

BEYOND THE LIBERAL/CONSERVATIVE DIVIDE ON CONTRACEPTION: THE WISDOM OF PRACTITIONERS OF NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING AND ARTIFICIAL BIRTH CONTROL

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ABSTRACT

The article argues that contemporary dialogue on sexuality and contraception represents a new way of approaching Christian sexual ethics. Through an analysis of the experiential reflections of practitioners of natural family planning and artificial birth control, it shows that both sides seek the following goods: self-giving, relational intimacy, mutuality, sexual pleasure, and a strong connection between sexual and spiritual experience. It claims that while each side has distinctive insights, their shared concerns offer a way beyond the post-*Humanae Vitae* tension on sexual ethics. In this new dialogue, proving *HV* right or wrong will be much less important than helping Christian couples develop their sexual relationships in the context of their commitment to Christian discipleship.

I. Introduction

Because academic arguments about *Humanae Vitae*¹ are typically characterized by tension and intractability, conversation among those who disagree on sexual ethics has all but ceased. Discussions continue among conservatives, in forums removed from mainstream academic conferences,² while liberals sometimes use teaching on contraception as an example of various problematic tendencies in the church, but otherwise indicate by their silence that the issue has been settled. The

¹Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1968).

²See, for instance, Kenneth D. Whitehead, ed., *Marriage and the Common Good* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2001), proceedings from the Twenty-Second Annual Convention of Catholic Scholars.

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language used to talk about the other side is almost always reductive and dismissive. Even the Common Ground Initiative, founded by Cardinal Bernadin in 1996 to encourage dialogue between liberals and conservatives in the church, only took up the issue of sexual ethics in 2004. Because of the delicate nature of the discussion, for the first time proceedings were not made public and participants were asked not to take the content of conversations outside the confines of the conference. Dialogue itself was a scandal!

Yet dialogue has never seemed more important. There is a groundswell of popular literature on natural family planning written by couples and those who work with them, and a small, but growing response from couples who use contraception.³ Theologians in the post-Vatican II generation also seem somewhat more willing to give serious consideration to sexual ethics, as they move beyond narrowly focused discussions regarding the morality of particular contraceptive acts and the question of dissent.⁴ Their work suggests that the unnecessary and unhelpful divide between “liberals” and “conservatives” can be transcended. This new generation is much less invested in defending or criticizing *Humanae Vitae*; they are more interested in contributing to the development of sexual relationships that are as central a part of the life Christian discipleship as prayer, parenting, and social justice. A new sort of sexual ethics that fails to fit into the usual categories is beginning to emerge.

For participants, proving the other side wrong on contraception is not the point. Rather, dialogue is valued if it leads to recognition of areas of shared concern and contributes to more authentic Christian living. This paper, which examines the new theological conversation, is envisioned as a contribution to a new way of doing of sexual ethics that focuses less on argument about norms and more on dialogue within a diverse Christian community about practices. While I will not claim to resolve the debate over contraception, I will suggest that reframing the dialogue around a new focus on sexuality as a dimension of discipleship is valuable in itself.

The method I will utilize is designed to encourage this new dialogue. After a brief review of the document at the heart of the modern debate, I will turn to experience,⁵ analyzing the arguments of advocates

³See articles by Pamela Pilch and Leslie Tentler in *Commonweal*, 23 April 2004, and multiple responses in Correspondence sections in subsequent issues.

⁴See, for instance, Richard Gaillardetz, *A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 101-11 and David McCarthy, “Procreation, the Development of Peoples, and the Final Destination of Humanity,” *Communio* 26 (Winter 1999): 698-721.

⁵Experience is a significant source for contemporary Christian Ethics for both lib-

of artificial contraception and natural family planning, pointing out key claims made by each group, identifying distinctive contributions, and searching for common ground. Listening to practitioners from both sides will allow for a new way of seeing the contemporary social map of sexual ethics. Contemporary Catholic writing on family planning differs from Vatican II-era discussions marked by competing concerns with resisting or adapting to the modern world by upholding or questioning moral norms. Younger writers both embrace the relational-focus of contemporary culture and maintain a counter-cultural understanding of sexuality as a dimension of Christian discipleship. This is a good place for a new conversation to begin.

II. *Humanae Vitae and Its Aftermath*

Humanae Vitae is significant for the purposes of this article not only because it ignited the contemporary debate on contraception, but also because the commission appointed to decide if church teaching on contraception should change incorporated the experiences of married couples. Prior to the second Vatican Council, some prominent Catholic theologians, including Bernard Haring, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Louis Janssens, raised questions about the official teaching against contraception, while others, notably Cardinal Suenens, Josef Fuchs, and John Ford, upheld the traditional view.⁶ In order to deal with growing controversy, Pope John XXIII appointed a commission to study the subject. It started as a group of six men, most of them scientists, and eventually expanded to include over sixty members, including four women.

In *Turning Point: The Inside Story of the Papal Birth Control Commission*, Robert McClory details the crucial roles played by Pat and Patty Crowley, leaders of the Christian Family Movement (CFM), whose testimony was influential in pushing the majority of the commission toward acceptance of artificial birth control. Initially, the Crowleys did an informal survey of the membership of the CFM, a network of groups of lay Catholic couples who met weekly to discuss the role of faith in their daily lives. They were staggered to find that “even the most dedicated, committed Catholics are deeply troubled by

erals and conservatives, though its precise value is disputed. See Margaret Farley, “The Role of Experience in Moral Discernment,” in Lisa Sowle Cahill and James F. Childress, eds., *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1996), 134-51, and Karol Wojtyła, “The Problem of Experience in Ethics,” in his *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993): 107-28.

⁶William Shannon, ed. *The Lively Debate: Responses to Humanae Vitae* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1970).

this problem.”⁷ Frustrated users of the rhythm method testified in their letters that the method “seriously endangered [their] chastity,” “[made them] obsessed with sex throughout the month,” allowed them to show only “guarded affection” in fertile times (during which many women experienced their highest levels of sexual desire).⁸ They urged the Commission to allow married couples to decide for themselves when sex was appropriate, taking account of all relevant dimensions of their sexual relationship and their married life.⁹ According to Patty Crowley, at the end of the Commission’s third meeting in 1964, Pope Paul VI urged the group to “continue its deliberations, listen to the anxiety of so many souls, and work diligently without worrying about criticism or difficulties.”¹⁰ Commission members dared to hope that change was imminent.

The Crowleys returned to the next meeting of the Commission with a more systematic survey of over 3000 couples in 18 countries that was to have an even greater effect. Though most couples said the method worked well enough, and 64% said it helped them grow in self-sacrificial love, 78% believed that it was harmful to their marriage, in that it increased tension and reduced spontaneity. As the Crowleys saw it, couples “were struggling to find something positive in what struck them as basically negative.”¹¹ One woman questioned whether the sacrifice was worth it: “Rhythm leads to self-seeking, promotes excess in infertile times and strain in fertile times. Is contraceptive sex irresponsible when I have already borne 10 little responsibilities?”¹² The Crowleys’ surveys, which were complemented by similar, smaller studies done by Commission members from Europe and Australia, significantly influenced members of the commission.¹³ When a straw vote was taken among the nineteen theologians of the group at the Commission’s final meeting, fifteen agreed that contraception was not intrinsic-

⁷Robert McClory, *Turning Point: The Inside Story of the Papal Birth Control Commission* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 72. See also Robert Blair Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion* (Kansas City, KS: Leaven Press, 1985)

⁸*Ibid.*, 73. McClory notes that the studies of psychiatrist John Cavanaugh were also used to support the idea that rhythm was psychologically harmful, especially for women.

