
"HOLINESS AND SWEETNESS A CALL TO A WIDER APOSTOLATE"

(Continued from Winter 1991)

Part II: "A Wider Apostolate"

Deacon Walter Sweeney

What we in the NFP apostolate have been charged with is the teaching of the Catholic Church itself. And it needs to be communicated through all the channels by which the Church normally teaches. Ours is not a marginal message. We were not called to sit on the sidelines, nor to be pushed to the margins of the Church's life. We are called to enter into the center of the Church's ministry to marriages and families. Here are some of the diocesan paths already opened to us:

1) **Marriage Preparation Programs:** Volunteer couples are always needed, and we should encourage our NFP couples to enter more fully into this work. It gives a chance to show NFP as integrally connected to all the other aspects of marriage and family life presented. This is really the only place so many of the Church's couples can be addressed personally, and it is also a place couples expect to hear what the Church has to say, even if they do not think they agree with it.

2) **Family Life Offices:** Competent people with a comprehensive vision of the teaching of the Church are needed to administer family ministry programs for dioceses and parishes. This requires some training but those who have grasped the most troubling and difficult core of the Christian vision of marriage are uniquely qualified to absorb in an authentic way the other aspects of this ministry. Jump in, you will be learning a language that will help couples and families put the truth into practice.

3) **Sexuality Education:** Programs in schools, colleges, young adult programs, and in parish and diocesan offices are desperately in need of people

who can teach credibly. NFP couples openly live, the full Catholic message about sexuality and therefore can fulfill this void. You who have already been called to teach in the face of resistance and indifference are just the ones most needed in this work.

"Ours is not a marginal message."

Who is to preach, to counsel, to make the significant comment at the right pastoral moment about NFP and its many and significant benefits? Doesn't it seem that the only way this will really happen is if some of us are called into the various pastoral ministries? This is what is beginning to happen. Have you felt called into a pastoral ministry of some kind? There are many opportunities for lay people and married couples in parishes, in catechesis and in teaching. In the apostolic exhortation **Christifidelis Laici** the world's bishops, and the Holy Father himself, plead with each Christian to enter the harvest field. If the Lord seems to be moving you into something, go for it. "Why", asks the harvest master, "are you standing about idle all day long?"

The training of the clergy and lay workers, not only in the facts of NFP but, in how it fits into the total teaching on Christian marriage and family life, is work we must move into. This is especially important because attitudes are so firmly fixed during official training times, especially if it is presupposed that the official and normative teaching is being transmitted. Who better than those who are living out these norms to help instruct those who are charged

with administering and overseeing the activities of the faith?

At a time when NFP seems not to have spread as far or as fast as all our years of intense effort would warrant, it may be time to look to ourselves for the next step forward. The indifference and even persecution we may sense is not going to budge on its own. Why do we wait for others who cannot grasp what we are experiencing to spread the word? While many courageously are attempting to do so, only those who have tasted and live the fullness of the Christian sexual life can really bring the message into the mainstream of Catholic life and thought.

Look to your NFP programs. Can they operate at their present levels even if some of the teachers move into other family ministries? Are the recruiting and training of new NFP teachers delayed because it appears that there are already "enough" NFP teachers for the number of couples being taught? Are you encouraging your learning couples to become active in other family ministries and in pastoral ministry to bring NFP into their own lives? A little courage may be required here, a little letting go, a little dying to self so that some of the fire we have in a seed falls to the ground and "dies" that it can grow into something monumentally larger and better! ■

Deacon Walter Sweeney is Associate Director of the Family Life/Respect Life Office of the Archdiocese of New York. He coordinates Marriage Preparation Programs for the Archdiocese; teaches family ministry courses in various seminary and graduate programs; and trains parish family ministers. For six years he coordinated the Archdiocesan NFP program which is now directed by Sheila Power Potter. He, his wife Kathleen, and Don Paglia (National Association of Family Life Ministers), will lead a workshop on "NFP and Family Life ministry" during the DDP National Conference in June 1991.