

Theological Reflections on Natural Family Planning

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CAN THE USE of Natural Family Planning (NFP) to avoid pregnancy be morally justified? In discussions about the difference between NFP and contraception, one often hears the response that NFP is justifiable so long as one does not have a “contraceptive mentality.” There is something quite right about this answer, for in that case there would be something amiss with one’s basic intention. The proper method for the moral evaluation of any course of action always involves a consideration of the end of the action (*finis operis*), the intention of the agent (*finis operantis*) and the circumstances.¹ Presumably what is meant by “a contraceptive mentality”² in this context is the intention of a married couple to live out their marriage in a way that deliberately closes off their intercourse to the very

¹ See *Veritatis Splendor*, §74; see also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§1750, 1755–56.

² Donald DeMarco comments on the history of the usage of this term in his article “The Contraceptive Mentality,” www.catholicculture.org/library/view.cfm?recnum=3417. Among the important sources for the term are: Stanislas de Lestapis, S.J., *La limitation des naissances*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Spes, 1960), 63–65, which speaks of a “contraceptive state of mind”; the “Majority Report” of the 1967 papal commission that preceded *Humanae Vitae*; and Elizabeth Anscombe, who noted that “the contraceptive mentality teaches that women need to be as little chaste as pagans thought men need to be,” in *Contraception and Chastity* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1977). Interestingly, even the Majority Report, which argued for a change in the Church’s teaching regarding the moral permissibility of contraception in certain cases, condemned the “contraceptive mentality” as a “way of life which in its totality is egoistically and irrationally opposed to fruitfulness,” cited as “The Papal Commission Report,” in *The Catholic Case for Contraception*, ed. D. Callahan (Toronto: Collier-Macmillan, 1969), 159.

possibility of procreation. What is problematic about such an intention is that it separates the inseparable meanings of intercourse within marriage, that is, its unitive and procreative dimensions.³ Regardless of the moral evaluation that we might make of the practice of NFP in general or in some specific set of the circumstances, there is reason to think that the practice of NFP with a “contraceptive mentality” is morally problematic.

But presumably a couple might consider practicing NFP with an intention other than a contraceptive mentality. One might, for instance, think of morally good reasons for wanting to do so, such as spacing births a bit for the good of a mother’s health, or caring better for the sake of one’s existing children, or for the good of the marriage in a time of great pressures of some sort—these are scenarios in which a couple might remain open to any children that might come and yet might have reasons that bring them to hope that there will not be a pregnancy for a time. Is NFP in such a scenario morally justifiable? If we presume that the intention of the couple is morally acceptable here, then the issue turns to the moral evaluation of the practice—to the *finis operis* rather than the *finis operantis*.

One way in which to attempt an answer to this question would be to consider whether NFP is in principle morally permissible, provided that there are morally unexceptionable motives for using it in specific circumstances. Unlike an act of contraception, where the nature of the action is morally objectionable regardless of the intentions,⁴ there does not seem to be anything intrinsically objectionable to the acts of intercourse themselves or to any of the actions taken in the course of deciding whether or not to have intercourse on a particular day. If spouses are using their knowledge of NFP well, their actions in preparation for and during sexual relations need be no different in those cases in which they are seeking to avoid children than in those in which they seek to have them. The difference between the two cases consists rather in the pattern of having intercourse and abstaining that the couple chooses, and this pattern exists only because of their intention. The moral quality of NFP would then need to be determined not by considering the nature of one’s acts (as in contraception) but by the ends and goals that motivate one’s free choice of a particular pattern of intermittent intercourse.

The motives under discussion here seem unobjectionable. They raise no red flags about a contraceptive mentality. But what might still give one pause here is a set of background worries that one sometimes hears voiced,

³ See *Humanae Vitae*, §12; and Pope John Paul II, *Theology of the Body: Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), “Reflections on *Humanae Vitae*,” §4.

⁴ See *Humanae Vitae*, §14.

especially by religious people who are convinced of the goodness of raising up children for the Lord and who are convinced about the connection between the procreative and the unitive dimensions of the marital act. One might pose them thus:

1. Are we morally required to have all the children possible for us, given our current understanding of the natural rhythms of fertility?
2. Are we morally required to refrain from intercourse when we know as a couple that we are infertile?

Neither of these questions is yet resolved by the answer that urges us to avoid a contraceptive mentality. It may prove helpful to think about the theological underpinnings of NFP, so as to see its justifiability beyond merely presuming this practice to be permissible so long as one does not have a contraceptive or some other morally disqualifying intention.

