THE INTEGRATION OF NFP INTO MARRIAGE PREPARATION

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"The very preparation for Christian marriage is itself a journey of faith. It is a special opportunity for the engaged to discover and deepen the faith they received in Baptism, and nourished by their Christian upbringing. In this way they come to recognize and freely accept their vocation to follow Christ and to serve the Kingdom of God in the married state".
(***Familiaris Consortio***)

This statement by John Paul II is what we'd hope all engaged couples are realizing as they come to us for marriage preparation. We'd also hope they are open and excited to hear what the Church has to say about marriage and specifically about sexuality in marriage. But as we all know, that is very often not the case. Even those of us doing marriage preparation aren't always focusing on it as a journey of faith for the couple….or even as sacramental preparation in the same sense as we would preparation for the reception of other sacraments.

What we in marriage preparation ministry are doing is taking our ministry of helping couples prepare to live together as husband and wife very seriously, by providing tools to enhance their couple relationship, while at the same time addressing marriage as both sacrament and vocation. Helping them understand what the Church teaches in the area of human sexuality and living marital chastity is but one of our tasks. But it's a huge task and a challenge because of the very different message about sex that today's young adults have received from the media, perhaps family and friends, and the society in which we live. At the same time, it's a very teachable moment because these couples are at a point in their lives to see sexual expression differently by the very fact that they are getting married.

Marriage preparation is an opportune time to present the wonder and beauty of what we teach and believe on human sexuality and its lived experience through Natural Family Planning (NFP) in marriage. It provides the opportunity to explain what we mean about conjugal love that is both unitive and procreative.

First, we need to consider those who will be sitting in front of us. While we're all aware of the media's vision of sex and its influence on today's young adults, I'd like to add a bit related to today's youth, who will before too long be the ones in marriage preparation. Some of today's music could make your hair curl…or send one off to confession. Some movies and TV shows could do the same, even the ones specifically made for youth.

Beyond that, I'd like to give you just a couple of common experiences my associate director and I have while doing chastity education with junior high and high school youth, from both Catholic and public schools, in our diocese. Our chastity retreat or program includes the "what and why" of Church teaching, as well as consequences of teen sexual activity, prolife issues, etc. In recent years, those requesting the program have also requested that oral sex be

discussed, as it has become a big problem with junior high and high school students. If you ask anyone, they will readily tell you when it became a problem and why. Note also that it's very common for a "warm" discussion to ensue among the students on whether or not that activity is "sex." Love and life? Unitive and procreative? Not even on the radar screen.

Naturally, the other issue that arises is premarital sex itself. Included in the program is current statistical information on the negative effect premarital sex can have on the future marriage relationship. The effect of cohabitation is also discussed. Teens strongly feel that premarital sex is very different than physical love in marriage and that sexual activity now will not affect their future marriage relationships.

Another issue is that which is raised in the popular movie, "Brokeback Mountain." Recognizing the controversy over the movie, I ask if you are aware of the teen version in a library book? The book, "Rainbow Boys," a youth novel, is well enough written so that by the end the reader readily relates to the characters and probably sympathizes with their situation. However, the young reader most likely has missed the well planned agenda within the plot. The plot goes well beyond accepting people for who they are, including their sexual orientation. It includes sexual intimacy scenes and the definite idea that the youth have the right to that activity. While there are many excellent books for today's youth, there are quite a number available at the library that have questionable content and explicit sexual scenes, of both boy and girl and same sex relationships. Love and life? Unitive and procreative? Not a concept that is being promoted to our youth through the media.

Reviews and excepts of many youth books are available at www.aolteenreads.com. Most of the books are appropriate for junior and high school readers. Some are not. Many parents are aware of TV shows, music and movies that present to both youth and adults a very different vision of sex than what the Catholic Church teaches. It would be interesting to know if they are aware of what is available to their kids in the library.

Isn't the topic integrating NFP into marriage prep? Yes, it certainly is. So why include the previous information? In order to consider how NFP and related Church teaching should be included in marriage preparation, we have to consider the audience we will be addressing. Therefore, it is important to recognize that many of the engaged coming to us have been inundated for years with the current world view of sex. The Church's vision is very far afield from what they consider acceptable. Have they heard/do they know that sex outside of marriage is wrong? Yes. Do they know, understand, "buy" it? Not necessarily. Parents, teachers, and clergy try in any number of ways to get our beliefs across, but our chances are limited. By sheer volume the other message is dispensed many more times than ours. The world in which young adults live also models the worldly view.

Young adults tell us that living a chaste life is a great challenge. If one doesn't agree to sex by the third date, he or she is considered very odd. Conversely, there are many teens and young adults today who have decided to stay virgins until marriage. Statistics show that number is growing. Many of those individuals take the teachings of their faith very seriously. If we want to encourage those coming before us to follow the Church's teaching on marital chastity through NFP, we have to consider what will meet the varying needs of those we're ministering to. We have to think outside the box to get them interested and excited about it.

