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# “My Husband the Gentleman”

By

Sarah Hammond

Even before I knew it by name, I have always believed chivalry to be very important. When I was a teenager, it was on my list of characteristics and qualities that I found particularly appealing in boys. This might sound crazy, but “yes,” I really did have a list, and I really did go over it with a pencil and check it off whenever a new boy caught my attention. This list included everything from “is Catholic” and “has a relationship with God” to “likes kids,” “makes me laugh” and “my parents like him.” Seriously, close to the top of the list I wrote, “is chivalrous.”

In being on the watch for chivalry for so long, one of the first things that attracted me to my future husband, Daniel, was that he was an almost perfect gentleman (I say “almost” because no one is perfect—but I happen to think my Daniel is pretty darn close). When Daniel was with me, I never found myself opening a car door or any other door. If his arms were empty, mine immediately were cleared of whatever they were carrying (except for my purse, of course—he wouldn’t carry that!). As the years went by, none of these chivalrous habits disappeared. Daniel wasn’t trying to impress me during our courtship. He’s just a gentleman, pure and simple.

Now that we’re married, there’s an even more meaningful way that Daniel has been able to be a gentleman for me. In our experience with **Natural Family Planning**, I can tell you that I feel so respected and well cared-for by my husband in a very big way. He would never treat my healthy body, working perfectly as God designed it, as though it was diseased and in need of being “fixed” just to be sexually more available to him at all times.

In addition, Daniel would never encourage me to put my health at risk. Many dangerous side effects result in using hormonal contraception. In fact, something is not quite right when people take a daily pill or wear a patch in order to prevent a healthy reproductive organ from working properly. Contraception is not the way to go and I have a wonderful, chivalrous gentleman who knows that!

This pretty much sums up what I’m getting at: one day over the summer, Daniel said to me, “I’m really glad that we don’t use contraception. I feel like that would really cause me to see you as more of an object. You don’t deserve that.”

That is my “knight in shining armor.” I’m so glad I put chivalry on my list!

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*This article was adapted from “Sarah’s Blog,” ForYourMarriage.org, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009. It is used here with permission.*

# How Natural Family Planning Changed My Life

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by Dawn Farias

As a child I was baptized Catholic, but essentially grew up with no religious practice. As a married adult, I reentered the Church, and soon after felt a tugging at my heart to stop practicing contraception. At that time, I did not know about Natural Family Planning (NFP). More basic, I did not know about Church teachings on the moral practice of family planning. What I would learn about God's design for my married life and through the practice of NFP would change my life.

## *True Freedom and Openness to Life*

When my husband, Ariel and I took an NFP class, I have to admit that I was scared. Giving up control, was frightening! It was one thing to be committed to an ideal, but something quite different to follow through on it. It definitely involved a leap of faith! Over time and with some experience, I began to appreciate the gift and beauty of NFP.

In practicing NFP, my husband and I must decide if we, as a couple, are ready to embrace the possibility of a new life in each menstrual cycle. When we had used contraception, we ignored this reality. With NFP we could not ignore how God made us— as a man and a woman. NFP helped us understand the relationship that God designed between the marital act and procreation. It has made us “open to life.” It even brought our last two children into the family!

## *The Gift of Self*

In using NFP over the years both my husband and I, now see that we give ourselves to each other fully in the marital act. For us, the idea of contraception has become almost vulgar. It cheapens the marital act. Contraception seems to say: “I love you, honey, but I don't love you THAT much.”

NFP also guards against the objectification of the woman in the relationship. Contraception often keeps the woman in a defensive position because it allows “intimacy on demand.” NFP does not allow this because of the practice of periodic abstinence when not seeking a pregnancy. A deeper equality between husband and wife can be nurtured with NFP. NFP begins the process of this awareness.

