

Married Love and the Gift of Life

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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to have more children for the time being or even for an indefinite period (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 10).

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

WEB SITE

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/index.shtml. (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.)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

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

Pope Paul IV. Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (*On the Regulation of Birth*). Washington, DC: USCCB, 1968.

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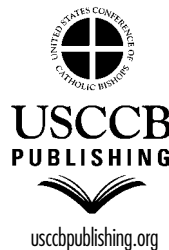
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