

IT'S NOT "CATHOLIC BIRTH CONTROL"

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Natural Family Planning & the New Evangelization

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Readers of Catholic journals and newspapers have certainly heard of the "new evangelization" in the last decade. On December 12, 2000, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger delivered an "Address to Catechists and Religion Teachers" as part of the Jubilee of Catechists, and less than a month later Pope John Paul II issued his apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* about evangelizing in the new millennium. There seems to be universal agreement that a new evangelization is a good thing that needs to be done. But what is it?

There is really nothing startlingly new about it — only a decided emphasis on sharing the basics. As Cardinal Ratzinger said in his Jubilee address, "Man cannot do or avoid doing what he wants to. He will be judged. He must account for things.... If we take the Christian message into well-thought-out consideration, we are not speaking about a whole lot of things. In reality, the Christian message is very simple: We speak about God and man, and this way we say everything."

In his apostolic letter, John Paul II drew attention to the public admission of the sins within the Church that he had made in March 2000, as if to say, "We are to share the light of the Lord, but we acknowledge that our own behaviors can cloud that light." The Pope noted the importance of weekly Mass. "It is a fundamental duty, to be fulfilled not just in order to observe a precept but as something felt as essential to a truly informed and consistent Christian life.... In many regions Christians are, or are becoming, a 'little flock' (Lk. 12:32). This presents them with the challenge, often in isolated and difficult situations, to bear stronger witness to the distinguishing elements of their own identity. The duty to take part in the Eucharist every Sunday is one of these." The change of emphasis is palpable — not just avoiding mortal sin but bearing witness to Jesus.

The "new" evangelization puts greater emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus. With this perspective, we see the sacraments and the Church herself in a new light. When we confess our sins, we are more conscious that it is Jesus who exercises His power of forgiveness through His priest. When we consider the teaching authority of the Church, we understand that the Holy Spirit uses it to continue the teaching work of Jesus, rather than seeing it as the arbitrary announcements of men who wear funny hats. We are to listen to the Word, proclaim the Lord Jesus with confidence, and bear witness to the Lord by keeping His commandments. Of significant importance, we are to explain the reasons for the teachings of the Church that are particularly difficult for some in our culture to accept. As John Paul II wrote, "A special commitment is needed with regard to certain aspects of the Gospel's radical message which are often less well understood, even to the point of making the Church's presence unpopular, but which nevertheless must be a part of her mission of charity. I am speaking of the duty to be committed to *respect for the life of every human being*, from conception until natural death."

Certainly this also applies to the Church's unpopular teaching that calls for generosity in the service of life and condemns unnatural forms of birth control. The degree of that unpopularity was illustrated recently by the National Survey of Family Growth, which reported that only 1.1 percent of Catholic women are using any form of natural family planning (NFP).

What Can Be Done?

The highest authorities in the Church have urged a new effort at evangelization, and the above statistics indicate that a new effort is indeed needed to explain the reasons for Catholic teaching on birth control. Perhaps some have thought that NFP programs could accomplish that task, but the statistics show that the efforts of the past forty years have been remarkably ineffective. Something different needs to be done.

I suggest that the pastors of the Church, both bishops and priests, need to resuscitate and revise the recommendation made by the U.S. bishops' Committee on Pastoral Research and Practice's important document "Faithful to Each Other Forever: A Catholic Handbook of Pastoral Help for Marriage Preparation" (1989). The bishops urged that every engaged couple be required to participate in a complete natural family planning course.

They made it clear that a short treatment squeezed into a pre-Cana day was insufficient. The idea was not well promoted, and it never caught on. Twenty-two years later, only seven dioceses have this requirement or are about to implement it.

In light of the call for a new evangelization, the NFP requirement needs to be significantly revised. Simply teaching the female signs of fertility and infertility won't do. NFP courses need to become agents of evangelization.

Burden or Blessing or Both?

Why didn't the NFP requirement idea catch on? Granted, there are some bishops and priests who simply do not support the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, but the overall low response to the 1989 appeal suggests something further: Many believing bishops and priests are hesitant to impose what they feel is a burden. Or they may feel that a pre-Cana day session of one or two hours is sufficient to make interested couples aware of whatever NFP help might be available, and they may feel that requiring the attendance of uninterested couples would be unproductive. They may also think it would be difficult on teachers to flood their courses with reluctant attendees. To the extent that an NFP course is simply an organ recital, I agree.

