

Contraceptive Mentality and Natural Family Planning

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The contraceptive mentality permeates popular culture. It is a given, an expected, an understood. Mothers sign their daughters up for the pill at menarche. Popular, widely-read magazines such as *Seventeen* and *Good Housekeeping* promote for various types and brands of contraception. A common topic at collegiate sorority gatherings is what kind of birth control pill everyone's using; they start with the assumption that all use it.

Sex education has replaced the health curriculum in virtually all public schools. Middle school boys and girls learn not how to eat a balanced diet, but instead learn about their basic human right to sexual pleasure and how to dress a banana with a condom. Abstinence is but one option among many. They learn that practice makes perfect. If you choose sex, the seventh and eighth graders learn, you should be prepared. So they practice. They're prepared. So they take a pill. They're prepared. So they think.

The contraceptive mentality is a culturally imbedded notion that began spreading profusely after the introduction of oral contraception in the early 1960s and the subsequent legalization of contraception in 1965.¹ This contraceptive mentality divorces sex from procreation and treats fertility as an illness, a disease, which are all alien to the nature of the sexual act. Nonetheless the mentality is increasingly widespread. This mentality leads to fission in marital communication, detrimental impacts on women's health, and even lays the groundwork for a societal justification of abortion. Given any one of these effects, it is evident that this mentality is dangerous. Those standing against it must offer a charitable alternative to the body-self dualist myth that the contraceptive mentality propagates.

¹ *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965), legalized contraception for married couples and *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, 405 U.S. 438 (1972) legalized contraception for all people.

My co-authoress and I offer today an argument both for Natural Family Planning (which we will henceforth refer to as NFP) and against contraception. We will distinguish between the two practices, explaining why NFP is both naturally and morally distinct from contraception. We will also evaluate NFP and the contraceptive mentality.

NFP is a scientific, data-gathering tool. In its own right, it is morally neutral. In application, however, there are moral distinctions worth parsing. NFP is distinguishable from contraception in nature, act, and intent. In its nature, NFP embraces the natural cadences of the woman's fertility cycle. Conversely, contraception frustrates and controls the fertility cycle in two primary forms: chemical and barrier. Chemical contraception, commonly known as oral contraception or more colloquially as birth control, intercepts the natural biological sequence, tricking the woman's body into believing it is perpetually pregnant. NFP requires no artifice, no extrinsic device. NFP only requires knowledge—knowledge of one's fertility; and self-restraint, which will be addressed in more detail in the act and intent sections of this paper. Most fundamentally, NFP embraces the intent of nuptial sexuality: "I want you and all that you are mentally, spiritually, physically, and emotionally; I give and I withhold nothing from you; you give and withhold nothing from me."

Oral contraception requires one ingest high doses of hormones, which the body is not currently producing naturally. Barrier contraception requires placing an artificial barrier between the woman and the man. Not only does this interrupt the spontaneity and pleasure of the moment, it also implicitly communicates to one's lover: I want you, but not your fertility and neither can you have my fertility; I want you but not your children; I want the pleasure you can give me but do not want any responsibility that may follow. In sum: I want myself, not you; I am

selfish. How do two become one when they turn inward to self instead of outward toward the other? In short, they cannot.

At this point, it is worth briefly mentioning marriage and divorce. Marriage rates among cohabiting couples is low. By diminishing the potential of pregnancy from sex, contraception leaves no obvious need for the permanent commitment of marriage. I reluctantly use the well worn but fitting adage: Why buy the cow if you get the milk for free? There is also a strong correlation between the divorce rate and the rate of contraception use.² Divorce rates are high among those who contracept. Divorce is almost nonexistent among those using NFP. The self-giving, self-sacrifice required by NFP amounts to more than a bunch of white-hatted celibates attempting to control the intimacy of our private lives. When used properly, NFP is a wise, supportive sealant for marriage.

