

Refilling the Empty Pews: Can an NFP course be an agent of evangelization?

By John F. Kippley

While visiting the Twin Cities in June 2011, I learned that my home parish is slated for closure in mid-2012. The Church of the Visitation in southwest Minneapolis was created in 1946 because married couples were having babies. It was carved out of Annunciation Parish, our former home, and Incarnation Parish, each about a half mile from the new church. Fortuitously, in that June visit I met a former pastor who agreed with me on the root cause for the closure: contraception. To be sure, in the last 65 years there have been some changes in demographics, but the area is still middle-class and the homes are well kept.

In the spring of 2009, Father Timothy Sauppe, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Westville, Illinois, a rural parish in the far west of the Diocese of Peoria, was forced by economics—too few children—to close the parish school. He wrote to Bishop Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C., to his parishioners, and posted on the parish website that the root cause of the closure was the practice of contraception including sterilization.

Over the last decade I have read several articles accusing the users of natural family planning for the empty pews, but that is simply not the case. Statistics published in 2010 make it clear that less than 2% of church-going Catholics are practicing any form of systematic NFP, but those numbers do not take into account those who, at the time of the survey, were pregnant, breastfeeding, or just accepting babies as they come.¹ With appropriate adjustments, it appears that the statistics are really saying that at least 90% of fertile-age church-going Catholics are using unnatural forms of birth control. Statistics from once-Catholic countries in Europe indicate birth rates well below replacement levels, except among Muslim immigrants. The Catholic Church in the West is closing its schools and churches. In short, it is contracepting itself either out of existence or into a minor sect.

No one who cares about the Church as the visible body instituted by Christ for the salvation of the world can be happy about this. In fact, no one who appreciates the great contribution to the public square made by well-formed Catholics can be pleased by this self-destructive diminution of its influence.

The problem has been recognized for some time. In 1989 the USCC Bishops' Committee on Pastoral Research and Practices published a book on marriage preparation, *Faithful to Each Other Forever*, in which they urged that every engaged couple should be required to attend a full course on Natural Family Planning. Recognizing that many couples would not appreciate this requirement at first, they expressed confidence that many would be very grateful by the end of the course. Unfortunately, only seven dioceses (counting one on the way) currently have this requirement, so 22 years later, we are still waiting for the implementation of this recommendation. Further, two more recent USCCB documents about marriage do not reaffirm the NFP requirement.² Given that response, it seems to me that parish priests are called to be the real warriors in the effort to restore authentic Christian faith and practice to our Catholic parishes and to the public square.

The need for evangelization

The problem of the rare use of NFP is not a lack of information. There are NFP programs in every diocese, and anyone with access to a bookstore or the internet can teach themselves all they need to know about natural family planning—just Google “NFP.” The basic problem is a twofold lack of faith and faith-based love. Catholics who read the papers or watch the evening news know that the Catholic Church officially teaches that it’s immoral to use contraceptive drugs, devices, and behaviors. These same Catholics may never hear this teaching from the pulpit or see it in the parish bulletin, but the secular press takes a perverse delight in publicizing this doctrine, especially when the Pope reaffirms it. The problem is that most Catholics today simply don’t believe the teaching.

Another serious problem is the difficulty of preaching Catholic teaching on chastity at Masses attended by a regular parish congregation including children. It’s a difficulty shared with the subject of abortion, but difficult is not the same as impossible. The sexual revolution and its consequences simply cannot be completely off-limits, or the entire area of sexual morality is surrendered to an aggressive, anti-Christian secularism.

I submit that the biggest need in the Church today, at least in the West, is the evangelization of Catholics who do not believe that what the Church teaches as the demands of love really are the demands of the Lord Jesus. Pope Benedict XVI has recognized this by creating the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization. Benedict has also indicated what the emphasis must be when he wrote in his book on Jesus: “The organ for seeing God is the heart. The intellect alone is not enough...[man’s] will must be pure and so too must the underlying affective dimension of his soul which gives intelligence and will their direction.”³ The content of the message doesn’t change, but there needs to be more effort made to help partial believers accept the entire message of faith with a renewed attitude of personal gratitude to the Lord Jesus for his entire work of salvation including his gifts of the Church and its teaching authority. I suggest that the right kind of NFP course offers a unique opportunity to teach these basic attitudes and doctrines and thus evangelize the young people who are the future of the Church.

