

Preparation for Marriage:

What Couples Have a Need and a Right to Know

John F. Kippley

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Introduction

It is no secret that Catholic teaching about love, marriage and sexuality has been challenged for more than 50 years right within the Church. From a Church that was guided by the teaching of *Casti Connubii*¹ which was hugely followed in practice for 30 years, we have become at a sociological level a Church both confused and divided. In a response to questions raised by chemical birth control, Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the received teaching in *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. That was met by a rebellion led by dissident priests who were joined by large numbers of laity.

The confusion about marital sexuality led to confusion about same-sex attractions and behavior, and that serious problem was made public in the great Scandal of 2002.

The widespread acceptance of marital contraception has led to birth rates in some once-Catholic countries that are now below replacement levels. Many Catholic schools and churches have been closed, and in Europe some abandoned churches are now used as skateboard parks and trapeze schools.²

Before Margaret Sanger started the war against chastity in early 1914, the American divorce rate was one divorce for every eleven marriages. The combination of contraceptive behaviors and secularized attitudes has led to a

¹ Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii (On Chaste Marriage)* December 31, 1930. This was occasioned by the acceptance of contraception by the bishops of the Church of England in August, 1930.

² 02Jan2015 http://www.wsj.com/articles/europees-empty-churches-go-on-sale-1420245359?KEYWORDS=*

current divorce rate of one for every two marriages in the United States. That is, the general societal acceptance of contraception that was supposed to be a help to marriages led instead to a 500% increase in the divorce rate, hardly an advertisement for marital happiness. Further, there is secular evidence that the divorce rate of Catholics who have **ever** used systematic NFP is 53% less than the rate of those who **never** used NFP³.

Articles and books have been written on these things. There may be some differences about the causes, but I am not aware of any informed and believing Catholic who argues that things are what they should be. In my opinion, there are two huge questions. First, **what do believing Catholics want** the Church to look like in 10, 20, 40 and 60 years? I hope that many of today's thirty-somethings will be around to see a Church that is reunited in faith and practice. Second, **what can faithful Catholics do** to create once again a faith community that hugely accepts and lives by the actual teaching of the Church?

Most of this paper was written well before the end of the Synod on the Family that concluded on October 25, 2015. The concluding document makes it clear that the Holy Spirit prevented the bishops and cardinals from breaking away from the received teaching of Sacred Scripture and Tradition regarding the permanence of marriage and the non-reception of Holy Communion by those living in a biblically defined state of adultery. However, the Synod did not propose anything by way of a plan to help couples prepare for truly Christian, for-better-AND-for-worse marriages.

The question of **what to do** is so vital that the teaching of St. James could hardly be more relevant. “What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and

³ <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/medical-research/upload/CMR-Summer-Fall-2013-Divorce-and-NFP-edited.pdf>, page 14.

filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (2:14-17). Applying this to the Synod and its concluding document is an exercise in disappointment. While the avoidance of open heresy is a good result, certain statements could be clear and are scarcely a cause for rejoicing. The lack of any prescription or agenda for supporting the Catholic family as faithful and fruitful is a cause of disappointment.

Proper preparation for marriage is absolutely essential for renewed marital commitment and family life. To put it positively, proper preparation for marriage can teach much of what young couples need to learn and have a right to learn. Negatively, without the proper teaching, this sort of renewal simply will not happen. The general argument in Romans 10:13-15 certainly applies. St. Paul wrote about Jesus in verse 13, “For ‘everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.’” He then continues,

“But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!’ ”

Preparation for marriage and family life needs to permeate Catholic education at every level, but the primary subject of this paper is the immediate preparation for marriage and especially what can be taught in the right kind of course on natural family planning (NFP). I think there are at least **seven areas of instruction** that are so important that they can be deemed obligatory.

1. The New Evangelization. We hear this term frequently, but what does it mean? When he was first introducing the idea, St. John Paul II noted that what is **new** about it is that it focuses on helping **Catholics** to understand and believe that Jesus himself is the author of Catholic teachings including those that apply in a very practical and sometimes counter-cultural way. I think that in the context of

preparation for marriage, it means that young couples need to review the Last Supper promises of Jesus.

We are told to start with people where they are, and that applies here. If the couple is attending Sunday Mass, they are at least hearing the Nicene Creed and perhaps they are actively reciting it. But what happens when they ask themselves, “Why should I believe this? Why should I believe that the Nicene Creed teaches the truth about God?” And then, “Why should I believe **anything** that the Catholic Church teaches? Why should I believe what the Church teaches about marriage and birth control?”

