



To observe that we live in a society that is suffering greatly from sexual confusion or, if you will, sexual misconduct, is not a novel insight. There is little need here to provide a full set of statistics to demonstrate the consequences of the sexual revolution, for who is not familiar with the epidemic in teenage pregnancies, venereal diseases, divorces, AIDS, etc.? Our society has been undergoing a rapid transformation in terms of sexual behavior and few would argue that it is for the better. For instance, today one out of two marriages end in divorce. Six out of ten teenagers are sexually active. The millions of abortions over the last decade and the phenomenal spread of AIDS alone indicate that our society has serious problems with sexuality. The statistics of ten years ago were bad enough; many thought things could hardly get worse--as did many twenty years ago, and thirty years ago. In the last generation the incidence of sexual activity outside of marriage and all the attendant problems has doubled and tripled--or worse. We have no particular reason to believe that we have seen the peak of the growth in sexually related problems.

Statistics do not really capture the pervasive ills attendant upon sexual immorality. Premature and promiscuous sexuality prevent many from establishing good marriages and a good family life. Few deny that a healthy sexuality and a strong family life are among the most necessary elements for human happiness and well being. It is well attested that strong and secure families are more likely to produce strong and secure individuals; they produce individuals less likely to have problems with alcohol, sex, and drugs; they produce individuals more likely to be free from crippling neuroses and psychoses. Since healthy individuals are not preoccupied with their own problems, they are able to be strong leaders; they are prepared to tackle the problems of society. While many single parents do a worthy and valiant job of raising their children, it remains sadly true that children from broken homes grow up to be adults with a greater propensity for crime, with a greater tendency to engage in alcohol and drug abuse, with a greater susceptibility to psychological disorders.

These realities affect every realm of life--they affect people's ability to relate to friends and family; they affect people's ability to do well at their studies and their jobs; they affect the whole of society which needs stable and secure individuals to

lead us out of our troubles. And those who do not experience love from family and friends tend to seek any semblance of love they can find--and thus become involved in illicit sexual relationships--and the cycle starts again. The multiple varieties of abuse of sexuality and the grievous consequences of such abuse, then, is not only damaging the current generation, it is threatening to ruin the chances of future generations to live happy and fulfilled lives.

Twenty years ago when the sexual revolution was beginning to be in full swing, many argued that the value of the sexual revolution was that it was going to liberate men and women from the repressive view of sexuality pervasive in society; people would be free to make love to those whom they loved without the strictures of marriage. Many pointed to Christianity as the source of sexual repression. But the Christian view of sex, once considered a distorted view of sexuality, is now beginning to look a lot more like wisdom. Christians no longer need to offer apologies for their insistence upon sexual morality, for their insistence upon reserving sex for marriage. Some in high public places are now beginning to counsel abstinence before marriage and to extol faithful monogamous marriages. They have begun to see these as practices of great practical wisdom. Christians, of course, have long recognized the practical value of chastity and fidelity but have also recognized them as practices in accord with God's will for mankind.

In a certain sense, Christian morality--especially in regard to sexual morality--is quite similar to natural morality or common sense morality. One does not need to be a Christian to understand why certain sexual practices are wrong. Christians differ from unbelievers not so much in the understanding of what is moral and immoral as in their commitment to trying to do what is moral. Christians understand that when they are doing wrong they are not only violating good sense, they are violating God's law; they are failing to be the loving and responsible persons God made them to be. Thus, Christian apologetics about sex may not seem much different from common sense apologetics about sex, but it is the Christian tradition which has most faithfully preserved the common wisdom about sex. Clearly it is easy to "forget" or become confused about the common wisdom about sex; Christians are blessed with the powerful aid of revelation and tradition to keep them straight on what constitutes sexual morality.

