

## NFP Courses: Asking Questions Can Be Helpful

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Published in *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, August-September 2006

To those familiar with the Natural Family Planning movement, it is common knowledge that there are different systems of NFP accompanied by different forms of teaching. There are sympto-thermal systems that teach three fertility signs and how to use them in a cross-checking way, and there are systems that focus primarily on the mucus sign. Within each of those systems, there are different teacher-training systems and different educational methodologies ranging from small classroom instruction to exclusively one-on-one.

What may not be commonly known is that there are significant and important differences that cut across all NFP systems and teaching methodologies. Are these differences truly important to a busy priest who refers engaged couples to one or another NFP course? That depends upon his answer to another question: “Do you want your engaged couples to attend a course that seeks to elicit a decision for marital chastity and Christian discipleship or a course that seeks to be only an anatomy-physiology course on human reproduction?”

### Background

In early September 2005, a new member of an NFP-oriented email chat list identified herself as a teacher of FAM, the “Fertility Awareness Method.” I responded with two questions: 1) Since FAM has been around for 30 years and has been known to recommend or accept contraceptive behaviors as its method for avoiding pregnancy, I asked if that was still the case. 2) Since it has been common to think that NFP programs teach against such immoral behaviors, I asked if that is true about NFP programs and teachers today. Those questions stirred up about a hundred responses.

At the outset, it became clear that FAM teachers accept or recommend the use of contraceptive behaviors during the fertile time as a method for avoiding pregnancy. In other words, they teach women how to monitor their fertility so they can use contraceptive behaviors only during the fertile time. Contraceptive behaviors include not only barrier methods but also masturbation, whether mutual or solitary, and oral sodomy. This is not new. Back in the 1970s, an advocate of FAM enthusiastically advocated oral sex during the fertile time. I suggest that FAM is not a form of NFP but is, in fact, the greatest competition to NFP. With FAM, women avoid using birth control drugs with their abortifacient properties and all their risks to health. They also avoid having to use unnatural methods every time they have sex. The difference between FAM and NFP is not knowledge but virtue. FAM uses contraceptive behaviors during the fertile time to achieve its effectiveness; systematic NFP uses chaste abstinence during the fertile time to achieve its effectiveness.

The public responses to my second question were so ambiguous that I wrote privately to a few knowledgeable people and concluded that there is only one program in the United States that *systematically* conveys Catholic teaching against these behaviors, and that program is changing. Should diocesan-endorsed NFP programs explicitly teach such Catholic morality? Obviously, there are differences in opinion on this. That’s why Catholic priests who want to promote and teach marital chastity through NFP instruction need to be aware of significant differences in NFP programs.

What follows are eight observations of the discussion that took place after I asked the two questions above. First, however, I need to identify myself. My wife and I founded the Couple to Couple League in 1971 and helped to direct it for another 32 years. It embodied our convictions on some of the issues that follow. We are no longer associated with CCL, however, and we understand that it is undergoing many changes. My wife, Sheila, and I have founded a new

organization, NFP International, and we have written a new 86 page manual, *Natural Family Planning*, that anyone can download for free from NFP International's website, [www.NFPandmore.org](http://www.NFPandmore.org). We are disinterested in that we no longer have any financial or organizational interest in what happens in the American NFP movement. On the other hand, we remain as interested as ever in NFP education as a vehicle for teaching marital chastity and generosity in the service of life.

### **1. Confusion about FAM.**

Some believe that the heart and core of systematic NFP is the systematic observation of the female signs of fertility and therefore that FAM is simply another form of NFP. Others of us believe that the heart and core of systematic NFP is chaste abstinence during the fertile time. We believe, therefore, that any system that recommends or accepts contraceptive behaviors during the fertile time of the cycle (or at any time) is part of the contraceptive movement and is definitely not a form of NFP and is not a part of the NFP movement. This needs clarification in every diocese.

### **2. Rarity of teaching against some contraceptive behaviors.**

A newspaper article in the fall of 2005 reported that half of teenagers ages 15-19 have engaged in oral sex. That means that at any NFP course it is highly probable that some of the couples—engaged or married—have engaged in that immoral behavior either together or with others in the past. They will know from experience that it is an effective way to prevent pregnancy while experiencing male sexual relief. Some may think it is permissible behavior; others may think it is wrong and be repentant; others may be confused. Also, many will have had experience with solitary or mutual masturbation.

From what I could ascertain from the public discussion and from my private inquiries, there is a general reluctance to convey Catholic teaching against these contraceptive behaviors. I think that almost everyone teaches couples not to use barrier methods and withdrawal during the fertile time. It's easy to teach against these immoral behaviors because you can give very practical, pregnancy-related reasons. Pragmatism fails, however, concerning masturbation and oral sex. The reasons for avoiding these sins are exclusively moral and religious, and some (or many) NFP teachers find it difficult to convey moral and religious reasons for virtuous behavior. Thus these common sins are addressed only when and if a client asks about them.

