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Following the apparitions of Our Lady of Fatima in 1917, Jacinta Marto, the youngest of the three child seers, related something very significant to one of her caregivers shortly before her death in 1920: "My dear Mother [Godinho], the sins that bring most souls to Hell are the sins of the flesh."[1] This is not because "sins of the flesh" (i.e. sins against chastity) are necessarily the gravest, but because they are the most common and most unrepented of mortal sins. Our post-Christian world, which is growing more and more explicitly anti-Christian by the day, has normalized sins against the Sixth and Ninth Commandments to an incredible degree. Masturbation and pornography use, homosexual acts, fornication, and even adultery are no longer quietly tolerated but actively promoted as healthy and "normal".

Blatantly sinful sexual acts of this kind are committed or approved of by many Mass-going Catholics, to say nothing of just how few people are aware of St. Thomas Aquinas' teaching that even passionate kissing outside of marriage is mortally sinful![2] Of particular note is the mass rebellion against the Church's perennial teaching on contraception, with some surveys noting that as many as 63 percent of weekly Mass attendees approve its use as morally acceptable. When Catholics are polled without regard to frequency of Mass attendance, the approval rate is around 90 percent!

Doctrinally committed Catholics, within both Novus Ordo and Traditional Latin Mass communities, rightfully decry this sad state of affairs. It would be correct to acknowledge that our first priority should be fearlessly defending the Church's infallible teaching that the use of contraception is mortally sinful, lest our brothers and sisters in Christ be led astray by the tyranny of "pastoral" indifference practiced by so many bishops and priests today.

However, it would be dangerously naive to presume that every Catholic couple who admirably avoids contracepting *by artificial means* are therefore following the relevant body of Catholic moral teaching and avoiding sin. If we are to honestly examine the common usage of Natural Family Planning (NFP) today, we find that it is far too often another way that our cultural disease of sexual liberality has infected even the most faithful members of the Body of Christ.

This is not to say that NFP is a bad thing. Fr. Chad Ripperger, a renowned traditional priest and exorcist, rightly points out in his sermon on "Contraception and NFP" that NFP "is a good thing in so far as it does not separate the unitive and procreative elements" of the

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marital act. “But,” Fr. Ripperger explains, “Natural Family Planning can also be used in the wrong way, so that even though, in and of itself it’s okay, the circumstances might be bad in its use, by intention. For example, some people have a contraceptive mentality.” Thus, in order to understand the proper and improper uses of NFP, we must first take a broader look at the unfortunately complex shift of emphasis that took place in the 20th century with regard to the Church’s teachings on marriage and sexuality.

The Sexual Revolution: Rejecting the Primary End of Marriage

Every crisis we see in our world is linked to a lack of supernatural faith, in one way or another, and the half-century-long train wreck known as the Sexual Revolution is no exception. Those who reject God necessarily reject the crucial difference between a man aided in the struggle against concupiscence by sanctifying grace and a man bound by the fetters of original sin. When this reality is cast aside as an invented mythology of our forefathers, man is no longer made in the image of God. Man is only an animal, and like any other animal, he should not be expected to live in a way that is contrary to his base instincts. Those who hold this position have presupposed that lust is not a product of original sin (which, of course, doesn’t exist, they say), and therefore the fact that they are not able to live up to Christian norms of sexual morality is not a proof of a deep need for God’s grace. Instead, their failure to resist temptation becomes proof that the behavior being expected of them is a mere arbitrary and unrealistic human invention, rooted in whichever oppressive cause is fashionable to decry.

Certainly, devout married Catholics who avoid the pill and other means of artificial contraception would not intentionally accept this atheistic view of human sexuality and original sin. But is it possible to say that this worldview is truly divorced from the present-day beliefs espoused by so many conservative Catholic media sources, catechetical materials, priests, bishops, and even popes? If the answer is no, then how is it possible that the mainstream of the Church has readily accepted at least some aspects of these hideous error?

