

What is Natural Family Planning (NFP), What Does the Catholic Church Think of It, and Why Could It Use a New Name?

What is the primary purpose of marriage?

While there are other goods that marriage has to offer such as the good of the husband and the wife, as well as the welfare of the human race, the primary purpose of marriage is the begetting of children. In fact, the very name “Matrimony” comes from two Latin words that mean the “the duty of motherhood.”

Does the Catholic Church require married couples to be open to having children?

God rules all that He has made. Marriage was made by God. Since God intended marriage for the begetting of children, couples who enter marriage must be open to having children.* In fact, in order for the marriage to be valid, this end of marriage (i.e. the openness to children), must not be excluded at the time of the exchange of vows.

To put it plainly, since God requires it, the Church requires it. Furthermore, since you and your beloved freely, willfully and unreservedly made sacred promises before God to this at your wedding, you are bound to fulfill them.

*Cf Canon Francis J. Ripley, *This is the Faith: A Complete Explanation of the Catholic Faith*, Rockford, Illinois: TAN, 2002, p. 338)

What if we can't have children . . . does that mean that our marriage bond was invalid?

Children are a gift from God; they are the crowning gift of marriage. Yet, sometimes it happens that despite a couples' openness to children they are not blessed with a child. This can be the source of tremendous suffering; however, at times, medical sciences may be able to remedy or improve fertility without violating Christian morals. Furthermore, information gained through use of Natural Family Planning may also aid couples in conceiving.

Note that the “openness to children” spoken about in the question above doesn't imply a mandate to beget children. Furthermore, failure to conceive a child does not invalidate one's marriage.

What is the Catholic norm when it comes to growing one's family?

The Catholic norm is for married couples to submit themselves to God's plan for their family accepting children as a loving gift from Him (when and if) He should desire to bless them in this way.

What is Natural Family Planning?

Natural Family Planning (NFP) is the name given to various methods utilized to assess one's level of fertility through observable biological/physiological/biochemical indicators. This information can then be used to help a married couple either achieve or postpone pregnancy by adapting their timing of the marital act in accord with their intention.

Is Natural Family Planning simply “natural” birth control?

Because the term “Family Planning” is associated with contraceptives, it would be easy to assume that NFP is simply a more “natural” variety of “birth control” that allows a couple to “plan” their family as they see fit. In fact, through my experience talking to many couples using NFP, this is how it is frequently being used. However, for the Catholic Church, the usage of so-called “NFP” doesn't fit the mold of the current cultural perspective on married sexuality, procreation, birth regulation, etc. In fact, the Church doesn't utilize the term “Natural Family Planning” in her official documents; instead it uses terms like “periodic continence” and “regulation of procreation.” The Church's use of “NFP” isn't just a difference in perspective or in wording. The Church actually offers clear conditions as to when such a method may be legitimately utilized as well as criteria that must be met in order that it may be used in a morally upright manner. In short, while the culture may say “yes” in response to this question, the Church's approach to so-called “NFP” is so clearly distinguished from “birth control” that the two cannot be considered identical.

What specific conditions does the Church offer for the appropriate usage of NFP (better termed “Periodic Continence”) when it is being used for the purpose of postponing pregnancy?

1. That there be a **serious reason** to practice periodic continence.
2. That it be with the **mutual consent** of the marriage partners.
3. That this continence **not be the near occasion of mortal sin** for either party.
4. That the periodic continence last **only so long as the serious reason lasts**.
5. It is recommended that the situation be **reviewed by one’s confessor** to insure that all the requisite conditions are present.

—(Answer From: Canon Francis J. Ripley, [This is the Faith: A Complete Explanation of the Catholic Faith](#), Rockford, Illinois: TAN, 2002, p. 357)

What constitutes a serious reason?

Serious reason may arise from the medical (physical or psychological), the eugenic (concerning the ability to produce “normal” offspring, e.g. there may be genetic issues that makes progeny’s survival to full-term unlikely), the economic (i.e. “true financial hardship”), or from the social order (e.g. wartime, suffering from a natural disaster). -Ibid, pp. 358-359.

Does the Catholic Church consider it acceptable to use NFP to “plan” one’s family?

While just/serious reasons may arise at times within married life that would make the use of “Natural Family Planning” permissible for postponing pregnancy, the use of NFP to control one’s fertility such that you can build your family as you wish without respect to just/serious reasons is contrary to Natural Law and Church teachings.

Can NFP be used by married couples to help them conceive a child?

Yes. Since NFP provides information on the fertile “window” within a woman’s cycle, this information can be very helpful for couples seeking to conceive a child. Using NFP in this way can be very effective. Furthermore, one can use NFP in this way without committing serious sin (as opposed to other common methods of fertility treatment utilized these days such as In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)). For more information on assessing the morality of fertility treatments visit: <https://tiny.cc/fertilityhelp>

Does the Church ever require that married couples use NFP for postponing pregnancy?

Married couples **may use** NFP when serious reasons arise and all the criteria are met for postponing but the Church never obliges them to do so. “Traditionally, the Church has never criticized married couples for simply accepting the children God sends” (Ibid, p.359). The following quotes from a Catholic marriage manual make the point in this way:

“The control of births, therefore, should always be the exceptional situation, never the normal.” Beyond this, “The modern Catholic couple must be reminded that parenthood is the business of marriage. This is their vocation. The Catholic husband and wife should do this work with wisdom and prudence, and, where there is good cause, may consider family limitation. But family limitation does not *have* to be considered. Most of you will find that the best evidence of a lifetime of worthwhile work will be your children. You should want children; and parenthood, God willing, should be more than an incidental experience in your married lives. If you have a truly Catholic conscience and a love of children, you will find that alleged obstacles can be overcome. Far from losing happiness, you will gain great long-range satisfaction.”

- Rev. George A Kelly, [The Catholic Marriage Manual](#), New York: Random House, 1958, p.46 and pp. 45-46.

Of course, it goes without saying that the use of contraceptives or sterilization to avoid pregnancy is never permissible. Furthermore, if someone does make use of these means for the purpose of postponing/avoiding pregnancy with sufficient knowledge and full consent of the will, he or she commits mortal sin.

NFP should rarely be used (i.e. for postponing pregnancy) and isn’t required by the Church, so why learn it?

Besides being a powerful tool for aiding/postponing conception, it brings with it a wealth of information that can be helpful to identifying certain treatable issues that may affect a wife’s fertility/broader health/pregnancies. Moreover, as rare as it may be for all of the criteria to be met to use NFP for postponing, it seems best that NFP be known before a serious reason arises (as it gives you one more valid and morally good option with which to approach the situation). Then, if the couple does decide to use it, having a prior knowledge of an NFP method will most likely aid the couple in making accurate observations of their signs of fertility, help a couple to employ the method effectively, give the couple confidence in the method, lessen the temptation to contracept, and most likely reduce tension/stress that could be anticipated when learning a method in the midst of what may already be a stressful situation.