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Family Foundations

A photograph of a middle-aged couple embracing outdoors. The man, on the left, is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light blue shirt and a patterned tie. The woman, on the right, has blonde hair and is wearing a white top with a dark blue sleeve and a pearl necklace. They are standing next to a stone wall, with a blurred background of greenery and a body of water.

Romance
that
endures

AMORIS LAETITIA
PROTESTANTS & NFP
POTIONS OF STERILITY






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In This Issue

Bill and Tanis Merimee, a CCL promoter couple from Cleveland, have nine children, ranging in age from 24 to 5 — and they just became grandparents! Although they are very busy, Bill and Tanis make a point to go on dates and guard their couple time. Learning about each other's love language has also been helpful, they say.

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From busyness and exhaustion to uneven libido, devoted married couples face an array

of issues when it comes to intimacy. "I feel a huge amount of pressure," admits a sleep-deprived mother of four.

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James Tour is a Messianic Jew who feels grateful to have discovered NFP. "I am so thankful to the Catholic Church for remaining fast and strong on this," he told *Family Foundations*. "You have so blessed my home and marriage."



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Special thanks to the talented Donna Wheatley for photographing Bill and Tanis Merimee for our cover story. "They were playful, fun and laid back," Donna said of the couple, who have been married nearly 25 years. "And still in love!" Check out more of Donna's beautiful pictures at donnaheatleyphotography.com.



Ann
Gundlach
Editor

Protecting your intimate space

I have often remembered part of a marriage talk I heard many years ago in which couples were advised to place “hedges” around their relationship. Much like a line of bushes can create a boundary around your yard to help keep out unwanted intrusions and create a safe space, the hedges we were urged to erect were rules or practices that would protect our relationship and promote comfort, trust and security.

Many of the suggested practices were designed to promote fidelity. It was all good advice, but what really stuck with me was the overall concept of being aware of dangers encroaching into our relationship.

As we were planning our features on marital intimacy, and more specifically, sexual intimacy, the hedges talk came to mind again as I recalled times when Greg and I struggled a bit in this area. Actually, let me correct that. Greg has hardly ever had an issue; it was usually me and my thinking that was a problem because I let outside influences get into my head.

There have been two ways that my thinking has wreaked a little havoc on our sex life. The first was at a time when Greg and I were on different pages about being open to more children. I wanted more; he felt at his limit. While we were working through our discernment, I let incorrect assumptions about Church teaching influence me. I over-emphasized procreation to the point of questioning what was the point of sexual intimacy if my husband didn't want another child? I came to resent him touching me, because I figured since he wasn't open to a child he

was likely just using me. Pretty messed up, right?

The point is I had let influences of certain “Catholic” circles encroach into the safety of our intimate space. I had neglected to protect our relationship with the hedge of a solid understanding of the meaning of marital love. When I better understood what the Church actually taught about both the unitive and procreative aspects of sex, my hesitation to be intimate evaporated.

The second outside influence that invaded our private space is, I suspect, a common one: negative body image. When I picked up some unwanted pounds in my 40s, soon false messages from the culture about what is beautiful were swimming through my head, which certainly affected our sexuality. Greg never complained, but I found it hard to believe he was still attracted to me, and that carried over into how I felt about being intimate. It became hard for me to give myself freely and lovingly because I didn't feel secure in Greg's love, and that sweet closeness of intimacy was a bit elusive for a while.

I suspect we are all a bit naïve about the many intruders into our private marital space — past relationships, pornography, unspoken expectations of each other, distorted images of marriage and more. But there are protections available, too: the grace of your Sacrament, knowledge, communication, patience, etc. As contributor Margaret Berns points out on page 18, we're called to restore the garden, and planting some hedges is a good place to start.

Family Foundations

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Central Intelligence



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Your Love Story soon to be released

Married Christian couples are called to be apostles of divine love made visible and tangible in our everyday world... sacramental marriages are essential to building a civilization based on truth and love. This sacrament, where “the two become one,” has the power to transform not only your lives but the lives of all those around you. No solution to society’s many problems will have a lasting effect unless we rebuild a culture of marriage and family.

— Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone

True confession: I am celebrating 35 years of marriage this month, and in all those years I’ve thought of my marriage as a model of Jesus’ love for his Church only slightly more often as I got excited about doing my taxes. For most of us, marriage is experienced more often in the balancing of schedules, paying bills, worrying about our children and praying just to get through another day than it is experienced as rejoicing in the bond that transcends our physical being. We get so caught up in the everyday business and boredom of life that we simply forget to step back and consider what an incredible gift we’ve been given as married persons.

Yet if we don’t think about this from time to time (especially in our darkest hours), how can we help in “building a civilization based on truth and love,” as the Archbishop says above?

Much of what we do at CCL is focused on trying to help couples proclaim the truth and beauty of marriage. Teaching NFP is the main practical way we do this. In reflecting on the more than 30 years that Karen and I have been teaching, I’m convinced one of the reasons we are still do is because we enjoy the interaction with the engaged couples. They are so in love and optimistic about their future that it reminds us of the gift we’ve been given in our own marriage (even if it’s a bit more gray and definitely more wrinkled).

Another way CCL tries to help proclaim the truth and beauty of marriage is with materials to help engaged couples move into their marriage with a better and more complete understanding of God’s magnificent plan for their chosen vocation.

I am happy to say that in September CCL will be releasing a new book to be used by engaged couples in marriage preparation. After a true labor of love, CCL

Board Member Deacon Bill Turrentine’s new book, *Your Love Story: A Guide to Engagement and Marriage* will be released.

Your Love Story brings a fresh perspective to marriage and addresses directly much of the cultural confusion about what marriage is and is not. Importantly, it paints a vision of the vocation as beautiful, rewarding, challenging and worth every ounce of life-long commitment we have to see it flourish and grow. Bill and his wife Pat’s own story is revealed throughout the book, adding depth, honesty, humor and reality. Also interspersed throughout the text are the love stories of six CCL couples that bring many crucial truths of married love to



light and demonstrate how married couples really can reflect the total, self-giving love of Jesus while fully living our messy day-to-day lives.

San Francisco’s Archbishop Cordileone wrote the Foreword for *Your Love Story*; the quote above is taken from it. We are honored by his endorsement. End-of-chapter discussion questions will guide and

***Your Love Story* brings a fresh perspective to marriage and addresses directly much of the cultural confusion about what marriage is and is not.**

encourage engaged couples as they begin the journey to write their own love stories through marriage, and the text contains the just-revised Order of Celebrating Sacrament of Matrimony that is being released for first use in the U.S. starting in September.

I am sharing about *Your Love Story* now because we will be coming to you ask for your help in spreading the word about this exciting new book. Lacking a Madison Avenue marketing budget, we will be asking anyone willing to carry a copy to a local parish or church and personally share it with the clergy there so they can consider ordering copies for the couples they prepare for marriage. Everyone who agrees to help will be given a complimentary copy of *Your Love Story* for their personal use. We will even have some simple things to use to help you get through the conversation with Father. Stay tuned!



Re-energizing in Houston

CCL couples are reviving their outreach efforts in Houston!

Chapter coordinator Mary Ellen Van Horn from the Diocese of Galveston-Houston invited Erick Carrero, CCL's director of volunteer

outreach, to speak to the chapter in April to present a vision for the future of their work in the local area. After speaking on the rebranding changes, couples felt focused and re-energized to help spread the good news of NFP. The chapter assigned roles to each member to reach out and get more involved, whether it be through social media, visiting parishes or prayer.

The Diocese of Galveston-Houston sees potential for NFP expansion by supporting the Spanish community with NFP classes and outreach since 72 percent of the 1.3 million people in the Houston area are of Hispanic origin.

Erick was also able to meet with diocesan officials — NFP coordinator Joe DeVet and family life director Deacon Arturo Monterrubio — to explore what CCL can do to further support couples who are learning NFP through their diocesan program. This includes the possibility of providing a complimentary issue of *Family Foundations* magazine after couples receive their NFP instruction and/or providing the monthly supportive “Charting your Course” email, which goes to current CCL students during the year after they take their class. These ideas are part of the effort of the League to do all we can to create an NFP supportive environment, even if CCL is not the source of educating. Joe DeVet stated that “the archdiocese has not thanked CCL adequately for all they have done for us, in the past and in the present.”

The diocese also sees potential for NFP expansion by supporting the Spanish community with NFP classes and outreach since 72 percent of the 1.3 million people in the Houston area are of Hispanic origin. Because the diocese of Galveston-Houston has such a large Hispanic community, after hearing of plans to start revamping CCL's Spanish program, Deacon Arturo was excited by the possibility of being part of the pilot program for the course once it is developed.

CCL is proud to have the volunteers of Houston getting excited about the rebranding changes and being ready and willing to help create an NFP supportive culture in their parishes.

Lexington eyes expansion of NFP with Hispanics

The Diocese of Lexington is also increasing its efforts to teaching the Hispanic community NFP and called upon CCL to help. At the request of Family Life Director Mike Allen, CCL's Erick Carrero gave an NFP presentation in April to a monthly formation group, Discípulos Misioneros (Missionary Disciples), made up of leaders in the Hispanic community. The group, along with interested couples, totaled more than 70 people.

Erick's presentation, “Conocimiento de la Fertilidad y la Paternidad Responsable” (Fertility Awareness and Responsible Parenthood), touched on Theology of the Body and other backbones of NFP to introduce the basis for CCL's mission and generate interest for education to the Hispanic community of Lexington. Erick was glad he “had a chance to share with people the commitment to faith and sees a need to reach out to Hispanic families in



the diocese.” He was thrilled at the response the audience gave in support of NFP and CCL's mission. “One woman expressed the pressing need for good training and support of those learning and using NFP, and she felt very encouraged that CCL could provide that,” Erick said.

After the presentation, couples were given the opportunity to sign up for a full NFP course to be given this summer, and a large number of couples showed interest and signed up to learn more. We love this promising jump in the interest of our Spanish program in Lexington!

Former volunteer tapped to lead CCL



The Reynolds family includes (L to R), Chris, Lucy (8), Cecelia, Agnes (4), Cletus (10), Paul (13) and Mary (16).

At the end of May the CCL Board of Directors announced their selection of Chris Reynolds as the League's new executive director. Stepping into the role after the retirement of Mike Manhart, Ph.D., Reynolds brings a strong commitment to CCL's mission and an excellent track record in working with volunteers. He has an MBA with extensive business experience and understands the need to grow our ministry.

Chris and his wife, Cecelia, first connected with CCL through friends who offered to help them interpret

their charts. They had tried to learn the Billings method on their own after several years of contraceptive use. At the time, they were non-practicing Catholics but because they were pregnant with their first child, Chris was strongly being called back to the faith, knowing he needed to actually have a faith to be able to pass it on.

