



# Humanum

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BOOK REVIEW

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## fNFP: Hard Truths and Good Fruits

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**Simcha Fisher**, *The Sinner's Guide to Natural Family Planning* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2013).

*The Sinner's Guide to Natural Family Planning* is not a textbook, and it doesn't teach you how to chart. It's also not a book of apologetics to explain the theological argument against contraception, or to help non-Catholics understand the Church teaching on family planning. Simcha Fisher is clear about that from the start: as she says, "I'm Catholic, and I write like a Catholic."

Fisher's writing speaks to an urgent and largely unmet need among the married laity, by ministering to the struggles, worries, and wounds of Catholic couples practising NFP. This book is a life-line for anyone trying to live out the teaching of the Church in a thoughtful, engaged way; it's written for someone who is already practising NFP, but discovering that doing so is very different from the rosy picture often painted by its proponents and marriage prep classes. It is written by someone who is intimately familiar with that struggle, because she has lived it herself.

In *The Sinner's Guide to Natural Family Planning*, Simcha Fisher tackles the three sides of NFP: the impact NFP has on our spiritual life, the impact it has on society, and the impact it has on relations between spouses. In a relatively short book, she manages to cover, with astonishing clarity, virtually every question a practising Catholic could ask about the theological implications of NFP: what it really means to be "open to life", what chastity in marriage looks like in practice, whether it's possible to use NFP with a "contraceptive mentality", and how NFP is different from contraception.

"Why doesn't the Church just make a list?" Simcha Fisher addresses this question head-on in the first; perhaps she knew that we all have a tendency to approach God's law with a legalistic, "show me the line so I can dance around it" kind of mind-set. "If the Church seems distressingly vague, it's because she doesn't want to get in the way of the conversation you

could be having with God,” she explains. “He doesn’t just want to talk to The Church as a whole: He wants to talk to you.”

The difficulty is that, in their efforts to promote NFP to Catholic couples and the secular world as a viable alternative to contraception, fertility awareness advocates often end up implying that the two are more-or-less interchangeable. Focusing almost exclusively on the fact that NFP is just as effective as other methods of family planning is to miss the point, though. As any couple is likely to discover within the first month of marriage, you can’t practise NFP without very quickly becoming aware of the inseparability of the unitive and procreative dimensions of sex. Yes, we can use NFP to responsibly space our children, but the fact that abstaining is hard and can put a strain on our relationship calls us to a thoughtful awareness of our reasons for delaying having a child. (Which is precisely why many experts in the field now prefer to use the term “natural fertility awareness” rather than “planning”, so as not to imply that it is just another form of contraceptive family planning.)

It’s all too easy to fall into the trap of trying to fit Catholic teaching about contraception and NFP neatly onto the secular world’s vision of sex, when in fact the two perspectives are so different as to be almost completely incompatible. We need to approach the question of family planning from a different angle than the one that the world takes for granted. Instead of asking “How can I get what I want?”, we need to ask a more radical question: “What is sex for?” Or, indeed, “How can I help my spouse get to heaven?”

Simcha Fisher tackles the realities of practising NFP within marriage with refreshing insight and humor, and most importantly, she provides much-needed advice for helping one’s relationship and spiritual life to survive and during difficult periods of necessary abstinence. She also calls us to examine our own judgements of other couples and why they may or may not have children, reminding us that “Only one Person knows what’s in another man’s heart, and that person ain’t you or me”.

Not only that, but her exploration of NFP’s impact on the relationship between husband and wife is a beautiful meditation on the practical application of St John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*. I came away from *The Sinner’s Guide to Natural Family Planning* with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the complementarity between men and women; and a new awareness that our different struggles, desires, strengths, and weaknesses are an opportunity to grow in empathy and love together, to help us fulfill our mission as spouses to help each other grow in holiness and ultimately get to heaven. As Simcha Fisher explains, the strain of abstinence—the mismatch of desire and nature—that often occurs when couples are working around a woman’s cycle to avoid pregnancy can either be seen as a burden, or “as God’s way of making sure we take care of each other—that we step beyond what is easiest, and look to our spouses first”.

She addresses difficult issues directly, such as the fact that the woman often feels less like having sex during the infertile period of her cycle, challenging couples to see things from the other’s perspective in an act of radical empathy. At every turn, she provides practical examples of how spouses can help each other through periods of necessary abstinence, without ever downplaying the struggle—because, as she says, “NFP is a genuine and significant cross”.

Simcha Fisher’s work is unique and much-needed precisely because of her realism and honesty: all too often in their eagerness to get couples to use NFP rather than artificial contraception, NFP instructors gloss over the difficult aspects of the practice. In the end, though, this does everyone a disservice; the Church’s teaching on marriage, sex, and family

planning is beautiful in its fullness and authenticity, and we shouldn't shy away from the more difficult issues connected with NFP. Fisher's writing is a perfect example of how to engage these issues in all their complexity and nuance. NFP can indeed bring you closer to each other and to God, but it's far from being a simple process.

*The Sinner's Guide* is ultimately an uplifting and encouraging book because Simcha Fisher is at once real about the struggle and hopeful about its ultimate significance. And she doesn't stop there: Fisher shows us how we can move beyond the hard work of a marriage that is open to life in a responsible way, to grow closer to our spouse and to God in self-sacrificial love and trust. She describes how, by honestly grappling with our spouse's vulnerabilities, we are called to give ourselves more fully to the other: "Here is what the Church asks of us, beyond the mechanics of what our bodies may and may not do," she writes. "A man should work with his wife to figure out what he can do for her so that she feels close enough to want to have sex, even when she isn't biologically primed to seek it out. And the Church asks a woman to work with her husband to figure out what she can do for him so that he feels cared-for and desired even when the stars are not in their favor, whether they're having sex or not".

In *The Sinner's Guide to Natural Family Planning*, Simcha Fisher gently leads practising Catholic couples to a better understanding of the Church's teaching on NFP, helping us to see it less as a burden and more as a blessing that can help us to "become expert lovers", focused on the needs and desires of our spouse. As she shows, this particular cross bears the fruit of a deeper union and great spiritual growth in the long-run, if only we invite God into our relationship to help us.

Ultimately, NFP is not compatible with a secular vision of sex and what sex is for because it requires us to put the other person first, above our own desires, in an act of radical empathy. It acknowledges that men and women are fallen, and offers us a way to salvation: it brings us face-to-face with the needs of our partner, which will ultimately make us holier—if we let it. As Fisher puts it, NFP is hard because we're in conflict with one another; but in a beautiful twist of fate that reveals the awesome creativity of our Creator's design, it can also be the means of our salvation. "If men and women are divided, it is through this division that He will bring us back together, to restore us to the complementarity and harmony for which we were designed."

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