

The Right Kind of NFP

By John F. Kippley

More than 43 years after *Humanae Vitae*, Catholic teaching on birth control is still drawing attacks—and from all sides. In an ultra-conservative Catholic magazine in 2011, two articles strongly criticized the practice of systematic natural family planning, specifically allowed in HV 10 and 16 for sufficiently serious reasons. The first author feared that couples are using NFP without sufficiently serious reasons and therefore selfishly and sinfully. The second author feared that spouses are sinning sexually instead of practicing marital chastity during the fertile time. In a January Protestant-oriented blogsite, “Claire” stated that NFP is evil because it has the same pregnancy-avoiding purpose as contraception. A commenter thought Claire was simply trying to mock Catholic teaching, so he agreed.

I agree that it is possible to use NFP selfishly, and some so-called NFP users have told me that they have engaged in immoral behaviors during the fertile time. Of course, is there any created good that cannot be misused? The “NFP is evil” accusation, whether serious or just anti-Catholic mockery, reflects poor thinking. Just as the end does not justify the means, so also the end does not homogenize the means. That is, a common goal certainly does not make morally the same the various ways to achieve that goal. Ordinary people readily see that honest work and illegal drug dealing are not morally equal ways to buy that nice house on the hill. However, as with many cases of thinking that involve sexuality, not a few people have difficulty in applying the principle of non-homogeneity to birth control. A confused “Claire” could be a providentialist condemning those who practice NFP for serious reasons. On the other hand, that sort of statement is also used to argue that contraception is not morally different from abstaining during the fertile time—so why bother with NFP? Almost all debate about important issues deals with the means to achieve some goal; the means are extremely important.

On the other side of the coin are the good things that can happen when people receive the right kind of NFP instruction. And what is the “right kind” of NFP course? First, it will teach that there are two distinctly different forms of NFP—ecological breastfeeding and systematic NFP, and it will teach ecological breastfeeding as a form of NFP. Second, the right kind of course will act as an agent of evangelization—transmitting Catholic sexual morality and placing this teaching squarely in the light of Christian discipleship. Third, it will teach all the common signs of fertility and infertility, thus enabling users of systematic NFP to exercise legitimate choice among morally acceptable alternatives. Let’s take a look at each of these characteristics of the right kind of instruction.

Ecological breastfeeding. The name of this form of baby care is not an effort at being cute or “green” but simply makes a very necessary distinction. One kind of breastfeeding truly *does* delay the return of fertility, but most styles of breastfeeding have little or no such effect. We call these latter styles “cultural breastfeeding,” characterized by the use of bottles and pacifiers as suckling substitutes, the early introduction of infant formula and foods, and long periods of mother-baby separation. With western cultural breastfeeding, fertility generally returns by twelve weeks postpartum.

Ecological breastfeeding is the form of baby care that respects the natural, symbiotic relationship of mother and baby in which the baby's suckling postpones the mother's return of fertility. The key to ecological breastfeeding and natural breastfeeding infertility is frequent and unrestricted nursing. This pattern respects the mutually beneficial relationship between mother and infant. If mom keeps her baby close by and nurses him on cue, he will suckle frequently enough to postpone the return of fertility. The term "ecological breastfeeding" or "eco-breastfeeding" has become so well known that it has become necessary to further define it as nursing according to the Seven Standards of Ecological Breastfeeding. These are seven maternal behaviors as follows: breastfeed exclusively for the first six months; pacify or comfort your baby at your breasts; don't use bottles and pacifiers; sleep with your baby for night feedings; sleep with your baby for a daily-nap feeding; nurse frequently day and night and avoid schedules; avoid any practice that restricts nursing or separates you from your baby. In our studies, we found that mothers who followed the Seven Standards experienced an average of 14.5 months of breastfeeding amenorrhea (the absence of periods due to breastfeeding). That's an average, not an absolute. Seven percent had their first period in the first six months and one-third were still in amenorrhea at 18 months.

Some mothers have written my wife to say that they had already adopted this form of baby care by just following their maternal instincts and were surprised to find it had a name. Others object to one or another of the standards, and I will answer only one objection in this article—sleeping with your baby. First, co-sleeping can be the safest form of sleep for babies provided it follows the rules of safe sleeping dealing with bedding and parents. One of the greatest risks for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) is the presence of someone who smokes. Second, it is helpful to remember that SIDS was formerly called crib death.