These friends urged them to get a copy of CCL's *The Art of Natural Family Planning*, which presented both the method and the morality behind it. Chris says CCL's book was "an eye opener," and Cecelia soon was equally enthused, saying she became convinced "that this was the only way to space babies." They learned CCL's method through the old Home Study Course, and within a short time also found themselves in training to become a teaching couple.

They began teaching, giving talks at pre-cana events and responding to the many opportunities that came to evangelize about NFP. "God has put many people in my path to pass on this information and share my enthusiasm and personal experience," Chris says.

The Reynolds taught NFP for CCL from 2002–2012, in Baltimore, Md., Raleigh, N.C., and most recently in Colorado Springs, CO. In Baltimore they also served as Chapter Coordinators.

"I have felt called to spread the word about NFP and Theology of the Body since I learned of it," Chris says.

"I think most people, like my wife and I, were short changed by not learning this beautiful and sound teaching of the Church. I am enthusiastic about leading CCL so I can help all the members and volunteers spread this message even further."

"I am enthusiastic about leading CCL so I can help all the members and volunteers spread this message even further."

The board appreciates the commitment that Chris and Cecelia have made to CCL through service in several capacities from teaching to chapter leadership, and that Chris has developed a heart to serve the members and learning couples.

"Chris is an enthusiastic leader who attracts volunteers to work with him. He desires an engagement with volunteers and students in a manner that will meet their needs. He understands systems and processes to help organizations grow," Mark says. "CCL has a promising future for the couples we are trying to reach, the priests and dioceses we are trying to support, and the volunteers that we are trying to motivate and inspire. We are excited to have Chris bring his talents and skills to the leadership of the League."

IMPERFECT LIVING



BY GREG WILLITS



NFP almost separated us

by Carlos and Mariana de la Torre

Newly certified Teaching Couple Carlos and Mariana de la Torre of Alameda, Calif., will be sharing this talk with their students.

Carlos “I will call off the wedding!” This was the first thought that came to my mind when I realized how serious Mariana was about using NFP. The wedding date was three weeks away.

She had mentioned earlier in our relationship that when she got married she wanted to use NFP, but I had never been convinced about the method. I didn’t think it worked

and I always thought she would later change her mind. We had already taken our NFP class as part of the marriage prep, and as we were reviewing Mariana’s charts prior to the wedding, I realized there might be many days of abstinence. This made no sense to me; I thought this was an old-fashioned rule of the Catholic Church. I was convinced sex within marriage should be “free,”

whenever and however I wanted it to be. I grew up in a culture where that was the norm. The body of my wife was supposed to be mine. I also thought using NFP could seriously damage our marriage, due to the periods of abstinence.

Mariana Carlos and I come from very different religious backgrounds. I was a cradle Catholic, and he was

raised in a Protestant family, but both of us were very passionate about our faith. We both believed marriage was a lifelong commitment, so we knew we needed to find a solution to the differences that separated our faiths. Carlos was OK with us getting married in the Catholic Church. But I never thought contraception would be a deal-breaker for him.

Carlos When I met Mariana I was very convinced and happy about my faith, and I was thirsty to learn more about God. I was very attracted by her beauty and her strong convictions. Growing up I never heard anything against contraception. The only negative I know of was the bad experience my mom had; she would always complain about getting bad headaches. For this reason I didn't want my wife to take the pill; I thought probably a barrier method was the better way.

Mariana Growing up, I always knew contraception was wrong, but I never really understood why. When I found out Carlos was not on board with NFP, I knew that even though I didn't have all the arguments to explain it, I could not go against my conscience. I felt I had to either follow God's will or give in to Carlos' wish to use contraception.

Our relationship was on the rocks. I prayed to God to help me understand the Church's teaching; I started looking for resources on the Internet but couldn't find anything compelling.

Carlos A few days after the biggest argument we have ever had, I decided to accept NFP and move forward with the wedding. Why? Because I loved her, I wanted to marry her and I didn't want Mariana to do anything to her body. In the back of my mind, I thought that once I had all

the children I decided I wanted to have, then I would convince Mariana to let me get a vasectomy.

Mariana We got married, but using NFP was challenging. I felt lonely and like I needed to prove to Carlos that the method worked. I would be nervous when making decisions based on the chart, given my lack of experience. But slowly we started to experience some changes in our perception of NFP.

Four years into our marriage we gained a better understanding about God's plan for marriage by reading Saint John Paul II's writings. Everything about NFP started to make sense. Mariana de la Torre

Carlos While I loved Mariana, I didn't get much involved with NFP. Deep inside I was waiting for the method to fail, to prove my point and to be able to tell her so. But to my surprise, the method never failed. Slowly my thoughts about NFP started to change, the arguments about NFP disappeared and I began to see the benefits of using it. Abstinence periods enabled me to know Mariana better, to demonstrate my love to her in other romantic ways that didn't need to be physical. I also noticed I was having more self-control and was able to stop thinking about sex when it was not the time for it. NFP was helping keep the flame of physical attraction between us, which I believe is important to keep the marriage united. It was also working perfectly to space our kids.

Mariana Four years into our marriage we gained a better understanding about God's plan for marriage by reading Saint John Paul II's writings. Everything about NFP started to make sense.

Carlos I was especially blown away by the teachings behind Theology of the Body. I had never thought so deeply about how valuable a person is. Ironically, now contraception seemed so wrong to me. My perception about family and children changed as well. Now I could see why there would be families using NFP with a large number of kids, not because the method didn't work, but because they had understood the precious gift a life is.

Today I am thankful that I didn't break up with Mariana, and I can say that NFP has been one of the most important factors for the happiness and healthiness of our marriage.

Mariana Once we wrapped our hearts around NFP, I started to feel a burning desire to share it with other couples, but I didn't know how. I remember praying about it, asking God to take my hands. A few weeks later I received an email from CCL with a request for couples interested in becoming NFP teaching couples. There was going to be a training seminar — on the day of our 6th wedding anniversary. We submitted our application, and it was amazing to spend our anniversary at that seminar six years after the day we almost didn't get married because of NFP. And now this is what unites us more every day.

For more information about CCL's volunteer ministries, visit ccli.org/do-more/volunteer/



In the mood

by Kathleen M. Basi



I'm a bit fixated on our NFP charts. Specifically, on recording checkmarks in that "coitus" line.

It's not because I can't live without sex. It's because I can. My

husband, Christian, though, is another story. So I like to have proof that we're doing it often enough.

We recently talked about this contentious topic, and we kept coming back to a basic biological reality: women's sex drive — and their desirability — is intimately connected with their shifting hormones, and that influences both women and men. Snippets of our conversations looped through the interviews I conducted for this cover story. Another recurring theme: the quiet grace of the sacrament, renewing couples in the midst of struggle.

Kate: I worked so hard before we were married to shut down desire. You can't just turn that reaction off.

Christian: I get frustrated in Phase II when you're flirting because you're turned on, and yet we can't do anything. I understand where you're coming from, but I don't need the extra flirtation.

"We've found one of the easiest ways to tell you've arrived at the infertile time is that we both wake up in the



morning and don't want to have sex anymore," said Chris Selmys, 37, of Ontario, Can. "It's not uncommon for us to have a really big fight on that day instead of having sex."

Chris and his wife, Melinda, 36, a Patheos blogger and the author of *Sexual Authenticity: An Intimate Reflection on Homosexuality and Catholicism*, find it ironic to call this a "honeymoon" phase. Chris wishes NFP users were better prepared for this very real struggle.

Michael Jarecki, a Catholic therapist from Omaha who offers telephone counseling through the Pastoral Solutions Institute (catholiccounselors.com), remembers a female client telling him that taking prescription testosterone for a few months opened her eyes. "My sexual drive was intense," she told him. "If I had initiated sex, and he didn't want to do it, I would have felt really angry. All of a sudden I understood [how it is for my husband]."

For Bill and Tanis Merimee, a CCL promoter couple from Cleveland, the challenge posed by shifting hormones is complicated by hyper-fertility. "In Phase 1," Bill said, "Tanis seems to be able to walk near me and get pregnant!"

Phase II is even harder. "I'm really attracted to my husband," Tanis said, "and when he shows affection in the fertile time, I get uptight. I'm thinking, 'Just wait a week already!'" By the time Phase III arrives, sometimes

it's been almost a month of abstinence. Still, at 45, Bill appreciates the breadth of their physical intimacy, not simply the intercourse.

Tanis' primary love language is quality time, and she needs connection time with Bill in order to feel ready for intimacy. But as a firefighter and critical-care nurse, Bill works long shifts, so that time is hard to come by. "I feel disconnected from him when he's gone," she said. "When he comes home it's great, but I see him for an hour, and if it's our last day of Phase III..."

"It feels like you're forcing or programming sex," Bill said.

The postpartum time, remembers Lisa Reinkemeyer, is one of the most difficult times for a wife to fully engage in intimacy. She and her husband, Bob, a teaching couple from Syracuse, Mo., have six boys, ages 15 and up, as well as three grandchildren. Leaking breasts, extra weight, low libido, uncertain cycles — they often urge student couples to take a deep breath, Lisa says. "It took nine months to get to this point. It's reasonable that nine months may be needed for a return to normalcy." She also warns that some of these issues resurface as menopause approaches.

But hormones aren't the only things that take a toll on intimacy. Busyness, exhaustion and cycle uncertainty affect everyone.

Kate: I just feel tired all the time. It doesn't matter if I take a nap, I'm still tired.

Christian: I know. And then there's the kids. We don't have the opportunity to be spontaneous very often.

Bill and Tanis Merimee know well what it means to find their intimacy curtailed by...well...just about everything. In addition to working, Bill is studying to be a nurse practitioner. Tanis homeschools their younger children, and she and Bill run a nonprofit, Marriages of Grace (marriagesofgrace.org). They're also musicians who book and play string gigs in the Cleveland area.

And they have nine kids, none of whom were exactly "planned."

The Merimees, 45, took a relaxed approach to family planning for the first two decades of their marriage. "We're pretty spontaneous by nature," Tanis said. "For



9 tips for improving intimacy in your marriage

- 1 The marriage is the primary relationship in the family. Treat it that way.
- 2 Identify what makes your spouse feel loved and direct all efforts toward meeting that need in a way that respects both spouses.
- 3 Assume the good of the other — assume the best, rather than the worst of their intentions whenever conflict arises.
- 4 Make many more emotional deposits into the relationship (smiles, "let me take care of that," compliments) than withdrawals (bringing up a difficult topic like finances or sexual frustration).
- 5 If something is important to your spouse, choose to make it important to you too.
- 6 Spend 20 minutes a day "wasting time" together, in the words of the pope. At least every other week (minimum), set aside a longer period of focused time to do the same.
- 7 Plan a time once a week to lay out the week's logistics and address frustrations.
- 8 Surround yourself with a supportive community. Exchange child care for date nights and weekends away.
- 9 Seek out creative ways to encourage desire in the partner with lower interest: Take the kids off her hands; drop a note in his lunch box; give her a kiss or a hug at random intervals.



