

World & Nation

Study shows couples rate NFP satisfactory, effective

By Cindy Wooden

Washington (NC) — Just before the 20th anniversary of the papal encyclical "Humanae Vitae," the National Conference of Catholic Bishops released preliminary results of a study which shows that 70 percent of couples using natural family planning are doing so for "moral, ethical or religious reasons."

Of the couples who said they had used natural family planning within the past year, only 10 percent reported an "unintended pregnancy," a rate which is less than the average 16.1 percent failure rate for women using all family planning methods involving periodic abstinence from sexual intercourse.

In addition, 68.1 percent of the wives and 62.7 percent of the husbands gave a positive response to the statement, "being in conformity with Church teaching in matters of family planning is important to me."

The nationwide study of diocesan programs was conducted by the Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning, a project of the NCCB Committee for Pro-Life Activities. Auxiliary Bishop James T. McHugh of Newark, N.J., is the project director.

Release of the study, which was funded with a grant from the Knights of Columbus, came just before the July 25 anniversary of Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical, "Humanae Vitae," which reaffirmed the Church's opposition to artificial forms of birth control and encouraged the development of natural methods for spacing or avoiding pregnancies.

The results of the study "verify that couples who are properly instructed and well-disposed find natural methods satisfactory and effective in planning births," wrote Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago, chairman of the bishops' pro-life committee,

in a July 15 letter to U.S. bishops.

The study, conducted by Sister Grace A. Boys, a member of the Sisters of Social Service and a researcher at the University of Portland, Ore., is based on the responses of 3,345 couples from 24 diocesan natural family planning programs. The husbands and wives each completed their own questionnaire, then answered one together.

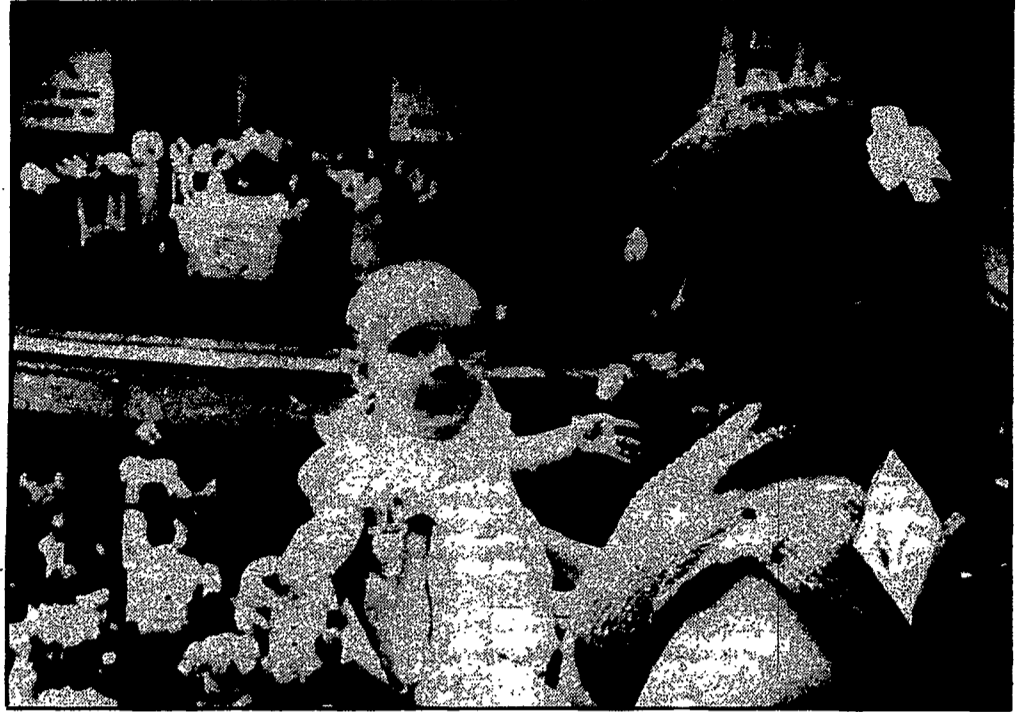
After the religious motivation for using natural family planning, Sister Boys said, the couples listed health reasons. A growing number of U.S. women are concerned about possible side effects of birth control pills and other artificial means of contraception.

Couples in the study had participated in diocese-sponsored training in one of two natural family planning methods for predicting a woman's fertility: the ovulation method, which monitors cervical mucus; and the sympto-thermal method, which adds indicators such as temperature and changes in the cervix, and secondary signs such as breast tenderness.

Unlike the "rhythm method," which assumed a woman's cycle of fertile and infertile periods was the same every month, natural family planning methods are based on biological changes monitored daily.

As with other family planning methods or devices, the key to natural family planning's effectiveness is good instruction, "knowing how to recognize the signs of fertility" and abstaining from intercourse during fertile periods, Bishop McHugh said.

The new study provides data to support what couples who teach natural family planning have been saying for years, the bishop said. "Their marriages are satisfying, there is more rapport and better communication" between the wife and husband, because the method "relies on the mutual cooperation of both the husband and wife."



Lynn Hammersmith and four-month-old Amy look on from the balcony during a Mass celebrating the 20th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's encyclical, "Humanae Vitae." The July 25th Mass was part of the 1988 convention of the Couple to Couple League for natural family planning at Illinois State University.

"My partner takes equal responsibility for avoiding genital contact during the fertile time," said 78.4 percent of the wives and 85.8 percent of the husbands. Nearly one-third of the respondents said the husband is mutually or exclusively responsible for charting the signs of his wife's fertility.

"Intimacy is more than genitality ... which is one of the reasons NFP enriches marriages," Sister Boys said.

The couples in the study had been married for an average of 8.6 years. The average age of the women was 31.7 and their husbands' average age was 33.8.

Most of the couples use natural family planning to space the births of their children, she said, although 10 to 15 percent of the couples use it to achieve pregnancy.



DINING AROUND THE DIOCESE



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