What is being done with NFP in marriage prep now? Using the information from the Diocesan Development Program's annual profile for 2004, we can say:

> "There has been slight overall improvement in the amount of scheduled time dedicated to NFP in marriage preparation programs. The time given to NFP is not lengthy; in 84% of Pre-Cana programs, it is less than one hour. The majority of diocesan marriage preparation programs make some effort to provide at least rudimentary NFP information to various groups, with special attention directed toward couples preparing for marriage, e.g., booklets, fact-sheets, witness couple talks and NFP course instruction. Through NFP introductory sessions more than 76,789 individuals received basic information on NFP."

I have included the 2004 profile questions and responses which relate to NFP in marriage preparation, and also the list of the dioceses which participated in the 2004 profile.

(Numbers are direct from the DDP Profile)

23) Does the (arch)diocese have guidelines for marriage preparation?

99% Yes 01% No

24) If the answer to question (23) was "Yes," is NFP included in the guidelines for marriage preparation?

75% Yes 25% No

25) On average how much time is allowed for NFP education in marriage preparation programs? (*Give your best estimate*)

16% 0 minutes - 15 minutes
33% 16 minutes - 30 minutes
22% 31 minutes - 45 minutes
13% 46 minutes - 1 hour
17% 1 hour - 2 hours+

26) Does the (arch)diocese require an introductory session to NFP for the engaged? (*Check one*)

34% Yes 66% No

27) If the answer to question (26) is "Yes", how much time is allotted to the required NFP introductory session?

13% 30 minutes
22% 45 minutes
48% 1 hour - 2 hours

17% Other, e.g., "one day NFP seminar," etc.

28) If the answer to question (26) is "Yes", what is the content of the required NFP introductory session? *(Check all that apply*)

(*Frequency*)
- 25 The appropriate Church teachings
- 17 Reproductive anatomy and physiology
- 23 Basic NFP science (e.g., *all the signs of fertility discussed*)
- 20 Basic NFP methodology (e.g., an overview of all the specific NFP systems offered in your diocese)
- 25 Benefits of NFP
- 23 Contraindications of various contraceptives
- 18 NFP witness talk

29) Does the (arch)diocese require an NFP *course* for engaged couples? (*Check one*)

03% Yes 97% No

30) Is the (arch)diocese moving toward mandating a full course of NFP instruction for engaged couples? (*check one*)

16% Yes 84% No

The following dioceses participated in the 2004 Profile survey:

Allentown, Altoona-Johnstown, Amarillo, Austin, Baton Rouge, Boston, Camden, Charleston, Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, Corpus Christi, Detroit, Duluth, Erie, Evansville, Fall River, Fargo, Fort Wayne-South Bend, Gary, Green Bay, Greensburg, Harrisburg, Hartford, Houma-Thibodaux, Jefferson City, Kalamazoo, Kansas City, KS, La Crosse, Las Cruces, Lincoln, Los Angeles, Louisville, Marquette, Memphis, Metuchen, Milwaukee, New Orleans, New Ulm, New York, Newark, Norwich, Ogdensburg, Orlando, Owensboro, Palm Beach, Pensacola-Tallahassee, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Portland, ME, Portland, OR, Rapid City, Rockford, Rockville Centre, St. Cloud, St. Louis, St. Paul-Minneapolis, Salina, Salt Lake City, San Antonio, San Diego, Scranton, Sioux City, Spokane, Superior, Tucson, Washington, DC, Wichita, Yakima.
(Information from the 2004 Profile from the Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning, Secretariat for Prolife Activities, USCCB.
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At first glance, this looks like an insignificant time is being spent on NFP. But that can be misleading. The information provided tells us how much time was spent on "NFP" , but it doesn't tell us exactly what that means. Is that methodology? Church teaching and methodology? Physiology? I've asked to add questions which would give us more complete information in future profile questionnaires. Further, if what is being addressed is about NFP in a day long or weekend long program, the time is in line with that spent on other topics.

The DDP also did an informal survey of dioceses that are doing some innovative things with NFP and marriage preparation. There are some creative ideas; some day long programs; and some good ideas on integration into the formal marriage preparation program.

The above gives us an idea of how NFP is treated in dioceses that responded to the survey. As to how NFP is included in marriage preparation programs in general, there is great variety there also. Some marriage preparation programs include not just NFP as a method, but the reasoning behind it, the Church teaching that supports it and witness couples who discuss how NFP enhances the marriage relationship. Most diocesan/parish programs include at least some basic information on NFP. Some have a couple witnessing to NFP. A few require a full course in NFP instruction.

