

# Historical Origins and Reflections on the Term *Natural Family Planning*

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Abstract: This paper provides a history of the term *natural family planning* (NFP) and discusses why it is important to use this term in the challenging task of educating couples and health professionals as to why conjugal love is intimately linked with openness to life. The philosophy of NFP is appreciation, acceptance, and learning to live with fertility. Fertility is a holy time for couples as it is a time in which couples can be co-creators with God in creating new human life. As such, NFP is an important antidote to preventing abortions.

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*Introduction*

**I**N THE PAST TEN TO FIFTEEN YEARS there has been a change in the terms used in health care and especially in women's health. These changes are due to the prevalence of a gender theory ideology whereby a person's gender reflects what a person thinks or feels rather than a biological reality. This ideology is in opposition to the anthropology of the human person for thousands of years that a person's gender is based on the person's biological reality as a man or woman.

An example of how gender theory ideology has changed the terms we use for women's health can be found in the United States (US) National Institutes of Health (NIH) style guide.<sup>1</sup> As an example, NIH now recommends instead of the term *breastfeeding*, the terms should be *chestfeeding* or *bodyfeeding*. We should no longer use the term *pregnant woman*, but rather *birthing person*, or *people with uterus*. This terminology also has become standardized in professional and scientific journals. At the end of this paper, I will tie the problem with such gender-theory-induced terms with the terms used for NFP based on an anthropologic meaning of the human persons as man and woman in a marital conjugal relationship.

The modern term that was introduced in 1970 for natural methods of family planning is *Natural Family Planning* or in short, NFP. However, around the year 1998 there was a movement to change the term to *Fertility Awareness Based Methods* (FABM) or *Fertility Awareness Methods* (FAM). This effort was made to make the term more secular and to introduce the idea that during the fertile phase of the menstrual cycle a woman or couple should use "safe" means to avoid pregnancy, i.e., besides abstinence, use condoms or withdrawal. The term was introduced as consistent with what was thought of as a secular or religious/ethical-free system of family planning.

This change in the term used for natural methods of family planning is problematic since the new terms are not based on the anthropologic meaning of the human person and in particular the conjugal relationship of a man and woman in accepting and living with their fertility. There are consequences to this change, since in using FABM there is no need for marital chastity in the practice of periodic abstinence, and there is no growth in the couple

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<sup>1</sup> *NIH Style Guide*: <https://www.nih.gov/nih-style-guide/inclusive-gender-neutral-language>. Retrieved May 1, 2024.

integrating their combined fertility into their marital lives. This paper will provide a history of the origins of the term *Natural Family Planning*, further explore the anthropologic meaning of the term, and then discuss why the term NFP should be used rather than FABM.

### *Origins of the Term “Natural Family Planning”*

Before the term *Natural Family Planning* was proposed, there were several terms used for the means of avoiding pregnancy by not having intercourse on what were thought to be the days of fertility in the menstrual cycles—terms such as *the number of fertile days*, *natural birth regulation*, and *natural fertility regulation*. However, by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most common term was *rhythm*, which is still frequently used today.

It is common knowledge that two physician scientists—Dr. Hermann Knaus, an Austrian who worked at the German University in Prague, and Dr. Kyusaku Ogino, an obstetrician gynecologist from Japan—developed the first calendar-based methods of natural fertility regulation. In the United States the Knaus method became known due to the work of a young professor of obstetrics and gynecology from Loyola University School of Medicine, Leo J. Latz. He wrote a book titled *The Rhythm of Fertility and Sterility in Women*.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Latz sold thousands of his little blue books with the word *Rhythm* prominent—and thus this word stuck as the term used to describe the Knaus calendar-based system of family planning.

About the same time that Dr. Latz was popularizing the use of rhythm in the United States, there was a parish priest, Fr. Wilhelm Hillebrand, who taught married couples in his parish the new Knaus calendar-based system of family planning. However, he found that several of the couples he taught to use the Knaus method became pregnant when they were trying not to. His brother, a physician, was familiar with some of the scientific work on basal body temperature (BBT) and its relationship with ovulation, and encouraged Fr. Hillebrand to read about and use BBT along with the Knaus system. Fr. Hillebrand followed his brother’s advice and is considered the first developer of the basal body temperature method of family planning. He most likely also

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<sup>2</sup> Leo Latz, *The Rhythm of Sterility and Fertility in Women*. Chicago: Latz Foundation, 1932.

was the first to use the term *natural family planning* and said that the use of BBT gave birth to natural family planning.

He wrote to Dr. Knaus about unintended pregnancies and used the term *natural family planning* in his letter of April 20, 1938.<sup>3</sup>

I have found that deviations from your norm occur, both at the beginning and at the end. Therefore, one cannot accept your rules blindly. Fortunately, the estimation of the time of ovulation by the basal body temperature curve resolved the uncertainty and thus gave birth to natural family planning.