In 1930, Pope Pius XI issued *Casti Connubii*, an encyclical on Christian marriage in response to the results of that same year’s Anglican Lambeth Conference, which had concluded that contraception within marriage was morally licit. (This position had been rejected only ten years prior at the 1920 Conference.) In *Casti Connubii*, Pius XI very clearly laid out the Catholic understanding of the proper ends to which marriage, and particularly the marital act, is ordered:

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> "Thus amongst the blessings of marriage, **the child holds the first place.** And indeed the Creator of the human race Himself, Who in His goodness wishes to use men as His helpers in the propagation of life, taught this when, instituting marriage in Paradise, **He said to our first parents, and through them to all future spouses: 'Increase and multiply, and fill the earth.'** [Gen. 1:28] As St. Augustine admirably deduces from the words of the holy Apostle Saint Paul to Timothy [1 Tim. 5:14] when he says: "The Apostle himself is therefore a witness that marriage is for the sake of generation: 'I wish,' he says, 'young girls to marry.' And, as if someone said to him, 'Why?', he immediately adds: 'To bear children, to be mothers of families.'
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> **The second blessing of matrimony, which We said was mentioned by St. Augustine, is the blessing of conjugal honor which consists in the mutual fidelity of the spouses in fulfilling the marriage contract**, so that what belongs to one of the parties by reason of this contract sanctioned by divine law may not be denied to him or permitted to any third person; nor may there be conceded to one of the parties anything which, being contrary to the rights and laws of God and entirely opposed to matrimonial faith, can never be conceded." (*Casti Connubii*, n. 11, 19, emphasis added throughout)

This encyclical introduces nothing innovative. It simply relays consistent magisterial teaching on marriage, beautifully contextualized so that the contemporary faithful may understand it and apply it to their lives. The 1917 Code of Canon Law (can. 1013) concurs that "the **primary end** of marriage is the procreation and nurture of children; its **secondary end** is mutual help and the remedying of concupiscence."

The 1983 Code (can. 1055 § 1), however, is far less clear: "The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and which is **ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring**, has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between the baptized."

One could be forgiven for assuming that the Church teaches the two ends of marriage are not specifically delineated in terms of hierarchical importance, particularly when examining the 1983 Code in light of the 1965 Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes*:

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> "Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children. **Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents.** The God Himself Who said, 'it is not good for man to be alone' (Gen. 2:18) and 'Who made man from the beginning male and female' (Matt. 19:4), wishing to share with man a certain special participation in His own creative work, blessed male and female, saying: 'Increase and multiply' (Gen. 1:28). **Hence, while not making the other purposes of matrimony of less account, the true practice of conjugal love, and the whole meaning of the family life which results from it, have this aim: that the couple be ready with stout hearts to cooperate with the love of the Creator and the Savior.** Who through them will enlarge and enrich His own family day by day." (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 50)

Neither *Gaudium et Spes* nor the 1983 Code of Canon Law explicitly *deny* that procreation is the primary purpose of marriage. However, it is undeniable that the clear and unequivocal nature of the language used in our prior examples is absent from these conciliar and post-conciliar formulations. It is yet another example of the ambiguity common to the documents of Vatican II (and, consequently, to their juridical expressions in ecclesial law). In fact, an episcopal bloc representing approximately 80 cardinals and bishops urged the Council Fathers to vote against *Gaudium et Spes* for several reasons, including their concerns over the document's ambiguous position on the ends of matrimony.

In addition to these problematic passages regarding the ends of marriage, *Gaudium et Spes* has this to say about the procreation of children:

> "Let them thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which the future may bring. **For this accounting they need to reckon with both the material and the spiritual conditions of the times as well as of their state in life.** Finally, they should consult the interests of the family group, of temporal society, and of the Church herself. **The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God.** But in their manner of acting, spouses should be aware that they cannot proceed arbitrarily, **but must always be governed according to a conscience dutifully conformed to the divine law itself, and should be submissive toward the Church's teaching office**, which authentically interprets that law in the light of the Gospel." (*ibid*.)

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In a similar manner in which Michael Davies noted the "liturgical time bombs" in Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,[3] we can see how these passages in *Gaudium et Spes,* despite being surrounded by no shortage of related orthodox teaching (including a laudatory statement on large families), could act as "time bombs" in regard to the Church's teachings on sexuality and procreation of children. Arguably, this is exactly what happened.

