

THE PERSON, THE FAMILY, AND FUNDAMENTAL CHOICES

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Commenting on the status of marriage in the United States today Sar Levitan recently noted that "despite the turbulence of the last two decades, repeated survey research shows that Americans now place top priority on family life and marriage as critical aspects of personal development and happiness." Perhaps this signals a slowing down of the debate about the changing nature of marriage, and a beginning of more realistic expectations in regard to its future functioning and stability. However, marriage is seen today primarily in terms of relationship, and for purposes of this article, it can be described as a process of fundamental choices by a man and a woman fully committed to a mutual and permanent sharing of their lives. Essentially these choices or decisions reflect the values of the two persons involved, their interpersonal relationship and the family life they share with their children and others-extended family, neighbors and friends.

Fundamental to their values and vision of the world is their religious commitment, and recent studies confirm that a strong religious commitment is a positive support for marriage and family life. Also true, but often overlooked, is the fact that a strong, mutually-shared religious commitment broadens the couple's vision and opens to them a new dimension of marriage-that is, marriage as vocation or mission. This essay deals, the with Christian marriage as relationship, as community and as vocation with special emphasis on the fundamental choices a couple makes in regard to parenthood. It proposes that a Christian married couple, by the mutual choice of natural family planning, crystallize their values and attitudes in regard to interpersonal love and sexuality; marriage as relationship and vocation, and Christian commitment in a secularized and sexually libertarian culture.

The Person

It is commonly accepted that marriage is a union to two persons, male and female, who choose each other as partners for life. Our view of the person is shaped by classical Catholic philosophy, by psychology and the behavioral sciences and by contemporary theology, often referred to as Christian personalism. Each person is "made in the image of God' and redeemed by Jesus Christ. Each person has the capacity to know, to think and to make decisions freely and responsibly in the depths of his or he: conscience. Each individual is genetically and socially different from all others, with his or her own history and destiny. In the process of human development, beginning even before birth, each person develops harmoniously his or her unique qualities, abilities and talents.

Critical to this process of human development is a true understanding of sexuality. Human sexuality is not simply a biological phenomenon. It is a composite of the biological, psychological and social dimensions of personhood. The sexual difference between man and woman as designed by God has serious implications in terms of conjugal love and procreation. Yet, a proper appreciation of the powers of sexual love requires an understanding of human reproduction and the responsibility and capacity for harmonious management of sexual desire on the part of both partners in marriage. Sexuality, and specifically its genital expression, is expressive of the person, and in the words of Pope John Paul II

is realized in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death The only "place" in which this self giving is made possible is marriage (Familiaris Consortio, no. 1).

While traveling the course of self-discovery self-awareness and self-understanding, each person struggles for maturity, which includes the ability to relate to others. This relational aspect of the person corresponds to an inherent need for community, and it is a counter-balance to individualism, which if entirely untempered can become self-destructive.

Christian Marriage-A Community of Persons

Every person belongs to many communities in the course of a lifetime, but the primary and most common form of human community is marriage. As John Paul II notes in *Familiaris Consortio*,

this conjugal communion sinks its roots in the natural that exists between a man and woman and is nurtured through the personal willingness of the spouses to share their entire life project, what they have and what they are. For this reason such communion is the fruit and sign of a profoundly human need (no. 19).

But marriage is not simply a mechanism for fulfilling needs. The very nature of marriage demands and depends upon the unity and partnership that logically result from the mutual love of the spouses. The Second Vatican Council describes this mutual love as eminently human, enriching, ennobling, capable of special gifts and expressed and perfected in marriage in those actions by which the couple are united intimately and chastely. The Council also tells us that Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched

by Christ's redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church, so that this love may lead the spouses to God with powerful effect and may aid and strengthen them in the sublime office of being a father or a mother (Pastoral Constitution on the *Church in the Modern World*, no. 48).