In published programs there is great diversity, as well. As an example, "God's Plan for a Joy Filled Marriage" by Christopher West and published by Ascension Press does a masterful job on the theology of the body, marriage as vocation and sacrament, and living marital chastity. However, it doesn't include information on couple relationships, practical living issues, etc. Conversely, "Preparing for Marriage" by Thaddeus Pijacki and published by the Center for Learning discusses marriage as a sacrament, but focuses primarily on the relationship issues. The only page related to NFP reads, "The church encourages married couples to plan the size of their families through the use of natural methods of birth regulation such as Natural Family Planning. Why is this area so controversial, and what are some of the fears that might be associated with artificial birth regulation?"

Why such diversity? To get a better understanding of that, a little history lesson on NFP in marriage preparation is needed. First of all, PreCana began in the Archdiocese of Chicago over 60 years ago and rapidly made its way across the country. If one were to look at the outlines of that time, one would see that sexuality was included, and was usually discussed by a doctor. But modern NFP was not, as the methods we know of today were not available at that time. Secondly, if we fast forward a bit, we find that a number of years ago NFP wasn't as well integrated into diocesan structures or family life offices as it is now. NFP coordinators and family life directors brought very different gifts to the table. Their vision of where NFP fits into marriage preparation was very different. Hence, in many dioceses there were PreCana days on many facets of marriage, with perhaps just a few minutes devoted to NFP. In some, there would be a PreCana day and then another whole day devoted to Church teaching on sexuality and the basics of NFP methodology. Some dioceses use this model today

The overall picture looks much different today. NFP is integrated well into family ministry in most dioceses and more readily included into marriage preparation programs. Therefore, there is greater opportunity for these two ministries to work together to the advantage of those they serve. When one adds to that the explosion of new information and programs on the marriage relationship, primarily because of Smart Marriages and the Healthy Marriage Initiative, and the expanded interest in the Theology of the Body, we can see that the time is right to look at integrating NFP into marriage preparation in a new way. The suggestion is to put some of the best minds in both NFP and family ministry together to come up with a concept for integrating NFP more appropriately into marriage preparation. A further suggestion is that those "great minds" be the people in the trenches who are already doing just that. These are people who are open to "thinking outside the box" to better engage couples on the wonder of the

teaching on sexuality and how well it fits with all facets of married life and love. The pastoral letter on marriage could incorporate this integration, but dioceses and parishes would need resources to make it a reality.

In the beginning, God created man in his image;
in the divine image he created him;
Male and female he created them.
God blessed them, saying:
"Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it.
(Genesis 1: 27, 28)

Obviously, this is the basis for Catholic teaching on marriage and the appropriate use of the gift of sexuality. Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body gives wonderful insights into that Scripture passage on the complementarity of man and woman, and that desire to "become one flesh." In addition, *Familiaris Consortio*, which family life directors often refer to, is very rich on the couple relationship and how the "communion of the couples gives rise to the community of the family". At the same time, much of the new research and programs on couple relationships talks about the differences in men and women that affect the relationship. The programs then go on to say that couples should learn to celebrate their differences so they can totally complement each other as husband and wife…..two becoming one, in every aspect of married love.

A common "visual" used in NFP ministry is the connection between sexuality and "***SPICE.***" The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that sexuality affects "all aspects of the human person in body, mind and spirit." Thus sexuality is expressed through the acronym, "***SPICE,***" affecting the person ***S***piritually, ***P***hysically, ***I***ntellectually, ***C***reatively and ***C***ommunicatively, and ***E***motionally. How beautifully this fits with the concepts of what our faith teaches and with the new research on how the differences between men and women affect relationships.

In Genesis, we hear Adam saying, "This one at last is flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone." Again Pope John Paul expounds on that in the Theology of the Body. With a little creativity, that can be tied to other facets of the marriage relationship. In a fourteenth century painting of Adam and Eve, there is a depiction of God literally pulling Eve from the rib of Adam. It provides a wonderful visual of why man and woman are equal, but so different in all aspects of their being. No wonder we're constantly striving to become one, but are so constantly aware of our differences! This once again provides an opportunity to celebrate the complementarity of man and woman.

The theology of the body stresses the oneness of the sexual union and helps us see that as a foreshadowing of the union of Christ and his church. Development of this idea in a discussion of sexuality in marriage and marriage as sacrament gives young couples a powerful vision for living the vocation of marriage.

Good marriage preparation takes the two becoming one in sexual intimacy, but also intimacy in all aspects of married life and love. Talk with any couple who have been married a number of years and who are still deeply in love. While they maintain their differences due to

gender, personality, family background etc., they are in many ways becoming one flesh, one spirit, or as Paul VI said, "husband and wife become one heart and one soul, and together attain their human fulfillment." (Humane vitae, 9) Marriage preparation programs are geared to presenting this reality through both catechesis and couples' witness.