Yet, although most Christian denominations have remained steadfast in their allegiance to traditional Christian wisdom in sexual issues, few Christians have not been deeply affected by the saturation of our modern cultural forms with a view of sexuality radically opposed to the Christian view. Ten minutes of watching MTV or of a soap opera, ten minutes of listening to any rock, pop or country western music station, one visit to the corner store magazine rack, or two minutes at the beach should serve to convince the most skeptical that our society has very little respect for the Christian moral norms regarding sexual relations. Christians, too, have begun to lose sight of the understanding of sexuality advanced by their tradition. Thus, now is the time for Christians to offer apologetics for their understanding of

the role of sexual relations within human relationships. "Apologetics" is a term used to refer to the energetic attempt to explain one's position to others. But Christians, I think, need to be as concerned with providing apologetics or explanations to themselves and fellow Christians about sex as they need to bring their message to others. Both internal and external evangelizing are necessary, for few if any can escape being adversely affected by the distortions of our times. Christians need to strengthen themselves as well as their compatriots.

Christians have much to learn about their own tradition before they can become effective witnesses to those in the larger society who desperately need to encounter individuals in control of their sexuality and happy because of it. There are a multitude of Christian truths which bear upon sexuality and which would assist Christians and others in escaping the ravages of a disordered sexuality. The time seems to be ripe for making the most persuasive case we can for Christian morality. Certainly, many are ceasing to pursue promiscuous relationships because of their fear of contracting AIDS. But this is not the only reason for the growing disenchantment with the sexual revolution. Many find themselves lonely after their sexual encounters and are looking for something more. There are increasing reports of sexual indifference; many claim to have lost an interest in sex, even with those whom they love. And, while many may not have moral objections to premarital sex and abortion, there seems to be an increasing weariness with these phenomena and an increasing interest in reducing both. Many are beginning to see that the call for more and better sex education, or more and better access to contraceptives is not the solution. Rather, we need a better understanding of the relation of sex, love, marriage, and children. And it is this understanding that I think Christianity can provide. Here let us focus on three fundamental truths about sexuality stressed throughout the Christian tradition; 1) that marriage is the proper arena for sexual activity; 2) that marriages must be faithful for the love of spouses to thrive; and 3) that children are a great gift to spouses. Christian teaching about sexuality also provides guidelines for those with homosexual leanings, and for discerning the morality of a whole host of sexual practices. Here I shall focus primarily upon the Christian understanding of marriage, for if we grasp the basics of this understanding, the implications for most other kinds of sexual activity are fairly clear.

Those attempting to provide apologetics or explanations should have a sense of the needs and views of their audience. As has been suggested above, it is safe to assume that modern Americans have a casual notion of sex; they think it is natural for those who love one another to engage in sexual union, whether married or not, and often whether of the same sex or not. But most have begun to see that happiness is rarely achieved through promiscuity; they have begun to acknowledge that premarital sex has done little to ensure good marriages; they fear that teenage sex and abortions may cause lifetime scars on young people's psyches. To these people we must make the case that happiness, true intimacy, and sexual fulfillment are more naturally found within faithful marriages.

What are the reasons for saying that it is appropriate for sexual union to take place only within marriage? It is hardly deniable that sexual union creates powerful bonds between individuals, even often among those who do not desire such bonds. Those who have sexual intercourse with each other are engaging in an action which bespeaks a deep commitment to the other. The current pope uses an interesting phrase in his teachings on sex--and that is the term "language of the body", which is not so very different from our "body language." He claims bodily actions have meanings much as words do and that unless we intend those meanings with our actions we should not perform them any more than we should speak words we don't mean. In both cases, lies are being "spoken." Sexual union has a well-recognized meaning; it means "I find you attractive"; "I care for you"; "I will try to work for your happiness"; "I wish to have a deep bond with you." Some who engage in sexual intercourse do not mean these things with their actions; they wish simply to use another for their own sexual pleasure. They have lied with their bodies in the same way as someone lies who says "I love you" to another simply for the purposes of obtaining some desired favor.

But some engaging in sexual intercourse outside of marriage claim that they mean all that sexual union means and that therefore they are not lying with their bodies. They are, though, making false promises, for those engaging in sexual intercourse outside of marriage cannot fulfill the promises their bodily actions make. They have not prepared themselves to fulfill the promise of working for another's happiness, or achieving a deep bond with another. For such achievements take a lifetime to complete; they cannot be accomplished in brief encounters.

