

The USCCB's "Married Love & the Gift of Life"
The U.S. Bishops Pitch NFP: But Without a Sense of Urgency
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On November 14, 2006, the bishops of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) overwhelmingly accepted for publication a document on Natural Family Planning (NFP) titled "Married Love and the Gift of Life." It is encouraging to see our bishops give attention to a subject that is practiced by only about three percent of Catholic married couples in their fertile years. The document appears to be aimed at engaged and newly married couples, and it tries to attract them to the practice of NFP in a very positive way. I hope it succeeds. I also hope that the bishops will keep track of how copies of this document in booklet form are distributed to engaged couples and how many engaged couples take a full course of NFP instruction. If the latter number remains small, the bishops will need to take a more effective approach.

As with any document, "Married Love" has its pluses and minuses. On the plus side, the first thing to note is that "Married Love" is readable and short, a bit less than 2,740 words. More importantly, it adopts a positive tone, seeking to attract couples to the practice of NFP with the promise of heightened sexual intimacy and other marital benefits. It also teaches the abortifacient potential of hormonal forms of birth control. It draws a loose analogy between the dishonesty of telling lies and the dishonesty of contraception. This is important because it seems that some folks don't mind thinking of themselves as lustful, but almost no one likes to think of himself as a liar.

In promoting NFP, "Married Love and the Gift of Life" is careful to teach that couples should be open to new life and need a serious reason to use NFP to avoid or postpone pregnancy. This is significant because a well known promoter of NFP, Fr. Richard Hogan, has recently argued that in standard NFP instruction there is no need to mention the qualifier about needing a sufficiently serious reason to use NFP. Specifically, on Fr. Mitch Pacwa's EWTN program (September 13, 2006), Fr. Hogan said he was "on a campaign" to delete mention of "serious reason" from regular NFP instruction. In a December 2006 reply to criticism, Fr. Hogan wrote, "[G]rave or serious reasons for having recourse to the infertile times should not be imposed as a prerequisite on couples beginning their lives together."

The need for a sufficiently serious reason to use systematic NFP—i.e., chaste abstinence during the wife's fertile time of the menstrual cycle—has been a standard part of Catholic teaching ever since systematic NFP became feasible in the early 1930s. In his October, 1951 address to midwives, Pius XII noted that serious motives can arise from "medical, eugenic, economic and social" factors. Pope Paul's VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae* teaches that serious reasons can arise from the "physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances." Such classifications are broad enough to cover anything that would be a truly serious reason to avoid pregnancy. Fr. Hogan is not opposed to this teaching, but he thinks it should not be taught during regular NFP instruction. He apparently thinks that most couples who practice NFP will more or less

automatically become generous in having children, and so there is no need to convey this part of Catholic teaching.

I suggest that in a materialistic culture almost all engaged and married couples will benefit from learning that marriage is for family; that having children is *obligatory* not optional; that they are called to generosity in the service of life; and that they need very good reasons, not trivial ones, to seek to avoid pregnancy. Paul VI qualified “serious reasons” with language about “just causes” and other terms that make it clear that couples can morally use NFP for reasons far less than life-or-death or near-bankruptcy cases, but that’s not the issue. The present question is not what qualifies as a sufficiently serious reason. The question here is whether NFP-teaching organizations should censor the qualifying reasons for the moral use of NFP. *Married Love* indicates that the US bishops believe that the qualifier is an integral part of the teaching, and that is to their credit.

On the other hand, “Married Love” has some shortcomings that could have been easily avoided. First, its description of NFP is seriously incomplete. It limits itself to systematic NFP—periodic abstinence—and completely ignores the practice of ecological breastfeeding that spaces babies without recourse to periodic abstinence. The reality is that there are two distinct forms of Natural Family Planning. One form was invented directly by God and has been with us from the beginning. It is called ecological breastfeeding, or eco-breastfeeding, to distinguish it from other methods of breastfeeding that have little or no effect on fertility. The other form is systematic NFP, which relies on chaste abstinence during the wife’s fertile time.

Ecology is concerned with the relationships between two organisms and how each affects the other. Eco-breastfeeding is the form of nursing in which the mother fulfills her baby’s needs for frequent suckling and her full-time presence and in which the child’s frequent suckling postpones the return of the mother’s fertility after childbirth. My wife, Sheila, has standardized the practice of eco-breastfeeding into the Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding (see www.nfpandmore.org/ebf.shtml) to distinguish it from the methods of breastfeeding that have little or no such effects. These are described at The key is frequent and unrestricted suckling, and that entails the absence of cultural icons and practices such as bottles, pacifiers, schedules, long separations of mother and baby, etc. Following the Seven Standards ensures that the mother will have her baby with her and that she will let the baby suckle frequently. It is well established that American mothers who practice eco-breastfeeding enjoy a God-given period of natural infertility averaging 14 to 15 months postpartum. By nature’s standards, for a nursing mother to go one or two years without menstruation is the norm, and the return of menstruation soon after childbirth is the exception. This lifestyle of mother/baby togetherness is different from the average parenting style in America, but it is good for both mother and baby, and some of the most enthusiastic users of NFP are those who practice eco-breastfeeding.