The Writings of Father Paul Quay, S.J.

Among the papers that the late Father Paul M. Quay, S.J., left at the time of his death in 1994 is an unfinished manuscript on the theology of Natural Family Planning that may help to address these questions. In cooperation with Sr. Miriam Paul (Dr. Hanna Klaus), I am presently working to bring this manuscript to completion. A year before *Humanae Vitae*, Quay had published an essay called "Contraception and Conjugal Love"⁵ that provides a splendid defense of the view that contraception contradicts not only the procreative but the unitive meaning of marriage. In many ways the relatively brief treatment given in that article to sexual intercourse as a sort of language and to contraceptive sex as a kind of lie is much like the view that Pope John Paul II would take up in his Angelus lectures on the theology of the body. Quay went on to develop his ideas at greater length in his book *The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality*.⁶ In his posthumously published book *The Mystery Hidden for Ages in God*,⁷ one can find a thorough account of the doctrine of recapitulation in Christ that gives the larger framework. His general thesis is that Christ recapitulated in his life the whole of the life of Israel (taken together as if it were a single individual), but completing what was incomplete, perfecting what

⁵ Paul M. Quay, S.J., "Contraception and Conjugal Love," *Theological Studies* 22 (1961): 18–40.

⁶ Paul M. Quay, S.J., *The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality* (1985; repr., San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

⁷ Paul M. Quay, S.J., *The Mystery Hidden for Ages in God* (1995; repr., New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

was imperfect, and sanctifying what was sinful. Each Christian individual, family, and culture, in turn, needs to live in Christ and to recapitulate the life of Christ. As human beings we continue to bear the marks of the Fall, especially in the darkness of the intellect, the weakness of the will, and the distortions of our natural inclinations that are consequences of original sin, for the image of God in which we were made has been shattered. With our baptism, sanctifying grace restores the life of God within us, but coming to live and act according to His likeness requires the sacraments and other gifts of grace, so that we learn how to recapitulate the life of Christ by imitating Him at each stage of our growth.

Within this general framework of recapitulation in Christ, Quay's general approach to human sexuality and more specifically to the topic of natural family planning pays much attention to the natural and supernatural symbolism of sexuality. The mere mention of symbolism may make some people think of literature and worry that this risks reading something into biblical texts that is not there. To use such an approach successfully as a means of theological reflection depends on recognizing that not all symbols are of human invention. It would be easy to suppose that they are, given the incredible range of symbols that we human beings have devised—not only the clever symbols that poets dream up and that artists paint, but the stylized symbols of the highway department and the prosaic characters that are letters of the alphabet. Conventional signs like these involve the use of one physical object or design to represent another by means of a connection that is imposed on the sign. There is nothing, for instance, about the word "apple" (spoken or written) that resembles an apple. A picture of an apple might, I suppose, resemble the apple—unless I were the one trying to draw it!

But there are natural signs as well—signs in which one physical object or event signifies something else without any human imposition of meaning: smoke is a sign of fire, certain kinds of clouds are a sign of impending rain, a baby's cry is a sign of discomfort, and (to get closer to the point of this reflection) estrus is a sign of fertility by which the females of many animal species can alert the males that they are in heat. By contrast, human beings are the exception here. With us, sexual attraction occurs independently of the periods of fertility. Precisely because we are persons with an intellect and a will whose freedom makes us responsible for our choices, human relationships need to be mediated through spoken words and governed by properly ordering our loves. But the fact that we need to make free choices does not take away the fact there still are natural signs that operate in our lives independently of our choices. Those who have become versed in the techniques of natural family planning increas-

ingly know how to read the cycles of temperature and of cervical fluid as signs of fertility and infertility.

In addition to natural signs and conventional signs, there is also a whole world of symbolism, natural and supernatural. The distinctive connotation of “symbol” here is that the object (including events and patterns of events) that is the sign does not just point to something else on the same level. There is something in the object’s structure that makes it specially suitable to point to or mean something else on another level altogether. In fact, it is this aspect of signification that makes some physical objects particularly good symbols in literature. When the poet, for instance, say, “My love is a rose, pretty but prickly,” there is something about a rose (its loveliness, but also its thorns) that make it specially suitable for being a poetic symbol for the woman whom the poet is describing. And it is no surprise that love is frequently symbolized by fire—the inviting warmth, the fascinating flame, but also the danger of getting burnt suggests something about fire that is readily descriptive at another level altogether about human love.

