

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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THE MORAL USE OF  
NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

by  
*Janet E. Smith*

*Humanae Vitae* states that methods of natural family planning may be used only for serious reasons. This essay considers why the Church would allow use of NFP only for serious reasons and attempts to sketch out what would constitute serious reasons. It consults writings of various popes who have given some guidance on these issues. It also considers if there is a "proper" family size.

This is a previously unpublished essay.

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Many Catholics who use methods of natural family planning (NFP) are confident that since NFP is approved by the Church, it can be used morally. They are not so confident, however, that they know what constitute moral reasons for using NFP. Some, for instance, think it should be used only if severe hardships would result from having a child or another child. This essay will attempt to sketch out the types of circumstances in which methods of NFP can be used morally; in the course of doing so it will suggest that the range of reasons is broader and perhaps more liberal than many think.<sup>1</sup> It will draw heavily upon Church documents and papal statements for two reasons. One, the Church has given some attention to this issue. Secondly, most of those interested in this issue are Catholics, though the principles invoked

<sup>1</sup> There is little written on this question. A classic treatment of the moral use of periodic continence can be found in John C. Ford, S.J., and Gerald Kelly, S.J., "Pius XII on Periodic Continence", *Contemporary Moral Theology*, vol. 2 (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1964), 396-430. I treated the differences between NFP and contraception in chap. 4 of my book *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 1991). See also Anthony J. Zimmerman, S.V.D., "Natural Family Planning vs. Contraception", *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (May 1989): 52-65. Chap. 4 of my book also treats at some length why it is moral to use NFP.

should be acceptable to any reasonable individual, especially to Christians.

Before beginning, however, we must take note of another group of individuals that have come to doubt whether it is ever moral to use methods of natural family planning. They tend to believe that procreation is such a great good that couples should simply accept all the children that God sends them; determining how many children to have or when to have children seems to them to demonstrate a lack of trust in God. They believe that in accepting the vocation of marriage they have also accepted the obligation to have as many children as they could possibly care for, or at least they have the obligation to have a large family. This essay will not provide a full-blown argument justifying that it is moral to use NFP; such has been done elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Rather it will address the question of the obligation to have children and the question of trust in God, since in addressing these questions we will establish some important principles that will assist us in determining when it is moral to use NFP.

First let us clarify what it means to have an obligation. The word *obligation*, in its roots, refers to something that is binding upon one, something that one should do; not to do it would be to sin by omission. Or one could have an obligation *not* to do something, and to do it would be to sin. Most obligations that bind absolutely, that have no exceptions, are those that are expressed in what are known as negative precepts. For instance, we all have a moral obligation never to deliberately kill an innocent man. Positive precepts such as "give alms" are generally relative to one's circumstances. For instance, we all have an obligation to support our children, but if we fail to do so because of some circumstance not of our making, such as famine, we would not be doing moral wrong through our failure to meet our obligation. In a Christian context, we all have an obligation to give alms, but this is an

<sup>2</sup> See Janet E. Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, and the essays by Joseph Boyle and Mary Rosera Joyce in this book.

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obligation qualified by our means; we all need to give something, but that something is relative to our means.

Moreover, it should be noted that in our modern age, an age that seems obsessed with freedom, we chafe at anything that binds, since we sense that it limits our freedom. Obligations laid on us by God, however, serve more to liberate us than to enslave us; his demands on us are designed to advance us in perfecting our human nature. So it should ultimately be a joyful experience to fulfill the obligations that God gives us, if, at times, they share an element of the cross. While recognizing that childbearing brings its hardships, *Humanae Vitae* in its first line speaks of the mission (*munus*) of transmitting human life that God has entrusted to spouses. The word *mission* (*munus*) is weighted with meaning; it refers to a special task that God gives to those wish to serve him, who wish to build up the Kingdom of heaven here on earth. To give a brief sense of the meaning of this word, the documents of Vatican II tell us that Mary has the *munus* of being Mother of God, the Pope has the *munus* of infallibly proclaiming Church doctrine, bishops have the *munus* of ordaining priests, priests have the *munus* of consecrating the sacraments, and spouses have the *munus* of transmitting life.<sup>3</sup> Thus this "obligation", this mission, of having children is not one that should be dispensed with as an arduous and unpleasant chore or be done in a minimalistic way. Rather, spouses realize that having and raising children responsibly is one of the major contributions they can make to the Kingdom of God. It brings with it some burdens and considerable responsibilities, but these are burdens and responsibilities that ennoble us to fulfill; they do not enslave us.