Now the blessings start piling on. In *Natural Family Planning: The Complete Approach*, the users manual of NFP International (NFPI), we list 21 health benefits for breastfed babies in terms of reduced incidences of diseases. The list is impressive: allergies, asthma, autoimmune thyroid disease, bacterial meningitis, botulism, Crohn's disease, diarrhea, ear infections, eczema, gastroenteritis, inflammatory bowel disease, leukemia, lymphoma, multiple sclerosis, necrotizing enterocolitis, obesity, respiratory tract infections, sudden infant death syndrome, ulcerative colitis, type 1 and type 2 diabetes, and urinary tract infections. These benefits are dose-related, so the frequent suckling of eco-breastfeeding helps to provide more of these natural health advantages. There are also more general benefits such as improved school-age test scores. The benefits for breastfeeding mothers are also significant—reduced risks of breast cancer, endometrial cancer, ovarian cancer, thyroid cancer, anemia, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis in a mom's later years. Yes, amazingly, researchers have found that mothers who breastfed have a reduced risk of hip fractures years after the last time she nursed her child.

In addition to these quantifiable benefits, breastfeeding also offers emotional and spiritual benefits. Pope Pius XII took time out from his busy wartime schedule in October 1941 to

address a women's group, urging them to breastfeed their babies if at all possible because of the emotional and spiritual benefits of that close mother-baby contact.

“We see in mothers those who exert the earliest and the most intimate influence upon the souls of the little ones and upon their growth in piety and virtue...This is the reason why, except where it is quite impossible, it is more desirable that the mother should feed her child at her own breast.”

In the NFPI course, students learn these things. We cannot force them to do eco-breastfeeding, but it is our hope that the scientific evidence supporting it is so persuasive that open-hearted couples will want to adopt this form of baby-care. When eco-breastfeeding becomes part of a new Catholic culture, Catholic parishes will be known not just for their academics, athletics and bingo but also for their healthier kids and moms.

The New Evangelization. The time is past for an NFP course to be just a reproductive organs recital. Such a course might have been sufficient prior to *Humanae Vitae* when couples had already formed their consciences according to *Casti Connubii* and sought NFP help only when they had an already large family or other serious reason. For better or for worse, however, there wasn't much practical help available prior to the 1968 encyclical, but that's another story.

Today the Church is in a situation so dire that in his first presidential address to his fellow USCCB bishops, Cardinal Timothy Dolan noted that many Catholics no longer see Christ teaching in and through his Church. Like Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, he hopes that a New Evangelization will greatly improve this situation.

The right kind of NFP course ought to share in the New Evangelization. I cannot speak for any other course, but in NFP International we recognize the problem alluded to by Cardinal Dolan. Simply quoting an authoritative encyclical such as *Humanae Vitae* no longer has the effect it once did. If the teaching of the Church is seen only as the teaching of a group of older men with pointed hats, it has little effect even on those who accept Jesus as the Lord of their lives. The challenge is to connect Jesus with the teaching of his Church.

In the NFPI course, we address this task by starting with the Nicene Creed. On what basis do those who profess the Creed every Sunday believe that the bishops at Nicea back in 325 got it right when they used a new term—“consubstantial”—to define the very being of Jesus and his relationship with his Father? As far as I can see, our only certainty is to believe that Jesus was keeping the promises He made at the Last Supper. There He promised that He would send the Holy Spirit who would lead the Apostles and their successors into the fullness of the truth. Our faith is that Jesus keeps his promises. With regard to Nicea, Jesus kept his promises, and the Holy Spirit led the bishops to clarify the Faith as they did. With regard to *Casti Connubii* and *Humanae Vitae*, Jesus is still keeping his promises. The same Holy Spirit who guided the successors of the Apostles at Nicea and Chalcedon and Ephesus and all the councils of the Church still is guiding the

Church today. Jesus keeps his promises. He has spoken through Pope Pius XI, Pope Pius XII, Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*, and in Pope John Paul II who made the reaffirmation of *Humanae Vitae* the principal focus of the first ten years of his pontificate. That, in a nutshell, is how the NFPI manual advances the New Evangelization. That's how we try to help our students see Jesus still keeping his Last Supper promises as he continues to teach in and through his Church.

A covenant theology. The classical definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding” also applies to the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. In 1994, ten years after he completed his Theology of the Body lectures, Blessed John Paul II taught the meaning of the marriage act in terms of the spouses' own marriage covenant.