What, then, is the plan for integrating NFP in marriage prep? Perhaps, if great minds got together, using the Genesis creation piece as the focus, one could weave the male/femaleness of who we are into many facets of marriage preparation, such as communication, spirituality, and relationship skills, while still recognizing how family of origin, personality, etc. make one into the person he or she becomes. This concept fits beautifully in the discussion of marriage as sacrament and vocation and can be seen from the recent documents this Committee on Marriage and Family has written. There should then be a natural flow to clarifying the teaching on sexuality in marriage and presenting NFP due to the greater understanding of the complementarity of husband and wife in all facets of married love.

That clarification can include the twofold purpose of sexual intercourse. This again fits into the whole, particularly when one considers that wonderful, not often used, line from *Humanae vitae*, "By its intimate structure, the conjugal act, which while most closely uniting the couples, makes them capable of generating new lives, according to the laws inscribed in the very being of man and woman." *(Humanae vitae, 12)*

As engaged couples seeking marriage in the Catholic Church, those attending marriage prep should be considering a willingness to accept children lovingly. Most are at a point that they see children somewhere in their future. Our task is to assist them in an awareness of the unitive and procreative connection of sexual intercourse. Further, to help them value the total gift of self, physical, emotional and spiritual, that conjugal love should be and to respect its generous nature. Using NFP allows this to happen. It also challenges the couple on the understanding of sacrificial love. It would be remiss to ignore the challenges that abstinence brings into a marriage. But it is equally remiss to ignore the depth of love and understanding of the other and the other's needs that come through that abstinence.

Part of our task must certainly be to stress openness to life and that fact that we view "Children as the supreme gift of marriage" *(Gaudium et spes).* Therefore, connecting love and life, unitive and procreative has positive affects; recognizing the generous dimension of spousal love, and bringing about a new understanding of sexual intimacy, so different than what society teaches. Recognizing children as gift, rather than right, can help to establish that, in many facets of life, God's plan is ultimately better than our own. This fact is often overlooked in a society where individuals feel compelled to be in control of their lives. Perhaps it also sets into motion the ability for the parents of the future to very concretely teach their children why anything that breaks the unitive/procreative connection is out of God's plan.

Should marriage preparation team training include information on NFP and related Church teachings? It should be noted that in the past many team couples doing marriage preparation were themselves contracepting. Often a couple was invited in to talk about NFP for a short time, but not be part of the team. Today many more marriage preparation team couples accept and live the Church's teaching on marital chastity. Because of the varied gifts couples bring, and the very low percentage of Catholic couples using NFP at his time, it is sometimes necessary to use as team couples who have yet to accept this teaching. Having all team couples

living this teaching is a goal to move toward. Meanwhile, only couples using NFP and living this teaching should be presenting this topic. Couples who haven't yet grown in their acceptance of this teaching need to receive the teaching and the methodology during their training. Further, all team couples need to know they are representing the Catholic Church in their ministry and must not say anything that is not in accord with Catholic teaching. Therefore, the Church's teaching on sexuality in marriage needs to be an integral part of the training for those serving in marriage preparation ministry.

Most team couples will say that doing marriage preparation is marriage enrichment for them. Many come to an acceptance of the teaching on sexuality in marriage through their training and particularly because of the witness of those team couples who are using NFP.

Should NFP in marriage preparation include information on the physiology and methodology? Experience tells us that both women and men are fascinated about how the reproductive system works and how it can be read. A brief example of that with a simple explanation of how the method works can serve as the "hook" to entice couples to attend classes.

Should NFP classes be required for all engaged couples? That is an individual diocesan issue. The idea has both merit and challenge. The merit is that couples are intrigued by what they learn about their combined fertility and how they can effectively plan their families naturally. The challenge is that if the session is too long or intense, the couples can close their ears and be more opposed. Therefore, the real challenge is creating NFP classes specifically designed for engaged couples who are required to attend them.

Should we discuss contraception and what the Church teaches about it? There are so many issues to discuss in marriage preparation, we need to focus on the most important pieces of each topic. As has been said, we have a wealth of good positive information to present on sexuality in marriage and living that through NFP. If contraception is addressed at all, we need only to ascertain how it isn't in accord with the unitive/procreative criteria, and possibly some of the negative physical and relational aspects of its use.

One often hears that the Church is always saying "no" to sex. This project provides a golden opportunity to give engaged couples the very positive "yes" about our teaching on sexuality in marriage and how our sexuality can affect every aspect of married life. The wisdom of happily married couples combined with the wisdom and beauty of Church teaching lived out through NFP can provide a positive vision for the young couples on God's plan for married love. It can provide "a special opportunity for the engaged to discover and deepen the faith they received in Baptism , and nourished by their Christian upbringing," helping them to recognize the nuptial meaning of their bodies and the language of love they speak, living marriage as a mirror of Christ's love for this Church.