> "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."
>
> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Married Love and the Gift of Life*

the benefits for marriage of Cherishing Fertility

Do you want to avoid divorce? To be true to their public vows to love for as long as the beloved lives, married couples have to be vigilant and have constant recourse to the graces of the sacraments. A healthy marriage requires attention: conscious efforts to communicate better, and certainly a growing prayer life together.

One practice ties all these together and seems almost magical in its ability to strengthen marriages. In fact, less than 1% of couples who practice it suffer divorce. That activity is **natural family planning (NFP).**[1]

Not Your Grandmother's Rhythm Method

"Oh, that," maybe you are thinking. "Isn't that the old, unreliable 'rhythm' method?"

Not so fast. It's true that the rhythm method failed when a woman's cycle wasn't uniform.[2] But NFP isn't rhythm. Natural family planning uses specific signs of the woman's natural rhythms of fertility to plan sexual activity for the purpose of either avoiding or achieving pregnancy. Modern methods of NFP have a **99% success rate in avoiding pregnancy**.[3]

NFP methods, especially NaPro technology, also have success rates ranging from 38% to 82% in achieving pregnancy, depending on the problem causing the infertility. (In contrast, the morally objectionable *in vitro* fertilization method has a success rate ranging from 21% to 27%.)[4]

Most people have never heard of natural family planning, and those who have are often skeptical. One woman, Sharon, relates how she felt during her Pre-Cana introduction to NFP: "I sat in the class with my arms folded and an *almost* closed mind and heart. But, it was there I started to realize (although I didn't yet want to admit it to anybody) that my thoughts about NFP came strictly from a place of ignorance."[5]

Her fiancé, Michael, liked the idea of protecting Sharon from using potentially dangerous contraceptive chemicals by using NFP. But he faced other problems. He was hampered by old habits, such as viewing pornography, that made it difficult for him not to objectify women. How could he value his wife as a whole person?

How could NFP help Michael and Sharon's marriage, as it has helped so many other marriages?

Sex = Babies + Bonding

The answer lies not so much in what NFP is but in **what sex is**. Sex has two meanings: babies and bonding.[6] God wants sex to be life-giving: to give life to the relationship of a husband and a wife (bonding) through giving life to a new person (a baby).

Like Mike and Sharon, many of us wonder, "Can't I just have the bonding, without the openness to babies?" The problem with this idea is that the two meanings of sex are inseparable. Being closed to new life makes us closed to our spouse. After all, a wife's fertility is part of *her*; female fertility is a *personal* reality not to be chemically suppressed or destroyed. The same is true of a husband's fertility. Do we treat our

spouse's body and fertility with reverence or with fear?

Sadly, our whole culture seems to fear fertility. Society's message is often that the worst possible consequence of sex is a baby. But, as Dr. Janet Smith puts it, "**… if a pregnancy results from an act of sexual intercourse, this means that something has gone right with an act of sexual intercourse, not that something has gone wrong.**"[7] Fertility is not a disease: it's a sign of health.

What would you think about someone who said, "The worst possible consequence of a job is a paycheck!" It would be a little odd, wouldn't it? There are many reasons to have a job, but its primary purpose remains to support oneself and one's family financially. Likewise, sex has many wonderful effects, but its primary purpose remains enabling the gift of a new life. (This is one of the most secure findings of evolutionary biology.) And babies are indeed gifts, one of the great rewards of marriage.

Because NFP respects the fact that the conjugal act is ordered to new life, NFP is not "Catholic birth control." There is a fundamental difference between *having contraceptively sterilized sex* and *abstaining from sex* during a fertile period.

> "The total giving of oneself, body and soul, to one's beloved is no time to say: 'I give you everything I am—except . . .'"
>
> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Married Love and the Gift of Life*

Really Good Things for Marriage

In fact, married couples abstain from sexual activity all the time, for all kinds of reasons. (You're probably abstaining right now!)[8] Couples who use NFP tend to have as much intercourse as other couples.[9] **All kinds of benefits come from NFP**: more communication, more discernment about God's will, more respect for one another, not to mention preserving the woman from all the toxic side-effects of contraceptive drugs.

These effects include blood clots, hypertension, migraines, and depression. In addition, it should be considered that the Pill may occasionally operate not through preventing pregnancy but as an abortifacient (causing an abortion).[10] Also, it must be noted that the main mechanism of the intrauterine device (IUD) is most certainly abortifacient. Women and girls are not often adequately informed of these significant issues—a grave violation of their dignity and their right to informed consent. Couples using NFP avoid these problems.

But the biggest benefit of NFP comes from letting God into the bedroom. Sex is too wonderful to close it off to God. (It should be noted that there are couples who give their marriage to God by opening themselves in an absolute way to new life. This generosity and NFP are mutually complementary ways of life.)

Mike and Sharon were so impressed with what NFP did for their marriage that they began to teach it to other couples. Reflecting on this experience, Mike said, "[In] teaching NFP for seven years and talking to couples about these issues, Sharon and I have *never, not once*, met a husband or wife who says about [NFP], 'It's the dumbest thing I ever did.' We consistently see a mixture of surprise, joy and peace. And **surprise, joy and peace are really good things for a marriage.**"[11]

[1]Mercedes Arzú Wilson, "The Practice of Natural Family Planning Versus the Use of Artificial Birth Control: Family, Sexual and Moral Issue," *Catholic Social Science Review*, vol. 7 (Nov 2002), p. 1. [2]The method's failure rate is 9% (R.A. Hatcher, et al, *Contraceptive Technology*, 18th Edition [New York: Ardent Media, 2000]. [3]Summarized at http://www.fertilitycare.org/crms/effectiveness.htm and http://ccli.org/nfp/basics/effectiveness-p02.php. [4]Summarized at http://www.fertilitycare.org/napro/infertility.htm. [5]Sharon and Mike Phelan, "Escape from Fuddledom," http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/nfpweek/art-phelan.pdf. [6]Janet Smith, Ph.D., "Contraception: Why Not," audio CD. [7]Janet Smith, Ph.D., *Humanae Vitae: A Challenge to Love* (New Hope, Ken.: New Hope Publications, n.d.), p. 10. [8]As Christopher West likes to say. See www.christopherwest.com. [9]"Study confirms that couples using natural family planning have intercourse just as frequently as couples using other methods," 10/11/2005, http://www.news-medical.net/?id=13701. [10]Walter L. Larimore and Joseph B. Stanford, "Postfertilization Effects of Oral Contraceptives and Their Relationship to Informed Consent," *Archives of Family Medicine,* vol. 9 (Nov. 2000), pp. 126-133. [11]Phelan and Phelan, "Escape from Fuddledom."

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