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Reflections on the Spirituality of Natural Family Planning

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*We are learning the importance
of living in harmony with
nature's rhythms rather than
attempting to control them. NFP
is an example of this intention.*

"Just as the peace between two nations is maintained by mutual good understanding, it is hardly necessary to say that the peace of married couples is created by profound mutual understanding."

(Dr. Kyusako Ogino—developer of the calendar/rhythm method of NFP, 1934)

Not long ago, I received an urgent phone call from a woman who was disturbed by comments I made in an article for the local Catholic newspaper. The article was about natural family planning (NFP) and how NFP enhanced marital and spiritual life. Although I never commented on church teaching, mentioned the Pope, or called anybody sinner, the woman was angry. She inferred that I (and indirectly the Pope) felt that people who use medical contraception were less Catholic than those couples who use NFP. She said, "I have been going to church and communion for 20 years and I am a good Catholic." The woman then ended the conversation with the

comment that all the people that she knew who used NFP were “red necks.” Although I was a little taken back about the phone call, the conversation did trigger my memory about a comment that Dr. Ziegfried Ernst, a Protestant physician from Germany, made about contraception. He said, “there is a definite contradiction involved in taking both the pill and the host.” Who is right, the woman or the doctor? Does a method of family planning interfere with one’s spirituality? With one’s relationship with God? To put the question more bluntly, can a person be a good Catholic (or for that matter a good Christian, Jew, Buddhist) and take the pill at the same time?

The answer to that question is extremely important, one that couples should take into consideration when deciding on a form of family planning. I would like to provide some insights into the answer to the question of whether an artificial method of family planning can interfere with one’s relationship with God. I recently completed a research study in which the comments and measured responses from 20 couples who have used NFP for at least a year to avoid pregnancy are compared with the comments and measured responses from 20 couples who have used NFP in the past but are now using some form of artificial contraception for at least a year period. Both groups of couples were asked to comment on how their form of family planning affected their relationship with God. Each person was also administered a spiritual well-being (SWB) index, a tool to indirectly measure a person’s perceived relationship with God. The forty couples were randomly selected from the files of two NFP service centers, one in the West and one in the Midwest.

There are two definitions of spirituality that will be used for this article as indicators for spirituality and spiritual well-being. The first definition is from the National Interfaith Coalition on Aging. Their definition states that spiritual well-being is the affirmation of life in a (harmonious) relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness. This is an integrated relational definition. The other definition is from a paper given by Keith Egan, Ph.D. at a spirituality and health workshop at Marquette University in 1982. Egan said that spirituality is about the mystery of life, the mystery who is God and the mystery of who is the human person. One is fully human when this Mystery (God) empowers one to be free to speak the truth, to be in love with God and neighbor. “Spirituality is the mystery that makes actual the human power for freedom, truth and love.”

REFLECTIONS ON THE SPIRITUALITY OF NFP

Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee wrote a column for the local Catholic newspaper on the spiritual benefits of the practice of fasting (*Catholic Herald*, March 2, 1992). He said that fasting is a way of making a person more open, more available spiritually and socially. Fasting provides an interior freedom, a freedom where one is not controlled by passions and inordinate desires so that one was freed up to do what one knows to be right and what one really wants to do, that is, to be spiritually free. Fasting, he said helps one to be more open to God, more open to the needs of others, it provides solidarity with the rest of human kind (especially the poor) and can be associated with the conversion of others. The practice of fasting as described by the Archbishop seems to fit well the definitional aspects of spirituality and spiritual well-being.

The practice of fasting is not just a periodic abstinence from forms of food but rather an abstinence from all types of human desires. NFP as a form of periodic coital abstinence can be viewed as a form of fasting. Its practice requires a fast or periodic abstinence from genital intercourse when used to avoid pregnancy. Just as there are spiritual benefits from fasting from food there can be spiritual benefits for the person or persons who practice NFP. Fasting from sexual intercourse can help a person to control sexual passions and desires. This control helps to free the person. When persons are in control of their desires then they are able to focus on God and other persons more fully. Pope John Paul II made similar remarks in a recent address to participants in a training course on NFP (*The Pope Speaks*, July/August 1992). He said that "only one who is free, i.e., not dominated by concupiscence, can give himself and accept another person without reservation." And St. Paul reminded the Galatians that "you have been called to live in freedom—but not a freedom that gives free rein to the flesh. Out of love place yourselves at one another's service. . . live in accord with the spirit and you will not yield to the cravings of the flesh." (Galatians 5/1, 13-18).

NFP as a form of periodic abstinence can also be a sign of being more open to God, open to God's gift of fertility and to the possibility of new human life, that is, open to be co-creators with God. Abstinence is a time when the couple quiets the physical so that they can reflect on God's will and on the stewardship of their fertility. It

can be a time to decide if God is calling for them to have or not to have children. A decision not best made in the passion of desire.

