



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

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## Contraception: Family planning or family avoidance?

**I**N JUST the last 50 years, contraceptives have changed the world's perception of birth control. There has been much debate over the use of contraception versus natural family planning (NFP). While the intention of both may appear the same – to avoid having a baby – the repercussions for couples who choose either method are different.

Advocates of contraception often claim that the birth control pill is the best thing that ever happened for women because it freed women to have sex without fear of pregnancy. Women can also determine when they want to have children.

Many also point out that using contraceptives for birth control is no different from using the many other artificial means that improve our daily lives.

We have home appliances for household chores, and pacemakers to help malfunctioning hearts. So contraception is just another artificial aid with benefits. Just because it is artificial does not mean it is wrong to use it.

NFP advocates argue against contraception not because it is artificial but because it negatively impacts the human person. While a pacemaker helps an ailing body function, contraception does the opposite; by using contraception, a couple chooses to reject offspring by impeding a normal human function.

### Fostering spontaneity between couples

Advocates also say contraception allows couples to be spontaneous in their expressions of love. They can have sex whenever they want to, unlike couples using NFP who have to abstain from sex periodically.

How then, can such spontaneity be damaging to fostering a loving marital bond? Let us look more closely at the premise that spontaneity strengthens marital bonds.

Compare a young child “spontaneously” banging on the piano producing random sounds, to the “spontaneous” movements of an accomplished pianist on the same instrument, producing impromptu musical pieces. The two similar means yield vastly different ends. Years of disciplined practice and hard work have allowed the pianist’s “spontaneous” playing on the piano to produce music that can lift hearts to the heavens.

The same can be said for “spontaneous” love between married couples. Compare the bond that is enriched by years of disciplined practice and sacrifice for the good of each other and the marriage, against that which is built on the “spontaneity of the moment” alone.

To further explore the rationale behind abstinence, it must be recognised that even couples using contraception have to abstain during certain periods, for example, when a spouse is away from home or ill. One’s demands to meet urges and desires cannot play the central role in a marriage. Temperance and self-control fostered by the practice of abstinence among couples

*In this continuing series on Values, we look at the issue of contraception versus natural family planning (NFP), and their implications on couples and society.*

using NFP assures of fidelity instead of uncertainty during such periods.

### But the intention and result are the same?

Though the intention for using NFP or contraception may be the same it is only similar if evaluated purely on the ends and not the means. The difference lies, however, exactly in the means that one adopts.

Through NFP, a couple chooses to abstain from sex at certain times of the fertility cycle. They choose to manage their desires out of respect for each other’s body and fertility. In the case of contraception, a couple chooses to alter each other’s bodily functions to indulge a desire.

So while both contraception and NFP seek to allow couples to express their marital love while being able to plan for and space their children, the issue goes beyond the intention to the means and impact of birth control itself.

Aside from birth control, it may be more worthwhile to consider how each allows couples to cultivate qualities that will enrich a marriage – or not.

Qualities such as unconditional love, mutual affirmation and respect, improved communication, as well as self control and the virtue of temperance.



### Contraception in a Nutshell

#### What It Is

Contraception refers to methods or devices that directly inhibit or act against conception. Examples include withdrawal, barrier contraceptives (intra-uterine devices, condoms), hormonal contraceptives (oral contraceptive pill, the Patch) and sterilisation.

Natural Family Planning (NFP) refers to family planning methods approved by the Catholic Church which involves periodic abstinence and understanding the fertility periods of the woman.

#### The Current Landscape

Among more developed countries, about 55 per cent of married women in the reproductive age are using some form of contraception.

Among married women of reproductive age in Singapore, about 62 per cent use some form of “family planning”. About 16 per cent use sterilisation, 10 per cent use the Pill, 5 per cent use the intra-uterine device, 22 per cent use the condom, and only 9 per cent use some form of natural method of avoiding pregnancy.

#### Arguments For Contraception

It prevents unplanned pregnancies. Contraception prevents “unwanted” and “unplanned” pregnancies. In the process, it also helps to reduce abortions. Further, some barrier contraceptives have the additional function of reducing the risk of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

It is spontaneous. Contraception allows couples to have sex whenever they feel like it.

It is reliable. Contraception works. The different contraceptive methods have different reliability but couples have a choice. The natural “rhythm” method is unreliable.

There really is no moral difference between using NFP and using contraceptives. The intention is the same – to avoid pregnancy.

#### Arguments Against Contraceptives and For NFP

Contraceptives increase permissiveness and abortions. The availability of contraceptives and promotion of their benefits increases sexual permissiveness and provides a false sense of security. Actual experience shows that unplanned pregnancies, abortions and STIs have actually increased.

Contraceptives are not without harmful side effects. The Pill has been shown to have a host of side effects. These include blood clots that can lead to stroke, heart attack or death; increased risk of breast and cervical cancer, and liver tumours; hypertension; depression; weight gain; and migraine. Intra-uterine devices have been associated with pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility, ectopic pregnancies, and irregular bleeding.

NFP respects the human person. Contraception is wrong because it is the rejection of offspring by causing a normal human function to “dysfunction”, and treats fertility as a disease rather than part of being human.

NFP is reliable. NFP, as it is today, uses reliable and scientifically proven methods like the Billing Ovulation Methods (BOM) and Creighton Model System of Fertility Care (CrMS) which have high effectiveness rates of more than 98 per cent. The “rhythm” method is outdated and no longer used.

Practise love not lust. NFP allows couples to develop the virtue of temperance and express their love in other ways during the times when they decide not to engage in the marital act. It cannot be denied that romantic dinners, long walks together or loving words of affirmation are important ingredients to a successful marriage.

The means matter. Good intentions are not good enough. The means matter too. The intention of NFP is to plan for babies while respecting and accepting the woman’s fertility cycle. NFP can aid in having babies.

### What the Church Teaches

Two become one in marriage. “All married life is a gift, but this becomes most evident when the spouses, in giving themselves to each other in love, bring about that encounter which makes them ‘one flesh’.” (Pope John Paul II, Letter to Families 1994, 12)

There are two inseparable dimensions (unitive and procreative) of the sexual act. “The two dimensions of conjugal union, the unitive and the procreative, cannot be artificially separated without damaging the deepest truth of the conjugal act itself.” (Humanae Vitae, 12)

Rendering procreation impossible is intrinsically evil. “...each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life... every action which... proposes whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible is intrinsically evil.” (Humanae Vitae, 14)

The end does not justify the means. “It is not licit, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil so that good may follow therefrom.” (Humanae Vitae, 14)

Contraceptives can be used for treatment. “The Church, moreover, does allow the use of medical treatment necessary for curing diseases of the body although this treatment may thwart one’s ability to procreate. Such treatment is permissible even if the reduction of fertility is foreseen, as long as the infertility is not directly intended for any reason whatsoever.” (Humanae Vitae, 15)