The Family

The importance of the family is a recurring theme in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* tells us that

the well-being of the individual person and of human and Christian society is intimately linked with the healthy condition of that community produced by marriage and the family (no. 47).

Yet, in a rapidly changing society such as ours, even fundamental institutions like marriage and the family are called into question as to their value and enduring quality. It is not uncommon to read that the family is a dying institution, soon to be replaced by some new pattern of relationship. Mary Jo Bane, commenting on today's family writes:

Marriage is far from withering away in contemporary America and is, in fact, enjoying unprecedented popularity. Its character, to be sure, is changing substantially because of declining birthrates and because women hold a different position in contemporary marriages. The change, though, seems to be taking place within a context of strong and persistent commitment to marriage relationships.

Certainly the emphasis has shifted from the family as social institution to the family as partnership or community of persons. The present focus is on the relationship between the spouses, their communication and intimacy, their shared values and vision of the future and their relationship with their children. While the value and importance of the family may be the prevailing convictions of contemporary society it is by no means certain, however, that the well-being of the family is a central factor in decisions regarding interpersonal relationships, sexual behavior or parenthood. Moreover, to some degree, Christian families must recognize that they exist as a religious minority in a culture that is alien, if not antagonistic, to their values. This is especially true in regard to childbearing and childrearing. For example:

- In a society where birthrates are presently below the level of population stabilization (2.1 children per family), there are continuing efforts to canonize the small family model and to dissuade people from voluntarily raising even a relatively large family
- In a society where millions of dollars are spent on drugs, alcohol, recreation and leisure, the child is often portrayed as a threat and economic liability
- In a society where no one should be deprived of the necessities of life or suffer from disadvantage, millions of unborn children have been legally destroyed by abortion, and this infectious madness has now begun to take its toll on infants suffering from disease or genetic defect who are denied life-sustaining care or food.

In this atmosphere, the Church consistently reaffirms the value, dignity and rights of children. No better summation of our commitment to children and the family can be found than the words of John Paul II in his homily in Washington, D. C. in 1979:

- When the sacredness of life before birth is attacked, we will stand up and proclaim that no one ever has the authority to destroy unborn life.
- When a child is described as a burden or is looked upon only as a means to satisfy an emotional need, we will stand up and insist that every child is a unique and unrepeatable gift of God, with the right to a loving and united family.
- When the institution of marriage is abandoned to human selfishness or reduced to a temporary, conditional arrangement that can easily be terminated, we will stand up and affirm the indissolubility of the marriage bond.
- When the value of the family is threatened because of social and economic pressures, we will stand up and reaffirm that the family is "necessary not only for the private good of every person, but also for the common good of every society, nation and state."
- When freedom is used to dominate the weak, to squander natural resources and energy, and to deny basic necessities to people, we will stand up and reaffirm the demands of justice and social love.

- When the sick, the aged or the dying interpersonal dynamic are abandoned in loneliness, we will stand up and proclaim that they are worthy of love, care and respect.

Fundamental Choices

The foregoing comments lead us to a consideration of the fundamental choices Christian spouses are called to make in light of the teachings of recent popes.

Conjugal Love

Conjugal love, the love that binds a man and woman together for life, is different from every other kind of love. It demands and fosters a deep, interpersonal intimacy. Intimacy requires communication, self-disclosure, and a willingness to forego some personal privacy. At the same time it satisfies the human need for companionship and community; and gives each partner a heightened sense of self-worth and security.

Conjugal love is an all-encompassing, interpersonal dynamic that constantly grows and becomes stronger and more binding. It requires of each spouse large-heartedness and generosity and a willingness to risk something of self in the interest of the conjugal relationship. At the same time it creates a special unity and fidelity between the spouses which is able to withstand the tendency to selfishness or the attraction of power, material goods or personal advancement that might otherwise erode their relationship. In effect, as the dynamic element in their relationship, conjugal love gives an unbreakable quality to their union and their partnership.

