

A Pastoral Letter to Catholics on Natural Fertility Methods



God's Gift

of life & love

Australian Bishops Commission for Pastoral Life



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foreword

In the forty years since the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* was published, a number of marvellous developments have occurred. The work of researchers has refined natural fertility methods to a high degree of reliability making their practical application a great deal easier than was the case in the 1960s. We have seen, too, the emergence of movements and organisations of married couples who in various ways are exploring the intricacies of married love and assisting each other in the journey of married life. It is with hope and enthusiasm that we wish to draw the attention of the whole community to these developments and, in particular, to the experience of those couples who have discovered for themselves the benefits of natural fertility methods and the wisdom of the Church's teaching concerning the transmission of life.

We recognise that in the past there has been poor communication, hurt and confusion in this area. The reasons for this are complex. However, it is important not to let those past considerations, important as they are, interfere with the presentation of a way of living and loving that assists married couples in an area of intense importance to them, namely their sexual relationship and their fertility.

We call all the people in the Church in Australia - married, single, clergy, religious - to a renewed appreciation of the sacredness of married love and of the great sign of love and life which our couples witness to us. For it is only within the context of a deeper understanding of the meaning of married love that we can fully appreciate the Church's teaching on the transmission of life.

+Bishop Eugene Hurley
Chairman, Bishops Commission for Pastoral Life

May 28, 2009



Planning Families: The Responsibility of Married Couples

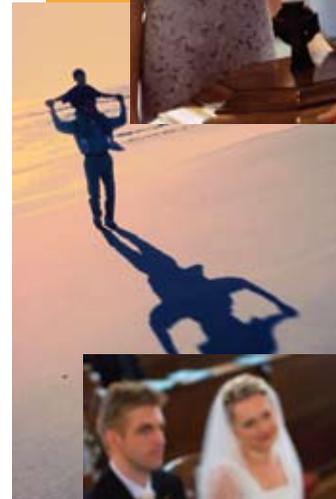
Married couples should regard it as their proper mission to transmit human life and to educate their children; they should recognise that they are thereby co-operating with the love of God the Creator and are, in a certain sense, its interpreters. (Gaudium et Spes, N 50)

Planning a family is one of the great joys and responsibilities of married couples. The fertility of a couple is a special bond between husband and wife and part of the intimate, exclusive giving of themselves to each other in marriage. Some couples are happy to leave the size of their family to God's providence, generously choosing to raise a large family, exercising their freedom to take no action to avoid conception. There are other couples anxious to have a child or a further child, who find they are unable to achieve a pregnancy.

Then, there are times when, for reasons relating to health, economic factors or the well-being of other children, a couple judge it would be wiser not to bring a child into the world at this time. In relation to such decisions, the Catholic Church recognises that natural fertility methods are a legitimate means for regulating birth and an expression of responsible love.

In order to understand why the Church actively promotes natural methods of fertility management and does not condone the use of contraceptives or procedures which lead to the termination of life already conceived requires an understanding of the sacred nature of the marriage bond and the role of marital love in the lives of couples.

Family



What is Natural Fertility Management?

Natural fertility management refers to birth regulation methods which rely on the accurate identification of the woman's natural phases of fertility and infertility. The fertile phase in a woman's cycle is recognised by a number of symptoms, including observation of the vaginal discharge of cervical mucus alone or in combination with body temperature. Once a couple learns how to recognise the woman's fertile phase, they can use the information to achieve or avoid a pregnancy as they desire, without the use of chemical agents or devices, simply by timing when they have sexual intercourse.

The primary methods of natural fertility management are the Billings Ovulation Method and the Sympto-Thermal Method.

Life-giving

Marital Love is Life-Giving

The communion of husband and wife through the act of conjugal love is a source of life, not just to the couple but to all who come in contact with them. By its very nature authentic love extends outwards drawing others into its circle, thereby expanding the communion of love. Most of us know of married couples whose homes are places of warmth and hospitality. People love to gather there and draw strength from the love they share with the wider community: extended family, neighbours, people in distress. Pope John Paul II referred to this dimension of married life as the 'civilisation of love'.

The life-giving nature of marital love can be felt in many ways, but it has special significance in the procreative element of married life. When a couple express their love through the act of intercourse, they enter a language of love which speaks of chaste intimacy, permanency, faithfulness, unity and the willingness to 'surrender all' and 'accept all'. It is a fundamental statement of the meaning of the marital communion. Thus we speak of sexual intercourse not just as one act among many actions in married life (like working, doing domestic chores), but as a special kind of embodiment of all



Love

the love that the couple brings to the marital relationship. Through this one act, a couple says: 'I give my total self as a man and call forth in you the fullness of your womanhood'; 'I surrender myself completely as a woman and acknowledge the fullness of your manhood'.

