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Spiritual Dimensions of Natural Family Planning

Ronda Chervin

I AM writing this article as a philosophy professor, an author of books on lay spirituality, and a wife and mother—reflecting on attitudes toward life underlying the traditional arguments against contraception and for NFP. The exploratory concepts I shall develop here reflect, I think, the “radical” (going to the roots) viewpoints of contemporary defenders of NFP based on a positive experience of natural sex,¹ a spirituality of the physical, a love of nature as gift, and a sense of feminine and masculine wholeness.

I shall explore some spiritual dimensions of natural sex from the standpoint of the sense of mystery: (1) the mystery of the body of the spouse, (2) the mystery of the fertile time, (3) the mystery of the child, (4) the mystery of the feminine and masculine, (5) the mystery of God’s providence, and (6) the mystery of contemplation in action.

The Mystery of the Body of the Spouse

A theme that runs through Christopher Derrick’s intriguing defense of natural sex² is that illicit sexuality tends toward a gnostic separation of spirit and flesh, whereas healthy moral sexual expression ties soul and body together. How so?

In casual sex the key factor is the *individual’s experience* of his (her) *own* sensual delight. The body of the other-sexed partner is an instrument for such pleasure but can be substituted for by some other means: hence the increase in masturbation, gadgets such as vibrators, and so on.

In married sex the body of the other is loved as the incarnation of a unique personality—there are many possible females and males but *one* chosen spouse. It is, after all, quite a mystery that a body that one previously viewed

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as neutral, or merely a set of attributes capable of being rated quantitatively, becomes for the one in love a splendid, unduplicatable, beloved object!

I have been happy to observe in older married couples a sort of correlation between the openness of having a large family and an earthy appreciation of the physical qualities of the spouse, signified by frequent embraces and much conversation about each other's good features.

This factor is worth marveling at, to my mind, even in those troubling cases of couples who try NFP and "fail" through having "cheated" on the method. In the light of so many couples aged thirty and over who become colder and colder to each other as years go by, it is striking that other couples can barely accept the abstinence necessary for NFP. Of course, sometimes there are negative psychological difficulties in lack of control, but, at the same time, it is a positive spiritual good of marriage when sexual union is experienced as a source of such happiness.

The Mystery of the Fertile Time

If true feminism were to become victorious, every woman would think of the gift of her own fertility as "sacred." I imagine the liberated woman saying to the man in her life, "Now is my miraculous time. Now I may be able to bring a new human being into existence. Come to me with your seed only if you want to participate in this mystery."

How different that sounds from such expressions as, "It's the bad time now, honey. I'm sorry." It took a friend who is a consecrated nun to heal my blindness. She said, referring to a hysterectomy she had just undergone, "I miss having my menstrual period. It always seemed to me a sign of my feminine flow of life."

Specifically thinking about the *fertile time* as sacred can illuminate the moral teaching against contraception. As Mary the mother of God was prepared by grace to be ready at the *sacred time* for the incarnation of the divine son, making a *sacred space* in her womb, so, too, at the *sacred time* of the mass the altar becomes a *sacred space*, and so, too, at the time of fertility, through the sexual union of the parents, the life of the new creature may begin, making the mother's womb into a *sacred space*.

It is good to come to a church to pray even when the sacred rite is not transpiring. So, too, it is good to make love even when a baby cannot be conceived, in the nonfertile time. But just as it would be a desecration to say the words of consecration at the altar yet deny the Real Presence, so, too, it is a desecration of the sacred time to enter the sacred space of the woman's uterus while at the same time destroying the potency of the act through contraception. To perform an act designed to bring the life-giving seed and egg together, only to throw it all into the garbage pail—or to take a pill that cleverly simulates a pregnancy precisely to *avoid* a pregnancy—is as dis-

ordered as to say a black mass.

By contrast, the couple who follow NFP seal off the sacred fertile time with reluctance, honoring it respectfully as a believer genuflects before the altar. The NFP couple ardently hope for the time when economic and psychological conditions will make it possible for them to engage in fertile love-making.

