

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING VS. CONTRACEPTION: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

by Janet E. Smith

Some people claim contraception and natural family planning are essentially the same: Both can be used by couples who want to have sexual intercourse but who don't want to have a baby. There is more to an action, however, than the motivation behind it. Intentionally preventing the life-giving potential of sexual intimacy is not the same as the prudent reliance on periodic abstinence to avoid conception. Below are four ways they are different:

Moral Differences

Contraception: Those who use contraception treat fertility as a defect. They act to prevent a potential life-giving act from being life-giving. Moreover, contraception greatly reduces the meaning of the marital act, which by its very nature is meant to express complete self-giving and commitment. What expresses this better than saying, "I am willing to be a parent with you"?

Natural Family Planning: The nature of married love calls couples to give themselves wholly to one another in an intimate language that says, "I make a complete gift of myself to you. I want only what is good for you. I am willing to be a parent with you." Couples using NFP acknowledge the gift of fertility and do not contradict the intimate language of the body, thereby respecting God's plan for sexuality.

Relationship Effects

Contraception: The availability of contraception encourages promiscuity. It leads many men and women to engage in sexual relationships with persons they may not know well and have no intention of marrying, and sometimes with persons they don't even like. Even when they have contraceptive sex with those whom they believe they love, the use of contraception can seem to make unnecessary such conversations as: "What happens if our contraception fails?" That question alone can put a relationship in danger! Contraception also facilitates cohabitation, which generally is bad preparation for marriage.

Natural Family Planning: NFP fosters chastity and requires commitment. Those who have practiced abstinence before marriage find NFP easier than those who have been sexually active. They know abstinence can be an expression of love rather than a deprivation, and they generally have a larger "tool kit" for showing love and affection — e.g., going for walks, dancing, cooking together and cuddling. NFP also facilitates strong communication skills, which is one of the important glues for a relationship.

Social Consequences

Contraception: Among the many negative consequences of widespread contraception are a great increase in unwed pregnancy, single parenthood, abortion and divorce. Singleparent families are more likely to suffer poverty and hardship, and the children have many more difficulties achieving success in life and relationships.

Natural Family Planning: Studies show that couples who use NFP almost never divorce. Let that sink in. Marriages are strengthened by what it takes to use NFP successfully: self-discipline, commitment, communication, mutual agreement on goals, generosity, and a love for God's gift of sexuality.

Health Effects

Contraception: The various forms of hormonal contraception have a multitude of bad physical side effects, including an increased risk of breast cancer and strokes. (EDITOR'S NOTE: See additional risks on page 25.) This is unsurprising, since these forms of contraception fill a woman's body with synthetic hormones that suppress her natural hormones and fertility.

Natural Family Planning: NFP has no bad physical side effects. None. To the contrary, a woman who knows how to chart her cycles has a treasure trove of information that helps her and her physician understand any problems she may have with fertility and health concerns that come with hormonal imbalance, most of which can be treated by changes in diet and by vitamin and mineral supplements.

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Celebrating Life and Love

FIFTY YEARS AGO, the sexual revolution was in full swing. The reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which ended nearly three years earlier, had raised expectations that the Catholic Church would overturn her long-standing prohibition against contraception — a teaching opposed by many, including outspoken theologians at the time. When Pope Paul VI finally published the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* on July 25, 1968, reaffirming the Church's perennial teaching, it was met with widespread dissent. Still today, polling reveals that the large majority of Catholics believe artificial birth control to be morally acceptable — or not a moral issue at all. Such evidence suggests that *Humanae Vitae* was, ultimately, a colossal failure. What reason, then, could we possibly have to celebrate the encyclical's 50th anniversary?

The first answer to this question lies in section 18 of the document itself. There, Paul VI anticipates the encyclical's rejection, writing: "It does not surprise the Church that she becomes, like her divine Founder, a 'sign of contradiction'; yet she does not, because of this, cease to proclaim with humble firmness the entire moral law, both the natural law and the law of the Gospel." The Holy Father then goes on to explain that, contrary to popular belief, the Church has no authority to change such teachings about morality. Rather, she only interprets and proclaims them in order to defend human dignity and promote "the true good of man." To ask if the encyclical was a "success," therefore, is to ask the wrong question. To paraphrase Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, God does not call us to be successful; he calls us to be faithful.