It is within this faithful 'yes' to one another at such a profound depth of human intimacy that the creation of new life becomes a possibility. Through this intimate and sacred language of love, God joins with the couple in being co-creators of life by imparting the spark of divine life to the couple in the creation of a new human being.

It is within the context of this loving and life-giving communion that the Church affirms the inseparable connection between the two meanings of sexual intercourse in marriage: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning.

The Church's great respect for the physical union that takes place between married couples and its unique place as a sign and source of communion in the fidelity of the marital relationship, provides the essential context for understanding the Church's teaching on fertility regulation.

'Indeed, by its intimate structure, the conjugal act [that is, marital intercourse], while most closely uniting husband and wife, capacitates them for the generation of new lives, according to laws inscribed in the very being of man and of woman. By safeguarding both these essential aspects, the unitive and the procreative, ...[marital intercourse]... preserves in its fullness the sense of true mutual love and its ordination towards our most high calling to parenthood.'

(Humanae Vitae, No. 12)



Marital Love is Unifying

'When my husband & I come together to physically express our love, I am conscious of something sacred happening. For us, sexual intimacy is a sacred rite through which we renew and regenerate the love bond between us. This love is a delicate balance between the nourishment we give each other through our intimacy and the nourishment we provide to other people in our lives including our children.' (Sue, aged 36 years)

The gift of married love is the unique and distinctive expression of human intimacy. Through the covenant of marriage, the life of a woman and the life of a man become intertwined in a profound and pervasive way. So total is their self-giving to one another that they live no longer as two individuals but as 'two in one flesh'.

Furthermore, this intimacy is experienced in a profound way. Not just confined to the physical or genital act of intercourse, the married couple's intimate loving involves a way of relating that permeates their entire lives. Through countless routine interactions in daily life, a husband is called to respond to his wife as 'the woman of his life,' and she to her husband as 'the man of her life.' Their sexual way of relating and the unity and permanency it implies makes their love different to every other man-woman friendship they may encounter. This is the 'exclusivity' of married love which sets it apart from all other human relationships.



unity in Love

Loving and Life-Giving: A Dynamic Unity

Many people ask 'What's the difference between avoiding conception through natural means and avoiding it through contraception?' After all, they say, the result is the same: a pregnancy is avoided. In responding to such questions, the Church highlights the deeper meaning of the act of sexual intimacy rather than just its biological consequences.

The promotion of natural fertility methods by the Church goes hand in hand with the promotion of an attitude to sex, to love, to life itself. Without this attitude it is possible that natural methods will be used with a contraceptive mind-set. The letter of the law will be adhered to, but the spirit could be lost. This is an inadequate expression of the Church's teaching on responsible family planning.

Contraception alters the meaning of the sexual act itself. To deliberately and willfully cut off one's fertility in the very moment that life could begin creates an intrinsic contradiction. On the one hand, a spouse is surrendering his/her whole self. Yet in the midst of that surrender there is a denial experienced by the couple who, in effect, say to each other: 'No, I will not offer you all of me. No, I will not accept all of you.' In this way an implicit 'falsehood' becomes embedded in an activity which opposes its intrinsic value as a source and expression of total self-giving.

The very act which has the capacity to express the completeness of the couple's self-surrender instead becomes an act of holding back of one's deepest self. It is out of respect for this deep communication between a husband and wife in marriage that the Church rejects contraception. By its stance the Church is protecting the precious meaning of the marital covenant and the promotion of life.

'Watching our three year old son play with his building blocks, at times I am tempted to interfere and help him. Yet somehow this would intrude on his discovery and diminish his accomplishment. Clearly the more loving action is to keep a watchful eye, ready to affirm and appreciate. I think the difference between fertility regulation by natural means and artificial means can be described in similar terms. While contraceptive methods can control fertility, natural methods allow us to manage the gift of fertility which comes from God. Controlling fertility engenders a sense of dependency and ultimately our sexual self-appreciation is diminished. Managing our fertility through natural methods empowers us to responsibly plan our family without undermining our need to be fully present to each other as sexual, fertile beings.'

(Chris, father of 3 children.)