## *Growing together in holiness*

The sacrifices that NFP entails have only served to make me a better person and more devoted to the Lord. Without knowing it, using contraception promotes the idea that children are a burden. Children do require lots of work, and pregnancy demands its own set of sacrifices, but NFP has helped me meet these challenges by leading me to the realization that children are God's blessings. I am constantly forced to pray, change, make concessions and find solutions to the selfishness and laziness that come up often when meeting the needs of others.

Today, I am confident that had I not been open to life in the practice of NFP, I would not have needed to depend on God, and not have grown as a person. This growth benefits my family and the people I meet in everyday life. Jesus calls us to serve others. Marriage and parenthood are ways we can immediately apply this call in our lives. NFP has led me to be more open to life, more aware of God's design for intimacy in marriage, more dependent on Him to fulfill these plans. It has strengthened my relationship with my husband, given me personal insight and it has given our children life!

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*Dawn and her husband, Ariel Farias have four children and live in the Archdiocese of San Antonio. You can read more thoughts from Dawn at [www.sufficientfortoday.com](http://www.sufficientfortoday.com)*

# Connections

by

Jennifer and John Campbell

*F*or a newly engaged couple, learning Natural Family Planning is informative, interesting, at times a little embarrassing, but always enlightening. Living NFP, on the other hand, is a different story. It is a story about connections, very unique and fulfilling. It involves the use of information learned which we then apply to the reality of everyday married life. At the beginning of our married life, we used NFP to avoid pregnancy, as the time was not right for it. Currently, we are using NFP to achieve pregnancy. We were delighted to find that the two focuses of NFP have made our young marriage both more focused and more intimate.

Unlike artificial contraception-which usually places full burden of family planning on the woman-NFP promotes shared responsibility of the fertility of both the husband and wife. It lends a spirit of togetherness to a marriage. There's no, "Have you taken your pill?" That is, "are you safe?" In our marriage there's no holding back that precious part of ourselves, our fertility. Rather than a burden to be dealt with, for us it is a blessing to be understood and respected. The complete self-giving says, I love all of you.

The benefits of NFP extend beyond family planning. We'd heard that often times the husband will develop a deeper respect for his wife and the gift of her fertility. In practice, we've found this to be noticeably true. A constant awareness of cycles and phases makes it easier to perceive when to be loving and gentle, extra patient and thoughtful, and when to resume physical intimacy.

Unlike a couple using contraception in their marriage, sex is not always an option for two who are living NFP. That's a good thing, contrary to what popular culture might imply. By experiencing times when we can not engage in physical intimacy, the moments that we can are made all the more poignant and precious. Even when we want to engage, and the chart says no way, buddy, it lends an element of bittersweet waiting. After all, consider the alternative: when a woman is on the pill or using some other kind of chemical contraceptive, she's always available for sex. There's no waiting, no longing, just indulging whenever you want. Nice at first, perhaps, but over time spontaneity and passion fade all the more quickly by the frequency of the intimacy. Oftentimes sexual intimacy will become less mutual over time in a contracepting marriage and more mandatory, and thus less rewarding for one or both spouses.

Periodic abstinence in our marriage has opened up broader channels of communication between us. Like many young couples, we both are currently employed. Commuting, daily exercising, paying bills, preparing dinner, outside commitments . . . all are busy but necessary activities in a healthy lifestyle, but collectively tiresome as well. Tired couples find it difficult to talk in the evenings, and would prefer to veg out. We're no different. But since NFP holds the key to our family planning, we necessarily discuss personal and intimate topics about our fertility that most couples never broach. These NFP talks are portholes to deeper discourses and more

personal dialogue between us. We've both noticed that with time, open and intimate communication is becoming less a difficulty and more a reflex, and we both attribute that in part to NFP. We've found that subjects such as our budget, work, saving for a house, and where we'll spend Christmas are child's play after you can discuss mucus and temperatures with a straight face!