If spouses have an obligation to have children, what would be

<sup>3</sup>I have written on the meaning of this word in "The *Munus* of Transmitting Human Life: A New Approach to *Humanae Vitae*", *The Thomist* 54, no. 3 (July 1990): 385-427; a shortened version of this paper appeared as "The Importance of the Concept of *Munus* to Understanding *Humanae Vitae*", in *Humanae Vitae: 20 Anni Dopo* (Milan: Edizioni Ares, 1989), 671-90 (published as Chapter 12 in this book); a shorter version of both treatments can be found in *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, 136-48.

the nature or source of that obligation? Are there limits to that obligation? The Church has traditionally taught that marriage, as the proper arena for sexual intercourse, has as one of its ends or purposes or goods the bringing forth of new human life.<sup>4</sup> In this day and age, a fairly complicated argument may be required for such a claim, one that can only be sketched out here. Indeed, to most it seems odd to speak of acts and institutions having purposes or ends. The basis for the Church's teaching is that marriage has certain ends or purposes that those who marry are obliged to pursue and that these ends or purposes are the goods of marriage; that is, they are the goods that marriage is meant to help people achieve and enjoy. Perhaps it is sufficient to note here that, among other reasons, the Church teaches that marriage has procreation as an end because children, in order to prosper, need to be raised in a stable home environment and cared for by both their mother and father; marriage, then, is for the well-being of children as much as for the well-being of spouses. Thus, to refuse to have any children would be a violation of the nature and purpose of marriage; it would be to use marriage for something other than its natural end.

Furthermore, bringing forth new life is a great good, first for the good of the child conceived who has the potential of enjoying many other goods, secondly for the spouses who enjoy the meaningful lives made possible by children and the many joys that accompany parenthood,<sup>5</sup> and thirdly for society, which needs individuals to work for the common good. Since these goods are so great, spouses should be willing to foster such goods.

Such reasoning and argumentation seem nearly absurd to the modern way of thinking, which considers childbearing an "option" to the point where there are married couples who proudly and conspicuously proclaim their voluntary childless state—often for the reason that children would impede their pursuit of various

<sup>4</sup> See chap. 2 of *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* for a discussion of procreation as the primary purpose of marriage.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Cormac Burke, "Children and Values", *International Review of Natural Family Planning* 12, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 181-92.

avenues of self-fulfillment.<sup>6</sup> The modern view, however, is an anomaly; people in nearly every age, culture, and religion have generally considered children to be a great good and something that spouses naturally want. Those who voluntarily remained childless have been considered peculiarities. But many moderns think it irresponsible to bring more children into the world, since the world is, in their view, such a "messed up" place. Some also think that there is a worldwide population problem that makes it immoral to have children, at least many children. Others think children are a burden and not a gift, that they are a drain on the parents' energies and resources. Finally, it is often argued that some individuals would not make good parents and thus ought not to become parents.

While most of the above reasons may often be thinly disguised rationalizations of those who do not want to exert the effort necessary to be parents, it seems plausible that some may choose not to have children for good reasons. Suppose, for instance, a couple were involved in some greatly needed charitable work in the community, say, work directed toward helping impoverished youngsters get the skills needed to escape their impoverished lives. If these couples refused to use contraception and relied upon a method of NFP (or upon complete abstinence), would they be failing to fulfill some obligation to have children? Certainly, it is curious that they seek to pursue goods that are not per se proper to their state in life while declining to pursue the goods that are per se proper to their lives. Nonetheless, it seems arguable (though not necessarily ultimately justifiable) that such lives may well merit an "exemption" from the obligation to have children—but only because the goods being sought are common goods that go beyond their personal needs.<sup>7</sup> The modern disinclination to

<sup>6</sup> For a critique of the modern view, see G. E. M. Anscombe, "Why Have Children", in *The Ethics of Having Children*, ed. by Lawrence P. Schrenk, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 63 (1990): 48–54.

<sup>7</sup> When I speak of the "common" good and "selfish" goods, I do not mean to suggest that the good of the individual is at odds with the common good. "Selfish" does not mean "individual". The true good of the individual embraces



have children, though, rarely derives from such lofty motives; moderns generally believe many activities, not just service activities or charitable activities, rate higher as goods than the good of having children.

Christians understand the good of having children to surpass nearly all other goods. Children are seen as an even greater good than they are in purely natural terms. As was stated earlier, Christians in having children understand themselves to be fulfilling a mission given to them by God. God wishes there to be new life with whom he may share the goods of his creation and has chosen to entrust the mission (*munus*) of transmitting of new human life to spouses. As John Paul II interprets the creation story in *Genesis*, God created man and woman and their sexuality to expand the opportunities for love in this world. The body, in John Paul II's view, has a "nuptial meaning", a meaning that entails total self-giving, and total self-giving entails being open to the further gift of children.<sup>8</sup>

Let us further note that in the Catholic Church, canon law holds that if spouses enter marriage with the intent never to have children, their "marriages" are invalid;<sup>9</sup> that is, they are not marriages at all. The Church bases this restriction not on some arbitrary fancy or on some Machiavellian scheme of filling the earth with Catholics but on the very nature of marriage. Exhortations about the blessing that children are and about the obligation that parents have to have children are commonplace in Church

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the common good; "selfish" goods are precisely those goods that the individual perceives to be good for himself without reference to goods beyond his own desires.

<sup>8</sup> For a review of John Paul II's teaching, see chap. 8 of *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* and my article "Pope John Paul II and *Humanae Vitae*", *International Review of Natural Family Planning* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 95-112. See also Rev. Richard Hogan, "A Theology of the Body", *The International Review of Natural Family Planning* 6, no. 3 (Fall 1982): 227-312.

