

Natural Family Planning: Overcoming Original Sin with Grace

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The purpose of this article is to demonstrate a method for working with married couples practicing natural family planning in order to assist them in coming to a deeper understanding of God's design of the gift of self within marriage. Blessed John Paul II repeatedly invited couples to trust in God and to experience the joy of mutual self-gift within marriage. His teachings came to be known as the "Theology of the Body". The reflections which follow may be of benefit in discussions during pre-Cana classes or in marriage encounter weekends.

Below is a summary of a program that I have used for teaching and for discussion of natural family planning, and is based on concepts from *The Human Person According to John Paul II* by Rev. Brian Bransfield. Natural family planning enables a woman to become aware of the times during which she is fertile. Using this understanding, a married couple can choose to have sexual relations during fertile times with a desire to achieve pregnancy, or they can refrain from sexual relations avoid or postpone pregnancy. NFP is a physically and spiritually healthy practice. The following schema may be used in discussion with married couples to help them to understand the theology behind the Church's acceptance of NFP.

Blessed John Paul II used the Genesis account of original sin to explain the nature of sin and its effects on human relationships. In his book, Father Brian Bransfield seven steps of original sin, and included seven steps of grace corresponding to the promise of redemption. These steps are practical because they describe the process involved in choosing to sin, or choosing to receive grace. These insights may be used to generate discussions about the Catholic Church's teachings on natural family planning.

The Seven Steps of Original Sin

1. **Bypass the family structure of union:** The devil separates Adam and Eve, so Eve is not with Adam, and Adam is not there to defend Eve.
2. **The innocent little question:** Did God really say not to eat of any tree in the garden? Satan does not deny that God exists. He craftily refocuses God's prohibition to not eat of the tree in order to deceive man into thinking that his choice to be obedient to God is a deprivation. Adam and Eve and each of us can easily forget our obedient relationship with God. Our needs can demand urgent attention from us, which can include ignoring God's law. We find ourselves craving a thing or a person that we cannot morally have. The innocent little question that Eve dealt with becomes our own. It insinuates that what we are about to do doesn't really matter. We begin to think it is not that big of a deal. It is not really that bad, everyone else is doing it. Why wouldn't God want us to have something that pleases us or makes us happy? We are tempted to distrust God. We are tempted away from a loving union with God. Isn't all sin a temptation to fall out of union with God? The innocent little question is not so innocent.

3. **The lie:** Eve should not have answered the devil. She could have called Adam, or she could have asked for help from God. Instead, she answered the serpent accurately about what God told them, stating that they are not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or they will die. Satan, the father of lies, contradicted God saying, “The day you eat of it surely you will not die! No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is evil” (Gen 3:4). Blessed John Paul taught that the history of sin begins when man “no longer acknowledges the Lord as his Creator and he himself wishes to be the one who determines, with complete independence, what is good and what is evil” (*Veritatis Splendor* 102). Eve rationalized the lie until it looked like truth.
4. **Fear:** In the process of consenting to the suggestion of Satan, Eve experienced a profound fear. Fear is an essential ingredient of every sin. Unfortunately it is not the fear of offending God, of offending the one we love, of losing the love relationship with God or others. The fear is of death. It is a fear that we will die if we don’t get what we want. We will not advance. We will not have pleasure. We will not enjoy the kind of life we truly deserve. We will not be loved and respected. The fear at the root of all our other fears is that we are not enough. The fear induces us to believe that God did not create us good enough, and that we must look for something else. This attitude offends God, who created us in his image. The dialogue of trust that Eve was accustomed to having with God and with Adam in the garden turned into a monologue of fear.
5. **The choice, the action of sin:** For the first time in their lives, Adam and Eve used their interior freedom in an act of sin. Each one individually acted in sin. They broke the law of God. The act of sin has an effect on a human person’s very being. In choosing sin a person chooses to embrace and to love something that is not of God. When we have an inordinate love for something, we conform ourselves to it. We become what we love. Through inordinate love of persons or things, our moral judgment and our desires become distorted and disordered. The will always chooses a perceived good. Adam and Eve perceived disobedience toward God as a good. Their actions had consequences. Sin causes a misalignment in a person’s relationship with God, with self, with other people and with the world.
6. **The hiding:** Adam and Eve were immediately aware of the change in the friendship they had with God following their choice to eat the fruit, and they hid themselves. Their hiding has spiritual meaning: in sin, we hide from the truth. They hid from God, and they hid from each other covering themselves with fig leaves. They also hid from their inner selves. God called out, “Where are you?” Is it possible that the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God

does not know where they are hiding? He called out to them. He sought them. With that seeking, Redemption begins. God immediately started to draw them back to himself.

