

What do love, mercy, and life have to do with Natural Family Planning (NFP)?

Everything! That's because the practice of NFP can help a couple open the heart of their marriage to all the gifts that God wishes to provide. Why? Because these authentic methods of family planning respect God's design for married love!

LOVE

Married love is the most deeply personal union found among men and women (see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], no. 1643). Married love “involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter—appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of the will” (*Familiaris consortio* [FC], no. 13). The marital union calls husband and wife to become one flesh, one heart and one soul (see FC, no. 13). It therefore “demands indissolubility and faithfulness in ... mutual giving; and it is open to fertility” (FC, no. 13).

Married love is “caught up into divine love” which enriches the couple's relationship with grace (*Gaudium et spes* [GS], no. 48). Marriage is for the good of husband and wife, the creation of new people, and the forming of the family. It therefore is good for society. Marriage bestows a unique dignity on husband and wife that contributes to their mutual salvation (see GS, no. 48). Marriage is a vocation, a real calling from God to form a communion of persons, the one-flesh union spoken of in Genesis and reaffirmed by Jesus (see Gen 2:24; see also Matt 19:6). In fact, the Church teaches that when they marry, husband

and wife receive a “kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state” (GS, no. 48). In other words, God prepares spouses to faithfully live their sacred union and become parents who will love and nurture their children.

What does NFP have to do with married love?

The methods of NFP are a support for married love. They are good tools for married couples to help them live in harmony with God's divine plan for human sexuality, marriage, conjugal love, and responsible parenthood. Let's take a closer look at responsible parenthood.

“Responsible parenthood” does not exclusively mean “avoiding pregnancy.” Avoiding pregnancy, in the proper context, can be part of responsible parenthood. In itself, however, avoiding pregnancy in marriage can also be a sign of irresponsibility since it may lack generosity. In light of Catholic faith, responsible parenthood has a much wider meaning than avoiding or planning pregnancy. It relates to how God created men, women, human sexuality, and marriage.

“Responsible parenthood is, first, a husband and wife's conscious acceptance of marriage as created by God.”

Responsible parenthood is, first, a husband and wife's conscious acceptance of marriage as created by God (see *Codex Iuris Canonici* [CIC], Canon 1055 §1). This takes in the nature of the marital relationship (including the sexual act) as “ordered ... toward the good of

the spouses and the procreation and education of children” (CIC, c. 1055 §1). Responsible parenthood includes the just and prayerful decision-making exercised by spouses in light of this beautiful design of God, recognizing that God wants the best for husband and wife.

Responsible parenthood requires that husband and wife understand God's design for marriage—that it is love-giving (unitive) and life-giving (procreative). Spouses ought to be well-formed in understanding Church teaching and reflect upon their responsibilities toward each other, children already born, and the wider society when deciding when to attempt to conceive or not (see *Humanae vitae* [HV], no. 10).

Authentic responsible parenthood, therefore, only makes sense in light of the nature of married love as willed by God. That love is “total,” a “very special form of personal friendship in which husband and wife generously share everything ... not thinking solely of their own convenience” (HV, no. 9). This marital friendship means that spouses love each other not because they will get something from each other, but just because of who they are. This kind of generous, selfless love “leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves” to each other (GS, no. 49). It is precisely this gift of self which must be received in its wholeness—fertility included. In God's plan, the fertility of the couple is part of their gift of self to each other. To withhold one's fertility in marriage is like saying, “I accept everything about you except your hands—please keep them off of me.” Sound like an extreme example? Well, that's what spouses are saying through their body language when using contraceptive barriers or chemicals! It's saying, “I will give you my whole self—except for this.” Using contraception harms the

spousal union as well as the procreative good that is part of God's will for their marriage. If spouses want their marriage to grow, they will have to strive to love rightly. Inviting the Lord God into their marital love and honoring his design is foundational for a happy marriage.

MERCY

Mercy is love as expressed in an imperfect world. It helps men and women see and cherish each other—gifts and weaknesses included! It calls forth patience and bestows forgiveness. Mercy is a blessing.

How does practicing NFP encourage spousal mercy?

NFP requires effort since husband and wife must live their sexuality in a way that respects the gift of their combined fertility. Through the use of periodic sexual abstinence (the NFP means to postpone pregnancy), husband and wife practice individual and couple

“Marital love puts the well-being of the beloved before personal desires.”

self-discipline for the good of each other and for their family. This can be difficult; it may quickly reveal their weaknesses and may even result in discord. Ideally, husband and wife should discuss with each other why they may be attempting to postpone a pregnancy and also any underlying issues that make periodic sexual abstinence difficult (e.g., family stress, loneliness, emotional immaturity, etc.). They can discover whether their reasons are in line with what God wants for their marriage. This will need honesty and lots of “give and take.” In the end, NFP always requires sacrifice and