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Ethics of natural family planning (NFP) vs ethics of contraception

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Abstract

The article analyses the moral difference between Natural Family Planning (NFP) and contraception. *Problem Statement*: Today one of the most frequently asked questions is the following: if contraception and NFP both have the same purpose of avoiding pregnancy, how can there be any moral difference between them. Moreover, people state that it does not make any difference which method is used, if the end and purpose are the same. In fact, proponents of contraceptives often argue that there is no moral difference between contraception and NFP and even treat NFP as a natural form of contraception. *Purpose of the study*: To disclose the ethical/moral difference between contraception and NFP. *Research methods*: Theoretical structural method was used for thorough understanding of human person as a bodily and sexual being. Comparative analysis was used to find the distinction between Christian anthropology and dualistic anthropology. Action assessment criteria were used to evaluate the difference between contraceptive action and contraceptive purpose. *Findings*: In order to show the moral difference between contraception and NFP, firstly thorough understanding of human person as a bodily and sexual being is given, the difference of the use of NFP and contraception in the aspect of human dignity is revealed, and then a distinction between a contraceptive action and a contraceptive will is drawn. *Conclusion*. The end or purpose of family planning does not make all of the various practices ethically the same. NFP is not a natural contraception; it is the ethical opposite.

Keywords: Christian anthropology, dualistic anthropology; bodily; sexuality; natural family planning; contraceptive action; conjugal act.

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1. Introduction

The revelation of moral norms in the training of healthcare workers is equally important as their professional training, because medicine by nature is related to the morality (Narbekovas, Obeleniene, Juskevicius, Meilius, & oth. 2012). Doctor and patient, as intelligent and free persons, together play a certain role in seeking medical purpose – patient's wellbeing. Seeking for patient's wellbeing is a moral obligation that derives from the nature of medicine. A doctor, who harms his patient's wellbeing, damages his profession (Pelegrino & Thomasma, 1996, 31). Therefore, it is important for a doctor to receive not only theoretical and technical professional training, but also to respect moral norms that defend human person's value and dignity. Human life is the core value of medical ethics (Have, Meulen & Leeuwen, 2003; 87–91). Thus, the respect of the norms of medical ethics is especially relevant when discussing procreation, of which family planning is an integral part. The desire to separate procreational part of human sexuality from other non-biological purposes has always been relevant. The creation of contraceptive means allowed detaching procreation and many thought that it was an event, which freed human from biological tyranny. In turn, it caused erroneous attitude towards human sexuality of two sexes and marriage because, due to the exclusion of procreation, they became unnecessary (May, 1981, 3-4.). Often there is no essential difference made between contraception and natural family planning when considering the regulation of fertility. Often natural family planning is considered as a natural contraceptive mean, while in reality it is not only a different method of family planning but also different actions that derive from different attitude towards human and sexuality. Often people ask, if contraception and natural family planning both have the same purpose of avoiding pregnancy, how can there be any ethical difference between them?

2. Two different understandings of human person and sexuality

Christian anthropology treats human as a unity of body and spiritual soul. The unity of these two components are so solid that “soul can be considered as bodily “form”; soul and matter are not two united natures in human but instead while being united they form one nature”(Narbekovas, Obeleniene & Pukelis, 2008, 14). This way body is inseparable from person and even more, it expresses person. „The body is not some object „out there“, but is suffused with personal meaning from the inside out“ (Anderson & Granados, 2009, 30). Body is *person's goodness* and not just *goodness for person* (Narbekovas,2002, 9). It is a lot more than just material reality because human body with its sexuality, masculinity or femininity, is not only a source of fertility and procreation, but it also has a conjugal character. It means it has the ability to express love through which one person becomes a gift to another person, and thanks to this gift, he/she gives meaning to his/her existence (John Paul II, 1997. 63).

Thus, we are talking about unique human nature, which is marked by indivisible unity of two different components – bodily and spiritual. In other words, human is a *bodily sexual person*.

On the other hand, in *dualistic* anthropology human is viewed only as a conscious subject whose dignity depends on the level of consciousness and the ability to independently handle his/her own life. According to this thinking, the body itself is only a necessary *mean for person* because without it conscious sensual subject cannot exist. Consequently, body and bodily life is something that is separate from person and in this way, it is only *instrumental goodness*, *goodness for person* and not *person's goodness* (Narbekovas, 2001).

Christian ethics is based on integralist conception of sexuality, which stresses the uninterrupted existential and psychological relation between life transferring or procreational

dimension of human sexuality and love transferring, or dimension that unites people (May, 1981, 3).

