

document but it can be very helpful to priests as a review of their responsibilities and opportunities in reconciling penitents. It serves to remind us that we must always, both in preaching and in the confessional, separate the evil of the sin from the weakness of the sinner. And we must be patient and understanding as confessors for we too are sinners and all can benefit from union with Christ in prayer, in the Scriptures and in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

The second document counsels priests and pastoral ministers in how to assist divorced and remarried Catholics. Without compromising the Church's teaching on the unity, mutual fidelity and indissolubility of Christian marriage, everything should be done to help couples with their problems prior to breakup and to assist them when it occurs. Some divorced persons will continue to live as single persons and they should be encouraged to live a full Christian and sacramental life. Some divorced and remarry and they should be helped to have their marriage validated and blessed if that is possible. Some, however, are unable to validate their present marriage but they too should be given pastoral care and counseled to seek God's help in prayer, in the Scriptures and in Eucharistic adoration. While they cannot receive the Eucharist, they can deepen their own faith, seek the grace of conversion and participate in the activities of the Christian community.

While these documents are primarily addressed to priests and ministers, all can profit from reading them. Therein we see the Church, and priests, as ministers of God's mercy. As agents of reconciliation and as guides for all on the path to deeper union with Christ. ■

*This article was originally published in the March 28, 1997 issue of the Catholic Star Herald, the official newspaper of the diocese of Camden, N.J. It is reprinted here with permission.*

# A Couple's Witness

*Anonymous*

Recently, I was in the office of my NFP Coordinator for my first annual NFP check-up. She asked me how we liked the Natural Family Planning program and when I explained to her how it had rejuvenated our marriage and improved our feelings about ourselves, she suggested we tell our story. Because our journey here has been painful, we have decided to remain anonymous.

However, we are convinced that the Catholic Church has an exciting secret that needs to be shared.

So, let me start with a little background information. We're both in our mid-30s, married 13 years with three young children. Each of us had painful childhoods, filled with rejection. My husband's father was regularly unfaithful to his wife and equally regular in beating her. Being the only boy (he has two sisters), he received the brunt of his father's rage. Each attempt to please was met with humiliation and physical force. His parents divorced during his senior year of high school and the family split up, each setting up their own household.

I am the youngest of a large family. My father was stricken with cancer when I was in 2nd grade and died when I was a teen. I got lost in the crowd of children and illness, and was "found" by a brother who sexually abused me when I was 6 and 7, and a neighbor who sexually abused me from the age of 10 to 14. In my late teens, when I revealed these

things to my mother, she suggested that I was at fault.

We'd been sexually active before marriage and I remained on the Pill for another seven years, keeping our bedroom door firmly shut to God. For several reasons, we never considered NFP as an option for us. No one we knew who'd had sex before marriage practiced NFP. Priests gave us conflict-

ing opinions on artificial birth control. The users of NFP we did know were either dissatisfied with the restraint demanded or pompous and judgmental of those outside their clique, as if their practicing NFP automatically made them

morally superior. We also never heard it promoted at Mass, and we were regular active church-goers, not infrequent guests.

Because of the sexual abuse, marital intimacy was confusing for me and I can see now how I injured my already bruised husband. We were unable to give ourselves to one another. I could not see how God fit in with sexual pleasure. After I received counseling for my increasing thoughts of suicide, we started a family. I thought using my sexuality to bring life would heal me. While being parents to our son was easy and wonderful, by the time our daughter was one, I was out of control. I again went for counseling, determined to find out if I really was to blame for the abuse and face myself. At this point, we also

*"We are convinced that the Catholic Church has an exciting secret that needs to be shared."*

decided to place everything in God's hands and use no birth control.

Three weeks later, we were expecting. While putting things in God's hands was a step in the right direction, using no birth control was not the answer. We weren't being responsible, we were trying to pawn responsibility for our lives over to God. Also, the absence of birth control does not demand mutual respect.

When our third child was weaned, my husband suggested we give NFP a chance, since the Church recommended it. Some friends of ours practiced the method and seemed to have an especially intimate relationship. When we attended a talk on NFP given by several married couples and recommended by our friends, my suspicion that NFP was for the saintly was confirmed. Each couple clearly stated that they were virgins before marriage, as if this was a prerequisite. Had this been my only introduction to the NFP program, I would never have tried it. These talks further isolated us from the Church whose doctrines we were trying hard to embrace.

I was lucky to have a special friend in whom I could confide my feelings of being unfit for the NFP program. With her support, we decided to give NFP a chance. That brought us to the office of

our diocesan NFP Coordinator a year ago. We aren't the same couple now. We've finally achieved that "community of life and love" outlined in *Gaudium et Spes*. The respect for ourselves and each other demanded by NFP has helped each of us heal. This may sound implausible. But just as something as simple as not working on the Lord's Day can enrich family life, so can NFP enrich a marriage. I have come to see the goodness of our sexuality and this change in me has allowed each of us to give ourselves to the other without reservation. This new found mutual respect has opened our hearts to each other and we are no longer two hurting individuals. We are secure in our love, sure that our union is God's plan for us.

We have discovered that sexual intimacy is a central facet of the marriage covenant. Feelings of respect, concern and permanence flow from a healthy and happy sexual union. Conversely, when one feels used and cheap and unworthy in the bedroom, then there is no respect and empathy in the relationship and true union is elusive.

Many people who practice NFP and many who have yet to try it, feel that because a woman abstains from sexual relations during ovulation, that the program is sexist and cruel. But I have found the opposite to be true. Sex on demand seems so empty now. I could not go back. It would be too tempting to use my husband and be used in return. And that week when we abstain is our gift to God. We've truly been given a knowledge that can transform lives.

Please help us spread the word about NFP. Don't be afraid to recommend it just because it demands sexual restraint in our sexually free world. This call to a higher level of responsibility is precisely NFP's core of strength. Let others know that this special program of planning a family is open to everyone, no matter how long they've been married or how many partners they've had. Every marriage deserves this incredible gift. ■

## SPOTLIGHT ON:

# One More Soul

Steve Koob, Ph.D.

*Every now and then a new family will move into an old neighborhood bringing with it gifts that add to the life of the community. It is fairly easy to think of the NFP community as one such neighborhood where everyone pretty much knows everyone else. The organization spotlighted here is in many ways, the "new kid on the block." One More Soul is a relatively new group that has already shared its gifts generously with the NFP community and the Church. We thought that you should get to know them.*

What's in a name? When a friend of mine first heard of One More Soul, he asked, "Steve, do I really need another soul?" I replied, "No, Tom, of course you don't need another soul. You just need to take very good care of the one you have." A potential vendor, hearing of us by phone, wrote to "One Morsel." One More Soul is a "small delicacy," which we pray is, "one that is extremely pleasing" to almighty God.

One More Soul (OMS) was begun in 1993 to "educate and convince people that children are a great blessing from the Lord and that contraception is harmful to women, marriage, and society." Mary Ann Walsh and I, as co-founders, believe that the creation of a single human soul is more awesome than the creation of the entire material universe. Thus if our efforts lead to only one couple being open to new life—one more soul—all our efforts are easily justified.

## Real Love

The perfect book for anyone whose ministry involves teens or for that matter anyone who spends a lot of time with young people.

(See page 15 for further details.)