Could there be a physical cause?

There are physical issues that reduce libido, and in fact, a reduced sex drive could very well be your body's way of alerting you that things are not quite right. A healthy libido is normal and a sign you're your monthly hormones are in sync as they should be. So while relationship and communication issues can also effect our desire, self-help should also include a look at the possible physical causes. These are detailed in CCL's *Fertility, Cycles & Nutrition*, along with suggested vitamin and mineral supplements and amounts for improvement. Visit www.ccli.org/store.

Low thyroid function Very low temperatures, with pre-ovulatory temperatures in the range of 97.2° and below, are a good indicator of low thyroid function. Other signs are weak changes in mucus as the cycle proceeds, both before and after ovulation. Self-care in many cases can make a difference. If self-care does not enable you to have better cycles, better charts or better libido, it may be worth having a physician check your thyroid function.

Short luteal phase If your chart shows a poor temperature shift, and

Phase III is considerably shorter than the charts shown in *The Art of Natural Family Planning*, it may be that your progesterone, which rises to its highest level after ovulation, is lower than ideal. Normal levels of progesterone contribute to better overall cycles as well as to improved desire, at least in some women.

Worn out adrenals The adrenal glands, which sit atop each kidney, produce steroid hormones that perform various functions in the body. The stress hormone cortisol is the "bad" hormone, which rises in re-

sponse to long term stress. In large amounts, it interferes with estrogen, progesterone and testosterone and can disrupt the cycle and decrease desire. In both sexes, the adrenal glands also produce testosterone, which in women boosts libido.

Overweight or obesity Body fat is a source of estrogen, which in excess competes with progesterone's functions. Body fat also turns testosterone from the adrenal glands into estrogen. Losing excess body fat can improve both progesterone and testosterone levels, which in turn can improve desire.

Depression Good nutrition, enough sleep, the right amount of outdoor exercise, stress reduction and an active prayer life all contribute to healthy moods. If you or your spouse feel that your moods are concerning or your outlook doesn't improve with self-help, look to good medical care.

Breastfeeding The most profound natural change in hormones in the human species occurs after birth, and estrogen and progesterone may remain low for many months as a woman breastfeeds. It is entirely normal for low desire to appear. Desire can return long before fertility returns, as the body adjusts to the change in hormonal status and adrenal hormones, including testosterone, are produced.

Pre- and post menopause Something to look forward to! As the levels of the steroid hormones estrogen and progesterone drop, testosterone is no longer overshadowed, and a rise in desire during the premenopausal time or after menopause is common. Good nutrition aimed at supporting the adrenal glands will help ensure womanly desire continues long after menopause.



instance, Bill has said to me, ‘Do you want to go on a vacation, and your mom will watch the kids, and we’re leaving in about five hours?’ I was all in! That is who we are. It’s very difficult to be rule-abiders. We understood that about ourselves starting out, which is why we were so open to more children.”

“We’re not stupid,” Bill emphasized. “We get the rules, it’s just the cost-balance analysis didn’t make sense for us.”

Being open to children meant that for most of their marriage, the Merimees didn’t worry about abstinence. But now that they’re in their 40s, health complications have forced them to abstain for the sake of responsible parenthood. So they’re learning a lesson many other couples know well: extended abstinence, like an overreliance on sex, can tax a marriage.

Melinda and Chris Selmys, who have seven children, feel the stress keenly. Due to unusual health issues, their last four pregnancies happened despite abstaining...a lot. “Sex actually does unify people,” Melinda said. “There are chemicals that allow people to bond. It’s stress relieving. These benefits are important to maintaining a healthy marriage and patience with your children. So when you’re trying to raise a large family but you can’t have sex because your cycles are weird, it’s really hard.” For a while, Melinda suffered from bleeds every two weeks. The resulting anemia sapped her energy. At times, the Selmyses discerned that having another child would be

less stressful than trying to raise their family without the benefit of sexual intimacy.

The promise of NFP as a path to self-knowledge just made her own cycle ambiguity feel more punishing. “No matter how hard I try, the kids are fighting in the kitchen, I get distracted, and I don’t remember to do (my observations). One time, I really pushed to do my charting for two weeks. And then my chart disappeared. This was my best effort, and I didn’t even have the record of it.”

Good charting certainly can help, but even couples with textbook cycles often struggle to understand each other.

Christian: To me, if you don’t look at me and get turned on, I must not be sexy enough.

Kate: I feel like you’re saying that if I don’t desire sex then I must not love you.

Christian: No, that’s not right. I have this innate desire to please you. So if I don’t turn you on, am I doing my job?

Kate: I don’t think you realize, I feel a huge amount of pressure to get going. It can be debilitating. Every single time we have sex, I say a prayer: “Please God, let me get going quickly.”

Often, differences in libido require work to overcome. For some it can be a real struggle, but many couples

experience that tension to some degree. The Merimees remember years when Bill felt Tanis wasn't interested enough. "And I wasn't," Tanis said. "I was tired. I did have babies and not enough sleep."

Learning about "love languages" changed everything for them. Physical touch is the primary way Bill is able to receive love. Tanis, on the other hand, needs quality time with her husband — sharing a glass of wine and a good conversation, or taking a walk together. "Despite his busy schedule, Bill makes the effort to ensure that I'm feeling loved too," Tanis said, "even if it's a phone call or a text when he's working. As Bill explained it to me, if I



said to him, 'I don't want to have sex with you', or 'I can do without sex', then in his mind I would be saying, 'I don't love you.'"

Getting to know themselves and each other in this way taught them to express their feelings in a way that allowed them to approach challenges in intimacy as a way to grow together, rather than feeling defensive or under attack.

This is the key, says Michael Jarecki, who has been integrating faith and therapeutic principles for 22 years. Sometimes, people "suck it up and do what I have to do to be a 'good' spouse," he said. But if resentment builds, eventually it leaks out.

Jarecki urges couples to address conflict in an invitational way. For instance, instead of "You told me we'd have time; you are the problem," an invitational approach invites the other to understand. "I know you didn't intend to get tired, but I'm sad. I'm frustrated, but I'm not blaming you."

Think of it this way, Jarecki says: if you're at work and you just impulsively tell the boss exactly what you think, you may get fired. Honesty is vital, but it matters how you say it.

Kate: Women are always saying, "The sexiest thing in the world is a man doing dishes. Or changing a diaper. Or vacuuming." Why doesn't that work for us?

Christian: Because you and I divide the work so evenly. It's not sexy for me when you're outside mowing the lawn or playing sports with the kids either. We just do what has to be done.

When desire is uneven and the demands of daily life make intimacy seem like a pipe dream, it's easy to feel betrayed. Wasn't NFP supposed to improve communication and self-knowledge? Weren't we supposed to have a monthly honeymoon? How can we claim NFP is better than contraceptives when contraceptive users can have

sex whenever they want? If a couple's experience of NFP feels so disconnected from their expectations, it can be tempting to jump ship altogether.

"From the very beginning, for 24 years, we've always been open to what God wants for our marriage. Are there disappointments? For sure. But you learn to accept them."

Tanis Merimee

I've come to realize that sex always has conse-

quences. Throwing out the charts and letting nature take its course often leads to large families and the associated pressures. Using NFP requires painful, sometimes heroic, sacrifice. But using hormonal contraception is no guarantee of sexual bliss. After all, if it does suppress ovulation, the woman shouldn't have a time of increased desire at all. It's common to hear complaints about low libido from pill users. Nor does contraception solve the trifecta of busyness, exhaustion and uneven desire. But where does all this leave those of us who practice NFP? If sex is a mixture of the sublime and the excruciating, then as married couples all we can really do is pray for the grace to help us navigate the rapids as a team. Which brings us to the million-dollar question: How do we make our sexual intimacy work better?

When we queried CCL members, they stepped up to the plate to share not only the crosses but the blessings they have found through the act of intimacy. Understanding sex as a self-gift, as taught by the Church, has been integral in this journey.

For Laura, a 29-year-old CCL teacher and mother of four from Ohio, setting a goal of being intimate at least once a week has helped her marriage. "Not to say that it's scheduled," she said, "but while I go about charting throughout the week, I keep it in mind. If I see it's been a

week or longer, I know it's something I need to make time for. It's not expected of me by husband but a gift I am happy to give to him. I have found it not only has benefited our intimacy but truly benefits our relationship outside of the bedroom as well. We've had our fair share of fights, but over the years as I put this stipulation on myself, I've noticed we speak softer and are more forgiving to one another. It is clear to me this is a side effect of celebrating our sacrament!"

Alicia, a 31-year-old CCL teacher who blogs at sweepingupjoy.com, recalls intimacy-related struggles from early in her marriage and recognizes the grace at work in their marriage. When they hear of other couples whose sex lives are getting worse with age, they don't relate, she said. "We always giggle about how they must be doing it wrong. Within our marriage and using NFP, things just keep getting better!"

An extended period of abstinence is teaching Maria and Jeremy, a 30-something teaching couple from Missouri, how much they rely on physical intimacy to stay close to each other. "It is a super, wonderful, awesome gift, but it isn't the only one God has given to us," said Maria, 32. "Right now we are working on the gift of teamwork, sort of like hiking along side-by-side a steep mountain cliff. We know that sometime we will reach the bliss of the summit, but we want to intentionally enjoy the hike

while it is happening. This, these moments, are the stuff of life." They try to replace complaining with counting their blessings — and most importantly, they take their frustrations to God in prayer. "We know the sacrifice is worth it," she said, "and we will be better, stronger and hopefully holier — closer to God and each other — with each day. Isn't that what marital intimacy is about?"

The more I hear people reflect in this way, the more it seems to me that in this area of marriage, just as in all areas of life, the attitude with which we approach challenges makes all the difference. This was particularly clear to me the day I sat down to chat with Bill and Tanis Merimee. When you interact with them, you can't help but be struck by how happy, how peaceful they seem. The burden of hyper-fertility seems to rest lightly on them. They don't look or talk like people worn down by raising a large family. They could have become bitter and turned their back on NFP. Why didn't they?

"There have definitely been pregnancies that have been more difficult than others because they're unexpected, but they're all part of God's plan," said Tanis. "From the very beginning, for 24 years, we've always been open to what God wants for our marriage. Are there disappointments? For sure. But you learn to accept them."

Bill tries to avoid shaking his fist at God. After all, they had a hand in each pregnancy too. "Sometimes the



Candid advice from a happy housewife

by Margaret Berns

Isn't this totally a fun topic?! Thank you so much, dear fall of Adam, for wreaking havoc on our sexuality!