How can any of us believe the Nicene Profession of Faith without first believing that at Nicea Jesus was keeping his Last Supper promises about the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit? The questions being raised today provide us with opportunity to affirm with faith and conviction that the Holy Spirit continues to lead the Church. We believe in the teachings of the Catholic Church because we believe first of all in the Lord Jesus and his promises. We believe that Jesus continues to be true to those promises.

In meeting with couples for marriage preparation, I suggest that the Catholic priest would do well to open his Bible to the Last Supper account in the Gospel according to John. His engaged couples need to read the threefold promises of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit to guide the Apostles and their successors through the centuries and today.⁴ For many, this may be the first time they have read those promises. The next step would be to turn to the permanence-of-marriage passage in Mark 10:2-12 and perhaps also the corresponding passage in Matthew 19: 3-12. Couples will benefit from seeing that Catholic teaching on the permanence of marriage comes directly from Jesus. They also need to understand that the “except for unchastity” clause in verse Mt 19.9 refers only to marriages that are invalid.

⁴ John 14: 15-26; 15:26-27; 16:12-15

I grant that the effort to build faith in engaged couples is primarily a priestly responsibility, but couples also need to see this faith reflected in their fellow laity. That's why our NFP manual raises the question of "Why should I believe...?" and places the response in the Last Supper promises of Jesus. This is easy to do in an NFP course. Couples need to experience this New Evangelization, and in Catholic marriage preparation they certainly have a right to hear it—and more than once and from different sources.

2. A theology of the marriage act that supports *Humanae Vitae*. In today's context, it is obvious that couples need to hear that Christian marriage is permanent. That means that they need to see marriage as part of the Divine Covenant, not just a contract that can be broken by mutual consent. They should also realize that every one of their marriage acts ought to be a reminder of their marriage covenant.

Here I propose that it would be helpful for couples to learn and internalize a simple theological statement about the marriage act: "Sexual intercourse is intended by God to be, at least implicitly, a renewal of the marriage covenant." St. Pope John Paul II used this covenant-renewal concept in his 1994 *Letter to Families*⁵. This covenant understanding gives positive meaning to Catholic biblical teaching about the marriage act. It states first of all what sexual intercourse ought to be—exclusively a marriage act and then, within marriage, a renewal of their marriage covenant. It also explains why the same anatomical act that is the serious matter of mortal sin *outside* of marriage can be a serious good *within* marriage. Outside of marriage, there is no covenant commitment, and thus sexual union is essentially dishonest. Within marriage, the marriage act **can** be and **ought** to be a true renewal of the faith, love and commitment of their

⁵ "In the conjugal act, husband and wife are called to confirm in a responsible way *the mutual gift* of self which they have made to each other in the marriage covenant." St. John Paul II, *Letter to Families from Pope John Paul II*, n. 12, para 12, 02 Feb 1994.

wedding day promises, at least implicitly, even though some marriage acts are something less than that.

The covenant statement also invites an explanation of the Christian biblical covenant of marriage. A covenant of God's making. A covenant that the Lord Jesus makes clear is binding until death. A covenant of self-giving love. All of this is important for engaged couples to understand.

The natural family planning course can affirm the unconditional character of the marriage covenant by pointing out that contraception contradicts instead of affirming the marriage covenant. The marriage act ought to say, "I take you once again for better and for worse until death do us part." The body language of the *contraceptive* marriage act says instead, "I take you for better but definitely NOT for the imagined worse of possible pregnancy." It is essentially dishonest and thus immoral. Couples have a need and a right to know these things.⁶

3. Specific moral teaching that deals with the temptations to which abstaining couples are tempted. In the context of morally acceptable systematic Natural Family Planning, the method for avoiding pregnancy is chaste abstinence during the fertile time. Experience indicates, however, that some couples practice fertility awareness with immoral fertile-time sexual actions such as masturbation and forms of sodomy. For example, a woman called my NFP office and asked if we had a priest on staff. Since we didn't, she told me her story. She and her husband had been doing mutual masturbation during the fertile time. They had taken an NFP course in which nothing was said about these things. They had been doing this for eight years, and then she read our book on natural family planning where she learned that the Church teaches that these things are immoral. She wanted to go to confession by phone because she was so active in

⁶ For a more extensive treatment, see John F. Kippley, *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality* (Ignatius 2005) especially chapters 1-4.

her parish that she knew the priest would recognize her voice. She was happy to hear my advice to confess in another parish where she was not known.