⁹*Ibid.* This is a popular version of the principle of totality, proposed as an alternative to act-centered moral analysis.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 78-79.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 91.

¹²*Ibid.*, 92. For an alternative view of the Commission, see George A. Kelly, *The Battle for the American Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 153-98 and James Hitchcock, “The Significance of the Papal Birth Control Commission,” in Patrick G.D. Riley, ed., *Keeping the Faith: Msgr. George A. Kelly’s Battle for the Church* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom, 2000). Both question the relevance and accuracy of the CFM surveys.

¹³After listening to the lay women of the Commission, one bishop commented, “This, is why we wanted to have couples on our Commission” (McClory, 106).

cally evil.¹⁴ Commission members then asked the women to speak of their experience, and they did. Patty Crowley in particular testified to the negative psychological effects of rhythm, to the testimony of married couples that it did not foster married love or unity, to their belief that it felt unnatural.¹⁵ In sum, said Crowley, “the sense of the faithful is for change.”¹⁶

However, despite the Commission’s official report, which reflected the views of the majority¹⁷ of Catholics that the totality of the married relationship should be considered when analyzing the morality of contraception, a minority report (authored by Germain Grisez and signed by four Commission members) convinced the pope that the church could not have erred for centuries and that when the good of procreation is blocked by contraception, the integrity of the sexual act is violated.¹⁸ In 1968, he issued *Humanae Vitae*, affirming that every sexual act must remain open to procreation.

Some liberal theologians argue that the document has never been received by lay Catholics. McClory notes that of all episcopal conferences in the world, 17% fully accepted the teaching, 56% were opposed, and 28% uncertain.¹⁹ The Crowleys, who had been convinced the teaching against contraception would change, felt betrayed and, along with the other U.S. lay members of the Commission, urged couples to follow their consciences.²⁰ At Catholic University, Charles Curran authored a dissenting letter that was signed by over six hundred Catholic scholars within a few weeks.²¹ This organized public theology was greeted with suspicion by the Vatican. Yet, the majority of American Catholics stopped using the rhythm method and polls show that most believe they should be permitted to make their own decisions about family planning.²²

¹⁴Ibid., 90. The final vote of the entire commission was fifty-eight to four.

¹⁵Ibid., 103-04

¹⁶Ibid., 107.

¹⁷Of course, a worldwide survey of Catholics has not yet been done. It is possible that such a survey would reveal a greater diversity than the current data suggests.

¹⁸Ibid., 110-11.

¹⁹Ibid., 145.

²⁰Ibid., 141.

²¹Ibid., 140.

²²Eighty seven percent of Catholics agreed with this statement in a 1993 Gallup poll (*Los Angeles Times*, 7 January 1993, p. E6). Vincent Genovesi reports that only about 4% of couples use NFP, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality*, 2d ed., (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 206. The pro-NFP Couple to Couple League believes the figure may be even lower, perhaps three percent. See John Kiple, “How Many?” available at ccli.org/articles/howmany. See also, Richard Fehring and Andrea Matovina Schlidt, “Trends in Contraceptive Use Among Catholics in the U.S.: 1985-1995,” *Linacre Quarterly* 68/2 (May 2001): 170-85. Seventy percent of Catholic couples did not use contraception in 1955; see Kelly, 188, relying on demographic research from 1973.

As disagreement spread, many moral theologians wrote articles developing the idea of totality²³ or showing the legitimacy of dissent from non-authoritative specific magisterial moral teachings.²⁴ The controversial *Human Sexuality*, which resulted from a study commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America and is representative of liberal scholarly arguments of the time, promoted sex as a sign and means of growth in mutual perfection and characterized contraception as a dimension of responsible parenthood.²⁵ The faithful grew increasingly suspicious of official Catholic sexual teaching and all but a small minority stopped listening altogether. According to Andrew Greeley, *HV* has been an important cause of decreasing mass attendance and commitment since Vatican II.²⁶ At every level, liberals argue, the teaching has been rejected.

Yet, the late John Paul II was a great defender of *HV* and his new way of teaching about sexuality was an inspiration to many during his pontificate. Especially in his lectures on theology of the body and his writings on the family, he tries to provide a personalist understanding of sexuality.²⁷ Eschewing traditional natural law arguments, he promotes NFP as a method that is fully giving because fertility is offered to one's partner and lovingly received, fully human because it allows for transcendence of desire through self-control in the service of a higher good, and fully open to life in that children are graciously accepted rather than ruled out.

Catholic conservatives appreciate John Paul II's theology of the body and offer a different perspective on *HV*. As they see it, the document was a prophetic denunciation of a deeply problematic cultural move to de-emphasize the procreative end of sex and marriage.²⁸ The CTSA's *Human Sexuality* was a misguided attempt to remove procreation from its central place in sex and marriage.²⁹ Pope Paul VI, who saw clearly that contraception would lead to growing promiscuity, sex-

²³See, for instance, Bernard Häring, "The Inseparability of the Unitive-Procreative Functions of the Marital Act," in Charles E. Curran, ed., *Contraception, Authority and Dissent* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 176-92.

²⁴See Charles E. Curran and Robert E. Hunt, *Dissent In and For the Church: Theologians and Humanae Vitae* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969).

²⁵Anthony Kosnik, et al. *Human Sexuality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 131-37.

²⁶Andrew Greeley, *The American Catholic: A Social Portrait* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 141.

²⁷See *Familiaris Consortio* (Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1981), #28-36, and *Reflections on Humanae Vitae: Conjugal Morality and Spirituality* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1984).

²⁸See Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, John Finnis, and William E. May, "Every Marital Act Ought to Be Open to New Life," in *The Teaching of Humanae Vitae: A Defense* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 33-116.

²⁹See "Morality in Sexual Matters: Observations of the Sacred Congregation for the

ual diseases, abortion, divorce, and an increasing anti-life mentality, is to be celebrated for his prophetic wisdom.³⁰ If the pronouncements of *HV* were not fully supported by theological reasoning at the time, the theology of the body developed by John Paul II now more than suffices. While *HV*'s defenders acknowledge that the majority of the faithful disagree, they mourn this fact and celebrate the strong witness of couples who testify to the ways in which the practice of NFP enriches their marriage.³¹ In their view, Pope Paul VI was right to defend the truth and reject the opinions of married couples, since the Magisterium is obligated to lead the faithful, not yield to the culture. If *HV* is not received by all Catholics, it is nonetheless true, fully accepted by some, and wholly supported by the Holy Father's theology of marriage and family. According to conservatives, the battles leading up to the issuing of *HV* are beside the point; what matters is the document that was promulgated and the prophetic witness of the faithful who live it out.

