

Question: Is contraception really that big of a deal? As if using contraception wisely and occasionally in marriage could affect my relationship with God. And even if it really did, how is natural family planning any different from contraception?

Answer: As Catholics, we believe that all people are made in the image and likeness of God. Among other things, this means that we can think, we can choose, we can love and we can create. It means that another human being may never be used as a mere "means"; people are meant to be loved, never merely used.

Jesus reveals something more about who God is. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Jesus "reveals the innermost secret of God." This is significant. Wouldn't you want to know God's "innermost secret"? It is this: "God himself is an eternal exchange of love . . . and he has destined us to share in that exchange" (CCC, 221).

While this has serious ramifications for literally everything in life, one of the consequences is directly related to the topic at hand.

God is a "communion of Persons" (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). The Father continually pours himself out to the Son, the Son to the Father, and the love between them is so real that "It" is a "Who": another Person, the Holy Spirit.

You and I are made in the image and likeness of the Trinity. This means that we are made to be in relationship with one another. And these relationships are meant to be in the image and likeness of God.

While all human relationships have the potential to image God to the world, there is virtually no other relationship as striking in this regard as the relationship between husband and wife. It is truly the most explicit icon of the Trinity on earth. This reveals that each marriage has an even higher purpose than the "good of the couple" or the "good of society"; it is meant to be an image of God in the world.

In fact, Catholic theology has called marriage the "primordial sacrament." Before any of the sacraments were instituted, the love between husband and wife was already an image of who God is. The husband pouring himself out to his bride in love, she receiving that love and reciprocating. This love is so real that it has the potential to be another person.

Now, of course God is not sexual. So when I say that the sexual embrace is "like" the way in which the Father and Son pour themselves out in love, I am speaking by analogy. Nonetheless, marriage is meant to be a sign of God in this world. What would it be if the Father intentionally withheld his divine life from the Son? What would it look like if God intentionally sterilized himself?

Married couples have accepted a great and terrible task: to be an image of God to the world. This is why Pope John Paul II said that marriage and the family are "placed at the center of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love" (Letter to Families, 23).

If we allow that a couple can even occasionally use each other in the most intimate moment of union, what are we saying about who God is? A couple may fail in this regard, just as anyone might find themselves in sin, but that is not the standard for which we are aiming.

What is more, marriage is a sacrament. As I noted, it is the "primordial sacrament." Think of what it would look like to "sterilize" another sacrament. What would it look like if the priest, standing at the altar, said the words, "Father, do NOT send your Holy Spirit to bless these gifts." Or if he said, holding the host in his hands, "This is NOT my body." What if the priest said in the confessional, "Through the ministry of the church, I do NOT absolve you of all of your sins"? What if he only occasionally said that, if for the most part he said the right words and consecrated the host or absolved the penitent? That would be O.K., right? Of course not. In the same way, a husband or wife must never say to the other, "I do NOT give myself to you in this moment."

A priest doesn't have to say the Mass every day, nor does he have to hear confessions every day. But whenever he does say Mass or hear confessions, he must never intentionally work against the sacrament. In the same way, a couple does not have to enter into the sexual embrace every day. They are not sinning if they choose to not come together in this intimate way. This is why the accusation that contraception and natural family planning are "the same thing" is false. Through contraception, a couple is intentionally sterilizing the sexual act. In natural family planning, they are merely choosing to cooperate with the natural rhythm of a woman's body. They are not "contra" life.

Some might argue that this is splitting hairs. The end result is the same: no conception. But I would respond: Is it merely "splitting hairs" to allow someone in the hospital to die of natural causes vs. euthanasia? The end result is the same: The person is dead. But there is an incredible world of difference between "working with" the natural rhythm of life and death and "working against" life through intentionally hastening death. In the same way, natural family planning is a way a couple can wisely and maturely take responsibility for their call to be an image of God as well as raise children.

Could a couple engage in natural family planning with a "contraceptive mentality"? They could. And they, too, are called to resist the temptation to do this. All of us are called to embrace the cross of Jesus, no matter our vocation. All of us must belong more to Jesus than to the world.

I understand the dilemma. We are standing at the crossroads between this world and Christ. Let's stop thinking like 21st century Americans and begin thinking like Christians. A 21st century American fears pain and sees "the good life" as comfortably settling down, comfortably marrying the spouse of your dreams, having a comfortable number of children, working at a comfortable job, so we can comfortably retire and die somewhere . . . comfortably.

The follower of Christ is only the person who is willing to "deny himself, pick up his cross, and follow" Jesus. Not much comfort in that. But you can be that person. You may fail, but God is on your side. He wants you to try, knowing that you will need his help.