

# Diocesan Activity Report-NFP

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The national meeting of the diocesan coordinators of NFP programs took place at Seton Hall University on June 19-22, 1985. The 144 participants came from 51 dioceses nationwide, and from the various national NFP provider organizations. The program combined a number of substantive presentations with workshop sessions and general discussions.

Archbishop Peter L. Gerety of Newark welcomed the participants at the opening session. The Archbishop also took the occasion to express his happiness with the relocation of the national office to Seton Hall University. Noting that the work of NFP promoters and teachers is primarily a pastoral effort, Archbishop Gerety said that a Catholic university, in addition to fostering learning, research and dialogue, looks at the human person in the light of faith. One of the important roles of the Catholic university is to give an integrated approach to the truths of the faith and assist those in various pastoral endeavors. The main integrating factor is theology, and the Archbishop expressed his hope that the theologate of Immaculate Conception Seminary, along with the university's theology department, would provide a special and positive perspective on all areas of human knowledge and science. Archbishop Gerety, referring to John Paul II's recent letter to young people, emphasized that those in the NFP apostolate also have a special opportunity to prepare people for marriage. Work in natural family planning gives couples "a special appreciation of human sexuality as a gift of God, as one expression of a deep, mutual, interpersonal love between a man and a woman who are committed to one another for life and who perceive the privilege that is theirs to share with God in the transmission of human life." It is this vision that they can bring to youth to prepare them for the vocation of Christian marriage. Monsignor John Petillo, Chancellor of Seton Hall, reiterated Archbishop Gerety's view of future cooperation between the Diocesan Development Program and the University.

Archbishop Gerety then referred to the letter from Archbishop Martinez of the Vatican Secretariat of State, indicating that the Holy Father had been informed of the meeting and that he encourages those in the diocesan programs to continue their participation in the Church's overall pastoral care of married couples and families. Archbishop Martinez emphasized the following points:

- a) Those working in NFP have a special ecclesial mission, in union with the bishops, to expand access to NFP.
- b) Natural family planning involves a special Christian understanding of human sexuality, married love and responsible parenthood.
- c) The Church's teaching in regard to sexuality and marriage offers enrichment for the person and society. It is an expression of that conjugal love that binds husband and wife together until death.
- d) Responsible parenthood implies a positive orientation toward parenting and a high valuation of children.
- e) Success in NFP requires an accurate understanding of the methods, which is based on good instruction. This instruction must take into account the need for the two great virtues of love and continence and the inherent link between them that enables couples to practice periodic abstinence without endangering conjugal intimacy.
- f) The Holy Father has frequently recognized that it is providential that different NFP methods exist to meet the special needs of individual couples. The diocesan programs provide an opportunity for all to work together, to share research and pedagogical techniques, and to achieve a unity of purpose and commitment.

John Quesnell, a specialist in marriage and family therapy, in the keynote address said that he looked forward to the day when NFP would be totally integrated into marriage preparation and enrichment programs, and not isolated as a special area of concern. Wholeness is the objective, and abstinence a natural part of the conjugal relationship. NFP promotes selflessness and concern for the other person as well as a high value on human life. In marriage, commonly shared values are most important, not the amount or intensity of sexual activity. It is the agreement on value questions that ultimately binds couples together and gives them an appreciation of spirituality and their own relationship with God. NFP helps a couple strengthen their love. It fosters communication; generates self restraint, creates fidelity and mutual respect. In a word, each person is valued for who he or she is, and for what one can call forth from one's partner. NFP also teaches patience, from which a couple develops a deeper appreciation for sex, a better understanding of equality and a deeper awareness of the need for spiritual love. NFP is not an end in itself, but is important for promoting those values which make for a lasting marriage.

Dr. Anthony Haynor, a sociologist at St. John's University in New York, described some of the trends and attitudes toward marriage in the U.S. Present patterns include later age at marriage and first birth; increased proportions of working wives and mothers; lower birth rates; higher divorce rates; larger numbers of older persons and pervasive questions or doubts about marriage and parenthood. A later age at marriage may imply greater maturity, but it also lengthens the time between sexual maturity and permanent commitment. This leads to pre-marital sexual activity and accounts for increases in out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Consumerism and affluence often lead to overemphasis on material goods, which in turn requires two wages and/or two professions/careers/jobs. Parenting, especially motherhood is denigrated, and the value of the child is diminished. NFP couples should view these phenomena in the context of continual changes in American society and the tendency of Americans to be oriented to the immediate present. Technology and affluence create unlimited expectations, if not demands. Secularization has increased, and sacred and religious commitments have a weakened hold on people. Moreover, the moral nets that held society together have also weakened. Consequently, people have little on which to base their personal commitments and little sense of the hereafter. The result is a deepening and corrosive individualism.

Fr. William Smith, dean of studies at St. Joseph's Seminary in New York, described some of the new techniques of human reproduction. In light of legitimate desires of married couples to have a child, and an often naive confidence in scientific progress, many fail to assess these techniques in terms of marriage and familial commitments, in terms of counterbalancing concerns and in terms of long-range implications for society. Fr. Smith made the point that not everything that is doable is thereby good, that we must have an inherent respect for God's overall governance of our lives, and for the structure and purpose of each and every human action.

Fr. Donald McCarthy spoke of the need for understanding and communicating with priests. NFP is a difficult topic for priests to deal with, and one that requires the reassurance that comes from the witness of couples. Priests can also be helpful by giving a reasoned explanation of the theology of Christian marriage, the difference between NFP and artificial contraception, and by providing encouragement to couples during the learning process. Fr. McCarthy drew from Familiaris consortio and other papal addresses in presenting a contemporary view of the Church's teaching.

