Real Talk On Natural Family Planning

May 31, 2019 | By Deanna Johnston | Commentary

I became aware of Natural Family Planning (NFP) when I was young:
in fact, NFP was an integral part of my family's return to the Catholic Church. As a child, I remember seeing charts with the baby stickers and the colors. I attended a mother-daughter program once in grade school and again in high school that explained the goodness of God's design of the male and female bodies and the gift of fertility.

Basically, I knew that NFP was a thing, that the Catholic Church liked it, and that at some point I would probably use it too.

When I finally took my first Natural Family Planning class as a single adult, I remember hearing things like, “It’s easy to use!” and “It’s 97-99% effective when used properly,” and “Couples who use NFP have a very low divorce rate.” I was sold! Who doesn’t want an easy-to-use method that’s highly effective and that will divorce-proof your marriage?

Fast forward to life as a newlywed. It did not take long to realize that charting for NFP as a married couple is very different than charting as a single woman. There were times when the chart was not so easy to interpret, when following the rules of the method was frustrating, and when I wondered, “Is there something wrong with me? Am I just not cut out for this NFP lifestyle?”

Learning NFP and actually living NFP can be two very different
experiences. Over the years of working with engaged couples, I realized that some of the talks they were hearing on Natural Family Planning were similar to what I heard in my first class: it's easy, it works, and it's great for your marriage.

Let's be honest: when it comes to sharing Natural Family Planning with engaged and married couples, we are in competition with contraceptive culture. Sometimes, in our zeal for wanting couples to experience the fullness of what the Church teaches, we use language that only emphasizes the ease and effectiveness of a particular method and how great NFP can be for postponing pregnancy. However, when the conversation about NFP stops at merely postponing pregnancy, we aren't giving couples the whole picture: that the beauty and fullness of the Church's teaching on married love is a cross we embrace by placing our fertility in God's hands.

**NFP Is not the rhythm or calendar method.**

The Rhythm Method was developed in the 1930s and is based on calendar calculations and counting days. It attempts to predict when the fertile phase begins and ends but does not take into account that every woman and every cycle that she has is different. Modern methods of NFP are based on extensive and rigorous scientific research that considers a woman's changing signs of fertility.
Because each woman and her cycle are unique, NFP involves the charting of daily observations to determine where she is in her cycle that day.

**There is no “one method fits all.”**

One of the great things about NFP is that there’s a method for everyone! Because different families have different needs, some couples may find that one method is easier for them to understand than another. There is the **Mucus Only Method**, such as Billings or Creighton (FertilityCare), which teaches careful observation and charting of the absence or presence of cervical mucus throughout the day. Others might prefer charting with a method that “cross-checks” symptoms such as the **Sympto-Hormonal Method**, which uses an at-home fertility monitor to measure daily hormone levels (i.e. Marquette), or the **Sympto-Thermal Method**, which observes cervical mucus, basal body temperature, and the position of the cervix (i.e. Couple to Couple League). Ultimately, couples should be encouraged to find a method that works well for them. This is important to note: it’s a process to know what works best for your family, and to know that it’s okay to switch if necessary!

**Using NFP is not always “easy.”**

There are many different reasons why NFP can be challenging for a
couple. The woman is making observations and paying attention to
details she may not have had to observe before. Some women’s cycles
are just more complicated than others. It can be frustrating,
confusing, and downright awkward sometimes. But this is why
working with a certified instructor or teaching couple is so important
and helpful!

**NFP affirms the beauty of God’s design of fertility in a man and a woman.**

The contraceptive culture treats fertility like a disease. However,
God’s design is that men are fertile 24/7 and that women have
monthly fertile windows, and his design is perfect. Human fertility
does not need to be controlled or “fixed;” it’s a gift that needs to be
used responsibly.

**NFP is a powerful expression of holistic living and pro-woman healthcare.**

Our culture is increasingly concerned with having organic and
hormone-free food... so why would we want to pump our bodies full of
hormonal contraceptives? Additionally, because NFP looks at the
whole person, it provides valuable information regarding a woman’s
health. If she is struggling with something like infertility,
endometriosis, or other reproductive health issues, methods such as
FertilityCare and NaPro Technology can help get to the root of the issue.

**NFP is one way of living out “responsible parenthood”**.

The Church teaches that couples are called to exercise “responsible parenthood” in the discernment of their family size. In *Humanae Vitae* paragraph 10 it says:

> [T]he exercise of responsible parenthood requires that husband and wife, keeping a right order of priorities, recognize their own duties toward God, themselves, their families and human society. From this it follows that they are not free to act as they choose in the service of transmitting life, as if it were wholly up to them to decide what is the right course to follow. On the contrary, they are bound to ensure that what they do corresponds to the will of God the Creator.

This means that, as a couple discerns whether it is time to achieve, postpone, or avoid pregnancy for serious reasons, God always needs to be part of the conversation. With Natural Family Planning, a couple can have that ongoing discernment on a day-to-day, cycle-to-cycle basis.
NFP Is not “Catholic Contraception.”

Morally speaking, Natural Family Planning is very different from contraception. Contraception is the intentional sterilization of the marital act that essentially says, “Life is not welcome here.” NFP, on the other hand, always remains open to life, even if a couple chooses to wait until the infertile window to share in the marital embrace. As Archbishop Chaput’s pastoral letter Of Human Life (1998) tells us, NFP


differs not merely in style but in moral substance from

contraception as a means of regulating family size. NFP is not

contraception. Rather it is a method of fertility awareness and

appreciation. It is an entirely different approach to regulating

birth. NFP does nothing to attack spouse, or block the

procreative nature of intercourse. The marriage covenant

requires self-giving, and therefore open to the possibility of

new life. But when, for good reasons, a husband and wife limit

their intercourse to the wife’s natural periods of infertility

during a month, they are simply observing a cycle which God

Himself created in the woman. They are not subverting it. And

so they are living within the law of God’s love. (paragraph 14)
Practicing NFP does not automatically make your marriage better.

While NFP certainly creates an opportunity for ongoing communication between spouses, it's only one part of the toolbox of skills for a happy, healthy, Christ-centered marriage. If a couple does not communicate well or pray together on a regular basis, using NFP is not going to be a "fix all." A good marriage requires hard work, and NFP can be one of many tools to help make a marriage stronger.

Natural Family Planning is a way of living that says, "Your Will, not ours, be done, Lord."

Someone once told me that finances and fertility are the two most difficult things for married couples to entrust to God. No matter which method we are using, or whether the plan at the time is to achieve or postpone pregnancy, we are called to be open to life always. From personal experience, I can say that this can sometimes be extremely challenging and even a little scary. But honestly, it is so worthwhile.

As we continue to teach couples about the science behind Natural Family Planning and how it cooperates with the life-giving and love-giving nature of marriage, we must not ignore the reality that NFP will sometimes call us to embrace the cross. Trusting God with our
family planning is not something that is easy to do, but through the grace that comes in the sacrament of Holy Matrimony, Christ gives us what we need to say “yes” to God’s plan. In the end, no matter what the chart says, when God says, “Let there be life,” there are no mistakes or accidents, only beautiful and precious gifts.

For more information on Natural Family Planning, visit stphilipinstitute.org/familylife.
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THE MAGAZINE OF THE DIOCESE OF TYLER
PUBLISHED BY THE ST. PHILIP INSTITUTE OF CATECHESIS AND
EVANGELIZATION
DIOCESE OF TYLER | 1015 ESE LOOP 323 | TYLER, TX 75701 | (903) 630-5055