In another case, an enthusiastic user of his own form of “NFP” was trying to persuade another man to practice “NFP” and told him that abstinence is no problem because you can just masturbate. The other gentleman told him, “That’s immoral.” The first man and his wife were self-taught using a book written by my wife and me, and they have written that they had “skipped the chapters on the moral aspect and what made NFP different from contraceptive methods.”⁷ They repented and became NFP teachers.

In another case, an email letter informed me that the writer had just recently read our book on natural family planning and was surprised to find that the Church teaches that masturbation and other activities are immoral. She said that she and her husband had taken an NFP course 23 years previously, never heard anything about such things, and had been practicing fertile-time immorality for that entire time. They changed their behavior.

The problem is that many or most NFP programs say nothing about these specific immoral behaviors to which abstaining couples are tempted. It is completely insufficient to instruct couples simply to avoid genital contact. Experience shows that such a general statement can be interpreted solely as a means to prevent the transmission of semen, but no one has ever become pregnant from oral-genital copulation.

The NFP course and text do not need to spend much time and space on this subject. In our text, *Natural Family Planning: The Complete Approach* (NFPTCA), we quote section 14 of *Humanae Vitae*. First, it condemns abortion. Then it continues: “Equally to be condemned, as the magisterium of the Church has affirmed on many occasions, is direct sterilization, whether of the man or of the

⁷ “Mr. B: used ‘NFP’ wrongly,” Chapter 7, “Witness,” *Natural Family Planning: The Complete Approach*, John and Sheila Kippley, 2010, p. 122. Available at www.nfpandmore.org.

woman, whether permanent or temporary. Similarly excluded is any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means.”

Our text then asks, “What are the other behaviors that seek to render procreation impossible?” We answer:

- “● Barrier methods such as condoms, diaphragm, foams, and jellies
- The intrauterine device (IUD)
- Hormonal forms of birth control (the Pill, Shot, Patch, implants)
- Masturbation, whether mutual or singular
- Withdrawal and ejaculation (Onanism)
- Marital sodomy (anal sex and oral sex)”⁸.

I use this quotation simply to illustrate that it does not take much space to convey this sort of teaching. We do not harangue; we simply report.

Our text then asks, “Why do we mention masturbation and marital sodomy?” We reply: “It’s because we listen and read. People have told us [as indicated above]... We have read in the papers that in some parts of the United States about half of high school teenagers have experienced oral sex, that is, oral sodomy. It takes no genius to figure out that if they somehow attend an NFP course and hear ‘abstinence’ during the fertile time, they may start thinking in terms of their previous behavior unless they learn that it’s immoral. *Chaste* abstinence is the pregnancy-avoiding ‘method’ of true systematic NFP⁹. Couples have a God-given right to know specific sexual morality that applies to marriage.

4. The call to generosity in having children. Systematic natural family planning is not “Catholic birth control.” Please note that first word, “systematic.” It is necessary to distinguish two entirely different forms of natural family planning. The oldest is what we call “ecological breastfeeding,” and that form of NFP does

⁸ Kippley and Kippley, *NFPTCA*, 18.

⁹ *NFPTCA*, 19.

not require any sort of justifying reasons. Breastfeeding infertility is simply a very natural side effect of frequent suckling, and I will describe that later.

True systematic NFP is based on fertility awareness and chaste abstinence during the fertile time. There are several signs of fertility and infertility. What are frequently called different *methods* of NFP are simply different *systems* of using one or more fertility signs to designate the fertile and infertile times of the female fertility cycle. The term “Systematic NFP” refers to the different systems of fertility awareness.

Humanae Vitae sections 10 and 16 make it clear that couples need a sufficiently serious reason to use systematic NFP to postpone pregnancy or to limit their family size. In our NFP text we quote both sections, and we use the term “sufficiently serious” to combine their meanings. We also quote directly from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which teaches that spouses have the “duty to make certain that their desire [for spacing or avoidance] is not motivated by selfishness but is in conformity with the generosity appropriate to responsible parenthood” (CCC 2368).

Couples have a need and a right to know the actual teaching of the Church about the call to generosity and the need for a sufficiently serious reason to use systematic NFP.

5. All the common signs of fertility and infertility. God made the fertility of women much more interesting than that of men. Unless they suffer from some sort of abnormality or disease, men are constantly fertile from pubescence onward. Women, however, have a cycle of fertility and infertility. God made woman in such a way that she can observe certain signs that tell her when she is fertile or infertile. Observing one or more of these signs is the essence of modern fertility awareness.

Cervical mucus. Under the influence of rising estrogen levels, the cervix starts to secrete cervical mucus several days before ovulation. The secretion generally dries up and disappears several days after ovulation as estrogen decreases and progesterone increases.

Changes in the cervix. A less obvious sign is the cervix itself. Under the influence of those same hormones, before ovulation the cervix rises slightly, the mouth of the cervix opens and becomes softer, and then these signs reverse themselves after ovulation.

Temperature. Another valuable sign is a woman's resting body temperature that rises slightly after ovulation, reflecting the higher levels of progesterone secreted after ovulation. It stays higher for some days and then falls as progesterone falls at the time of menstruation.

Different systems. There are in North America at least three different systems based on just the cervical mucus sign, of which the Billings Ovulation Method is one. In a second type of system, the temperature sign cross-checks the mucus sign, and these systems are called versions of the Sympto-Thermal Method. A third system, the Marquette Method, uses urine and a dipstick to monitor hormonal levels as a crosscheck on the cervical mucus sign.

Equally effective? In the mid-1970s there was considerable debate about the relative effectiveness of the Billings mucus-only system and the Sympto-Thermal system. The Human Life Foundation, established by the U. S. Bishops in 1968, persuaded the National Institutes of Health to conduct an independent comparative study. The results showed that the Sympto-Thermal Method had significantly higher effectiveness rates than the Billings Ovulation Method¹⁰, but the debate continued. More recently, the Marquette system showed itself more effective than a mucus-only system.¹¹

¹⁰ Maclyn E. Wade, Phyllis McCarthy, et al., "A Randomized Prospective Study of the Use-Effectiveness of Two Methods of Natural Family Planning," *Am J. Ob. And Gyn* 141-4 (Oct 15, 1981) 368-376.

¹¹ Richard J. Fehring, Mary Schneider, Mary Lee Barron and Kathleen Raviele, "Cohort Comparison of Two Fertility Awareness Methods of Family Planning," *J of Reprod Med*, 54:3, March 2009, 165-170.

Regardless of relative effectiveness, the temperature sign is a simple, very inexpensive, and highly accurate way of determining important information about fertility and infertility. It can provide an extremely valuable certainty about pregnancy and gestational age.

Couples have a God-given right to make an informed choice. They have a right to know these natural signs of fertility and their relative user-effectiveness in comparative studies.

6. The many health benefits of breastfeeding for both baby and mother.

There is no question: breast *milk* is the best nutrition for ***babies***. There is also no doubt that breast *feeding* is the best way for a baby to obtain this best nutrition. Babies who are breastfed have significant health advantages. For breastfed babies, our NFP manual lists reduced risks of contracting 21 specific diseases and conditions. A second list describes six more general health benefits for babies and young children including a better immune system and scoring higher on cognitive and IQ tests at school age.¹² These lists are necessarily incomplete because every year new studies on breastfeeding are published. Early each year my wife, Sheila, posts her review of the new studies at the NFPI blog site.¹³

There is also no question that breastfeeding is also best for ***mothers***. The breastfeeding mother enjoys reduced risks of breast cancer, endometrial cancer, ovarian cancer, thyroid cancer, anemia, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis (increased risk of a hip fracture).¹⁴

Breastfeeding is an ecological, mutually helpful relationship. Babies are born with weak immune systems. If a baby gets some sort of illness or infection, it transmits it via suckling to its mother. In turn, her intestines develop the antibodies to it,

¹² NFPTCA, 103-105.

¹³ <http://nfpandmore.org/wordpress/?cat=59> for 2014 research.

¹⁴ NFPTCA, 104-105.

and those are then transmitted to the baby. Her immune system makes up for the natural weakness of the baby's immature immune system. God really does know what He is doing. This information is basic good-health instruction. Every young person has a God-given right to know these gifts of God, and God's Church should be in the forefront of teaching them in foreign missions as well here in the States. This can easily be taught in the right kind of course on natural family planning.

7. The Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding: a natural way of spacing babies. There are different patterns of breastfeeding, and all of them have a certain amount of value because of the inherent values of breast milk and the breastfeeding process.