Dualistic anthropology is known for disintegrated, *separatist* conception of sexuality where the expression of love and the procreation are separated, procreational element is attributed only to the biological function of sexuality and named as reproductional human function, love is simplified to the level of feelings or is identified as lust (see table 1):

Table 1. Comparison of conceptions of sexuality in Christian anthropology and dualistic anthropology

Criterion	Christian anthropology	Dualistic anthropology
Conception of sexuality	Integralist	Separatist
Love	Conscious action, unconditional gift in unlimited time	Unconscious feeling in limited time: appears and „disappears“
Human body	Manifest the person, it is <i>person's goodness</i>	<i>Instrumental</i> goodness
Fertility	Person's goodness which is necessary to recognize and manage, when seeking to consciously harmonize sexual needs with human nature	It is not necessary to know and manage own fertility; it is possible to control it using the contraception
Intercourse	Expression of love in body language, unconditional gift, inseparable from procreation	expression of feelings and passion is separable from procreation

3. The evaluation of NFP and the contraception in the aspect of human dignity

Moral goodness and badness of human actions depend on how much these actions contribute to the preservation of human dignity. All actions that correspond with human person's dignity are morally good, and actions against human dignity are morally bad (Narbekovas, Obeleniene, & Pukelis, 2008, 60). Every person expresses his/her sexuality through another person. However, human can never be an instrument, being a person he/she is always the purpose. Human must be desired because of his/her own person and not sexual values. Person's dignity demands that a person cannot be neither exclusively nor firstly the object of consumption because the role of an instrument or a mean to attain the purpose conceived by another subject conflicts with human nature itself. Love is the only opposition for the use of a person as a mean to attain a purpose or as another person's activity instrument (Wojtyla, 1994, 25).

In addition, human dignity demands that a person would act with conscious and free resolution, that his/her actions would come out of his internal personal decision and not blind internal impulse, which may be uncontrollable sexual need or external violence. When sexual desire is materialized through intercourse using another person only as a mean to satisfy sexual desire, not only sexuality of that person is damaged, but the perpetrator himself. Natural law of human dignity defends human and sets the right relation with other humans, and the only right relation among persons is love and respect that comes out of it (Smith, 1993, 236).

Every conjugal act can end in conception of new life, but intercourse has other purposes and not only the transferring of life, i. e., the expression of love to one's spouse. Even though spouses express their love through conjugal act when using contraception, they deny their bodility because they exclude fertility and at the same time, the unconditional gift of oneself just receiving satisfaction. This way, their relation gains the character of consumption, which conflicts with the conception of human dignity.

According to the definition of the World Health Organization (WHO), methods of NFP are based on observation of naturally occurring signs and symptoms of fertile and infertile phases of the menstrual cycle. Awareness of the fertile phase can allow a couple to time intercourse, either to avoid or to achieve pregnancy (World Health Organization, 1988). This definition includes two components: previously mentioned awareness of fertility and the managing of sexual behaviour according to family needs. On the other hand, when using contraception the managing of sexual behaviour becomes unnecessary. However, it is obvious that human always controls his nature by adaptation. Nature cannot be overcome by coercion. Nature is controlled only by thorough cognition of its purposefulness and regularity, which dominates it. If intercourse is based on desire including another person, then the behaviour with that other person in the aspect of his/her moral value is formed indirectly through the means of expression of sexual desire in that particular relation. "People may remain faithful by appropriate order of love, if he/she is faithful to his/her nature. When nature is coerced, then a person is "coerced" and turned into the object of consumption, not love." (Wojtyła, 1994, 301-302).

4. The assessment of the morality of NFP and the action of the use of contraception

Seeking to assess the morality of human action these elements are important: a) the object of action, b) the intention or the purpose of acting person, c) circumstances. Human action will be morally bad if even one of these three elements will be bad, i. e., it will conflict with moral norm (Narbekovas, Obeleniene & Pukelis, 2008, 61).

Morality is the orientation of rational human action towards goodness and the independent pursuit of goodness cognized by mind. Human action cannot be acclaimed as morally good only because it is fit to attain one or another *purpose* (in this case – to avoid pregnancy when planning a family), or solely because the *intention* of the subject is good (willingness to express marital love through conjugal act). Action is morally good when it testifies and signifies that a person independently assumes the final purpose and when a *concrete action* does not contradict *human's goodness* (in this case – the goodness of sexuality and fertility, the goodness of marriage, the goodness of life) which is recognized by the mind in truth. If the *object* of concrete action is incompatible with the real person's goodness, then our will and our essence become morally bad due to such choice.

The object of action depends on what human, being free and intelligent, chooses to do. By his free resolution human determines himself as a moral subject (Narbekovas, 2000, 30). Nevertheless, the treatment of NFP as natural contraception is common because in both cases the *purpose* is the same – not to get a woman pregnant. People often do not see any difference among applied methods, if their purpose and result are the same (Kippley, & Kippley, 1994, 45). Therefore, the proponents of contraception insist that there is no moral difference between natural family planning and contraception because in both cases the *intention* is the same – that conjugal act would not result in new life. In order to reveal the moral difference of the application of natural family planning methods and contraception, it is essential to show the difference between the contraceptive *action* and the contraceptive *purpose*.