The expressions of conjugal love are myriad, and to some degree, particular to each couple. But virtually all married couples will acknowledge that consideration of the other person, communication, mutual patience; understanding and encouragement are indications of and powerful sustainers of conjugal love. So too is sexual love in which the couple engage in a deep and specially reserved interpersonal sharing, and through which they become co-creators with God by bringing children into the world and building their own family.

Responsible Parenthood

In its teaching and pastoral concern for families, the Church emphasizes the need for responsible parenthood. Unfortunately, this term has often been interpreted as a rejection of childbearing. However, as

described by the Council and recent popes, the concept of responsible parenthood involves the following elements:

A free, informed, mutual decision by the couple

Regarding the frequency of births and size of the family

Based on their conscientious assessment of their responsibilities

To God, themselves, their children and family and the society of which they are a part

And enlightened by the authentic teaching of the Church's magisterium regarding the objective moral order and the licit methods of spacing or limiting pregnancies.

Decisions regarding childbearing and childrearing are certainly in the forefront of the fundamental choices that couples make in marriage. But it is a mistake to think that such decisions are fraught with tension, lacking in mutual agreement, or threatening to conjugal love and family well-being. More realistically and more commonly, such decisions reflect the couple's values and attitudes, and are reached in relative calm. When couples are secure in their love, when they value parenting and enjoy their children, when they are convinced that material advantages are but one aspect of family life, and when they see childbearing as a special sharing in God's plan of creation and redemption, there is an openness to life and a genuine willingness to share their life and love with others, particularly their own offspring.

Natural Family Planning

Efforts to formulate and carry out decisions regarding childbearing and childrearing should begin in courtship and should be characterized by positive anticipation. In other words, a man and woman plan to marry and to have a family. "Family planning" in its broadest sense should be a positive concept that gives primary attention to *building a family*, to fostering basic human relationships that exist therein, to appropriate enjoyment of the spiritual, cultural and material advantages of modern society, and to fulfilling the mission of the Christian family-"manifesting to all Christ's living presence in the world and the genuine nature of the Church" (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 48).

Conjugal love and parenthood derive their greatest strength from an understanding of God's creative love, his willingness to share his life and eternity with each person and his sending of his Son to redeem the human family. Efforts to understand the divine plan of creation/redemption also lead to a deeper appreciation of the natural world and the powers and capacities of human nature. As indicated above, the human person is a knowing, thinking, reflective being, capable of discovering wisdom and harmony in God's design. This leads to a respect for human sexuality, for procreation, and for the harmony and integrity of the process of human reproduction. It points to the wisdom of working with human nature and preserving the unbreakable connection between the unitive and procreative aspects of sexual intercourse. In this regard, Pope John Paul II has called for a deeper study of the difference, both anthropological and moral, between contraception and reliance on the natural cycle of fertility.

Couples who make the fundamental choice in favor of childbearing and childrearing will also determine the timing or spacing of each birth. The Church teaches that such decisions should respect the natural cycle of fertility and infertility and should be based on a willingness to limit sexual intercourse to those times when pregnancy will not occur. Such a choice, says Pope John Paul II

involves accepting the cycle of the woman, and thereby accepting dialogue, reciprocal respect, shared responsibility and self-control In this way sexuality is respected and promoted in its truly and fully human dimension and is never "used" as an "object" that, by breaking the personal unity of soul and body, strikes at God's creation itself at the level of the deepest interaction of nature and person (Familiaris Consortio, no. 32).

Dialogue. The choice of natural family planning requires communication directed toward setting priorities, pursuing agreed upon goals and maintaining an openness to the future. A couple should discuss their understanding of the signs of fertility and their ability to integrate periodic abstinence into their conjugal relationship.

Reciprocal respect. Integral to sexual love in marriage is respect for one another as individuals and as partners. It involves sensitivity to the other person's needs and development of a variety of ways to manifest appreciation, understanding, love and intimacy.