In sum, the Papal birth control commission was unique in that the experience of married couples was solicited and seriously considered over a three-year period of deliberation that culminated in a negative judgement on natural methods of family planning. Pope Paul VI's decision to affirm the traditional teaching is read by liberals as a rejection of the modern experience of the faithful and by conservatives as evidence of the enduring truth of Catholic tradition. However, if the conversation seems to stall here, it need not do so. Contemporary advocates of both natural family planning and contraception share a new approach and more common ground than is usually acknowledged. An analysis of their reflection on experience will bear this out and point toward a new kind of dialogue on sexual ethics.

III. Lessons from Experience: Natural Family Planning and Artificial Birth Control

The contemporary popular literature on natural family planning is vast and one who studies it can only conclude that, for the majority of practitioners, the experience is extremely positive. The problems of couples in the Crowley's study seem largely absent. In order to understand why, it is important to note what has changed since 1968. NFP is more scientific than the traditional rhythm method, and, if strictly adhered to, much more effective (95-99% for dedicated users, though

Doctrine of the Faith on the Book Human Sexuality," *The Pope Speaks*, 13 July 1979, pp. 97-102.

³⁰Janet E. Smith, "Paul VI as Prophet," in Janet E. Smith, ed., *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 519-31.

³¹See John Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 10-14, 142-54.

actual use rates are somewhat lower).³² However, while increased effectiveness may account for some of the differences between the new literature and older accounts of rhythm users, theological developments are at least as significant. Indeed, the theology shapes the experience in profound ways.

New understandings of church authority and the role of conscience allow couples today to choose NFP as lifestyle rather than accept it as an externally imposed law. As John Grabowski points out, *HV* asserts the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative ends of sex without explaining it, leaving couples to obey or dissent.³³ While few Catholic couples today believe that use of contraception would render moot their claim to Catholic identity, John Paul II's theology of the body invites the radical choice of NFP as a practice that fits in with a larger commitment to maintain a distinctively Christian marriage. As the pope sees it, sex is the sign of the total self-giving of the married couple, the language to communicate fidelity. The suppression of fertility (viewed as an essential dimension of the person) is a falsification of the inner truth of sexual love. It causes the body to say with its actions, "I give myself to you," but with fertility withheld, the fullness of self-gift is denied.³⁴ This understanding both rules out contraception and provides a theological framework for viewing sexuality as a crucial dimension of a radically self-giving marriage.

Theologians supportive of this view write about how the practice of NFP helps marriages of Catholic couples grow and deepen. John Grabowski, whose work is representative of this new trend, sketches a positive picture of NFP as a practice that is confirmed by the majority of studies and testimonies today.³⁵ As Grabowski indicates, many NFP couples experience an increased capacity for total self-giving, growth in mutuality, better communication, higher levels of intimacy, increased sexual pleasure, and spiritual growth.

³²Mercedes Arzu Wilson, *Love & Family: Raising a Traditional Family in a Secular World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 250-55. How much lower is a matter of much dispute. NFP advocates like Wilson and the Couple to Couple League cite use rates of seventy to ninety percent, while others present evidence that failure is much more common. See Christina Traina, "Papal Ideals, Marital Realities: One View from the Ground," in Patricia Beattie Jung with Joseph Andrew Coray, eds., *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 277.

³³Grabowski, 130.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 130-31. See John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* §32.

³⁵Grabowski, 152-54. Thomasina Borkman points out the limits of existing studies that focus, for the most part, on satisfied users. Comparison with artificial methods of contraception is also difficult because NFP is more of a way of life with training methods similar to those of self-help movements than a birth control method. See Borkman, "A Social Science Perspective of Research Issues for Natural Family Planning," *IRNFP* 3/4 (1979): 331-55.

There is significantly less contemporary Catholic writing on the experience of using contraception, perhaps because while contraception makes possible certain sexual practices and life choices, it is not a radical lifestyle choice in itself. A method of family planning rather than a practice, contraception does not call forth the same level or type of reflection as does NFP. Still, Rosemary Radford Ruether's groundbreaking 1971 article, "Birth Control and Ideals of Marital Sexuality" (an older piece that nonetheless fits more with the newer conversation), and more recent work by Christina Traina, David McCarthy, Richard Gaillardetz, and others point in new directions.³⁶ Most agree with the traditional teaching that sex is for union and procreation. However, as Ruether suggests, "the procreational and the relational aspects of the sexual act are two semi-independent and interrelated purposes which both are brought together in their meaning and value within the total marriage project, although it is not only unnecessary but even biologically impossible that both purposes be present in every act."³⁷ While the marital relationship ought to be marked by mutual love and openness to children, a couple's sexual relationship is primarily oriented toward the former. These theologians assert that contraception is beneficial because it allows couples to grow in mutual love without worrying about conceiving more children than they can responsibly welcome. Though their arguments may fit with more theoretical claims about totality, they are deeply rooted in experiences of Christian spouses who want their sexual lives and their faith to be of one piece, and find contraception to be helpful rather than harmful.

Because popular accounts of the benefits of contraception for the relationship of Catholic married couples are rare, it will be difficult to evaluate these claims. Clearly, a precise comparative study of couples using NFP and artificial birth is yet out of reach. Still, it will be possible to glean insights into the goods of the practice of contraception by looking at contemporary Catholic and Protestant writing on sexuality, as most of this writing assumes (even if it does not explicitly acknowledge) the use of birth control. While these sources cannot provide evidence that the practice of birth control results in various goods, they can at least suggest that the practice does not impede their realization. Along with more direct writing on the difficulties of natural methods, these sources make possible an analysis that finds in the lives of couples who use contraception desire for and experience of many of the very same goods NFP advocates value. When this common ground

³⁶Ruether's article appears in Charles E. Curran and Richard P. McCormick, eds., *Moral Theology No. 8: Dialogue about Catholic Sexual Teaching* (New York: Paulist, 1993), 138-52. See also Traina.

³⁷Ruether, 141.

is discerned, the future of sexual ethics (taken up in the conclusion of this article) will be easier to envision.

Total Self-Giving

Among the goods that couples on both sides of the divide claim to find, self-giving is possibly the most prominent. On one hand, NFP is reputed to both make possible self-giving in sexual relations and predispose couples to the sacrifice required for total self-giving in their marriage. Christopher West, perhaps the primary popular communicator of John Paul II's theology of the body, does not attempt to prove that contraception is intrinsically evil or sinful. Instead, he tells his audiences that since sex requires total self-giving, giving one's fertility is a re-enactment of a couple's wedding vow.³⁸ Protestants Sam and Bethany Torode adopt a similar approach using their own experience. "Rather than pointing fingers," they say, "we want to point to a better way."³⁹ For them, birth control is wrong because, "[w]hen we should be saying 'I do,' contraception says, 'I do not.'"⁴⁰ Furthermore, they suggest that if fertility is reserved, couples are more likely to reserve themselves in other regards, while giving freely will lead to increased respect, truth, love and surrender.⁴¹ Centering their argument on discipleship to Christ, the Torrodes ask, "[W]ould Christ ever withhold any part of himself from the Church, or sterilize his love?" Seeking to follow Christ's example, they advocate coming together in "an open embrace, withholding nothing from each other."⁴² Many studies of NFP couples provide evidence of the opening effect of NFP.⁴³

Some advocates go even further, arguing that development of the virtue of chastity, which requires sacrifice in periodic abstinence, also predisposes couples to grow in the virtue of justice. Catholic philosopher Gregory Beabout states that "chastity forms sexual desires so that they are desires for sexual activity as a sign of the mutual and complete

³⁸Christopher West, *Good News about Sex and Marriage: Answers to Your Honest Questions about Catholic Teaching* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Press, 2000), 108.