'Waiting' is an Expression of Married Love

What makes natural fertility methods unpopular to many in the community is that they involve abstinence, a time of 'waiting'. We live in a society where we have grown to expect instant availability - fast food, fast service, quick-fix solutions, instant gratification. Even sex has become a commodity to be had - NOW! Our culture makes it difficult to appreciate the value of waiting. It is true that this is not always easy for couples and is part of the many sacrifices entailed in married living. The immediate frustration of waiting must never be allowed to eclipse the enduring value of waiting. Yet, the call to patiently endure is a feature of many aspects of the Christian life and is always aimed at bringing about an even deeper joy and love. There are times in marriage when intercourse may not be an act of generous love, but a selfish imposition such as when one partner is ill, just prior to or just after the birth of a baby, or when there is illness in the family. The greater act of love in these circumstances might be to refrain from intercourse, to 'wait' and just be with and for each other.

Abstinence calls for both husband and wife to communicate about their sex life and to appreciate its place in their overall marriage. In particular, it calls for the husband to be attentive and interested in the wife's fertility - thus appreciating her womanhood in a deeper way. He feels trusted by being invited into an area of life from which he often feels excluded. She discovers a serenity in knowing that she is loved for who she is, without having to change or deny her fertility.

In their use of natural fertility methods, couples speak of abstinence as a way of developing mutual respect for one another. 'Waiting' can lead them to explore other non-genital signs of affection for expressing their love. There are many ways of saying 'I love you' and unless we use all these ways, the ultimate expression, intercourse, loses its significance. Special gestures of kindness, cuddles, kisses, loving caresses or just being held are all ways of showing love for one's spouse and can be a 'rediscovery' of the romance that first brought them together. Through appreciating their gift of fertility, a couple grow in understanding and love.

Waiting in Love

How Much Abstinence is Required?

The duration of the fertile phases varies between each couple and between cycles. A couple is possibly fertile for up to 9 days within an average length cycle. The amount of abstinence required by the couple varies depending on the individual couple's specific cycle characteristics and their motivation to avoid pregnancy. If they require maximum effectiveness, they must apply the method correctly.





Hope for the Childless Couple

Sometimes great sorrow is experienced by a married couple who is denied the joy of children. Modern methods of natural fertility regulation have proved to be highly effective in achieving pregnancy in many situations.

By education in natural fertility regulation, diagnosis and correction of reproductive abnormalities by competent doctors can be facilitated. Couples are given the best possible opportunity of conceiving by following the natural indicators of fertility, particularly the essential ingredient of fertility, the cervical mucus secretion. Apart from being very successful in alleviating infertility, natural methods avoid the physical and moral dangers of modern techniques of assisted reproduction.

Openness to Life is a Communal Affair

In the Christian way of life, children are viewed first and foremost as a gift, not a burden. They are a sign of new life, openness and hope to the whole Christian community. In asking couples to welcome the gift of children we as a Christian community must be prepared to encourage them in this task by giving moral and practical support such as financial and prayer support, baby-sitting, working for family-friendly policies and celebrating together the special times in the life of a family.

Often in our modern society parents feel as though public institutions and policies oppose an openness to children. All too often communities adopt a materialistic ethic whereby things and objects are placed above people. 'Having' and 'doing' override the importance of 'being'. The special moments of human existence, like conception and birth, thus become burdens which interfere with the efficiency of daily living. Sexual expression is reduced to the pursuit of pleasure and the possibility of conceiving a child is seen as interference rather than as a gift of married love. Widespread promotion of contraception has led to an acceptance of a mentality which separates procreative responsibility from the marital love-union. Through this separation we are experiencing a loss of appreciation of children who are sometimes portrayed as being an intrusion into one's lifestyle.

These attitudes affect us all. A prejudice has developed today, even in some Catholic circles, whereby large families are made to feel peculiar or unnatural. A fourth or fifth pregnancy is greeted with sympathy from well-meaning friends instead of joy and encouragement. Such attitudes can cause parents to lose heart and to consider that something is wrong with their being pregnant or wanting more children. The community, both family and neighbourhood, needs to work together to help identify with the couple the psychological and practical tasks of child rearing and how the couple might receive the necessary support. To deny this need can lead to isolation and pull the couple apart at a time of bringing about new life in the family.

Faithfulness to the teachings of the Church concerning what Pope John Paul II termed the *Gospel of life*, that is the sacred value of all human life from its beginning to its end, is something for which all are responsible (*Evangelium Vitae*). As a community our attitudes and actions must foster a life-giving climate conducive to the freedom couples need to welcome children and the possibility of children as a vital part of their relationship.

