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NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

By MARY SHIVANANDAN

There are two myths abroad among many in the Church today — that natural family planning (NFP) is just another marriage enrichment program, and that NFP couples are somehow super couples. Both myths do a great disservice to couples, families and the sacrament of Marriage.

The Church's teaching, expressed most recently in *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio* and the writings of Pope John Paul II, affirms the indissoluble link between the unitive and procreative aspects of the gift of sexuality. This teaching is at the heart of any catechesis of sexuality throughout all phases of the life cycle.

To apply this teaching in today's society calls for a radical conversion, just as Christianity demanded a radical conversion in the early days of the Church.

NFP is also a radical message in the realm of relationship to self, neighbor and God. It does not need super couples — Jesus did not come to call the just, but the sinners — it is for the wounded as much or more so than for those who have perfect relationships, whoever they may be. It has the power to heal as well as to enrich healthy marriages. It is a continual challenge to grow.

What is natural family planning? It is a method for achieving or avoiding pregnancy by observing the signs and symptoms of the fertile and infertile phases of the menstrual cycle. When pregnancy is not desired, the couple abstain from sexual intercourse during the fertile phase. There are two major methods: the ovulation method, which depends on a single indicator of fertility, cervical mucus, and the sympto-thermal method, which adds indicators such as temperature, changes in the cervix, and secondary signs such as breast tenderness, change in skin texture and mittelschmerz (menstrual pain near the time of ovulation).

Several national and international studies have rated the method effectiveness of NFP at 98 to 99 percent. The use effectiveness rate, which measures how well the method is used under ordinary life circumstances, varies from 75 to 99 percent. Couples who have reached the limit of their family size have a higher use effectiveness rate than those who are mainly spacing pregnancies. It is important to note here that these percentages are equal to, if not better than, those

It's not Easy, But It Works — And Strengthens Many Marriages

for the barrier methods such as the diaphragm and condom. Every method of birth control carries with it a risk of pregnancy.

Natural family planning couples accept fertility as a gift. They know that even though the method effectiveness is 98 to 99 percent, they do not have complete control. Couples talk about God's two percent. This helps them in the event of an unplanned pregnancy.

Knowing the best time in the cycle to conceive gives the couple planning a pregnancy the opportunity to be consciously present to the child from the moment of conception. The method itself enhances the realization that in their childbearing and childrearing the couple participates with God in the ongoing work of creation and redemption.

One of the advantages of natural family planning is that it calls for shared responsibility. Without mutual commitment to abstain during the fertile phase, the method does not work. It is well-documented that women usually shoulder the burden of contraception alone, whether it be the IUD, the Pill, the diaphragm or even sterilization.

The Church teaches that neither the woman's fertility nor the man's is to be suppressed. In practice, that calls for the man to respect the woman's cyclical fertility, and for the woman to respect herself. By observing and accepting her cyclical fertility, a woman learns to appreciate its gift and gain a new sense of self-esteem.

It is a process of discovery also shared by the husband. His discovery is often centered on the meaning of sexual intercourse when it is not always available. The NFP husband looks more deeply into himself to better understand the reasons for engaging in sexual intercourse. It can be a painful process, fraught with frustration, but the rewards are tangible. Romance often returns to the marriage. A well-known phrase in NFP circles is "the honeymoon effect," when a couple makes love after the fertile phase waiting period.

Preliminary research points to the method itself as having an impact on communication. Couples usually attend class together; they discuss fertility charts; they must have at least minimal communication about their sexual behavior each month. The method also provides them with a vocabulary to discuss an intimate area of their lives and provides information about the wife's cycle, including



(Photo by Jim Whitmer)

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING opens new channels of communication between marriage partners by making each more aware of the woman's fertility cycle.

her moods, to which the couple did not previously have access.

Preparation for marriage is a "teachable moment." Some dioceses and pastors are testing a mandatory series of NFP classes for engaged couples before marriage. The majority of the couples appear resentful at first, but as they begin to chart the woman's cycle and come to understand and appreciate the natural pattern that is a part of life, many change and choose NFP.

Others come to NFP late in their reproductive years — during premenopause, when use of other methods is contraindicated for medical reasons. NFP can be used in all phases of the fertility life cycle since it does not depend on regular cycles.

From some of the first psychosocial studies of NFP in the 1970s, it was discovered that couples spontaneously mentioned a deepened spiritual relationship as a result of NFP practice. Not uncommonly, they returned to the practice of their faith. As one couple put it, "It was the first time we really heard the Church's position. The Roman Catholic Church is not against birth control, but for a natural relationship for the couple."

In 1981 the American Catholic bishops established the Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning as part of its Office for Pro-Life Activities. In a November 1986 report to the U.S. bishops, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, chairman of the bishops' Pro-Life Committee, emphasized that "NFP involves a fundamental approach to human sexuality that places conjugal intimacy in the larger context of marital rights and responsibilities."

Noting that presently NFP "is

treated as a peripheral movement," Cardinal Bernardin called for the "institutionalization" of NFP in Church structures. A survey of NFP activities in 86 dioceses in 1986 showed that 31 percent had no paid staff and 38 percent had only one paid staff person. Twenty-six dioceses had no budget at all, and 31 had budgets between \$1,000 and \$10,000. Only 14 dioceses had what could be classified as an operating budget for NFP.

Efforts must be made to inform physicians, scientists and the health professions of the reliability of the modern methods of NFP and to solicit their assistance. The clergy should receive continuing education on NFP with special reference to their role in supporting NFP and referring couples to NFP programs. Positive information on NFP should be given in all premarriage and marriage enrichment programs as well as in other diocesan programs, such as parish councils and Renew.

Msgr. James T. McHugh, Director of the Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning, notes that Cardinal Bernardin's report has already generated an upswing of interest and activity in natural family planning in many dioceses, as well as a renewal of commitment among long-established programs. "This report is especially helpful," he said, "because it is very practical. It outlines how the various agencies in the Church can work together to help married couples understand and live fully the Church's teaching in regard to married love and human sexuality."

Mary Shivanandan is the author of *Challenge to Love* and editor of *The NFP Reader*.