³⁹Sam and Bethany Torode, *Open Embrace: A Protestant Couple Rethinks Contraception* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 8.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 30. The Torrodes represent a small but growing minority of conservative Protestants who agree with the traditional Catholic position.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 127.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 25.

⁴³See Joseph Stanford, M.D., "My Personal and Professional Journey with Regard to Moral Issues in Human Procreation," in Cleta Hartman, *Physicians Healed* (Dayton, OH: One More Soul, 1998), who says he learned from patients that abstinence strengthened couples' ability to sacrifice for each other, 115; Kimberly Kirk Hahn, *Life-Giving Love: Embracing God's Beautiful Design for Marriage* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Press, 2001); Mary Shivanadan, *Crossing the Threshold of Love: A New Vision of Marriage* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 262-70.

self-donation of persons and for reasons commensurate with its being that kind of sign.” Practice in discerning what sorts of bodily actions are signs of self-giving helps couples become more open to self-donation in other areas of their lives. Chastity, according to Beabout, also opens families to more children, makes materialist living less thinkable, and leads to a prioritization of people over things. So while he agrees with Pope Paul VI that those who want peace should work for justice, he proposes, “If you want justice, work for chastity.”⁴⁴ In this view, a sexual relationship shaped by natural family planning celebrates and encourages self-donation in the relationship of the couple, which spills over to the children, and, ultimately, to the world.

In the contrasting experience of couples who use contraception, self-giving is central to sexual relationships even when sex is not completely open. Ruether grants that in an ideal world, every sexual act would be totally open to procreation and totally loving, but claims that in reality, people are not free to have unlimited numbers of children, nor are they always capable of giving themselves fully to a spouse. Concerns about population and the limits of parental energies contribute to her sense that families ought to be limited.⁴⁵ Love is limited, in her view, by human capacity as well, for “[m]ost couples do not express the full mutuality of their persons in the sexual act for the simple reason that they have not achieved such mutuality, because their understanding of each other is distorted and fraught with petty tensions and dislikes.”⁴⁶ Human beings do not always have a “total” self to give. Their self-understanding evolves over time and is incomplete. Thus, their ability to love with everything that they are in order to achieve oneness is limited by their humanity. Sex is ordinary much of the time, but over a lifetime the sexual relationship of a couple contributes to total self-gift of their marriage.⁴⁷

Self-giving in the marriages of couples who use contraception is also parental, according to advocates, even though spouses are not always open to procreation. Traina contends that intentionally procreative sex is not ideal, but extraordinary, in that “[t]here is a new focus, a shared delight in a common project that really is a ‘total self-gift’ to

⁴⁴Gregory R. Beabout and Randall Colton, “If You Want Justice, Work for Chastity,” unpublished paper, 2003. See also, McCarthy, who highlights the connection between openness to procreation and solidarity, “Sexual Utterances and the Common Life,” *Modern Theology* 16/4 (October 2000) 443-59.

⁴⁵Ruether, 141. Traina (275) also notes that other goods must be weighed when considering whether or not to be open to the good of procreation.

⁴⁶Ruether, 141.

⁴⁷On this theme, see also, David McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home: A Theology of the Household*, 2d ed., (London: SCM Press, 2004), 46-48.

each other and our hoped-for future child.”⁴⁸ Still, it is relatively rare for most couples and thus not normative in any way, since intentionally non-procreative sex is good in itself. Ordinary non-procreative sex centers on self-giving and this is encouraged, rather than compromised, by the practice of contraception. For, argues Traina, “contraception does not impede self-gift but, like pregnancy, allows it the freedom to proceed unworried by consequences.”⁴⁹ Just as the unitive and procreative goods of marriage are separable, so, too, the self to be given is distinct from fertility. One does not have to give oneself as a potential parent in order to give fully. Even with contraception, partners may still give themselves as parents to the ongoing sexual relationship. As Traina puts it, “[o]ur children have in a certain respect made us, have shaped our minds, spirits, and even bodies. This awareness is always implicit and sometimes explicit in our lovemaking.”⁵⁰ Believing that many potential goods must be balanced when they chose to have sex, practitioners of contraception argue that birth control allows them to give them selves as fully as possible to each other and their existing children.⁵¹

Yet theologians who promote contraception do not stop here. They contend that sex “communicates to us our own goodness. That sense of goodness is essential if we are to understand ourselves as beloved by God, and thus able to communicate God’s love to others.”⁵² According to Catholic theologian Christine Gudorf, experiencing sexual pleasure

reinforces the lesson that it is OK, even good, to let go of control, to open oneself up to other people and experiences, to let down our protective barriers, our self-consciousness. When sex is not segregated from the rest of our lives, the pleasure of orgasm can reach far beyond the moment of intense pleasure itself, and change, a little at a time, the way we relate to our partner, and even to the larger society and world. It can encourage us to trust more, to be willing to risk more, to reach out to others more.⁵³

Gudorf points out that sex makes people feel loved and loving, to their partners, their children, their community and this is why many strongly advocate contraception, which may allow for more spontaneous, unworried sex among married couples.

⁴⁸Traina, 274.

⁴⁹Ibid., 279.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Joseph A. Selling, “The ‘Meanings’ of Human Sexuality,” *Louvain Studies* 23 (1998): 35.

⁵²Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex, & Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 98.

⁵³Ibid., 109

In sum, contemporary NFP defenders and birth control advocates both see self-giving (between spouses, to children, and to others) as a goal, even though they conceive of self-gift differently. Despite the disagreement about how best to achieve self-gift, there is a shared vision of marriage, and in particular the sexual relationship of a married couple, as an ongoing project of total self-giving. Sexual practices that contribute to this project are judged to be helpful, while those that hinder it are seen as harmful.

Communication and Intimacy

The framework for growth in self-giving is the marital relationship, thus it should come as no surprise that advocates of both NFP and contraception seek high quality marital relationships and embrace practices that enhance intimacy. Theologians who favor NFP are likely to cite sociological studies showing that NFP improves communication between husbands and wives. Many couples report that their need to communicate about their fertility translates into better communication about other matters. One physician notes that "As one of my male clients says, 'If you can talk about cervical fluid, you can talk about anything.'"⁵⁴ In addition, during fertile times when children are not desired, couples learn to communicate their love in other ways. Family therapist Gregory Popcak finds that couples "are forced to nurture their friendship more because they can't just 'throw sex' at their problems."⁵⁵ Popular NFP guides help spouses plan other ways of showing affection, such as sharing a candlelight dinner, meditating or praying together, and talking about feelings of love or desire.⁵⁶ Alternatives to sex (which may become less common as a marriage progresses) seem to increase intimacy in the lives of couples committed to NFP,⁵⁷ and better quality relationships may even contribute to more lasting marriages.⁵⁸ For contemporary NFP supporters, stronger, more intimate

⁵⁴Torodes, 50.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Merryl Winstein, *Your Fertility Signals: Using Them to Achieve or Avoid Pregnancy*, Naturally (St. Louis: Smooth Stone Press, 1989).