Shared responsibility. Decisions regarding the spacing of births and the size of the family must be mutual decisions, and responsibility for carrying out such decisions should be borne equally by both partners. Sharing responsibility also involves sharing other tasks and obligations—care of existing children, regard and

care for grandparents, assuming and meeting financial obligations. The choice of natural family planning is premised on periodic abstinence and the integration of that abstinence into the whole pattern of conjugal love.

Self-mastery. Spouses must recognize the value of sex in their marriage, as well as each one's own need for self-discipline and self-mastery. In a highly charged sexual environment such as ours, self-mastery calls for continual efforts to relate sex to marriage and to avoid attitudes or patterns of behavior that tend to trivialize sex.

In his many addresses on natural family planning, Pope John Paul II has emphasized the importance of both love and continence in the life of a married couple. Of course, extrinsic factors such as illness, separation and other responsibilities often require a couple to forego sexual intercourse; but the choice of natural family planning is premised on periodic abstinence and the integration of that abstinence into the whole pattern of conjugal love. The successful practice of natural family planning by an increasing number of couples in all parts of the world and in widely different cultural settings proves that the integration of periodic abstinence is possible. However, experience also indicates that where there is no past history of deferring self-gratification, it is far from easily achieved.

The Church's tradition of celibacy and consecrated virginity is a parallel experience to periodic abstinence. Celibacy and virginity involve a willingness to forego marriage and family life and sexual love for the sake of building the kingdom of God. Married couples adopt periodic abstinence to fulfill the totality of their familial responsibilities. In both cases sexual love is seen as a positive good which can be given up in light of other goods and responsibilities. Moreover, married couples and those embracing celibacy and virginity can be mutually reinforced and motivated by each other experience.

Recent decades have witnessed to scientific developments that have given greater reliability to natural family planning methods. Educational techniques and instructional programs have been developed to train couples in the practice of natural family planning. In the forefront of these efforts have been many dedicated lay men and women, as well as priests and religious.

In *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul emphasized that providing instruction, motivation and practical help to couples is a responsibility of the whole Church and that "every effort must be made to render such knowledge accessible to all married people and also to young adults before marriage. Thorough, clear, timely and serious instruction and education given by married couples, doctors and experts" (no. 33). In the United States, as in other nations, there are a number of national groups that promote natural family planning and provide such instruction. Nonetheless, while recognizing the many programs in existence, the Holy Father has called for "a broader, more decisive and more systematic effort to make the natural methods of regulating fertility known, respected and applied" (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 35). In keeping with this recommendation, the U.S. bishops,

with the assistance of the Knights of Columbus, have launched a nationwide effort to help expand and coordinate natural family planning programs at the diocesan level and to integrate natural family planning into programs of marriage instruction, marriage enrichment and family assistance that are presently offered by various Church agencies.

In addresses to international congresses, John Paul II has also noted that the Church does not endorse any one approach to natural family planning, but rather encourages specialists to continue their research and their teaching of the various methods because the needs of couples are so diverse. The Holy Father maintains it is "providential" that different methods exist. His comments apply to the various techniques for discerning the time of ovulation, such as the Billings ovulation method, the basal-body temperature method, and the sympto-thermal method which uses a number of indicators.

The Pope's advice also applies to differing program approaches-couple-to-couple, doctor-to-patient, and the efforts of nurses and educational specialists in clinics, hospitals or other teaching centers. The important point is that the Holy Father recognizes the background and need of the couple as a criterion for the choice of a particular approach, affirming that it is not simply circumstantial, but *providential*, that a variety of approaches exist.

Well aware of the expertise, dedication and apostolic zeal of so many people in the natural family planning movement throughout the world, Pope John Paul B has also issued a plea for greater cooperation and collaboration. "It is necessary," says the Holy Father, "that various groups dedicated to this noble work [of promoting natural family planning] appreciate their respective efforts and mutually exchange experiences and results, firmly avoiding tensions and disagreements which could threaten so important and difficult a work" (Address to Study Group, July 3, 1982/.

