

NFP Instruction: Organ recital or New Evangelization?

By John F. Kippley

Should instruction about Natural Family Planning (NFP) focus almost exclusively on the reproductive system or should it also be a bona fide New Evangelization effort? That is the question facing bishops, priests and NFP organizations and teachers.

The present situation. Some “NFP” teaching is simply non-contraceptive birth control. Internet ads make that clear. The NFP programs used by the dioceses of the United States are a mixed bag. Some may have some Theology of the Body talk, others may have some generic Christian references, and others seem to be mostly secular. When Dr. John Billings developed his mucus-only method, he opined that it stood on its own merits as a form of birth control and did not need the addition of religion, and that seems to be common thinking today. The teachers may be Catholic but the texts they use are basically secular. Someone very familiar with the diocesan NFP programs told me that most do not teach about the immorality of masturbation and marital sodomy. They will teach against barrier methods on the pragmatic grounds of reduced effectiveness and against hormonal birth control on grounds of health and their abortifacient properties, but they do not address the issue of sexual morality.

Is this what Catholic young couples need today? Does the current NFP movement serve the need of the Church to call its people to full faith and practice? Can a bare-bones mention of Catholic teaching advance the New Evangelization effort within the Church?

My concern is this: After almost 44 years of generally benign neglect of *Humanae Vitae*, there are signs that more American bishops are starting to take its teaching more seriously. Specifically, more dioceses are getting ready to require all engaged couples to take a complete NFP course as a normal part of preparation for Christian marriage. The question is, what is a complete NFP course? Should it be secular or should it be designed to inspire couples to make faith-based decisions for chastity and generosity?

The NFP course and the New Evangelization. When an NFP course is mandated by a bishop as preparation for receiving the Sacrament of Matrimony, its content takes on added significance. Many—perhaps most—of the attendees will not have consciences already formed in accord with Catholic teaching. Most “required” engaged couples would not be taking an NFP course if they were not required to do so. Many of them will be in serious need of both conversion and the New Evangelization.

Conversion. Many engaged couples need to have a faith-based change of heart that accepts Catholic teaching about love, marriage, and sexuality. For many, the change of heart needed for Christian discipleship calls for a change of behavior before marriage as well as commitment and marital chastity after the wedding. Further, they need to learn that Catholic teaching against contraception includes contraceptive behaviors as well as drugs and devices. They need to learn that it is immoral for them to engage in masturbation and marital sodomy. Since research has shown that many young people

have engaged in some of these behaviors, it will require a great change of heart to live a life of Christian chastity.

The *New Evangelization* is the effort to show that Jesus is the ultimate author of Catholic teaching including its countercultural teaching on love, marriage and sexuality. Bishops, priests, and NFP teachers need to recognize that merely saying that something is Church teaching no longer has the same effect that it had 60 years ago. The Church needs to have a systematic effort to rebuild faith in the *Magisterium* of the Church, an effort to show that Jesus both instituted the Church and continues to guide it.

The two big questions of the New Evangelization effort are these: 1. What should the Church teach to those it can reach either in the pews or in special events such as lectures and study sessions such as NFP courses? 2. How can the Church evangelize the many baptized Catholics who no longer come to Church every Sunday?

1. Faith in the Last Supper promises of Jesus. Everything that Catholics are called to believe rests on the promises that Jesus made at the Last Supper, but for many that faith is only implicit. The New Evangelization seeks to make that faith explicit. Educational psychology tells us to start where people are, so I suggest that the Nicene Profession of Faith is a good place to start. How many Mass-goers are conscious that in professing the Nicene Creed they are also professing their faith that at the Council of Nicea Jesus was remaining faithful to his Last Supper promises? Both sides of the Arian question were quoting Sacred Scripture. How can we be sure today that the Council Fathers at Nicea got it right when they affirmed that Jesus was “consubstantial”—of the very same substance or being—with the Father? Our certainty of faith today rests on the promises of Jesus at the Last Supper that the Holy Spirit would lead the Apostles and their successors into the fullness of the truth. In the gospel of John, five times Jesus promised the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit, summed up well in this verse.

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...(16:12-13a).