In 1949, Fr. Hillebrand corresponded with a physician scientist, Dr. Rudolf Vollman from Switzerland, who was conducting research on the use of BBT. In the letter he expands on the term *natural family planning* in recommendations that are still very important today.<sup>4</sup>

First of all, the present status of natural family planning must be fully documented. Only then can a further discussion of physiologic, medical, psychologic, moral and pastoral be fertile.

Second, to serve the cause and progress of natural family planning the available data must be collected and systematically analyzed...The facts then decide future plans but not the so-called authority of a name.

Third, that Natural Family Planning may occupy the position in human society which it deserves, requires that the political and clerical authorities give their full support.

Although Fr. Hillebrand was most likely the person who originated the term *natural family planning*, there was not widespread use of this term. In the United States, *rhythm* was the common term, and other books like Dr. Leo Latz's were written using the term *rhythm*. Furthermore, there was a

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<sup>3</sup> R. Vollman, "The First Teacher of the ST Method of Natural Family Planning," 1980, in *Natural Family Planning: Nature's Way – God's Way*. Ed. Rev. Anthony Zimmerman (Book Coordinator), (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: DeRance, Inc., 106-108.; Rudolf Vollman, "Brief History of Natural Family Planning," in *Natural Family Planning: Introduction to the Method*, 1-5. Washington, DC: The Human Life Foundation, 1977.

<sup>4</sup> R. Vollman, *ibid.*

scientific commission in the United States that promoted the use of *rhythm*.<sup>5</sup> In the 1960s this commission held four international symposia on the rhythm method with prominent scientists attending.<sup>6</sup> These symposia were in response to the development of the birth control pill, the Catholic Church's concern about its use, and the study of this concern during Vatican II with a special birth control commission.

Although the Vatican Birth Control Commission recommended changes in Church teachings on contraception, the encyclical *Humanae vitae* came out in 1968, in which Pope Paul VI proclaimed that use of artificial contraception was wrong and against the nature of the conjugal act. In the document the pope also called on health professionals and scientists to bend their backs to study and procure more secure methods of natural fertility regulation.

Soon after the encyclical came out, the United States Bishops Conference provided funds with other conservative organizations like the DeRance Foundation to form The Human Life Foundation of America.<sup>7</sup> This was an independent, non-sectarian organization to pursue research essential to the improvement of natural methods of conception regulation. The first Scientific Advisory Committee of this foundation included six PhDs and ten MDs.

In 1970 an International Meeting on the Status of Natural Methods of Family Planning was sponsored by The Human Life Foundation and the NIH Institute for Child Health and Human Development. According to the author of the conference's proceedings book, this conference helped change the terminology of natural methods from *rhythm* to *natural family planning*.<sup>8</sup>

The definition of NFP that evolved from the conference was:

5 Herbert Ratner, "Commission on Rhythm: Origin of the Commission," *The Linacre Quarterly* 32, 4 (1965): 356–357.

6 Herbert Ratner, "Commission on Rhythm: The 2nd International Symposium on Rhythm," *The Linacre Quarterly* 33 (1966): 310.

7 Later on, the foundation was also called The Human Life and Natura Family Planning Foundation. See Larry Kane, "NFP Pioneers: Human Life and NFP Foundation," *NFP-Diocesan-Activity-Report* 5, no. 4 (1994): 6–7.

<sup>8</sup> Uricchio and Williams, eds., *Proceedings of a Research Conference on Natural Family Planning*, xvii–xviii.

Natural Family Planning methods are means by which a couple uses the daily observations of signs and symptoms of the fertile and infertile phases of the menstrual cycle to guide the timing of intercourse according to their desire to achieve or avoid a pregnancy.

Of note is that Dr. Rudolf Vollman, who was a scientist in the perinatal branch of NIH at that time, attended this conference. He might have influenced the use of the new term of *Natural Family Planning* since he was familiar with the term from his early correspondence with Fr. Hillebrand.

Soon after the 1970 conference, the World Health Organization (WHO) also published a book on natural family planning and define NFP with a similar definition to that of the 1970 NIH Human Life Foundation meeting and funded a prospective study on the effectiveness of the ovulation method of NFP.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the US Title X family planning program was funded by Congress; it specifically used the term *Natural Family Planning* and stated that the Title X-funded clinics should be providing NFP services.

In 1983 the International Federation of Family Life Promotion held a conference in Hong Kong that was represented by 26 countries from Africa, the Americas, Asia/Oceania, and Europe. The purpose of the conference was to illustrate the development of NFP programs worldwide. At that conference the definition of NFP presented emphasized that abstinence is a part of the method, hence the term *periodic abstinence*.<sup>10</sup> The conference leaders also recognized that natural methods are more than techniques of fertility control. They also “involve the challenging task of education in which conjugal love is intimately linked with openness to life.”

