

For Men Only

by Charles Balsam

My experience of marital sexuality has been a mixture of pain and redemption. The pain comes, in part, from the natural struggle of two lovers to "tune in" to each other's needs. It also comes from my own immaturity and some unrealistic expectations. When these go unspoken and are not dealt with mutually, the struggle seems to be compounded. Love takes time. Love needs bridges, not barriers. Sexually, the biggest barrier I brought to my marriage was my hesitancy to risk. I believe the form of family planning we chose has helped me to accept myself and to seek a deeper union with my wife. This has been redemptive, for I experience God's love through my wife in our struggle to love each other unconditionally and sacrificially.

My wife once told me that she might not have married me if I had insisted on a chemical form of family planning. That's tough love! She was concerned with her personal integrity and the interpersonal dynamics of our relationship. She had been charting her natural signs of fertility for over two years. For her to take full responsibility for our fertility through contraception would have been to diminish her self-gift. It took me several years to realize the meaning of this. In other words, she taught me something important about total giving and accepting of each other in marriage.

Living NFP has not always been easy. I am not speaking of the fear of unplanned pregnancy. I am speaking of continence, that is, refraining from intercourse to postpone conception during the phases of our cycle when we are both fertile.

Some criticize abstinence or continence as unnatural and thus view NFP as too difficult. I think the difficulty lies in what continence can reveal. I discovered that I had placed more emphasis on genital intimacy than relational intimacy. Besides providing us with the possibility of invoking new life, sexual intercourse celebrates relational intimacy.

In and of itself, sex does not create marital intimacy. In fact, sometimes sex isn't intimate at all. I have found this to be true most often when we are not relationally intimate. Using a chemical or a mechanical contraceptive would represent another kind of intimacy barrier. For us to alter or destroy our fertility would also destroy the power of intercourse to signify total self-giving. Retaining the full meaning of intercourse is important to us.

This experience of learning and living NFP has caused me to reflect on myself as a rather typical, twentieth-century American male. While it is natural for persons to yearn for intimacy and affection, I do not believe I was socialized to be relationally intimate. Stereotypically, men have been raised to be analytical, detached and performance oriented.

In a way, becoming relationally intimate with my wife has been "unnatural" for me. Thus, I think men have to learn to be intimate and more vulnerable... two qualities that most women want in their relationship with their spouse. It is this learning process, not abstinence, which I believe many find to be "unnatural" and perhaps makes living NFP difficult for some couples.

Continence does me a favor. It provides me with a "rhythmic" opportunity to make sure it is not only sex but more so love and intimacy that bind me to my wife. This is why we assert that contraception is chauvinistic. Contraception isolates the responsibility for transmitting life to one spouse (usually the wife) and it reinforces what I call the "Playboy playmate fantasy" caricature of women: sexually precocious, available and sterile. Because a woman can become pregnant, in this caricature she and her sexuality are deemed inferior and males continue to see her primarily as a sex object. Males continue to be rescued from integrating their own sexuality into their development and from viewing women as persons. Contraception (and abortion) are not worthy of her dignity as one image of God in the world.

Of course, the other caricature... barefoot and pregnant... is also an affront to her dignity. Modern methods of fertility acceptance (NFP) are an antidote to either caricature. When mutually learned, lovingly lived and applied according to the goals of a couple, NFP promotes the equality and dignity of husband and wife. Contraception and abortion undermine this strength, a point many feminists seem to overlook.

Though difficult at times, integrating our fertility into our marriage has strengthened us individually and as a couple. If I had been told this before we married, I would not have believed it. I am thankful to have a spouse who loves me and herself enough to demand that I love her in a way that Christian marriage requires.

Thus, fertility acceptance (NFP) not only reminds me of the interpersonal nature of procreation, it is a constant reminder that genital intimacy belongs in the context of relational intimacy. The periodic tension that sometimes comes with abstinence lead us to frequently examine our relationship, our needs, our communication and the quality of our intimacy and affection. As a male, that is extremely important, given my natural tendency to overemphasize the quality of the genital relationship.

Can I promise anything beneficial for couples considering or choosing NFP? Yes, depending on the quality of their relationship. NFP has helped me mature, though I have a long way to go. NFP has challenged me to question my assumptions about women as mate and lover and begin to appreciate the "feminine" aspects of myself. It has taught me the beauty of the female menstrual cycle. It has called me to cherish my wife rather than simply desire her. NFP has taught me that fertility is an integral, interpersonal power to invoke new life and participate in the creativity of God. NFP has challenged me to accept and revere our fertility as we have found it and more fully accept the gift of each other in Christian marriage