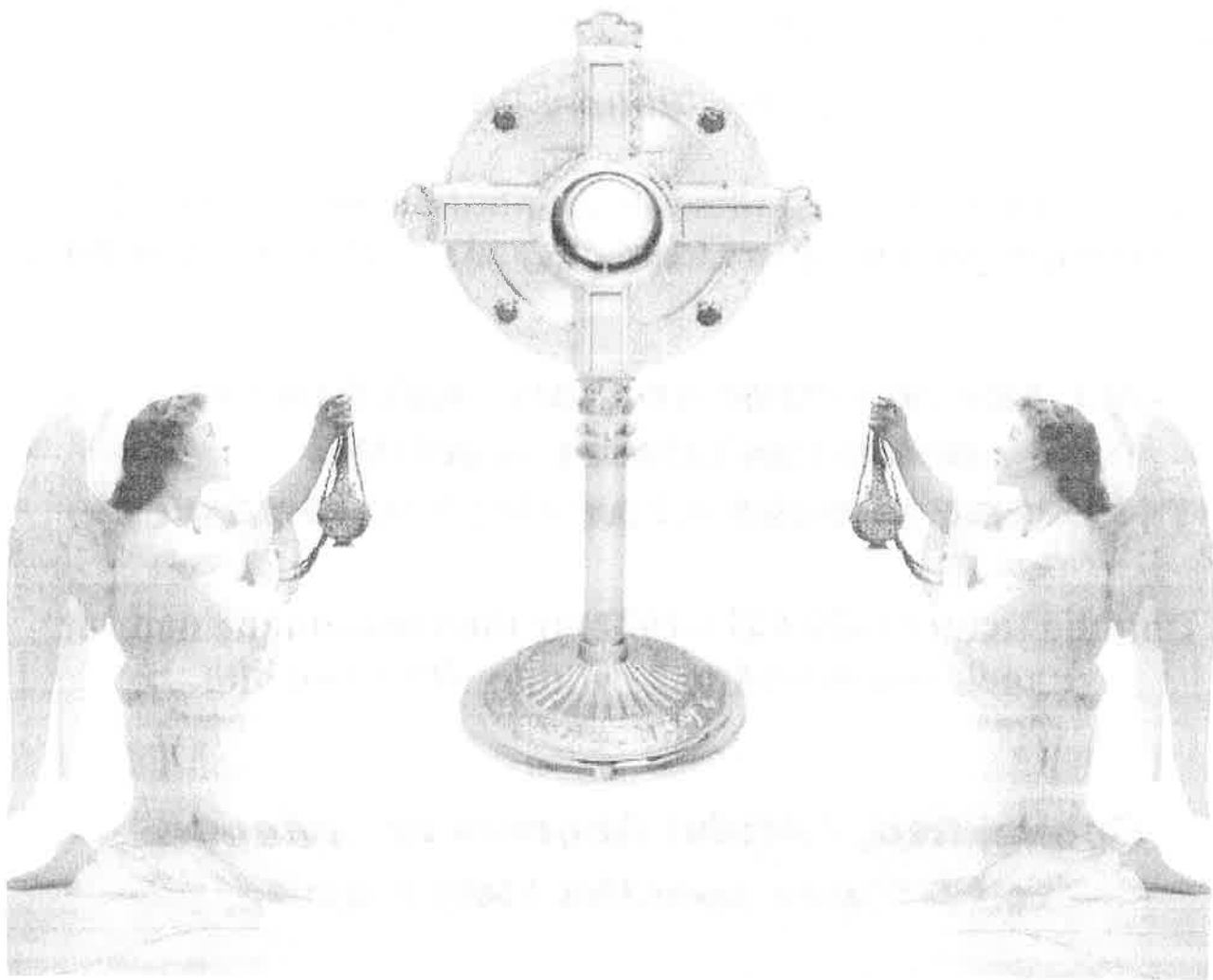
Humanae Vitae is, in the end, actually more relevant today than ever before, especially in light of cultural, ecclesial and scientific developments over the past five decades. For one thing, it has become increasingly clear

that the sexual revolution, despite its promise of "free love," brought neither authentic freedom nor authentic love, but the reverse. Indeed, the expansion of the culture of death and the breakdown of the family have proved Paul VI's warnings in *Humanae Vitae* to be prophetic (see page 10). Moreover, the Church has developed a deeper appreciation and understanding of the encyclical's message about married love, especially through the pontificate of St. John Paul II, which has inspired a new generation of priests eager to share the Gospel of Life (see pages 22, 30). Finally, Catholic physicians and researchers, in answer to Paul VI's call, have done an extraordinary service to society by advancing the science of fertility (see page 20).

At the heart of each of these developments are real people and relationships, demonstrating the concrete impact of understanding, accepting and proclaiming the Church's wisdom about life and love. This brings us to another document of Paul VI, published seven years after *Humanae Vitae*. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, which effectively called for a new evangelization, Paul VI explained: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (41). In other words, the primary way the Church evangelizes is through the living example of her members.

This commemorative edition of *Columbia* is filled with compelling testimonies from people who have discovered the Church's life-giving message about marital love. We invite you to read their stories of hope with an open mind and heart so that you, too, might come to a better understanding of why *Humanae Vitae* is truly something to celebrate. ♦

ALTON J. PELOWSKI
EDITOR



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