⁵⁷See Beverly McMillan, "Confessions of an Ob-Gyn," *New Oxford Review* 68/8 (September 2001): 17; K.J. Tompkins and Barbara Dwyer, "Experience with a Hospital-Based Natural Family Planning Service," *IRNFP* 10/4 (Winter 1986): 347; Thomasina Borkman and Mary Shivanadan, "The Impact of Natural Family Planning on Selected Aspects of the Couple Relationship," *IRNFP* 8/1 (1984): 63; M. Peter McCusker, "NFP and the Marital Relationship: The Catholic University of America Study," *IRNFP* 1/4 (1977): 333.

⁵⁸There is some evidence that NFP couples have lower divorce rates. See Nona Aguilar, *The New No-Pill, No-Risk Birth Control* (New York: Rawson Associates, 1986) and Jeff Brand, *Marital Duration and Natural Family Planning* (Cincinnati: Couple to Couple League, 1995), though systematic comparative studies have yet to be attempted.

relationships are a key reason to adopt what may at first appear to be a difficult practice.

Advocates of contraception share this concern with communication and intimacy. However, they are more likely to emphasize that sex is a necessary part of maintaining intimacy in marriage. Ruether argues that “[m]an needs to express his mutuality with his partner, and in the sexual act this mutuality is both expressed and recreated”; thus abstinence can cause “extensive emotional damage to the basic stability of the marriage.”⁵⁹ The cementing of love between the couple is necessary for the good of their relationship and the good of their already born children. Traina concurs, noting the importance of sex as a glue, especially in times of difficulty, “when words fail (or worse, harm).”⁶⁰ Ruether proposes that if couples really wanted to use times of abstinence for spiritual growth, they would abstain during Lent or at other religiously significant times.⁶¹ Traina points out that the busy lives of modern married couples provide many opportunities for not having sex, making planned abstinence unnecessary.⁶² Whatever the role of abstinence, when sex is possible, advocates of contraception claim that intimacy would be impeded by undesired abstinence. Early testimonies of those who switched from rhythm to the pill provide good illustrations of the experiential argument for the connection between intimacy and contraception. One woman relates:

I can't begin to tell you the difference the pill made in our relationship within a week. Never before in our married life had either of us felt so free about our sexual love. We became immediately more physically affectionate outside of the marital act. We became more communicative, there was a greater feeling of family, we became less critical and less nagging about smaller everyday things, happier with our particular places in the world.⁶³

Most contemporary Catholic couples who assume they will use contraception and use it consistently are not quite as ecstatic about its

⁵⁹Ruether, 143. See also Michael Novak, *The Experience of Marriage* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), quoting married couples, “We know that it [sex] is of fundamental importance to developing our personal relationship, to increasing that mutuality that we find is a very real analogy of Divine Love” (42).

⁶⁰Traina, 273.

⁶¹Ruether, 150.

⁶²Traina, 280.

⁶³A letter from the Crowley surveys, quoted in John Kotre, *Simple Gifts: The Lives of Pat and Patty Crowley* (New York: Andrews and McMeel, 1979), 97. Testimony that abstinence distorts intimacy can also be found in Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, and Mitch Finley, “The Dark Side of Natural Family Planning,” *America*, 23 February 1991, pp. 206-07.

life-giving powers. However, one does find in the literature a recognition that NFP can impede intimacy in the lives of modern couples who “if they have children, are often struggling to keep sexual intimacy alive in their marriage.”⁶⁴ Given the realities of modern family life, “the demands of periodic abstinence can be transformed from ‘an opportunity to find other ways to express their love’ into a major obstacle in the marriage relationship.” If married sexuality is to “[make spouses] capable of play, delight, and the risk of vulnerability together,” if is to “ratify their covenantal love for one another,” it seems to those who approve of contraception that it can assist couples seeking to strengthen their marital relationship through sexual intimacy.⁶⁵

While the different conceptions of the value of abstinence are clear, it is perhaps more significant that advocates from both groups are deeply concerned with communication and intimacy. No one is claiming, as many earlier opponents of contraception did, that intimacy must be sacrificed for the sake of some other good, even procreation. Rather, both are convinced that their chosen method of family planning helps couples grow closer together and thus contributes to the good of marriage.

Enhanced Sexual Relationship

Advocates of both NFP and contraception agree that their practice benefits their marriages in part because it enhances their sexual relationships. NFP practitioners often speak of the courtship and honeymoon phases in each cycle as helpful for keeping sex interesting. Some couples who move from artificial means of contraception to NFP report that their sex life improves. In a typical statement, one couple testifies that, “[With the pill], we started to get bored. A thing of beauty loses its attractiveness when it is available at any time without any effort,” while another claims that “[d]uring the waiting period, we find ourselves talking things over more, and when the infertile days come again, we experience supreme joy in our sexual union with each other. There is a natural creative tension present that is missing when you take the pill.”⁶⁶ Paul Murray, a Catholic teacher and NFP user, concurs, noting that, “If intercourse is intimate sharing, then a conscious decision to abstain under such circumstances is intercourse in all but the

⁶⁴Gaillardetz, 110.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 111. Note that Gaillardetz sees much wisdom in *HV* and believes that many couples can successfully adopt NFP.

⁶⁶Ingrid Trobisch and Elisabeth Roetzer, *An Experience of Love: Understanding NFP* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1981), 83. See also Torodes, 52.

physical sense of the word, and is utterly sexual in its nature.”⁶⁷ Here, sacrifice is linked to pleasure, because rather than burdening a couple, it frees them to be creative in their expression of sexual desire for each other. Unlike most couples in the Crowley’s study, today’s NFP users overwhelmingly report that though abstinence can be difficult at times, it ultimately contributes to the good of their sexual relationship rather than diminishing it.

Similarly, practitioners of contraception believe that contraception enhances their sexual relationships. Methods such as the birth control pill and male or female sterilization allow for spontaneity and response to the sexual cycles of both males and females.⁶⁸ Neither partner is held back by fear of pregnancy or discomfort with disruptive barrier methods of contraception, thus both are better able to express themselves sexually and give and receive sexual pleasure. This is significant because both the desire for and experience of pleasure are viewed by most practitioners of artificial contraception as central to the goodness and holiness of sexual relationships. Mary Pellaur’s now classic description of female orgasm, which acknowledges the role of an almost greedy desire for pleasure, reads differently from the theology of the body’s definition of sex as total self-giving. Instead, Pellaur sees several important elements of sexual experience, including being here and now, ecstasy, and vulnerability. She writes of the difficulty of allowing herself to be vulnerable to her husband, “I experience an orgasm and all the impelling feelings before it as his power over me in order to receive this ecstasy, and this is not easy. It depends upon trust that is built up in many elements of our relationship—the mutuality growing, the confidence in reliability, the sense that this person will not hurt me on purpose, our abilities to forgive each other.”⁶⁹ This is testimony that while human beings may sometimes find it hard to receive sexual pleasure because it requires vulnerability and trust, it is nevertheless fundamentally important. Contraception advocates emphasize the good of sexual pleasure and believe that birth control enhances their ability to become vulnerable enough to give and receive it.

Both NFP and contraception users are concerned with enhancing

⁶⁷Paul Murray, “The Power of ‘Humanae Vitae’: Take Another Look,” *Commonweal*, 15 July 1994, p. 15.