The existence of the institution of marriage acknowledges the importance of love for the happiness of human beings, the importance of the lifetime unconditional love that marriage facilitates. Humans flourish when they bask in the love of others. Love nourishes human goodness like no other force. For instance, love assists us in feeling secure in ourselves; it gives us the confidence to dare to exercise our talents; it gives us the assurance to reach out to others in love. Love also serves to heal past wounds. Love in almost any form can promote these and other great benefits to mankind, but marital love provides special benefits. Human beings are complicated and are not easily known by themselves or others; a lifetime relationship with another seems hardly time enough to get to know another. Sexual intimacy plays a major role in the revealing of one person to another. Sexual intimacy provides an opportunity for giving oneself to another in an exclusive way. Only in marriage can sexual intimacy achieve the goals it is meant to serve.

The Christian insistence on reserving sexual union for marriage, then, has as one of its chief justifications a concern that sexual union is meant to express the desire for a deep and committed relationship with another. That relationship can only be built within marriage for marriage is built upon a vow of faithfulness to one's beloved. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, regularly condemns the sin of adultery. Faithful marriage is used regularly as the paradigm for the kind of

relationship which God's people should have with God. Those who are not faithful to God are likened to adulterers. Proverbs and the whole of wisdom literature harshly condemns the adulterous spouse. Most spouses are devastated at the mere thought that their beloved desires another, let alone that their spouse may have actually been unfaithful. Faithfulness is essential to create the relationship of trust which is the bedrock of all the other goods that flow from marriage.

We take vows in marriage because we realize that we are all too ready to give up when the going gets tough; we realize that our loves wax and wane. Indeed, society at large seems to have a fondness for marriage. After all, in an age where there is little moral pressure against living together outside of marriage, most still choose to take marriage vows. Couples realize that marriage vows help them express and effect the commitment they feel for each other. But as the divorce rate indicates, modern society ultimately does not take these vows very seriously--or at least modern couples do not prepare for marriage in such a way that they are prepared to keep their vows.

Let me speak for a moment about marriage preparation. I am not speaking here of the engagement encounter weekend, the talk with the pastor or the pre-cana conference in which engaged couples participate. I am speaking about the kind of preparation which we must do for ourselves for many years before we enter marriage. Many young people enjoy the exercise of drawing up a list of characteristics they would like their future spouse to have. But their time would be better spent drawing up a list of characteristics which they themselves should have in order to be a worthy marriage partner. They need, too, to reflect upon their expectations of marriage; many may come to see that their expectations are largely selfish. Most of us dream much more about how happy our spouses are going to make us rather than about how much we are going to do for our spouses.

Since marriage requires loving, faithful, kind, patient, forgiving, humble, courageous, wise, unselfish individuals--and the list could go on--, young people should strive to gain these characteristics. Marriages cannot survive unless the spouses acquire these characteristics. Certainly it would be foolish to require that individuals have all these characteristics before they marry, for none of us do. Indeed, the experience of marriage itself undoubtedly helps foster these characteristics. But the fact is that if we do not work at acquiring these characteristics before marriage, we will be acquiring their opposites, such as selfishness, and haughtiness, and impatience--characteristics that are death to a marriage.

Since faithfulness is one of the cornerstones of marriage let me speak of it at a little greater length. For many it seems odd to speak of the need to be faithful to one's spouse before marriage, but such is the case. In a sense, one should love one's spouse before one even meets him or her. One should be preparing to be a good lover, a good spouse, one's whole life. This means reserving the giving of one's self sexually until one is married--for in a sense, one's sexuality belongs to

one's future spouse as much as it does to one's self. A few generations ago, it was not uncommon for young people to speak of "saving themselves" for marriage. It is a phrase scoffed at today, but one that is nonetheless indicative of a proper understanding of love, sexuality and marriage. One should prepare one's self for marriage and one should save one's self for marriage.

How does one do so? Obviously by remaining chaste--and that is not an easy prescription. For instance, it means being attentive to what provokes sexual thoughts and desires and avoiding these provocations. It means, most likely, dissociating one's self from many of the forms of entertainment popular today. Those who have a view of sexuality as a gift which one offers one's spouse at the time of marriage cannot afford to be victim to the constant sexual stimulation modern Americans face daily. So we need to be careful what music we listen to, what movies and T.V. shows we watch, and we need to try to dress modestly. We need to try and save sexual thoughts and sexual stimulation for the time when they will not be frustrations but will be welcome preludes to loving union with our spouses. Sexual temptations are, of course, impossible to avoid especially since our society does not seek to make it easier for us; rather it provides temptations around the clock. Christ's teaching that lust in one's heart is wrong, tells us that we must guard our inner purity as well as govern our actions.

