

The Conversion Value of Natural Family Planning

By John Kippley | June 20, 2008

Ever since the publication of *Humanae Vitae* on July 25, 1968, a great fear has cast a sickly hue over the pastoral work of the Church. This malady is simple to diagnose but difficult to cure. It can be stated this way: “We fear that if we teach that it is immoral to use unnatural forms of birth control, our parishioners will vote with their feet, the pews will be emptied, and how will we pay the bills?”

There are two primary reasons why that fear can be realistic. First, in recent years the educational ministries within the Church have generally failed to build faith in the Church as the Body of Christ. All too many Catholics have a liberal Protestant view of the Church as just a religious organization in which one feels comfortable. If it starts to preach something I find uncomfortable, I can simply shop around for another church. And no matter what my church says officially, I can interpret my Bible to mean whatever I think it means.

Catholic belief in the Church is simultaneously more demanding and more liberating. It is more demanding since it requires the believer to believe all that the Church teaches because it has been revealed by God Who can neither deceive nor be deceived. It is more liberating because it frees the conscientious person from endlessly trying to figure out his own interpretation of the Bible or which of contradicting interpretations he thinks is correct.

And why should a person believe that the Catholic Church teaches with the authority of God—especially today? He needs to understand what Jesus Himself did to ensure that his teachings—including the divine truth about human love—would endure till He returns. So the question is really this: Why should a person believe that Christ Himself continues to teach in and through the Catholic Church that He established? The answer starts in the Bible including some very important teachings at the Last Supper. And the rest is history, as they say.

Truth attracts people of good will. The fear that teaching the fullness of the truth will lose parishioners is realistic only when the local church fails to teach the saving truth that it is Christ Himself who teaches in and through the Catholic Church, regardless of the sins of those who do not follow that teaching. The answer is simple: correct preaching and catechesis.

The second reason why it is realistic to fear that parishioners will vote with their feet is the almost complete failure of parishes to teach the real content of *Humanae Vitae* and to provide the practical help of Natural Family Planning. As a result, some think that no matter what they do, they will have ten children in a dozen years, and others think they will almost never be able to engage in the marriage act if they do not want more children. This is a tremendously false picture, but it is fostered by the almost complete absence of relevant preaching and teaching at the parish level.

On the other hand, the wonderful reality is that the truths reaffirmed by *Humanae Vitae* and the practice of Natural Family Planning attract those who want to live the truth about love—and there are many such couples. Repeatedly couples have witnessed to the fact that the practice of natural family planning was the starting point of their journey to the Church or back to the Church. I am convinced that the practice of marital chastity opens the mind and heart to the fact that it is Christ Himself who continues to teach the demands of love in and through His Church. In most cases, however, it is not just the periodic abstinence of NFP that has convinced couples; it is also the fact that they learned some of the reasons behind the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*.

In the early Eighties, I received a letter informing me that the writer, his wife, and his family had entered the fullness of the Catholic Church. He described himself as having been a fundamentalist married to a Baptist. They had been practicing NFP because the wife did not want to use the Pill; he very reluctantly went along with this but only because he loved and respected his wife. One evening as he was waiting for dinner, he picked up an NFP newsletter and read something that rang true. He remarked to his wife that there was a lot more to this NFP stuff than just mucus and temperatures; there were good reasons for it. She answered that she had thought there were and had been waiting for him, the more philosophical of the duo, to explain them to her.

They eventually concluded that if the Catholic Church had it right on this one, they owed it to the Church to take a look at its other claims as well. In due time and with the grace of God, he notified me of the family's entrance into full communion with the Catholic Church. Praise the Lord!

The names of Scott and Kimberly Hahn are well known in the Church today. Back in their Protestant seminary days, they found something I had written about birth control and found it persuasive. They accepted the universal Christian Tradition against unnatural forms of birth control—a Tradition taught almost exclusively by the Catholic Church today—and acted accordingly. I believe that living this part of Catholic teaching gradually helped to open their hearts and minds to the fullness of the truth.

And the process continues. It is not at all uncommon to read that “NFP has brought us, to a large degree, into the Catholic Church.”

Truth attracts and retains people of good will. That's why it is necessary to preach, teach, and practice the truths affirmed by *Humanae Vitae*.