

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).

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 a method of NFP encourage spousal mercy?

NFP requires effort since husband and wife will have to change their sexual behavior to respect 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 self-discipline for the good of each other and for their families. This can be difficult.

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. In the end, NFP almost always requires sacrifice and forgiveness. If lived well, this honest struggle can deepen a couple’s spousal relationship, as the demands of love help them to rise above their own desires.

When husband and wife work with God and his design, they will honor the power to unite in a holistic and procreative way and be enabled to maintain the “integrity of the powers of life and love” placed in them by the Lord God (CCC, no. 2338). They will ensure the unity of their persons and marriage, thus living chastely (see CCC, no. 2338). In addition, through the use of periodic sexual abstinence, spouses will be able to “experience the gift of married love while respecting the laws of conception,” thereby acknowledging that they are “not the master of the sources of life but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator” (HV, no. 13).

LIFE

How does NFP use in marriage support life?

The methods of NFP respect God’s design for married love. They do nothing to oppose God’s gift of human fertility. NFP education teaches husband and wife to value their fertility as their gift from God. NFP teaches husband and wife to prayerfully discern when to attempt to conceive a new baby or not. Each NFP method helps couples understand their “fertile window.” This is the time of fertility which includes the wife’s ovulation (when her ovary releases an egg, or ovum) and the number of days that her

husband’s sperm can live in her body when fertile. No other method of family planning does that; NFP methods therefore clearly value procreation!

When we consider that marriage and conjugal love are “by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children” (*Gaudium et spes*, [GS] no. 50), we can more easily see the value of NFP methods. Husband and wife can participate in a lifestyle that reminds them that they are “cooperators with the love of God the Creator, and are, so to speak, the interpreters of that love.” (GS, no. 50).

NFP

Opening the Heart of Marriage

The Church teaches that in marriage, “Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state” (GS, no. 48). Through the practice of the methods of Natural Family Planning, married couples can integrate God’s design for life and love in their daily lives. At times it won’t be easy, since sacrifice and honest communication will have to happen. If couples persevere, the benefits are well worth the effort! Husband and wife will see their love grow and deepen. Their hearts, and the heart of their marriage, will be open to all good gifts that the Lord God wishes to give them!