It must be acknowledged that few think it sensible for those who are engaged to wait until their wedding night to enjoy sexual union. This view seems to be nearly as widespread among Christians as in the rest of society. Many think waiting until marriage would make sexual intimacy too awkward; that it is good to have a more relaxed and casual time to get to know one another sexually. Most think that since one is soon going to take vows it makes little difference whether sexual intimacy begins before or after a ceremony which simply ratifies a commitment already felt.

What difference does waiting make? Well, certainly a vows is not a vow until it is spoken; unspoken, unratified commitments are all too easily broken. But there are practical reasons as well. Father James Burtchaell at Notre Dame has written a marvelous book, *For Better or Worse*, laying out many of the reasons why it is best for couples to wait until marriage before they begin their sexual intimacy. He speaks eloquently of the period before marriage as an irreplaceable opportunity for the lovers to get to know one another; engaging in sexual intercourse creates a false sense of closeness; it creates a bond that may be obscuring elements in a relationship which need to be worked on. Courtship is a marvelous time for talking and getting to know each other; for sketching out dreams and plans; for expressing worries and hesitations. The delight of sexual union can easily be a disincentive to working out all the matters that those who are getting married should work out.

But there is perhaps a deeper reason, and that is the question of honesty and trust. Few of those having sexual relations before marriage, especially Christians, can be fully open about their actions. This means that individuals engaging in such relationships must inevitably be deceiving someone--most likely their parents, their

teachers, and perhaps their friends as well. The ability to practice such deception does not bode well for one's integrity. The lovers observe that each is good at deceiving and will file away this information and will most likely have reason to wonder in the future if one's spouse is being honest with one's self--after all one's beloved had no trouble deceiving others whom he or she respected. Many Christians feel terrible guilt at violating what are their own deeply held moral principles; some after they are married tend to have guilty feelings about sex. In a sense, they have programmed themselves to think of sexual intercourse as a furtive and naughty activity.

Couples who do wait until marriage to enjoy sexual union often seem to have a special a kind of euphoria about their sexual union. Because they have waited they feel entitled to sexual enjoyment and see it as a privileged good of marriage. They have an easier time developing a deep and abiding trust and consideration for each other. Their willingness to wait, their willingness to endure the strains of sexual continence because they love and respect one another, is a great testimony to their strength of character. They have also shown that sexual attraction is not the most important part of the relationship; they have shown that they enjoy each other's company even when the delights of sexual union are not available to them. Such faithfulness and chastity before marriage ensure greater faithfulness and chastity during marriage. And because of pregnancy or illness or separation, all couples must abstain at some time in the marriage; the acquisition of the virtue of self-mastery before marriage facilitates such necessary abstention.

Young people need to be chaste before marriage not only because of the love they hope to share with their future spouses, but also because of the responsibilities they have to their future children.

Years ago the chief reason for refraining from sexual activity before marriage was fear of pregnancy. Pregnancy was feared both because young people were not prepared to take care of their children and also because there was considerable societal disapproval of sexual intercourse before marriage. The societal disapproval is gone and contraceptives have largely removed the fear--though not the reality--of unwanted pregnancies. Indeed, contraception seems to be one of the chief facilitators of much of the sexual misconduct of our times. There certainly were many fewer teenage pregnancies, many fewer abortions, a lesser incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, etc., before contraception became widely available. Contraception has made people feel secure that they can have sexual union apart from the obligations of marriage and child-rearing. Yet contraceptives do not remove the responsibilities that come with the child-making possibilities of sexual intercourse. Young people are notoriously irresponsible about nearly everything. They are roughly as responsible about using contraceptives as they are about doing their homework, hanging up their clothes, and doing their chores. And even those who use contraceptives are not really safe, since contraceptives do not always work. We must drive home to our young people that they are not ready for sexual intercourse until they are ready to be parents, for sexual intercourse always

brings with it the possibility of being a parent.