In all seriousness — and I do mean, all seriousness — it has taken me nearly 20 years to appreciate the blessing and gift of our marital covenant. And I don't just mean appreciate in the "generically grateful" sense; I mean wholly appreciate it in the same way as my husband does.

Put clearly, dear reader, I enjoy sex.

(Is it awkward to say that? I feel like it's awkward!)

And yet — and yet — I know without a doubt that we're meant to enjoy it. Why? In short, it's God's will that we do. When I think about the release of hormones attached to this act, the love of my husband that grows exponentially each time, our seven children, i.e. the beautiful fruits of our love...I know without a doubt that sexuality is a gift.

But it's taken considerable work to get me to this point. Twenty years' worth of work! First, and perhaps hardest of all, I had to take an enormous step back from what our culture promotes as a healthy sexuality. Ours is not a Cosmopolitan marriage, where the focus is all on "driving him mad" or "talking dirty."

Instead, I focus on him — on



us. This is a very important tip: focus. It is without a doubt the hardest part of a being able to enjoy sex, but we are both so much happier (if you know what I mean, wink, wink) if I can be fully present to the physical act of our union.

Second, I've had to forgive myself for the mistakes of my past. It's a simple equation, really, but one the world keeps getting wrong. Premarital sex: bad. Procreative, married love: very, very good. Unmarried couples, do yourself an enormous favor and abstain from sex until you've tied the knot. It's heavy baggage that can come forward into your marriage in ways you can't anticipate, which can take lots of healing.

My third suggestion is to shoot for having sex at least once a day. Ha! Caught your attention, didn't I? OK, every other day then. Responsible parenthood can at times call for some periodic abstinence, but when you do have a green light, use it! Our minds are hard-wired to be habitual, and in this case, daily practice makes things much better. My friend says that married sex is like a fine wine: the more time you give it, the better it gets.

Fourth, find a time that works for you (the wife); you can usu-

ally count on your husband to be ready and willing any time. For my husband and me, that's often the mornings or afternoons — not the evenings, when I'm drained. Finding a good time has been crucial to our frequent intimacy.

Above all, dear beautiful wife, please put having sex at the very top of your list, and please don't relegate this relationship to the mundane to-dos of the day! I tried that once. It didn't work. My husband knew he was being relegated and my apathy nearly broke our marriage. My openness, however, saved our family.

For that reason, and all the others listed above, I am a staunch defender of frequent sex. Truly, if you don't have health-related impediments, open your heart to your spouse and see where it takes you.

Above all, please put having sex at the very top of your list, and please don't relegate this relationship to the mundane to-dos of the day! I tried that once. It didn't work.

Easier said than done? Probably, so I asked my go-to guru Sarah for some practical tips. Sarah is a Catholic kindred spirit and has one of most beautiful marital relationships I know. Here is her advice on kindling a fire in the bedroom.

1. Pray for the grace to want to give yourself to your spouse. It doesn't come naturally sometimes. Pray before/during/after that God will bless this act, and He will. He will! Your mind will be freed of its burdens, and your heart of the sexual ties that are holding you back.
2. Know that, more often than not, if the idea is not tempting after a very short while the momentum will carry you with it. You

don't have to feel 100 percent on board to get started.

3. Try to identify if there is tension in other areas that makes it hard for you to forgive and be warmly open to your spouse's advances. Saying the words of forgiveness is only a beginning. It takes time and the stumbling blocks are often subtle.
4. Trust. The grace of the sacrament is no accident. In the same way that some people turn away from confession despite the wide arms of God's mercy calling us back, we can turn away from the grace that's offered in our marital covenant. This sacrament is for your personal sanctification, for your marriage and for your family. That's a pretty ripe plum for the enemy of our souls.
5. If you struggle with what Christopher West calls "angelism," an unhealthy sense of what purity means and an aversion to the sacrament, it's not from God. He wants you to enjoy this sacrament with the same depth of joy that you take in Holy Communion.

The bottom line, my friend? Adam and Eve didn't mean to screw up. They did, though, and it's our job to restore the garden.

Margaret Berns is the founder of *Minnesota Mom*, a popular Catholic blog that deals with the ups and downs of family life. To read more about her thoughts on married sexuality, see her series *The Gift of the Magi for Modern Wives, Parts I and II*: minnesota-mom.com/2012/08/the-gift-of-magi-for-modern-wives-part-ii.html. (Don't miss the comments!) Margaret recently was a guest on Danielle Bean's new podcast, "Girlfriends," where the two bloggers discussed sex. For a link to that podcast, along with a book Margaret recommends on the topic, visit ccli.org/blog.

disappointment is that we knew it was possible to get pregnant and we didn't have the willpower to abstain," he said. "I'm very attracted to my wife — thanks be to God! — and there were times when I would think, 'Bill, you didn't have the moral strength to say it may be in the best interest right now not to have sex.' I'm not disappointed in the outcome, that a beautiful life has come forth. Still, I think, 'I should have had a little more strength.'"

What has helped them stay positive is to approach each other with openness and understanding, and a willingness to look for solutions.

There were many years, Tanis emphasizes, when being open to life granted them a great freedom to enjoy each other and to celebrate their love to the fullest on a physical level. "I believe this strengthened our bond tremendously," she said. "This freedom allowed us to connect and also trust immensely that God was in charge of our lives. It is incredible how he

has blessed us in our openness to life." Tanis and Bill are overwhelmed by the many ways, for instance, God is providing opportunities for scholarships to cover some of the cost of college for their children.

But freedom from abstinence didn't protect them from all frustration. Tanis remembers her 30s as a time when she often didn't feel good about herself. "I'm a swimmer, and I

couldn't get to the pool with four babies hanging on me," she said. "When you don't feel attractive, it's hard to want to have sex." To eat well, rest well and exercise takes commitment, but it's an act of love toward oneself and toward one's spouse.

Christian: You know I run because I want to look good for you. I work my butt off for you. Literally!

Kate: I know. I'm sorry it took me so long to get on the bandwagon. But being in good shape has made me feel better about myself too — and that's helped me have energy and interest in sex.

Another hurdle in enjoying marital intimacy is the cultural perception that sex is more valuable if it's spontaneous. Michael Jarecki says when spouses schedule time for each other, far from cheapening intimacy, it's an act of love. "You are safeguarding intimacy, making sure it happens, instead of getting swept away by work, kids or tasks around the home."



Private looks or touches, small gifts, a note, dwelling on special memories, a foot rub, taking more interest in your spouse's interests — even a quick prayer — all these things help keep a couple focused on each other.

Brain chemistry and hormones are all well and good, Lisa Reinkemeyer says, but you can help trigger those by paying attention to what's most important to the other person. Private looks or touches, small gifts, a note, dwelling on special memories, a foot rub, taking more interest in your spouse's interests — even a quick prayer — all these things help keep a couple focused on each other. Anticipation can prepare the heart for intimacy, she believes. "We move heaven and earth to get our kids to the big game, but do we see date night in the same gravity?"

The Merimees take turns planning date nights once a month. Once they went to an art museum and made up stories about the masterpieces. Another time, they played a game with their dinner menu. "I ordered, and Bill's job was to guess what memory that particular dish evoked," Tanis said. "For example, if the dish contained dried cherries, his job was to recount a picnic that included dried cherries."

Dates are great, but sometimes you really need to get away altogether. The Merimees are so convinced of the value of "the getaway," they've institutionalized it. "My schedule stinks," Bill said frankly, "so I've tried to maximize time with my wife in creative ways. Every two years we go away for a week, just the two of us."

A big trip won't always fall in Phase III, of course. When the Merimees left for a trip to the South Pacific island of Palau, it was Phase I. They took full advantage of their overnights in Chicago, Beijing, and Hong Kong, although they knew they were pushing the limit (and the rules). But then they abstained for the rest of the vacation.

Two days before heading home, they kayaked to a remote island: crystalline water, a coral bay, white sand... and no one for miles. "This is the beach that's in everyone's mind when they think about making love on a deserted beach in the South Pacific," Bill said. "We thought, 'We can't even enjoy this? Really?'"

The kicker? When they returned home, they discovered Tanis was pregnant anyway. They had pushed the limit just a little too far.

So the getaways are not a perfect solution for intimacy. And yes, it requires heroic logistics to make sure kids are taken care of. Still, a few days away can do wonders for a marriage. "It's like a honeymoon," said Bill. "For the next year we're basking in the glow."

There is no one-size-fits-all formula for achieving satisfying intimacy, but one thing is certain: If a couple prioritizes it, it usually improves with time.

Kate: I think what's changed for us is that I know for you to enjoy sex, I need to enjoy it too.

Christian: That endometriosis surgery also helped, because before that you were in pain.

Kate: Remember how we used to fight because I'd be waffling all day about my signs and then at the last minute we couldn't do it?

Christian: That hasn't happened in a long time now. We're better at communicating.

"Life is full of frustrations," Deacon Bob Reinkemeyer reminds couples. "We need to focus on the ones we can change and remember that some frustrations are short term and will resolve themselves." If the communication lines are open and a couple is praying and discerning, decisions about abstinence are made ahead of time. There is less need for pressure, disappointment or unfulfilled expectations.

These days, Bill Merimee views the challenge of their difficult schedule during Phase 3 as an opportunity to grow in love. "I see each month as an opportunity to be a little bit better for Tanis," he said.

They also choose to focus on the transitory nature of things. In a few years, the kids will be older, Bill will be finished with his schooling and Tanis may be near to menopause. "At this point in our life, we're able to say 'OK, let's come up with ways to make these next few years manageable.'"

That communication, say the Selmyses, is one of the real positives of NFP. In many marriages, "one partner refuses sex and the other feels rejected and that drives conflict. Or one partner assents to the other and that also builds conflict." Practicing NFP brings those conversations forward, allowing couples to reconcile their differences "instead of it being a tug of war."

For some Catholics with low libido, ideals about love as self-gift have instant appeal, says Melinda. "They express your experience of sexuality: You have rational control over the will. It's gratifying to think of this as virtue."

But, she added, it's easy to view a spouse who has a higher sex drive as less than. "The person with low libido may even spiritually lord it over their partner: 'What is wrong with you that you can't turn this off?' In marriage, there needs to be patience and charity, to allow the other person to progress toward greater chastity if that is needed."

This is a classic example of what counselor Michael Jarecki refers to as “assuming the good intentions of the other.” Even when a spouse lashes out, he says, remember they’re not trying to hurt you; they’re trying to communicate a need and a hurt of their own. When people come to counseling, it is as if they are drowning. “They’re flailing around, and they’re grabbing their spouse and shoving them under. They can’t understand why it would hurt. There’s not a malicious intent. There’s just a desire to meet some of the longings of the heart.” If the relationship is in pain, then many of the things one partner wants from the other are going to feel like additional burdens, not a gateway to closeness.



