

HUMANAE VITAE

A Boon to Natural Family Planning

Last of 3-part series
By James B. Burke
NC News Service

Married couples had a hard time finding out about effective natural ways of controlling birth when "Humanae Vitae" was issued 15 years ago.

Today, however, natural family planning is readily available in most of the United States.

"In the U.S. when the encyclical came out, what is called natural family planning today wasn't existent," said Larry Kane, executive director of the recently-defunct Human Life Foundation.

"The few sound (natural) methods at the time were temperature-based (measuring change in woman's temperature to verify ovulation). They were effective but tougher for the couple to follow.

"To get a handbook on them was impossible," he said. "Most instruction was done in doctor's offices."

In 1983 there are about 36 natural family planning books on the market and roughly 1,500 natural family planning programs sponsored by church, private and governmental bodies around the country, Kane said.

In areas of heavy Catholic population, "a couple may be no more than five miles from a natural family planning program," he continued. "The latest (1976) government figures show about 6 percent of U.S. couples are using natural family planning."

Increased availability of natural family planning is due in large part to "Humanae Vitae" and the U.S. bishops' efforts to take its teaching seriously, said Kane.

"What has happened with natural family planning in the U.S. probably wouldn't have taken place if there had been no 'Humanae Vitae,'" Kane said.

In the encyclical, published July 25, 1968, Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the church's moral opposition to artificial contraception, abortion and sterilization as means of controlling birth, but he left the door open to other methods.

"If, then, there are serious motives to space out births, which derive from the physical or psychological conditions of husband and wife, or from external conditions, the church teaches that it is then licit to take into account the natural rhythms immanent in the generative functions, for the use of marriage in the infertile periods only, and in this way to regulate birth without offending...moral principles," the pope wrote in the encyclical.

The pope also exhorted scientists, especially Catholic ones, to provide "a sufficiently secure basis for a regulation of birth, founded on the observance of natural rhythms."

Pope Paul was not referring to calendar rhythm, a largely ineffective method of birth control popular in the United States at the time, Kane said.

Rather the pontiff was working from mid-1960s reports from U.S. Catholic physicians, the World Health Organization and the Population Crisis Committee, a population lobby, all agreeing that some temperature-based "rhythm" methods were effective and could be improved.

"The American bishops put both feet into natural family planning in 1969," Kane said.

Not long after "Humanae Vitae" was issued the American bishops gave \$800,000 seed money to set up the Human Life Foundation, which developed a network of scientific, governmental and religious groups researching natural family planning.

"The bishops maintained a loose link with the foundation, but their original support was absolutely crucial," Kane said. "This was the only bishops' conference in the world that did something serious on 'Humanae Vitae' immediately."

Individuals and private groups took up the natural family banner in the early 1970s, perfected the methods by "experiential learning" between couples and experts, and popularized the results, Kane added.

In 1982, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities instituted a three-year Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning. Of the 181 U.S. dioceses, about 150 have natural family planning coordinators.

"The present boom in natural family planning is attributable as much to changes in society as the encyclical," said Msgr. James McHugh, director of the Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning.

"The encyclical signaled to the church that the magisterium had not changed its position," he continued.

Other contributing factors to the growth of natural family planning were society's loss of faith in the pill's "promise" and its realization that artificial contraception is a "vehicle to sexual liberation," Msgr. McHugh said.

Today natural family planning programs in the United States fall into two major types: the Billings Ovulation Method (BOM) and the Sympto-Thermal Method (STM).

The Local NFP

In 1973, Natural Family Planning began in the Rochester area with one teaching couple traveling through the diocese. Requests for instruction and speakers were received through the diocesan Family Life Office. After interest mushroomed and it was evident this would continue, the founding members agreed that an office and independent organization was necessary. In January 1978, NFP Education of Rochester was formed to provide quality instruction in the sympto-thermal method. St. Mary's Hospital has donated office space since that time.

NFP promotes responsible parenthood and an appreciation of the gift of fertility. A thousand diocesan couples have been instructed in the use of NFP both to plan and to avoid pregnancies. These couples come from various educational, religious and cultural backgrounds.

More than 10,500 individuals have been educated through Fertility Awareness sessions. Presentations have been given to physicians, clergy, community and Church groups, nursing staffs, students, marriage preparation groups and others.

NFP Education has provided training for 33 instructor-couples over the past 5 1/2 years. Fifteen couples are presently certified to teach in this diocese. Other programs and services include instruction, information sessions, a reference library, a quarterly newsletter, and referrals to NFP programs across the country.

