

“Happiness, Marriage, and NFP”

Theresa Notare

Happiness in life requires courage and work. Happiness comes at a price. Want to play the guitar like a rock star? You will have to take music lessons and practice for hours daily. Want to have a strong, lean body? You will have to eat healthy food and exercise regularly. The list is endless. Hard work and sacrifice are a prerequisite to true, mature happiness.

As people of faith, we know that happiness arises from living a life that is in harmony with God’s will and leads us to fulfill our purpose. God made us for a reason—to love Him and our neighbor and to live that love into eternity!

When we “understand that love is our mission” (a theme from the 2015 World Meeting on the Family), this truth will “shape many other areas of life” (see the Catechism of the World Meeting on the Family, 189). This can be clearly seen in marriage and family which, when founded on Christ, is a school of love (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1657).

The vows in a Catholic marriage speak of the self-gift that the husband and wife make to each other in Christ. This requires “dying to self” as the two put aside “I” to become “we.” Married love, including its sexual expression, is holy. When lived in accord with God’s plan, conjugal love should “reverence God’s vision of human sexuality.”¹ This requires that the couple trust in God’s plan for their marriage, including when (or whether) they are able to have children. It may also ask for courage since Catholic couples will have to reject contraception which does harm to God’s design. Faith in God and an understanding of His good gifts to husband and wife will help in their marital journey.

Some married Catholics do not realize the deep happiness that they can have in their marriages when God is at the center of everything. Indeed, this happiness is nothing less than a share in God’s holy joy. It also references Christian hope—Christ died for our sins, we are redeemed—and so are our relationships!

Husband and wife can express God’s love for one another while they also honor His design, including their sexual lives. Sexual intercourse, as willed by God, is a holy time for husband and wife. It fortifies their union as they live the “one flesh” reality willed by God. Conjugal relations is *the worthy place* for receiving new life—it is exactly where God willed that new life would come into this world. That is why husband and wife are called to honor God’s design of fidelity to their union and openness to life.

Honoring God’s will does not mean that couples can’t regulate the number of children in their families. When they need to postpone or avoid pregnancy, they may continue to honor God’s design by practicing one of the methods of Natural Family

¹ Committee for Pro-Life Activities, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Human Sexuality from God’s Perspective, *Humanae vitae* 25 Years Later,” (1993); available at: uscbb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/catholic-teaching/upload/Human-Sexuality-from-God-s-Perspective-Humanae-Vitae-25-Years-Later.pdf.

Planning (NFP). NFP methods respect God’s gift of fertility. All NFP methods ask husband and wife to be mindful of their fertile time and do no harm to God’s design. In the daily charting of the wife’s menstrual cycle, the couple is presented with opportunities to discern whether God is calling them to accept new life or not. This is an awesome and sacred responsibility!

Since NFP methods reject contraceptive drugs or devices and require periodic sexual abstinence when attempting to postpone conception, the NFP lifestyle can foster mutual growth in emotional and spiritual maturity. Both husband and wife are asked to respect the life-giving potential of their combined fertility and to work together in that project while inviting God to help them.

When they realize that God may be calling them to have a child, because of their knowledge of NFP they will know the best time to attempt a pregnancy. All NFP methods require self-discipline since periodic sexual abstinence is the NFP means to avoid pregnancy. This can be very difficult, but it is doable with the help of grace and the habit of self-discipline which is common to all virtues and a robust spiritual life.

When couples persevere in learning and using NFP, they reap many benefits. All NFP methods are effective for both attempting to achieve or avoid conception. They are also good for the body since no devices or drugs are used. In fact, NFP methods are the “organic” way to live with human fertility—they do not pollute the environment.

Most importantly, NFP methods teach married couples to understand their bodies and to communicate with each other about their fertility and their relationship. These conversations can foster deeper couple communication that can improve their relationships. NFP research confirms this benefit showing that NFP couples feel respected by their spouses.² NFP helps married couples commit to real happiness—the deep happiness of living life according to God’s plan!

Theresa Notare, PhD, is the assistant director of the NFP Program of the USCCB’s Secretariat for Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth. Contact nfp@usccb.org. A version of this article was created for the workbook of the Workbook of the 2015 World Meeting on the Family.



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² L. VandeVusse, L. Hanson, R. J. Fehring, A. Newman, J. Fox, “Couples’ views of the effects of natural family planning on marital dynamics,” *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 35, no. 2 (2003):171-176.