Learning NFP: the Experiential Paradigm

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Dr. John Marshall has recently published a book, *Love One Another: Psychological Aspects of Natural Family Planning*, in which he urges the Church to change its teaching on contraception. As a distinguished physician (he is professor *emeritus* of Neurology at the University of London) and a long-time researcher in natural family planning (NFP), Dr. Marshall’s opinion is likely to carry much weight, especially as he bases his arguments on correspondence with 10,000 couples he has taught NFP during the past 40 years. In this paper I do not intend to give a detailed critique of the book or its author. Suffice to say that Dr. Marshall, as one of the original six members of the Birth Control Commission of 1964, called by Pope Paul VI to examine the legitimacy of the anovulant Pill, voted with the majority report to change the Church’s teaching.

**Marshall’s Thesis**

What concerns me in this paper is Dr. Marshall’s contention that the experience of married couples shows that “the basic problem on which the teaching on contraception was based was flawed.” He charges that “the nature of intercourse can only be discovered by the experience of couples and by scientific observation. So the appeal to authority is not convincing in this field.”¹ In the final chapter in which Dr. Marshall makes these statements, he is specifically referring to the fact that in his view, couples do not experience every act of intercourse as open to life. But, throughout, he is citing the negative experiences of some couples he has instructed in NFP as the primary argument for changing official Church teaching, since, he believes, they face an unacceptable moral dilemma.² In other words Dr. Marshall believes that the documentation concerning negative experiences of couples he has amassed is irrefutable evidence of the Church’s mistaken view on responsible parenthood. It, therefore, becomes critical to examine his interpretation of these experiences.

**NFP: An Innovation**

First let it be said that the experiences themselves are not in dispute. They
provide valuable information on the practice of NFP. It is the thesis of this paper that these experiences cannot be understood without understanding the nature of experiential learning and the nature of the person. Natural family planning is a form of experiential learning which is not the case with contraception. According to Thomasina Borkman, Professor of Sociology, George Mason University, natural family planning, which is based on observing signs and symptoms during the fertile period, is an innovation. She cites the following reasons. It is a family planning method that accepts fertility rather than suppresses it like contraception. It is based on sound scientific information unlike Rhythm. The couple rather than the man or woman alone take responsibility for fertility. They can have personal knowledge and awareness of their reproductive processes which enables them to take charge of their fertility instead of abdicating control to the medical profession. The abstinence required to avoid pregnancy can be experienced as positive and strengthening their marriage rather than as a deprivation. The couple view sexual intercourse as only one aspect of their sexuality in a marital relationship. Finally many couples claim that NFP improves their interpersonal communication and becomes a “way of life.”

Two types of knowledge are essential in natural family planning: (1) physiological information taught in a didactic fashion in an impersonal way in formal courses by credentialed professionals, and (2) application of this knowledge to daily life in the emotionally-laden area of sexuality. Learning NFP is like learning to swim. It can only be mastered by doing, and the credible teacher is the one who practices NFP. The whole person is involved, the feelings as well as the mind and the body. Confidence and motivation are important especially as it is a dynamic process which changes on a daily basis. For the method to be effective both husband and wife must work together.

Dr. Borkman and I have been working on issues related to NFP since 1977 when I approached her as a medical sociologist for insight into the rejection of natural methods by the medical profession. A pioneer in research on mutual support or self-help groups, Dr. Borkman was struck by the similarities between the practice of NFP and the 12-step approach to recovery from alcoholism and other addictions. Both call for abstinence to solve a specific health problem. Both adopt a spiritual-behavioral approach as opposed to a medical treatment model. Both are said to lead to transformation and a new “way of life.”

Contrasting Anthropologies

What is unique about the original 12-step program, Alcoholics Anonymous, according to Kim Bloomfield, is that the movement “serves as a distinct social and cultural force by what it offers in addition to abstinence: an alternative interpretation of reality to that of the utilitarian/rationalist perspective which has traditionally dominated American thought.” It also offers a different anthropology or view of the nature of the human person.
The utilitarian/rationalist philosophy prevalent in our society today emphasizes the primacy of autonomy, self-interest, secularization, rational control of human life and unrestricted freedom. This means the individual seeks the meaning of his life and actions primarily in himself, especially the rational part. The self or conscious mind is seen as separate from the body or the rest of the person and the individual person as separate from family, society and the environment.