The contraceptive *purpose* is often used to justify the use of contraception in marriage based on the theory of *totality*. According to this theory, separate, "isolated" conjugal acts and conjugal acts in total are treated differently. The proponents of this theory acknowledge that the procreation is in fact marital goodness and that marriage and children are inseparable. However, they also state that procreational marital goodness is not harmed even if separate conjugal acts are consciously and freely made infertile, with the condition that these acts are dedicated to the expression of marital love and if spouses are not opposed to the goodness of children in general (May, 2000, 130).

Seeking to justify the use of contraception in marriage, erroneous methodology of the assessment of action morality is used, i. e. consequentialism. According to this theory, concrete criteria for the assessment of behaviour are formed based on only the analysis of prospective *consequences* of a choice (hence the term consequentialism). The proponents of this theory claim that a choice to make certain conjugal acts contraceptive is directed to the strengthening of marital love. Such logic leads to the conclusion that what spouses do here and now – their object of chosen act – is the strengthening of marital love, which is obviously a good thing. Nevertheless, this way contraceptive act or even a number of contraceptive acts in this case are justified because of the final purpose. *The final purpose, the intention* of spouses who use contraception and those who apply NFP is good – to express and strengthen marital love without starting new life. But *immediate intention* is different: when using contraception spouses do something or use something that directly targets the beginning of new life, while spouses who apply NFP know the time of infertile days and that new life will not be started, but they do not do anything directed against new life. The difference is obvious between unwillingness that something happens (the start of new life) and willingness followed by active actions (the use of contraception) so that it does not happen (Lawler, Boyle, & May, 1985, 168).

In order to call an action *contraceptive*, there must be a double *choice*: firstly, the choice to have intercourse, which is known to be related with the start of new life; secondly, the choice to get rid of procreational result. Thus, the *choice* to destroy the procreational dimension of sexuality makes an act of intercourse contraceptive. The essence of contraception lies in person's free choice and actions (May, 1981, 114). Therefore, in case of contraception the *object* of action is not the strengthening of marital love, but the choice to make conjugal act here and now infertile. Such object of action that targets life is not moral (Finnis, 1991, 86). In the case of NFP, when spouses periodically refrain from conjugal acts, there is no contraceptive choice. When expressing marital love through conjugal acts during infertile days, distant intention may be not procreational, but it is not directly anti-procreational as in the case of contraception. Contraceptive intercourse is against life by intention and chosen action (to use contraception).

Contraception embodies the intention to avoid pregnancy and therefore makes intercourse an act of different kind – anti-life. Intercourse without contraception has different structure: it is essentially a vital act both by physical and intentional sense. Therefore, it is obvious that the application of NFP has a close relation between *intention* and *action*.

5. Discussions

Contraceptive behaviour makes conjugal act an incomplete expression of a person. When the body is not considered anymore to be a personal reality, it is degraded to mere materiality and is used only according to the criteria of pleasure and effectiveness. Therefore, sexuality as well is depersonalized and exploited: instead of being a sign of self-gifting and acceptance of another person, more often it becomes an instrument to satisfy instincts. Thus, the meaning of human sexuality and person are distorted.

Those who apply natural family planning methods have completely different view of human person, sexuality and marriage. In this case, human is regarded as bodily sexual person, fertility is regarded as one of the biggest *person's* goodness, and marriage is regarded as a complete self-gifting. "Body language" is understood as a special mean to express masculinity and femininity in interpersonal relation; therefore, natural family planning science seeks to teach how to correctly read this "body language" and use it the proper way. Seizing periods of infertility, spouses respect the undisturbed marital relation, which has two interdependent purposes: to unite and give life.

The difference between NFP and contraception is revealed by their separate purposes. NFP can be used to avoid pregnancy, if there are morally acceptable reasons for that, but it is often applied with the purpose to start new life during fertile days and it allows knowing when conception will happen. In the case of contraception, women can also get pregnant, although such pregnancy will not be wanted and it will happen due to the malfunction of contraception. Moreover, nobody uses contraception with the purpose of getting pregnant. This means that these methods are not the same, but essentially different (May, 1981, 116-117).

6. Conclusions

- NFP is not a natural contraception, but the opposite in moral sense. The purpose or consequences of family planning do not make various methods morally equal.
- These two methods are based on different attitude towards human, sexuality and human dignity. NFP is based on Christian anthropology and integralist conception of sexuality; contraception is based on dualistic anthropology and separatist conception of sexuality.
- The assessment using the criteria of action morality reveals that contraceptive action is immoral because it makes intercourse anti-life both in the aspect of the intention and the object of action.

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