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Natural Family Planning and an Integral Vision of the Person

Marshall Fightlin

NATURAL FAMILY planning (NFP) is not simply “a better form of birth control.” Behind NFP lies an integral vision of the human person. Behind contraception lies the fragmented vision of the contraceptive mentality. The two are worlds apart. As Pope John Paul II noted in his brilliant document on the family:

(T)he difference, both anthropological and moral, between contraception and recourse to the rhythm of the cycle . . . is much wider and deeper than is usually thought, one which involves in the final analysis two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality. (*Familiaris Consortio*, 32/6.)

What is the vision of the human person that lies behind NFP?

Love: The Goal of the Person

We hear a lot today about fulfillment. We are told that we owe it to ourselves to fulfill ourselves. But in what does fulfillment consist? Since the human person is meant for dialogue and interpersonal relationships, his essential fulfillment can only be realized by giving of himself to others in love. This basic insight is in flat contradiction to the underlying assumption of contemporary psychology that human beings can only be motivated by love of self. The orientation away from self and toward the other is basic to love and hence basic to married love. In marriage, each spouse

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truly loves the other, not simply as an object, but as a person, a thou. This means that the husband loves his wife for herself, for her own good, and not for what he can get from her.

This is of decisive importance. The love of a thing is radically opposed to the love of a person. Take the love of wine. Why do I love a glass of wine? I love it because of what it does for me: I am getting something out of it. It makes me feel good. But just as soon as the wine stops making me feel good, just as soon as I stop getting something out of it, I throw the wine away. This is a perfectly appropriate way to love a glass of wine, but it is not an appropriate way to love a person, a spouse. To love a spouse in the same manner as I love a glass of wine—only as long as she makes me feel good—is not to love her at all, but to use her. But only things are for using. People are for loving. The marriage of two people, then, is about loving, not about using. This pertains to every aspect of their marriage, including their sexual life.

With My Body, I Thee Worship

Persons are for loving, not for using. But what is a person? Contemporary Western culture has lost the sacred link between body and soul. Our culture vascillates schizophrenically between considering the person as nothing-but-body and considering the person as nothing-but-mind. On the one hand are the “body-only” Skinnerian behavioral psychologists, the Darwinians, and the extreme natural food enthusiasts. On the other hand are the feminists-a-la-Steinem (“biology is not destiny”) and the Planned Parenthood Federation (“the right to choose”).

The truth is that the person is both body and soul. He is a body-soul composite. This means that I am not a ghost-in-a-machine. My body is not an object, not something I act upon as if it were “not me.” My body is an integral element of myself. What I do to my body, I do to myself.

The corollary, of course, is that, what I do to my wife’s body, I do to her.

As You Love Your Own Body

No man who loves his wife will pluck her eyes out. Love for his wife includes caring about her ability to see. This is because

it is *her* sight. It is *she* who sees. To take away her sight is to diminish, not simply her body, but to diminish *her*.

What is true of my wife's ability to see is even more true of her ability to conceive a new human being. If a person is of more value than the entire material universe, then the capacity to procreate another person must be seen as worthy, not only of esteem, but even of awe.

It makes sense, then, that a husband's love for his wife must include a love and reverence for her fertility cycle, and a consequent unwillingness to destroy it. On this view, tubal ligation or use of the Pill are both out of the question. For the husband to ask this of his wife is an insult, an act of rejection. The message he sends is: "I don't love you as you are. You need to be fixed up first. You need to be made less than you are." It is worth noting that this is the only instance when surgery and medication are used, not to promote health, but to destroy it, rendering a fertile woman sterile.

The Golden Rule tells us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. There is, then, a legitimate love of self. But the self that I am to love includes my fertility potential. Hence my self-love must include a reverent acceptance of my fertility. As St. Paul noted, "No man ever hates his own flesh. On the contrary, he nourishes it." (Eph. 5:29) What is a woman doing who agrees to be sterilized or to take the Pill? She is cutting herself in two and rejecting part of herself. She is at war with herself, considering part of herself as a threat, from which she needs "protection."

If healthy self-love, or self-esteem, is a basic ingredient of good mental health, then this basic ingredient must include an affirming attitude toward one's own fertility, and a consequent refusal to damage or destroy it.

The Marriage Act: A Sign of Love

The integral vision of the human person recognizes the sexual act as a form of *language*. It is an act that is designed to *express* something. It expresses in "body language" what was expressed verbally at the altar on the couple's wedding day. The wedding vows express the couple's intention to make a permanent gift of

themselves, a surrender of their total selves, to one another. This means that each person ceases to exist for himself. Each one "dies" in a mysterious way ("they are no longer two") and become a "servant" of the other. Not only do the spouses "die" in a mystical sense, but the vows include the pledge to be ready to die, literally, for the other, should this be required for the other's true good.

It is this total gift of themselves, once pledged at the altar, that is symbolically acted out in the marriage act. Hence the language of the marriage act is essentially a language of total giving, total receiving, and total communion. As such, it is a unique and special expression of marital friendship.

If the marriage act is a language, so is contraception. What is contraception saying? It says, "There is something about me that I do not wish to give you. There is something about you that I do not wish to receive. Something about you is a threat, from which I need protection." This contraceptive language of partial withholding and partial rejection, being an objective insult, necessarily spoils the marital language of total giving and receiving. This is a direct consequence of ignoring the principle that the spousal and procreative meanings of the marital act are indissolubly linked.

From the perspective of the integral vision of the person, contraception is too high a price to pay for family planning.

Expressions of Love: Ordinary and Extraordinary

Married love, like all love, must be expressed in order to grow. In the case of married love, there are certain ordinary, everyday expressions that must be present if married love is to grow. These expressions include a basic generosity in doing favors, showing considerateness and patience for the spouse. Such expressions also include physical signs of affection such as kisses, hugs, hand-holding, as well as gestures like bringing home a rose, chatting with each other on the phone during the day, serving one's spouse a favorite meal.

These everyday gestures are the very stuff out of which married love grows. They are essential and irreplaceable. This means that nothing can replace them, not even sex. In fact, in the absence

of these everyday expressions of love, sex becomes destructive. This is because the sexual act is a special, not an ordinary, sign of love. The sexual act will, therefore, foster love only if it is a true sign of a "love life" that really exists in the couple's daily life. If you will, the in-bed only helps the couple if the out-of-bed is going right. What improves the quality of the couple's sexual life is not more sex, but more considerateness and sharing of the couple's daily life.

Several conclusions follow from this. First of all, sex may be omitted by mutual consent, if there is a good reason, without harming the married love. In such a case, the omission of the special sign of love will not hinder the practice of showing the ordinary signs of love.

Secondly, there will inevitably be times when sex *must* be omitted for the sake of love. A couple's sexual life must always be subordinated to the requirements of considerateness. There are frequently situations in which abstinence for a time is the only form of love: for example, when one spouse is ill, when there is lack of privacy, when there is not sufficient time, etc.

This means that a couple must be able to control their sexual impulses. Appeals to the need for "spontaneity" in sexual matters cannot undo the prior need for self-control. "Spontaneity" must not be erected into an absolute. Nor should it be used as a euphemism for selfishness. Husbands who force themselves on post-partum wives are being inconsiderate, not "spontaneous."

The Psychology of Pleasure

Paradoxically, the integral vision of the person, with its requirement of self-control, offers a superior form of hedonism. This is because, with the integral vision of the person, one is enabled to derive from life all the pleasure that life was designed to give. One aspect of pleasure that is not sufficiently appreciated in contemporary culture is that its intensity depends on the intensity of desire for it. The more one desires to possess something, the more one will enjoy possessing it. How does one increase desire? By waiting.

We all understand this principle instinctively. What piece of

candy ever tasted so good as the one you had on Easter after Lent was over? How much does waiting for Christmas before opening the gifts contribute to the joy of the gifts. How much more do we enjoy the blessing of electricity after a two-day power failure. "Fast before feast." To most people, this is common sense.

Yet in contemporary culture, especially with its contraceptive mentality, there is enormous resistance to applying this principle to sexual joy. Sloganeering about "spontaneity" protects those unwilling to put forth the effort necessary to profit from this principle. Yet the principle stands: A couple's appreciation of their sexual life is greatly threatened by "instant sex," but is greatly enhanced by periods of abstinence. Proof? It is not the NFP couples who are always talking and writing about "sexual boredom." Nor is it NFP couples who ask, "Is there sex after marriage?"

Conclusion

Couples who accept the integral vision of the person will shun any thought of "using" one another "for sex." Their focus will be, first of all, on cultivating their marital friendship by all the ordinary, everyday signs of love. They will view the marital act as a special, privileged sign of their married friendship. Because it is the sign, and not the reality, the couple will strive to make the reality correspond to the sign. They will recognize the need for self-control in order to insure that sexual activity is always subordinated to the requirements of considerateness-for-the-other. Far from being frightened by periodic abstinence, they will recognize it as an important component in the overall appreciation of their sexual life.

With such a vision of the person, contraception is out of the question, and NFP is the obvious answer, should the problem of postponing pregnancy arise for a married couple.