Conclusion

"The Church believes in the family," writes John Paul II, because it "possesses and continues still to release formidable energies capable of taking man out of his anonymity, out of being standardized and depersonalized" (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 43). Every married couple knows that the family is a unique haven for the individual and the special place for the development of conjugal love and the marital relationship. In marriage each person gives up some small portion of his or her independence or privacy. But it is a small sacrifice for the benefits of intimacy and community. The cohesive factor for many couples is the sacramental nature of Christian marriage, by which they themselves "signify and partake of the mystery of that unity and fruitful love which exists between Christ and his Church" (*Constitution on the Church*, no. 11).

In marriage the spouses grow in love, and their relationship takes on added fidelity and permanence. But the experience is shaped by their vision and their values, which also direct and guide their fundamental choices. Their decisions regarding sexuality, childbearing and childrearing should be based on their appreciation of their unique capacity "to serve life, to actualize in history the original blessing of the creator-that of transmitting by procreation the divine image from person to person" (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 28) . Their decisions should also respect their responsibilities to God, themselves, their families and the society of which they are a part. In carrying out their decisions regarding parenthood, couples should master the natural methods of family planning which, in the context of responsible parenthood, respect the design of God and the natural connection between the unitive and procreative dimensions of sexual intercourse. In so doing, the spouses, "made to the image of God and enjoying the authentic dignity of persons [are] joined to one another in equal affection, harmony of mind and mutual sanctification Thus, by the joys and sacrifices of their vocation and through their faithful love, married people will become witnesses of the mystery of that love which the Lord revealed to the world by his dying and his rising up to life again" (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 52).

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PROGRAM SUGGESTIONS

Diocese

1. Call together diocesan and related agencies-Family Life, Pro-Life, Catholic hospitals, existing NFP groups in local area-to determine what must be done to bring quality and accessible NFP programs to all in the diocese. The staff of the Diocesan Development Program for NFP can be of assistance in this planning process.
2. With the cooperation of various diocesan agencies, NFP groups, Catholic doctors and nurses, and couples practicing NFP, offer a program for diocesan clergy and religious to provide up-to-date information on methods and available services.

Parish

1. Provide fertility awareness and NFP orientation to all couples in pre-Cana programs.
2. With the assistance of the diocese and existing NFP groups, offer instruction programs in NFP for married couples in the parish.

High School/College

Provide fertility awareness education as an integral part of programs in human sexuality

Hospital

1. Sponsor an educational workshop for health care professionals to provide up-to-date information on NFP methods and their effectiveness.
2. With the assistance of diocesan agencies and existing NFP groups, inaugurate (or expand) NFP instructional programs for the community.

Married Couple

Plan a program of private study to fully understand NFP and the various methods available. Attend an instructional program offered by the parish, diocese, hospital or NFP group.

PROGRAM RESOURCES

Print

Aquilar, Nona. *No Pill, No Risk Birth Control*. New York: Scribner, 1980, 254 pp., \$6.95.

Billings, E. and A. Westmore. *The Billings Method*. New York: Random House, 1981, \$6.95. The ovulation method.

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Burtchaell, James T (ed.). *Marriage Among Christians*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1977, \$3.50. Series of essays by married couples on various aspects of Christian married life.

Diocesan Plan for Natural Family Planning Program Development. Washington, D. C.: Diocesan Development Program for NFP, 1981, 37 pp. Comprehensive pastoral plan for developing or expanding diocesan programs. Single copies free.

Kasper, Walter. *Theology of Christian Marriage*. New York: Crossroad, 1981, 102 pp., \$7.95.

Kippley, John. *Birth Control and the Marriage Covenant*. Cincinnati: Couple to Couple League, 1981, 212 pp., \$4.95.