Anyone wishing more information should contact NFP Education of Rochester, 89 Genesee St., Rochester, N.Y. 14611, telephone (716) 464-8705, or NFP of the Southern Tier, 480 Main St., Big Flats, N.Y. 14814, telephone (607) 562-3331. -- Terese Petracca, NFP director.

BOM couples monitor and record changes in the cervical mucus discharge. By predicting when ovulation is likely to occur, a couple is able to identify fertile days.

STM combines the use of a variety of ovulation-related symptoms, including mucus discharge, with the woman's basal body temperature change which occurs after ovulation.

Both methods can be used to avoid or achieve conception.

The 1976 National Study of Family Growth, a U.S. government survey, showed that of the approximately 67 percent of white, married Catholic women between the ages of 15 and 44 who were practicing birth control, 33 percent were using the pill while only 8 percent were using a natural method, which the government labeled "rhythm." Structures of the natural family planning programs vary. A couple may attend three meetings or in some cases six or seven to learn a method.

"Both Billings and Sympto-Thermal, when practiced well, are somewhere in the range of the pill's effectiveness," Kane said. "That's something like 98 percent effective."

"Of course, teachers can make errors or couples can make errors in understanding," he added.

Catholic hospitals are promoting natural family planning. Certain communities of women Religious have set up natural family planning staffs in all their community's hospitals, Kane said.

"There is a dramatic new increase of natural family planning governmental programs," Kane said.

Since 1972 Kane estimates the U.S. government and World Health Organization have spent about \$4 million on natural family planning research and educational projects. He projects that in 1986 they will spend about \$2 million a year on natural family planning.

"The government is required by law to present all effective natural family planning methods," Kane said. "In addition, they are getting many requests from users for more information."

In one Midwestern state a Planned Parenthood group has published a natural family planning newsletter, he said.

In his recently published "A Theological Perspective on Natural Family Planning," Msgr. McHugh said he hopes the future will bring more reflection on a theological context for natural family planning.

Msgr. McHugh suggests there is need "of a theological-pastoral context in which natural family planning can be seen as one aspect of Christian married life -- indeed as an important aspect because it relates to each couple's shared vision and values, their attitudes toward conjugal love, sexuality and parenthood."

Kane imagines the 25th anniversary of "Humanae Vitae" finding natural family planning less closely identified with the Catholic Church.

"Many church-related programs are half-filled with non-Catholics," he said. "Natural family planning will probably become more widely used and seen as a contribution of the church to medical science."

Diocesan Newspaper Urges Studds: Resign

Fall River, Mass. (NC) -- The Anchor, newspaper of the Fall River Diocese, called for the resignation of Rep. Gerry Studds (D-Mass.), admitted homosexual who was censured by the House of Representatives July 20.

A House investigating committee reported he had a sexual liaison with a 17-year-old congressional male page in 1973.

Rep. Daniel Crane (R-Ill.), 47, also was censured by the House after the committee

determined he had a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old female page in 1980.

The House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct found Studds and Crane had engaged in "improper sexual conduct."

"Painful as it may be for some to accept, Congressman Studds should not be representing the people of southeastern Massachusetts in the House of Representatives. The decent thing for Mr. Studds to do would

be to resign," said the Anchor's July 29 editorial, written by Father John F. Moore, editor. Studds' district includes major portions of the Fall River Diocese.

Studds, 46, said in mid-July that the relationship with the page "was a very serious error of judgment on my part" but that he had no plans to resign.

The Catholic Post, paper of the Diocese of Peoria, which includes Danville, in Crane's congressional dis-

trict, has not taken an editorial stand on the issue of Crane's conduct, said Albina Aspell, editor.

NFP Classes

Elmira -- Classes in Natural Family Planning sponsored by Natural Family Planning of the Southern Tier will begin Aug. 31. A \$40 fee covers three sessions, materials and follow-up. Registration is limited and made by calling (607) 562-3331.

Latin American Bishops Ask 'Foreign Powers' To Leave Central America

Vatican City (NC) -- Fifty Latin American bishops have asked all "foreign powers" in Central America to withdraw and to ignore requests from governments and opposition groups to intervene in the region, Vatican Radio reported July 27.

The Jesuit-run radio station said the bishops made their appeal in a document approved in Bogota, Colombia, during a preparatory session for a meeting of the Latin American Bishops Council.

"Reconciliation among brothers and the reconstruction of the social fabric of these countries are indispensable for the achieving of a solid and lasting peace," the document said.

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