

## Your Right to Know: A Universal Core for NFP Instruction

This is my plea for bishops, priests and informed laity to help ordinary couples know and live according to the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. I am not just politely suggesting; I am begging those with teaching authority in the Church to do two things relevant to *Humanae Vitae*. 1) Require that every engaged couple take the right kind of NFP course as a normal part of preparation for marriage. 2) Insist that every required course teach a universal core that includes all the common signs of fertility, ecological breastfeeding, Catholic morality regarding love, marriage and sexuality, and some additional things stated below. I believe that the Church-related NFP course should be an exercise in evangelization, not just non-contraceptive birth control.

I accept the teaching of Jesus that being his disciples involves taking up our cross daily, and I believe this applies to his teaching about love, marriage and sexuality. I also believe that his words in Luke 11:46 apply to those who have teaching responsibilities in the Church today. “Woe to you also, scholars of the law, for you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burden with one of your fingers.” Thus I believe that bishops, priests, deacons and informed laity are called to do what they can — both to affirm the teaching **and** to provide the practical help to live it.

Couples have a right to know enough about the intellectual and practical help available so that they can make a well informed choice among the available options.

Engaged and married couples have a God-given right to learn—

- All the common signs of fertility and infertility—mucus, temperature and cervix and how to use these in a cross-checking way for confidence and effectiveness.
- Ecological breastfeeding as a form of natural baby spacing that maximizes all the health benefits of breastfeeding for both mother and baby, maintains the milk supply, and delays the return of fertility for an average of 14 to 15 months.
- The moral teaching of the Catholic Church relevant to love, marriage, sexuality, generosity in having children, and birth control.
- This teaching in the context of God’s revelation and the marriage covenant.
- The relative effectiveness of the different systems.

**I believe that this right to learn and to know is indisputable.** After all, who can argue that anyone, Catholic or not, does **not** have a right to learn all of this?

The current situation, however, does not facilitate that right to learn the options. Many of the NFP services offered by diocesan offices are variations on the mucus-only approach.

- They teach only the external mucus sign.
- They exclude teaching the internal observations of mucus and the cervix.
- They exclude any teaching of the temperature sign.
- They do not teach ecological breastfeeding.
- They do not teach Catholic morality as a normal part of their instruction.

Among those who teach the cross-checking signs, no American program except NFP International teaches ecological breastfeeding. Others may teach about breastfeeding as a healthy practice, but they do not teach the seven standards of ecological breastfeeding, the only kind associated with extended breastfeeding infertility. **Withholding this information unfairly restricts the freedom** of couples to choose.

Some dioceses try to compensate for this by offering more than one program. That would be satisfactory if the couples knew enough to make an informed choice between the different programs, but they don't.

Why does this happen? I think it is a matter of salesmanship. The mucus-only programs are run mostly by women who are nice people. They have sold their product to the diocese and not infrequently have been hired as the diocesan NFP coordinator or director. They are liked by their bosses who are happy to have someone taking on this task. It is quite natural for them to think that their particular program is the best or at least completely adequate, and the idea of offering couples a real choice seems quite foreign. After all, the leaders of their respective programs have said that the temperature sign, the internal observations, and the cervix sign aren't needed. It may be that the diocesan NFP coordinator has never experienced ecological breastfeeding.

All of this is understandable, and all of it makes for harmony in the chancery office, but is it fair?

**What is needed is a minimum universal core** in every NFP program that is recognized in any way by the diocese. It would respect the God-given rights of couples to know what God has made available:

- All the common signs of fertility and infertility—mucus, temperature and cervix and how to use these in a cross-checking way for confidence and effectiveness.
- Ecological breastfeeding as a form of natural baby spacing
- The moral teaching of the Catholic Church relevant to love, marriage, sexuality, generosity in having children, and birth control.
- This teaching in the context of God's revelation and the marriage covenant.
- The relative effectiveness of the different systems.

This can be done with relative ease. There is no good reason why every program cannot teach Ecological Breastfeeding.

Adding the temperature sign to current mucus-only instruction will not be difficult to teach, but there may be resistance to change. I am not saying that everyone has to chart temperatures. No. What is necessary is that couples are given sufficient information so that they know that the temperature sign can be used in a cross-checking way and has other significant advantages listed in my commentary on the temperature sign. They should learn *how* to chart if they so desire.

Speaking of resistance to change, I understand that an American doctor-promoter of Calendar Rhythm went to his death still believing that nothing more was needed. I am grateful that in 1935 Father Wilhelm Hillebrand used the temperature-based research of Dr. T. H. van de Velde and insisted that an elevated temperature pattern was needed to cross-check the rhythm calculations, thus correcting the weakest part of the Calendar Rhythm system. What motivated Father Hillebrand was not any sort of doctor-based dogma but simply wanting what would best help his parishioners. I think he provides an example for our bishops and priests today.

As reported in my commentary on relative effectiveness, the US Bishops sponsored a scientific study by independent researchers that concluded, “Results of this study show the STM to be superior to the OM of NFP in terms of use-effectiveness.” Then, almost all the couples who had been in the OM side of the study asked to be trained in the STM, and they were trained. It seems to me that the bishops should be making sure that couples today have that same opportunity.

I have no objection whatsoever to a couple choosing to use a single-sign system after they have been adequately taught how to use additional signs in a cross-checking way. That is their right. I insist only that they receive adequate instruction so that they are truly free to choose one way or the other.

We are all familiar with the saying of Jesus in John 8:32, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” While it is certainly true that he was speaking about himself, that latter phrase can also be applied to many areas.

In urging a universal core, I am urging only that these words, “and the truth will make you free” apply to the science and art of natural family planning. Couples deserve to know the full truth so that they can exercise their Christian freedom to choose, among morally valid alternatives, what they believe is best for them and their babies.

Near the top of this commentary, I quoted Luke 11:46: “Woe to you also, scholars of the law, for you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burden with one of your fingers.”

In providing the full truth, bishops and their collaborators certainly will be helping to lift the burden of living the truths affirmed by *Humanae Vitae*. In fact, great numbers of couples who accept and live out the full truth that includes generosity and ecological breastfeeding will find that the whole package is much more of a blessing than a burden.

John F. Kippley, September 29, 2013