

An Evaluation of Natural Family Planning

By Joseph Mizzi

Birth control is an ethical issue intricately related to the meaning of marriage and human sexuality. Can married couples decide when and how many children they should have? If so, which methods are morally acceptable for that purpose?

A minority of Catholics and Christians feel that they should have as many children as possible. On the other hand, the official position of the Catholic Church, as well as most evangelical Christians, hold that parents may for just reasons plan their family, as far as it is humanly possible, in a responsible way.¹

Many Catholic individuals and most Christians are convinced that family planning can be legitimately achieved by both natural and artificial means.² However the Catholic magisterium officially condemns the use of any artificial form of contraception, but allows periodic abstinence, or natural family planning (NFP), as a permissible form of birth control.³

NFP is based on methods intended to identify the fertile days during the menstrual cycle, and avoiding sex during that time. The calendar rhythm method, which determines fertility on the basis of the length of previous menstrual cycles, has largely fallen out of fashion. The symptom-based method (such as the sympto-thermal method), which is commonly used today, relies on signs of fertility (basal body temperature, cervical mucus and changes in the cervix). Exclusive breastfeeding can also be used in the first months after birth as another form of NFP – this is known as the lactational-amenorrhoea method.

Clarifying the Issues

Before discussing the Catholic teaching on birth control, we should clarify a few points.

There are different forms of contraceptives, and some of them, such as the intra-uterine device (IUD or ‘the coil’)⁴ and the progesterone-only contraceptive pill⁵ are *potentially* abortive. Strictly speaking, they should not be called ‘contraceptives’ because they do not always prevent conception but rather they may cause the death of the embryo in its early stages of development. Without question, such ‘contraceptives’ are immoral.

We will not discuss the use of contraceptives in extra-marital relationships, whether intended for the prevention of pregnancy or sexually-transmitted diseases. Sexual intercourse outside the bond of marriage is always immoral and contrary to the God’s Law.

Our focus is on the *moral* aspects of birth control; other issues will not be discussed. When compared to artificial contraceptives, NFP has its pros and cons, but it is a reliable and effective form of birth control if used appropriately. Parents should give careful consideration to NFP when choosing a suitable method of birth control.⁶

The Official Catholic Position

The teaching of the Catholic magisterium can be summarized by the following quotations from two key Papal encyclicals, *Casti Connubii* and *Humanae Vitae*.

In his 1930 encyclical, Pope Pius XI writes: ‘But no reason, however grave, may be put forward by which anything intrinsically against nature may become conformable to nature and morally good. Since, therefore, the conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious. Small wonder, therefore, if Holy Writ bears witness that the Divine Majesty regards with greatest detestation this horrible crime and at times has punished it with death. As St. Augustine notes, ‘Intercourse even with one’s legitimate wife is unlawful and wicked where the conception of the offspring is prevented. Onan, the son of Juda, did this and the Lord killed him for it.’⁷

In 1968 Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*. ‘The Church, nevertheless, in urging men to the observance of the precepts of the natural law, which it interprets by its constant doctrine, teaches that each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life. This particular doctrine, often expounded by the magisterium of the Church, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act. The reason is that the fundamental nature of the marriage act, while uniting husband and wife in the closest intimacy, also renders them capable of generating new life.’⁸

In brief, the Catholic Church teaches that every conjugal act must always remain open to the transmission of life because the unitive and procreative meanings of the act are *inseparably connected*. Furthermore it is claimed that its teaching on this subject has been constant throughout the centuries and that it is in line with the teaching of the Church Fathers, the Scriptures and Natural Law.

The Fathers

The Roman Catholic view on marriage and sexuality is largely based on the patristic writings, especially that of the most influential Church Father, St. Augustine.