Getting young people to associate sex with child-bearing is not easy, but it is necessary; in fact, it is important for adults to encourage young people to try to think like a parent. It is wise for parents to talk about parenting with their children. It is good to get them thinking about what they would like to do with their children; to get them thinking about what they want to be able to provide for their children. And parents must convey to their children that they are not a burden to them, that they consider their children to be great gifts from God. Our society almost universally looks upon children as a burden; they are expensive, noisy, and troublesome; they stand in the way of careers and adventuresome travel. This view, of course, has not stopped people from having babies, but one senses that many children are just another possession of their parents or just another experience that adults wish to have. Many couples seem to want to have a few "designer children" as adornments to their lives--not as reasons for their lives.

God, it seems, has a preference for children; after all one of his first commands was "be fruitful and multiply." Throughout the Old Testament having many children is listed among the signs of prosperity that indicate God's favor. Psalm 127 states "Behold, sons are a gift from the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy the man whose quiver is filled with them." Psalm 128 is one of my favorites; it states, Happy are you who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways!  
For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork; happy shall you be, and favored.  
Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home;  
Your children like olive plants around your table.  
Behold, thus is the man blessed who fears the Lord.

God has arranged matters such that parents and children need each other. The experience of parenting like the experience of marriage both requires and fosters many virtues. Having children generally does adults a lot of good; most find themselves becoming more selfless, more patient, kind, loving, and tender when they have children. Learning to live with children has many of the same advantages of living with a spouse; it forces one to accommodate one's self to others; it forces one to acknowledge that one has constant tendencies to be selfish. Staying awake at night with children, dealing with their daily joys and sorrows, learning to be a good example for them, contributes greatly to the maturity of adults.

Christians have a radically different view of children from the rest of society. They understand that their offspring are not their possessions through which they are to live their unfulfilled dreams and have another way of winning the respect of the world around them. Rather, Christians see children as a gift from God, as souls entrusted to them, whom they are to return to God. Among Christians there is a predisposition towards children, for Christians understand that God loves life and wishes to share His glorious creation. Christians are generally more eager and



willing to have children because they realize the importance of children to God and depend upon Him to assist them in providing for the children He has given them.

Recently a relative of mine mentioned that he wanted to have a large family but that he did not know how it would be possible to manage financially. He had noticed that I had a large number of friends who started their child-bearing early and had lots of children. Few of the women have paying jobs. He wanted to know how they did it. The question is a good one and I think I know the answer: they trust in God. They regularly live on the edge of things--for the first few years they experience occasional anxiety that another child will be an undue strain on the budget, or they fear that they will not be able to afford a car or house large enough for the growing brood, or they fear that they may not be able to meet food and medical costs. But after a few years, they find that in most surprising and often in quite spectacular ways, their needs are fulfilled. To be sure, they learn to budget and scrimp and save and they are not ashamed to take hand-me-downs and they often learn to live a life that is a little tacky around the edges. But they lack none of their true needs and often enjoy luxuries they never would have dreamed of having. So they come to trust God and live without a lot of obvious security. Trust in God replaces the American desire for perfect security; they do not set their sights on accumulating enough money and material goods to serve as a buffer against the world. With trusting hearts and light hearts they proceed to enjoy their growing families and to soak up the love that flows in big families. And they become ever more generous with what they have. Those with large families seem to have a special generosity and hospitality about them. Guests are extremely welcome and interruptions seem not to be the annoyance they are for most; members of large families seem quite ready to drop everything to help someone else. Slowly but steadily they become better Christians.

Here I would like to broach a topic which is sensitive and controversial; it is a topic about which I have been doing much research, and that is the topic of contraception. I am now doing revisions on a manuscript for a book on *Humanae Vitae*, the encyclical written by Pope Paul VI which taught that the use of contraceptives is immoral. This teaching has been nearly completely discounted by society as a whole and widely ignored by Catholics as well. Nonetheless, I have found a wisdom in this teaching which I would like to promote among both my Catholic and non-Catholic sisters and brothers in the Lord. One of the great fruits of ecumenism, of course, is that different traditions have much to learn from each other. But it is wrong to think that opposition to contraception is a distinctively Catholic doctrine. It surprises many to learn that the belief that contraception is not in accord with God's will is not a distinctive Catholic belief. The fact is that all Protestant denominations as well as Catholics were opposed to contraception up until 1930. The Anglican Church twice early in this century condemned contraception and then for the first time in 1930 passes a resolution that it was morally permissible for spouses to use contraception. Thus, in the Christian scheme of things, acceptance of contraception is a relatively new phenomenon. Catholics have, perhaps, preserved the teaching against contraception more

faithfully, but it is not a teaching exclusive to them.