Human sexuality, Quay shows, manifests natural symbolisms of this sort. Sexual organs and activities not only have structures and functions at the biological level but also point to important realities in personal relationships, desires, conscious/unconscious urges, feelings, impulses, inclinations, and understandings. Without trying to make in this essay the whole case for Quay’s understanding of the symbolic structure of human sexuality, let me merely mention some examples that may help to clarify the general approach that Quay takes when reflecting on the theology of NFP. At the level of its natural symbolism, the sexual intercourse of human beings carries significance like other signs do (whether verbal, written, or iconic) as a kind of language that says various things, regardless of whether a given individual or couple is conscious of them, or prepared to say them, or even wants to deny them. The physical union of intercourse symbolizes the union of persons in a marriage. The nakedness of a couple having intercourse symbolically conveys their openness to one another and their vulnerability (not keeping anything back or hidden, but presenting oneself for the acceptance of the other, warts and all). In sexual relations bodily actions communicate various things whether we consciously affirm these meanings or not, or just do them spontaneously and without any such conscious intention, and even if we deliberately misuse them in a deceitful way, as in a seduction for some ulterior motive.

The sexual activity of human beings involves so much more than the comparable activities of any other animal, precisely because there are

persons involved, persons whose thoughts and words and choices can make their intercourse a word of love or of domination, a word of affirmation or of denigration, a word of tenderness or of indifference. In their sexual relations, do any given individuals always say by their words and their actions what they actually intend? do they really mean what their words and their actions say? do they consciously intend anything at all? When I occasionally speak on this level with the freshmen students in the dormitory where I live at Fordham, many a local Romeo and a local Juliet seem immediately to understand the distinction between what someone actually says in so many words, what one may mean (or want to say, or is thinking about possibly saying, etc.), and what one's actions (for example, in sexual intercourse) are in fact saying. Even a Romeo who tells his Juliet of his undying affection and who truly means it may not be ready to make good on that promise, given the demands of residency, medical school, sophomore year in college, or even just final exams.

At the level of supernatural symbolism, the richness of Quay's view can be suggested by even just one passage from scripture. In Ephesians 5, husbands and wives are told to be mutually submissive to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives are to respect and obey their husbands, like the way in which the Church should conduct herself toward Christ. Husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies and to be ready to sacrifice themselves for their wives, as Christ did for the Church. For in the relation of husband and wife we see the mystery of Christ and His Church. From the supernatural symbolism used in this passage Quay draws a number of the implications:

- Just as the Lord would never seek another bride, and the Church should never seek another Lord, so too adultery is gravely wrong.
- Just as the Lord will never seek another man like himself but dedicates himself to his bride, and the Church should never seek another bride but give herself entirely to this Bridegroom, so too human beings should never enter into homosexual relations.
- Just as Christ the Bridegroom and his bride the Church await the marriage feast of Heaven, so too human beings should await their marriage and not engage in premarital intercourse.
- Just as Christ does not strive to please himself, but should be ready to die to render His spouse pure and spotless (unlike Adam, who joined his bride in sin), so no human being should masturbate, or try to dominate one's spouse, but should love that spouse in a way that will help that spouse to grow in holiness.

Nor is Quay's approach limited to showing why certain practices would necessarily be inauthentic for reflecting the relations between Christ and his bride the Church and thus for knowing what is good and right for human beings. Much of his study is devoted to showing how God has inspired the writers of Scripture to use sexuality symbolically for displaying certain things that we need to know about the mystery of God in himself and about his plans for the Church. The prophet Hosea, for instance, uses human marriage as a symbol for the covenant that God made with Israel, and Paul uses that same imagery to have us understand the relation between the Church and Christ.

The Application of Quay's Understanding to NFP

What does all of this have to say about natural family planning? If we grant that human marriage symbolically points to something about the love between Christ and His Church, then the practice of NFP for the avoidance of children would, at least at first glance, appear to be gravely evil. The task of the Church on this earth is presumably (with due respect for human freedom) to bring as many souls to live in Christ as she can. How could the Church ever stand in the position of being unwilling to bear such children? It would seem that any use of NFP to avoid children would contradict the basic symbolism by which sexual activity, seen in light of the supernatural symbolism, points to a need always to stand ready for bearing new children in the Lord. Presumably, couples could only use NFP so as to have as many children as possible.