<sup>9</sup> There are some reasons which allow a couple to practice methods of natural family planning throughout their marriages (see page 455 below), but spouses must still be open to children.

documents.<sup>10</sup> *Casti Connubii* (echoed by *Gaudium et Spes*, *Humanae Vitae*, and *Familiaris Consortio*)<sup>11</sup> speaks of the child being the first among the blessings of marriage.<sup>12</sup> After citing the admonition in *Genesis* to "increase and multiply", *Casti Connubii* states:

How great a boon of God this [having children] is, and how great a blessing of matrimony is clear from a consideration of man's dignity and of his sublime end. For man surpasses all other visible creatures by the superiority of his rational nature alone. Besides, God wishes men to be born not only that they should live and fill the earth, but much more that they may be worshippers of God, that they may know Him and love Him and finally enjoy Him forever in heaven; and this end, since man is raised by God in a marvelous way to the supernatural order, surpasses all that eye hath seen, and ear heard, and all that hath entered into the heart of man. From which it is easily seen how great a gift of divine goodness and how remarkable a fruit of marriage are children born by the omnipotent power of God through the cooperation of those bound in wedlock.<sup>13</sup>

Pius XII speaks explicitly about the obligation to have children but teaches that the obligation is not absolute; that is, there may be moral reasons for the spouses to elect not to fulfill that obligation. Pius XII's instruction on the nature of the obligation to have children is lengthy but deserves to be cited in full because of its importance:

If the act [of sexual intercourse] be limited to the sterile periods insofar as the mere use and not the right is concerned, there is no question about the validity of the marriage. Nevertheless, the moral licitness of such conduct on the part of the couple

<sup>10</sup> Ford and Kelly maintain that the "obligation" to procreate was first articulated by Pius XII, but I believe it to have been implicit in the description of the primary end of marriage as procreation. Chap. 2 of my book argues that the traditional understanding of the ranking of the ends of marriage is not incompatible with *Gaudium et Spes*.

<sup>11</sup> See *Gaudium et Spes* 50, *Humanae Vitae* 9, and *Familiaris Consortio* 14.

<sup>12</sup> *On Christian Marriage* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1930), 8.

<sup>13</sup> *On Christian Marriage*, 9.



would have to be approved or denied according as to whether or not the intention of observing those periods constantly was based on sufficient and secure moral grounds. The mere fact that the couple do not offend the nature of the act and are prepared to accept and bring up the child which in spite of their precautions came into the world would not be sufficient in itself to guarantee the rectitude of intention and the unobjectionable morality of the motives themselves.

The reason for this is that marriage obliges to a state of life which, while conferring certain rights also imposes the fulfillment of a positive work in regard to the married state itself. In such a case, one can apply the general principle that a positive fulfillment may be omitted when serious reasons [*gravi motivi*], independent from the good will of those obliged by it, show that a similar demand cannot reasonably be made of human nature.

The marriage contract which confers upon husband and wife the right to satisfy the inclinations of nature, sets them up in a certain state of life, the married state. But upon couples who perform the act peculiar to their state, nature and the Creator impose the function of helping the conservation of the human race. The characteristic activity which gives their state its value is the *bonum proles*. The individual and society, the people and the state, the Church itself depend for their existence on the order established by God on fruitful marriage. Therefore, to embrace the married state, continuously to make use of the faculty proper to it and lawful in it alone, and on the other hand, to withdraw always and deliberately with no serious reason [*un grave motivo*] from its primary obligation, would be a sin against the very meaning of conjugal life.

There are serious motives [*seri motivi*], such as those often mentioned in the so-called medical, eugenic, economic, and social "indications", that can exempt for a long time, perhaps even the whole duration of the marriage, from the positive and obligatory carrying out of the act. From this it follows that observing the non-fertile periods alone can be lawful only under a moral aspect. Under the conditions mentioned it really

is so. But if, according to a rational and just judgment [*secondo un giudizio ragionevole et equo*], there are no similar grave reasons [*gravi ragioni*] of a personal nature or deriving from external circumstances, then the determination to avoid habitually the fecundity of the union while at the same time to continue satisfying their sensuality, can be derived only from a false appreciation of life and from reasons having nothing to do with proper ethical laws.<sup>14</sup>

Pius XII teaches that unless some serious circumstances arise, spouses are obliged to have children. But he also makes it clear that it is moral for spouses to limit their family size or even to refrain from having children altogether if they have sufficiently serious reasons. We shall consider below what constitute just reasons for limiting family size or for not having any children. (We shall also comment upon the proper understanding of the force of such phrases as "grave reasons", "serious motives", and "rational and just judgments" that appear in the text cited above and reappear in *Humanae Vitae*.)

*Gaudium et Spes* 50 also speaks of the obligation of spouses to have children and speaks of it in specifically Christian terms:

Married couples should regard it as their proper mission to transmit human life and to educate their children; they should realize that they are thereby cooperating with the love of God the Creator and are, in a certain sense, its interpreters. This involves the fulfillment of their role with a sense of human and Christian responsibility and the formation of correct judgments through docile respect for God and common reflection and effort.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Pius XII, "Address to the Italian Catholic Union of Midwives" (Oct. 29, 1951), in AAS XLIII (1951): 835-54. Trans. by Vincent A. Yzermans, *The Major Address of Pope Pius XII*, vol. 1 (St. Paul, Minn.: Worth Central Publishing, 1961), 168-69.