Yes, NFP can be a challenge and a sacrifice at times, and we're not saying it's always easy, but that is part of true love a bit of sacrifice for the beloved. We find a noble joy in sacrificing ourselves for each other, even in so private a way as withholding intimacy until the time is right; self-sacrifice is an important root element of love, and it builds respect for each other and ourselves. We've also found that a sense of humor helps during the times of no physical intimacy.

When the signs of fertility were apparent, we'd jokingly say, "Ok, see you in a few days." We've heard some people say they could never follow NFP since they can't have intercourse during the time that they want. We've found that the time of abstinence gives us moments when we can just be together and talk, play tennis, joke, or go out to dinner. It reminds us that we're much more than just physical beings wanting to satisfy a desire.

We're both happy to have learned NFP and to be living it. We know that it is enriching our marriage in our every day life and even in ways we probably won't realize until much later. Knowing that we're building a strong foundation of love, mutual respect and faith gives us confidence in our future. We're best friends who love each other enough to want the best for each other and our marriage!

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# NFP, the Theology of the Body, and Our Marriage

*Michael and Alysha Chambers*

Many will tell you that the responsibility of being permanently faithful to one person is too great and that being open to life is too much of a burden. They say contraception brings with it freedom and life; however, we have found that it is in openness to God, to each other, and to new life that true freedom is obtained. This is what living Natural Family Planning (NFP) can help couples to experience.

Alysha was in college when she first heard NFP mentioned. All she knew then was that it existed and the Catholic Church considered it a good thing. Michael, a convert to Catholicism, grew up believing that contraception was good and that all couples should use it. Our first real understanding of what NFP is, and what the Church teaches came during our marriage preparation program. We learned that NFP at its core is simply knowledge of the physical changes one can observe in the woman's fertility cycle. It gives couples a way to measure and chart their fertility signs. We also learned how responsible parenthood is the virtuous application of this fertility knowledge.

One unexpected aspect of NFP that impressed us was how it fosters communication between spouses. Couples practicing NFP discuss the future of their family with every cycle. Knowing how to discuss such important matters has proven a great blessing to many marriages. Michael decided that blessing, by itself, was enough of a reason to learn NFP.

Another theme we discussed in marriage preparation was the Theology of the Body. It helped us understand who we are and how God created us. It is through our bodies that we express who we are spiritually. Also, because we were made in the image and likeness of God, our bodies are supposed to reflect who God is which means we are to act as He acts. How does God act? He loves. God's love is a total gift of self. God's love is life-giving. As husband and wife one way we love like God is through our sexuality. If NFP is studied in this context, our appreciation of each other as man and woman increases because the uniqueness and dignity that God has imprinted in our bodies is revealed. It was at this point that Michael realized NFP was not moral birth control; rather, it is a complete way of life honoring one's spouse's sexuality and fertility. It is loving naturally – the way God designed it.

In studying NFP in the context of the Theology of the Body, both of us have become more open to each other, to God, and to children. We truly believe that “children are the crown of marriage” and we pray that God will bless us with children some day. Until then, we will “make our plans but hold them lightly.” For us, that means planning to use NFP both when we are attempting or delaying pregnancy, all the while striving to hear and do God's will!

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Michael and Alysha Chambers, Diocese of Arlington, Va., were married September 24, 2005. This article first appeared in the Couple to Couple League's *Family Foundations* (Jan/Feb. 2006). It has been edited to fit this publication and is printed with permission.

# Signs of Grace

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by Jennifer Ricard

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes grace as the “free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God.” My husband, Frank, and I have experienced God’s “undeserved help,” as we have wrestled with His plan for our family. We now know it was God’s grace that guided our journey.

Frank and I met in our work place soon after college. Our first date was at a Chinese restaurant. After dinner, my fortune cookie read, “Stop searching forever, happiness is just next to you.” Frank thought it was the coolest thing ever—I wondered if it was a setup! From that unexpected beginning, we married and had five children almost immediately. Because of our family size, people often assumed that we were “good Catholics,” thinking that we had always accepted the Church’s teaching prohibiting contraception. In our case that assumption would be wrong. We had used contraception despite the fact that the priest who prepared us for marriage taught us Church teachings. We stopped using contraception only to have our first baby, Emily. We did the same for our second child, Madeline, and our third child, Sam.

