must include their entire selves. As a relationship in Christ, their marriage must reflect the total giving of Christ on the cross! The vows a couple make reflect this total giving. This includes a radical openness to the possibility of the creation of new life. It is why the Church is against, not just “artificial” contraception, but all contraception which includes any mentality that is contraceptive.

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Why is this? Because anything short of this is to reserve a part of oneself and not entirely entrust oneself to one's spouse. The most intimate and powerful aspect of a person is his or her fertility. It is through a person's fertility, either male or female, that they share in God's creative power. Contraception denies and frustrates this creative power and, in a real way, undermines, not only the procreative element of marriage, but also the unitive element of the conjugal covenant. In a more colloquial way, as I heard it said by another bishop, it is as if a husband or wife is saying, "I'll give you all I am – except my fertility; I'll accept all you are – except your fertility." Such an attitude undermines the intent of the sacrament of marriage which involves total giving to one's spouse. Such an attitude essentially erects a barrier between God and the couple. While there certainly is no "religious" calculation regarding the specific number of children a married couple ought to have, a contraceptive mentality factors out God in the couple's family planning.

This is why an appreciation of NFP for married couples is so important. When a married couple practices NFP, it assists (not hinders) the couple to embrace the fullness of what a sacramental relationship is intended to be. A person might ask, "But are not there good and solid Catholic marriages in which couples have used contraception for most, if not all, of their marriages?" Statistics indicate that there is a large percentage of Catholics who either presently are doing so, or have done so, at some time in the marriage. Nonetheless, to do so frustrates what God intends in a sacramental relationship. NFP allows the couple actually to enhance their relationship and experience the relationship as God intended, i.e., without holding back on one's spouse. God loves us totally and has shared his creative love with us totally in Christ. As people created in God's image and likeness, we reflect this image and likeness best when we mirror in our own lives what is taking place in God.

There are a number of common misconceptions (no pun intended) about NFP. One of the oldest is that it essentially is just a new name for the "Rhythm Method" which is dependent on a woman's menstrual cycle being very regular. Most people know that menstrual cycles are not always the same nor all that regular. NFP, as opposed to depending on a cycle being regular, relies on methods of observation: charting monthly cervical fluids and waking body temperatures to determine fertility or lack of fertility. One crucial element is the participation and cooperation of the husband. This works, not only to foster greater communication between the couple, but also means that the husband shares equal responsibility for the conjugal covenant. It also eliminates foreign chemicals from being introduced repeatedly into the body of the wife. When practiced as instructed – and it does involve an initial instruction as well as a commitment to

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follow through with it – it is 99% successful for spacing pregnancies or achieving pregnancies. Another misconception (again, no pun intended) is that it is not any different than other methods of contraception.

Why is NFP considered morally acceptable by the Church while contraception is not? First of all, NFP is not “Catholic contraception.” It is not contraceptive at all. It does not involve withholding a part of the husband or wife from one’s spouse, which is why it is morally acceptable. Those who practice NFP keep themselves fully open to the nature of a conjugal covenant. When a husband and wife need to limit the number of children or provide space between the times when they bear children, they simply observe the wife’s natural cycle of infertility during a month. It is simply observing a cycle which God created in the woman. Contraception, on the other hand, subverts this cycle and thus frustrates the nature of what God created.

Another reason why there is such a serious concern with contraception is the way that many contraceptive technologies function. When a condom is used in marriage, the intent is to prevent conception. While it may be used to prevent disease, its basic function is to prevent the release of sperm into the vagina whereby it has the potential of uniting with an ovum.

Other technologies, however, often function as abortifacients, such as, the IUD, the Morning After pill, Norplant, Depo-Provera, etc. They may not necessarily always function in this way though some always do. There is nonetheless a real possibility that, if ovulation does occur while using one of these technologies (which sometimes does happen) and the ovum becomes fertilized (which then also may happen), then the endometrium will not readily receive the fertilized ovum. The end result is a chemical abortion. Whether intended or not, utilization of these methods implies formal cooperation to allow chemical abortion to occur.

Couples who practice contraception rather than some form of NFP, are not morally aligned with the Church. In many ways, their spiritual lives and the practice of their Catholic faith is hindered. For example, practicing Catholic couples who use contraceptive methods in marriage frequently omit this information in Confession even though the Church teaches contraception is seriously sinful. Intentionally to withhold a serious sin within Confession affects the sacramental validity of that Confession. More than likely, if a couple wants to avoid mentioning contraception, they simply avoid the Sacrament of Penance.

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In light of what I have proposed, I ask engaged couples to reflect and pray on the nature of the sacrament they hope to share. By its very nature marriage envisions a loving relationship between a man and a woman that is life giving and life affirming. As a sacrament, it is not only essentially unitive but essentially procreative.

I ask married couples who do practice contraception in their marriage or have done so in the past, to become more familiar with what the Church actually teaches on marriage and contraception. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a readily available resource. I also encourage them to investigate and learn about the benefits of NFP.

I ask deacons and priests to examine their pastoral practice with regard to their preaching, teaching and counseling of couples, whether married or engaged. The information offered by priests and deacons needs to be according to the mind of the Church for which they were ordained. Couples preparing for marriage have a right, not only to the full teaching of the Church on the nature of marriage, but also a need to be provided sufficient information and good direction for them to follow the Church's teaching.

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