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<sup>9</sup> World Health Organization, “A Prospective Multicentre Trial of the Ovulation Method of Natural Family Planning, II: The Effectiveness Phase,” *Fertility and Sterility* 36, no. 5 (November 1981): 591–598.

<sup>10</sup> Uricchio, W.A., Preface to book. Editors Lanctot, C., et al., “Natural Family Planning Development of National Programs” IFFLP/FIDAF; Washington D.C. page 9.

*What is the Anthropological Meaning of the Term NFP*

One of the most active pioneer members of the Human Life Foundation was Dr. Mary Catherine Martin, PhD, RN.<sup>11</sup> She was involved with developing a curriculum for NFP teachers, diocesan NFP program criteria, and other materials. She was concerned in the early 1980s about the philosophical and anthropologic meaning of natural family planning. She presented at the 1986 IFFLP congress in Hong Kong and wrote this for the proceedings book.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to emphasize that the fundamental pedagogical philosophy of learning to live within the procreative potential of the couples is one of fertility acceptance. Fertility acceptance reflects the couple's knowledge of fertility. To suggest that NFP is simply fertility awareness or knowledge that a couple may use .... is not accurate and should not be identified as NFP. Fertility acceptance is the preferred pedagogical and attitudinal concept to promote when teaching couples NFP.

I also have reflected on the meaning of the use of NFP and have developed a model of fertility integration with four different levels of integration within a conjugal man-and-woman relationship.<sup>13</sup> The lowest level of integration is viewing NFP as just another means of contraception; the second level uses NFP because it has no side effect; the third is a realization that NFP can strengthen the marital relationship; and the fourth and highest level is seeing fertility as a gift from God and the fertile time as a holy time in which couples can create new human life, i.e., new images of God. It is a task of NFP providers to help couples go through these levels of fertility integration.

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Katherine Martin, "NFP Pioneers: NFP Teacher Training and Service Development Efforts—1974–1985," *NFP-Diocesan-Activity-Report* 6, no. 1 (1995): 10–11.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Katherine Martin Comments. (1984) In (Editors Lanctot, C., et al.,) "Natural Family Planning' Development of National Programs" IFFLP/FIDAF; Wahington D.C., 150.

<sup>13</sup> Fehring, R. Toward a model of fertility integration. In J. Koterski (Ed.). *Life and learning IV Proceedings of the 4th Annual University Faculty for Life Conference*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1994.

The term *natural family planning* also became the terminology used by the popes since Pope Saint John Paul II. For example, in 1998 Pope John Paul II wrote a letter to Dr. Anna Cappella, director of the Center for Research and Study on the Natural Regulation of Fertility at Rome's Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. He said, "It is not uncommon in current thinking for the natural methods of fertility regulation to be separated from their proper ethical dimension and to be considered in their merely functional aspect."

Pope Benedict XVI explained that the Church defends recourse to natural methods of family planning as more in keeping with human dignity, since they require "maturity in love, which is not immediate, but which needs reciprocal dialogue and listening, and a singular control of the sexual impulse on a path of growth in virtue."

Pope Francis said at a recent conference celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Billings Ovulation Method of NFP:

In the second half of the last century, as pharmacological research for fertility control expanded and the contraceptive culture was on the rise, John and Evelyn Billings conducted careful scientific research and developed a simple method, accessible to women and couples, for natural knowledge of fertility, offering them a valuable tool for the responsible management of procreative choices.

Saint Mother Teresa, M.C., was a huge proponent of Natural Family Planning and stated that it "involves acceptance by the couple of a way of life of conjugal harmony and devotion to their children, which makes of their life something beautiful for God."

Most of the major NFP groups used the term *natural family planning* until recently in their websites or literature. For example, the Creighton Model FertilityCare System website stated that the Creighton Model, FertilityCare, CrMS is a form of natural family planning. The Couple to Couple League refers to itself as the largest NFP provider in the U.S. since 1971. In Germany the term *naturliche familia plannung* easily translates to the English form and is referred to as NFP. Sensiplan, a form of NFP developed by the German research group, refers to it as a method of NFP.

Over the years, though, there has been an effort to scrub out the name *natural family planning* and NFP from websites, books, and other literature. Around 1994, the Georgetown University Institute for International Studies

in Natural Family Planning changed its name to The Institute for Reproductive Health. The American Academy of Fertility Care professionals no longer has the term on their website or in their materials. It is hard to find the term on the Billings Ovulation Method USA website.