Such problems require careful reflection on the structures of human fertility as well as on their natural and supernatural meanings, so as to discern the moral rightness or wrongness of specific patterns of sexual activity that makes use of the sort of knowledge that NFP brings. It would be all too easy to mistake the images being employed for the meaning to which they point. It would be all too easy to suppose that the Scriptures show us Christ and the Church as if already husband and wife, with the baptized as their children. But in fact, Christ is not our Father, and he has not begotten the children of the Church through the Seed that is the Holy Spirit. Christ is the Son of the Father, and not anyone's Father. Revelation does not show him having entered into a generative union with his bride. Rather, the baptized are the Father's adopted children, the sisters and brothers of Christ. This caution allows us to see that the Church should indeed have as many children as possible, but there is no need to bring the largest possible number of children into this world. The task, rather, is to bring all those who are naturally born to be reborn of water and the Holy Spirit from the womb of the Church by baptism.

For the resolution of the problem, it is crucial to remember that the espousal of Christ and the Church is not the Bible's only use of the symbolism of human sexuality. The espousal texts focus on the type of love found between Christ and the Church. In a way, this corresponds to the tenderness, generosity, and loveliness that is common between the engaged but that sometimes fades in human marriages. In the best ones, the idea remains as model of what the couple wants to preserve, even as they come to learn how their love needs to be deepened over time. While children are not expressly mentioned in these texts, they are prominent in other scriptural uses of sexual symbolism that are concerned with motherhood and with adoptive fatherhood.

In Isaiah (1:2, 4), for instance, God speaks of the tribe of Judah as children whom he has reared despite the fact that they are the sinful sons of wicked people: "The LORD has spoken: 'Sons have I reared and brought up. . . . Ah, sinful nation, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly!'" While their biological generation is recognized to come from their human parents, these people are God's children by adoption. Isaiah 29:33 ("When [Jacob] sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, they will sanctify my name") treats the sons begotten by Jacob as the people that he has formed for himself and thus the work of his hands. One could recount others passages in the same vein (43:5–7, 21; 44:21; 45:11; 50:1). Correlated with God's adoptive fatherhood is Israel's motherhood, for it is the task of Israel, God's people, to bear children for him. Hosea (that is, 1:10; 2: 2, 4, 5) and Ezekiel point to the link between the symbolism of fatherhood/motherhood and the symbolism of husband and wife, for example: "The LORD says, 'You took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne to me, and these you sacrificed to them [to idols] to be devoured . . . , you slaughtered my children'" (Ez 16:20–21; see 23:4, 37). The individuals who were born naturally to their human parents only became God's children by his espousal to Jerusalem, their mother.

Similar sexual symbolisms are used in the New Testament, but the relationships grow more complex with the revelation that God is not just Father but Son and Holy Spirit—one God in three distinct Persons. Only one is Father, and there is only one Son whom he has begotten naturally, his eternal Word, Jesus Christ (Jn 1:1–5, 18). All God's other children only become his children by being reborn as children of the Church, whom Christ espoused by the sacrifice of the New Covenant on the Cross (Eph 5:25–27). We become children of the Church through reception of the word of God by faith. But Christ is not said to beget children of his Church, and the Church can only give us life supernaturally by the gift of the Holy Spirit, not by natural generation (see Gal 4:26–27, with

echoes of Is 54:1, and Rom 8:15). A man's love for his wife, whether she be fertile at the moment or not, should be taken to symbolize Christ's love for his Church, which never fails, whether she is bearing new children for the Father at any particular time or not.

Natural birth to Christian parents does not make anyone a Christian. We are born into a world of sin, outside of the Church and afflicted by the consequences of the Fall. But we are reborn as Christians through water and the Holy Spirit. Paradoxically, since the Church is not only his Body and his Bride but also the new Israel and the People of God, the newly (re)born Christian becomes part of the Church by becoming one of God's People, just as a child generated from the physical union of its parents thereby comes to be a member of the family into which that child has been born.