“In the conjugal act, husband and wife are called to confirm *the mutual gift of self* which they have made to each other in the marriage covenant. The logic of the *total gift of self to the other* involves a potential openness to procreation; in this way the marriage is called to even greater fulfillment as a family. Certainly the mutual gift of husband and wife does not have the begetting of children as its only end, but is in itself a mutual communion of love and of life” (*Letter to Families*, n.12, italics in original).

The Pope's first sentence above is very similar to the primary statement of the covenant theology we use to explain the core teaching of *Humanae Vitae*: “Sexual intercourse is intended by God to be at least implicitly a renewal of the marriage covenant.” This easy-to-grasp concept helps to explain why the same anatomical act that is the sin of fornication before marriage can be a virtuous act within marriage. It makes sense and gives meaning. Couples readily understand that the marriage act ought to symbolize the committed love and fidelity, for better and for worse, of their marriage covenant.

The covenant renewal meaning of the marriage act helps couples realize that the whole purpose of marital contraception is to contradict the “for better and for worse” of their own marriage covenant. The contracepted act becomes “I take you for better but definitely not for the imagined worse of possible pregnancy,” and thus it is intrinsically dishonest. Some people may like to think of themselves as lustful, but not many like to think of themselves as dishonest.

What kinds of reasons are needed? To breastfeed, you don't need any reasons beyond the natural reason to do what is best for your baby, but a related question has been raised. Is it morally permissible to hope for extended infertility with ecological breastfeeding? Certainly. The extended infertility of ecological breastfeeding is a normal, God-given side effect of following God's plan for baby care. It is the most natural form of natural family planning, and it is good and proper to hope for this along with all the other normal good effects of breastfeeding.

What sort of reason is needed to practice systematic NFP? Here I want to quote directly from our NFP manual so you can see how the NFP International course handles this important question.

“We need to be clear. Systematic NFP is not ‘Catholic Birth Control.’ Christian marriage is a sacrament in which the spouses are called to be generous to each other and to be generous with God in having children and raising them in the ways of the Lord. Marriage is for family.

“Children are gifts from God. Most Christian married couples can assume that much of the time, perhaps even most of the time, God is calling them to be generous and invite another child to share family life on this earth and to share eternity with Him. The knowledge of systematic NFP is also a gift from God, and couples should use it generously, not selfishly. . . Pray for the grace to be both generous and prudent. This will help you to discern whether you have sufficient reasons to avoid or postpone pregnancy. Pray and listen the Church and its biblically-based teaching.”

At that point, the NFPI manual has another 17 pages largely devoted to the transmission of Catholic teaching about marital chastity and the proper use of systematic NFP. In short, we believe that an NFP course that operates in a Catholic context has a serious obligation to teach what the Catholic Church teaches about Christian love, marriage, and sexuality.

Systematic NFP. This is the form of natural family planning that relies upon abstinence from the marriage act during the fertile time to avoid pregnancy. It encompasses several different *systems*, but no matter what the system is called, there is only one pregnancy-avoiding *method*—chaste abstinence. When barrier methods or other immoral behaviors are used during the fertile time, what is practiced is periodic contraception, not natural family planning.

Most discourse about NFP focuses on the different signs of fertility and infertility, and then upon the relative effectiveness of different systems in achieving or avoiding pregnancy. For the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to say that there are three common signs of fertility—changes in cervical mucus, physical changes in the cervix, and changes in a woman’s waking temperature. Each sign has its relative strengths and limitations. Mucus-only systems use only the mucus sign. Most cross-checking systems use the mucus and crosscheck it with the temperature, and sometimes they add the cervix sign as helpful in certain situations. All the systems identify the overall fertile time and are very good at helping couples achieve pregnancy. The temperature sign is the single best indicator for estimating the date of childbirth. The cross-checking systems are more effective for avoiding pregnancy.

What signs should a couple learn? The most basic principle of psychology is that you cannot choose something if you do not know about it. That’s why I am convinced that the right kind of NFP course should teach couples all the signs. I have dealt with people who feel cheated and angry when they found out about the sign that was deliberately not taught to them or even disparaged. In some cases, full knowledge can reduce the amount of abstinence and clarify otherwise ambiguous situations. These signs of fertility are

God-given, and couples have a God-given right to be adequately informed about all of them.