This contrasts sharply with the anthropology of Alcoholics Anonymous. Where utilitarianism/rationalism does not recognize limits except those of self-interest, two main features of the AA philosophy are “essential limitation” and “mutuality.” Human beings are recognized as finite in their relationship to God yet “whole” in their limitation. While they have an innate urge to transcend limitation they do so only in mutual dependence on one another and in relationship with a divine power. Spirituality is central to the human being and persons must always be treated as ends in themselves. Not only are human beings relational but Man is viewed holistically as a biological, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual entity. There is no split between body and soul.

While individuals can influence each other they cannot unilaterally change one another. (This is reminiscent of St. Thomas Aquinas’ view of the human person as sui iuris--no one else can will for him.) The person grows by reaching for a personal relationship with a Power outside himself and by a complementary relationship with others in the group.

**Different Anthropologies and Experience**

Related to the holistic approach to the human person is a particular form of learning. Labeled in the 1970s “experiential,” it is central to 12-step programs as it is of natural family planning. Dr. Borkman defines it as knowledge “grounded in an individual’s lived experience.” Experience gained by field or laboratory work has always been a part of professional training, but for self-help groups the person’s lived experience and that of their peers “occupies center stage.” While professional expertise involves emotional distance, experiential knowledge results from emotional involvement in the situation. The learning is primarily by practicing and doing, and the experiential knowledge gained is pragmatic rather than theoretical.

It is important here to recognize the danger of arguments from experience. Since the focus of this paper is the nature of experiential learning, it is not able to take up a philosophical analysis of the value of experience as a source of truth. Surprisingly, our present pontiff, John Paul II, has presented just such arguments in his philosophic works, especially *The Acting Person.* In the introduction to the first English translation of the revised edition of *Love and Responsibility* which deals with questions of sexual ethics, he stresses experience as a primary source of the work, his own and that of the many who came to him for pastoral advice. He describes experience as “the sole source
of information and the basis of all reliable knowledge on whatever subject.” But he qualifies this by warning that the notion of experience must not be limited to surface experience but reach the full depths of the human experience. This presupposes an adequate understanding of the nature of the human person. For Wojtyla/John Paul II, every human act is accompanied by an experience; it is through moral action that the human person experiences himself as becoming either good or evil. A philosophy of experience cannot be separated from morality or an “adequate anthropology.” It is precisely because the original AA program is based on an “adequate anthropology” (in fact a Christian anthropology since it is based on the Oxford Movement, a Christian renewal movement) that the program has been effective. It corresponds to the truth of the human person in a way that the utilitarian/rationalist view of the human person.

**Experiential Learning**

Several important features are intrinsic to experiential learning. Peers have a fundamental role to play. It is the basic level at which the viewpoint of the problem and its resolution are developed, then applied by members and transmitted to others. Long-time practitioners act as role models for newcomers. The spiritual dimension is vital. Members fashion a template or framework of the problem and develop a common language. Often a voluntary change of identity or a transformation is part of the solution to the problem. One of the most salient characteristics of experiential learning is the sharing of personal stories.

All this can be seen in relation to natural family planning. An important feature of NFP programs is the “witness couple,” who describe their discovery of NFP and its effect on their marriage, often after switching from contraception. One of the most successful NFP programs in the United States is based in St. Cloud, MN. Kay Ek, the director, attributes their success to their Witness Couple Program. She says:

We have been extremely pleased and sometimes surprised at the large numbers of new couples who choose NFP as a result of hearing one of our Witness Couples speak at the Marriage Course . . . Time and again I’m asked by other NFP directors how we get the numbers of clients we have, and I keep coming back to the incredible value it’s been to have young couples talking to young couples about this exciting, yet counter-cultural way of life.

A regular feature of NFP program newsletters either in the form of an article or a letter is the experiential testimony of couples. Examples of NFP newsletters are *CCL Family Foundations*, *NFP Advocate*, and *Stepping Stones*.
Role of Personal Testimonies

Several disciplines, according to Julian Rappaport, are discovering the importance of narratives in understanding cognition, personality development, community and culture. Narratives are "acts of communication and self-definition." Personal testimony or witness has always played an important role in Christian life as well as in the more recent self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Researchers have identified a difference between individual and community narratives. Examples of community narratives are the gospel stories of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan. Members of a bible study group apply these stories to their own life. Carole Cain recounts how the AA story developed and how new members relate to it. A member will tell how drinking made his life unmanageable, how he gave up alcohol and adopted a sober life-style in AA. In NFP, too, couples tell how they were dissatisfied with or harmed by contraception and switched to NFP, finding in the process a new way of life.