There is significance to the fact that Christ leaves his espoused Bride a virgin who brings forth the members of his body virginally, for it is by the power of the Holy Spirit who has been given to her that the Church bears us. The Holy Spirit was the agent of the Father's begetting of the human nature of his Son in the virginal Mary, and is likewise the agent of our regeneration as children of the Church, so that we can truly be said (Jn 3:9) to be born of the Spirit. In fact, it is only after the resurrection of Christ that he spoke of his disciples as his brothers.⁸ By his sacrifice and victory on the Cross, he won the Church as his bride. At Pentecost his disciples became her first-born, and we who have come later are his brothers and sisters, not because the Father has begotten any Sons other than Jesus but because he has shared with us the life of his Only-Begotten Son (Gal 3:26–27). All the children of God except for Jesus are adopted (Gal 4:5–6; Rom 8: 14–16, 23, 29–30; Heb 2:10–17). But unlike human adoption, this adoption actually bestows a share in the very life of the adoptive Father by the gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Jn; Jn 3:3–8; Eph 1:5).

Quay also finds a certain support for this view at the level of natural symbolism, from the hiddenness of conception, which we now recognize to be distinct from an act of intercourse. Upon the discovery of a pregnancy, there is a need for a free and right response from those who have begotten a child to accept and nurture the child who has begun to grow within his mother. Quay reads the natural symbolism here as a kind of adoption, that is, an acceptance of the child into the family, and he speculates that there may be a certain significance to the fact that the gametes or sex cells involved in generation operate independently of the will or actions of those having sexual intercourse. The gametes are formed in the bodies of adults and depend on these bodies to be able to live, but they are actually

⁸ A point also made by Joseph Ratzinger in *The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

independent organisms. Each of them lives with its own life and not with the life of the person within whose body the new organism has been formed in the way that the cells that make up our bodies do. In this respect, it is possible to grasp, far more clearly than earlier ages could, that when a child is conceived, it has not been “created,” even unconsciously, by its parents. The time of their sexual relations does determine whether it is even possible for the gametes to meet; but whether the gametes do actually unite is not even under the scrutiny, let alone the control of human volition (except, of course, for laboratory IVF). Strictly speaking, the new child’s conception has not been brought about by their will as some object that they have made, and therefore it is not something owned by them. Its actualization, even biologically, is not their doing. On this point Quay notes that the evil of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) consists in its rejection (and attempted denial) of this latter fact, for IVF treats the gametes (and implicitly the child that results) as if they were parts of the parents or as if they totally belonged to the parents for their existence and for their goals. Contraception also gets this wrong by treating the gametes as some sort of foreign bodies, alien to each of the couple (or as totally dependent on the individuals), since they can be blocked and disposed of at will. IVF thus reflects symbolically a technological will to make a child, regardless of what happens to the marital union in the context of which it takes place, regardless of what happens to the zygote if “things don’t work out,” regardless of the consequent expectations laid upon the child that has been so made on the basis of the implied ownership, and, above all, regardless of the radically altered understanding of what it is to be human that is implicit in the making process.

In fact, children are begotten through the creative act of God, not made as items of property desired by their parents. At the supernatural level we need to be adopted by God the Father, but at the natural level too we are begotten and conceived by parents who must, in one sense, adopt us. The child thus formed from gametic union is an independent entity, distinct from both parents, but (considered symbolically) it is utterly dependent. A child’s every trait and entire genetic endowment comes from his parents, half from his father and half from his mother. As human persons, new children are like brothers and sisters to their parents, except displaced from them in time. Yet, whenever the union of the gametes results in a healthy zygote, a new genetic type is formed, one that was hitherto non-existent. Even though a child’s physical qualities may be familiar on either or both sides of the family, they are in aggregate wholly new. But more, this person is, in a far stronger sense, wholly new. Although sharing in the personal properties of its lineage, the child remains an individual who has his own destiny. The child is not the genetic replica of any of its forebears but

constitutes a new human type. Those of its problems that are rooted in its genes (whether the standard types of genetic disease, or some genetic predispositions to other diseases or certain traits of temperament, or various patterns and intensities of feeling and emotion) may be unique to it, or at least not shared with its family. The child that has been conceived (as zygote, as embryo, or as fetus) depends wholly on its mother's body for its sustenance and protection. And while each parent provides a single gamete, an equality that symbolizes the gift of an equal genetic component to this new child, the size and structure of the contributions differ. Once the generation has taken place, everything else that the child needs of a material nature for its growth and development is supplied by its mother: food, elimination of waste, warmth, physical protection, suitable environment, and so on. And yet this newly conceived child is an entity that is radically distinct from the mother in whose womb it lives. In principle, the child can be separated from her completely and still survive (that is, insofar as it is possible to substitute artificially for her nurturing activities). But a bonding begins in utero, and separation from one's mother can mean the stunting of psychological development, for the child in the womb is already in the womb responding to stimuli from her. At sixteen weeks, for instance, an unborn child already has ears that are developed far enough to hear its mother's voice, and it can already feel its mother's movements.

