

# Fact of FAITH

## Q&As about Contraception

### What does the Church teach about married love?

Marriage is more than a civil contract; it is a lifelong covenant of love between a man and a woman. It is an intimate partnership in which husbands and wives learn to give and receive love unselfishly, and then teach their children to do so as well. Christian marriage in particular is a “great mystery,” a sign of the love between Christ and his Church (Eph 5:32).

Married love is powerfully embodied in the spouses’ sexual relationship, when they most fully express what it means to become “one body” (Gn 2:24) or “one flesh” (Mk 10:8, Mt 19:6). 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. When Scripture portrays God creating mankind “in his image” (Gn 1:27), it treats the union of man and woman as joining two persons equal in human dignity (“This one, at last, is bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh,” Gn 2:23), and as being open to the blessing of children (“Be fertile and multiply,” Gn 1:28).

### What does this have to do with contraception?

A husband and wife express their committed love not only with words, but with the language of their bodies. That “body language”—what a husband and wife say to one another through the intimacy of sexual relations—speaks of *total* commitment and openness to a future together. So the question about contraception is this: Does sexual intercourse using contraception

faithfully affirm this committed love? Or does it introduce a false note into this conversation?

Married love differs from any other love in the world. By its nature, the love of husband and wife is so complete, so ordered to a lifetime of communion with God and each other, that it is open to creating a new human being they will love and care for together. Part of God’s gift to husband and wife is this ability in and through their love to cooperate with God’s creative power. Therefore, the mutual gift of fertility is an integral part of the bonding power of marital intercourse. That power to create a new life with God is at the heart of what spouses share with each other.

To be sure, spouses who are not granted the gift of children can have a married life that is filled with love and meaning. As Pope John Paul II said to these couples in a 1982 homily, “You are no less loved by God; your love for each other is complete and fruitful when it is open to others, to the needs of the apostolate, to the needs of the poor, to the needs of orphans, to the needs of the world.”

When married couples deliberately act to suppress fertility, however, sexual intercourse is no longer fully *marital* intercourse. It is something less powerful and intimate, something more “casual.” Suppressing fertility by using contraception denies part of the inherent meaning of married sexuality and does harm to the couple’s unity. The total giving of oneself, body and soul, to one’s beloved is no time to say: “I give you everything I am—except. . . .” The Church’s teaching is not only about observing a rule, but about preserving that total, mutual gift of two persons in its integrity.

This may seem a hard saying. Certainly it is a teaching that many couples today, through no fault

of their own, have not heard (or not heard in a way they could appreciate and understand). But as many couples who have turned away from contraception tell us, living this teaching can contribute to the honesty, openness, and intimacy of marriage and help make couples truly fulfilled.

## **Why does saying “yes” to children at the altar mean never using contraception to close the act of intercourse to new life?**

Some argue that if a husband and wife remain open to children throughout their marriage, they need not worry about using contraception occasionally. But practicing what is good most of the time does not justify doing what is wrong some of the time.

Even if I see myself as a truthful person “on the whole,” any occasional lie I tell is still a lie, and so is immoral. By such acts, I begin to make myself into the kind of person who lies. This is no less true when we falsify the “language of the body,” speaking total love and acceptance of the other person while denying an essential part of that message.

A couple need not desire or seek to have a child in each and every act of intercourse. And it is not wrong for couples to have intercourse even when they know the wife is naturally infertile, as discussed below. But they should never act to suppress or curtail the life-giving power given by God that is an integral part of what they pledged to each other in their marriage vows. This is what the Church means by saying that every act of intercourse must remain open to life and that contraception is objectively immoral.

[Natural Family Planning] has become more than a totally safe, healthy, and reliable method of birth regulation to us. The essential qualities of self-restraint, self-discipline, mutual respect, and shared responsibility carry over to all facets of our marriage, making our relationship more intimate.

—*Faithful to Each Other Forever*, 44

## **Are couples expected to leave their family size entirely to chance?**

Certainly not. The Church teaches that a couple may generously decide to have a large family, or may for serious reasons choose not to have more children for the time being or even for an indefinite period (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 10).

In married life, serious circumstances—financial, physical, psychological, or those involving responsibilities to other family members—may arise to make an increase in family size untimely. The Church understands this, while encouraging couples to take a generous view of children.

## **What should a couple do if they have a good reason to avoid having a child?**

A married couple can engage in marital intimacy during the naturally infertile times in a woman’s cycle, or after child-bearing years, without violating the meaning of marital intercourse in any way.

This is the principle behind natural family planning (NFP). Natural methods of family planning involve fertility education that enables couples to cooperate with the body as God designed it.

NFP does require communication and commitment, but isn’t that what marriage is all about? We have gained so much by using NFP and have lost nothing.

—*Natural Family Planning Blessed Our Marriage*, 18

## **What is natural family planning?**

Natural family planning is a general name for the methods of family planning that are based on a woman’s menstrual cycle. A man is fertile throughout his life, while a woman is fertile for only a few days each cycle during the child-bearing years. Some believe that NFP involves using a calendar to predict the fertile time. That is not what NFP is today. A woman

experiences clear, observable signs indicating when she is fertile and when she is infertile. Learning to observe and understand these signs is at the heart of education in natural family planning.

When a couple decides to postpone pregnancy, NFP can be very effective. NFP can also be very helpful for couples who desire to have a child because it identifies the time of ovulation. It is used by many fertility specialists for this purpose. Thus a couple can have marital relations at a time when they know that conception is most likely to take place.

## **Is there really a difference between using contraception and practicing natural family planning?**

On the surface, there may seem to be little difference. But the end result is not the only thing that matters, and the *way* we get to that result may make an enormous moral difference. Some ways respect God's gifts to us while others do not. Couples who have practiced natural family planning after using contraception have experienced a profound difference in the meaning of their sexual intimacy.



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