Jarecki urges couples to “lean in” to each other. Women tend to suppress their feelings and push through to facilitate their husband’s desires, he says, because they tend to be much more relationally attuned, and thus more willing to bend for the good of the other. But over time, resentment can build, especially if their husbands expect them to “create this hot desire and intense passion on top of that.”

One common complaint Jarecki hears is men withholding physical affection during times of abstinence. “They say, ‘It’s just going to fuel my desire.’” He reminds men that when they were dating, they were able to show

physical affection without expecting sex. “It might have been hard, but you would do that out of love and wanting to win their heart,” he said. “Why not now?”

Women, too, have a particular role to play in improving intimacy: We have to get our heads in the game.

Women, whether they work or stay at home with the children, often commiserate about being “on” 24-7. At every moment of every day, we are surrounded by our work. And many of us are what the Huffington Post calls the “default parent,” the one who gets handed the dirty tissue, even if Dad is closer to both the child and the trash can.

Add in lower natural desire, and it’s hard to shut off Mom and switch on Lover. But we need to work to encourage our own desire — because what is good for our husbands is ultimately good for us too. (See sidebar on page 18.)

When one sets out to write an article like this, there’s always the hope that someone will offer a magic formula. But that isn’t how life works. Joyful marital intimacy isn’t a formula. What works today won’t work forever.

Michael Jarecki draws a parallel between one’s marriage and one’s prayer life. Formulas only work if the foundational relationship is strong. It’s easy to feel like Martha when what is needed is a Mary-like attitude. Otherwise, you can come out of time devoted to relationship building — either with God or with your spouse — feeling no more refreshed than before you committed the time. That can lead to resentment.

When there are issues, he suggests, first “bar your emotional guts out.” Get rid of it all. God can handle it. Then it’s time to simply be in His presence. The priest who started Boys Town once described sitting before the Eucharist as radiation therapy — letting Jesus “burn out all the junk and begin to fill us anew.”

It’s important to do this before trying to unload on your spouse, he says. Simply being in the presence of another is very much like being in the presence of God. It fills our spiritual and emotional cup, which begins to overflow. Then we can give back; we can love our spouses and our children well.

We will never be perfect, but through grace, we always have a chance to start anew. Jarecki reminds that we are called to faithfulness, not 100 percent success. He likens it to an archery contest. “Faithfulness means that we keep shooting for the bullseye even though it is a challenge to hit,” he said. “Maybe I missed the bull’s eye, but I don’t throw down my bow and quit. I don’t settle for the outer rings. And I don’t start shooting my teammates instead. I just adjust and try again.” [FB](#)

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‘Marriage was not instituted solely for the procreation of children,’ but also that mutual love ‘might be properly expressed, that it should grow and mature [125].’

Amoris Laetitia for NFPers, not dummies

by Father John P. Floeder

I talk about love. A lot. God is love, and any who preach Jesus Christ must always preach love. I teach sexual morality, which can only be properly understood in the context of love. In the confessional, I always try to remind the penitent that God loves them and forgives them. With all my talk about love, it is a real danger to lose focus as to what love means and to forget that the love Christ calls us to, to love as He loves (John 13:34), is hard and even unappealing to many today.

Pope Francis is truly a pastor at heart and keenly feels this danger of both losing sight of the positive vision of love and of the real struggles of real people. (This, of course, is not to say that his predecessors were not pastors or concerned with the same things.) Pope Francis took the opportunity to reflect on love and the challenges of love in the context of marriage and family life by calling for a Synod on the Family. Following what has become standard practice, he then prepared his apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, as his response to the work of the synod in light of the struggles we face today.

It is a long document. This makes it intimidating to pick up. One might further be hesitant given the sometimes critical reactions of those in the Catholic media. Why might this document be important or helpful for you, the NFP user? Is it worth reading?

Amoris Laetitia is worth your time because it is a scriptural, theological and practical look at love in the family and the challenges we face today. It gives insight and pastoral advice on how to live love. It gives

correctives on how to teach — or not teach — about that love. And it gives a window into the heart of our chief shepherd who is always challenging us to engage the world as Christ did.

To help you discover these riches, I want to give you a map so you do not get lost in all the words, drama and debate. The key areas to enter into as an NFPer are the purpose of the document and its two fundamental themes: development of language or style, and love in the ideal and real. With this, my hope is that you can fruitfully navigate the document itself and the various responses to it.

Mercy for all

At the Synod on the Family in the fall of 2015, bishops and various experts discussed the family and the challenges it faces a decade and a half into the new millennium. This was last done in a major way in 1980. That synod led to St. John Paul II writing one of the great documents on the family: the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*. While the fundamental teachings on the family remain unchanged, the last 35 years have seen homosexuality become an increasingly widespread issue, an increase in divorce and a growing number of young people delaying or even forgoing marriage. Given this, a new response was needed.

The media coverage of the most recent synod portrayed it as a battle between progressives, who wanted a change in discipline or teaching on things like





Few human joys are as deep and thrilling as those experienced by two people who love one another and have achieved something as the result of a great, shared effort [130].

communion for divorced and remarried Catholics, and conservatives, who rightly insisted on doctrinal continuity and no undermining of the good of the sacrament of marriage. Given these divergent voices, the expectations for this post-synodal exhortation were too high and unrealistic. Some were hoping for a change in teaching on communion for the divorced and remarried. Others were hoping for a crystal-clear rebuttal.

Pope Francis, the pastor, chose to largely take a different route. As Cardinal Schönborn explained in his intervention at the presentation of *Amoris Laetitia*, the exhortation is “guided by the phrase ‘It is a matter of reaching out to everyone,’ (AL 297) as this is a fundamental understanding of the Gospel: we are all in need of mercy!” The pope wants to speak to the real situation of real people by presenting to them the love and mercy of God. He is not trying to change doctrine. He is a pastor giving pastoral advice in light of the discussion of the synod. Everything in the document should be read and interpreted in light of the teaching of the Church, as Cardinal Burke reminds us in his reaction to the document published in the National Catholic Register.

The document is largely focused on the positive vision of love and family we find in Scripture and Church teaching. It strives to present love, marriage and family in a compelling way while also trying to reach out and offer help to those struggling. As Cardinal Schönborn points out, Pope Francis does not want us to focus on those who are in “regular” and “irregular” situations as if they are two absolutely separate realities; instead, we should strive to reach out in love to all by affirming the good and helping them to want to do better.

The most challenging part of the document for most is chapter eight, addressed largely to pastors, and which deals with how to accompany and help those who are struggling to live the fullness of teaching on marriage and family. Here the pope is at his least clear and concrete. As he himself says, “If we consider the immense variety of concrete situations... it is understandable that neither the synod nor this exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases” (AL 300).

Instead he calls for careful discernment in difficult cases. This is troubling to some because it seems to open the door to abuse by some pastors who argue that many are not culpable for the situations that they are in (cf. AL 302). More thought and discussion are needed on chapter eight, but what is clear is that any pastoral solutions that are discerned need to be consistent with Church teaching. Pope Francis has not changed Church teaching. But he is calling us to walk with sinners and help them to want what God wants for their marriage and their family.

A change in style, not substance

Humanae Vitae gives us the key teaching for the Catholic NFP: the inseparability of the unitive and the



I thank God that many families, which are far from considering themselves perfect, live in love, fulfil their calling and keep moving forward, even if they fall many times along the way [57].

procreative meanings of the sexual act. Because of this reality, every sexual act, if it is to reflect the dignity of the person, the nature of the act itself, and the demands of love, must be a real mutual gift of self and open to life. This allows the sexual act to be a real one-flesh union.

My hope is that those of you reading this have experienced the fruits of this teaching and have grown in your love of your spouse through practicing NFP. Sadly, you have likely also experienced that Church leadership has not always done a good job of promoting or explaining this teaching and the importance of NFP. I am grateful for, and surely God is pleased with, those who promote NFP and the Church’s teaching on sexuality and marriage when many who attend Mass reject the message or are ambivalent about it.

The substance of this teaching has not and will not change where the Church is the Church. But Pope Francis wants us to consider more carefully our style in sharing the Church’s teaching on this and all the key



moral issues. Rather than focusing on people's moral failings, we should hold up the truth and help them to see why it is worth trying to live: "What we need is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them" (AL 35).

Then Pope Francis addresses sex and NFP directly: "We often present marriage in such a way that its unitive meaning, its call to love and its ideal of mutual assistance are overshadowed by an almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation. Nor have we always provided solid guidance to young married couples, understanding their timetables, their way of thinking and their concrete concerns. At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage.... This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God's grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite" (AL 36).

While most who promote and teach about sexuality and NFP do so well, Pope Francis offers us a great examination of conscience. If we are to succeed in helping ourselves and others to live the Church's teaching in a world that questions the value and meaning of sexuality and marriage, we must present why they are fulfilling instead of focusing only on why other ways are sinful. We must work to help young couples live their "timetables" in NFP, as CCL does so well. We must show rather than only tell.

But the part I see most lacking today in the above is recognition that the realities of sexuality and marriage can only be lived in God's grace. Too often, when people present the Theology of the Body or NFP they are presented as a cure to the ills of marriages today. Sometimes it is implied that if one comes to understand the truth of

these, sex and marriage will be great. Do we speak concretely about the challenges and sacrifice needed for love, marriage and NFP? Do we in the same breath also help them to realize the absolute need for God's grace, which we can always trust in? While maintaining our substance, can we adapt our style so as to better serve others?

The heart of the matter

The exhortation spends the most time on love, which is fitting since its subtitle is "on love in the family." Pope Francis is trying to model for us how to positively place the procreative meaning of the sexual act in its proper context by speaking extensively about the unitive meaning. If you only have time read a portion of the document, focus on chapters one, four and five. The pope gives us the ideal while striving to enter into the real aspects of love and family life.

In chapter one, Pope Francis lays out the scriptural foundations of love, marriage and the family. When the couple lives fruitful love, they are a symbol and living icon of the Trinity (AL 11). When Adam and Eve are joined together as one flesh, this union has both a corporeal dimension and a union of hearts and lives (AL 13). Yet in these blessings, Jesus still speaks to and knows the anxieties and tensions of real families and weaves them into his parables (AL 21).

Chapters four and five should be required reading for every couple preparing for marriage. In chapter four, the pope breaks open 1 Corinthians 13 in a beautiful and profound way. He then reiterates that great need of the gift of grace in marriage (AL 124) while giving a host of practical advice, like a couple needing to work to make time to dialogue and listen (AL 136-7). Chapter five reflects on love made fruitful, touching on the joy of large families but the need for responsible procreation (AL 167).