Sr. Grace Boys of the University of Portland reported on a client survey conducted in the Portland area. The study measured intended and unintended pregnancies occurring during the previous year. A high level of satisfaction was reported by users of NFP, both in regard to instruction and use. Also, the importance of the Church's teaching was considered important to the respondents.

Most support for couples electing to use NFP comes from their teachers or other couples, which underlines the importance of a supportive network. More information is expected as the data is further analyzed.

Dr. Frank Rice of Fairfield University reported on the research on NFP that has been published during the past five years. Dr. Rice updated his earlier study (see International Journal of Fertility) and also reviewed some of the research on the ovulation method. The research shows that the ovulation method and the sympto-thermal method are effective, but require careful instruction and motivation. Efforts should be constantly made to refine the parameters, to enhance interpretation and to facilitate accurate charting. Efforts should be made by couples to establish a consistent pattern of behavior in these areas. Dr. Rice noted the new interest of government agencies in promoting NFP, at least in less developed countries, and this should increase the research base and lead to new information.

Dr. James Fox of Holy Name Hospital in Teaneck, New Jersey, spoke of challenges to the medical profession. The modern doctor is essentially uninformed about NFP, having received practically no information in his/her training. The medical journals carry virtually no articles on contemporary NFP methods, whereas the representatives of the various contraceptive companies are in the doctor's office every week. When a patient asks the doctor, it is generally at the end of a visit and the doctor cannot afford the time for proper instruction. Reversing these situations will not be easy. Nonetheless, Dr. Fox reminded the participants that NFP is workable and good for people, and he argued that the Church has a vested interest in seeing it better promoted and taught.

Dr. Fox then proposed that the Diocesan Development Program begin immediately to plan for a major International Congress on NFP in 1987 or 1988. There would be sessions on advances in reproductive biology pertinent to NFP, on sociology and demography, on pedagogy and on ethics and theology. The Congress would focus on new studies, commissioning papers as soon as possible. All would be researched and presented according to strict guidelines so as to insure their validity, consistency with other studies and their eventual publication in scholarly journals. In his paper Dr. Fox presented a series of questions in each field that might be studied and reported on. These questions will be circulated to some consultants and a working committee will be set up to further discuss the proposal. Things should begin to move in August, 1985.

Mr. Robert Kambic, currently doing research at Johns Hopkins University spoke on the evaluation of NFP programs. He proposed some basic questions that every diocese should pursue for self-evaluation and for program development. The use of a standardized

instrument at the diocesan level would then pave the way for an annual or biennial national report.

Dr. Hanna Klaus addressed the topic of adolescent sexuality and sexual self-image. Dr. Klaus reviewed the stages of psycho-sexual development in childhood and adolescence. She argued that fertility awareness contributes to maturity and a healthy self-identity on the part of adolescents. She also argued that mother-daughter communication is extremely important, and although some would link this to contraception, such an approach will likely be unsuccessful and counter-productive. In fact, most young women show a need for a better understanding of human relationships and of their own emotions. Dr. Klaus followed her presentation with a workshop on counseling techniques, in which she reported on her own adolescents' project that is in process at a number of sites across the country.

Two presentations dealt with periodic abstinence. Patrick Downing of Toledo reviewed some recent studies on the frequency and perceived need for sexual intercourse. The sexual drive is by no means as demanding as the pop-literature implies. In fact, absent communication and other signs of affection, sex can easily lose its attraction for married couples. Fr. Ronald Lawlor's presentation on conjugal chastity complimented Pat Downing's. Fr. Lawlor said that chastity should be seen as self-possession, as a factor contributing to the appropriate enjoyment of sex. But chastity should be learned and applied at all stages of life, with differing and appropriate emphases. NFP is important for the teaching of chastity, and is successful because couples have acquired positive and dignified attitudes toward their own sexuality. NFP teachers have a great opportunity to teach people how to successfully practice NFP, to meet their own needs in terms of parenthood, and to enjoy their sexual love -- all within the context of God's plan and their own growth in holiness.

Michael Taylor from Mt. Rainier, Maryland, reviewed Title X of the Public Health Service Act which provides the bulk of family planning money in the U.S. He also described the regulations and guidelines for receiving federal funds, noting that much unclarity and ambiguity surrounds the guidelines. A number of dioceses spoke of their own funded projects and the difficulties encountered. There may be easier access to Title XX money for educational projects in regard to adolescent pregnancy. More work will be done to explore the possibilities of federal or state funding of NFP programs.

In addition to the presentations there were workshops on various ways of implementing the Diocesan Plan - in premarriage programs, in seminaries, among Hispanic-Americans, in high school marriage courses. A discussion with some of the major national providers provided awareness of new dimensions of their programs and new avenues for cooperation.

A further set of workshops focused on public relations, on breast-feeding and on pre-menopause. During the past year a number of Catholic newspapers have given positive coverage of NFP events or printed special supplements. Considerably more systematic public relations work should be done by NFP couples, and the workshop provided counsel for such efforts.

Bishop Walter Curtis of Bridgeport, Connecticut, celebrated the closing Mass. In his homily, Bishop Curtis spoke of the interest of the Bishops Pro-Life Committee in the Diocesan Development Program, and of his personal involvement as Chairman of the NFP subcommittee. Bishop Curtis also emphasized that, as the Holy Father has frequently said, couples in the NFP movement are involved in a special pastoral work. Couples should realize that the sacrament of marriage entitles them to special gifts -- charisms -- for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church. These are not simply little personal graces, but are aimed at fulfilling the Church's pastoral work. Thus, NFP couples bring to their work both understanding and competence in teaching the various methods and the witness of promotion and personal commitment to NFP.

Summaries of the presentations and the workshop papers are in preparation, and should be available by September. Some complete texts will also be available.