Happiness in the Family and Openness to Life

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Kudos to Dr. Irene Alexander for her recent article (Alexander 2018), Dr. Alexander complements the usual clinical discussions of Natural Family Planning (“NFP”—i.e., periodic abstinence for the purpose of avoiding pregnancy) to focus on its effects as lived out by spouses.

Dr. Alexander addresses important, rarely mentioned topics like the hardships added to contemporary family life by the isolation of nuclear families and the absence of grandparents from the home. She describes the psychological and spiritual superiority of NFP over contraception, especially the harmony between the unitive and procreative aspects of marriage.

As a family physician who has spent over forty years with hundreds of families who have faced the same challenges Dr. Alexander describes, I would like to offer a few supportive comments.

1. A vital component of a normal, happy married life is the “ecological” breastfeeding of infants, which leads to a “Natural Child Spacing” of more or less one and a half to three years (Kippley 1974). For many families, no other method of child spacing is needed. With declining fertility as couples age into their thirties and forties, this spacing spontaneously increases to three to five years and eventually fertility disappears, usually long before menopause. Because of the prevalence of absolute and relative infertility in the human species, some couples who take no steps to avoid pregnancy may have no children, some only one or two, most between three and six, and very few up to eight or ten. Unheard of are the families of fifteen to twenty children of the 1950s, when breastfeeding was rare.
2. Since ecological breastfeeding requires continuous mother–baby presence, most families who are open to life adopt the traditional family structure. This model involves a mother who works to support her husband

and children by making a home for them and a father who works in the world to support the family financially.

In an age when boys are taught that there is nothing they can do that a girl cannot, and that as males they can add nothing of unique value to the family or society, many become alienated. In contrast, the mutually supportive differentiation of roles in the traditional family shows them that their special role is to be a good father, gladly shouldering the burdens of work in order to enable their wives to be good mothers. (These lessons in true, self-sacrificing masculinity are also a great preparation for the priesthood.)

In playing different but equally vital roles, both husband and wife find fulfillment. Nothing is so rewarding as being needed, respected, and valued by your beloved. Grateful for their wives’ sacrifices in bearing and caring for children, many Dads also take on more of the menial tasks of child-rearing, like changing diapers, carpooling, and watching the older ones while Mom gets a much-needed nap.

3. It is a paradox of Christian life that self-sacrifice leads to happiness. On the other hand, obeying the secular commandment to live for one’s own fulfillment by choosing career over family leads to tension, conflict, and misery. It is no wonder that divorce is so much more common among those who practice contraception.

All families face difficulties and heartbreaks, but I have known many, many families who breastfeed, are completely, unconditionally open to life and have rich, happy lives and thriving children. The need to restrict the number of children is an exception, not the rule. Dire poverty is rare. (Relative poverty is a price many families are willing to pay for the sake of higher

goals.) Medical conditions that threaten women's lives are rare (and sometimes exaggerated).

4. NFP is a drastic step up from contraception, and it has a beautiful fail-safe feature. As Dr. Alexander points out, every month couples will ask themselves, "Remind me again, why are we abstaining?" But it's also important to remember that the deprivations Dr. Alexander describes for both men and women during abstinence are trivial compared to the deprivation of the entire family *from children* that results from "successful" NFP.

In a culture where the contraceptive mentality prevails, it is not easy for modern Westerners, even good Christians, to be untainted. We are not free of materialism, and we may fear that being unconditionally open to life will be too difficult. On the contrary, large families are normally associated with earthly as well as heavenly happiness. Anyone who has ever seen a tired, crabby, stressed-out teenager come home to the adoring smiles and outstretched arms of an infant or toddler will know that there is truly no greater gift we can give our children than another brother or sister.¹

5. All couples with big families practice frequent continence. It may not be periodic; perhaps it might be called "sporadic continence." Life as a parent is exhausting, the baby just woke up, the alarm is about to go off, someone has the flu, and so on. The idea that couples who do not practice NFP are free to fall into each other's arms at a moment's notice is a fantasy. Far from indulging in such hedonism, these men and women epitomize "responsible parenthood." Sporadic continence, as dictated by the contingencies and immediacies of family life, can provide all the opportunities for self-sacrifice and spiritual growth that Dr. Alexander so well describes. What it does *not* do is to deprive husbands and wives regularly and deliberately of the profound, restorative unity of conjugal relations during the fertile time.
6. *Humanae Vitae* is not a prescription for NFP. It is, in fact, primarily concerned with "the transmission of human life," which St. Paul VI calls "this duty." It is a call to accept children with a generous spirit.² According to the encyclical, NFP is *allowable* for serious

reasons. It is never described as morally obligatory. (Even women facing serious privation or risks to their health *may* choose to be open to another child.)

The normal, default position for married life, then, should be neither contraception nor NFP, but generous and unconditional openness to life, with acceptance of God's plan for the nourishment of infants and with NFP available if needed in exceptional circumstances. This way of life has been called "the most natural family planning of all."

My years of practice with many families confirm that such openness is achievable for most couples. It will surely be aided greatly by St. John Paul II's "conjugal spirituality." In fact, a generous and unconditional openness to life is an intrinsic part of a true conjugal spirituality.

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Notes

1. St. John Paul II, Homily on Washington, D.C. Mall, 1979, "... it is certainly less serious to deny their children certain comforts or material advantages than to deprive them of the presence of brothers and sisters, who could help them to grow in humanity and to realize the beauty of life at all its ages and in all its variety" (<https://fauxtations.wordpress.com/2015/02/12/st-john-paul-ii-and-children-as-a-gift/>).
2. St. Paul VI, 1968, excerpts from *Humanae Vitae* cited by Bishop James D. Conley in the same issue of LQ: "[Married] love is above all... an act of the free will, whose trust is such that it is meant not only to survive the joys and sorrows of daily life, but also to grow, so that husband and wife become in a way one heart and one soul, and together attain their human fulfillment.
 "It is a love which is total—that very special form of personal friendship in which husband and wife generously share everything, allowing no unreasonable exceptions and not thinking solely of their own convenience. Whoever really loves his partner loves not only for what he receives, but loves that partner for the partner's own sake, content to be able to enrich the other with the gift of himself...
 "Finally, this love is fecund. It is not confined wholly to the loving interchange of husband and wife; it also contrives to go beyond this to bring new life into being. 'Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the procreation and

education of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute in the highest degree to their parents' welfare.' Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today, no. 50: AAS 58 (1966), 1070–1072 [TPS XI, 292–293]. https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html.”

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