The Mystery of the Child

No other belief can give the people of our day courage to live according to nature and accept the children that God gives them, except this—the belief that every child has a soul that is worth more than the stars in the heavens, though at times [the parents] are near fainting under the shower of the stars.

So wrote the Nobel Prize-winning Norwegian novelist, Sigrid Undset.

At a time when so many view children as mere statistics of overpopulation or burdens so unwanted as to warrant destruction in the womb, it is necessary continually to refresh our sense of the mystery of the irreplaceable new child.

Is it a matter of chance that I notice so much joy in their children among couples who practice natural sex and, on the other hand, a growing tendency to emphasize the negative among those who have decided to use any means available to avoid having more children? Given the incredible burden that children really are, it can only be through a transcending vision of the worth of the child that parents can retain a spiritual sense of wonder in spite of their fatigue.

What a grim paradox it is that the argument for “quality” of life takes the form of blindness to the unique quality of the single individual. More and more quantities of opportunities are to be provided, all of which make no sense if no one knows how to live or love! Never should the response to the mystery of the individual be lost for the sake of ambiguous human values.

The Mystery of the Feminine and Masculine

Basic differences between the nature of man and the nature of woman also play a part in the distinction between contraception and NFP.

Many psychologists and philosophers agree that the feminine is characterized by a desire to unite mind and heart, the masculine by a tendency to separate the will from the passions.³

Let us center in on these qualities as they affect the sexual act. It is natural for a woman to seek wholeness and reject a barrier method that separates the feeling of the act from its intent. The male is less sensitive to such a violation. On the other hand, because he wants to dominate his passions with his will, he will experience the self-control of NFP as ultimately a sign of masculine strength.

From another standpoint, the contemporary emphasis on wholeness as a goal for men and women can be achieved only through loving the natural

destiny of sex, which is the birth and tending of the child. It is through parenthood that a man's strength is channeled into loving responsibility and a woman's love overflows into care.

The Mystery of God's Providence

"Ah, sweet mystery of life . . ." the poet sings. Even on a natural level without belief in a personal God, mankind is capable of appreciating the fact that life is not subject to one-year plans, two-year plans, five-year plans. As von Hildebrand shows in his book *Humanae Vitae: A Sign of Contradiction*,⁴ the major difficulty couples encounter in avoiding contraception is the modern fixation on being able to control one's own life. Taking a technological model as paradigm, we come to imagine that only what is planned is efficient and good, while what comes as a surprise must be something negative.

In a book I have just finished writing with Sister Mary Neill, O.P., we emphasize the theme of surprise as characterizing the events of salvation. Mary is amazed at the salutation of the angel. Redemption through God's dying on the cross could hardly be part of any believer's "five-year plan." So, too, the conception and birth of one particular baby who will never be formed again is always a mystery of providence, as those know only too well whose babies have died shortly after birth or who have suffered from miscarriages or sterility. Openness to surprise is a deeply spiritual category intimately linked to acceptance of pain, yet without it life becomes stagnant and meaningless.

The contraceptive mentality is aimed, sometimes unsuccessfully, at the total elimination of surprise and therefore corresponds very well to our contemporary lack of faith in God's loving providence. NFP, on the contrary, while including the dimension of prudent planning, never excludes the possibility of surprise and greets the unexpected baby with wonder even amidst initial dismay.

The Mystery of Contemplation in Action

Contemplation leads to action. Such is the history of spirituality in the Church. Those most able to reflect deeply on the mysteries of life are those most full of energy to bring about change. Where do those countless people who volunteer their time for pro-life work against abortion or in NFP counseling get their persevering energies if not from holding fast to the vision of the worth of natural sex and individual life? Now our strength is poured out in action. In heaven we shall rest in contemplation. Can you imagine what it will be like to see all those couples saved from distorted sexuality, and all those babies saved from abortion, shining in the glory of their preciousness in the light of the God of life and love?

Notes

- 1 This term comes from Mary Shivanandan's excellent book by this title (New York: Rawson, Wade, 1979).
- 2 *Honest Love and Human Life* (New York: Coward McCann, 1969).
- 3 See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Man and Woman* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1965), and Steven Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1980).
- 4 (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1969.)

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