

BIRTH CONTROL: It Almost Cost Us Our Marriage

How can a couple continue to love each other when the bond so crucial to marriage is being destroyed?

by Bob & Gerri Laird

It was June 6, 1975, our fifth wedding anniversary. We were the "perfect" family with two beautiful children — a boy and a girl. Although material goods were abundant, we had been through many difficulties: job-related separations, several moves leaving behind family and friends, two miscarriages, and several bouts with ill health. Although as spouses we rarely argued or mentioned divorce, we were distant and unfulfilled.

There was resentment between us. We were living as two single persons under one roof, each seeking equilibrium rather than growth. Our communication was superficial, and we avoided discussing controversial topics. We deemed our marriage a success because we were still together, unlike many of our friends who had separated. Our marriage was a social affair, and we did little to involve our Creator.

Perhaps, prior to marriage we had failed to understand the religious aspects of the sacrament of Matrimony. We were "in love," and marriage had logically followed. Our engagement had been marked by celebrations and anticipations, with little spiritual outreach. Catholic teaching on human sexuality, parental roles, and child rearing were often deemed too controversial to discuss at pre-marriage classes. Sad to say, our source for most Catholic information was the religion section of the local secular newspaper.

When *Humanae Vitae* (the prophetic encyclical of Pope Paul VI on human life and the regulation of birth) was issued in 1968, it was reported in the secular press as "one man's opinion" which would probably change in time. Priests as well as lay people were confused. Our priest advised us to "follow our conscience" with regard to making a decision toward family planning.

"Follow our conscience" became our rallying cry. To us, this meant that we could legitimately use unnatural birth control. After all, the majority of Catholics were contracepting, and calendar rhythm was outdated.

We started out with Gerri taking the Pill. Both of us found it far more challenging to remain chaste during this period of our marriage because the Pill eliminated openness to new life; Gerri couldn't get pregnant. There was a great temptation to forego honest communication with one another and forfeit our chastity for sexual pleasure.

During our contraceptive years we worried about "performance" when we engaged in genital intimacy. We had lost sight of what true love really means — giving for the good of the other. Without even realizing it, we were destroying the love/life bond which is so crucial to marriage. We were celebrating the unitive aspect of our relationship, but not the procreative.

It took us two miscarriages off the Pill before we made the decision to move on to another form of contraception. We tried condoms and foam briefly, but these were far too messy. We felt as though we were gearing up for war, not for love! When we tried the IUD, Mother Nature reacted rapidly. Within two months, Gerri had minor surgery twice because of infections. We also discovered that the IUD was an abortion-causing device.

Wise advice

It was at this point that Gerri attended a Catholic women's retreat and shared her frustration with birth control to a small group of ladies. A kind, elderly woman told her that God had a better way. She explained that the Catholic Church sees the sacrament of Matrimony as practiced each day of our married lives, not just on our wedding day. This friend showed how the ultimate expression of our marital intimacy through sexual intercourse is always open to the transmission of life because it is open to the love between the couple and God. Love begets love. She also explained that couples who understand the natural biological rhythms of the woman can use them to conceive a child or to avoid sexual contact when there is sufficient reason to refrain from creating new life. Gerri borrowed a copy of *The Art of Natural Family Planning (NFP)* by John and Sheila Kippley and began using the method.

We struggled for several months as we tried to regain the freedoms we had lost through unnatural birth control:

Freedom to love each other daily through non-genital communication (a smile, a kiss, a hug) and develop true affection and intimacy without having to perform in the bedroom.

Freedom to experience the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual high of a spontaneous decision to have relations when fertile.

Freedom to totally and completely accept God's gift of fertility and submit to His will of creating or postponing life.

Our lovemaking had become a very chemical and mechanical experience. When we freed ourselves from birth control and learned self-control, it was the beginning of a lifetime honeymoon — one that says, "I love you more today than yesterday, but not as much as tomorrow." Birth control had taken the mystery out of the most intimate part of our being. We had been manipulators rather than co-creators — exploiting one another at will. Using contraceptives had made us slaves to our desires. The side effects were scary, and our relationship robotic. We had failed to ask ourselves two questions:

Where does God fit in if humans have their hands on all the controls?

What freedom is there in trying to outsmart the Master?

A better way

Not having correctly understood the covenant we were making with God in the sacrament of Matrimony, we had been unwilling to commit to God's way, and we almost lost each other.

Perhaps part of our problem was that we had invoked Catholic teaching at our convenience. We'd failed to understand the true decision that our priest had asked us to make during our marriage preparation. It was not just the decision to use or not use unnatural methods of birth control; it was choosing whether or not to involve the Church's guidance in our decision. In *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI tells us to follow a correctly

informed conscience in making the decision leading to the possible creation of new life. Such an awesome decision! We found that if we could do that, then other decisions regarding such mundane issues as purchasing a home or an auto become trivial.

NFP is not "Catholic birth control," nor is it calendar rhythm. It is a concept of fertility awareness that allows the married couple to understand the biological signs of the wife and then determine if they have sufficient reason to avoid a pregnancy that month in accordance with the teachings of our Church. If sufficient reasons exist, then the couple abstains from sexual intercourse but continues to show their love in non-genital ways. If sufficient reason does not exist, the couple pours forth their love knowing that the result could lead to the creation of a child. What a powerful option!

A shift in attitudes

Sexual intercourse is indeed a privilege - it comes with the marriage covenant. When we fully embraced God's teachings on marriage, our attitude toward our own two children changed drastically. We discovered that they were indeed gifts - a tangible sign of the most intimate love between husband, wife and God. We had a natural desire for more children, and our family continued to grow.

We think the answer to the persistent question of why the Catholic Church is so opposed to unnatural birth control is perhaps too obvious. It harms us physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. The Church opposes it not only because it may cause us permanent damage, but also because it artificially removes the possibility of conception from the act of intercourse. NFP is good marriage insurance - a real piece of the rock on which to build a solid family foundation. Statistics support this marriage-building aspect of NFP. Couples who practice a natural form of child spacing have a divorce rate of less than 5%.

Pope Paul VI challenges couples in *Humanae Vitae* to share the good news of marital love with other couples. We were so overwhelmed by our experience that we felt to hold it within ourselves was almost as wrong as not having it in the first place. We turned to the Couple to Couple League and found a non-profit organization which provides this good news of NFP to other couples. For 14 years we have been volunteer teachers who experience the joy of spreading the good news to married and engaged couples alike.

Our Lord speaks to us in such different ways. We must learn to listen. That unnamed woman who explained to Gerri what the sacrament of Matrimony really meant was symbolically to us the same person who walked on the road to Emmaus. Perhaps he was trying to tell us the truth many times through many people, but we chose not to listen. Fortunately, our God is patient. We praise Him and thank Him for our fertility. May we glorify His name through our family.

This article has been reprinted from the Couple to Couple League Family Foundations Magazine, Jul-Aug 98.