Augustine viewed marriage as good, though he accorded celibacy a higher spiritual value. In his view, the primary purpose of marriage is procreation, and then also for companionship and as a legitimate channel for ‘carnal concupiscence’. The New Catholic dictionary defines ‘concupiscence’ as the ‘yearning for something, mostly for something evil or contrary to reason, the inclination of the lower appetites, the opposition of the flesh to the spirit, which, though not sinful, is often the occasion of sin.’⁹

Augustine’s view is reflected in the official position of the Catholic Church, at least up to the beginning of the twentieth century. ‘The primary end of marriage is the procreation and education of children; the secondary, mutual assistance and the remedy of concupiscence.’¹⁰

Augustine taught that sex is morally good for the purpose of procreation, ‘For necessary sexual intercourse for begetting is free from blame, and itself is alone worthy of marriage.’ Beyond that (sex for pleasure only, or even for pleasure *and* procreation – ‘sexual intercourse which takes place through incontinence, not alone for the begetting of children, and, at times, not at all for the begetting of children’) it is an expression of lust, but it is pardonable in marriage. ‘But that which goes beyond this necessity (procreation), no longer follows reason, but lust.’^{11, 12} Sexual intercourse for pleasure involves, in his view, ‘venial sin’.¹³

Augustine is highly respected by Catholics and Protestants alike, and all Christians are indebted for his enormous contribution to Christian theology. However Augustine was not immune from error, and at this point he was evidently mistaken.

The sexual act between married couple is a holy gift of God, a wonderful expression of their unity as well as the means of reproduction. There is no lust when a man and his wife celebrate and enjoy their love and unity through the God-given gift of sex. In Scripture, the godly father advises his son, 'May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer - may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love' (Proverbs 5:18, 19). The Song of Solomon is a beautiful celebration of the romantic love between the man and his wife. 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine.' He is no less passionate, 'How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much better is your love than wine' (Song 1:2; 4:10). Should we attribute 'lust' to what God's Word calls love?

Yet, despite the biblical endorsement on the beauty and holiness of marital sex, sadly the power of tradition has perpetuated a distorted view on sexuality for centuries, even to our day.

The Scriptures

The Bible has much to say about marriage and sexuality. God instituted marriage from the beginning of creation for, he said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him' (Genesis 2:18). Thus the primary purpose of marriage is companionship, and indeed, the Bible describes marriage as a covenant of companionship (Malachi 2:14).

The conjugal act is in itself the sign of the unity between the man and his wife. 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh' (Genesis 2:24). God also gives them the command to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Genesis 1:28). Children are the Lord's heritage and his reward (Psalm 127:3) and therefore married couples should eagerly embrace this wonderful privilege and grave responsibility. But the Bible does not command that *every* conjugal act should be intended for procreation, nor does the Law of God explicitly forbid contraception.

There is one reference to contraception in the Scriptures.¹⁴ Judah's firstborn son, Er, was married to Tamar but he died and left her without any children. Judah commanded his second son, Onan, to marry her in order to preserve his brother's line. But knowing that the offspring would not be his, Onan 'wasted his seed on the ground' whenever he had sexual intercourse with her. The Lord was offended and took his life. The context is amply clear that the reason for God's punishment was Onan's evil intention - he wanted to 'avoid giving offspring to his brother' as was his duty. Should we suppose that God would not have killed him if Onan used NFP to achieve his evil intent?

Some Catholic authors argue that the explanation that Onan was killed for violating the levirate law is inadequate because the penalty for not giving your brother's widow children was public humiliation (the woman had to take off one of his sandals and spit in his face), not death (Deut 25:9). But in fact such penalty was reserved for the brother who refused to marry the widow; the Bible says nothing about the case of a brother who marries the woman but then fails to fulfill his duty. Moreover Onan was not punished by death in a judicial sentence,

but by a direct intervention by God. Similarly, the Law did not prescribe the death sentence for not telling the whole truth, and yet God struck Ananias and Sapphira dead for speaking a lie (Acts 5). The objection is overruled.

Other Catholic authors frankly admit that Onan's case has often been misapplied. A Catholic commentator writes, 'Onan is commissioned to raise seed to his brother's wife, according to the levirate law; cf. Deut 25:5-10. Onan's offence is obvious; he selfishly refuses the responsibility of fulfilling his duty to his brother, as the law provided. That is the point of his offence (not what is popularly called onanism today).'¹⁵

If contraception is indeed such a shameful, vicious and a horrible crime, as Catholic theology asserts, it is rather perplexing why the Bible should be silent on such a grave sin.