What a parish priest can do

The first thing a parish priest can do is to love his parishioners so much that he is willing to suffer some initial rejection. The next thing he needs to do is to remember that he has three great gifts that are not available to anyone else at that particular place and time. First, he has been gifted with the authority to teach what the Church teaches in that parish at that time. Second he has been gifted with the right to preach from the pulpit. Third, he enjoys the gift of being able to meet with parishioners one-on-one. Closely related to this is another gift—some of his parishioners truly want to do what is right, and others at least want to have their wedding in the church building.

Preaching from the pulpit

First, here’s what not to do. From vicarious experience I can say that a priest should never use the term “sexual intercourse” from the pulpit. A local well-intentioned priest used that term several times in a Sunday homily, and the reactions even among the fully orthodox were negative. If the subject demands a reference to that act which is morally proper only for married couples, the term to use is “the marriage act.” The former

physiological term applies to all sorts of sinful activities; the marriage act refers to what the act is supposed to be.

It is my understanding that in addition to the readings of the day, the priest can also focus on the Mass itself, and of course that includes what the Lord Jesus did at the Last Supper and on Calvary. Specifically, the priest can focus on the Nicene Profession of Faith. Most Sunday-Mass Catholics are well acquainted with the Nicene Creed, but perhaps the faith of many is more implicit than explicit. If the core reason behind the widespread Catholic rejection of the teaching reaffirmed by *Humanae Vitae* is lack of faith, then it is necessary for Catholics in general to understand what is really involved in the Nicene Profession of Faith. Christians in general and Catholics in particular need to remember, or learn for the first time, that a dozen years after the Catholic Church was “legalized” in the Roman Empire, some theologians and politicians were denying the divinity of Christ. The heretics were saying that Jesus is the best person imaginable but still only a human person. They said He was very much *like* God but denied that He fully shared the Godhead with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Both sides quoted the Bible because Jesus made some statements that emphasized his full humanity and others that emphasized his full divinity. The bishops of the Catholic Church assembled and talked and prayed and voted to affirm the Tradition that Jesus is true God as well as true man, of the very same nature as the Father.

The question is obvious: How can we be certain that the bishops at the Council of Nicea got it right? The answer is found at the Last Supper where Jesus repeatedly promised that he would send the Holy Spirit who would guide the Apostles and their successors into the fullness of the truth. When we affirm the Nicene Profession of Faith we are implicitly affirming our Catholic faith that Jesus keeps his promises and that the Holy Spirit led the bishops of Nicea to affirm the truth about Jesus.

What about today? The promises of Jesus still hold, and the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church in its teaching. That faith is implicit in the profession of the Nicene Creed, but it needs to become explicit. In my opinion, one of the most important responsibilities of the parish priest today is to lead his parish into the explicit faith that the Holy Spirit continues to guide the teaching of the Church. In an age that has lost its compass with regard to love, it is more important than ever for Catholics to believe that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Love, continues to teach the divine truth about human love—and especially the demanding truths about love, sexuality and marriage.

There are also a number of other Christian principles involved in the birth control issue, and all of them can be developed from what Jesus did and said in the Paschal mystery, his public life, or from other biblical sources. Some come readily to mind—humility, Christian love, marriage, the daily cross, grace, repentance, the Christian covenant, generosity, and moral consistency. All of these subjects coalesce to form a right Christian conscience that sees the difficulties inherent in married love as simply an expected part of Christian discipleship. All of these themes can be and should be preached from the pulpit with guarded allusions to Catholic teaching about love and sexuality.

One-on-one

A second great charism bestowed on the parish priest is the ability to meet with individual persons and couples to help them grow in faith. Here he has a unique

opportunity to evangelize them and to build upon whatever he has preached at Mass. Have they truly accepted Jesus as the Lord of their lives? In making decisions, do they ask themselves what the Lord Jesus wants them to do or not do? Do they understand that the ultimate purpose of every human relationship is to help the other person on the path to heaven and that this applies especially to engaged persons and married couples? Do the engaged couples realize that the demands of chaste Christian love require them to be abstinent until marriage, and that loving chastity also rules out excessively stimulating activity?

Then, of course, the priest has the opportunity to teach Catholic teaching about birth control, self-control, and the call to generosity in the service of life. A question that most priests will have to answer for themselves is, “What shall I say and do about natural family planning?” Even in dioceses that require engaged couples to attend a complete NFP course, he still may have questions. Some NFP courses are almost exclusively oriented towards NFP-related physiology and come across as teaching Catholic birth control. Other NFP programs use an interpretation of the papal *Theology of the Body* to try to explain the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. Almost all NFP programs say some nice things about breastfeeding, but currently only one NFP program promotes and teaches *ecological* breastfeeding, the pattern of baby care that truly does delay the return of fertility for an average of 14 to 15 months postpartum. Some call it God’s own plan for spacing babies, and others call it the most natural form of NFP because it does not require periodic abstinence.