NFP as a form of fasting can help a person be more open to the needs of one's spouse. If you can quiet your own needs, then you can be open to the needs of another and particularly one's spouse. Quieting one's physical desires can help a person to be aware of emotional times in the life of the spouse. Dr. Ogino expressed this by saying that "to have a good understanding of such psychological periodical changes is useful for the maintenance of the peace of the married couple." Fasting from the physical aspects of sexuality can also stimulate the couple to look for other ways of expressing their intimacy in non-genital ways. Couples who use NFP often develop forms of intimate expressions in the spiritual, intellectual, communicative and emotional areas that help them to be more integrated and mature individuals.

NFP as a form of periodic coital abstinence helps a married person to understand and be in solidarity with those who are called to be chaste, who are called to order their sexual drive by totally abstaining from genital coital activity: the single person, the religious, the homosexual, the adolescent. NFP can, through this witness of a married chastity, help with the conversion of others and primarily with the conversion of their children. By being chaste, parents can practice a true sexual self-control, sexual self-respect and thus will be able to be non-hypocritical role models for their children. They will be able to say more than "do as I say not as I do." A respect for sexuality by periodic fasting will also reflect on others in the family, friends, co-workers, church members and especially engaged couples before they are married.

An Orthodox Jewish practice, as described in the Talmud, prescribes that a married woman must avoid intercourse from the beginning of menstruation until five days past. This is considered a time of purity. A benefit of this practice (as explained by a Rabbi Lam) is that it helps the husband not to become bored with the wife. Many couples who use NFP explain this phenomenon as the "honeymoon effect," that is, when they abstain from the genital expression of sexuality for a time, and then resume intercourse the experience of it becomes new and exciting.

A misconception of couples who consider using NFP is that they will not have enough time for the physical nature of sexuality, that the expression of intercourse is unnatural and lacks spontaneity.

Couples who use NFP have an average of over 14 days of infertility in a 28 day cycle to have intercourse. After ovulation has been indirectly confirmed intercourse can occur anytime of the day or night, plenty of time for spontaneity. Couples who use NFP do not experience less times for sexual intercourse than other couples but because of periodic abstinence the experience of it is more exciting and more enriching to their relationship.

Max Levin, a Jewish psychiatrist, stated that from his experience when he found Catholic couples who could not practice NFP there was either a serious problem with their marriage or a crisis of faith. He said of the latter that a physician would be wise to refer them to their father confessor. To those couples who found periodic abstinence difficult he would say "May the good Lord never ask you to bear a heavier burden."

Cardinal Suenens in a book he wrote titled "Sex and Self-Control" reminded us that all persons are obliged to practice sexual self-control before marriage, after marriage, or if a person never marries. He said that too many people think that an unmarried person's obligation to be chaste ends with marriage. There is chastity in marriage and chastity outside of marriage. A celibate's sexual life is ordered by "chastity's forbidding anything contrary to the virtue. In marriage, chastity orders the couple's sexual life by placing it in the service of conjugal love." NFP helps couples to develop a sexual self-control and to help them to lead an ordered chaste life at the service of conjugal love.

EVIDENCE THAT NFP ENHANCES A MARRIED SPIRITUALITY

If the above comments are true then there should be evidence that NFP enhances the spiritual life of couples. To find this evidence 20 married couples who have used NFP for at least a one year period were asked (in person) whether NFP enhanced their spirituality, i.e., their relationship with God. Their responses were compared to the responses of 20 couples who used NFP in the past and who are now using some form of artificial contraception for at least a year period. In order to reduce bias, two non-NFP user graduate students interviewed the clients, and categorized and interpreted the responses.

The majority of NFP couples felt that their form of family

planning either 1.) enhanced their relationship with God, 2.) increased their trust in God, 3.) increased their faith in God's will and 4.) helped them to be aware of God's gift of fertility. The process of spiritual enhancement was aided by having NFP help the couples to live a life consistent with church teaching, God's intentions and moral values. Couple's also felt that NFP helped them to develop a trust in God and because of that trust a form of mental freedom. Only four of the NFP couples found that NFP had no effect on their spirituality and their relationship with God. There were no negative responses:

Sample responses are as follows:

"I believe strongly of God in my life. On a daily basis, I try to turn my will and my life over to God to do and be who he would want me to be. What I found with NFP is that I feel much more confident that God's will is more involved than my will."

"I can appreciate the cycle of life. It makes me feel very thankful that there is a God that has made this—how wonderful and how the whole thing works together, like having children and the intimacy between a married couple. It's heightened my awareness of its goodness."

"I feel good about it because it kind of allows me to try and comply with Catholic teachings and I'm not putting that obstacle between myself and my relationship with God. The obstacle of knowing a teaching and ignoring it or choosing not to follow it. So I feel good about that."

"It has brought God into the picture. My relationship with God has gotten much closer; its taught me patience, understanding, caring, sharing, development in our relationship between each other as well as individually. My relationship with God has grown enormously. It hasn't been easy, but it's been real rewarding."

"It made me fulfill my spirituality. I also feel at peace with the Lord, so I know that I have chosen the right way, or the right path."

In contrast to the NFP couples, 11 of the contraceptive couples found that their method of family planning had no effect on their spirituality. Some felt that it was a block to their relationship with God. Other responses reflect their struggle with Church teachings, limiting family size, financial strain, and feeling closer to God when they had their children.

