

Responding to *Humanae vitae*'s call to minister to married Couples:

THE DIOCESE OF MEMPHIS

God's Providence—A History of Teaching Natural Family Planning in Memphis

By Mary Pat Van Epps

In the early 1950's, before the development of the birth control pill, Dr. John Billings in Melbourne, Australia was asked to investigate the unreliability of the Calendar Rhythm Method. His dedication and research led to the development of the Billings Ovulation Method™ of Natural Family Planning (NFP).

By the mid-1960's Dr. Evelyn Billings had joined her husband and the research team and began the actual teaching of this new method of NFP to couples who were deeply grateful for the understanding of their fertility and ability to regulate it. The Billings and their colleagues could not have been working at a better time. By then the birth control pill had become the most sought after contraceptive method with its promises of so-called complete freedom and control. Couples, both married and unmarried, rushed to their doctors to be "put on the pill." The world urgently needed a solid NFP method that respected God's plan for marriage!

Also around the same tie, in 1968, Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae vitae* reiterating the constant and profound teaching of the Catholic Church on the regulation of birth and the sacredness of the conjugal union. Unfortunately, and as we know, many Catholics refused to accept this teaching. The opposition of many would become a challenge to those who promoted NFP and Catholic teaching that supported its use in marriage.

In 1974 Sr. Lucille Levasseur, a Marist Missionary who had been teaching the Billings Method in the Fiji Islands, came to Memphis, and with support from Fr. Milton Guthrie, gave presentations on this new NFP method around the city. Many Catholic couples, who were still trying to live the teaching of the Church, flocked to hear her lectures. And, many of them became involved in teaching the Billings Method to others. Midsouth Family Planning was established as an organization to disseminate information and instruction in the Billings Ovulation Method™ through the efforts of Don Bennis, Ramona Hall, Kathy Dowling and many others. The name was later changed to Midsouth Ovulation Method, Inc. (MOM) and in 1976 Sr. Jane Hofmeyer was giving monthly lectures on the Billings Method with volunteer teachers providing instruction in their homes. Bishop Carroll Dozier, Msgr. Paul Clunan, and Fr. John Batson lent their support and encouragement to the couples.

By 1978 many of the original instructors were no longer able to be involved in the teaching. From the ashes, Doris Moss, Marsha Keller, and Mary Pat Van Epps began again to keep the NFP flame alive in Memphis. In 1979 Msgr. Clunan brought Dr. Hanna Klaus to Memphis to speak on the Billings Method to a large group of Pro-Life leaders. By 1980 Sharon Masterson and Doug Smith became leaders and Midsouth Natural Family Planning, Inc. became the functioning organization.

In 1981 Sr. Annette Crone and St. Joseph Hospital offered to provide an NFP Center as a service of the hospital. Mary Pat Van Epps was hired as coordinator and along with dedicated volunteer teachers and the support of Paul and Joan Mahoney, NFP grew and became firmly established in Memphis.

Bishop Francis Stafford helped sponsor a visit to Memphis by Drs. John and Evelyn Billings in 1985. The Drs. Billings gave lectures and interviews for three days and touched many lives. The NFP Center developed the first Mother/Daughter Programs in 1986 and added the Father/Son Program in 1987. These programs became well known throughout the country, and many other dioceses began presenting them using the model developed in Memphis.

By 1987 with hospital cutbacks, the NFP Center was closed, but in 1988 Bishop Daniel Buechlein made the NFP Center a ministry of the Catholic Diocese of Memphis. Fr. Bill Silk provided the prayers and Rita Schroeder and St. Francis Hospital provided the office and classroom space.

The Mother/Daughter and Father/Son Programs flourished at St. Francis serving more than seven hundred people each year. An NFP Center Advisory Committee was established, and a strategic plan was written. Chastity promotion materials became a major development of the NFP Center and were sold throughout all fifty states and Canada.

Diocesan NFP Director, Mary Pat Van Epps, was appointed in 1988 to the NFP National Advisory Board of the then called National Conference of Catholic Bishop's Diocesan Development Program.¹ She helped write the bishops' *Standards for Diocesan NFP Ministry*. The Diocese of Memphis was one of the first NFP Programs to receive Endorsement from the bishops' NFP office by providing quality NFP instruction as well as instruction on the moral principles contained in the teachings of the Catholic Church regarding sexuality, fertility, marriage and family life. A dedicated group of volunteers NFP teachers continued to provide instruction and follow-up to couples of all faiths in the Memphis area.

In 1994 the Diocese of Memphis hosted the Billings Ovulation Method Association Meeting with Drs. John and Lyn Billings again being guests in our city. In 1996, the NFP Center moved into the new Catholic Center with the rest of the diocesan offices and was a well-established service ministry offering help and hope to couples wanting to live in harmony with God's design in this way of life based on love.

From 1996, the Diocese of Memphis NFP Center flourished teaching the Billings Ovulation Method™ to couples all over the mid-south, both Catholics and Protestants. NFP Teachers, Carol Thomas, Doris Fragale, Tina Heindel along with Mary Pat Van Epps remained faithful Teachers for the next 21 years. The chastity promoting materials of bookmarks, stickers, cards, T-shirts, shorts, etc. continued to be sold across the country. The Mother/Daughter and Father/Son Programs increased in many dioceses and more people were exposed to the beauty of NFP by learning about God's wonderful design of human fertility and sexuality.

By 2013, new Teachers, Jessica Robbins, Sierra Kallaher, Andrea Jimenez and Jennifer Podesta became part of the team with youthful enthusiasm to continue the work. After so many years of devoted work in NFP, Mary Pat Van Epps retired from the diocese in June 2017. It is her prayer that the good work of NFP instruction will continue in the Diocese of Memphis!

@2018, Mary Pat Van Epps. Used with permission.

1. The Catholic bishops' conference changed names over the years and is now entitled the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The bishops' NFP ministry, which was founded in 1981, changed its name in 2007 and is called NFP Program. It is in the Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth.