

"Outgoing, Confident & Competent"

Diocesan NFP Coordinators and The Implementation of The National Standards

Editorial: Theresa Notare

A disgruntled NFP user recently published an article in *America* (Feb. 11, 1995). Entitled, "My Argument with NFP," the author told of her experience with NFP and how this experience convinced her that NFP is an ineffective method of family planning. As might be expected, the article was filled with many inaccuracies and gross misstatements. However, amidst the false claims were two pieces of information which immediately attracted my attention: 1) The author said she had wanted to learn NFP, but found it difficult to obtain information from either

her doctor or the Church; and 2) She lacked confidence in the competency of her NFP instructors.

Quite apart from this particular author's interpretations, access to NFP information and teacher competency are important issues. I will look at both issues primarily from the perspective of NFP services offered under the auspices of the Church, for it is my strong opinion that: 1) diocesan NFP coordinators can make a significant contribution to ensure that access to NFP information and services is attainable in a diocese; and, 2) that there is a desperate

need for a national system of quality control among NFP teachers. The bishops of the United States have supported this last point in their approval of the *National Standards* of the DDP.

Be Outgoing!

We in the NFP community know well that health care professionals are often woefully misinformed about the modern methods of NFP and NFP providers. But as important as it is for people in the medical community to be well-informed, it is even more critical for those who work for the Church. How discouraging it must be for a person who wants to follow the Church's teaching on responsible parenthood, to find only a poorly informed staff among Church personnel. Diocesan NFP staff—coordinators and teachers—need to be outgoing! They need to make sure

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Pontifical Academy of Science Studies NFP

On November 16-19, 1994, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences sponsored a conference on NFP research. Entitled, "The Scientific Bases of the Natural Regulation of Fertility and Associated Problems," the conference involved some 30 experts from around the world.

Twenty-two presentations were given by men and women, Catholic and non-Catholic. Among the presenters was Dr. Thomas Hilgers of the Pope Paul VI Institute of Human Reproduction in Omaha. DDP director, Bishop James T. McHugh was among the organizers of the conference.

In their presentations the participants acknowledged the sound scientific basis of NFP methodology. Scientists can no longer question the fact that women have clear, identifiable signs of fertility. However, the presenters did acknowledge two problems

in regard to these methods: enabling a woman to understand her own body and the reproductive cycle, i.e., to recognize the fertile and infertile periods, and the need for more studies to validate the reliability of NFP methods.

In their discussions, the participants stressed the importance of "formation." By this term they referred to the competent teaching of NFP to clients. Current NFP research demonstrates a direct correlation between the level of teaching and the efficacy of NFP. It was acknowledged that the second problem, abstinence, was more difficult to address because it involved a change in human behavior. Some presenters underscored the significant cultural and behavioral hurdles to overcome, both in developed and underdeveloped countries, before patterns of responsible abstinence can be established. They also admitted that some difficulties may

be psychological.

Participants of the meeting were received by the Holy Father in an audience on Nov. 18. The Holy Father noted that, "Scientists have managed to demonstrate . . . that the natural methods of regulating fertility . . . are trustworthy and effective, even in cases of very irregular ovarian cycles." He continued and emphasized that "Knowledge of human sexuality and the reproductive system helps married couples to discover the spousal dimension of the body and its place in God's design." The Holy Father concluded by imparting his blessing on those gathered as well as blessing their work, "I entrust to the Lord your research which will allow important advances to be put before the international scientific community as a vital service to the integral development of individuals and couples." ■

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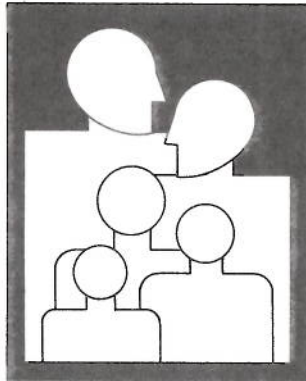
that they are known in their diocese. The main receptionist in a chancery should at a minimum, know who the NFP leaders are in the diocese. And eventually, a strong commitment must be made by diocesan NFP personnel to NFP outreach education. This outreach might involve the "papering" of NFP literature in parishes, hospitals, and offices of OB/GYNs. But it must also include personal contact. Projects must be constructed where well informed, articulate, and joyful NFP supporters can meet with various appropriate people (e.g., doctors, priests, and teachers) to ensure that NFP information is correct, that NFP literature will be disseminated, and that potential clients will be referred to NFP teachers. At this point it might be helpful to review "who's who" in diocesan NFP services.