Others may think that the unpopularity of Catholic teaching indicates that it is nearly impossible for ordinary couples to follow it. Granted, marital chastity is not easy, but as St. Paul has assured us, God's grace is always sufficient for our needs (cf. 2 Cor. 9). Further, as Cardinal Ratzinger stated in his Jubilee address, "Whoever omits the cross, omits the essence of Christianity." Yes, marital chastity is difficult, but Jesus continues to teach us that "my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt. 11:30).

A Rare Opportunity

The right kind of NFP course offers a rare opportunity for evangelization. It is rare because there are not many opportunities to require ordinary young people who are not involved in parish life to sit down long enough to hear a good explanation of both what the Church teaches about birth control and why, about the call to generosity in having children, and the whole basis for the Church daring to teach in such a countercultural way.

Marriage preparation is a time of special grace. It might be the first time in the lives of the engaged couple that they sit down two-on-one or even one-on-one with a priest for several instructional meetings. The priest or deacon has an unprecedented opportunity to explain the need to have a personal relationship with Jesus, the need for personal prayer and weekly Sunday worship, and the need to see Jesus in the sacraments and in the teaching authority of the Church. The priest has an opportunity to explain the covenant meaning of the marriage act and the force of the teaching found in *Casti Connubii* and *Humanae Vitae*.

The couple has come to him to prepare for a wedding; his challenge is to evangelize them, to help them to prepare for living a Christ-centered life regardless of their past. Nevertheless, even if the priest does everything he should do in these personal visits, his efforts must be complemented by the right kind of NFP course. All of us benefit from hearing the same truths from different sources.

As noted above, Bl. John Paul II taught that it is part of the charity of the Church to explain the difficult moral teachings of the Church, and the right kind of NFP course provides that opportunity. It will teach that the marriage act is intended by God to be a renewal of the marriage covenant, and I can assure every bishop and priest that this makes sense to many who hear it for the first time. Recently, a retirement-age gentleman with whom I was struggling through a very muddy nine holes of golf told me that he had recently attended a lecture on the theology of the body. It seemed to him that the only difference between contraception and what he heard was that the speakers were recommending NFP techniques instead of contraceptives. It sounded to him as if there was no real moral difference between the two. It's a common objection, so I briefly explained that when two people marry they pledge to take each other "for better and for worse," and the marriage act ought to be a renewal of the marriage covenant. On the other hand, when spouses engage in contraceptive behaviors, they are saying, "We are taking each other for better but definitely not for the imagined worse of possible pregnancy." They are contradicting their marriage covenant. "Oh," he said, "When you put it those terms, I can see the difference."

Yes, this simple explanation gives meaning to the marriage act. It helps couples to see why sex outside of marriage is immoral and what it should be within marriage.

Practical Evangelization in an NFP Course

We at NFP International have revamped our NFP course in a conscious effort to evangelize our students, most of whom would not be there unless required by their pastor. The areas in which we seek to help students think with the mind of Christ as mediated in His Church are as follows.

- *Generosity.* We make very clear that we are not teaching “Catholic birth control.” We affirm what the Bible and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teach about generosity in having children. We quote *Humanae Vitae* regarding serious and just reasons, and we note the need for prayer to discern God’s will in here-and-now circumstances. We believe that the call to appropriate generosity is essential in a Catholic NFP course.
- *Breastfeeding for Natural Spacing.* While breastfeeding currently enjoys good press about its health advantages for babies, there is still great ignorance about its benefits for mothers and its baby-spacing effects. We teach the health advantages for the mother as well as for babies, and they are significant. We let students know that Bl. John Paul II endorsed the scientific recommendation that mothers should breastfeed for at least two years.

More importantly as far as an NFP course is concerned, we teach the seven standards of “ecological breastfeeding,” the only form of baby-care that is associated with extended breastfeeding infertility. Our published studies have shown that American mothers who practice ecological breastfeeding experience, on the average, 14 to 15 months of breastfeeding amenorrhea (the absence of periods). A required NFP course is not about good health in general, but it is certainly an appropriate place to teach the kind of breastfeeding that postpones the return of fertility sufficiently that it can be called a natural baby-spacer.

- *The Proper Definition of Contraceptive Behaviors.* It is commonplace in the NFP movement to teach that chemical birth-control methods affect the inner lining of the uterus in such a way as to make it very difficult for a newly conceived baby to implant. This is called the “abortifacient potential” of the Pill and other forms of hormonal birth control. It is also common to mention that research has shown that use of the Pill increases a woman’s risk of breast cancer and that using condoms during the fertile time can increase the risk of pregnancy. The reasons given are usually pragmatic.

However, it is not at all common for NFP programs to teach against the uncomfortable subjects of marital masturbation and sodomy. Why not? These contraceptive behaviors do not carry a risk of pregnancy or health risks. The reasons not to engage in them are not based on pragmatism but on the moral teachings of the Church. Apparently many teachers, even in diocesan-sponsored programs, feel unable to transmit teaching that requires faith in the moral teaching of the Church. No one likes to talk about these practices, but it is unreasonable to think that engaged couples are not aware of them. Silence can be interpreted as acceptance. Therefore, NFP counselors are obliged to transmit traditional Catholic teaching about their immorality; it only takes a few sentences to do so (and it would be both difficult and inappropriate to teach about these subjects from the pulpit at Sunday Mass).

- *Faith in Jesus & the Holy Spirit.* After all is said and done about all the health and anti-abortifacient reasons are given, the bedrock reason for not using unnatural methods of birth control is our faith that the teaching of the Church against contraceptive behaviors is true and binding on our consciences. The question is: Why should we believe that the teaching of the Church is true? The proper answer to this question lies at the heart of the New Evangelization.

In our NFP course, we turn to the Last Supper for the answer to this question. In His Last Supper discourse, Jesus repeatedly promises that he will send the Holy Spirit to guide the Church through the ages. Our NFP text illustrates this faith in a practical way with the Nicene Creed. Who can believe that the articles of the Nicene profession of faith are *true*, and not just a statement of denominational policy, without faith that Jesus was keeping His promise to send the Holy Spirit? At every Sunday Mass we profess our faith that the Holy Spirit guided the bishops at Nicaea and is still guiding the Church today. That means that we believe, at least implicitly, that Holy Spirit has guided the successors of the Apostles via the tradition of marital non-contraception that was universal among all Christian churches until 1930 and which has been reaffirmed by the Catholic Church in *Casti Connubii* and *Humanae Vitae*.

An NFP course is not the place to get into the issue of the infallibility of the Church in her extraordinary Magisterium. Nor is it the place to develop the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* about the need to accept the teaching of the ordinary Magisterium. An NFP course is, however, the place to affirm the authority of Jesus as He continues to lead His Church.

Authority & Evangelization

The issue of authority is at the heart of evangelization, both old and new. A key question for a serious Christian is: Who, if anyone, speaks with the authority of Christ? In the Gospels, Jesus makes Peter the visible head of the Church, and history demonstrates that the Church has always believed that the Pope continues to teach with the authority of Peter. Indeed, at the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451 the teaching of Pope St. Leo I was greeted with the acclamation, “Peter speaks through Leo.” To which we can add, “And Christ continues to speak through Peter.”

In an age with a strong spirit of anti-authoritarianism, it is important to distinguish between having legitimate authority and being authoritarian. The teaching authority that Christ continues to exercise through the Pope and his brother bishops is an exercise of the servanthood of the Lord Jesus in the service of the truth — the same truth Jesus emphasized at the Last Supper and before Pontius Pilate. It is the task of the new evangelization to help ordinary Catholics see the Lord Jesus continuing to teach in and through His Church. When that teaching calls for us ordinary Catholics to carry a cross called periodic abstinence or a cross called the blessing and the burden of another child, it comes from Him who told us that we have to take up our cross daily in order to be His disciples.

I am not suggesting that an NFP course is the place to delve into the topic of authority and evangelization, but I am convinced that a Catholic NFP course needs to assert the teaching authority of Christ in His Church. After all, how can we dare teach that it is seriously immoral to use unnatural forms of birth control if we do not make clear that we are simply passing on the teaching of Christ in His Church?

A Two-Fold Opportunity

Among Catholics in general, barely over one percent are using some form of NFP. A few more are letting the babies come as they may, and some suffer from infertility, but some ninety percent of Catholic fertile-age couples seeking to avoid pregnancy are contracepting right along with the rest of secularized Christians and the unchurched. This is a moral and ecclesial disaster reflected in empty pews and closed schools and churches. The basic problem is an unhappy combination of marital unchastity and lack of faith. The answer has to be a new evangelization and the teaching of marital chastity.

The right kind of NFP course — a truly Catholic NFP course — offers a splendid opportunity both for a new Christ-centered evangelization and for teaching the “what” and the “why” of natural family planning. That sort of course is available through NFP International, and others are free to imitate it. I cannot think of any good reason why bishops and priests should not use their leverage to give engaged couples this beautiful opportunity to grow in faith, practice marital chastity, and hear the call to generous and responsible parenthood. A truly Catholic NFP course ought to be a requirement for every engaged couple.

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