

Your Right to Know: Catholic Moral Teaching

Moral teaching in the NFP course. It is well known to the general public that the Catholic Church teaches against the use of contraception. It is also common knowledge that most Catholics, at least in the Western world, ignore this teaching. Many may wonder why the Church continues to teach in this way, and I intend to address that more fully in a future blog. For the present I will say only that the Church cannot and will not change its teaching on love, marriage, and sexuality including birth control because (1) the Lord has created his Church as the “pillar and bulwark of truth” (1 Timothy 3:15) and (2) because marital contraception is intrinsically dishonest. That is, sexual intercourse is intended by God to be at least implicitly a renewal of the marriage covenant. It is supposed to be a bodily way of reaffirming the faith, the love, the commitment, the total self-gift and the better-and-for-worse of the marriage covenant. But the body language of marital contraception says “I take you for better but positively **not** for the imagined worse of possible pregnancy.” That contradicts the marriage covenant and makes it dishonest.

What needs to be taught in an NFP course? The NFP course cannot be a course in moral theology for at least two reasons—time constraints and also because many or most NFP teachers would feel quite inadequate in trying to teach moral theology. However, anyone teaching NFP can be expected to convey standard Catholic teaching relevant to NFP and sexuality.

- God calls married couples to generosity in having children and raising them in the ways of the Lord. Marriage is for family. “Natural family planning” is not “Catholic birth control.”
- When couples have a sufficiently serious reason to avoid or postpone pregnancy, they may resort to the periodic abstinence of systematic natural family planning. To put it another way, couples *do* need a sufficiently serious reason to use systematic NFP for postponing or avoiding pregnancy. They certainly do not need a life or death situation as their reason, but they are called to be generous, not selfish.
- No such reason is needed for ecological breastfeeding. No mother can force her baby to nurse. A mother simply needs to want what is best for her child, follow the Seven Standards, and let nature take its course.
- The “method” of systematic NFP is chaste abstinence from the marriage act during the fertile time. That excludes using contraceptive behaviors during the fertile time as well as at any other time. That excludes not only barrier methods but also masturbation (whether solitary or mutual) and sodomy whether oral or anal. Chaste abstinence does not mean that spouses have to live as brother and sister, but they are to avoid stimulating themselves into orgasm.

Whether Catholic or Protestant or an unbeliever, you have a right to know these teachings. When they are taught in the context of Christian discipleship, they make sense. I am not suggesting that it is easy to convey these teachings, especially those in the last paragraph above, but couples have a right to know them. Given the low level of purity even at the high school level in many areas, it is quite possible that any given

person in the NFP class has already engaged in some of these immoral behaviors. When they hear “abstinence,” they may well think of one or more of these behaviors as a way to do “NFP” and avoid the difficulty of sexual self-control. They know that the NFP teacher knows about these behaviors, and if they hear nothing, they may well rationalize that silence means consent. I have had first-hand reports from people who did.

In my opinion, Catholic moral teaching in an NFP course needs to be placed in the context of Christian discipleship. When a person appreciates the love that the Lord Jesus has for us, and the price He paid, and that He truly did promise to keep the truth about love alive in His Church, then when His teaching about the daily cross is applied to marital love and sexuality, it all makes sense.

This is what we have tried to do in Chapter 1 of our manual, *Natural Family Planning: The Complete Approach* at www.nfpandmore.org.

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