Ok, ok. You're probably thinking—sure this sounds nice. But let's get real. You're talking about a lofty dream world. It's not realistic. We live in a world where people habitually have sex before marriage. Moreover who hasn't heard about a couple practicing NFP who had an "oops baby"? And, what if it you're celebrating a special anniversary but it is the wrong time of the month to enjoy sex with the one you love? Clearly contraception is the way to go.

I must interject. This mentality misunderstands the sacred purpose of marriage and the marital bond. It is precisely this sacredness that NFP seeks to protect. It is this bond that NFP allows to deepen and to flourish. Many claim that contraception also protects the sacredness and bond of marriage, but empirical and practical evidence prove such claims false.

Having examined the nature of NFP and contraception, let's now consider how NFP differs from contraception in act as well. When one practices NFP he exercises his reason in accord with nature. What distinguishes man from beast is reason. It is through reason that we

² with the caveat that no-fault divorce was legalized around the same time as contraception.

embrace faith, we trust, we love—both God and man. By exercising this unique gift that God has bestowed upon man, we are not exhibiting doubt or mistrust in God; instead we are demonstrating a deep appreciation and respect for our rational nature and the gift of co-creatorship. Man has learned through science that woman is fertile for only a few days during each month. NFP, a scientific charting device, helps the couple know when the woman is fertile³. A couple needing to postpone pregnancy will exercise self-control and abstain during these few days. The couple must necessarily learn how to express affection in ways beyond the physical, by abstaining during a time when the woman's body is often most appealing to the man⁴ and the woman's desire for physical intimacy is also typically strongest.

As a consequence, a couple who is abstaining and is using no other method to avoid pregnancy will have to periodically evaluate their decision for continence by asking: “Why are we not having sex? How important is it for us to abstain?” Commitment to the NFP method is commitment to communication and to honesty. By asking each other “why are we abstaining now?” the couple implicitly assesses the justice of their reason. The desire for sex is great, but by exercising the will in accord with reason one can overcome the passion after assessing whether abstinence is really necessary.

Contraception, on the other hand makes a woman always sexually available to her husband diminishing the incentive for the two to get to know the other, engaging in relationship with the entire other person: emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and physically. One easily hears that claim protested with the claim that couples can pursue this kind of unity while

³Cervical Mucus: Present State of Knowledge, In: Cervical Mucus in Human Reproduction. World Health Organization—Colloquium, Published Proceedings, Geneva, Switzerland, 1972.; Roland M: A Simple Test for the Determination of Ovulation, Estrogen Activity and Early Pregnancy Using the Cervical Mucus Secretion. American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology 63: 81-89, 1952.

⁴ In published version cite to studies saying this

contracepting. Yet, regardless of stated intent, their objective cannot be achieved—the unitive and procreative aspects of intercourse are irreducible. Why? The predominant effect of the contraceptive mentality is the preoccupation with unitive pleasure over and against conception. This preoccupation can lead one toward sensuality, the inward and selfish pursuit of pleasure for its own sake, without regard for the wellbeing of the other. At its worst, sensuality displaces the pursuit of marital unity

By using contraception, the couple inherently removes the procreative dimension of intercourse and thus risks falling into sensuality. With the reduced chance of pregnancy comes also a diminished incentive to get to know someone in order to know if you are willing to have a child with that person. Rarely will a contracepting couple openly discuss whether now would be a good time to have a child, and rarely will such a couple seriously evaluate the reasons for doing so.

In contrast, a couple practicing NFP will regularly, out of necessity, discuss their commitment to achieving or avoiding pregnancy. Conversation opens up to the purpose of their relationship: building and living a life together. This includes the physical but is not reducible to the physical alone. This communication enriches all aspects of the couple's life and aids them in growing in closer union with each other. The woman feels she can freely express her concerns about and desires for children with her husband, who can do the same with his wife. Each feels loved as a whole person. When loved as a whole person, the woman is open to, and in fact, deeply desirous of, sexual intimacy with her husband and their union takes on a deeper meaning for both.