A very important aspect of the right kind of NFP course is the teaching of morality. First, that means teaching what the Catholic Church teaches about generosity in having children, the need for a sufficiently serious reason to use systematic NFP to avoid pregnancy, and marital chastity. It also means teaching against masturbation and marital sodomy during the fertile time. Unfortunately, according to a highly placed source who knows the NFP field very well, most NFP teachers feel uncomfortable teaching about marital chastity, and so these sinful behaviors are not mentioned. We address these subjects in the NFP International program, but I do not know of any other program that does. (If you are told that some other program does teach adequately about these matters, be sure to look at the written materials, and then let me know the title and page number.) Our practice is based on experience. One woman told me that for eight years she and her husband practiced mutual masturbation during the fertile time; she specifically noted that her NFP course had said nothing about it. She is certainly not the only one to tell me about fertile-time sins. Everyone knows that this sort of thing occurs, and it is all too easy to rationalize that silence infers consent.

Moral and spiritual blessings. One of the blessings of the right kind of NFP course is that more couples elect to practice chaste abstinence instead of contraceptive behaviors. I think that when the right kind of NFP course is joined to orthodox pastoring of engaged couples, at least one in four couples will enter marriage living according to the norms of *Humanae Vitae*. The significance of that 25% is that currently at least 90% of fertile-age church-going married Catholics are using unnatural forms of birth control, if we believe the recent statistics. Further, very significant numbers of contemporary engaged couples are fornicating when they start pre-marriage instruction. If one in four newly married couples start their marriages with marital chastity, that entails some significant conversions. In addition, because the seed has been planted, I think it is very possible that by their tenth anniversary, close to two-thirds of well-instructed couples will be living as they should. Every couple who stop using hormonal birth control also stop the flow of their dollars to the anti-life birth control industry, and many newly conceived babies will not be aborted by the anti-implantation potential of the Pill.

Another great blessing to the Church is increased generosity in having children with subsequent vocations. A veteran NFP teacher recently told me of some couples she personally had instructed over the years. The parents of eight children have two priest-sons. The parents of six have a son in the seminary. Parents of another large family have a son in a seminary and a daughter in a convent. And the list went on.

In addition to individual couples, the Church as a whole will benefit greatly from the right kind of NFP course and faith-filled pastoring. The pews will be refilled, vocations will be ample, the Mystical Body will become invigorated, marriages will be more solid, and adults and children alike will be healthier. Our secularized young men and women will be challenged and many will be effectively evangelized. The right kind of NFP course offers that opportunity.

Couples deserve a complete approach. Only in this way can users make free and informed choices. Mothers can't choose the seven standards of ecological breastfeeding unless they learn about them. Young people usually won't see Jesus as the ultimate author of *Humanae Vitae* without someone connecting the dots. Many will rationalize immoral behaviors during the fertile time unless they learn to the contrary. And who can choose to use all the signs unless they learn their strengths and weaknesses?

Will a significant number of engaged couples soon start to experience the blessings of the right kind of NFP course? It is not impossible that it could happen soon. All of us including bishops have heard repeatedly in recent years that the definition of insanity is to expect different results from doing the same old things. Some bishops and priests already realize that they would not be involved in the same-sex marriage debate if 90% of fertile-age married Catholics were living chaste marriages instead of using unnatural forms of birth control. Marital contraception is not only the elephant in the sanctuary; it is also the source of the other sexual evils that come from the Greek word *porneia*. But something more than awareness is needed to kick start chastity-based efforts to rebuild the Church. First, bishops and priests need to have a sense of urgency. Second, they need to truly internalize how the right kind of NFP course can help their dioceses and parishes as well as individual families. Lastly, bishops and priests need to realize that NFP is not difficult to learn and to practice and that NFP education does not require an expensive bureaucracy. Giant steps can be taken during the forthcoming Year of Faith. When dioceses require engaged couples to take the right kind of NFP course as part of parish evangelization efforts, good things will happen.

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John F. Kippley and his wife Sheila are the co-founders of Natural Family Planning International Inc. based in Cincinnati, Ohio. Mr. Kippley has two Master's degrees in theology, and his most recent book is *Battle-Scarred: Justice Can Be Elusive*. Mrs. Kippley has a degree in the health sciences, and in 2008 the Kippleys were awarded honorary doctorates in the humanities by the Franciscan University of Steubenville. In 1996 they were awarded the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Patrick A. Cardinal O'Boyle Award (affectionately referred to as the "swinging in the wind" award) for their contributions to Catholic family life. The Kippleys are the authors of several books on theology, NFP, and breastfeeding, all of which are available at the website of NFP International, www.NFPandmore.org, where they can be contacted. (Published October 2012, *Culture Wars*)