7. **The blaming:** From hiding comes blaming. When God called out: “Where are you”, Adam responded that he was afraid because he was naked, and so he hid himself. The Lord asked him who told him he was naked, and then asked if he had eaten from the tree he was not supposed to eat from. Immediately Adam responded, “The woman whom YOU (*emphasis added*) put here with me—she gave me the fruit and so I ate it” (Gen 3:13). Notice that Adam blamed God first and then the woman. We know the story: the woman blamed the serpent. Blaming is a way of not taking personal responsibility for our actions.

The Seven Steps of Grace

1. **Enter the family structure:** God’s saving plan began within a family structure. “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary” (Lk 1:26-27). Gabriel announced that the plan of God is taking place not in a distant temple or military maneuver, but in the very family structure proper to the identity of the human person. The fallen angel Lucifer whispered a temptation to the virgin Eve which broke down the first family structure. The archangel Gabriel announced the plan of God to the Virgin Mary in the very midst of the family structure. Whereas Satan bypasses the family, the occasion of grace always paves its way with unity. The true manifestation of love and mercy enters the family cycle. As Pope Benedict XVI teaches, “Redemption appears as the re-establishment of unity...” ([*Spe Salvi*](#) 14).
2. **The announcement of the saving plan:** Gabriel confidently announced God’s saving plan: “Behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus” (Lk 1:31). How different this was from Satan’s deceptive suggestion to Eve. Gabriel’s question was not disguised. He made a bold proclamation: “Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Lk 1:28).
3. **Truth:** Whereas Satan lied, Gabriel told the truth. “He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:32-33). Pope Benedict XVI emphasizes, “We must free ourselves from the hidden lies with which we deceive ourselves” ([*Spe Salvi*](#) 33). The life of grace and virtue requires seeking the truth in discernment of our thoughts and actions. The truth found a home in Mary because she is humble. Humility is being able to look at the truth of ourselves.

4. **Do not be Afraid-Trust and Entrust:** The fallen angel induced fear in Eve. Gabriel immediately and explicitly calls for trust. “Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God” (Lk 1:30). The rejection of fear takes the form of the decision to love. Mary entrusted herself to the Trinity: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (Lk 1:35).
5. **The Choice, the act, the fiat:** Adam and Eve made a choice to sin and that choice internalized the experience of isolation, alienation, question, doubt, lie, fear, and shame. We continually repeat this pattern in every subsequent sin that we are involved in. God seeks to heal the wounds of sins. In His wisdom, God plans that all salvation history waits for the “Yes” of the Blessed Virgin Mary: “Let it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). Saint Augustine said that our first parents lost what they had received by trying to seize what they had not received. In the plan of God, Mary receives the Word of God, and she carries the seed to restore all of man’s sinful self-taking. She has received the greatest revelation of the Father and His love. Mary’s *fiat* is always united to Jesus’ gift of Himself to the Father. Love takes the form of a sacrificial gift of self. Sacrifice is always the raw material God uses to convert us to love.
6. **The Visitation:** Adam and Eve went into hiding after they sinned. Mary with the presence of the perfect gift of self in her womb, and the effects of that gift in her heart propelled her outward in an act of charity. She goes to the hill country of Judea to help her cousin Elizabeth who is pregnant with John the Baptist. Self-giving love will extend itself to others.
7. **The Magnificat:** Charity is alive in Mary, and her actions reflect it. Recall that Adam and Eve, when they had sinned against charity, began to blame. Instead of blame, Mary’s self-giving love overflows in praise. She sings the Magnificat: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Lk 1:46). Mary proclaimed her joy because it is the natural overflowing of the love that is within her.

This practical reflection on the seven steps of sin and the corresponding seven steps of grace involved in redemption elucidates one of the Blessed John Paul’s repeated messages that by grace, Jesus Christ makes it possible for us to participate in the sacrificial gift of self that He, the Son of God, made for us. This is why the Church teaches that one cannot separate love from life within marriage because it does not allow for full participation in Christ’s self-giving love.

Works Cited

1. Bransfield, Brian. *The Human Person According to John Paul II*. Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2010.
2. Pope Benedict XVI. *Spe Salvi*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Vatican City, Vatican City, 2007. Web. 11 January 2013.
3. Pope John Paul II. *Veritatis Splendor*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Vatican City, 1993. Web. 11 January 2013.