The Effects of Conciliar "Time Bombs"

Today, it is not uncommon to speak with married couples and have them relate how they were taught an understanding of NFP without mention of the grave or serious reasons under which it can be used. Catholic parishes often host NFP classes as part of marriage preparation, as though the use of NFP is a default requirement for responsible procreation (a view seemingly endorsed by Catholic Answers). Some priests and lay NFP "coaches" go so far as to tell future newlyweds that it is acceptable (or even admirable!) to begin using NFP immediately, for no reason other than to get to know each other better before the kids come along.

Natural Family Planning apologists often caricature their critics as promoting a Catholic version of the Quiverfull movement, quick to point out that the Church does not teach that married couples must have as many children as possible. Stating that NFP should not be the default position, and that it should only be used under serious or grave circumstances, is not the same as advocating that a woman must be pregnant every year from marriage to menopause to be a good Catholic! Of course, this is not what the Church teaches, but what she does teach is much more nuanced. The Church has always taught that we should approach our animal appetites and tendencies with moderation, and her teaching on the marital act is no different.

In the 1911 book, *Marriage and Parenthood: The Catholic Ideal*, Rev. Thomas J. Gerrard explains that the sexual life of the married pair is guided by both religion and nature. The sexual life, he explains, must not interfere with the working life of the husband or wife — a clear moderation imposed by nature.[4]

The advice of the Church, rather, suggests an additional religious moderation by recommending restraint during eves of great festivals, and the seasons of Advent and Lent. In both cases, there is no strict obligation, and it is recommended that the strength of the weaker partner be the judge of the degree of restraint exercised. As Saint Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 7:5, "Defraud not one another, except, perhaps, by consent, for a time, that you may give yourselves to prayer; and return together again, lest Satan tempt you for your incontinency." Consequently, practice of true conjugal chastity often will result in a natural

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spacing of births.

While restraint is a core part of the practice of NFP, the intent is not practical or religious, but specifically to avoid conception. Again, it is not an evil thing in and of itself, but couples who are ignorant as to the ends of marriage can easily lose sight of the value of sexual restraint in terms of growth in virtue and marital love.

Natural Family Planning is often praised within the presuppositions of the prevailing secular birth control mentality, with advocates speaking about how much more "effective" it is at preventing pregnancy (Are children to be seen as the enemy? Is pregnancy a disease?), how much healthier it is than hormonal birth control, how much better it is for the environment, and similar reasons. Though these things are of course true, the way they are portrayed can lead souls to view NFP not as a true departure from the ways of the world, but merely as Catholic birth control.

Enter *Humanae Vitae*

Few Catholics today are aware of the spirit of rebellion which surrounded the 1968 release of Pope Paul VI's famous encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Continuing the work began in 1963 by Pope John XXIII before his death, Paul VI's Pontifical Commission on Birth Control studied the question of artificial contraceptives through 1966, believing that *Casti Connubii* had not fully settled the issue back in 1930. In 1967, a majority report of the Commission which asserted that contraceptive use within marriage was morally licit was leaked to the press.

Ultimately, Pope Paul VI rejected the majority opinion and settled the issue of contraception with *Humanae Vitae*, but the damage had been done. Much of the laity saw the Pope's use of his supreme authority as wrongfully "overruling" the Commission, even though the Commission had never held any authority to make binding doctrinal decisions. Entire bishops' conferences rebelled against the Pope's explicit condemnation of artificial contraception, including the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops in their shameful "Winnipeg Statement".

As we can see in regard to how NFP is taught today, this attitude of rebellion to Church teaching and attachment to worldly views of human sexuality did not disappear, even as many faithful bishops and priests began to more fervently defend *Humanae Vitae.* Instead, the focus shifted from artificial contraception to overly liberal use of licit methods to space births. *Humanae Vitae* explicitly affirmed prior teaching on the liceity of what we now call NFP (NB: there are several different methods which fall under the umbrella term "NFP", including the older rhythm method, the Creighton method, and others):

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> "If therefore there are **well-grounded reasons** 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, thus controlling birth in a way which does not in the least offend the moral principles which We have just explained." (*Humanae Vitae*, n. 16)

As with the other conciliar and post-conciliar documents noted above, there is no *denial* of any prior magisterial teaching in this excerpt, nor anywhere in the document. However, the ambiguity as to just what constitutes "well-grounded reasons" was and continues to be abused (whether intentionally or unintentionally) by those who choose to read *Humanae Vitae* in isolation from relevant prior documents.