The Natural Law

Reference is made to the 'natural law' in both the encyclicals quoted above. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the natural law is 'a system of right or justice held to be common to all humans and derived from nature rather than from the rules of society.'¹⁶ The Catechism teaches that the natural law is inscribed by the Creator on the heart of every person and that it expresses the moral sense which enables us to discern by reason the good and the bad.¹⁷

Pope Pius XI states that the purpose of sexual intercourse is 'by nature' procreative. He writes that the 'conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children', and therefore he condemns any who 'deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose' – namely procreation – as sinning against nature.

Pope Paul VI also urges the faithful 'to the observance of the precepts of the natural law.' The Catechism, quoting *Humanae Vitae*, states that 'it is necessary that each and every marriage act remain ordered *per se* to the procreation of human life.' Furthermore it states that this doctrine 'is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.'¹⁸

But then, surprisingly, periodic abstinence is justified on the same basis. 'The Church teaches that married people may then take advantage of the natural cycles immanent in the reproductive system and engage in marital intercourse only during those times that are infertile, thus controlling birth in a way which does not in the least offend the moral principles which we have just explained.'¹⁹

So, it is claimed that the marriage act, by nature, *always* have a 'procreative significance', and soon after, it is argued that the natural cycle includes times that are infertile. But the two statements are contradictory. Both could not be true.

The woman is infertile during most of the menstrual cycle, during pregnancy, during lactation (to a lesser extent), and following menopause. Thus nature teaches that sexual intercourse is intended for reproduction, but not every single sexual intercourse is destined by nature to that end. We learn from nature that the connection between the unitive and procreative significance are separable, and indeed separated, by the Creator himself.

If the light of nature is clear, the light of scriptural revelation is even brighter. The Bible interprets the conjugal act first of all as a sign of the marriage union (Genesis 2:24), and of the union of Christ with his beloved spouse, the church. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:31, 32). The ultimate significance of ‘one flesh’ is purely unitive with no hint whatsoever to any procreative meaning.

Both the natural law and the Bible deny the ‘inseparable connection’ between the unitive and reproductive meanings of sexual intercourse. The Catholic proposal of NFP and its rejection of any other form of birth regulation are based on a false premise – namely that sexual intercourse always has a procreative meaning. It does not.

Artificial Birth Control

The Catholic Church does not condemn contraceptives simply because they are ‘artificial’, for the Church allows all sorts of artificial drugs and technologies to alter body functions. Contraceptives are considered wrong because they disrupt the natural purpose of sex. ‘Contraception is wrong because it’s a deliberate violation of the design God built into the human race, often referred to as “natural law.” The natural law purpose of sex is procreation.’²⁰

Can it be argued, therefore, that since God gave us the stomach to nourish our bodies, it would be wrong to take appetite suppressants to control weight? I don’t think so. It is sometimes desirable to suppress the natural functioning of the body for a good purpose (in this instance, appetite suppression to reduce weight). In the same way, given that there are some circumstances when pregnancy should be avoided, the use of an artificial method to suppress the body’s fertility is as acceptable morally as deliberately restricting sexual intercourse to the ‘safe period’.

The basic moral difference between periodic abstinence and artificial methods of birth control is given in *Humanae Vitae*, 16: ‘In the former the married couple rightly use a faculty provided them by nature. In the later they obstruct the natural development of the generative process.’ The basic difference is not in the *motive* – parents can use either method to avoid pregnancy for some just reason – but in the *means* to reach that same goal. Since nature already provides a faculty to prevent pregnancy, and since it in certain circumstances it is desirable and good to avoid pregnancy, the Catholic objection to contraception is unsustainable.

In brief, there is no essential difference between periodic abstinence and artificial methods of birth control. Both can be used for exactly the same purpose. Moreover there is no moral difference between the *means* employed, whether ‘natural’ or ‘artificial’, since it is right to suppress normal body functions for the right reason, and in any case, nature itself imposes limits on human fertility.