Example of responses are as follows:

I'm uneasy using artificial cause I don't think God approves of it."

"I'm less likely to think of God as an integral part of our lovemaking. I seem less open to how He calls me to live. I feel distant from Him in this area which has affected my overall spirituality."

"We talked to a priest friend whom we've known for years and he encouraged us to have a vasectomy. He knew the financial strain that my husband was feeling and he said Jesus wants our home to be filled with joy and peace and love."

"Being a Catholic, I know that there are so many pros and cons to being on birth control pills, as far as the religion, and that is the main reason I had switched to NFP. I felt I gave it a try, and it didn't work and right now we really can't afford a third. I think it is a big copout that the Catholics use and say that you can use NFP and it's all right, but you can't use birth control—because one is the same as the other in preventing or allowing you to conceive."

"I'm very thankful for the daughter that we do have, and ever since her birth I've just felt closer to God."

Besides the above qualitative responses each couple (both husband and wife) were administered a Spiritual Well-Being (SWB) index. The scores on the SWB can range from 20—120, with the higher score indicating higher levels of SWB. The SWB index was developed by Drs. Ellison and Paloutzian and is a standardized measure of SWB based on a Judeo-Christian understanding of God as a personal Being. The NFP couples had an average score of 106.3. The contraceptive couples had an average score of 96.4. These scores were statistically different based on a standard statistical test. Of greatest difference was the religious well-being (RWB) sub-scale of the SWB index which indicates the strength of a persons relationship with God. The NFP group mean RWB was 53.4 and the contraceptive group was 46.2.

DISCUSSION

Both the qualitative and quantitative data seem to indicate that the NFP couples have a stronger and more harmonious relationship with God than the contraceptive couples. This difference could be due to NFP couples having a stronger spirituality before using NFP.

However, both groups came from the same family planning centers and they all have similar economic and educational backgrounds. What is clear is that the NFP group, in general, feels that their method of family planning has contributed to their relationship with God. Whereas, the contraceptive couples are either indifferent, apologetic with church teaching, or feel that their method of family planning interferes with their relationship with God. Could it be that NFP through periodic abstinence enhances this dynamics?

Other studies also provide evidence that it does. Fr. Matthew Gutowski, as part of his M.A. thesis, sent an open-ended questionnaire to 105 couples from three different NFP teaching groups (Kenrick Seminary, 1990). He found that the couples overwhelmingly felt that NFP enhanced their relationship with God. NFP helped them to trust God, appreciate fertility and children as gifts from God, helped them to see God as a partner with them in family planning, and helped them to live out their relationship with God in keeping with church teachings. Fr. Gutowski, thought that NFP could be viewed as a sacramental, "a way in which a couple receives actual graces (to the degree in which they embrace NFP through a spiritual perspective) which help them to bear fruit from the sanctifying grace which they receive through the sacrament of marriage."

A key point that Fr. Gutowski brings out is the degree to which the couple embraces NFP through a spiritual perspective. There are levels of use or stages of integration of NFP. Some couples use NFP only as another form of contraception, some for natural health benefits, others for the benefits on their relationship with their spouse, and others for integrating their fertility with a relationship with God. Couples who only use NFP for contraceptive purposes and do so selfishly may not benefit from a spiritual perspective. Couples, however, who are able to see the benefits of NFP in strengthening their relationship with each other, their children and with God can experience NFP at a transcendent level.

The analogy of fertility as a gift can help a person to understand the differences of NFP and artificial contraception in a context of holiness. If fertility is a gift from God, then that gift should be treasured and cared for. Suppressing, blocking, or destroying fertility through chemicals, surgery or barrier contraceptives is not caring for the gift of fertility. When couples struggle with their fertility and say to God we no longer want this gift because of difficulties in our lives then they are also saying that the grace of God will not

help them through this difficulty. God does not give without the grace to live and love wholly. When couples are using NFP, they do not deny the gift of fertility but rather they treasure the gift and use it only for special (holy) times.

Dr. Kyusako Ogino, former head of the gynecological section of Takeyama Hospital in Niigata Japan and one of the original developers of the calendar (rhythm) method of NFP in the late 1920s, wrote that "a woman has a fertility and a sterility phase, these alternating periodically. The former period is a holy time, at which the life of new sons and daughters will be created. Thus will the married life be idealized and sanctified." Dr. Ogino as a scientist was able to see how the results of his work could affect the lives of married couples in a spiritual sense. Couples who use NFP often comment on the awareness of their fertility, not only that it exists, but also the awesome knowledge that during the fertile time they can be co-creators with God.

Determining which method of family planning to use is an important decision for married couples. What many couples do not consider is the effect that the method of family planning can have on their relationship with each other and with God. Any method of family planning that becomes a barrier to God or to one's spouse should be rejected. Although the use of NFP can be a struggle for couples, when NFP is used from a spiritual perspective, it enhances both the marital relationship and the relationship with God. In today's society, where many marriages end in divorce, the use of any method that enhances the relationship with spouse and God is of utmost importance. The differences between artificial and natural methods, in that regard, is no trivial matter.