For example, in a 1951 address to the Italian Catholic Union of Midwives, Pope Pius XII expounded upon the grave circumstances in which a couple could make use of natural family planning, citing medical, eugenic,[5] economic, and social reasons which could lead a couple to discern whether or not they should use NFP. This is the total opposite of the view commonly held by NFP enthusiasts today, wherein NFP is seen as a discernment tool in and of itself.

While there is admittedly not a large body of magisterial documents which lay out precisely how a couple may discern if their personal situation rises to the level of a serious reason to consider the use of NFP, this in no way implies that the Church in the pre-conciliar period did not consistently teach that spacing out children was considered an exceptional decision, made only when strictly necessary. The 1958 "Catholic Marriage Manual" by Reverend George A. Kelly, states:

> "In former times **having no children or having only a few children would be so scandalous and un-Christian as to merit only a short note of condemnation**[…] The birth control state of mind is nowhere more clearly manifested than by many engaged couples who, without any grave problems at all, enter marriage with family limitation upper-most in their young minds. For a couple after ten years of marriage to think in terms of family limitation is one thing. **For a couple with two or three children to exaggerate their money, health, or space problems is much more common and much more deserving of criticism**."[6]

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Reverend Kelly later notes explicitly that "[t]he control of births, therefore, **should always be the exceptional situation in marriage**, never the normal."[7]

Other pre-conciliar works on Catholic married life espouse similar sentiments. The use of NFP was consistently understood in light of the truth that the procreation and education of children is not accidental to married life, but intrinsic to it, and of the highest importance.

Conclusion

It is not always enough to simply tell our fellow Catholics that Paul VI did not intend *Humanae Vitae* to give *carte blanche* to the use of NFP for any reason, nor to enumerate the grave reasons for its use as given by Pius XII. We must also combat the various errors of our age at their ultimately atheistic roots, being unafraid to reject any worldview which treats man as a servant not of God but of his passions and material concerns. We must charitably remind our fellow Catholics that the responsibility of staying chaste, staying married, and raising children is not something the Church expects us to do on our own. Jesus Christ raised marriage to the dignity of a sacrament, and with each sacrament comes an abundance of supernatural grace (to say nothing of Divine Providence!).

In order to truly restore Catholic moral teaching on sexuality and family life, we must start with rebuilding a solid foundation of understanding in light of Tradition. The Catholic Faith is not something as simple as a list of dogmas to be accepted or rejected in isolation. Instead, the Catholic Faith is a gift from Our Lord Himself, and it is only by the grace of God that we may conform ourselves to the Church and accept her teachings. It is by this grace that even the most difficult Christian teachings not only make sense but become truly beautiful.

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Notes

[1] This is quote is found in *The True Story of Fatima: A Complete Account of the Fatima Apparitions* (originally published in 1947) by Fr. John de Marchi, I.M.C. (p. 70 of the paperback edition printed by The Fatima Center). As Sister Lucia (in her *Memoirs*) and Fr. de Marchi both relate, Jacinta continued receiving private apparitions of Our Lady until her death on Feb. 20, 1920. "After each visit of Our Lady," Fr. Marchi explains, "Jacinta spoke with wisdom far beyond her age, education or experience." (*True Story of Fatima*, p. 70).

[2] *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 154, a. 4.

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[3] Cf. Michael Davies, *Liturgical Time Bombs in Vatican II* (TAN Books, 2003).

[4] Rev. Thomas J. Gerrard, *Marriage and Parenthood: The Catholic Ideal*, pp. 88-89.

[5] The term "eugenic" here is used in regard to a couple who may pass on a lethal condition (e.g. Tay-Sachs) to their offspring. This does not mean NFP is morally obligated under such possibilities, only that it is a legitimate discernment factor.

[6] Rev. George A. Kelly, *Catholic Marriage Manual*, p. 44.

[7] *Ibid*., p. 46.

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