Open to life

The Benefits of Natural Fertility Methods

Six months ago we quit the pill and began using a natural fertility method. We were pretty nervous about it because none of our friends were using it and we had heard some of our parents' friends complain that it wasn't reliable. We changed because I was sick of the side effects of the pill so we weren't expecting the impact on our relationship that is already evident. Now our family planning is a shared responsibility. We communicate about our decisions more openly and I don't feel burdened like I used to when the onus was always on me. Also, I feel better, healthier. And I like being in tune with my body...and John does too! (Jennie)

Many couples testify that, by encouraging a 'lifestyle of communication', natural fertility methods positively foster a deeper married love because the procreative responsibility rests not on one person alone but on the couple. Through learning about their fertility couples come to learn more about each other and in particular their capacity to be co-creators in new life. This awareness of fertility leads a couple to regard their sexual intimacy as significant, as a loving activity which has purpose and may be creative. In each cycle it invites them to reassess their decision about whether or not to extend their love to include a new child.

Natural methods are not complicated and can be taught to anyone. These methods foster self-awareness, self-control and communication skills: all qualities which are necessary for maturity and for establishing the stable relationship of marriage. Through encouraging the development of such qualities, the use of natural fertility methods has the power to strengthen marriages. Furthermore, these natural methods respect the health of the woman who would otherwise be subject to the damaging side-effects of chemical contraceptives. Many couples with no particular religious persuasion have turned to natural methods precisely for this reason. Disillusioned by the physical risks of contraceptives and attracted to a more 'holistic' approach of working with their bodiliness, many health-conscious people have embraced natural fertility management.



How Reliable are Natural Fertility Methods?

No method of fertility regulation, natural or otherwise, is 100% reliable. International studies conducted by respected scientists have shown that modern methods of natural fertility regulation are highly effective in avoiding pregnancy among women with varied cultural, educational and economic backgrounds. A number of studies have found the pregnancy rate to be less than 1%. This rate is comparable to the effectiveness of the contraceptive pill and considerably better than rates achieved by condoms and diaphragms. For couples having difficulty conceiving, natural fertility methods offer far higher success rates than IVF. Furthermore, they are spared the disadvantages of invasive surgical procedures and there is no deliberate creation of embryos which are then marked for destruction.

Natural fertility methods are suitable for couples at all stages of the woman's reproductive life (regular or irregular cycles, during breast-feeding, post pill, pre-menopause, or sub-fertility). When properly taught and applied diligently, couples can use natural fertility methods to reliably and confidently plan their families.

For More Information:

General Information
www.nfpprog.com

Billings Ovulation Method
www.billings-ovulation-method.org.au

Sympto-Thermal Method
www.acnfp.com.au

There are other natural fertility methods approved and used in some Catholic Dioceses in Australia, eg:
Creighton Fertility Care Method
www.fertilitycare.com.au

The Way Forward - Step by Step

Many factors affect a couple's capacity to undertake natural fertility management: their communication, the stability of their relationship, stages of faith and maturity. Each couple is unique. As with all her teachings, the Church recognises that while upholding the truths that guide Christian morality, we must also accept that a person's understanding and acceptance of the Church's teachings can be a gradual process.

The first step for a couple may be to seek accurate information about natural fertility methods and to learn how to use them. The inherent goodness of natural fertility management works on the love in the relationship and draws the couple together as one. We cannot judge the suitability of couples who come to learn; they vary from indifference to God and to the child through to deep devotion to God and God's loving plan for them. There are also couples who would reject any attempt at formation but who will always accept natural fertility teaching because that is what they came for, however imperfect their motives for doing so. The task of our faith community is to bear witness to the truth in love and to lovingly invite others to seek and live the truth.

In writing this letter we wish to publicly acknowledge those couples who have faithfully followed the teachings of the Church in this area. Your witness and experience have helped to bring the Church to greater depths of understanding about the sacred nature of married love. We also acknowledge those couples who have sincerely struggled with this teaching, and have not, for whatever reason, been able to embrace this method with success. With compassion we recognise that at times some couples have felt burdened by the Church's position. With love we invite you to explore afresh natural methods of fertility management and join with us in this journey of growth and development as our Church learns more and more about the nature of married love.

We also acknowledge and thank all those researchers and teachers of natural fertility, many of whom have dedicated their life's work to making the teaching of the Church a practical reality. It is indeed heartening that all Australian couples now have access through a local natural fertility service centre or through telephone contact to professional teaching advice on natural fertility methods.

We conclude by calling upon all members of our faith community to do all that is within their means to affirm the life-giving nature of married love and to foster a climate which will give credence to the Church's teaching on the sacredness of married love and its openness to the transmission of life.