This is not esoteric knowledge in the NFP movement. Sheila has written two books on the subject: *Breastfeeding and Natural Child Spacing* (Harper & Row, 1974) and *Breastfeeding and Catholic Motherhood* (Sophia Institute Press, 2005), which devotes one chapter to this topic. We have been actively promoting eco-breastfeeding as God’s

plan for spacing babies for over 35 years. The failure to make any mention of this form of NFP in “Married Love” is unfortunate and entirely unnecessary. The usual excuse for such omission—that engaged and young married couples aren’t thinking of baby care at this point in their lives—doesn’t hold water. They aren’t thinking about a lot of things they should be considering, and that’s why dioceses generally require at least six months of preparation for marriage. What better opportunity is there for these couples to learn about the baby-spacing effects of ecological breastfeeding? When else will they learn about the many health benefits for the mom as well as for the baby?

The benefits of breastfeeding are so significant that the U. S. federal government has launched a campaign to warn parents that their babies face serious health risks if they are not breastfed. When it comes to promoting breastfeeding and all its benefits for both mother and baby, the contemporary organs of the Church in the U. S. are lagging far behind the secular culture and two recent Popes. Pius XII took time out of his busy wartime schedule in 1941 to encourage mothers to breastfeed. John Paul II in 1995 sponsored a conference on breastfeeding and endorsed the recommendations of the World Health Organization and UNICEF that mothers breastfeed their babies for at least two years. More recently, Prof. Mary Shivanandan has incorporated breastfeeding into her doctoral curriculum at the John Paul II Institute in Washington, D.C. It is, after all, an application of the Theology of the Body, and that is precisely the sort of attention that is needed to mainstream the proper promotion of breastfeeding. A future edition of “Married Love” can be greatly improved by giving adequate promotion to eco-breastfeeding as a form of natural family planning as well as providing significant health benefits to mother and baby alike.

Another serious omission in the USCCB document is the lack of any reference to marital chastity. A somewhat recent survey reported that over 50 percent of 15- to 19-year-olds have experienced oral-genital copulation. That likely means that an unhealthy percentage of Catholic engaged couples have sinned in this way. In a key sentence, “Married Love” teaches that NFP couples “may choose to refrain from sexual union during the woman’s fertile time, doing nothing to destroy the love-giving or life-giving meaning that is present.” One might rightly interpret this sentence to exclude oral sex and other forms of marital sodomy, but with nothing specific about those sins, not a few couples may rationalize that they can engage in them, particularly those couples who did so prior to marriage. These behaviors are not being addressed in most NFP courses, and that’s all the more reason why this document on married love should have talked about *chaste* married love and *chaste* periodic abstinence.

The text of “Married Love” avoids the word “sin” and its derivatives, but twice uses the word “immoral.” The first time it describes the telling of a lie as “immoral.” The second time it describes contraception as “objectively immoral.” It would have been more meaningful if the authors wrote “objectively sinful.” “Sin” communicates in a way that “immoral” doesn’t. The songwriter had it right when he wrote “it’s a sin to tell a lie,” and he was writing specifically about the sin of saying “I love you” when you don’t. Not coincidentally, Pius XI called contraception a “grave sin.”

It is not easy to practice marital chastity and generosity in the service of life. “Married Love” acknowledges this: “Living God’s design for human sexuality in marriage can be difficult.” Indeed it can be very difficult. For not a few, overcoming temptations against chastity is a daily cross, which the Lord Jesus says we must carry in order to be his disciples. To those who have failed to live up to God’s plan, the document offers encouragement and a reminder of God’s love, but fails to issue Christ’s direct challenge to undergo a change of heart and behavior.

Strangely, the document makes no mention of making an NFP course a normal requirement for marriage preparation. In 1989 the USCC Bishops’ Committee on Pastoral Research and Practices issued a book on marriage preparation, *Faithful to Each Other Forever*, in which they urged that all engaged couples be required to take a *full course* of NFP instruction, not merely a couple of hours in a marriage-prep class. The recommendation hasn’t been widely adopted, but it’s a wise policy when the course teaches the details of NFP in the context of Christian discipleship. Couples deserve to know the good reasons for such a requirement, and “Married Love” should have explained them.

Perhaps my greatest disappointment with “Married Love” is that it fails to convey any sense of urgency. The Church is in crisis. Western culture has succumbed to the Culture of Death. Marriage is in crisis. Yet aside from a reference to the prophetic words of Paul VI about the negative consequences of the contraceptive sexual revolution, there was nothing telling the reader that *we* are either a part of a civilization-ending disaster or we are a part of the solution. There was no clarion call to be chaste as our Lord and Savior calls us to be. There was no call to Christian discipleship, no call to repent of our sins, and no call to join the task of building a Culture of Life.

If this document leads tens of thousands of engaged couples to the practice of chaste systematic NFP, ecological breastfeeding, and generosity in having children, I applaud it and its authors. If it has almost no effect whatsoever, however, I will not be surprised.

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