

Natural Family Planning and Contraception

By Greg Witherow

The Catholic Church is sometimes criticized for promoting Natural Family Planning (NFP) while rejecting contraception. Many see NFP as a form of contraception under another name. And it is easy to see why some might come to this conclusion. After all, NFP is the regulation of births (birth control¹) and like contraception it can be used to space births *or even misused to halt* any childbearing at all. Yet the Church firmly maintains that there is a moral difference in regulating births by practicing sexual temperance (NFP) and contraception. The purpose of this essay is not to prove contraception is wrong per se (that is dealt with in a separate essay). Instead, the purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that contraception and NFP are not moral equivalents.

To begin, let's examine two hypothetical Christian couples. Couple A believes God desires "large" families. And they rightly believe having a "full quiver" of children is a sign of God's favor². God blesses their marriage and they have five children. But in order to regulate the spacing of children, the woman uses the birth control pill. Likewise Couple B has the same convictions. They too see children as a blessing of God and desire a large family. God blesses their marriage and they also have five children. But in order to regulate the spacing of children, the husband and wife practice NFP.

At first blush both couples appear to have made morally equivalent choices based on sound Biblical thinking. For instance, both couples are identical in taking God's Word at face value (children are a blessing). And both couples are identical in acting on God's Word (pursuing a large family). Where the couples diverge is their technique of spacing. The question can be asked, "If the intentions of the couples are identical, are not the tools they use to manage the process therefore morally equivalent?" That's a fair question.

In order to answer this question, let's use an analogy. Let's take two women who are convinced a proper weight is one key to good health. They act on this conviction by maintaining their "marriage weight" of 110 lbs. But Woman A practices bulimia (eat-purge) while Woman B skips one meal a day (see the chart below). We return to our original question. "If the intentions of the women are identical, are not the tools they use to manage the process therefore morally equivalent"? The answer of course is No.

	Assumption	Goal	Technique	Result	Observation
Woman A	Proper weight is healthy	110 lbs.	Bulimia	110 lbs.	This person has an "eating-disorder"
Woman B	Proper weight is healthy	110 lbs.	Skip a meal	110 lbs.	This person practices a healthy self-control.

¹ In discussing this topic we must not get tangled up in semantic wars. Regulating births by sexual fasting is a spacing method (1-no sex 2-no baby). Therefore by definition NFP is a form of birth control. But the Church draws a distinction with contraception (1-have sex 2-use purging techniques 3-no baby).

² Childlessness is not a sign of God's curse. Zechariah and Elizabeth only had one child (John the Baptist), and he only by a miracle in their old age. But scripture describes them as being "righteous before God".

To the unknowing outsider, these two women appear to live healthy and balanced lifestyles in maintaining their figures. But the medical community classifies bulimia as an eating disorder (bulimia nervosa). It is a practice that is harmful to one's health and sometimes needs to be treated with psychotherapy. On the other hand an occasional fast can be a mark of a healthy, temperate lifestyle. No sane person would argue that bulimia and temperance, while having the same goal and the same result - are moral equivalents.

With occasional fasts, NFP is the practice of **sexual temperance** coupled with sex that is **potentially always life giving**. Saint Paul makes allowances for sexual fasts, as long as they do not cause one to fall into temptation³. Such temperance is a virtue – not a vice. And with NFP the couple *introduces nothing* to hinder life. Therefore NFP is in no way morally problematic. As an aside, the key **is not that NFP is solely natural**. Medicine (which by definition is unnatural) is good and can be used when it restores the body to its natural functions. The key is that NFP is **both natural and virtuous** in God's plan.

In contrast, contraceptive medicine fools the body to war against itself. As narcotics or alcohol alter the mind, so contraceptive medicines alter a woman's chemistry to reject impregnation. It can be unhealthy. But the sin is that **contraceptive sex is bulimic sex** with near 100% certainty⁴. Rather than leaving oneself open to conception, openness to life is eradicated by the couple. As a bulimic act, **it is neither natural nor virtuous**. Set in these terms, can it be argued otherwise? Therefore, the Church concludes NFP is moral while contraception is not. On this moral issue the Catholic Church stands alone.

Note: The truthfulness of something is not dependent on how widely it is practiced. The truthfulness of something is based on whether or not it is true. While it is a fact most Catholics contracept through ignorance⁵ or willful disobedience to Catholic dogma, it is also a fact that a remnant does not⁶. Finding truth by taking polls is a dangerous practice.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

2366 Fecundity is a gift, an *end of marriage*, for conjugal love naturally tends to be fruitful. A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfillment. So the Church, which is “on the side of life” teaches that it is necessary that each and every marriage act remain ordered per se to the procreation of human life. This

³ In 1 Corinthians 7:5. St. John Chrysostom believes Paul's point is that abstaining from sexual relations (as an act of humility) is a useful tool to better predispose one to prayer (as opposed to merely exchanging an hour of sex for an hour of prayer).

⁴ While condoms have failure rates as high as 15% (according to some women's health web sites), chemical “cocktails” found in patches, injections or the Pill rarely fail.

⁵ Many fine Christians contracept in ignorance because their non-Catholic church instructs them to or their Catholic diocese is silent on the topic. *But God is full of mercy* and judges us according to what we know.

⁶ Throughout redemptive history God has always preserved the faith even when it appeared the faithful vanished from the earth. After destroying the prophets of Baal, Elijah was pursued by Jezebel. Exhausted and alone Elijah lamented to God that only he remained faithful. In 1 Kings 19:18 God assured Elijah that he (God) had reserved 7,000 people who had not bent their knees to Baal. While the Temple appeared to be empty of “true believers”, in fact a remnant was preserved in order to carry on the faith in another day.

particular doctrine, expounded on numerous occasions by the Magisterium, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.

2368 A particular aspect of this responsibility concerns the *regulation of procreation*. **For just reasons**, spouses may wish to space the births of their children. It is their duty to **make certain that their desire is not motivated by selfishness** but is in conformity with the generosity appropriate to responsible parenthood. Moreover, they should conform their behavior to the objective criteria of morality:

When it is a question of harmonizing married love with the responsible transmission of life, the morality of the behavior does not depend on sincere intention and evaluation of motives alone; but it must be determined by objective criteria, criteria drawn from the nature of the person and his acts criteria that respect the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love; this is possible only if the virtue of married chastity is practiced with sincerity of heart

2369 By safeguarding both these essential aspects, the unitive and the procreative, the conjugal act preserves in its fullness the sense of true mutual love and its orientation toward man's exalted vocation to parenthood.

2370 Periodic continence, that is, the methods of birth regulation based on self-observation and the use of infertile periods, is in conformity with the objective criteria of morality. These methods respect the bodies of the spouses, encourage tenderness between them, and favor the education of an authentic freedom. In contrast, "every action which, whether in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible" is intrinsically evil:

Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality. . . . The difference, both anthropological and moral, between contraception and recourse to the rhythm of the cycle . . . involves in the final analysis two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality