

mental health, and economic and social conditions. This is still very general, but together with the prior statements, it provides us with enough information to formulate the following moral norm (note: this is my formulation): "If a couple has serious reasons, arising from the physical or mental condition of themselves, their children, or another for whom they have responsibility, or from the family's economic or wider social situation, they may defer having children temporarily, or, if the situation is serious enough, indefinitely, providing they use morally legitimate means. Recourse to natural fertility cycles to space births (NFP) under such circumstances is an example of a morally legitimate means. Contraception is not."

If there is any further interest, I would be happy in a future piece to discuss concrete situations that might rightly be judged to be "serious reasons."

One final important point to note. If NFP is chosen wrongly, the wrongness lies in the fact that it is chosen without "good reason" and therefore usually selfishly. The sin here (presuming a person knows what he is doing and freely does it) is the sin of selfishness. (For a Catholic, it can also be the sin of disobedience to authoritative Church teaching.) But choosing NFP selfishly is not the same as contracepting. Strictly speaking, persons can only contracept if they also choose intercourse: a contraceptive act renders sterile an act of intercourse (recall the famous definition from "Humana Vitae," No. 14: "Any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation -- whether as an end or as a means."); a contraceptive act always relates to some act of sexual intercourse; it is an act contrary to conception (literally contra-conception).

If there is no act of intercourse between a potentially fertile heterosexual couple, there is

no potential conception to act contrary toward. Those who choose not to have intercourse, that is, choose abstinence (as NFP practitioners do when they want to avoid pregnancy), cannot act contrary to any contraceptive-type of act, since they are specifically avoiding such acts. Therefore, those who choose NFP wrongly, although they do wrong, they do not do the same thing as those who contracept. Strictly speaking, they do not, indeed cannot, have a "contraceptive intention," although their frame of mind might be characterized by what John Paul II called a "contraceptive mentality" (by which I take him to mean, a mentality that sees the coming to be of new life as a threat, something rightly to take measures against). [Note: some moral theologians would disagree with me here; they believe that NFP can be chosen with a 'contraceptive intention' and therefore constitute for some couples a form of contraception.]

Note

[1] available at:

<http://ccli.org/oldnfp/b2010morality/churchteaching.php>

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Just Cause and Natural Family Planning Spacing Children Requires Discernment, Discussion

Q: Are there any conditions to follow Natural Family Planning (NFP) by a married couple, or is there blanket approval by Catholic Church? Wouldn't NFP be against life if the intention of the couple involved in sexual act is just pleasure and not life, provided they don't have any valid reason to postpone pregnancy? In this case, can **NFP be also considered similar to using condoms? Thanks and Regards -- D.R.P, Bangalore, India**

E. Christian Brugger offers the following response.

A: This is an excellent question, and one that I have been asked many times over the years by devout Catholic spouses. The answer is "no," NFP is not unqualifiedly good and can be used wrongly. The reason for this is subtle and needs to be stated carefully, because there is a popular, although erroneous, belief among some Catholic couples that NFP is "second best," and that if a couple is seriously Catholic, they will not self-consciously plan the children they conceive, but simply "let God send them." I do not mean to offend anyone's practices, but this "come what may" attitude is found nowhere in Catholic teaching on procreation in the last 150 years. There is no decision more serious to a Catholic couple than whether or not to participate with God in bringing a new human person into existence. The more serious a decision, the more it is due prayer, discussion and discernment. I teach my seminarians in Denver that God has a plan for every married couple; that the plan includes how many children they should have;

and therefore if a couple is concerned about doing Jesus' will, they should try to discover whether Jesus wishes them to have more children. They should have all the children that Jesus wants them to have, no less, and no more. Therefore, whenever they are conscious that they might become pregnant, they should discuss and pray over the question: "Does Jesus want us to have another child?" The idea that this question is intrinsically tainted with selfish motives is rigoristic and should be rejected. Every potentially fertile couple, as well as infertile couples capable of adopting, has the responsibility to ask it.

At the same time, NFP can be chosen wrongly. Pope John Paul II summarized the Church's teaching in this regard during an audience at Castel Gondolfo in 1994; (note the seriousness with which he says couples should take the decision to have a child); he writes: "In deciding whether or not to have a child, [spouses] must not be motivated by selfishness or carelessness, but by a prudent, conscious generosity that weighs the possibilities and circumstances, and especially gives priority to the welfare of the unborn child. Therefore, when there is a reason not to procreate, this choice is permissible and may even be necessary. However, there remains the duty of carrying it out with criteria and methods that respect the total truth of the marital act in its unitive and procreative dimension, as wisely regulated by nature itself in its biological rhythms. One can comply with them and use them to advantage, but they cannot be 'violated' by artificial interference."[1]

Principle of "iusta causa"

John Paul II says the choice whether or not to have more children "must not be motivated by selfishness or carelessness;" and then states: "When there is a reason not to procreate, this

choice is permissible and may even be necessary." What kind of "reason" renders permissible the choice not to procreate and hence to use NFP to avoid pregnancy? Pope Paul VI helps us answer this question. In "Humanae Vitae" (No. 16) he teaches: "If therefore there are 'iusta causae' for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances, the Church teaches that married people may then take advantage of the natural cycles immanent in the reproductive system and engage in marital intercourse only during those times that are infertile."

The Latin term "iustae causae" is sometimes translated "well grounded reasons," sometimes "serious motives", and sometimes "grave reasons." But the term is simply the plural of "iusta causa," which literally translates "just cause." According to the encyclical, a couple may space births, and do so through a deliberate recourse to the woman's natural fertility cycle [i.e., they may choose a form of NFP], if there are "just causes." This implies that if there are not just causes, then spacing births, and spacing them in this way, is not legitimate; in other words, that a couple ought not to space births, even through recourse to natural fertility cycles.

The Catholic Church first taught on intentional recourse to a woman's cycle in 1853. The Roman Sacred Penitentiary was replying to a request for an official clarification (a "dubium") submitted by the Bishop of Amiens in France, which asked: "Should those spouses be reprehended who make use of marriage only on those days when (in the opinion of some doctors) conception is impossible?" Rome replied: "After mature examination, we have decided that such spouses should not be disturbed [or disquieted], provided they do nothing that impedes generation." The quote

implies that choosing intercourse to avoid procreation can be different morally from choices to "impede procreation"; the latter are never legitimate; the former are (at least sometimes) legitimate. One hundred years later Pope Pius XII spoke at length on periodic abstinence for purposes of spacing births in his well-known "Address to Midwives" (1951). He uses several terms as synonyms for Paul VI's "iustae causae": "serious reasons," "serious motives" and "grave reasons." The Pope says that such reasons "can exempt for a long time, perhaps even the whole duration of the marriage, from the positive and obligatory carrying out" of the marital duty to procreate.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church summarizes the teaching when it says: "For just reasons (de iustis causis), spouses may wish to space the births of their children. It is their duty to make certain that their desire is not motivated by selfishness but is in conformity with the generosity appropriate to responsible parenthood. Moreover, they should conform their behavior to the objective criteria of morality" (No. 2368). That objective criterion excludes as legitimate the alternative to impede procreation through choosing to contracept. What constitutes a just cause?

Neither the Sacred Penitentiary, Pius XII, Paul VI, nor John Paul II specify concretely what constitutes a "iusta causa." "Humanae Vitae" gets nearest. It teaches that "with regard to physical, economic, psychological and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised by those who prudently and generously decide to have more children, and by those who, for serious reasons and with due respect to moral precepts, decide not to have additional children for either a certain or an indefinite period of time" (No. 10; see also No. 16).

The text itemizes four areas of life from which such reasons might arise: physical and