So much could be said on these sections on love, but you are best served by reading them and praying with them. We must all work to keep trying to get love right. These chapters can serve as a solid base and inspiration, for love always reveals itself and increases (AL 133-4) and "love always gives life" (AL 165). If we are to live and teach NFP well, it can only be in the context of love.

Do not let the media prevent you from reading and praying with *Amoris Laetitia*. While it is not like the philosophical or theological innovations of St. John Paul II or Pope Benedict, Pope Francis writes as a pastor trying to give fatherly advice and support. Fatherly advice, again, that is rooted in Scripture, Church teaching and an awareness of the real struggles of families. May its call for a change in pastoral style and situating talk of the procreative in the context of the unitive bear fruit in your life and in your sharing of NFP with others. [BF](#)



POTIONS of STERILITY

THE EARLY CHRISTIANS ON CONTRACEPTION

by Mike Aquilina

Ten years ago the historian O.M. Bakke published a book with the provocative title *When Children Became People*.

The title, of course, implies that there was a time when children were considered something other than human — less than human. And the book shows that it was so.

In the ancient world, most cultures treated children as property, units of production and even sexual objects. Child prostitution was common, made possible by the institution of slavery and the practice of abandoning unwanted babies at birth.

Except for the followers of biblical religion — except for Jews and Christians — the cultures of antiquity had no special regard for children.

Christianity immediately set itself apart, in many ways, but particularly in this one: Christians were open to new life. They did not practice abortion or infanticide. They did not use contraceptives. These were among the most striking ways

they distinguished themselves from everyone else. To the pagans, this pro-life attitude was synonymous with Christianity.

THE GENERATION OF THE APOSTLES

You can search the New Testament from end to end, and nowhere will you find the terms “contraception” or “birth control.” But that does not mean the Apostles were unconcerned about the subject. It means that the terminology back then was different from our vocabulary today.

In his Letter to the Galatians (5:19–20), St. Paul likely makes reference to contraceptive drugs in his discussion of sexual immorality. “Now the works of the flesh are plain,” he says, “fornication, impurity, licentiousness” — and next in his list comes the Greek word *pharmakeia*.

We recognize the word instantly as the root of our English words pharmacy and pharmaceutical. It is sometimes translated as potions or

drugs, but also as sorcery, witchcraft or magic. The range of possibilities is real. The ancients drew no bright line between pharmacy and sorcery, and practitioners of one were often practitioners of the other. When Plato used the term *pharmakeia*, he meant birth control, by means of drugs or “incantations.”

The context of Paul’s usage is important. Coming immediately after three words denoting sexual sins, *pharmakeia* in this instance probably refers to what other ancient sources more precisely call “potions of sterility.”

One of the standard academic histories of contraception and abortion, *Eve’s Herbs*, published by Harvard University, recognizes this reading of the Galatians passage — and notes similar uses of related Greek terms (*pharmakeion*, *pharmakeusin*, *pharmakoi*) in the Book of Revelation 9:21, 21:8, and 22:15, all of which are strong condemnations of people who act immorally.

THE EARLY FATHERS

The earliest Christian documents after the Scriptures certainly use the term in this way, as they condemn contraception alongside abortion and infanticide. Both the *Didache* and the *Letter of Barnabas*, produced in the mid- to late-1st century, speak of contraceptive potions in their discussions of “the Way of Death.” *Barnabas* also includes a rather blunt denunciation of those who practice oral sex, a common way to evade conception.

Clear condemnations continued from Christian authors in the second and third centuries — St. Athenagoras of Athens, Minucius Felix in Rome, Tertullian in North Africa and Clement in Alexandria, Egypt. The geographic diversity of the authors, and the consistency of the teaching over time, show us that this was hardly a local quirk or passing fad.

These post-apostolic authors were also more specific in their critique. They discuss not only the general category of “potions,” but also particular methods. Most of them mention drugs. Clement of Alexandria also mentions withdrawal during intercourse, saying: “the seed is not to be vainly ejaculated, or damaged, or wasted.”

In discussing birth control, the early Fathers state their principles clearly and apply them consistently. In the later Fathers we find the doctrine set out explicitly and with rhetorical force. The greatest Christian voices in the fourth and fifth centuries made clear to their congregations that contraception was unacceptable practice for Christians. We find the arguments — again, geographically dispersed — in St. Epiphanius of Cyprus, St. Jerome of Stridon, and St. Augustine of Hippo.

Yet no one puts the matter as eloquently as St. John Chrysostom. He repeatedly condemns contraception as unworthy of Christian marriage and he even calls it pre-emptive murder: “Why do you sow where the field is eager to destroy the fruit? Where there are medicines of sterility? Where there is murder before birth? Indeed, it is something worse than murder, and I do not know what to call it; for she does not kill what is formed but prevents its formation. What then? Do you despise the gift of God, and fight with his law?”

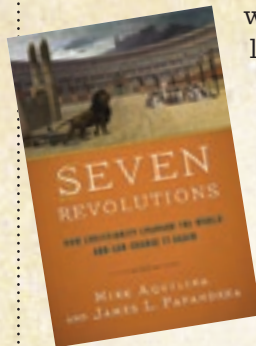
John saw birth control as a desecration of the sacrament of matrimony. If marriage is a sacrament (a sign and mystery) of God himself, then it should be a true communion, as God is, and truly fruitful, as God is.

THE WITNESS OF HISTORY

Honest historians cannot help but recognize the consistency of Christian teaching on contraception and abortion — especially because it is so strikingly different from every

other culture in antiquity. Search the documentary remains of the ancient Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Persians and Romans, and you won't find anything similar to the pro-life witness of the early Christians. On the contrary, you'll find that the leading lights of paganism were ardent supporters of birth control, abortion and infanticide. The pagan Roman governor Pliny the Younger spoke of the “rewards of childlessness” and said that having even one child was a “burden.”

Caesar Augustus, in the first century A.D., noticed the trends and worried about a looming demographic winter. He tried to legislate a solution



FOR FURTHER READING

Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*

SAN FRANCISCO: HARPER, 1997

Patrick Riley, *Civilizing Sex: On Chastity and the Common Good*

EDINBURG: T&T CLARK, 2000

Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church*

EUGENE, OR: WIPF AND STOCK, 1998

O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People*

MINNEAPOLIS: FORTRESS, 2005

Mike Aquilina and James Papandrea, *Seven Revolutions: How Christianity Changed the World and Can Change It Again*

NEW YORK: IMAGE, 2015

by outlawing adultery, fornication and homosexuality, and he punished some of these actions by flogging or death. He imposed punitive taxes upon men and women who remained single. Similar taxes were laid upon married couples who had few or no children. “And yet,” lamented the Tacitus, “marriages and the rearing of children did not become more frequent, so powerful were the attractions of childlessness.”

Instead, people lavished attention upon their pets. Clement of Alexandria noted that the same pagan

women who destroyed their children would take in baby birds and show them affection. The childless rich sometimes buried their dogs and cats in opulent tombs.

The Christian difference was stark — so stark that the pro-abortion historian John M. Riddle described the era of Christian dominance as a break in the “chain of knowledge.” With the rise of Christianity, contraception and abortion fell into widespread disfavor, and the ancient methods were forgotten. From the pagan perspective, that's a break. For humanity, however, it was salvation.

Why? Because the same principles that required Christians to condemn contraception and abor-

tion also led them to advocate for universal human dignity, human rights, charity for the poor, the rights of women and children, the sanctity and permanence of marriage, and the rights of people with disabilities. (It seems increasingly unlikely, in fact, that any of these will be sustainable apart from a nurturing Christian culture.)

Honest historians, whether they are Christian or not, recognize the consistency of the doctrine of classic Christianity. In 1965 John T. Noonan

Potions of sterility continued on page 30



Not just 'a Catholic thing'

PROTESTANTS EMBRACE THE BLESSINGS & CHALLENGES OF NFP

by Jessica Weinberger

As a junior at Ashland University in Ohio, Leah Heffner knew the birth control she was taking to combat her extreme PMS wasn't working — it was making it worse. So when her then-boyfriend Matt met with a natural chiropractor to explore alternative ways to treat his Crohn's disease, Leah also paid a visit to discuss natural options to address her psoriasis, as well as her PMS-related symptoms.

"With all of the other natural things we were trying to do to correct some of our health issues, it didn't make sense to us for me to be taking a hormonal, synthetic birth control when I was working so hard to get all other synthetic things out of my body," explained Leah, now 29, a lifelong Protestant.

Soon off the pill and discerning a call to marriage, Leah turned to her Catholic friends with questions about natural family planning. She borrowed CCL's *The Art of Natural Family Planning Student Guide* from a friend and began charting as an alternative, health-conscious family planning method.

"But as God tends to do, whatever your reason is when you start, He likes to sanctify your motives, and He really gave us a heart for being open to what He had planned for our family size and the vision for our family," said Leah, a stay-at-home mom of three who maintains a blog called "Life Around the Coffee Cup."

Leah and Matt represent a growing number of non-Catholics not guided by church doctrine who are embracing NFP and a fuller understanding of God's plan for human sexuality and marriage. The interest in NFP is on the rise for individuals and couples of all faith backgrounds, according to Kristin Detloff, a National Program Coordinator for SymptoPro Fertility Education from Oregon-based Northwest Family Services. With many women struggling with cycle irregularities and a greater awareness of the negative side effects of artificial contraception, many women are seeking alternatives, she said.

"They very much want to understand the information that charting their cycles can give and are excited to work with their body, rather than suppressing it to deal with any hormonal health issues they may face," Detloff, a Catholic mom of four from Watertown, Minn., said.

"There are no negative side effects or drug interaction concerns," she said. "So if you are interested in learning more, why not start now?"

'God is sovereign'

After their 2010 wedding, the Heffners began practicing NFP because of the health benefits and set an informal five-year timeline before discussing the possibility of children and family life. They looked forward to enjoying their time as a married couple, traveling without kids in tow and allowing Matt to establish his own marketing business and Leah to settle into her teaching career.

As they charted through their first few months of marriage, Leah struggled with accounting for her irregular cycle and accurately understanding her mucus sign. Frustrated with the uncertainty that came with every cycle, they began to let go of their own plans as a young couple and instead embrace the unknowns of a potential pregnancy.

"God is sovereign over everything, and it was time for us to have a baby because of something else He had in mind for us," she explained.

Setting aside their five-year plan, Leah and Matt soon became pregnant with their oldest and now have three children, ages 4, 2 and 6 months. Matt, 29, said the lens of

NFP helped him see how marriage and children are naturally connected by God, and he wouldn't change anything about beginning their family earlier than planned.

"Children have a tendency to squeeze the selfishness right out of you, and doing that early on in our marriage has had a great strengthening effect for us as husband and wife and as mom and dad to our kids," he said.