⁶⁸Bjorn J. Oddens, “Women’s Satisfaction with Birth Control,” *Contraception* 59 (1999): 281-82. According to a large German study, compared to NFP users, women who used contraception reported higher satisfaction generally, higher sexual frequency, more spontaneity. Still, NFP users, though generally somewhat less satisfied (72% versus 83% of pill users, 90% of IUD users, and 92% of those who relied on sterilization), reported more pleasure and increased sex drive, along with decreased frequency and spontaneity.

⁶⁹Mary Pellaur, “The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics that Celebrate Women’s Sexuality,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9/1-2 (Spring/Fall 1993): 174.

sexual pleasure, and many testify that their sexual relationships improved due to their chosen method of family planning. NFP promoters note that the sexual tension and creativity accompanying periods of abstinence enhance sexual relationships, while contraception advocates are more likely to recognize and name the centrality and complexity of desiring and receiving pleasure. However, neither group prioritizes pleasure in such a way that relationships outside of a mutually giving covenantal relationship would be legitimized, and both recognize its power and significance in the lives of married couples, not just because pleasure feels good, but because experiencing pleasure affirms the self-worth of individual spouses and calls them into deeper relation with each other.

Increased Mutuality

Within the marital relationship, both NFP and contraception practitioners seek mutuality. Though in earlier writing, NFP advocates may have appeared insensitive to potentially sexist implications of using this method, the newer generation is convinced that they have a strong answer to modern concerns about gender equity in marriage. NFP advocates contend that use of the method increases mutuality, as both husband and wife are involved in making the decision to abstain or have sex and remain open to life. Whereas most contraceptive methods are the responsibility of women alone, NFP requires the participation of men and women, because it takes two to abstain. Shared responsibility for sexual decision making is related, in advocates' eyes, to mutuality in other dimensions of the relationship. Moreover, many studies report that NFP users, particularly women, have higher levels of self-esteem that they attribute to increased awareness of and control over their bodies.⁷⁰ The testimony of a woman in a recent study is typical, "I've learned more about myself as a woman since I've started. . . . I just feel better about it on the whole, my self-esteem. It caused me to have more control."⁷¹ Men's growing knowledge of and respect for their wives also contributes to enhanced mutuality.⁷²

Even still, contraception advocates argue that mutuality is more easily attained with contraception because as "accidental" pregnancies are less likely to occur, women are not necessarily limited in their career potential. In a time in which women as well as men feel the pull

⁷⁰Joseph Tortorici, "Conception Regulation, Self-Esteem, and Marital Satisfaction among Catholic Couples: Michigan State University Study," *IRNFP* 3/3 (1979): 197-98.

⁷¹Richard J. Fehring and Donna M. Lawrence, "Spiritual Well-Being, Self-Esteem and Intimacy among Couples Using Natural Family Planning," *Linacre Quarterly* 61:3 (August 1994): 25.

⁷²*Ibid.*

of multiple vocations, this freedom is seen as necessary to women's equality.⁷³ While some natural family planning advocates believe that contraception is disrespectful of a woman's sexuality,⁷⁴ accounts of the sexual relationships of couples using contraception attest to feelings of sexual empowerment and mutual respect.⁷⁵ There is no sense that using contraception is experienced as the opposite.

Moreover, mutuality is enhanced, according to contemporary writers who favor contraception, when growth through intimacy results in greater wholeness (understood as balance between the masculine and feminine sides of oneself) for both partners. To be fully human is to be in mature relationship and transcend the limits of gender roles,⁷⁶ and this is more possible in a sexual relationship unhampered by the female fertility cycle.⁷⁷ This cycle is relevant when conceiving children, and should be known in order to better understand emotional and sexual variances, but it fades into the background with contraception, and, the significance of gender fades as well.⁷⁸ Practitioners of artificial birth control value mutuality unbounded by complementarity, and feel they draw closer to it with contraception.

While differing understandings of mutuality are apparent in the writings of the two groups, it is also clear that some sort of mutuality in relationships is valued by both. Most formal studies of NFP users show that women are even more satisfied with NFP than men, because of their enhanced self-knowledge, self-esteem, and sexual desire. Yet, practitioners of contraception see their method as the guarantor of enhanced sexual freedom and pleasure for women. Both seek to establish that women are valued and even liberated by their family planning practice for equality in relationships.

⁷³On competing goods, see Traina, 275 and Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 204-05.

⁷⁴Jim Ternier and Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers, "Speaking up for Natural Family Planning," *National Catholic Reporter* (13 February 2004), p. 19.

⁷⁵*HV's* insistence that contraception will decrease men's respect for women denies the possibility that a woman could desire sexual gratification for herself and/or degrade a man, with or without contraception. Moreover, Barbara Andolsen makes the point that women "are asserting ever more strongly that an ability to direct their own reproductive power is essential for their well-being and that of their families" ("Woman and Roman Catholic Sexual Ethics," in Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick, eds., *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition* [New York: Paulist, 1996], 226).

⁷⁶See Ruether, "Homophobia, Heterosexism, and Pastoral Practice," in James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, eds., *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 389.

⁷⁷Sylvia Chavez-Garcia and Daniel A. Helminiak, "Sexuality and Spirituality: Friends, not Foes," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 34/6 (June 1985):160.

⁷⁸Traina, 280-82.

Sexuality Linked to Spirituality

Perhaps most importantly, both NFP and contraception advocates make the case that their practice predisposes couples to see the spiritual in the sexual. Nowhere do we see a hesitance to affirm the goodness of sex or a blindness to the potential of sex to serve as a conduit of God's grace. For NFP users, self-control is viewed as necessary to making sexual behavior fully human. In order to be truly free, human beings must act according to the will rather than blind or animal impulse. Knowing the truth and acting on it, they are better able to engage in sex in a fully human way. In the view of some advocates, NFP calls for virtue (chastity), thus it fits more easily into religious life. Influenced by the pre-papal writings of John Paul II, in their experience, the association of sex with virtue is freeing rather than stifling:

The liberation of the person through chastity takes place not just exteriorly but in the depth of the will. It ensures that loving kindness takes precedence over the desire for enjoyment. Wojtyla states that 'only the chaste man and woman are capable of true love.' NFP couples experience this liberation.⁷⁹

Theological ideals extolling self-control are complemented by thick descriptions of the open marital embrace. Both inspire the religious imagination of adherents, making the practice of virtue both easier and more meaningful. One theologian argues that "[t]o reject the fertility of one's spouse as 'unwanted,' or unwanted right now is to reject his or her capacity, together with oneself, to image the Trinity.⁸⁰ Conversely, to accept the whole person including fertility is to allow for total oneness, and this one flesh union is the triune God embodied. It is not surprising this view of sex is associated with a positive response to NFP.⁸¹ Mary Shivanadan calls the theology of the body a new discourse for married couples. It has a profound effect on them because it is "much more than a method of family planning. It is a way of discerning God's plan for the family. Many couples view it as a 'way of life.'"⁸²

⁷⁹Shivanadan, "Natural Family Planning and the Theology of the Body," *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 3/1 (Spring 2003): 25.

⁸⁰Paula Jean Miller, "The Theology of the Body: A New Look at *Humanae Vitae*," *Theology Today* 57/4 (January 2001): 507.