The DDP has identified an NFP contact person in every diocese in the United States. Out of 188 dioceses, about half have an NFP program with an episcopally appointed **NFP Coordinator**. There is a big difference between an NFP Coordinator and an NFP contact person. A diocesan NFP contact person has minimal duties. For example, he or she receives all DDP's informational mailings, and is expected to disseminate that information to the bishop, appropriate diocesan personnel, and to the autonomous NFP teachers in the diocese. When requests come into the diocese for NFP instruction, the contact person refers clients to individual NFP teachers working within the area of the diocese.

The NFP Coordinator, on the other hand, has much more complex responsibilities (a complete list of those duties can be found in Section I of the *National Standards*, see p. 6). Those duties often include: creating an integrated NFP teaching team; scheduling NFP classes; providing

educational opportunities for appropriate groups in the diocese (e.g., priests, health care professionals, parish family life leaders, Catholic teachers, etc.); and disseminating NFP information.

Often, the NFP Coordinator also wears the hat of an umbrella ministry, e.g., "Family Life Director." In this case there is typically another person who assists the Coordinator in the organization of NFP activities. In many dioceses an NFP Advisory Board also helps guide the development of the program. Diocesan Advisory Boards are



often comprised of: NFP teachers; health care professionals; and appropriate chancery staff (e.g., director of Pro-Life Activities, Education, Priestly Life, etc.) Diocesan NFP teachers, an all volunteer staff, are the heart of the NFP program. They may teach as couples or as individuals, depending upon their specific NFP training. Diocesan NFP teachers are hard working, loyal, and joyfully spiritual. They are out on the "front lines" teaching and witnessing to the truth of the Church's teachings on conjugal love and responsible parenthood.

It is the tasks of the NFP Coordinator to pay special attention to making personal contacts. NFP information needs to get into the hands of both the couples who need to practice it, and the priests who need to support it. To this end, the diocesan NFP Coordinator must make his/herself known in the diocese, in the most positive of ways. In other words, the NFP coordinator cannot afford to be shy!

Confident Competency

How can one be sure that NFP teachers are competent? Generally, the NFP community answers by pointing to

whether or not an NFP teacher has been certified by a known and respected teacher education program. The NFP community knows each other's histories and consequently trusts each other's competency. However, in order to convince others, especially those who are skeptical, more is needed. How often have we heard NFP teachers say that couples may choose to learn NFP because they are tired of artificial methods and want "another method that may be more healthful?", only later do they find that their emotional and spiritual lives have been enhanced? In meeting people where they "are," NFP has to first "prove" itself as a viable method of responsible family planning before many people can be converted to the Lord's vision of human sexuality. And the key to the viability of NFP is competent methodological teaching.

NFP has no national "College of NFP Teachers" which ensures the competency of both secular and Church-sponsored NFP teachers. Each NFP provider has had to evaluate their own teacher candidates. This autonomy can work fine, however NFP can also benefit from an accrediting body. Currently only two groups approximate such a national organization: the American Academy of NFP; and the DDP/NFP. The former examines and evaluates Creighton Model OM programs exclusively, while the DDP looks only at Catholic diocesan NFP programs. Let's look briefly at the diocesan national system of evaluation.

The *National Standards* is the instrument which the DDP/NFP uses to evaluate diocesan NFP programs. The *Standards* provide a national system of evaluation of both the NFP program and the NFP teacher. Stated another way; the *Standards* require accountability from the diocese to an outside agency (i.e., DDP) as well as accountability from those who work in the NFP program to the program itself and an outside agency.

