

Voice from the Valley **By Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens**

Drawing closer to God with the gift of Natural Family Planning

One of the best kept secrets of the Catholic Church that we need to share more with our world is Natural Family Planning (NFP). Every July around the feast of Sts. Joachim and Anne (July 26), who miraculously conceived the Blessed Virgin Mary in their old age, the Church celebrates **Natural Family Planning Awareness Week**.

The Church wants to remind us that when we reverence the gift of married sexual love it strengthens our marriages and our families. Whereas when we abuse the gift of married sexual love, it diminishes both.

NFP is a scientifically based method of helping a couple regulate fertility based on concrete, daily signs that can allow a woman to verify when she can conceive a child. It is much more sophisticated and effective (98-99 percent accuracy) than the old “rhythm” method from the 1960s.

The truth is men are always fertile, but women are only fertile 15-40 percent of any given month. NFP’s scientific method teaches a couple to determine the fertility of the wife’s body so they can either achieve or avoid pregnancy. NFP reverences fertility as a gift from God and couples who practice NFP reverence God’s plan for their marriage.

People in our world are so used to contraception that they don’t often think about the benefits of NFP or the negative effects of contraception. First of all, NFP is completely natural as chemicals are not introduced into a woman's body.

It teaches women and men about their sexuality and can be used to achieve pregnancy when it is difficult. Most importantly a couple who uses NFP learns the power of chaste love.

They discipline their love by abstaining from sexual relations when, for good reason, they need to avoid getting pregnant. This discipline can be very difficult, but it is a powerful way to show true love.

As St. Paul VI said in his prophetic encyclical *Humanae Vitae*: “...the discipline which is proper to the purity of married couples, far from harming conjugal love, rather confers on it a higher human value It favors attention for one's partner, helps both parties to drive out selfishness, the enemy of true love, and deepens their sense of responsibility” (*Humane Vitae*, 21).

This was proven in newspaper columnist Ann Landers’ famous survey when she asked her readers: “How many women would prefer to be held by their husbands and not to have sex?” Seventy-two percent of women said yes to that question.

Couple to Couple League, a national network of couples practicing NFP, asked their couples the same question —less than five percent of women said yes. Why? (over)

Those women were being held by their husbands four to nine days every month! This is why couples who practice NFP have more than a 98 percent success rate in marriage, compared to around 50 percent for the rest of society.

They have learned to deepen their love, and their sexual relationship becomes more profound, not something they take for granted.

The truth is that contraception has had profoundly negative effects on our society. If you think back to the 1960s when the birth control pill first became popular, Planned Parenthood promised there would be more sex in marriage and less pressure because the fear of having kids is eliminated — so marriages would be stronger and there would be less divorce.

The organization argued there would be less pregnancy outside of marriage because we would give everyone contraceptives and teens would not get pregnant. This would lead to less abortion because contraceptives would make it not necessary.

St. Paul VI, on the other hand, made his own predictions in 1968. He said if contraception became widespread, it would lead to greater marital infidelity and moral decline.

He predicted divorce and abortion would increase. He said contraception use would lead to loss of respect for women and increases in pornography and human trafficking.

Fifty years ago there could be a debate about who was right, but today we know the facts. Abortion, divorce, teen pregnancy, pornography, these have all increased exponentially and we have the “me too” movement and the terrible scourge of human trafficking whose growth reveals what casual sex has done to our society.

Contraception has cheapened our view of sex, degraded the dignity of both women and men because it has separated the sacred, life-giving, dimension of sex from the unitive dimension. Contraception, St. John Paul II says, is like lying with our bodies.

In the act of sex, a person says with his or her body, “I want to give myself to you totally in love,” but at the same moment they hold back part of themselves by using contraception. When a couple is open to life and uses sexuality in accord with God’s plan, even if they know in this act they will not get pregnant, they are still expressing the deep covenantal gift of self that makes them one.

Most married people find this teaching today very challenging. I encourage you to look into NFP, pray and learn about this beautiful teaching of the Church.

You can watch a talk I gave on this topic on youtube: <https://bit.ly/3yLCv5j>.

We have two young women in our diocese who teach NFP and would be happy to speak with you about your questions. They can be reached at <https://bit.ly/3a1Y2by>.

The Church in her wisdom stands out from the rest of society with her teaching about family planning, this wisdom is worth exploring because it reverences sexuality, marriage and family.