⁸¹See Borkman and Shivanadan, "The Impact of NFP." Sixty percent of the couples studied found that NFP enhanced the religious or spiritual dimension of their relationship, (64). Sam and Bethany Torode claim that the abstinence required by NFP reminds them of the goodness of sex, making sex as prayer more of a possibility (54). A comparative study of twenty couples using NFP and twenty using contraception found higher spiritual and religious well-being in the NFP couples. See Fehring and Lawrence, 27.

⁸²Shivanadan, "Natural Family Planning and the Theology of the Body," 24.

Testimonies from NFP couples collected by Kimberly Hahn confirm this insight. “We don’t ‘have sex’; we give ourselves to each other,” says one woman. NFP “added a sacredness to our marital relations that wasn’t there when we were contracepting” claims another. As one woman sums up her relationship with her husband since they started using NFP, “I never felt so deeply loved and accepted by him nor so loving and accepting of him. We became keenly aware of the power of each act in a whole new way—a new life could result from *that* act of marriage.”⁸³ NFP brings sex into the realm of the sacred because it links it to virtue, procreative power, and symbolic representation of God.

Writers who defend contraception also believe that practicing sexual virtue leads to spiritual growth. However, according to Ruether, most mature married couples do not struggle to contain desire. She asserts that though celibates might ask, “I have sublimated my sexual drive entirely. Why can’t they do it for a little while each month?,” married persons “have sublimated the sexual drive into a relationship with another person.” It is no longer an abstract drive, but “the intimate expression of one’s relationship with this particular other person.”⁸⁴ It is not that couples cannot control their lust, but that at some moments, “they need to turn to each other for solace, reassurance, renewal of their bonds with each other [and] it is precisely at this moment and not ten days later that they need to be able to use the sexual act.”⁸⁵ They need to turn to sex when they feel called to.

Doing otherwise could be seen as ignoring the nature of chastity as a virtue, which calls for the right amount of sex at the right times for the right reasons.⁸⁶ Yet most writers who assume contraception do not explicitly invoke the virtue of chastity to inform their discussions of sexuality and spirituality; instead, they focus on the goodness of the body. Many believe that Christian spouses are held back from realizing their full sexual potential, not because they fail to control their desire, but because they are disconnected from their bodies and fail to recognize or respond to their desires.⁸⁷ Rejecting the traditional call to exercise self-mastery as unnecessary, James and Evelyn Whitehead ask

⁸³Kimberly Kirk Hahn, *Life-Giving Love: Embracing God’s Beautiful Design for Marriage* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Press, 2001) 89, 26, 73. Hahn includes a moving meditation on the sacrifice of her own body scarred by numerous difficult pregnancies. She maintains, “through the marital act, we *choose* to be a living sacrifice,” 122.

⁸⁴Ruether, 149.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 150.

⁸⁶Christina Traina, “Roman Catholic Resources for an Ethic of Sexuality,” unpublished paper, 2004.

⁸⁷See Chavez-Garcia and Helminiak, 161. The writers claim that orgasm breaks through human preoccupation with ideas and puts people back in touch with their bodies, opening them to the spiritual dimensions of reality. Many writers speak critically of the Christian tradition’s negative view of the body as something to be overcome. See,

couples to affirm their belief in the Incarnation (“in the flesh, we meet God”)⁸⁸ by listening to the stirrings—emotional, intellectual, and sexual—of their own bodies and responding. For too long, the Whiteheads claim, the tradition denigrated non-procreative sex by describing it as “using another person for pleasure,” rather than understanding, as married couples always have, that “sexual arousal is about more than lust, that sexual delight is not always selfish. . . . The sexual relationship . . . made life richer and more religious.”⁸⁹ Desire is recognized as good and even godly, for human passion is connected to God’s passion. The goal is to embrace this passion, exploring its depths and riches.⁹⁰

Despite the fact that theologians with differing views on contraception find God in different aspects of the sexual experience, both seek to link sexuality to the divine. Sex between spouses is not just sex, as the culture would have it, nor is it something best avoided by those seeking holiness (unless one desires procreation) as earlier Catholic accounts may have implied. It is, rather, a part of one’s Christian commitment, a practice through which married Christians live out their call to discipleship.

In sum, this analysis of experience and family planning shows that those who practice different methods nonetheless share a desire for and claim the realization of, many of the same goods. True, differences persist. Those who support birth control advocate sex as a way for married couples to grow as partners united in flesh and spirit. With the freedom to have sex when they desire it, practitioners of contraception find themselves more open to each other, their children, and their world. For NFP couples, openness to procreation is a fundamental part of openness to God. Advocates find in their practice a deeper willingness to sacrifice for the other leading to increased intimacy, sexual satisfaction, mutuality, and spiritual growth, all of which are tied to the fundamental willingness to give one’s fertility to one’s spouse throughout a marriage.

Still, the overlapping desires of contemporary writers seeking the goods of total self-giving, sexual pleasure, mutuality, and a sexual relationship that is deeply spiritual, are profound, and, in my view, ultimately more significant. There is a freshness in this conversation that allows for further growth in sexual ethics and practice, because instead of trying to prove each other’s positions illegitimate, this new genera-

e.g., Donal Dorr, “Rethinking Sexual Morality,” *The Furrow* 53/12 (December 2002): 655. No NFP proponents I read had similar concerns.

⁸⁸Whiteheads, 12.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 17.

⁹⁰On this theme, see also, James Nelson, *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience* (New York: Pilgrim, 1983) and Fran Ferder & John Heagle, *Your Sexual Self: Pathway to Authentic Intimacy* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1992).

tion is simply attempting to situate their sexual practice in the context of Christian living.

IV. Conclusion: Sexual Ethics in a New Key

Powerful experiential testimony exists on both sides of the contemporary family planning discussion; listening to all of it is the first step toward a new sexual ethics. Though NFP “works” for far fewer couples than contraception, the testimonies of those who find it satisfying are numerous and enthusiastic enough to compel attention. Conversely, the relative paucity of testimonies and studies on the benefits of contraception is partially made up for by the large numbers of users and by the silence about contraception in most mainstream Christian sexual ethics. But what are moral theologians to make of the many divergent claims embedded in the discussion? Is it appropriate to make judgments about the relative worth of differing arguments? My hope is that bringing the distinctive experiential wisdom of both groups into relief and exploring the common ground that both sides share will make room both for respectful agreement and mutual correction, thus moving the dialogue on sexual ethics beyond the current impasse. I offer a few examples of the sort of critique that may be possible.

The foremost insight of NFP users, total self-giving, ought to be taken more seriously by those who accept contraception. John Paul II has said that total self-giving is the purpose of human existence. If so, NFP couples rightly place donation of the self at the center of their lives. Learning to embrace rather than become frustrated by abstinence and (perhaps) more children, they fully integrate their sexual and spiritual lives. Though proponents of contraception may be correct in their assertion that self-giving is not the whole of sexuality, it seems a crucial dimension, especially when distinguished from the classic norm of “paying the marriage debt.” In sexuality, as in all things, human beings are tempted to selfishness or single-minded pursuit of their own pleasure, and though this is not the only sexual sin, it nonetheless remains significant. If a theological concept of self-giving allows couples to transcend individualist desires for pleasure and think more about what sex is really for, and what their partners truly need, perhaps more sexuality could aim toward, if not achieve, real union. In addition, if an ethic of self-giving encourages a greater openness to children and grants them a more significant place in the life of married couples, this may be beneficial. The generous testimonies of NFP couples who speak of their children and their sex lives as parts of a whole stand in contrast to pro-contraception sexual writing that, with few exceptions, fails to mention children. Centering on self-giving seems to open NFP couples in profound ways that cry out for imitation.