Researchers have discovered how stories people tell shape their behavior. "They become their stories," according to Wuthnow. The person forges a new identity by the telling of stories in a communal setting. Groups, says Rappaport, provide a narrative about change through involvement in the community and "this narrative serves as a basis for change in one’s personal identity." Some researchers call this change in identity a change in "worldview." Every group has its own worldview which evolves over time. Giving one’s testimony "can be understood as telling a story of personal worldview transformation." These researchers have identified four areas of worldview that undergo transformation: the relationship to self, to others, to the universal order and the problem that is the focus of experiential learning in the group.

There is a change from viewing the self as defective in some way. For example, with NFP men and women come to see their fertility not as a defect but as a healthy part of themselves. Formerly they chose contraception because they viewed each other’s fertility as somehow dangerous. Members revise their view of God. NFP couples develop a new spiritual relationship which appreciates God’s plan for their fertility and sexuality. They no longer expect a physician to provide a solution for child spacing but take the responsibility themselves.

Difficulties with Abstinence

It is recognized that the process of change and growth involves pain and effort. A common AA saying is "no pain, no gain." In other words, difficulties are not necessarily viewed negatively. Sandy Beach, a well-known interpreter of the AA philosophy, describes how pain is transformed into effort when the person is grounded in the spirituality of the program. The same is true of natural family planning. When Dr. Borkman first studied the testimonies of
NFP couples who claimed that NFP had benefited their marriages in spite of difficulty with abstinence, she found herself impelled to face her own negative views of sexual abstinence. She turned to the dictionary for a definition of difficulty and discovered two meanings: (1) a challenge and (2) a deprivation. Every worthwhile endeavor involves some challenges— one only has to think of the struggle in mastering a sport or a new field of learning. Most of the time the rewards outweigh the difficulty and pain of the effort.

To give an example from Dr. Marshall’s book. One woman, for whom abstinence is difficult but with benefits to the marriage, is classified under “problems with abstinence.”

I love my husband for his voluntary abstaining for all our sakes. But I regret it, too . . . I try to make it up to my husband in other ways, but this is not easy. My talents at cooking and housekeeping are not outstanding, whereas at intercourse I am unique as far as he is concerned.

On the other hand one husband found abstinence a deprivation.

So where are we forty years on? We are still together, our friends regard us as a devoted couple and we have three splendid children. . . . In fact we are emotionally crippled and live in an affectionate desert where . . . a reassuring hug in times of stress is unacceptable.

In this latter case the couple obviously were not able to integrate abstinence into their relationship, but the question arises as to whether that is intrinsic to natural family planning or to some defect in the couple’s marriage. Whatever the case, not to take into account this distinction between abstinence as challenge and as deprivation is seriously to misinterpret the experiences of NFP couples.

Dr. Marshall’s book gives equal or greater weight to negative rather than positive experiences. This contrasts with a prospective study he himself conducted from 1965-68 on the psychological aspects of the Basal Body Temperature (BBT) method (an earlier form of natural family planning), which he summarizes in the book. In that study less than 10 percent of both men and women felt that the BBT method “had hindered” their marriage, i.e., abstinence was viewed as a deprivation (the same percentage as the couples in the Borkman/Shivanandan study) while about three out of four felt it “had helped.” While 9 percent of men and 13 percent of women appreciated intercourse less after the period of abstinence, as many as 69% of men and 61% of women appreciated it more. With regard to certain aspects such as effect on spontaneity, the majority—more than half—said it did not affect, while less than a third said that it did. Again three out of four women and two out of three men found the method satisfactory, while only 22 percent of men and 17 percent of women did not. However these statistics are interpreted, the
majority of NFP users in the study—about three quarters—were satisfied with the method and found it helpful to their marriages.

With regard to the letters on which the book is based, Dr. Marshall’s method was to extract comments, record them on cards and file in categories. In contrast to the prospective study, such a method could not provide any percentages between satisfied and dissatisfied NFP users. Yet he dismisses the importance of percentages and instead accords equal weight to both negative and positive comments.  

**Stages of Growth**

Furthermore, Dr. Marshall’s methodology ignores stages of growth on NFP. Other researchers have discovered that couples go through distinctive stages. Notker Klann, for example, has shown that the same couple may experience NFP as negative at one phase of life and positive at another. Borkman and Shivanandan have noted two distinct stages, one physiological and the other psychological, which they labeled physical and relational. Couples who do not grow beyond the physical stage are likely to have more negative experiences than those who reach the relational, transformative stage. One woman in the book referred to this.

Actually I still think of it as family planning, when it’s really our WAY OF LIFE! Something now, quite naturally integrated into our happy relaxed relationship.