Applying the biblical principles, contraceptives may be legitimately used by a married couple, provided that they are used to postpone or prevent pregnancy for just and serious reasons, and that the method used prevents conception and does not destroy a human life already conceived.

Constant Doctrine?

Some Catholic apologists boast about the constancy of Catholic teaching against contraception, and often taunt other Christians for accepting artificial methods of birth control. Other Catholic writers freely admit that this is not the case. The facts of history prove that the position of the Catholic Church has also changed dramatically.

There is evidence that periodic abstinence was allowed, though not promoted, by Catholic authorities as early as the late nineteenth century. Some bishops prohibited the general dissemination of information about the rhythm method by priests to the laity.²¹ The issue was clarified in 1951 when Pope Pius XII stated clearly that ‘the observance of the natural sterile periods may be lawful’ for medical, eugenic, economic and social reasons.²² This landmark decision marks the official papal sanction of NFP.

It is ironic that St Augustine himself condemns the time-based method for avoiding pregnancy. Writing against the Manicheans, he chided them, ‘Is it not you who used to counsel us to observe as much as possible the time when a woman, after her purification, is most likely to conceive, and to abstain from cohabitation at that time, lest the soul should be entangled in flesh?’²³ Augustine rejected both the Manichean heresy as well as their ‘natural’ method of controlling births.

The modern Catholic Church still does not approve artificial birth control methods, but she now approves and promotes a periodic abstinence method condemned by the same Father who dominated for centuries the Catholic teaching on marriage and sexuality.

Conclusion

The Roman Catholic Church stand on the sanctity of life and marriage are admirable and commendable. However its teaching goes beyond the Word of God, and indeed, the natural law as well. The Bible teaches that the sexual relations are morally good within marriage as the expression of the intimate and life-long union of the husband and his wife, and also as the means of procreation. The first purpose should be present in every act of marriage, the second purpose is not always present in nature and it should not be forced on the intent of the conjugal act.

Jesus rebuked the religious authorities of his day, ‘Woe also to you scholars of the law! You impose on people burdens hard to carry, but you yourselves do not lift one finger to touch them’ (Luke 11:46 NAB). He rebukes the modern-day religious authorities for weighing down God’s people with their rules and regulations.

The teaching of the Catholic Church on contraception has burdened with guilt the conscience of millions of Catholic couples, many of whom desire nothing more than to enjoy their love and to be responsible parents. They should realize that it is a false sense of guilt. God created sex for their pleasure, not only for reproduction. Married couples are free to express their unity and enjoy one another intimately to the full extent allowed by their Creator and Lord.

Notes and References

¹ ‘A particular aspect of this responsibility (the transmission of human life and the education of their children) concerns the regulation of procreation. For just reasons, spouses may wish to space the births of their children. It is their duty to make certain that their desire is not motivated by selfishness but is in conformity with the generosity appropriate to responsible parenthood.’ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2368.

² According to a nationwide poll of 2,242 U.S. adults surveyed online in September 2005 by Harris Interactive, ‘Birth control/contraception is supported by 93 percent of all adults, including 90 percent of Catholics and 88 percent of born-again Christians, the "very religious" and Evangelicals.’ Available from: <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/vault/Harris-Interactive-Poll-Research-New-Finds-Different-Religious-Groups-H-2005-10.pdf>

In 1995, 70% of all U.S. Catholic women of childbearing age used some form of contraception. Since 64% of all women, regardless of faith, use contraception, the proportion of Catholic women who contracept is actually slightly higher than women at large. The use of natural methods of family planning among Catholic women in the U.S was around 2-3%. Data from the National Center for Health Statistics, published in Fehring, R. and Schlidt, A.M. "Trends in Contraceptive Use Among Catholics in the United States: 1988-1995" The Linacre Quarterly - Journal of the Catholic Medical Association Vol.68 No. 2, May 2001. Pp. 170-185. Available from: http://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=nursing_fac&sei-redir=1#search=%22Trends%20Contraceptive%20Use%20Among%20Catholics%20United%20States%3A%201988-1995%20Linacre%20Quarterly%22

³ See Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2370.

