

There are differences between NFP and artificial birth control, but let these suffice for now. As Pope John Paul II has explained, the difference really rests on a person's answers to some very basic questions like, "What is marriage?" What is sex? What is the human body? What is love?" Artificial contraception distorts the meaning of all these things. It sees the body and its sexual faculties as something to be "used", and it fails to acknowledge God's place in love and marriage. NFP, instead, is a practice of virtue, resting upon self-control, inner freedom, respect, trust, communication, and reverence to God's plan for love and marriage. It enriches both love and marriage. Every couple owes it to themselves to learn more about it!

To obtain written material about NFP, write to: The Couple-to-Couple League, P.O. Box 111184, Cincinnati, OH 45211, (513) - 661 - 7612.

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Pamphlet 013

Birth Control and NFP: What's the Difference?

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Tom and Jane have three children, and have determined that they cannot adequately provide for any more at the present time. They know that artificial means of birth control are morally wrong, and their priest recommended that they use NFP (Natural Family Planning). Yet they do not understand why NFP is OK if birth control is wrong. Don't they amount to the same thing?

Actually, they don't. NFP is very different from other methods of birth control. Here we will give some other reasons -- but first, a word about what NFP is not.

NFP does NOT refer to the so-called "calendar rhythm method", which was based on calendar calculations of a "normal" cycle. NFP, instead, based on direct observations of various signs that occur in a woman's body (changes in the cervix, cervical mucus, and temperature) which tell her when ovulation occurs. These observations are relatively easy to make, take only a few minutes, and work even for irregular cycles. NFP is internationally known and practical and is extremely effective. The medical principles on which NFP rests are being used by more and more doctors for a wide range of purposes.

Morally speaking, then, what is it that makes NFP acceptable while artificial birth control is wrong?

1) NFP does not separate sex from responsibility. The act of intercourse has a twofold meaning: sharing of love and giving of life. Married persons who perform this act must accept both sides of the coin. While not every marital act will result in a child, it must nevertheless be open to the possibility of life. The act will be "open" to life as long as the spouses do nothing to "close" it. Here's the difference between artificial birth control and NFP. In the first case, one does something (takes a pill, uses a condom, etc.) to deliberately "close" the life-giving power of sexual intercourse. In NFP, however, no such step is taken. The spouses do not act against their fertility. They do not reject the link between the two meanings of sex (love and life). They simply follow the natural patterns of the body's fertility and infertility -- patterns placed there by God Himself. In the fertile days of a woman's cycle, if there are serious reasons to avoid pregnancy, the couple respectfully steps back from the act of intercourse. In using birth control devices, however, they attack the meaning of the act -- they do the action of intercourse and then undo part of it. In NFP, instead, they simply choose at times not to do the action in the first place.

2) NFP is not just a "method" based on physiology. Rather, NFP is based on VIRTUE. It is based on sexual self-control, which is necessary for a healthy marriage. There are times in any marriage when

spouses have to put aside their desire for sex because of sickness, fatigue, travel, or other reasons. In a healthy marriage, love is shown in many ways, and not all these ways of showing love are physical. In fact, to refrain from sex when necessary is itself an act of love. Why? Because in effect the spouses then say to each other, "I did not marry you just for sexual pleasure. I married you because I love you. You are a person, not an object. When I have sex with you, it is because I freely choose to show you my love, not because I need to satisfy an urge." Using NFP requires abstinence from intercourse during the fertile days if a pregnancy has to be avoided. This actually can strengthen the couple's sexual life. When the spouses know that they can abstain for good reasons, they also come to trust each other more, and avoid the risk of treating each other primarily as objects of sexual pleasure rather than persons. Artificial birth control, on the other hand, gives free reign to the temptation to make pleasure the dominant element, rather than virtue. It encourages couples to think that sexual self-control is not necessary. It can encourage them to become slaves to pleasure.

3) NFP puts the responsibility for family planning squarely on the shoulders of both partners, because it requires communication and cooperation. Both spouses need to know when the fertile days of the woman's cycle have arrived, and then decide together what to do (depending on whether they are trying to avoid or achieve pregnancy). To think that such communication and cooperation

make the sexual act less pleasurable (because less spontaneous) is simply not true. To know with certainty what stage of the cycle one is in can increase the pleasure and spontaneity of the act, since the spouses can ignore worries about contraceptive failure or side-effects of the pill. Artificial birth control, besides introducing these worries, also puts the "contraceptive burden" on the shoulders of ONE, not both, spouses. It makes it possible for a spouse to cut off the fertility of the act, even without the consent of the other spouse. It can introduce division into the marriage.

4) NFP is not just a means of avoiding pregnancy, as artificial contraception is. Rather, it can also be used to ACHIEVE pregnancy since it pinpoints ovulation. It is a wholly positive approach to the sexual life of the spouses. It is clean, inexpensive, morally acceptable, and reliable.

As with anything good, NFP can be misused, if a couple has the wrong motives. Married couples are called by God to cooperate generously in bringing forth and educating new life. For a couple to decide that "we don't want children at this time", there need to be serious, objective reasons (health, finances, etc.). If the reasons are not objective but selfish, then the couple cannot justify the avoidance of pregnancy just because they are using NFP to do it. In this case they are not practicing "family planning", but "family avoidance"!