<sup>15</sup> Translation from Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Co., 1975), 953.

The very first line of *Humanae Vitae* picks up on this description of the proper mission of spouses: "God has entrusted to spouses the extremely important mission of transmitting human life." *Familiaris Consortio* speaks at great length about children as a gift and lauds the essential role the family plays in advancing the goods of civilization and in the process of evangelization and sanctification. Perhaps one line best sums up the thrust of the document: "The future of humanity passes by way of the family."<sup>16</sup>

John Paul II in other speeches and writings has regularly added his voice to the chorus on these points. In a homily on the mall in Washington, D.C., he said,

In order that Christian marriage may favor the total good and development of the married couple, it must be inspired by the Gospel, and thus be open to new life—new life to be given and accepted generously. The couple is also called to create a family atmosphere in which children can be happy and lead full and worthy human and Christian lives.

To maintain a joyful family requires much from both the parents and the children. Each member of the family has to become, in a special way, the servant of the others and share their burdens (cf. Gal 6:2; Phil 2:2). Each one must show concern, not only for his or her own life, but also for the lives of the other members of the family: their needs, their hopes, their ideals. Decisions about the number of children and the sacrifices to be made for them must not be taken only with a view to adding to comfort and preserving a peaceful existence. Reflecting upon this matter before God, with the graces drawn from the sacrament, and guided by the teaching of the Church, parents will remind themselves that it is certainly less serious to deny their children certain comforts or material advantages than to deprive them of the presence of brothers and sisters, who could help them to grow in humanity and to realize the beauty of life at all its ages and in all its variety.

If parents fully realize the demands and the opportunities that this great sacrament brings, they could not fail to join in

<sup>16</sup> *Familiaris Consortio* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981), 86.

Mary's hymn to the Author of life—to God who has made them His chosen fellow workers.<sup>17</sup>

The Catholic Church, then, teaches that children are a great good and it teaches that all couples have a moral obligation to be open to having children. Nevertheless, it teaches that there may be good reasons for spouses not to pursue the good of children at a certain time. And, what is expected to be a very rare occurrence, there may be good reasons that exempt spouses for the duration of the marriage from fulfilling their obligation.

Before we turn to examining what reasons might be good reasons for not pursuing the good of children, let us dismiss one false misunderstanding of the basis for the obligation to have children. Since Christians believe that in having children they are bringing forth new souls to share an eternity with God, some think that spouses must have children and have as many children as they can care for, since by not having children they would be denying souls the opportunity to come into existence. This view seems to be based on the false view that souls preexist and are, in a sense, awaiting a landing place. But souls do not preexist an act of sexual intercourse, nor is the act of sexual intercourse at a fertile time sufficient to bring forth new life. Rather, Christians believe that God creates a new soul for each new life that comes into existence and is thus the immediate source for that new soul coming into existence.<sup>18</sup> Sexual intercourse provides God an opportunity to do his creative work.<sup>19</sup> There is no "preexisting"

<sup>17</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Let Us Celebrate Life" (homily, Oct. 7, 1979), in *U.S.A.: The Message of Justice, Peace and Love* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1979), 281–82.

<sup>18</sup> On this point, Thomas Aquinas states, "The rational soul is a subsistent form, as was explained [Q. 75, a. 2], and so it is competent to be and to be made. And since it cannot be made of pre-existing matter,—whether corporeal, which would render it a corporeal being,—or spiritual, which would involve the transmutation of one spiritual substance into another, we must conclude that it cannot come to be except by creation" (*Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 94, art. 2, in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis [New York: Random House, 1945] vol. I, 866).

<sup>19</sup> See chap. 4 of *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later* for further discussion of this point.

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new life that is being denied an earthly existence because spouses seek to avoid a pregnancy. If this were so, it would seem that everyone would have an obligation to bring new life into the world; celibates would be doing possible future generations a great disservice by pursuing a life of celibacy. But, again, the claim that by not having children one is denying life an opportunity to come into existence is not plausibly true, for one cannot deny something to something or someone that does not exist. Spouses may be doing each other, society, and God an injustice in not having children, they may be making themselves willful and selfish arbiters of when it is good for a new life to come into existence, but they are not doing an injustice to some "possible child".

Although bringing new life into existence is a great good, spouses are not, therefore, obligated to have as many children as they can. In the remainder of the essay (1) I shall maintain that spouses need not have as many children as they can biologically, financially, and psychologically sustain; (2) I shall sketch out what constitute moral reasons for limiting family size; (3) I shall speculate about whether there is any size of family that should be considered minimal and attempt to give guidelines for spouses in their attempt to determine the best family size for their particular situation; (4) and finally, I shall address a question sometimes raised by those wary of NFP: Will those who use NFP lose sight of the procreative meaning of sexual intercourse and give themselves over to sensuality?