Around the time that Sam was born, Frank and I became involved in youth ministry. This prompted me to question our own contraceptive behavior. If we had to explain the Church’s teachings on chastity, I thought, we should follow them ourselves! I quickly ordered Natural Family Planning (NFP) books and signed up for the local diocesan class. Before class began however, I skimmed through the book and started tracking my menstrual cycle on a calendar. One romantic evening soon after that, with total disregard for the calendar, we conceived our twins, Caroline and Sophia.

Having five babies within six years was extremely overwhelming. Without hesitation I forgot about NFP and got a prescription for birth control pills. Something quite unexpected then happened. During these years using contraception I lost my sexual desire for my husband. Sex became one more thing I had to do for somebody. In addition, Frank and I began to fight about sex. Needless to say, this was upsetting—I loved my husband and I often prayed that God would help us!

In this difficult period a new parish priest came into our lives. With every examination of conscience in preparation for the Sacrament of Reconciliation he would bring up contraception. I would immediately dismiss the subject. “That teaching doesn’t apply to us,” I thought, “we have five kids!” And yet, this new priest’s comments stuck with me and my heart remained restless. The turning point for me happened after a conversation about sterilization.

One of our friends had been sterilized and asked me when Frank would “get snipped.” Without missing a beat, I said, “Maybe for my birthday.” The fact that I so easily thought of sterilization got me thinking—how could I, we, decide to do something so major without talking about it and praying? Soon after this realization, I wondered why we were not open to having another child. I found myself offering simple prayers asking God to help us. It was the first time that I had asked God for guidance regarding our fertility. From that simple step, God began to send signs through neighbors, family and friends.

Soon after that, I spoke with our new parish priest about my concerns. He confirmed that the Church’s teachings were true and gave me CDs and books to learn more. At the same time, I kept receiving signs about having a sixth child. For example, when we were out to dinner I complimented a woman about the behavior of her five children. She thanked me and mentioned

that her *sixth* child was away at college. At a parish meeting I saw an old friend who commented that she thought I had a new baby. She had not known we were discerning. I shared these and other experiences with our new parish priest and asked if they were signs from God. He said if they were, they would not stop coming. Father's words could not have been more true—the signs kept coming.

Meanwhile, Frank and I signed up for NFP class. It may sound like an exaggeration, but from the first day we began using NFP everything immediately felt different. Frank would set the alarm, take my temperature, and record the numbers on the chart. I felt so taken care of. I felt a tenderness that I hadn't felt in a long time. I liked that he was learning about my body. It was helpful that he knew where I was in my cycle, especially during difficult days. I came to understand this total love and acceptance in a deeper way.

As we lived the NFP lifestyle, we began to realize that all of our reasons for avoiding pregnancy were “earthly”—we would need a new car, a bigger house, and more money for everything. An unexpected encounter with an old man in a donut shop broke through our hesitation. “So, how many kids do you have?” I asked. “Three boys and three girls,” he responded. I got the biggest smile on my face, called my husband to share the story, and that evening our precious son, Thomas Anthony, was conceived.

It is by the grace of God that we have our children and a redeemed sex life as well. My husband, Frank, and I have learned that our sexual union should be focused on giving rather than getting. NFP provided the environment to live this out. We are so grateful that we now have the kind of marital union that God had planned for us! It has changed our lives so much that we became NFP teachers to spread the good news.

Now that we use NFP, we see our married life as always having an opportunity to love like God loves. Of course, God provides the grace, and we must choose to participate with Him. I am convinced that there is something about getting the sexual element of marriage “right with God” that ends up affecting everything. Marital union is the marriage vows made flesh and every act of intercourse is a renewal of these vows. Only a union centered on God and His will in our lives will truly satisfy the desires of our hearts!