They are grateful for the small group of Protestant NFP users they have connected with in the Knoxville, Tenn., area, including their church community, which is very supportive of life and large families. Leah hopes that one day, Protestant churches will become more vocal about NFP and the importance of being open to life.

"They very much want to understand the information that charting their cycles can give and are excited to work with their body, rather than suppressing it to deal with any hormonal health issues they may face."

"I just want someone to stand up on the pulpit and say that birth control, especially the abortifacient birth control, is damaging to the children that God is creating," she said. "I would also love to hear from the pulpit that all

children — not just the three that you think you want to have — are all a blessing."

Discussions about NFP rarely occur outside Catholic circles, including in the secular university setting. But James Tour, Ph.D., a synthetic organic chemist and professor at Rice University in Houston, Texas, is trying to change that as an outspoken proponent of NFP inside and outside the classroom.

After first learning about NFP from a recording of Janet Smith's "Contraception: Why Not?" presentation, Tour, a Messianic Jew and father of four, decided to record his own perspectives on NFP, which is available on his website and visited by thousands.

"Sex and fertility go together," Tour says in his recorded message, noting that NFP is "not just a Catholic thing." He shares that "fidelity to the marriage commitment is the ultimate reason for NFP."

Tour notes that NFP, rooted in biblical teaching, promotes a sacrificial marriage, which leads to unusually strong marriages based on reciprocal communication, love and care. He believes that many Protestants don't practice NFP for the same reasons many Catholics do not embrace NFP — many have never been taught NFP and fall victim to the world's selfishness.

"I am so thankful to the Catholic Church for remain-

5

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ing fast and strong on this,” he said. “You have so blessed my home and marriage — and fellow believers.”

Rural blessings

Alison Grotberg, 46, a non-denominational Christian, never felt good about the pill. When she and her now husband, Dwight, were engaged, she went on the pill at the recommendation of a Christian nurse friend a few months before their wedding.

“I never felt right about,” Grotberg said. “It wasn’t even just a physical not-good feeling. I did not feel good about it inside.”

The couple began to explore other options, ultimately using the rhythm method to conceive their first child. But Grotberg was still searching for a more holistic method and began hunting through bookstores for NFP resources.

Five years later, a friend invited the couple to a NFP seminar hosted by a Catholic church in Fargo, N.D. Already open to NFP based on Grotberg’s research, they listened to a presentation on the Creighton Model. That’s when something clicked.

“The phrase that really won us over was being ‘open to life,’” Grotberg explained. “It was the idea of every union being unitive and procreative. In order to be open to life, it had to be that way, and we wanted to be open to life — the life that God wanted to give us.”

Now the couple, who oversee a grain farm outside of Jamestown, N.D., have 10 children ranging in age from 23 to 3. As they see the fruits of NFP multiply within their family, they note the strengthened communication between them as a couple, which was crucial especially in their early years of marriage.

“It’s really made us grapple with our hearts, not only as a couple but as individuals,” she said. “When you’re faced every month with the question of abstaining if you don’t want to have a child, then you have to ask yourself why. Just going through that process every month helps you keep your priorities straight and helps you recognize your motivations.”

Education, support and discussion around NFP remain absent from most Protestant circles, which Grotberg believes is the direct result of our culture’s complete detachment from God’s design for sex, marriage and life. Without defined church teaching, non-Catholics also do not have the doctrine pointing them to this fuller understanding of human sexuality.

“The Catholic Church says not to use it, but when your church doesn’t say that, then there’s no moral qualms whatsoever about using it,” she said. “And why would you not use it when that’s what people do?”

To promote the use of NFP to couples of all faith backgrounds, Grotberg believes we need to highlight the benefits but also convey the real struggles that accompany this unconventional lifestyle. She personally struggles with reading her mucus sign and serving as the “gatekeeper” for reading their charts.

“Yes, it’s hard work, but it’s so worth it because it changes your thoughts about your relationship,” Grotberg said. “It changes your relationship with God and your prayer life. It changes your level of communication with each other, all in positive ways. It really is a catalyst for growth in your life, and it humbles you.”

As their children help outside on their gain farm and assist with chores like laundry and food preparation in the house, she sees the blessings that arise from a large family. Growing up with one sister, Grotberg said now understands how having more siblings teaches each child to serve others while being open to life.

“That is a huge benefit of NFP because it teaches you how to go into life knowing that it’s about service, instead of about just me, me, me,” she said.

Filled with gratitude for their unexpected journey to NFP, Grotberg hopes that Catholics are just as grateful for the truth and goodness that serve as the foundation to the Church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality.

“Instead of being mad, irritated or just blasé about it” she said, “thank God for your Church’s teaching about it and that you have the opportunity to understand human sexuality the way God intended it to be.” [✚](#)

Potions of sterility continued from page 27

wrote: “No Catholic theologian has ever taught that ‘Contraception is a good act.’ The teaching on contraception is clear and apparently fixed forever.”

The Catholic Church has recognized this and never wavered. The Church in the twenty-first century — like the Church in the first — condemns the range of birth-control methods: from withdrawal to abortions to chemicals that change the sperm or the egg. Intervening scientific discoveries have done nothing to change the

morality that was evident to Paul and Barnabas, Tertullian and Clement, Augustine and Chrysostom.

It is good, today, that many other Christians, through their study of Scripture and the history of the early Church, are becoming more wholeheartedly pro-life, more welcoming of children. [✚](#)

Mike Aquilina is author of more than fifty books on Catholic history, doctrine, and devotion. He has hosted nine television series and two documentary films. He and his wife, Terri, have been married for since 1985 and have six children.



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“Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a land slide, no escape from reality. Open your eyes, look up to the skies and see... I’m just a poor boy, I need no sympathy. Because I’m easy come, easy go, little high, little low, any way the wind blows, doesn’t really matter to me, to me.”

— *Bohemian Rhapsody* by Queen

I love this song. Who doesn’t? Lately, it’s been on my mind a lot, especially the first few lines. In a certain sense it sums up precisely how I’ve been feeling lately. Let me give you a little back story.

A few weeks ago our middle son came down with a stomach virus. It was a rough one. Being young he bounced back quickly. Everyone else seemed fine, until four days later when I came home from work and wasn’t hungry. I’m always hungry. I felt exhausted and my stomach was upset and so I went to bed at 8 p.m. I never go to bed earlier than 10 p.m. I grabbed a bucket and ended up using it repeatedly.

About an hour later I hear a great commotion outside the bedroom and quickly realize that our 7-year-old has thrown up in his bed...he also has the stomach virus. As my long-suffering wife is in the middle of cleaning up that mess, our 2-year-old daughter ejects her dinner unto her bed, then the floor and then, as she’s placed into the tub, into the bathwater. It was a nightmare.

I managed to struggle out of bed and helped wash our daughter while holding my own bucket. While getting her dressed in a clean pair of pajamas, we have a father-daughter bonding moment and share my bucket. It was a beautiful mess. Suddenly the lyrics to *Bohemian Rhapsody* came streaming through my mind and I think, “This can’t be real life...this can’t be it. How did I get here? Why am I here? Why have I done this to myself?”

I was at a low point thinking, “Wow, this is my life? Ugh.” I was longing for those carefree days of caring for

nobody but me. I longed for the time I could come and go as I pleased: of not having anyone else depend on me or come crying in the middle of the night and crawl into my bed and end up taking all of the bed except for a tiny 6-inch strip along the edge, of not having to worry about a child bringing home a stomach virus from school and infecting everyone else in the house, etc.

But later I woke up for the umpteenth time that night and crawled my way to the toilet and in the midst of the agony I realized that I wouldn’t have it any other way. My

life was empty before, as empty as my stomach was now. Every ache, every sickness, every lost adventure was merely a small death for a greater beauty. That’s what a life open to new life is doing for me. It takes me out of my closed, selfish, lonely little world and opens up vast expanses of possibility and hope. I begin to see that the longed-for vacation, new car, etc., are fleeting glimpses, and that the giggle of a new baby, the peaceful snuggle of a 2-year-old, the victorious smile of my growing child are eternal moments of heaven.

My beautiful wife acted heroically that night of our sickness. She didn’t complain or cry out for sympathy. She simply worked furiously to clean and care for our family. She wasn’t trying to “be a saint,” she was simply loving the lives God had given her as a result of being open to new life, to God’s will. It wasn’t easy, but nothing truly worth it is easy.

All those possible vacations and adventures and freedoms don’t really matter to me anymore. When I was younger I went where I wished, but now, because of this openness to new life, I am often led to where I do not wish to go, and surprisingly, it is in this I find my greatest joy.

Michael Gagnon holds a master’s degree in theology and is a youth minister in Georgia. He and his wife, Maria, are the parents of three children.



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Protecting the reservoir of intimacy

The Church tells us that “Marriage is an intimate partnership of life and love” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48), but with all the busyness of work and family it can be hard for couples to simply hold on to each other much less cultivate intimacy. What exactly is intimacy anyway, and how can couples be the intimate partners they long to be?

Intimacy defined

In the new, revised and expanded 2nd edition of *For Better...FOREVER*, I suggest that intimacy is like a unit of measure for love. Just as inches measure length or gallons measure volume, intimacy indicates how deep the reservoir of love is between two people. Just like a real reservoir can either be overflowing or undergoing drought conditions, it is normal for the level of intimacy to rise and fall over the course of a marriage. It isn't always possible to keep the reservoir of intimacy full to overflowing. The key is knowing how to detect when the levels are getting a bit low and taking the time to “top off” the reservoir to keep you from going through a prolonged dry spell.

In *The Seven Levels of Intimacy*, Matthew Kelley gives names to the different “water levels” the reservoir of intimacy can experience. At the low end is level 1, *cliches* (e.g., “How are you today, hon?” “Fine, thanks. You?”). That's followed by exchanging basic *facts* (2) about the day, *opinions* (3) and preferences, discussions about future *hopes and dreams* (4), conversations about the couple's *feelings* (5) about life and each other, working through *fears, faults and failures* (6), and, on the deepest level, revealing those *needs* (7) spouses must meet to feel emotionally and spiritually fulfilled. Each level is important in its own way, and every couple touches on each of these levels at least sometimes, but a couple can get a sense of how full their reservoir of intimacy is based on which of Kelley's topics they spend the most amount of time and energy discussing and thinking through together. The deeper the intimacy, the more the couple has cultivated the comfort, safety, time and space they need to see into the deepest parts of each other.

Of course, cultivating intimacy is important to the marital satisfaction of every couple, but for the Christian couple, cultivating intimacy is particularly important for two additional reasons. First, the deeper the intimacy

in marriage, the more a couple is able to become true partners in helping each other become everything God created them to be. Second, deep intimacy allows the marriage to become the sign it is meant to be of the passionate, sanctifying love God has for each of us (Eph 5:32). God wants to know every part of us, inside and out, for better or worse. Marriage prepares us for this intimate encounter with our Heavenly Bridegroom.