Seen in this way, at both the natural and the supernatural levels there is a hiddenness to the cycles and to the actualizations of fertility. The precise manner of conception is as imperceptible to the human eye as is grace working in a soul, for the Lord is one who acts in secret and, as 1 Timothy suggests, one who "dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:16).

What NFP relies upon, of course, is the presence of cycles of fertility, and these too, with careful discernment, bear a natural symbolism of great importance, and one that has parallels in the supernatural order. The infertile periods are not sterility, but periods in which a woman's body rests and prepares for the next ovum to be released. She neither knows nor controls the genetic complement of that ovum. Neither does a man know or control the genetic complement of any of the sperm contained in his seed. Curiously, any number of the ancient nature religions connected the cycles of the year with human fertility and devised rituals that begged their gods for fruitfulness in their fields and in their families. Some of these rituals seem to suggest an attempt to control the outcome, and in this way are not unlike what happens when IVF (let alone the technologies under preparation to produce designer babies) tries to bring to light and to put under our control what is naturally, and quite likely by divine design, kept hidden from human eyes.

At the natural level, we need to take note of the biological values of the biological rhythms of fertility, for the rest that it gives to a mother's body. One of the most obvious regulative goods in this domain is this natural spacing of pregnancies, which is such that a nursing mother is highly unlikely to become pregnant again during the period when her young baby needs the strength of her body for the nourishment that she provides by her nursing.

Although the love between the spouses is expressed positively by intercourse, it can also be expressed by refraining from intercourse for the good of the other spouse. It is clearly the case that many of the goods that must be sought by any couple during their fertile times will exclude simultaneously having sexual relations. There is the good of life itself, for the couple—and any children for whom they may already be responsible—need to eat and sleep. The parents clearly need to work, so as to earn what is needed for the family, to keep the home in order, to prepare meals, to take care of the sick, not only each other and their children, but their own parents and relatives and also their neighbors. Refraining from sexual relations might be needed for the sake of the common good, not only of their own family but of their community and their country.

The love between the spouses can call for abstinence from intercourse for the sake of each of the characteristic “goods of marriage.” When one's spouse is sick or absent, for instance, one must refrain from sexual relations for the sake of the basic good of mutual fidelity. Similarly, the indissolubility of their marriage could well be threatened if one forces the other to have relations (for example, a drunken husband or one who is trying to force contraceptive intercourse upon the other). And perhaps most importantly, abstinence may be needed for the sake of the third good of marriage, their children (already born or, in some circumstances, those hoped for).

And there are countless occasions when a couple will rightly refrain from having relations, for example, when very tired, or when traveling and forced to spend the night without private accommodations, or when one of them is emotionally upset by a death among kin or by a quarrel, and so on. Presumably, no special consideration with regard to fertility enters into decisions of these kinds. Further, spousal love might also require intermittent abstinence for prayer (see 1 Cor 7:5–6), or in exceptional cases, even of permanent abstinence, as in the case of virginal marriages, which are, in principle, acceptable to the Church.⁹

⁹ The reasons are far from clear to most people—but most people are not called to such a life. What is involved is, in traditional language, the conceding of a right to coitus to one another, supplemented with a solemn agreement and pledge that neither party will make use of this right.

The Question at Hand

To return, then, to the general question of this essay. What we have seen is that there are solid theological underpinnings in the natural and supernatural symbolisms of human fertility and conception for the practice of natural family planning. As noted at the beginning of the paper, the moral quality of a specific use of NFP is determined wholly by a specific couple's motives and the relations of these motives to the natural meaning of intercourse and to the particular pattern of relations that they are choosing. The reason that we can affirm this point is that the cycle of fertility is good, and the employment of the natural activities of the body for good ends is good. Properly practiced, NFP is one manifestation of spousal love as a way to acknowledge in action the intrinsic limits to fertility. In this particular way, it can symbolize the love of Christ for his Church and hers for him. Needless to say, this judgment does not exempt a couple from their obligation to a complete openness to children in every act of intercourse, especially during the fertile times, since sexual relations at such times are, ordinarily, the necessary and sufficient condition for fertilization. What lies at the end of any causal chain is morally the initiator's responsibility if he knows (or ought to know) of its nature in advance.