### *The Limits to the Obligation to Have Children*

It is never possible to define positive obligations completely, that is, obligations *to do* something, since the contingencies and variables of life are so great. Again, it is much easier to define negative prohibitions that forbid the doing of something. It is always hard to determine when one has met one's positive obligations. For

instance, when has one given enough to charity? Although it may be difficult to determine, it is not impossible to determine the limits to what one must give to charity; they are determined by one's means and one's other obligations and are best discerned through reasonable and prayerful reflection.

As has been established, marriage brings with it the positive obligation to have children. It might be said that all vocations bring with them obligations; for instance, a priest has an obligation to perform the sacraments, doctors have the obligation to heal, and lawyers have the obligation to do legal work. Yet, "obligation" is used in a somewhat loose sense here. Certainly, it would be curious for one to gain the skills of a profession and be unwilling to exercise them at all; however, only specific circumstances would make it a positive moral obligation to exercise those skills. We can all conceive of instances where we would think circumstances oblige a priest to hear a confession, a doctor to heal the sick, a lawyer to defend the accused. No one, however, would argue that priests are obliged to attempt to perform as many sacraments as possible, or doctors to heal as many patients as possible, or lawyers to do as much legal work as possible, or even that they have an obligation to do any given amount of their respective tasks. The virtue of prudence is needed to specify obligations of this nature; each individual will have to use prudence to determine if fulfilling a certain obligation is necessary in light of the other moral demands on him. For instance, a doctor may have many children of his own that he must help care for and may not be able to take more patients, a lawyer may be caring for elderly parents and not be able to take more cases, and so on. If priests, doctors, and lawyers may limit the exercise of the tasks to some degree obligatory for those in their vocations, would this not also be true of those called to be parents?

Of course, there is not a complete parallel between a married person choosing for or against parenthood and a lawyer deciding whether or not to plead a case. The obligations of parents, certainly, seem to be more closely analogous to those of priests; the sacrament of ordination brings with it obligations to administer the



sacraments, an obligation much stronger than that of a lawyer ever to plead a case. Becoming a doctor or lawyer does not effect the ontological change upon one that ordination to the priesthood does or marriage does. Once a priest, always a priest; those married are married for life; parents are parents for a lifetime. Taking the vow to be a priest or to be married is taking a vow to perform certain services for God; it is not a simple, revisable career choice. One of the elements of the pledge of marriage is to accept children.

But, to continue the analogy, a priest does not have to administer the sacraments if certain circumstances or other obligations preclude his doing so. For instance, a priest who is the president of a college would not need to hear confessions regularly. Even as president, though, he would have the obligation to hear a dying man's confession, no matter how inconvenient it is to do so. Thus, these sacramental modes of life bring with them certain obligations that must be met if certain conditions prevail.

Although most couples may face circumstances that require them to limit their family, having children is something that can reasonably be undertaken by most couples; that is, having children does not put an undue burden on the resources, financial, physical, psychological, or spiritual, of most couples. It is also certainly true that having children imposes an undue burden on some couples. An extreme instance would be if a couple were living in a regime where they would be killed if they were to bear a child; they would be justified in postponing childbearing indefinitely and perhaps in never having children at all. The teaching of Pope Pius XII cited above illuminates this question. He counsels that couples with known genetic defects or a woman whose life may be threatened by a pregnancy could enter a marriage intending to practice periodic abstinence for the whole of a marriage as long as the spouses would accept lovingly any child they may happen to conceive. They do not "intend" to have children in a positive and direct fashion, but if they refuse to use unnatural methods of birth control, they can also be said not to intend to thwart the natural end of marriage, since they never

engage in any positive action against that end. For just reasons, they choose not to pursue this end actively. The obligation to have children, then, is one that is not absolute; circumstances may exempt some spouses from fulfilling this obligation to have children.

### *Reasons for Limiting Family Size*

In passing, several reasons that would legitimate limiting family size have already been given. Can we formulate any general principles that characterize these reasons? First I would like to take a look at what the Church states about this matter. Five different phrases are used in *Humanae Vitae* in speaking to this question. HV 10 states:

If we look further to physical, economic, psychological and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised by those who, guided by prudent consideration and generosity, elect to accept many children. Those are also to be considered responsible, who, for serious reasons [*seriis causis*] and with due respect for moral precepts, decide not to have another child either for a definite or an indefinite amount of time.

HV 16 states: "Certainly, there may be just reasons [*justae causae*] for spacing offspring; these may be based on the physical or psychological condition of the spouses, or may be based on external factors." Further on it states the spouses may have worthy and weighty justifications (*argumenta . . . honesta et gravia*), defensible reasons (*probabiles rationes*), and just reasons (*iustae rationes*) for limiting their family size. It is my view that the common rendering of some of these phrases, such as "serious reasons" or "grave reasons", may suggest weightier reasons are required than is necessary. I believe the phrase "just reasons" to reflect more precisely what is meant. Trivial reasons will not do, but reasons less than life-threatening conditions will. What are these reasons that lie between what is trivial and what is life-threatening?

