

Diocesan Activity Report - NFP

Diocesan Development Program

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ADOLESCENT FERTILITY AWARENESS AND NFP NEW YORK--NEW JERSEY REGIONAL MEETING

On October 13, 1984, the dioceses of New Jersey and southern New York - Brooklyn, Rockville Center and New York, held a one-day Workshop at Felician College in Lodi, New Jersey. The Diocesan Development Program co-sponsored the event. More than 100 persons participated in the day-long sessions. The major theme of the Workshop was fertility awareness programs for adolescents. The theme was chosen because many diocesan programs recognize the need to impart correct information and establish some positive motivation toward sexuality, marriage and childbearing during the high school years. Moreover, increasing numbers of NFP personnel are being invited to collaborate with other diocesan agencies in setting-up high school marriage programs. From the available research and experience, it is clear that in order to develop proper attitude toward human sexuality and to achieve sexual responsibility, young people need accurate information about human reproduction set in the context of a positive appreciation of fertility. But coupled with information must be motivation - motivation based on Christian moral principles. Working from this conviction, a small group of speakers were invited to speak of their experience and discuss their programs with the audience.

Professor James Kelly provided an overview of Catholic attitudes toward marriage, contraception and abortion. Kelly reported on recent data indicating that Catholic attitudes are different from mainstream America. Kelly cited a study of sophomore and senior high school students by Judith Blake, which showed that Catholics placed a higher value on parenthood, were open to somewhat more children per family, and showed less concern about contraception. Other studies corroborate a difference in Catholic attitudes. (See references on final page).

Assuming, on the strength of the current data, that the differences in attitudes are real, Kelly raised the question as to whether they are simply "residual", that is, relics of the past or evidence of some kind of a quasi-permanent cultural lag. Responding to his own question, Kelly argued that the attitudinal differences could well persist if they were seen as prophetic. Kelly explained that "the moral requirements associated with religious affiliation will become residual unless they are experienced as somehow linked to the deepest aspirations of personal dignity and human community. If Catholic teachings about contraception and abortion are increasingly experienced primarily as requirements of group loyalty, as badges of Catholic difference, they will be residual; but if these teachings are experienced as prophetic, that is, as calls toward the promotion of human community and dignity, they are likely to remain, and in culturally vital ways."

In keeping with the specific theme of the conference, the presentation of high school educational and catechetical programs that have integrated the insights of NFP theory and practice was the focus of the first half of the day long meeting. Formats designed for use either in Catholic school or/parish religious education settings were discussed and reviewed by a panel representing the five programs from various states. Christine O'Keeffe of Washington, D.C.'s Center for Life described "The Rainbow Program," a fertility awareness and chastity series for 10th and 11th graders. The program is directed to enhancing communication between parents and adolescents, so that teenagers appreciate the procreative potential and develop self-esteem. It provides three one-hour sessions, but the material could easily be divided and covered in six sessions.

Teen Crossroads: Pathways to Decision, a fifteen hour program developed at St. Agnes Hospital, Baltimore was presented by Sally Schwerdt, who stressed the necessity of involving parents and their positive reaction when appropriately involved. Covering an entire semester, the Baltimore program has been piloted and evaluated in a number of schools and is moving toward its final form for publishing. The program is designed to help senior high students from 10th through 12th grade. It aims: 1) to increase their self-esteem; 2) to increase their appreciation of the gift of life and fertility; 3) to increase their knowledge of christian sexuality, and 4) to enhance communication with parents.

Sr. Sally Huston described the Cleveland program, stressing that it does not teach NFP, but deals with attitudes and values that lead to appreciation of NFP. It focuses on the marriage relationship and a Christian understanding of sexuality. The program includes two tape presentations and is used in Catholic high schools and religious education programs. The program has also been tested well and is used in all Catholic High Schools.

William Urbine reported on the initiation of efforts in Allentown, Pa. at present, a training concern in NFP for teachers is underway. There was some initial resistance for fear that the NFP movement was overshadowing other pedagogical work. The high school program is only one part of a concerted diocesan effort to provide information on NFP in all programs.

John Singler described the recently developed format for parishes of the New York Archdiocese, in which combined parent and teen presentations are offered as part of confirmation preparation. There, he said, both our public and parochial school students could be reached most effectively. The Archdiocesan format deals with five topics; self-awareness, relationships, appreciation of fertility, conception and the developing child, and moral responsibility. Singler stressed the importance of the parish priest taking part in at least the last discussion:

"Through personal contact with the parish priest his human concern and understanding will be seen by the teens and their parents and the real and deep concern of the Church will come across to them."

It is noteworthy that in the discussion there was a general consensus that none of the programs attempt to teach NFP to teenagers, but rather, intend to provide positive and accurate information about fertility and to inculcate proper attitudes toward sexuality, chastity and marriage.

The afternoon program included workshops on NFP programming, breastfeeding and NFP for the pre-menopausal couple. Two especially well received workshops dealt with the spiritual dimensions of sexuality, marital love and marital chastity. Dr. James Fox, a New Jersey gynecologist with more than 25 years experience in NFP, discussed the importance of intimacy for married couples. Intimacy requires affection, commitment, expressiveness and self-disclosure. NFP requires and enhances this quality of intimacy for a couple, and removes the total reliance on sexual activity as the basis of love and harmony.

Fr. Ronald Lawlor, OFM, Cap. described the chaste person as the self-possessed person, and said that while "virtue is difficult to acquire, it is not difficult to practice, once acquired." Referring specifically to marital chastity and to the periodic abstinence of the married when spacing births, he rejected the claim that periodic abstinence is "too difficult to expect." Such an assumption is contrary to fact and in Fr. Lawlor's opinion, seems only to induce or reenforce a poor sense of self-worth. On the other hand, the Christian message tells people of their great worth and lets them know they can indeed lead virtuous and excellent lives.

In his homily at the Mass, Archbishop Gerety told the participants that their efforts in promoting and teaching NFP is of great value - not only for themselves, but also for the Church. NFP is important, Archbishop Gerety said, as "a testimony to the value of human love," and "in helping couples appreciate the Church's full teaching on Christian marriage and living out their parenthood in a truly responsible way." The work of NFP couples is also important "in communicating a wholesome, positive and inspiring understanding of human sexuality," and is "a powerful testimony to the dignity and value of children", especially in a world that too often diminishes or rejects the child.

Follow-up on this meeting is planned during 1985 to meet the needs of an increasing number of couples and dioceses.

Information on a special teen fertility awareness program featuring the Billings method can be obtained from Hanna Klaus, M.D. and Ursula Fagan, MSW; on "Springtime of Your Life" - a slide presentation on teen chastity from CCL; and on an Adolescent Family Life Demonstration project from Family of the Americas Foundation.

Walter Sweeney
Rev. Msgr. James T. McHugh

ARTICLES ON CATHOLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD FERTILITY

Blake, J., "Catholicism and Fertility: On Attitudes of Young Americans", Population and Development Review Vol. 10, No. 2, June, 1984.

Filsinger, E. and Wilson, M., "Religiosity, Socioeconomic Rewards, and Family Development: Predictors of Marital Adjustment", Journal of Marriage and the Family, Vol. 46, No. 3, August, 1984.

Johnson, Nan, "Religious Differentials in Reproduction: The Effects of ~~Sectarian Education~~", Demography, Vol. 19, No. 4, November, 1982.

Mosher, W., and Hendershot, G., "Religion and Fertility: A Replication", Demography, Vol. 21, No. 2, May, 1984.

NEW POPE JOHN XXIII CENTER STUDY

Moral Theology Today: Certitudes and Doubts is the title of the Pope John XXIII Medical-Moral Center's latest publication. It contains the papers from the January, 1984, Workshop for Bishops held in Dallas, Texas. The Workshop dealt primarily with fundamental moral themes, notably, New Testament norms, twofold effect, proportionalism. A number of essays would be of special interest to those involved in NFP, including "The Moral Inseparability of the Unitive and Procreative Aspects of Sexual Intercourse", by Thomas Doyle, OP; and two articles on "The Bishop and NFP" - are on the educational approaches by Gerard Brunelle and are on the theological and pastoral implications by Msgr. McHugh. (A reprint of Msgr. McHugh's article is included with this Newsletter.) The entire volume would be a valuable addition to any NFP library. Copies can be obtained from Pope John Center, 4455 Woodson Rd., St. Louis, Missouri 63134, at \$17.95 per copy.