----- and Sheila Kippley *The Art of Natural Family Planning*. Cincinnati: Couple to Couple League, \$6.95.

McCarthy, D. and E. Bayer (eds.). *Handbook on Critical Sexual Issues*. St. Louis: Pope John XXXIB Center, 1983, \$9.95 (plus \$1 postage). Compilation of essays on human sexuality and on specific ethical problems related thereto.

McHugh, Msgr. James T, S.TD. *A Theological Perspective on Natural Family Planning*. Washington, D. C.: Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning, 1983, \$2.95. Theology of marriage and natural family planning; ideal for those in NFP education.

----- "Natural Family Planning Services in Catholic Hospitals," in *Linacre Quarterly*, Vol. 3, 1983.

Malone, Msgr. Richard and John Connery, S.J. (eds.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Christian Marriage*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1983. Available fall 1983.

Martin, Mary Catherine, Ph.D. *Fertility Acceptance and Natural Family Planning*. Washington, D.C.: NCCB Office for Pro-Life Activities, 1982, 60 cents.

----- and William R. Walker. "Survey Discloses NFP Practices, Preferences in U.S. Catholic Hospitals," in *Hospital Progress*, February 1983.

May, William. *Sex, Marriage and Chastity*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1981, 170 pp., \$9.

Pope John Paul II. *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio)*, December 15, 1981. Washington, D.C.: USCC Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, \$1.95.

----- . Text of the Pope's homily on the Mall in Washington, D. C., October 1979. Washington, D. C.: NCCB Office for Pro-Life Activities, \$4/100.

Pope Paul VI. *Regulation on Birth (Humanae Vitae)*. Washington, D. C.: USCC Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, \$1.50.

Roetzer, Joseph. *Family Planning the Natural Way*. Old Tappan, NJ: Flemming Revell, 1981, 128 pp., \$7.95.

Shivanandan, Mary. *Natural Sex*. New York: Rawson, Wade Publishers. Out of print; check library or diocesan Family Life office. Additional information from K. M. Associates.

Wojtyla, Karol. *Love and Responsibility*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981, 319 pp., \$15.

----- . *Fruitful and Responsible Love*. New York: Scribner, 1979, 74 pp., \$2.95.

Zimmerman, Rev. Anthony (ed.). *Nature's Way, God's Way*. Collegeville, MN: Human Life Center, 262 pp., \$5.95.

Audio-Visuals

Introduction to Natural Family Planning. 22 min., 16mm, color. Cogan Productions. Purchase, \$300. Also available on Super-8, \$225.

Learning Natural Family Planning with Peter and Kay Walsh. Slides/ tape, five half-hour sessions. Family Visions. Purchase, \$400.

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Loving Naturally -A Real Choice. 80-frame slide/cassette, color.

Family Life Bureau, Diocese of Trenton. Purchase, \$95.

New Dawn. 130-frame slide/cassette. Couple to Couple League. Purchase, \$79.95.

Natural Family Planning -A Consideration. 15 min., slides or video tape. Natural Family Planning Center, Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau. Purchase, \$50 (slides), \$8 (video).

Resource Agencies

- Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning, 1511 K St., N. W, Suite 337, Washington, D. C 20005. (202) 737-1339
- Couple to Couple League, E O. Box 11084, Cincinnati, OH 45211. (513) 661-7612
- Creighton University Natural Family Planning Education and Research Center, 601 N. 30th St., Suite 4810, Omaha, NE 68131. (402) 280-4430
- The Family of the Americas Foundation, 308 S. Tyler St., Covington, LA 70433. 5041892-4046 (formerly WOOMB)
- The Human Life Center, St. John's University Collegeville, MN 56321. (612) 363-3313 or 3552
- International Federation for Family Life Promotion, 1511 K St., N. W, Suite 333, Washington, D. C. 20005. (202) 783-0137