What makes natural family planning natural? I was challenged on that point by an editor from one of the top journals on family planning, who argued that there is nothing natural about NFP, in that it requires daily monitoring of fertility indicators and charting. Another common thought is that NFP is natural because it does not require use of synthetic hormones or any other drugs. The definition of natural methods for USAID includes condoms and withdrawal in addition to fertility awareness-based methods.

According to Saint Pope John Paul II, the true meaning of *natural* in natural family planning is that with its use the conjugal act does not separate the unitive from the procreative function. Couples who use NFP are faithful to this total meaning of the conjugal act and in the total giving of self in that act. The couples give of their total selves, including their fertility. When couples use contraception (even with condoms and withdrawal) they are not giving of their total selves but holding back. They are not living with and accepting their combined fertility. The pope called this the lie of the body.

Natural family planning is true to this anthropological meaning of the human person and the human act of intercourse. Fertility awareness-based methods with the promoted option to use condoms and withdrawal do not conform to this meaning. Continuing in this vein, the great pontiff rightly emphasized the “essential difference” between contraception and the use of natural methods is in exercising “responsible procreation.” It is an anthropological difference because in the final analysis it involves two irreconcilable concepts of the person and of human sexuality (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 32).<sup>14</sup>

This “lie of the body” goes much deeper with Gender Theory and gender transitioning, in which there are an infinite number of genders and that a man can become a woman and a women can become a man. Gender theory and the resulting chaos is an irreconcilable concept of the person and of human

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<sup>14</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (November 22, 1981), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html).

sexuality. Those who promote gender theory and biological transitioning are very active in promoting a terminology that reflects their beliefs—even at high levels in our federal government. At the core of gender theory is the creation of new pronouns to describe the person and, thus, the creation of chaos in the English language.

I find it ironic that the very hormones that are used in contraception are now used in helping people “transition” to another sex. Pope Francis gave an address on the importance of building a culture that protects the meaning of the human person and said, “Today the ugliest danger is gender ideology, which cancels out differences.” During an audience with members of the French-based academic organization Research and Anthropology of Vocations Institute (CRAV), Pope Francis said that gender ideology, which seeks to blur differences between men and women through movements such as transgenderism, “makes everything the same.”

Contraception became the lie of the body by separating the unitive and creative aspects of the act of intercourse in not total giving of oneself. But with contraceptive use also came the lie that a woman can be more like a man, using contraception in that she now does not have to worry about pregnancy. The lie goes even further when failure of contraception results in a pregnancy and the lie that the resulting developing baby is not a human person. And now with gender theory we have the denial or lie that a man can become a woman and vice versa by just feeling that one is the opposite sex—but also by dressing and acting the part, by using hormones to change the body, and by using surgery to try to form the body into what it is not.

I asked ChatGPT to provide a summary of differences between NFP and FABM. The answer was kind of muddled, but it did say this: “FABMs focus primarily on the physiological signs of fertility and how they can be used to achieve or avoid pregnancy. They tend to be more scientifically oriented and may be used independently of any specific religious or ethical framework.” I am not sure what the ethical framework for FABMs is; the ethical framework for NFP is clear that it does not violate the meaning and purpose of the conjugal act. Furthermore, the NFP term did not come from a formal religion but rather a group of high-level physicians and scientists.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, I believe that the term *natural family planning* more honestly reflects the anthropologic true nature of men and women and the

true nature and meaning of the conjugal act. The history of the term *natural family planning* has a sound and reasoned historical basis. It is a term that was developed by scientists to reflect what are referred to as modern NFP methods and their moral and ethical meaning. The efforts of replacing this term with FABM have been deliberate by some but also innocent in that it is a neutral term that reflects a secular and non-ethical stance.

I always found it interesting in that one of the developers of the first calendar-based methods of natural birth regulation (Dr. Ogino) was, as a non-Christian, able to see that the fertile time of the menstrual cycle was what he called a Holy Time—since it was a time in which couples can create new life and for those who believe in a creator means that these couples cooperate with the Creator in that task.<sup>15</sup>

I end this paper by a quote from Drs. John and Evelyn Billings, who developed and studied one of the modern methods of NFP, i.e., the Billings Ovulation Method. This quote was used in the advertisement for the 70th Anniversary Rome Conference on the Billings Ovulation Method:

We are not saying that everything Will be easy, we Will still have to fight for a long time, but... we are destined to win. There is no doubt that natural family planning Will be the Method of the future!

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15 Kyusaku Ogino, *Conception Period of Women*. (Harrisburg, PA: Medical Arts Publishing Company, 1934), 79-80.

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By Daniel B. Gallagher on Apr 18, 2024 08:57 pm *Dignitas Infinita* needed some *Familiaris Consortio*. *The Catholic World Report*, May, 1, 2024.