In much the same way Protestants have more faithfully preached the necessity of tithing, a doctrine not exclusive to Protestants. Many Catholics are now rediscovering the practice of tithing and many of them at the prompting of their Protestant brethren. They have found great spiritual growth through this practice and now in the Catholic press regularly urge their fellow Catholics to embrace this time-honored way of being grateful to God and of trusting in Him. Indeed, I think the doctrine on tithing has some similarities with the teaching that in one's child-bearing one must be generous with God. Some refuse to tithe since they think it foolish to give away money they think they need for their own well-being. Yet, those who are committed to tithing know that on occasion one must give to God what one believes one needs one's self. They give to God and His causes because they know He wants them to, and they trust Him to provide. Being generous in child-bearing is not so very different. Many a married couple will testify to their belief that they thought having another child would be an undue hardship, only to find that having another child was a source of wonderful blessings and splendid joy to them.

Of course, no one would deny that couples on occasion may have good reason to curtail their child-bearing at least for a while--few argue that sometimes spouses would be more responsible in not having more children at a certain time than in having children. This being the case, many do not see why couples may not responsibly use contraceptives to help them space their children or to delay child-bearing if sufficiently good reason exists. They consider contraception a marvelous invention of technology, like many other forms of medicine, and see no reason not to use it, if used responsibly. They find the Catholic counsel of periodic abstinence to be rather irrational. They reason that both contraception and natural methods of family planning are both designed to limit family size, so why not use the most effective method?

Oddly enough, NFP, or natural family planning, is one of the most effective means, if not the most effective means of planning one's family. NFP, of course, is not the out-moded rhythm method, a method which was based on the calendar. Rather, NFP is a highly scientific way of determining when a woman is fertile based on observing various bodily signs. The statistics of its reliability rival the most effective forms of the Pill. And NFP is without the health risks and dubious moral status of contraceptives. It has long been known that the IUD is an abortifacient; that is, it works by causing an early term abortion. Ovulation still occurs and therefore conception may occur; the IUD then prohibits the fertilized egg, the tiny new human being from implanting in the wall of the uterus. Most currently popular forms of the Pill work the same way; that is, they, too, are abortifacients. Furthermore, the pill and the IUD have proven to be dangerous to women in many ways--currently the IUD is off the market in the U.S. because of the many law suits brought against manufacturers. So those who are opposed to abortion and those interested in protecting the well-being of women would certainly not want to be using these forms of contraception. The other forms have aesthetic drawbacks or

are low on reliability.

NFP no longer means "not for Protestants." Many non-Catholics are turning to NFP as a means of family planning precisely because they do not want to use abortifacients and they fear the physical risks of contraception. They are finding as a pleasant effect of their decision that the use of NFP has positive results for their marital relationships, for their relationship with their children and their relationship with God.

Many find it odd that periodic abstinence should be beneficial rather than harmful to a marriage. Certainly most who begin to use NFP, especially those who were not chaste before marriage and who have used contraception, generally find the abstinence required to be a source of strain and a cause of considerable irritability. Abstinence, of course, like dieting or any form of self-restraint, brings its hardships; but like dieting and other forms of self-denial, it also brings its benefits. As spouses learn to communicate better with each other--and abstinence gives them the opportunity to do so--, as they learn to communicate their affection in non-genital ways and as they learn to master their sexual desires, they find a new liberation in the ability to abstain from sexual intercourse. Many find that an element of romance reenters the relationship during the times of abstinence and an element of excitement accompanies the reuniting. Spouses using NFP find that they come to understand and respect one another more. Let me read from a letter written by a woman who has used the whole gamut of contraceptive possibilities. Some of the language is rather crude and--but it's not anything you don't hear nightly on T.V.--during family viewing time, at that.