Oral contraception dampens the woman's libido and may cause her to gain weight, often leading to unnecessary self-consciousness and reticence in the bedroom. In the face of such

rejection, her husband also is less committed to learning her heart and working to satisfy her emotionally. This too leads the husband to sexual withdrawal. With a breakdown in intimacy, no wonder contracepting couples have such higher divorce rates than those practicing NFP.

We have discussed the distinction in nature and act between NFP and contraception. This brings us to the final distinction: intent. The intent driving NFP is openness to life, even if pregnancy is not actively sought. The intent driving contraception is anti-creation. It is specifically to prevent procreation; the word says it all: contraception literally means against conception. Though NFP and contraception can share an objective of avoiding pregnancy, this alone does not render the two interchangeable or morally equivalent⁵. NFP does nothing to obstruct the natural process; the procreative act remains procreative, whether or not pregnancy actually occurs. NFP, rather, charts the natural fertility cycle and embraces these rhythms in reason. Contraception obstructs this rhythm, making procreation the enemy of the procreative act.

The 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* presciently anticipated the effect of contraception on the unitive component of marriage. This papal writing also identifies in paragraphs ten and sixteen when a couple may use NFP to avoid pregnancy. We realize that not everyone accepts the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church, from which *Humanae Vitae* was issued. Even so, we invite all to consider the rationale driving Pope Paul VI to his conclusions. These same conclusions can be drawn without the teaching authority, by using natural reason in light of human experience to understand Truth. Nonetheless, because of its prescience and impeccable reasoning, we take Paul VI's exhortations as the starting point for examining when NFP can be used licitly.

⁵ Smith, Janet. "Moral Use of Natural Family Planning." LifeIssues.net

Contrary to popular misconception, *Humanae Vitae* does not exclusively limit NFP to “grave reasons.” In fact, the text never uses such a phrase and instead employs four broader terms: serious reasons, just reasons, worthy and weighty justifications, and defensible reasons.⁶

These phrases indicate that the couple has the freedom to prayerfully use NFP according to the dictates of conscience. And as we have seen, NFP by design orients a couple toward communicating and exercising their conscience in accord with morality. The church does not limit the use of NFP solely to life threatening circumstances. In addition to the four phrases just listed, the Church in *Humanae Vitae* identifies various conditions that serve as the basis of these reasons: physical, economic, psychological, and social. Beyond the four categories, the church provides no other clear guidelines for those seeking to use NFP morally and licitly. To aid in this evaluation, we will identify a few benchmarks to illustrate this idea.

In the case of our first couple, the wife suffers from stage four uterine cancer and the couple already has four children. If the wife were to conceive, she has a high risk of uterine rupture, killing both her and the baby, leaving their four children with only one parent. This couple vigorously practices NFP. They do so licitly. Their motivation is obvious: physical well-being of the mother, not to mention the well-being of the family.

In our second couple, the husband recently lost his job and is having difficulty finding a new one in the bad market. The wife is a stay-at-home mother who cares for their two children. The couple is saddled with \$250,000 in student loans and a home mortgage, which are due each month regardless of whether either is employed. The couple also has little in savings and investment. This couple is practicing NFP to avoid pregnancy at least until the husband is back in the workforce. This is a licit use of NFP in light of an economic condition. Should a third child be born, it would be difficult to provide to him even the most basic needs. Even so, if the

⁶ *Humanae Vitae*, paragraph 10.

couple chooses to have sex, they remain open to the possibility of conception and would welcome another babe if they were so blessed.

In the case of our third couple, the wife suffers from clinical depression and is currently in therapy. The couple already has one child but because of the wife's psychological struggle, she has been unable to bond with her child and has been emotionally distant and unavailable to her child and her husband. The husband feels the burden of being both mother and father to their son, a physical and psychological impossibility but one he attempts nonetheless. This couple licitly practices NFP to avoid pregnancy at least until the mother is more stable. They are justified in using NFP for such a purpose because of her psychological condition.