A passage from *Gaudium et Spes* 50 suggests what constitutes a

good decision by the spouses; it "takes into consideration their own good and the good of their children already born or yet to come, an ability to read the signs of the times and of their own situation on the material and spiritual level, and finally, an estimation of the good of the family, of society, and of the Church".<sup>20</sup> It seems right to say, then, that the Church teaches that in planning their family size, spouses need to be just to all their obligations: those to God, to each other, to the family they already have, and to all their commitments. They need to have defensible reasons, ones that are not selfish but that are directed to a good beyond their own comfort and convenience. As *Humanae Vitae* 10 states, physical or psychological reasons for limiting family size, and external factor—here one supposes financial and political factors are meant—also may shape a couple's decision about the responsibility of having a child.

Moreover, it must be understood that Christians have many ways of advancing the goods of the Kingdom of God, of which having children is only one. Those who are married have the mission (*munus*) of having children, but it is not their sole mission. They may be involved in other work that is also conducive to building up the Kingdom. Indeed, spouses may need to limit their family size precisely for the good of the family that they already have. Couples may have very good reasons for wanting to avoid a pregnancy: the wife may be ill, and another pregnancy may put undue strain on her health; she may have a sickly child or relative to care for and not be able to attend to the needs of an infant. A spouse may have psychological problems that makes him or her unsuited to be a parent at a given time. And let us repeat that health reasons are not the only morally acceptable reasons for avoiding pregnancy; *Humanae Vitae* 16 notes that "external factors" as well as the physical and psychological condition of the spouses may make the spacing of children necessary. The family may be

<sup>20</sup> Translation from Flannery, *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, 953.

experiencing severe financial difficulties or perhaps even joblessness. As in China, spouses may face a forced abortion if a pregnancy occurs. If couples have the knowledge (as they do with NFP) that would assist them in avoiding a pregnancy without doing anything immoral, it is morally licit for them to use such means.

In a word, spouses may have many good and moral reasons for wishing to limit their family size. Some Christians, however, might ask: Are couples who use NFP demonstrating too little faith in providence? Are they refusing to trust in God to provide for them and their families while they fulfill their vocational obligations to parenthood? Are they assuming that they know more about their health and financial needs, for instance, than does God? Shouldn't spouses have faith that if God "sends" them another child, he will provide the means to care for that child? Many spouses have tales to tell of being "miraculously" rescued and provided for when another child arrives; hence the adage "A child always arrives carrying a loaf of bread."

While it is undoubtedly true that God can and does provide for our needs, especially when we are struggling ardently to do his will, it is also true that our ability to reason and plan is also a gift from God, and one that he expects us to use. It is certainly true that some couples may be physically able to have more children than they can care for. Karol Wojtyla (now John Paul II) counsels that it is a moral necessity for some couples to limit their family size:

There are, however, circumstances in which this disposition [to be a responsible parent] itself demands renunciation of procreation, and any further increase in the size of the family would be incompatible with parental duty. A man and a woman moved by true concern for the good of their family and a mutual sense of responsibility for the birth, maintenance, and upbringing of their children, will then limit intercourse and abstain from it in periods in which this might result in another

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The Church has always taught that man is to be responsible in his disposition of the gifts and goods that God has given him. Saving for the children's education, for retirement, or for possible emergencies does not exhibit a lack of trust in God. Planning one's family size is befitting a creature who is able to reason. Recall the passage from HV 10 cited earlier: "If we look further to physical, economic, psychological and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised by those who, guided by prudent consideration and generosity, elect to accept many children." *Gaudium et Spes* also states: "Among the married couples who thus fulfill their God-given mission special mention should be made of those who after prudent reflection and common decisions courageously undertake the proper upbringing of a large number of children(50)."<sup>22</sup> Having many children, then, is to be the result of "prudent reflection", not the spontaneous result of a refusal to plan. Some couples may be so well situated that they need not plan when to have children and how many to have, but for them the decision not to plan is itself a prudent decision, a kind of a plan.

Some might still ask: Is there room even for those who are not altogether well situated just to let the babies come and trust God's ability to provide? In our materialistic age it is easy to overestimate what resources are needed to raise children well, and most of us need more diligently to seek the Kingdom of God first and trust him to provide as we do. Nonetheless, it is irresponsible for couples not to use NFP if they have little expectation that they could care for another child. Yet, if a pregnancy occurs in spite of their use of NFP (a very rare occurrence), then they should have confidence that God will provide. The need for heroic sacrifice, however, is not so hard to come by; perhaps it is not an oxymoron

<sup>21</sup> Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 243.

<sup>22</sup> Translation from Flannery, *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*.



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to note that "heroic faith" is needed in the *ordinary* circumstances of raising children, to make the sacrifices necessary to care for them, to exhibit the patience they need to have a loving upbringing. Some may be called to more extraordinary heroic faith if they bear a handicapped or retarded child. God will surely honor our willingness to undertake hardships to be generous with him, but we must be responsible in doing so. Primarily what he asks of us is that we graciously embrace the hardships that come our way.

But what about couples who are able to care well for many children, for whom having another child would not present an undue burden? Do they have an obligation to have as many children as they are able to care for well?

