

# NFP a 'way of life' for La Crosse couple

By FRANZ KLEIN  
Staff Writer

LA CROSSE – Ushered into Jack and Joyce Felsheim's modest townhouse on a recent Friday evening, I encountered all the trappings of family life. There were toys on the floor, pictures on the refrigerator; and, yes, children – four of them: Elizabeth (11), Emily (10), Mary (7) and John (3).

Active and faithful Catholics, the Felsheims are knowledgeable practitioners of the sympto-thermal method of natural family planning, which is up to 99 percent effective. And they're perfectly willing to explode the myth that Catholics are forbidden from taking a role in the planning of their families.

Joyce, currently a homemaker, said that while NFP and artificial contraception can share the same ends, the means are different. "With contraception you're saying, I want to be in control," she explained. "But when you use natural family planning, you're thinking the time might not be right right now. But you're open to the will of God."

Openness to God's will can change one's outlook when it comes to children, she added.

Looking at her own children, Joyce put it succinctly. "Our children are gifts from God," she told me.

Parishioners at St. Joseph the Workman Cathedral, the Felsheims have been married for nearly 17 years. Although Jack, who works as a marketing director, grew up Catholic, Joyce was an ardent Lutheran. "And I wasn't thinking of converting," she emphasized.

When they got engaged, she said Jack had said, "I suppose we'll use NFP." "My response, 'What's that?' And Jack didn't really know either."

Receiving their first dose of education during marriage preparation, the couple initially practiced NFP mainly for biological reasons.

"There are no artificial hormones," Jack explained. "It's based on knowledge, knowledge of the woman's body, knowledge of the man's body. It's not based on ignorance, and it's not based on a fear of

getting pregnant."

"I think we gradually grew into the moral aspects," Joyce added thoughtfully.

She didn't stop with understanding the Church's morality. After three years of practicing it, Joyce converted to Catholicism. "Natural family planning was a stepping stone into the Church," she said.



CT/Franz Klein

At play on a Friday evening is the Felsheim family – Jack and Joyce together with their four children: (from left) Mary (7), John (3), Emily (10) and Elizabeth (11). The couple practices the sympto-thermal method of natural family planning, and teaches a diocesan-sponsored NFP course at Franciscan Skemp in La Crosse.

Jack sees an incredible depth of wisdom in the Church's promotion of NFP.

"Natural family planning treats fertility as a gift of God, not something to be medicated or suppressed. It's about cooperating with the way we were made as people and understanding that's the way God made us," he explained.

The Felsheims began training to teach NFP in 1991. Today they teach the diocesan-sponsored courses at Franciscan Skemp Healthcare in La Crosse. Similar courses are offered throughout the diocese.

"We've taught more than 150 couples in the La Crosse area over the last 12 years," Jack said.

He said some couples are trying to achieve pregnancy, others to postpone it.

"For those trying to achieve pregnancy, understanding a woman's cycle and knowing the times of fertility can help," Jack said. NFP also allows couples to "postpone in a way that respects the teachings of the Church and their own marital fidelity," he added.

Joyce said the daily time commitment involved with the sympto-thermal method

– which involves calendar calculation and monitoring changes in basal body temperature and cervical mucus – is comparable to brushing one's teeth.

More difficult, she said, is starting with a correct understanding of human sexuality.

"If you don't have a correct understanding of sexuality, natural family planning will never make sense," Jack added.

"A lot of people set themselves up in the wrong habits, the wrong mentality," he explained. "They're desiring their own pleasure. It's possible to do that your whole life. But it's not healthy."

Jack said a lot of contracepting couples who have a few children experience a midlife downturn in their marriage, and start to look at sterilization as an option.

"But what if there was a way for you to revitalize your marriage? Would you do it?"

Radical as it may sound, Jack suggests the marital continence NFP practitioners utilize during periods of high fertility could be the magic bullet.

"Being a chaste spouse means being faithful to one person," he explained.

"And the only way to do that is to practice sexual self control. That's what's practiced in natural family planning."

"How does this revitalize a marriage?" I asked.

Jack and Joyce looked at each other. Joyce spoke first. "It's almost a honeymoon effect," she said. "It's all brand new again because you've had this time when it wasn't available. It doesn't become routine."

Recalling the question he asked earlier, Jack repeated, "If there was something you could do to make your marriage better, would you do it?"

NFP could be the answer, he added. "It's impossible to know everything about natural family planning before you become involved in it. You have to take that leap of faith. It will mean you're not afraid to open your marriage to the will of God, that you're not afraid to take your marriage to the next level."

Editor's note: For more information about NFP or to register for classes held throughout the diocese, contact call Jeff and Alice Heinzen, diocesan NFP coordinators, at 800-255-6226 or visit [www.dioceseoflacrosse.com](http://www.dioceseoflacrosse.com) and click on Natural Family Planning.

For more information on NFP,  
Call: 1-800-255-6226  
or e-mail: [nfp@dioceseoflacrosse.com](mailto:nfp@dioceseoflacrosse.com)

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# Contraceptive contradictions

The Catholic Church remains almost a lone voice in our age defending the view that contraceptive sexual activity in marriage is wrong. Many young Catholic couples either are not aware of this teaching, or simply choose to ignore it.