Second, NFP practitioners' praise of abstinence calls for serious consideration. In David McCarthy's reading of popular literature on sex, boredom is a recurring theme. Sexologists respond by encouraging couples to recreate the constraining conditions of the courtship period, by spending a weekend at a grandmother's house, having sex in a car, or going to luxury hotel. McCarthy rightly criticizes this attempt to make marriage more exciting by divorcing it from the home, and provocatively advocates a "sexier" reading of the ordinary.⁹¹ But is it not also important to listen to the vast majority of couples (most of whom practice contraception) who find a need to increase sexual tension? According to one extensive study of satisfaction with family planning methods in West Germany, 22-28% of female NFP-users found that the method increased their sexual desire and pleasure. No other method made this large of a difference.⁹² Taking regular sabbaths from sex seems to energize sexual relationships, especially in mature marriages. Perhaps women in particular (but not women alone) delight in having a space for non-sexual intimacy that is hard to find when sex is always a possibility. NFP couples may be right to contend that abstinence is "utterly sexual." The practice of NFP inspires many married couples to grow in self-giving and sexual intimacy; it ought not be dismissed.

Yet, writers who assume or argue for contraception have important insights to challenge those who practice NFP. Their insistence on the multiple meanings of sex, including the neglected good of pleasure, is crucial. Advocates of contraception have argued strongly that receiving pleasure is essential to good sex, just as essential as self-giving. While many NFP advocates already affirm that periodic abstinence increases sexual pleasure, most persist in emphasizing the giving over receiving and the need for self-mastery over uncontrollable desire. The reality is that most couples struggle not to contain desire, but to stir it up. Encouraging Christian spouses to enjoy the sexual gifts of their marriage and renew their relationships through sex may be a more important project than reminding them to be chaste.

Second, advocates of contraception rightly recognize that Christians are called to self-giving in many areas of their lives and cannot always open themselves to receiving another child. The desire for some measure of control over how many children they have and when they have them is an expression of their desire to grow in self-giving, as they wish to come together in sexual intimacy without compromising their ability to parent their existing children (or prepare for future children)

⁹¹McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home*, 34-44.

⁹²Odds, 220. The discrepancy between this finding and pre-1968 surveys is likely due both to the greater reliability of modern NFP as well as strong formation for NFP users.

and to contribute to the broader common good. If the Catholic tradition points toward a dual vocation of family and work for Christian spouses,⁹³ those who practice contraception uniquely recognize that balancing these commitments requires limitation in both spheres.

Despite bringing distinct, corrective insights to the dialogue on sexual ethics, the two groups share significantly more common ground, including desires to encourage self-giving inside and outside the home, cultivate strong relationships, practice mutuality, grow in sexual intimacy, and discover the transcendent dimensions of sexuality. This common ground is most evident among a new generation of scholars and lay people who cannot be easily categorized as liberal or conservative. In their writing, a counter-cultural focus on self-giving in sexual relationships and beyond sharply contrasts with a cultural backdrop of promiscuous sex for personal pleasure. In addition, a shared relational focus (largely absent in traditional sexual ethics) can be found just as strongly in NFP advocates' frequent testimony that the practice increases communication, intimacy, and union as in contraceptive users' insistence that sex is a necessary glue that binds them together, a natural way for couples to grow in love. Sexual pleasure is a good identified both by NFP advocates who claim that abstinence is sexy and by contraception users who do not want to derail sexual desire when it arises. Both groups are also concerned with mutuality in marriage, and though NFP practitioners focus on shared responsibility for family planning, while those who use contraception emphasize the desires of both men and women for anxiety-free sex and the freedom to pursue multiple vocations, neither group is wedded to the gender-specific limitations of earlier generations of Catholic writers.

Perhaps most important, however, is the shared focus on the transcendent dimensions of sexuality. This is fully evident in writings on both sides, for NFP users, in the language of total self-giving, and for contraception advocates, in the language of passionate human desire connected to divine love. Moreover, theologians on both sides use sacramental language to talk about "the more" of sex. Sr. Mary Timothy Prokes, a passionate defender of John Paul II's theology of the body, claims that Eucharist and sex both "involve reverence for real presence or they are treated with shallow casualness. Sexuality is the possibility of true self-gift and genuine communion of persons: there is no greater realization of this than sacramental Self-Gift as food and drink. What better Common Ground in the Body of Christ than shared understand-

⁹³See Julie Hanlon Rubio, "The Dual Vocation of Christian Parents," *Theological Studies* 63 (December 2002): 786-812.

ing of sexual reality and Eucharist?”⁹⁴ Similarly, radical Protestant theologian James Nelson quotes Molly in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (“yes I said yes I will Yes.”), affirming, “We human beings know in our sexual experience something of Molly’s yes. But Molly is not only us. Molly is also the hungering, passionate God who meets us bodily.”⁹⁵ Even as they take from the secular culture promising commitments to relational growth and mutuality, advocates of different family planning methods are joined together in their rejection of secular tendencies to not take sex seriously enough and in a common understanding of sexual experience as sacramental.⁹⁶

The most important task for both sides of this dialogue is to continue developing an experientially-based theological vision that can serve as a guide for the sexual relationships that are central in the lives of most Christians. The Papal birth control commission began this work some forty years ago when they listened to the experiences of married couples who were struggling with what the church asked of them. Although support for contraception did not find favor with Paul VI, there is no doubt that the CFM surveys influenced the development of a more personalist understanding of sex and marriage that was evident in *HV*. The dialogue that followed was valuable in laying out the defense of each side’s positions on contraception, but it often failed in attentiveness to experience and in situating sexual ethics within the context of Christian discipleship. Now a new generation of scholars, which includes many more married theologians, many more women, and many more Catholics born after the second Vatican Council and raised out of Catholic subcultures, has come to the fore.⁹⁷ They share a desire to live distinctive Christian lives and know sex is a part of that. They will do well to continue to listen rightly to experience in all its diversity, not so they can prove one side right or wrong, but so that they might raise up for married Christians values worth pursuing in sexual relationships. If couples can then ask good questions (Are we giving as much of our selves as possible in our sexual relationship? Does sex contribute to our growth in mutuality? Are we honoring the goodness of sexual desire? Do we recognize the presence of grace when we have sex?), theologians will have made a valuable contribution.

⁹⁴Sr. Mary Timothy Prokes, “The Catholic Tradition and Sexual Teaching,” unpublished paper, 2004.

⁹⁵Nelson, 32.

⁹⁶David McCarthy’s critique of sexual theologies that place too much importance on individual sexual acts is important to keep in mind here. Sex may be sacramental in the context of a lifelong marriage, even if particular acts mean relatively little (see *Sex and Love in the Home*, 46-48).

⁹⁷See William Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” *Communio* 31/1 (Spring 2004): 35-66.