Our fourth couple lives in China and already has one child. Under the country's one child policy, if the couple was to conceive again and the government was to find out, the government would force abortion on the woman or take the first child from the parents. Either would be devastating. Because of the oppressive social conditions, this couple licitly practices NFP.

Finally, in the case of our fifth couple, the pair is newlywed without children. They believe they should avoid having children for at least a few years in order to get to know each other better and to get used to married life. They think that preserving time before children will be good for their bond and will make them better parents. The couple practices NFP to avoid pregnancy. The licitness of this act is less clear than in the other four examples. This couple must rigorously assess whether the reasons are mere rationalizations or whether in the words of *Humanae Vitae*, they are just, defensible, or worthy and weighty. The desire to maintain a good social life is insufficient as is the more legitimate desire to "grow closer" without a more detailed rationale. Dating and engagement are supposed to prepare the couple in their knowledge of each

other. One of the purposes of marriage is openness to children and to bringing up the next generation. If the couple was not open to beginning a family when they got married, they should have waited until they were ready. The rest of their lives they will grow in depth of knowledge and respect for each other. Without a just reason, a couple using NFP acts contrary to the purpose and nature of marriage.

This brings us to a new point. Despite its nature and design, NFP can be used in a way that mimics the previously discussed contraceptive mentality. The contraceptive mentality divorces procreation from pleasure, pitting procreation against sex and framing procreation as inimical to the pleasure inherent in sex.. With the aid of drugs and other artifices, pleasure is easily attainable without the responsibility and commitment that otherwise would likely result, especially in days of old. With its ability to be used to avoid pregnancy, some argue there is little, if any, moral distinction between NFP and contraception, believing NFP also divorces procreation from pleasure. Their argument says that by utilizing this scientific data-gathering tool, a couple practicing NFP can freely have sex during the woman's infertile period and voila-- pleasure without babies. It's just like contraception because contraception also allows the couple to have sex without consequences. Right?

Wrong. This purported distinction between contraception and NFP fails in understanding not only NFP, but contraception as well. Particularly, the self-discipline, self-control, and communication inherent within the practice of NFP respect the integrity of the sexual act itself⁷. When used with the lone intent of avoiding children for unjustifiable reason (i.e. not meeting any of the afore discussed criteria), the couple's practice of NFP would necessarily become morally questionable and perhaps even be sinful, Nevertheless, even the most sinful use of NFP does

⁷ Smith, Janet. "Moral Use of Natural Family Planning." LifeIssues.net

not become contraceptive in kind⁸ (though, perhaps, they don't really help the whole situation of the contraceptive culture).

Unlike contraception, which drives a wedge between men and women with comparable ease, the NFP couple will only be successful in their mission if they exercise self-control and communication, adopting an attitude of responsibility for their fertility and their actions that contraception otherwise lets them pass over, to put it lightly. How is a husband to know if his wife is fertile? They talk. How is the couple to evaluate whether now is really a good time for sex? Either they communicate, engaging reason and choosing to exercise self-control to abstain, or they choose to forego such analysis for a unitive moment, open to accepting a new life between them. Neither choice is a bad one. Both are good for marriage! (Especially if a resultant pregnancy forces the couple to overcome, with virtue, their previously selfishness!)

In conclusion, even if a couple misuses NFP for selfish reasons, it is not the moral equivalent to contraception. It is our hope today that we have demonstrated sufficiently that this is the case. NFP upholds the dignity of the marital relationship in a way contraception never could do so. While the intent for a couple using NFP can be similar to those contracepting, the nature and act of the two will always differ. Through engaging the mind as well as the body in the sexual relationship, the NFP method counteracts the dualistic understanding of man that the contraceptive mentality tempts us to adopt. And through its practice—even if it is not perfect, which none of us are perfect—Natural Family Planning offers a hopeful start to healing the wounds such contraceptive beliefs have inflicted.

⁸ Erlenbush. "NFP: The Myth of the Contraceptive Mentality." Crisis Magazine, November 2011; Smith, Janet. "Moral Use of Natural Family Planning." LifeIssues.net