Most priests serve in a diocese that does not have an NFP requirement, and many serve in areas where there are no NFP services easily available, so what can they do? They can Google “NFP”. Usually the top listing is a financial service, but right near the top is NFP International that does most of its teaching via the internet. Disclosure: I am the volunteer president of this organization and co-author of its user’s manual, *Natural Family Planning: The Complete Approach*. This 154-page book in question-answer format is available online as well as in printed and e-book versions. NFP International requests a donation of \$10 to download the manual, but those who are poor can download it for free. This also applies to priests, and I think that every priest would do well to have it in his computer because it is much more than mere physiology. In fact, I urge every priest reader to download it and carefully read Chapter 1 in which we consciously try to evangelize the prospective NFP user. In Chapter 6, he can learn about the many benefits of ecological breastfeeding, and I can’t imagine any concerned priest who would not want his parishioners to know this information. Priests as well as laity will be refreshed spiritually by reading the beautiful conversion testimonies in Chapter 7. And if the reader wants to learn the mechanics of the Sympto-Thermal Method, it’s easily explained in the other chapters. There are no illustrations of external organs.

If the parish priest would like his engaged and married couples to learn NFP from this source, he can direct them to do the NFPI Home Study Course.⁴ In this course, the students complete a series of three tests based on the text and demonstrate their ability to interpret NFP charts. A Certificate of Completion is issued upon the satisfactory completion of the tests.

Since the turn of the century we have heard much about the need for a new evangelization but have seen few concrete and practical proposals. I believe that the right kind of NFP course offers a unique opportunity, and we have structured our NFP course

accordingly. If a parish priest would like to use an NFP course as an agent of evangelization, he will find considerable help in the NFPI user's manual. It is based on the faith implicit in the Nicene Creed and seeks to make that faith more explicit. It supports the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* with a "renewal of the marriage covenant" theology. It teaches all the common signs of fertility and infertility, and it promotes and teaches ecological breastfeeding as the most basic and natural form of NFP. This is why we call it "The Complete Approach."

Of course, much of the doctrine so needed for evangelization can be explained at the parish website and with bulletin inserts. In my opinion, however, one-on-one sessions provide a unique opportunity for priests to promote and teach marital chastity and the generosity so needed to rebuild the Church.

The reluctant couple

The believing priest can expect that most couples are not exactly anxious to take a course on natural family planning whether by classroom instruction or home study. Most of these will readily comply as soon as they realize that this is a normal part of the marriage-preparation requirements in that parish or diocese. However, occasionally a priest may encounter a couple who demand their canonical rights to be married in the Church without having to attend such an educational effort. I doubt that this will ever occur without some coaching by a dissenter, but it raises a question that needs to be addressed..

First, the canonical right to marry in the Church means the right to have the marriage witnessed by a priest or deacon. It does not necessarily entail the right to be married in the building commonly called "the church." In the 1940s it was a common practice for the wedding of a Catholic and a non-Catholic to be witnessed in the rectory, and a priest can still offer that alternative to those who are adamant about not taking an NFP course. The question, "Which room in this rectory would you prefer, this one or the one across the hall?" will most likely be met by resigned acceptance of the NFP course. True, those of us who teach NFP would prefer students who are anxious to learn the subject and to grow in faith, but the presence of reluctant students means that the NFP teacher is simply dealing with the same sort of student found in every required course from grade school through graduate school.

Second, the canonical right is a qualified right. In his annual speech to the Roman Rota on January 22, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI noted that the right to a church wedding requires that the bride and groom intend to celebrate and live the marriage truthfully and authentically. Here are two key paragraphs:

"The right to marry, *ius connubii*, must be seen in this perspective. In other words it is not a subjective claim that pastors must fulfill through a merely formal recognition independent of the effective content of the union. The right to contract marriage presupposes that the person can and intends to celebrate it truly, that is, in the truth of its essence as the Church teaches it. No one can claim the right to a nuptial ceremony. Indeed the *ius connubii* refers to the right to celebrate an authentic marriage.