This avoidance of the obvious is most unfortunate. Engaged and young married couples know what's going on in today's culture even if they are not doing it. So do bishops, priests, marriage prep personnel, and NFP teachers. Common sins need to be addressed. If they are not addressed in premarriage instruction, the engaged couples may well believe that silence is tacit consent. In some cases, they may be right. After all, it takes only a few words to address common temptations and to teach that masturbation and oral copulation are contraceptive behaviors and are the grave matter of mortal sin—as are all forms of contraceptive behaviors. Again, if a priest expects an NFP course to teach marital chastity, he needs to ask direct questions about these matters.

### **3. Lack of evangelistic awareness.**

In this discussion about moral issues, I found little or no expression of awareness that the Catholic NFP movement is or should be part of the evangelization mission of the Church. I suspect the vast majority of those who promote and teach NFP within Catholic auspices do so out of religious conviction and a desire to help build a culture of life. That, however, is not the same as a conscious awareness on the part of NFP teachers that they are part of a Church-wide movement to bring about a rebirth of chastity with a special emphasis on marital chastity. To the

extent that teachers have this awareness, they will naturally give it some expression. That's why the lack of such expression leads me to wonder if there is a lack of evangelistic awareness.

If I am correct on these matters, then the bishops of the Church need to make it clear to all who teach NFP in diocesan-approved programs that they are part of the evangelization mission of the Church. Dioceses and parishes can insist that NFP programs place the practice of chaste NFP specifically in the context of Christian discipleship. They can also direct that all teaching sessions begin with prayer.

#### **4. Lack of input from informed priests.**

In the discussion that dealt with morality and prudence, there was input from only one priest, Fr. Anthony Zimmerman, SVD, a resident of Japan and now well into his eighties. There are many priests who could be brought into such discussions. I will nominate a uniquely qualified priest at the end of this article.

#### **5. Confusion about the moral use of NFP.**

Among those who teach NFP, there is confusion about why marital contraception is wrong. There are also sharp differences of opinion as to when and if couples have sufficiently serious reasons to use systematic NFP. There is confusion as to when contraceptive behaviors are sins of impurity and when they constitute a sin against marriage itself.

Some see marital contraception as a sin of selfishness, but clearly that is inadequate. You only have to consider the case of a couple who simply want to postpone pregnancy for several months but do not want to practice periodic abstinence. Certainly it is difficult to accuse the parents of five children who are hoping to conceive their sixth in a few months as selfish, but they sin if they use contraceptive behaviors to postpone pregnancy.

Others see marital contraception as a sin of holding back. Well, certainly there is a holding back, but that's true of many actions. We contribute funds to help a disaster victim, but we don't invite him to share our home. We write a check for X amount instead of twice that amount. We say five decades of the rosary but not 15 or 20. We pray the *Magnificat* version of morning and evening prayer but not the whole Divine Office. And so on.

In the NFP discussion, there is almost no reference to the statement of Paul VI that marital contraception is "intrinsically dishonest" (*H.V. n.14*). In some cases, there seems to be an assumption that anyone who uses NFP will use it rightly, an assumption that excuses the NFP program from teaching that NFP is not just Catholic birth control.

It is clear that dioceses and NFP programs have to be more clear and explicit about the moral use of NFP. Somehow, our NFP courses, diocesan marriage preparation programs, marriage enrichment programs and similar efforts to evangelize engaged and married couples need to discover the vocabulary of generosity in the service of life, and, yes, even the obligation to be generous according to the circumstances of the family.

#### **6. Omission of breastfeeding as a form of NFP.**

In this discussion, as in almost all discussions about natural family planning, there was no reference to breastfeeding as a form of NFP. In the current discussion, this omission was understandable because of the way the questions were framed. However, any time you read that the core of NFP is the regular monitoring of female fertility, you know the writer is thinking only of *systematic* NFP.

The decision-making situation with breastfeeding is exactly the opposite of the situation with systematic NFP. With the latter, you need sufficiently serious reasons to use it to avoid or postpone pregnancy. With breastfeeding, however, the scientific case is so strong that you need sufficiently serious reasons *not* to breastfeed. To refuse to breastfeed your baby just out of

convenience is to subject your baby—needlessly—to a higher risk of at least a dozen diseases and even to the possibility of reduced intellectual capacity.

Extended infertility is a normal side effect of breastfeeding. In most of Western culture, however, baby care practices have interfered with this normal effect for many years, first with the rich who could afford wet nurses and then with the common people who mixed bottle-feeding with breastfeeding. In the late 1960s my wife coined the term “ecological breastfeeding” to designate the kind of breastfeeding and baby-care that normally results in extended postpartum infertility. She did the necessary research, and others have repeated her research. There is no question that ecological breastfeeding normally postpones the return of fertility for about 14 to 15 months in Western cultures. In certain tribal cultures, the duration of infertility is even longer.

The promotion and teaching of ecological breastfeeding should be part of every diocesan NFP program. The concerned priest who wants the best for his parish families will want to foster this natural form of baby care. He needs to be aware that there is great diversity on this part of NFP in the various NFP programs.

## **7. Confusion about the papal “Theology of the Body.”**

The “theology of the body” enunciated by Pope John Paul II was completed in 1984. For a decade, it had little influence, but since the mid-1990s its influence, or at least reference to it, has increased tremendously. On the other hand, what any particular person means by her or his reference to the papal *TOB* is by no means clear. A few years ago, I asked three *TOB* writers for a definition of the *TOB* in 50 words or less. They gave me three completely different definitions or descriptions. They were all correct, and none of them contradicted the others. Each just looked at it in different ways.

Because of widespread references to the *TOB*, you need to recognize that almost no one knows what somebody else is talking about when he or she refers to the “theology of the body.” Certainly every reference to the human body is not the “theology of the body.”

From the perspective of the birth control issue, I think the best summary of the *TOB* is found not in the 129 lectures that constitute the papal theology of the body but in the 1994 *Letter to Families* by John Paul II. “In the conjugal act,” he wrote, “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” (n. 12, italics in original). Of course, he develops the concept further, but that summary is short enough that it’s usable as a teaching springboard. That statement includes what George Weigel summarized as the *TOB*—the theology of gift. I admit to a special fondness for the *Letter to Families* statement because it is similar to the basic statement of the covenant theology of sexuality I have taught since the mid-1960s: “Sexual intercourse is intended by God to be at least implicitly a renewal of the marriage covenant.”

The bottom line at the pastoral level is this: if a program claims to teach the papal theology of the body, ask some questions.

## **8. Modesty or immodesty.**

The discussion that started in early September was given a further stimulus by an article in the October 2005 *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*. (“Immodesty unrecognized—the problems with teaching NFP”). Fr. Chad Ripperger, FSSP, noted that “certain methods of teaching NFP violate modesty by discussing anatomical details, which are inappropriate given certain circumstances.” What the author may not have known is that some NFP courses not only discuss the reproductive processes but also display images of the external sexual organs. I have never

found this to be necessary. It is quite sufficient to use a schematic of the uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries.

One correspondent wrote that as long as she has taught NFP she has used graphics of the male external organs. Her rationale was that since God has created man in the image and likeness of God and thus the human body is fundamentally good, it is appropriate to illustrate these aspects of his creation. While I think the writer is well intentioned, the NFP movement should not be using language that can be used by the pornography industry.

Father Ripperger is right: bishops, priests, deacons, and marriage preparation personnel may be sending engaged couples to NFP instructions in which the norms of modesty are ignored. In preparation for marriage, it is, I think, impossible today to avoid reference to the marriage act, but it is eminently possible to instruct couples about the basics of fertility awareness in such a way as to respect the norms of modesty. Here the goal is to not give the imagination the material for consequent sexual distractions and temptations. At a minimum that means not showing graphics of the external organs. Even our language can be tailored to modesty. After using the term “sexual intercourse” once, we can talk about the “marriage act” thereafter.

The bottom line is that if you want NFP instruction that will respect the norms of modesty and aid your efforts to encourage chastity, you need to ask questions about the courses to which you refer engaged and married couples.

### **What can be done?**

The first thing that can be done has already been mentioned: ask questions about NFP courses. Make your questions pertinent. If you are concerned about chastity and modesty, don’t ask, “Does your program teach chastity and respect the norms of modesty?” Instead ask, “What sort of graphics do you use? Do you show illustrations of the external sex organs? Can I review all your slides and other graphics? How do you address contraceptive behaviors including masturbation and oral sex? Can I review your teaching notes and outlines?”

The second and longer-range thing that can be done is to revise the “Standards” of the USCCB Diocesan Development Plan (DDP) for Natural Family Planning. A booklet of Standards for NFP teacher training and client education was formulated in the 1980s and revised in 2000. The current standards do not address the issues in this article. It is time for another revision. Similarly, some dioceses have their own Standards, which should also be upgraded to address the issues that have been raised by open discussion among NFP professionals.

Third, the U. S. Bishops’ DDP needs a priest to be fully aware of what is happening in the day-to-day NFP movement. He does not need to be part of the USCCB staff in Washington, D.C., and he may not even need to work full-time though there is certainly more than enough to do. He needs to be accessible by those in the grass roots NFP movement as well as by dioceses. He needs to be full aware of the different forms of NFP and he needs to be well educated in theology.

For this necessary position, I nominate Fr. W. Dennis Virtue, Ph.D. He is unique in the world for his extensive research and knowledge about breastfeeding and Catholic teaching. He earned his doctorate in theology at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas in Rome in 1994 with his thesis, *Mother and Infant: The Moral Theology of Embodied Self-Giving in Motherhood in Light of the Exemplar Couplet Mary and Jesus Christ*. This work undoubtedly helped John Paul II make his statement on breastfeeding the following year. Fr. Virtue is knowledgeable about the different forms of systematic NFP, and his humility would serve his mission well. I think that with the proper job description and support, Fr. Dennis Virtue would make a great and lasting contribution to the American NFP movement.

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