When asked, few can explain the reasons behind it. Some venture to say that the Church opposes sex in general, and pleasure in particular. Others think that the Church wants everybody to have as many kids as possible. Some are even more cynical, and suggest that repressed, gray-haired celibates enjoy being able to stick their intrusive noses into people's bedrooms.

The reasons behind the Church's position on contraception, however, are actually a far cry from any of these old clichés. Among the deeper reasons behind the teaching, the Church stresses especially how contraception forces us to speak a false and contradictory language to our spouse through our body and our sexuality.

## Way of communicating

Because sex is a deeply interpersonal form of communication, we can consider some related examples of personal communication to see how the language of our own bodies is violated whenever we engage in contraceptive sex.

Would it be normal, for example, for a wife to insert earplugs while trying to listen attentively to or carry on a conversation with her husband? The earplugs bespeak the view that, "I don't really want to hear you and be with you," and they disrupt the couple's mutual communication.

If a woman inserts a cervical diaphragm or a vaginal sponge while having intercourse, she is likewise employing a language that says she doesn't really want to communicate openly and fully with her husband. She wants to keep part of who he is at a distance, at arm's length; that is to say, she shuns his fertility and fruitfulness. In that moment, she is rejecting the paternal aspect of his masculinity, and refusing to share with him the deep maternal meaning of her femininity.

## Language of the body

We can further inquire whether it would it be normal to surgically excise healthy vocal cords, and then try to carry on a conversation with our spouse. Opting for a vasectomy and then pursuing sex involves a similar contradictory language of the body. When a husband puts on a condom during intercourse,

## Making Sense Out of Bioethics



Father Tad Pacholczyk

before trying to have a verbal conversation with his wife.

As Professor Bill May puts it: "A person does not put on gloves to touch a beloved one tenderly, unless one thinks that some disease may be communicated. But is pregnancy a disease? And is not the use of condoms, diaphragms, spermicidal jellies and the like similar to putting on gloves? Do husband and wife really become 'one flesh' if they must arm themselves with protective gear before 'giving' themselves to one another genitally?"

## Unconditional love

The problem here is clear: marital sexuality is actually all about loving someone totally and unreservedly, giving and receiving totally, and not holding back who we are for ourselves. It is a unique language of total self-giving.

Contraception, on the other hand, allows marital sexuality to devolve into a kind of mutual masturbation where each pursues erotic satisfaction apart from the total gift of self, and apart from any openness to life. Because of contraception, marital sexual activity slips into a subtle mode of mutual exploitation – a lifeless, self-focused, needs-centered apparatus.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the famous BBC correspondent who converted to Catholicism late in life, instinctively appreciated how the Church was resisting this trivializing of the gift of sex by its strong stance against contraception:

"It was the Catholic Church's firm stand against contraception and abortion which finally made me decide to become a Catholic ... . As the Romans treated eating as an end in itself, making themselves sick in a vomitorium so as to enable them to return to the table and stuff themselves with more delicacies, so people now end up in a sort of sexual vomitorium. The Church's stand is absolutely correct. It is to its eternal honor that it opposed contraception, even if the opposition failed. I think, historically, people will say it was a very gallant effort to prevent a moral disaster."

he disrupts that intimate communication that is written right into the language of his body, much as if he had wrapped his mouth in cellophane before

trying to have a verbal conversation with his wife.

## Venereal vomitorium

The idea of serially eating and purging, in order to be able to eat and purge yet more, is a striking example of misusing our body in its most integral design. The one who dines in this way is seeking in a sense both to eat and not eat at the same time. Objectively speaking, he is engaging in damaging and contradictory behavior, violating the inner order and meaning of his own body, and cheapening the basic and quintessential human activity of eating. This destructive behavior crosses a real moral line insofar as a person freely and knowingly chooses to do it.

Contraception involves this same sort of destructive and contradictory behavior. Unlike the case of the vomitorium, however, sex is an inherently relational activity involving two people. For that reason, the damage done by engaging in contraceptive sex as a couple will extend beyond the fabric of their individual persons and trigger damage at the heart of that delicate relationship which is their marriage.

## Contradictory language

The choice to use a condom during sexual intimacy speaks the same contradictory language of the vomitorium: the language of trying to have sex, but not really have it; of trying to do it, without really doing it. One is militating directly against the sexual act itself, violating its inner order and harmony by actively flustering its obvious life-giving designs. Contraception, thus, always involves an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other in the face of that innate language of sex which calls for a complete self-giving.

The reasons behind the Church's teaching thus run deep and flow from profound considerations regarding the integral design of human sexuality. Pope John Paul II put it well when he stressed how couples who use contraception in their marriage presume to "act as 'arbiters' of the divine plan and they 'manipulate' and degrade human sexuality and with it themselves and their married partner by altering its value of 'total' self-giving."

Editor's note: Father Tadeusz Pacholczyk, Ph.D., earned his doctorate in neuroscience from Yale and did post-doctoral work at Harvard. He is a priest of the diocese of Fall River, Mass., and serves as the director of education at The National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia ([www.ncbcenter.org](http://www.ncbcenter.org)).