It is our Catholic faith that the same Holy Spirit who led the Bishops at Nicea also continues to lead the Pope and Bishops today when they teach about the demands of love within marriage. The Church today at every level needs to connect the dots between the Last Supper promises of Jesus, our profession of the Nicene Creed, and our faith in the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is not just coincidental that it was also at the Last Supper that Jesus gave us his New Commandment—to love one another as He has loved us. This can be taught from the pulpit and in adult education. It can also be taught in an NFP course, and it is already being taught in the NFP courses offered by NFP International, the organization founded by my wife and myself. What we are doing is so much a matter of Catholic common sense that it can and should be done by every NFP program regardless of their various methodological emphases.

2. Evangelizing the not fully practicing Catholic. There are millions of nominal Catholics who don't take the Faith seriously, but they still haven't left to join a local

Protestant group. Some nominal Catholics may be staying away from the Church because they feel guilty about their behavior even if they can't give a very specific reason, and others feel alienated because they reject Catholic teaching about love, marriage and sexuality. They don't know the reasons for that teaching, only that its acceptance would require them to undergo a change of behavior. How can the Church reach such people?

Thousands of such young Catholics will be marrying in a Catholic church. Some will come of their own volition, but others will be coming just to satisfy their parents or grandparents or to have a good background for the wedding pictures. If the diocesan and parish pastors want to, they *can* reach these young Catholics. They *can* require them to take an NFP course that seeks to evangelize as well as teach human physiology.

I submit that the right kind of NFP course forms an essential part of the New Evangelization. It provides a way of reaching many couples who would otherwise never see the link between the Last Supper and the teaching authority of the Church, and it may be the ONLY way to present this part of the faith in the context of one of the greatest controversies in the Church and the culture. This is what we do in NFP International, and our user's manual, *Natural Family Planning: The Complete Approach*, can be used by anyone who wants it. (See www.nfpandmore.org.) Further, other programs can use it or adapt their own programs to include this effort of the New Evangelization.

The right kind of NFP course. As stated earlier, when a diocese requires an NFP course as a normal part of preparation to receive the Sacrament of Matrimony, the content of the course takes on added significance. There are distinctly different NFP programs. Some teach all the common signs of fertility and how to use them in a crosschecking way for confidence and the highest effectiveness. Some focus exclusively on the mucus sign of fertility but do not inform couples about the cross-checking temperature and hormonal detection signs. Studies that compare the effectiveness of mucus-only systems with cross-checking systems have shown the latter to be more effective. Some dioceses make several systems available, but some make only one system available. Is it fair to uninformed couples to restrict their knowledge just to a single sign and thus censor the teaching of cross-checking signs? Dioceses *can* require programs to give couples sufficient information so that they can make an informed choice.

Research shows that mothers who do Ecological Breastfeeding have an average of 14.5 months of breastfeeding amenorrhea (no periods). This is a normal human event that follows a normal distribution, with about six percent of such mothers having a first period before six months, and 33% still in breastfeeding amenorrhea at 18 months. This is the most natural form of natural family planning, but most programs ignore it. I know that many couples will choose not to do this kind of breastfeeding because it requires the mother to be near their baby, but some well informed couples will rethink their family situation so that mother can be home with their baby. The point is this: without proper information about all the benefits of breastfeeding in general and eco-breastfeeding in particular, couples cannot make a well informed choice. Is it fair for a diocese to

withhold such information from couples who are required to attend an NFP course as part of preparation for marriage and family life?

As indicated above, most NFP instruction is secular or minimally religious by design. How can couples believe the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* unless they are given religious reasons for such faith? Can pastors reasonably expect couples to grow in faith if the object of such faith is not presented? How does fertility awareness help men and women to overcome their temptations to lust? How can couples be expected to see the Lord Jesus as the ultimate author of these teachings unless the teacher connects the dots between Jesus and today? Is it fair for diocesan programs to withhold this teaching from the thousands of couples who are required to attend an NFP course?

The teaching of natural family planning is under strong attack by some Catholics who allege that it is nothing but Catholic birth control and is contrary to the centuries-long tradition of the call to generosity in having children. How many programs explicitly teach that NFP is *not* Catholic birth control? How many explicitly teach the need for sufficiently serious reason to use systematic NFP to postpone or avoid pregnancy? Is it fair to uninformed couples to withhold this specific teaching of the Church? How can pastors expect couples to have more than two children without hearing the call to generosity and the need for sufficiently serious reason?

The right kind of NFP course can be a powerful agent of the New Evangelization, but that's not going to happen without a significant improvement in almost all the current NFP programs. To paraphrase Romans 10: 15, "How can men believe what they have never heard? And how are they to hear unless someone teaches? And how can this teaching occur unless our pastors insist upon it?"

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