

Reflection on Natural Family Planning

One of the main reasons Catholics fail to practice the NFP discipline is that they simply don't understand the teaching. They have either failed to study what the teaching is all about or have had it explained poorly to them. He even calls it a "massive catechetical failure."

There are different ways of exercising one's spirituality; e.g.: fasting, alms giving, prayer etc. all these practices help one to be more in union with God. So also the exercise is NFP. As someone said, fasting provides an interior freedom, a freedom where one is not controlled by passions and inordinate desires so that one was freed up to do what one knows to be right and what one really wants to do, that is, to be spiritually free. Fasting also helps one to be more open to God, more open to the needs of others, it provides solidarity with the rest of human kind (especially the poor) and can be associated with the conversion of others. This definition can be best fit into the aspects of spirituality and spiritual well-being. The practice of fasting is not just a periodic abstinence from forms of food but rather an abstinence from all types of human desires. NFP as a form of periodic coital abstinence can be viewed as a form of fasting. Its practice requires a fast or periodic abstinence from genital intercourse when used to avoid pregnancy. Just as there are spiritual benefits from fasting from food there can be spiritual benefits for the person or persons who practice NFP. Fasting from sexual intercourse can help a person to control sexual passions and desires. This control helps to free the person. When persons are in control of their desires then they are able to focus on God and other persons more fully. Pope John Paul II made similar remarks in a recent address to participants in a training course on NFP (The Pope Speaks, July/August 1992). He said that "only one who is free, i.e., not dominated by concupiscence, can give himself and accept another person without reservation." And St. Paul reminded the Galatians that "you have been called to live in freedom-but not a freedom that gives free rein to the flesh. Out of love place yourselves at one another's service ... live in accord with the spirit and you will not yield to the cravings of the flesh." (Galatians 5/1).

NFP as a form of periodic abstinence can also be a sign of being more open to God, open to God's gift of fertility and to the possibility of new human life, that is, open to be co-creators with God. Abstinence is a time when the couple quiets the physical so that they can reflect on God's will and on the stewardship of their fertility. It can be a time to decide if God is calling for them to have or not to have children. A decision not best made in the passion of desire.

NFP as a form of fasting can help a person be more open to the needs of one's spouse. If you can quiet your own needs, then you can be open to the needs of another and particularly one's spouse. Dr. Ogino expressed this by saying that "to have a good understanding of such psychological periodical changes is useful for the maintenance of the peace of the married couple."

NFP as a form of periodic coital abstinence helps a married person to understand and be in solidarity with those who are called to be chaste, who are called to order their sexual drive by totally abstaining from genital coital activity: the single person, the religious, and the adolescent. By being chaste, parents can practice a true sexual self-control, sexual self-respect and thus will be able to be non-hypocritical role models for their children. On the other hand one who does not practice NFP there is either a serious problem with their marriage or a crisis of faith as observed by Max Levin, a Jewish psychiatrist.

Thus family planning either 1.) Enhanced their relationship with God, 2.) Increased their trust in God, 3.) Increased their faith in God's will and 4.) Helped them to be aware of God's gift of fertility. The process of spiritual enhancement was aided by having NFP help the couples to live a life consistent with church teaching, God's intentions and moral values. Couple's also felt that NFP helped them to develop a trust in God and because of that trust a form of mental freedom.

Cardinal Suenens in a book he wrote titled "Sex and Self-control" reminded us that all persons are obliged to practice sexual self-control before marriage, after marriage, or if a person never marries. He said that too many people think that an unmarried person's obligation to be chaste ends with marriage. There is chastity in marriage and chastity outside of marriage. A celibate's sexual life is ordered by "chastity's forbidding anything contrary to the virtue. In marriage, chastity orders the couple's sexual life by placing it in the service of conjugal love." NFP helps couples to develop a sexual self-control and to help them to lead an ordered chaste life at the service of conjugal love.