Repartee letter

Why is it that couples who initially and perhaps constantly find difficult the restraint required by NFP, eventually come to sing the praises of NFP? One of the answers seems to be that couples advance in the virtue of "self-mastery" through their use of NFP. That is, they begin to realize that their sexual feelings can be controlled to some degree and that they need to be subordinated to the goods of marriage. Thus, if spouses determine that they could not responsibly have another child at a given time, they have the self-mastery to control their sexuality so that it does not conflict with what they have determined to be good for the family. This self-mastery that they gain spills over into their family life and the rest of their life with favorable results. Again, whenever we gain self-control, whether through curtailing our eating, or drinking, or spending or in our sexual gratification--all activities good in themselves but in need of control--this self-control becomes somewhat easier in other realms of our lives.

Spouses using NFP become very good examples to their children, especially their teenagers who may be wrestling with new and powerful sexual feelings. One man told me about how his practice of NFP assisted him in being a good witness for chastity among the young men at his place of work. They would tease him about being able, as a married man, to have sex on demand (it goes to show how much

they know about marriage) but he responded that through the use of NFP he was required to abstain. He argued that if night after night he was able to sleep beside the woman he loved and not have sexual intercourse with her, they could learn to refrain from sexual intercourse with their girlfriends. He believed that parents who practice NFP could much more persuasively urge their children to be chaste before marriage.

Another reason given for the enthusiasm among couples for NFP is their view that couples who use NFP experience a greater bonding than those who use contraception. They claim that there is a more complete giving of one's self to another in a non-contracepted act of sexual intercourse than in a contracepted act. Certainly, no responsible person engages in non-contracepted sexual intercourse with one whom one does not want to have a significant bond--for non-contracepted intercourse brings with it the potential (sometimes symbolic) of a having a child together--and children represent a lifetime bond. Those engaging in contracepted intercourse may intend a lifetime bond but their actions do not express this intention. Those arguing this point cite as strong evidence for their position the claim couples who practice NFP seem to have a nearly non-existent divorce rate.

Couples who use NFP also claim that it brings them closer to God. They believe that God made the human body and that respecting the way the human body works is a way of respecting God. They believe that contraceptives are an obstacle not only to union with their spouses but also to union with God. Couples not infrequently feel that God is present in a special way during their love-making. The emotions that flow and the bonding that takes place during love-making are of a grand and mysterious--not to say sacred--nature. They believe that God is the source of love and life and that He has privileged them with being the transmitters of life through an act of love. They feel that by not contracepting they are leaving God space to perform His act of the creation of a new soul, if He so chooses.

I hope this discussion has served to explain at least to some extent why for nearly the whole of its existence the Christian tradition has been opposed to the use of contraception. I did not go into some of the more complicated moral arguments, nor did I try to address likely objections. I simply wanted to link this teaching with the view that child-bearing is an essential characteristic of marriage.

Certainly it is undeniable that much of the Christian understanding of the need for faithful marriages and for the reserving of sexual intimacy for marriage is linked to the power of sexual union to result in children. Christians must work to convince themselves and others that we should never lose sight of the link between sexual activity and child-bearing. If no one engaged in sexual union who was not prepared to care for any children who result from that union, the modern world would experience a radical change in its sexual behavior.

Christians need to provide apologetics and explanations why faithfulness and why responsibility towards children are two of the defining characteristics of marriage. Moderns, I think, are tired of unfaithfulness, tired of shallow and brief relationships;

they crave something more meaningful, something on which they can rely. Young people are rather sick of divorce. There is virtually no one who does not know some children who have suffered greatly from divorce. Certainly many of us because of our own foolishness, weakness or wickedness, or because of the foolishness, weakness or wickedness of others may not be able to form the marriage and families which we want and need. We must trust in the grace of God to provide for all those who turn to Him for aid, when matters are not as they ought to be. But the inability of many of us to live or to find what we know to be best, is not a repudiation of what is best. Christians who have the wisdom of the centuries should strive mightily themselves to live chaste lives and to form loving marriages and families, for such is vital to their eternal salvation and such may well be vital to the temporal well-being of the whole of society.

Source: Natural Family Planning Outreach [www.nfpoutreach.org/](http://www.nfpoutreach.org/)