With regard to breastfeeding and baby spacing, distinctions are critical. In the Western world, common cultural breastfeeding patterns typically do NOT space babies. Ecological breastfeeding, however, **does** provide a natural spacing of babies because it is a pattern of mother-baby closeness and frequent nursing. Frequent suckling maintains the milk supply; frequent suckling also suppresses ovulation. There is still confusion about this, and that's why "breastfeeding and natural baby spacing" needs to be taught in terms of the Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding. These Standards are maternal behaviors that encourage frequent nursing. As you will see in the following list, some of them are positive and some are negative. However, all of them are contrary to common Western cultural nursing patterns. The Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding are as follows:

1. Breastfeed exclusively for the first six months of life; don't offer your baby other liquids and solids, not even water.
2. Pacify or comfort your baby at your breasts.
3. Don't use bottles and don't use pacifiers.
4. Sleep with your baby for night feedings.
5. Sleep with your baby for a daily-nap feeding.

6. Nurse frequently day and night and avoid schedules.
7. Avoid any practice that restricts nursing or separates you from your baby.

All seven standards are evidence based. That is, published research demonstrates that each of these behaviors is associated with increased nursing.

It is highly inadequate to talk only about continued or extended breastfeeding as if that would provide the spacing many couples legitimately desire. That language takes us back to fifty years ago when an international breastfeeding organization was saying that what they called “total breastfeeding” had a baby-spacing effect. The problem is that such language says nothing about the importance of frequency. My wife and other nursing mothers noticed that there was a significant variation in the duration of breastfeeding amenorrhea—the absence of periods due to breastfeeding—among mothers doing “total breastfeeding.” Some mothers would have a first period at three or four months postpartum while others would go for a year or more, and they wondered why. Sheila was asked to research this, so she did.

Her research was first published in a nursing journal in 1972, and it showed that American mothers who followed the Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding went an average of 14.6 months before they had their first period.¹⁵ She also found that the duration of amenorrhea more or less follows a normal distribution curve with 7% having a first period by six months and 33% still in amenorrhea at 18 months. A second, much larger study published some years later found an almost identical average of 14.5 months of breastfeeding amenorrhea among American mothers.¹⁶ More recently Sheila found independent research that supports each of the Seven Standards and published this as *The Seven Standards*

¹⁵ Sheila and John F. Kippley, “The Relation Between Breastfeeding and Amenorrhea: Report of a Survey,” *JOGN Nursing*, (J of Nurses Assoc of The Am Col of Obs and Gyns) 1:4, November-December 1972, 15-21. At <http://nfpandmore.org/relationshipbreastfeeding.shtml>.

¹⁶ S. and J. Kippley, “The Spacing of Babies with Ecological Breastfeeding,” *International Review of Natural Family Planning*, Spring/Summer 1989. At <http://nfpandmore.org/spacingbabies.shtml>.

*of Ecological Breastfeeding: The Frequency Factor*¹⁷ All the standards are important. Drop any one standard and the odds are that fertility will soon return.

There are two great advantages of Ecological Breastfeeding. First, it maximizes the benefits of breastfeeding-in-general. It maintains the milk supply and the baby gets all the health benefits intended by our Creator. Second, it is a natural way of spacing babies. Some couples use Ecological Breastfeeding as their only form of child spacing, while others will use Systematic NFP when fertility returns if they need additional spacing. Among providentialist couples who want to let babies come as they may, it is imperative that they be well instructed about Ecological Breastfeeding because it is clearly God's own plan for spacing babies.

Every form of NFP instruction should include Ecological Breastfeeding simply because it is part of God's plan for mothers and babies. It is not only cost-free, but it saves all sorts of money in direct baby care, and it most likely saves money in health care. Unfortunately, the NFP movement in North America largely ignores it except for our organization, NFP International.¹⁸

Another organization that promotes breastfeeding and especially ecological breastfeeding is the Catholic Nursing Mothers League.¹⁹ It seeks to develop chapters in parishes, and pastors would do well to cultivate their services. For purposes of marriage instruction, the point is this. Every woman and every man have a right to know about Ecological Breastfeeding and natural baby spacing. God's Church should be in the forefront of spreading this good news about the way God has made us.

The right kind of natural family planning instruction can help the New Evangelization effort of the Church and provide excellent support for the magisterial teaching of the Church regarding love, marriage and sexuality. The

¹⁷ S. Kippley, *The Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding: The Frequency Factor*, Lulu.com, 2008.

¹⁸ Natural Family Planning International, www.nfpandmore.org.

¹⁹ Catholic Nursing Mothers League, www.catholicbreastfeeding.org.

“right kind” of NFP course teaches the seven subjects of this paper. To recall once again the gist of Romans 10:14ff, the Church cannot expect its people to believe and to act as they should unless the Church clearly teaches in such a way that its people hear and understand the message.

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