When a diocese implements the

Standards it strongly contributes to the strengthening of NFP ministry in all of the dioceses. This is so because the *Standards* underscore the fact that NFP services are an integral part of the Church's ministry to the family. They are a visible sign that the Church's teachings on human sexuality, conjugal love, and responsible parenthood are viable and here to stay. And they allow the bishops to respond to the needs of Catholic couples by providing them with assuredly sound ecclesial and methodological education that will enable them to live out the Church's teachings in this area.

The type of certification of diocesan NFP teachers which the *Standards* provides helps to validate NFP ministry in the dioceses. It is not a "re-certification." That is, it is not a repetition of what schools of NFP confer on their graduates. It is a ministerial certification. It is tailored to the needs of the diocese. It not only looks at NFP methodology, but it also looks at: how Church teaching is integrated in the classroom; how the diocesan NFP teacher is socialized into a diocesan team; and how that teacher is supported by the diocese (e.g., continuing education, opportunities for shared prayer, etc.).

The bishops of the United States are the only episcopal body—worldwide—that has made a commitment to integrating NFP services into the heart of diocesan ministry. It is the only episcopal conference with *National Standards* that include an implementation process. In fact, the DDP is periodically contacted by other episcopal conferences for information about this project. Much work needs to be done with regard to NFP out-reach education, and some NFP teachers may not yet be teaching as well as they should. But, diocesan NFP Coordinators can make a difference. They can begin with their own programs and implement the *National Standards*. Confidence in NFP and competency among NFP teachers can become a norm within the Church. ■

FOCUS: Implications of DDP

Endorsement for NFP teachers trained in education programs that have not secured formal Approval according to the *National Standards*

The *National Standards* require diocesan NFP teachers to be trained in Approved NFP teacher education programs. Diocesan NFP coordinators who wish to have their programs achieve Endorsement according to the *National Standards* may have questions regarding their future relationship to those teachers who graduate from NFP teacher education program that have not been evaluated according to the *Standards*. Typical questions the coordinator may ask include: "Can such teachers work within the diocese?"; "Are such teachers to be retrained by Approved teacher education programs?"; "Can we refer clients to such teachers?" These are some of the concerns which the following discussion tries to address.

There are currently two different situations of which diocesan NFP Coordinators must be aware with regard to the implementation of the *National Standards*:

1. **The interim period of certification.** Ending on Dec. 31, 1995, this process is tailored to meet the needs of the experienced NFP teacher.
2. **The permanent process of certification.** Beginning in January 1996, this process will treat all newly trained NFP teachers.

The Interim Period of Certification

Presently we are in an interim period of certification. This means that the Diocesan Development Program for NFP is currently "grandfathering" experienced NFP teachers into the system of the *National Standards*.

This process operates as follows: when a diocesan NFP program has achieved Endorsement according to the *National Standards*, that program must then evaluate its teachers. The experienced NFP teacher (one who has been teaching for at least a year) is evaluated by participating in either an observation or a self-study, or both. The evaluation is done by the diocesan NFP coordinator (or an appointed master NFP instructor). The DDP provides forms for both these processes and the diocesan coordinator is responsible for all of the documentation. Once complete, a simple application form is sent to the DDP requesting certification.

Certification Beginning in January 1996

The permanent process for certifying newly trained NFP teachers will go into effect as of Jan. 1, 1996. A major difference between the former process and the permanent process will be the requirement that a diocesan NFP teacher study with a DDP Approved teacher education program. This is a standard which will be upheld once the interim period is over.

It is important to remember that the *Standards* were developed for the dual purpose of evaluation and program development. Both the diocesan program and its teachers need to be evaluated in terms of NFP ministry (e.g., methodology and Church teaching). And, if the Church is to succeed in helping Catholic couples embrace its teachings on human sexuality, conjugal love, and responsible parenthood, both the program

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