Again, many would find this to be a nearly an absurd question; they would argue that having children is one of the many goods of this world, but surely not a good to which all other goods must be sacrificed. Christians, however, with their heightened sense of the value of human life, may think that having children is a good to be pursued at the expense of all other goods. There is, though, little evidence that this is the view even of the Church. *Gaudium et Spes* states that it is up to the couple to decide how many children they ought to have.<sup>23</sup> The passage from *Gaudium et Spes* 50 cited above suggests that having a large family would be a generous thing to do. Surely all Christians are called to be generous, but they are called to be generous in different ways. There is a note of the "supererogatory" here. This term refers to actions that are beyond what is obligatory; we must all do what is obligatory (again, with the proper qualifications). What is "supererogatory" may be asked of some of us but is not required of all of us. Thus, having a large family is the generous act that God asks of some spouses; he will ask other kinds of generous acts of other spouses. It is likely that those who are good and able parents and enjoy being parents and have the resources to enable them to take care of a large number of children should have large families; such talents and circumstances suggest that this is what God is calling them to.

<sup>23</sup> Flannery, 954.



Other couples may not be so inclined or so situated. They may also have other very pressing and worthy obligations—say, to elderly parents, or to public service or the like—obligations that would be neglected should they have more children. These seem also to constitute serious and just reasons for limiting family size. These also constitute ways of being generous with God.

### *Proper Family Size*

Is it right to conclude, then, that couples must have as many children as they can care for well without neglecting other obligations? I can find nothing in Church documents that suggests this or that even suggests what size a family might be considered a kind of norm. Since in past ages spouses have had little control over their fertility, such guidance was largely unnecessary, but since in the modern age methods of natural family planning have allowed us to be able to have a great deal of control over family size, such guidance would be helpful to many. Karol Wojtyla (now John Paul II), in his book *Love and Responsibility*, speaks of “the morally correct” number of children, whereby he seems to mean a number that constitutes a full family:

The family is an institution created by procreation within the framework of marriage. It is a natural community, directly dependent on the parents for its existence and functioning. The parents create the family as a complement to and extension of their love. To create a family means to create a community, since the family is a social unit or else it is not a family. To be a community it must have a certain size. This is most obvious in the context of education. For the family is an educational institution within the framework of which the personality of a new human being is formed. If it is to be correctly formed it is very important that this human being should not be alone, but surrounded by a natural community. We are sometimes told that it is easier to bring up several children together than an only child, and also that two children are not a community—

they are two only children. It is the role of the parents to direct their children's upbringing, but under their direction the children educate themselves because they develop within the framework of a community of children, a collective of siblings.<sup>24</sup>

This passage seems to suggest that only two children would not constitute a complete family. One of my friends, independently of the Pope's suggestion, upon the birth of his third child, said with a sigh of relief, "Now we have a family." (This man is now father of seven and still hopeful for more.) He explained that he thought three children was a "critical mass" for a family. That is, he thought when there were simply two children, they could too easily be two "only" children, pampered and spoiled by the parents and easily able to divide goods. He said three children made a social unit in which they needed to negotiate with more seriousness among each other; they really needed to share and could not each "have a parent".

Now let us hasten to say that no judgment is meant, of course, on those who are not able to have many children, nor is the suggestion made that smaller families cannot be "proper" families. But perhaps there is a family size most conducive to achieving the ends of a family for community living and all that comes with it and that this should be a goal for couples, insofar as possible. As several of the passages cited above suggest, large families are generally good at fostering generosity and selflessness in their members. This is not to say that small families cannot be successful at the same, but it suggests that some characteristics are more easily developed in large families. What has been said here about the importance of at least three children for a family is not to suggest that those who can must have at least three, or that once a couple has had three, they need have no more. Rather, these reflections have been offered to suggest the kind of factors that should be taken into account when couples are assessing the wisdom of having or not having more children.

It is my observation that couples do not often feel confident in

<sup>24</sup> Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 242-43.

their parenting skills until the third child. Up to that point, parenting can seem (and often is) overwhelming. By the time of the birth of the third child, however, couples (for the sake of survival if nothing else) have begun to acquire some significant parenting skills and tend to enjoy greatly the interaction between the children. The oldest one starts being of some help, and the youngest is generally greatly amused by the antics of his siblings and requires less full-time attention from the parents. Parents who deliberately stop at two children might find they enjoy parenting much more were they to have three. I have heard many mothers remark that after four, it does not make all that much difference if there is one more, and then one more, etc. The exponential leap of demands made on one's self with one baby or two is simply not repeated as the family grows.

Let us address the final concern here: Will those who use NFP lose sight of the procreative meaning of sexual intercourse and give themselves over to sensuality? Are couples who confine sexual intercourse to the infertile period, in attempting to avoid a pregnancy and to achieve union, guilty of giving themselves over to sensuality, to the selfish pursuit of sexual pleasure? Let us here understand sensuality to be the state of being out of control in regard to one's sexuality, the state of seeking sexual pleasure irrespective of the pursuit of other goods, or even in violation of other goods. We shall understand sensuality to be a state of luxuriating in the sexual delights of sexual intercourse *without* regard for the deeper meanings of the sexual act.

How does pleasure factor into the understanding of sexual intercourse as an action that has two purposes or meanings of an unbreakable connection, that of union and of procreation? Often union and the seeking of pleasure are thought to be identical. But the pleasurable effect of sexual intercourse is not the same as the unitive meaning. Pleasure is not one of the defining purposes of sexual intercourse, though it generally follows upon sexual intercourse and is almost always the motivating reason for sexual intercourse. Those who seek to have sexual intercourse solely for the purpose of experiencing pleasure and with no intention of

achieving union or of accepting the children that may result are violating the purpose of sexual intercourse and are guilty of sensuality. But those who partake in sexual intercourse during the infertile period for the sake of pleasure are not necessarily guilty of sensuality. It is wrong to think that couples who have sexual intercourse during the infertile period in order to avoid pregnancy are thereby necessarily guilty of pursuing sensual pleasures selfishly. Some may be guilty of such, but this is not the necessary or even likely consequence of the method;<sup>25</sup> selfish sensuality is more likely a result of their inability to order their passions or a result of not understanding the purpose and nature of sexual intercourse.

Not all sexual intercourse pursued for the sake of pleasure is hedonistic or a wrongful pursuit of sensual pleasure. Pleasure, again, may be the motive for engaging in an act that by its nature leads to union (and procreation), and so long as one embraces the goods that follow from the act, pleasure is not a vicious motive for performing it. One cannot contradict the other goods of an act when performing it (as one does when contracepting), but to seek the pleasure an act affords, while respecting the goods of that act, is not immoral. Seeking pleasure is not in itself a sin; seeking pleasure *selfishly* is a sin, but pleasure can also be sought in an unselfish way and in a way that brings goods to others as well as to one's self. Parents often play with their children because it pleases them; the play is not therefore vitiated because it was initiated because of a desire for pleasure. The good of the child need not be uppermost in the mind of the parents, but the good of the child may not be incompatible with the pleasure the parents intend. As long as the good of the children is also sought, for parents to seek their own pleasure is good since it properly satisfies natural human desires.

Those who engage in sexual intercourse for purposes of pleasure need not be doing so selfishly. If the desire for sexual pleasure

<sup>25</sup> Pope John Paul II does allow that methods of NFP can be used improperly, if separated from the ethical dimension proper to it. See, for instance, *Reflections on Humanae Vitae* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1984), 45.

motivates one to seek to have sexual intercourse with one's spouse, and if one is striving to help one's spouse achieve what is good also, one is acting morally and bringing about what is good. For instance, one may succeed in making one's spouse feel loved, or the mutual pleasure may foster intimacy and bonding, or comfort may be given and received. Here we see the unitive meaning of sexual intercourse being preserved without the procreative meaning being violated.

John Paul II teaches that far from fostering sensuality, the proper practice of NFP will enhance the loving relationship of the spouses and make their acts of sexual intercourse ones more expressive of love and acts more authentically expressive of total self-giving. The use of NFP, far from bringing about a state of sensuality, is more likely to assist one in gaining control of one's sexual appetites, in appreciating the deeper meanings of sexual intercourse, and in being better able to express them. Throughout his writings, John Paul II speaks to this point. Consider this passage:

If conjugal chastity (and chastity in general) is manifested at first as the capacity to resist the concupiscence of the flesh, it later gradually reveals itself as a singular capacity to perceive, love and practice those meanings of the "language of the body" which remain altogether unknown to concupiscence itself and which progressively enrich the marital dialogue of the couple, purifying it, deepening it, and at the same time simplifying it.

Therefore, that asceticism of continence, of which the encyclical speaks (HV 12), does not impoverish "affective manifestations", but rather makes them spiritually more intense and enriches."<sup>26</sup>

Those who have the virtue of self-mastery are better able to ensure that their acts of sexual intercourse are more truly acts of love-making rather than acts designed merely to satisfy sexual urges.

John Paul II claims that self-mastery gives one some freedom

<sup>26</sup> *Reflections on Humanae Vitae*, 64.



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from one's sensual impulses and observes, "This freedom presupposes such a capacity to direct the sensual and emotive reactions as to make possible the giving of self to the other 'I' on the grounds of the mature self-possession of one's own 'I' in its corporeal and emotive subjectivity."<sup>27</sup> In other words, the freedom gained through self-mastery enables one to refrain from sexual intercourse when it would not promote the good of the marriage and to engage in it when it does. This control over one's sexual desires makes one a more thoughtful and attentive lover, for one will be having sexual intercourse in the context of what is good for the marriage, not as the result of uncontrollable sexual desires. Thus, John Paul II, far from thinking that NFP leads to sensuality, thinks that it can be a cure for sensuality. He also seems to think that those who use NFP will have a better understanding of the meaning of sexual intercourse, and that those who have this better understanding will enjoy sexual intercourse more since it will engage them not only physically but psychologically and spiritually as well. So, in his view, the use of NFP protects against sensuality and increases pleasure.

The free and unfettered enjoyment of sexual intercourse by spouses is undoubtedly a source of much pleasure and many goods for spouses when the circumstances of their lives allow such. To be able to find every pregnancy a welcome event, those unplanned as well as planned, is surely a great blessing. But there are times when couples must limit their family size and must curtail their sexual activity. They should be confident that if their decision to limit their family size is well discerned, in using NFP they should be confident that they are acting morally and not mistrusting God or misusing their sexual powers.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 80.



# Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader

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