

## Natural Family Planning: Understanding the Body Language of Love

by Lisa Everett

This past week, Catholic dioceses across the country promoted Natural Family Planning (NFP) Awareness Week. The observance was timed to coincide with the July 25 anniversary of the issuance of Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, in 1968. This encyclical reaffirmed the church's opposition to contraception and instead promoted what has come to be known as natural family planning.

Pope John Paul II devoted a significant part of his pontificate to articulating the profound difference between contraception and natural family planning. "It is a difference which is much wider and deeper than is usually thought," he reflected, "one which involves in the final analysis two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 32). In fact, the late pope developed his beautiful "Theology of the Body" largely as a way to understand more deeply and to explain more positively this essential difference.

What concept of the human person and human sexuality does the pope's "Theology of the Body" expound? It begins with the conviction that man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God, who lives in himself a mystery of personal, loving communion as Father, Son and Spirit. This is so important to grasp clearly because unless we know who God is, we will never know who we are. We are created in the image and likeness of a God who is not an individual, but rather a loving communion of persons. Therefore, we not only resemble God because of the rational mind and free will we have as individual men and woman – we image God even more perfectly and profoundly by living in loving communion with one another. This means that man and woman are not only both created in the image of God, with the same personal dignity and the same supernatural destiny, but also man and woman are called to become the image of God by living in loving communion with one another.

God has designed marriage to be the first and, in a sense, the most fundamental form of living out the personal, loving communion that makes us like God. Pope John Paul II found in the familiar story of Adam and Eve an ancient affirmation of this truth that man and woman are made for each other and are meant to be a gift for each other. This call to communion is written in a special way into human sexuality, into the very maleness and femaleness of the human body, which are literally designed to fit together to make a man and woman capable of becoming "one flesh." As Pope John Paul II put it, "Sexuality is an enrichment of the whole person – body, emotions and soul – and it manifests its inmost meaning in leading the person to the gift of self in love" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 37).

Sexual intercourse is intended by God to be the most intimate sign of the complete gift of self that a man and woman make to one another in marriage. It is the body language of married love. This act, which expresses their mutual gift of self, at the same time makes

them capable of the greatest possible gift – cooperating with God in giving life to a new human person, who is truly the two of them in one flesh, created not only in their image, with 23 chromosomes from each parent, but above all, in the image and likeness of God. This beautiful vision is the basis of all of the moral norms that surround the gift of sexuality, including the norm that requires that every act of sexual love in marriage remain open to the transmission of life.

How, precisely, are contraception and sterilization irreconcilable with this concept of the human person and human sexuality? In essence, contraception and sterilization contradict the meaning of sex as a sign and instrument of complete, mutual, self-giving love. If I withhold my fertility from my spouse, which is an integral part of my identity as a man or woman, I am not giving myself completely in the very act that is supposed to express most profoundly my complete gift of self. Here is how Pope John Paul II explained it: “When couples, by means of recourse to contraception, separate these two meanings (love-giving and life-giving) that God the Creator has inscribed in the being of man and woman and in the dynamism of their sexual communion, they act as ‘arbiters’ of the divine plan and they ‘manipulate’ and degrade human sexuality – and with it themselves and their married partner – by altering its value of ‘total’ self-giving. 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 Catholic Church promotes natural family planning because it completely corresponds with God’s design for human sexuality, respecting the language of the body and the inseparable link between its love-giving and life-giving purposes. NFP is a scientifically-based method of regulating conception based on observing and interpreting the “sign language,” so to speak, that a woman’s body naturally provides and that indicates whether she is fertile or infertile on a given day. NFP allows a couple to prayerfully discern on a periodic basis whether God is calling them to conceive a child and then to identify the days on which conception is possible should they desire to achieve or avoid a pregnancy. Many couples find that the mutual respect, regular communication and shared responsibility that the practice of NFP requires strengthens their relationship with one another. Most importantly, couples who use NFP have the assurance that they are acting as faithful stewards of God’s gifts of sexuality and fertility.

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