



Theology Corner

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“Is Natural Family Planning (NFP) just another form of Contraception?”

For those who are unfamiliar with NFP, it is a method of family planning that is accepted by the Church as one that is natural and morally acceptable. Its method is to observe symptoms of fertility/infertility cycles in women so that they can either achieve pregnancy or postpone it for some grave reason. For the purposes of this question, we will focus more on the postponement of pregnancy. Why would it *not* be considered a form of contraception when a person clearly has intent to prevent a pregnancy by having sex during a time of infertility? The first answer is that it is compliant with the natural law. When a couple uses contraception (condoms, IUD's, etc.), it completely shuts the door to the possibility of procreation. The Catechism states that, “Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes.” (CCC 2351). What this means is that the sexual act cannot be separated from its the procreative or unitive nature. If a couple's health or financial situation is such that bringing a child into the world would cause undue hardship, the Church doesn't ask them to abstain from sex since that would deny the unitive aspect necessary for the man and the woman. In other words, God never intended that every time a husband and wife have sex that a child is conceived. There is a natural goodness from the love that is shared in the conjugal act. Just as the Church does not condone the complete rejection of the unitive aspect of sex, the Church does not condone the rejection of the procreative aspect. Again, contraception seeks to render procreation impossible. Thus, NFP is the one option that respects *both* aspects of the sexual act insofar as it enables the couple to have unity, it leaves the door open to life, and it respects the natural manner in which the body operates.

That being said, NFP can certainly be used in a way that is contraceptive in nature. This is something that I find is often left out of the conversation. If a couple uses NFP with the intention of blocking the possibility of marriage, then it *is* another form of contraception. Remember, we have to accept both the procreative and unitive aspect of sex. So, if we go into it knowing that we are actively seeking to entirely block either of these things, it is an evil act. What this means is that if we use the NFP method for anything other than a grave reason, we are contracepting. Let's consider some concrete examples:

- 1) “I don't want to have any more kids because I am happy with just one. Let's use NFP so I can avoid getting pregnant again.” (**BAD**)
- 2) “Having another baby could be life threatening for me. I am going to use NFP to decrease my chances of getting pregnant.” (**GOOD**)
- 3) “My husband doesn't have a job, so I don't think we should have kids right now. I'll use NFP in hopes that I don't get pregnant.” (**BAD**)
- 4) “My husband is going to be shipped off to serve overseas, so I'll use NFP in hopes that I don't get pregnant.” (**GOOD**).

The first rule to consider is that the reasoning for using NFP is for some grave reason. The second is that the hardship pregnancy will bring is not one that you can resolve somewhat easily. The third is that we have to be sure that the reason for postponing pregnancy is legitimate. Example #1 is a bad use of NFP because it is used as a means to preventing pregnancy since she does not want any more kids. She is wanting to shut the door to pregnancy in a natural way. This is not acceptable. Example #2 is a good use of NFP because the intent is to prevent death of the mother. This is a grave reason to postpone pregnancy, and the mother is not attempting to close the door to the possibility. Example #3 is a bad use of NFP because this is a situation that can be resolved by the father getting a job. This couple is putting themselves in a situation that can be avoided. Example #4 is a good use of NFP because while the mother is still open to life, she does not want to raise a new baby in a fatherless household. The key here is that the use of NFP must be used with the openness to life, respecting the natural operations of the body, seeking to postpone pregnancy for a reason that is grave and not likely to get out of anytime soon. Otherwise, it takes on the nature of a natural contraceptive.