"The *ius connubii* would not, therefore, be denied where it was evident that the fundamental requirements for its exercise were lacking, namely, if the required capacity for marriage were patently lacking or the person intended to choose something which was incompatible with the natural reality of marriage."⁵

What about the priest who serves under a bishop who has ordered his priests not to require an NFP course as a normal part of preparation for marriage? (I am not making this up.) Such an edict certainly does not prohibit the priest from incorporating appropriate NFP-related instruction into his own meetings with the couple. There is nothing in Chapter 1 of *Natural Family Planning: The Complete Approach* that requires anything more than faith and conviction on the part of the instructor. For the rest, there is nothing that every priest should not know and be able to teach. The text contains no images or details about breastfeeding as such, but every priest ought to know and promote the benefits of ecological breastfeeding. The female fertility cycle is not mysterious, and oral temperature-taking is certainly not intimate. With regard to the details of observing cervical mucus and changes in the cervix, the priest can simply state that he feels somewhat awkward discussing these matters, and he can ask the couple to read them by themselves. If the woman becomes interested, she will most likely have no problem with self-instruction from this manual, and the couple can certainly take the Home Study Course on their own initiative. As one couple wrote us as I was writing this article, “Thank you. The book is easy to read and so helpful and informative!”

The right kind of NFP course is a blessing, not just a burden, for engaged and married couples. Of course, by that I mean the kind of course that explicitly seeks to evangelize its students, encourages generosity in the service of life as taught by the Church, promotes and teaches ecological breastfeeding, uses easily understood concepts to support *Humanae Vitae*, and teaches the signs in a cross-checking way in order to reduce abstinence to a minimum. I doubt that a biology-only NFP program will help couples go beyond seeing NFP as something more than Catholic birth control, and I doubt that such a program will advance the evangelization mission of the Church.

This right kind of NFP course is a win-win-win situation for the couple, the priest and the Church with one important proviso. The priest has to make it clear that he is making this requirement because he loves the couple and wants what is best for them and their children both for eternity and for right now. At the very least, the right kind of course has sown important seeds. Sometimes it happens that when the mother is experiencing the joy of ecological breastfeeding, the couple will realize that God really does know what He is doing, and that may open their hearts to the rest of the NFP-related teaching.

The importance of evangelization

The Church has suffered great numeric losses in the last 40 years, and the birth control controversy has been a key element in this tragedy. The dissent from *Humanae Vitae* and false impressions of Vatican II created an atmosphere of theological uncertainty and indifference.

On the other hand the divine truth about human love and sexuality has a great power of attraction for those who are seeking the truth. Scott Hahn regarded himself as one of the most anti-Catholic students in his seminary, but providentially he read a covenant-focused explanation of *Humanae Vitae*.⁶ His immediate reaction was to throw the book across the room, but he later picked it up. He now credits it with helping both him and his wife to accept that part of Catholic teaching. We have had women tell us that their interest in becoming Catholic was initiated by practicing ecological breastfeeding first learned from a book written by someone who did not hide her Catholic faith—my wife.

Another woman wrote an open letter about her conversion. As an atheist married to an agnostic, she learned about NFP from a Catholic friend. The couple taught themselves and then practiced systematic NFP. As a truth-seeking atheist, she continued to read the theological parts of their NFP manual as her bedtime reading. One night she had an inexplicable conversion, and they eventually found and entered the Church. There are no guarantees, but the truth has power, and perhaps the power to accept the truth is enhanced when accompanied by practical ways to live out the truths of Catholic teaching. .

Love and sexuality and child nurturing are right at the heart of human experience. The Church has the truth on these great issues and wants to share these truths. The priest will do his couples, his parish, and the wider community a great service by doing everything he can to explain these truths in the light of Christian discipleship and making good use of the tools at hand. That, I submit, is an important part of the new evangelization that is so needed today.

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Editor: There are two sets of endnotes. The first is a normal word document either entered manually or by copying. The second is generated by the Endnote program. Some publishers like endnotes one way; some like them the other way. Just delete what you don't want. But please note: deleting the second set may delete the superscript numbers in the text. If this is a problem, I can re-submit according to the format you specify. jfk

Endnotes

¹ http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/2010_CMRSum_Fall.pdf

² *Married Love and the Gift of Life*, Committee for Pro-Life Activities of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 14, 2006; *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, A Pastoral Letter of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 17, 2009.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) 92-93.

⁴ The materials for the NFPI Home Study Course are easily available. The couple downloads the manual from the NFPI website and purchases a quality basal thermometer locally. NFPI requests a donation of \$70.00.

⁵ Address of his Holiness Pope Benedict XVI on the Occasion of the Inauguration of the Judicial Year of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota, January 22, 2011, paragraphs 8 and 9.

⁶ John F. Kippley, *Birth Control and the Marriage Covenant* (Liturgical Press, 1981). Revised and republished as *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality* (Ignatius Press, 2005).

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