Deep intimacy allows the marriage to become the sign it is meant to be of the passionate, sanctifying love God has for each of us (Eph 5:32).

Despite its importance on many levels, it is only natural that every couple goes through times when the intimacy they are experiencing is at higher or lower points. Here are some things a couple can do to keep the reservoir from getting too low.

1. Don't panic

The ups and downs of marital intimacy are normal. Even the closest couple will go through times when all they share are the basic facts of what kid needs to be taken where and what things need to be picked up at the grocery store. While a couple should not accept this low level of intimacy as the long-term status quo, neither should they see this as crisis in the shorter term. Rather, the wise couple will see these times as an opportunity to pause, take stock and make a plan for filling up the reservoir again.

2. Create rituals of connection

Rituals like meal times, game nights, dates, prayer times and other activities are regularly scheduled, expected times when the couple has intentionally planned and committed to meet together. Every couple does things like this once in a while, but smart couples make appointments with each other to carve out intentional time to work, play, talk and pray together.

Ideally, a couple will carve out smaller increments of time to connect across these four domains every day (for



at least 10 minutes or so) and somewhat larger increments of time (say, an hour or more) to connect weekly in these areas. For instance, daily rituals of connection could involve doing the dishes together (work), taking a short walk (play), discussing their feelings about the day while they walk (talk), and a nightly couple-prayer time (pray). Examples of somewhat larger weekly rituals of connection involve things like doing a household project (work), going on a date (play), talking about future plans over coffee on Saturday morning (talk) and going to Mass together (pray). As I note in *When Divorce is Not an Option: How to Heal Your Marriage and Nurture Lasting Love*, research consistently shows that creating regularly scheduled rituals of connection are the best way to make sure a couple is carving out the time they need to maintain at least basic levels of intimacy and catch and correct those times when intimacy is at a low ebb.

3. Share new experiences

Studies on so-called “sustainable marriages” show that couples who are marriage masters make a regular effort to learn or experience something new together. These don’t have to be big events. Going to a new restaurant or trying out a new board game could fit the bill. An-

We are all busy, but with intention and effort, every couple can create and maintain the intimacy that keeps a marriage warm, inviting and relevant.

other example is learning from each other. If your spouse loves a sport, or art, or other entertainment/hobby that you don’t have a lot of experience with, opening your heart and asking them to share what they love about that thing — and doing it together — is a great way to learn more about each other and create a wider, shared body of experiences. Sharing these little adventures can help couples feel that there is always something new to learn about each other and give them the encouragement they need to keep investing time in the relationship.

We are all busy, but with intention and effort, every couple can create and maintain the intimacy that keeps a marriage warm, inviting and relevant, which will sustain them through and even ease the more difficult times.

Dr. Greg Popcak, the author of many books, including For Better... FOREVER (2nd Ed. Revised and Expanded) directs the Pastoral Solutions Institute a Catholic tele-counseling practice. Learn more at www.CatholicCounselors.com

Good data, knowledge can help ease at least some intimacy stresses

by Andy Alderson

The intimate love between husband and wife is truly unique and unlike any other love between two persons. By defining the fertile and infertile times of a woman's reproductive cycle, practicing NFP in conjunction with responsible parenthood is the primary way we identify those potential times of sexual intimacy, in particular when postponing or avoiding pregnancy. Through my own experience and what I have seen from other couples asking CCL for help, how we chart can either bring clarity to determining those times for sexual intimacy or add to the frustration that some couples encounter.

Diligent charting

Having earned a degree from the School of Hard Knocks, I know first-hand how important it is for the chart to have accurate data. Anytime there are holes or missing information on the NFP chart, the times for marital intimacy can potentially be affected. I remember one day when I planned a very special evening for my wife and I, only to hear, "Oh, I started my mucus two days ago. I just didn't write it down." After some selfish grumbling and inappropriate blaming, I got the chart out to update it. When I recorded the mucus I noticed several days of missing temperatures as well. Full disclosure: This was after recently boasting at a pre-cana talk that the "temperature was my domain, and if there was ever a temp missing it was MY fault!"

It took an extra scoop of ice



cream to help get down the large slice of humble pie later that night.

The point of this is certainly not to place blame; in fact, that is absolutely the wrong take-away. Rather, when husband and wife take mutual responsibility for fertility awareness, they can work better together to ensure the chart is as up-to-date as possible. For example, rather than just owning only the temperature sign, I can also participate by helping ensure the mucus sign is recorded at the end of the day as well.

Our mobile app, CycleProGo®, can even help in this area. You can set the app to send you a daily notification to remember to chart your signs that day, or a notice if you haven't recorded your signs by a certain time each day. I once heard of a woman who really struggled to remember to

Having earned a degree from the School of Hard Knocks, I know first-hand how important it is for the chart to have accurate data. Anytime there are holes or missing information on the NFP chart, the times for marital intimacy can potentially be affected.

check her mucus sign who set her phone to ding a quiet alarm several times throughout the day and that was the gentle cue she needed.

The attached chart is one that was sent to us a couple of years ago and illustrates the need for thorough charting. As you can see, there are so many missing mucus and temperature observations that the only rule that can be applied with the data

given is Temperature-Only Rule. While this is a highly effective rule, it obviously requires more abstinence. Since there are no dry, nothing days recorded at the beginning of the cycle, technically there is no Phase I. Marital relations could possibly have been extended through Cycle Days 9 or 10 using the Doering or Last Dry Day Rules, and based on the likelihood of when Peak Day occurred, the Sympto-Thermal Rule might have been applied on the evening of Cycle Day 19 or even earlier. With missing data, however, the Phase I rules, Peak Day and subsequently the Sympto-Thermal Rule cannot be applied.

an application and interpretation of the rules to define the beginning of Phase III. In the example, significant elements of the Temperature-Only Rule had been misunderstood. In so doing Phase III was determined to start two days later than it actually began by that rule. Perhaps studying or reviewing the rules in the book will help solidify them. You can also have them out in front of you whenever you interpret your chart. They can be found in the Student Guide and also on the inside cover of the Chart Booklet. Or give CycleProGo® a try. It automatically calculates the boundaries of Phases I, II and III.

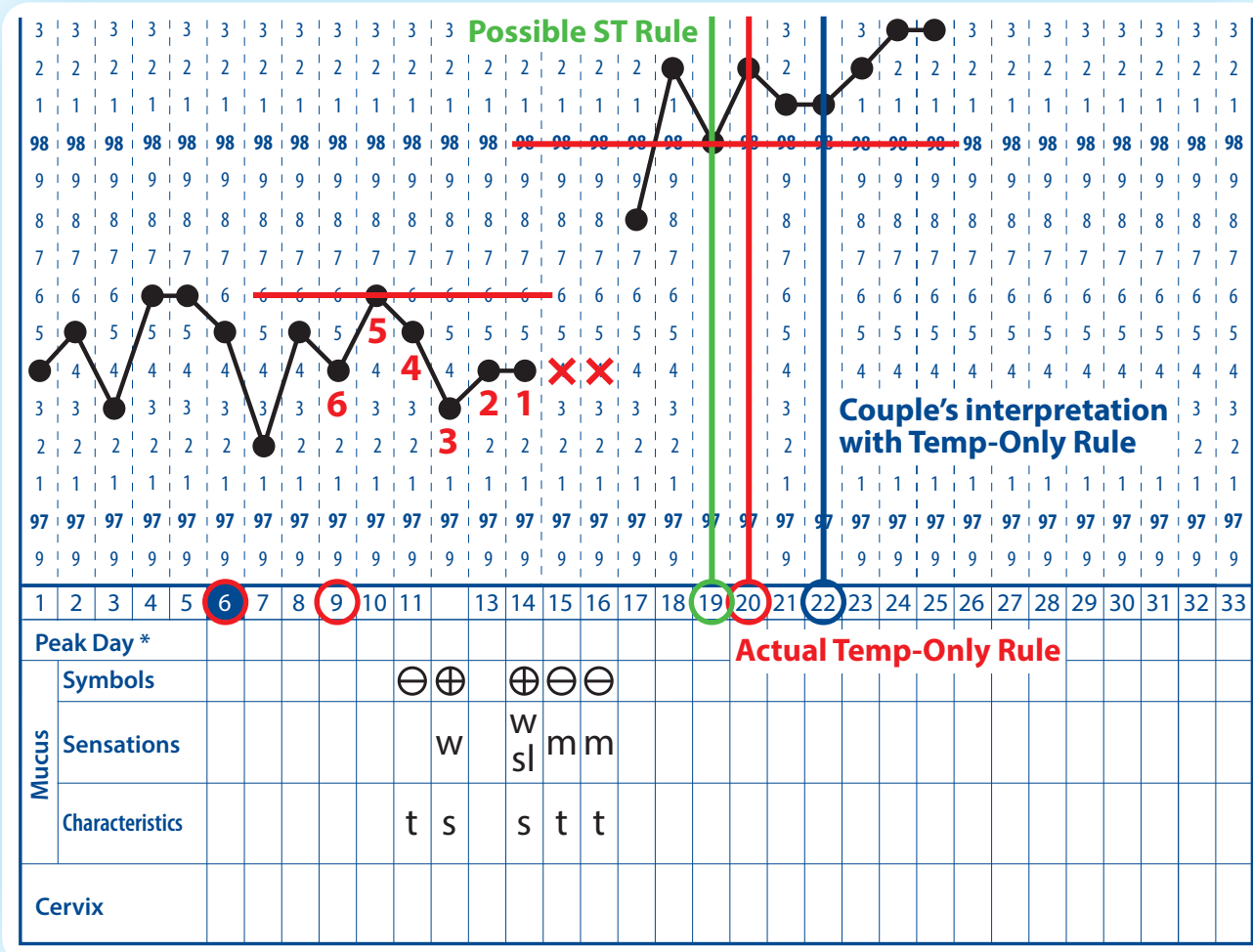
hood. With regard to marital intimacy, there is another important lesson I have learned over the years: that as a husband, I should take extra care during the fertile time not to pressure my wife. Admittedly, early in my NFP journey I did that. I learned, though, that my wife carries the greatest weight (pun intended) of having another child, so after we have prayerfully discerned that we need to abstain in any cycle, I then work hard to stick to that without pressure. Some couples dismiss the need to have the “how are we going to approach this cycle” conversations monthly (or at least frequently). But open communication that helps you stay on the same page does help cut down those pressured in-the-moment “Can we or can’t we?” situations that so often are intimacy-killers.

Know the rules

While this may seem obvious, it is very important. Often the assistance we provide couples is merely

Make decisions together

I wrote about making joint decision-making in my last article on NFP and responsible parent-



**Love bears all things, believes
all things, hopes all things,
endures all things.**

1 Cor 13:7



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