⁴ This applies even to intra-uterine devices that release progesterone. According to the NHS website, ‘The IUS releases the hormone progestogen, which is similar to the natural hormone progesterone that is produced in a woman's ovaries. This prevents pregnancy by stopping fertilised eggs from becoming embedded in the womb. It does this by making the lining of the womb thinner so it is less likely to accept a fertilised egg. It also thickens the mucus from the cervix (opening of the womb), making it harder for sperm to move through it and reach an egg. In some women, the IUS also stops the ovaries from releasing an egg (ovulation), but most women will continue to ovulate.’ See NHS Choices, Intrauterine System (IUS). Available from: [http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Intrauterine-system-\(IUS\)/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Intrauterine-system-(IUS)/Pages/Introduction.aspx)

⁵ The progestogen-only pill works in two ways: it thickens the mucus in the neck of the womb, so it is harder for sperm to penetrate into the womb and reach an egg; it thins the lining of the womb, so there is less chance of a fertilised egg implanting into the womb and being able to grow. Sometimes, the progestogen-only pill may also prevent ovulation (the release of an egg from your ovaries each month). See NHS Choices, Progesterone-only pill. Available from: <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/progestogen-only-pill/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

⁶ See NHS Choices, Natural Family Planning. Available from: <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/natural-family-planning/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

⁷ Pope Pius XI, Encyclical Letter, *Casti Connubii*, 1930. Available from: <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius11/P11CASTI.HTM>

⁸ Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter, *Humanae Vitae*, 1968. Available from: <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Paul06/p6humana.htm>

⁹ New Catholic Dictionary, Concupiscence. Available online: <http://saints.sqpn.com/ncd02235.htm>

¹⁰ Codex Iuris Canonici (1917), Ends of Marriage. Can. 1013.

¹¹ Augustine, On the Good of Marriage, 11. Available from: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1309.htm>

¹² Ibid. ‘Marriages have this good also, that carnal or youthful incontinence, although it be faulty, is brought unto an honest use in the begetting of children, in order that out of the evil of lust the marriage union may bring to pass some good.’

¹³ ‘It is, however, one thing for married persons to have intercourse only for the wish to beget children, which is not sinful: it is another thing for them to desire carnal pleasure in cohabitation, but with the spouse only, which involves venial sin.’ St Augustine, On Marriage and Concupiscence, 1:17. Available from: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/15071.htm>

¹⁴ ‘Judah got a wife named Tamar for his firstborn, Er. But Er, Judah’s firstborn, greatly offended the LORD; so the LORD took his life. Then Judah said to Onan, “Have intercourse with your brother’s wife, in fulfillment of your duty as brother-in-law, and thus preserve your brother’s line.” Onan, however, knew that the offspring would not be his; so whenever he had intercourse with his brother’s wife, he wasted his seed on the ground, to avoid giving offspring to his brother. What he did greatly offended the LORD, and the LORD took his life too’ Genesis 38:6-10 (NAB).

¹⁵ The New Jerome Biblical Commentary. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy, editors. Theological Publications in India, Bangalore, 2000.

¹⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, Natural Law. Available from: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/406283/natural-law>

¹⁷ See Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1954-1956.

¹⁸ See Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2366.

¹⁹ Pope Paul VI, Encyclical Letter, *Humanae Vitae*, 1968. Para 16. Available from: <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Paul06/p6humana.htm>

²⁰ Catholic Answers. Birth Control. Available from: http://www.catholic.com/library/Birth_Control.asp

²¹ See Noonan, Contraception, pp. 442-447.

²² Serious motives, such as those which not rarely arise from medical, eugenic, economic and social so-called "indications," may exempt husband and wife from the obligatory, positive debt for a long period or even for the entire period of matrimonial life. From this it follows that the observance of the natural sterile periods may be lawful, from the moral viewpoint: and it is lawful in the conditions mentioned. Pope Pius XII. Address to Midwives on the Nature of Their Profession. October 29, 1951. Available from: <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius12/P12midwives.htm>

²³ St Augustine, On the Morals of the Manichaeans, 18. Available from: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1402.htm>