In the chapter on spirituality, only three women appear to have an enhanced spiritual life as a result of using NFP while most of the others remain at the rule stage of religion/spirituality with most chafing at the restrictions. Dr. Marshall, himself, plainly does not view it as a “way of life.” Yet the transformative potential of NFP is one of its greatest assets.

**Frames of Reference**

Another critical feature of experiential learning is the couple’s frame of reference. Again an example can be taken from Dr. Marshall’s book. One couple quoted views sexual intercourse as a gift from God that should not be restricted while another is “sufficiently realistic to think that the perfect sexuality described in novels does not exist in reality.” The former elevates sexual intercourse to an overriding value in the marriage. This is reminiscent of the philosophy of Margaret Sanger, the birth control pioneer who called sex “this consecrating experience” in her book, *Happiness in Marriage.* She advises, “make the love you have found your religion. . . .For it can be the noblest of religions.” Such a view of sexual intercourse is not biblical and leads directly to contraception since nothing must interfere with sexual gratification.
Dr. Marshall, himself, expounds a philosophy of marriage favorable to contraception in the last chapter of his book. He cites with approval the conclusion of the majority report of the 1964 Birth Control Commission of which he was a member:

Sexual intercourse is essentially a unitive act. . . . Union is the essence of intercourse; procreation is not. . . . Why then may a couple, when they have good reason, not remove the procreative element when it is present?36

It is more than likely that Dr. Marshall took this philosophy with him in teaching natural family planning to couples. If they expressed negative views about abstinence or other aspects of the method such as “sex on a schedule,” he might sympathize but not assist them to work through the difficulties.

The Church’s Teaching as Template

NFP couples find in the Church’s teaching on responsible parenthood a rich template or framework for living their married life. John Paul II has articulated this perennial teaching in a new and profound way. Scripture has been a primary source for his renewed vision but he also credits the experience of couples who practice NFP with providing insights.37 Central to this vision is John Paul II’s theology of the body. He has coined the phrase, the “nuptial meaning of the body,” to signify the complete self donation of the couple in marital intercourse. Only if the procreative and unitive meanings are united in the marital act can the nuptial meaning of the body be preserved and marriage be a sign of God’s love for his people and Christ’s love for his Church.38

As the philosopher Karol Wojtyla and as pope, John Paul II has been greatly concerned with what he calls an “adequate anthropology.” He shows how responsible parenthood as taught by the Church corresponds to the “full truth about the person.”39 It might be said that natural family planning couples incorporate this anthropological truth. It shapes their personal story. By joining with other couples who also share this truth they continually transform the lives of themselves and their families. Marital chastity is an essential component of living responsible parenthood. Abstinence, while difficult, is accepted for the good of the spouse and for the sake of living God’s plan for marriage. It becomes a means of growth instead of a source of frustration and friction. Couples, on the other hand, who do not accept the Church’s teaching and chafe at restrictions on marital intercourse at any time in the cycle, tell a different personal story based on a different anthropology. Sooner or later these couples are likely to reject NFP altogether.

Conclusion

Dr. John Marshall, while acknowledging the benefits of NFP to couples who have integrated it into their marriage, focuses rather on those for whom
abstinence has become an experience of deprivation, either because of inadequate teaching and support or because of subscribing to an inadequate anthropology. There will always be difficult cases in NFP, such as those who may be called upon to confine intercourse to the postovulatory phase of the cycle, but even they can be helped to accept God’s plan for their marriage. Dr. Marshall’s solution is to change the Church’s teaching, to alter the very framework which provides the basis for true growth and transformation in marriage. As every pope in this century has prophesied and history bears them out, such a solution eventually destroys marriage and family life. John Paul II says in “Letter to Families,” “The Church is convinced that she must remain absolutely faithful to the truth about human love. Otherwise she would betray herself.” And he adds that “many people understand this truth intuitively!” In other words they come to it by both Revelation and their own experience because “only in this truth do they encounter “the truth and the life.”

Notes

1. Ibid., 118.
2. Ibid., 119.
14. It might be noted here that if the framework is not linked to an adequate anthropology, members may suffer more harm than good, for example the homosexual support group that affirms the homosexual lifestyle.
26. Ibid., 66.
27. Ibid., 20-24.
29. Marshall, Love One Another, 34.
33. Ibid., 33.
34. Margaret Sanger, Happiness in Marriage (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1940), 58, 70.
35. Ibid., 221.
40. Ibid., no. 11.
41. Ibid.