
Coordinator's Corner

Integrating Church Teaching into NFP Instruction

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During a chart review at an NFP follow-up session, a woman asked that a slide from the first class be shown to her fiancé. He had been unable to attend the class and she wanted us to “do the female anatomy slide” for him. We suggested that the same information was in their class materials, but she persisted. “The way you explained it was beautiful,” she said, “it was more than anatomy. I especially liked the part about conception. I had never heard it explained that way before.”

What does this have to do with integrating Church teaching into NFP instruction? The **National Standards** state that a Diocesan NFP program must accept and promote “the principles contained in *Gaudium et Spes*, *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio*, *Donum Vitae*, and related Church teaching” (p. 9). Likewise, the **Standards** require that an NFP teacher “accept and integrate within his/her teaching the principles” of these same documents (p. 15). Many NFP Coordinators and teachers have responded rather apprehensively to those requirements. They question whether there is appropriate time within NFP instruction to do this. It seems like such an overwhelming task!

The experience of the engaged couple is only one example of how the message that “sexuality . . . is by no means something purely biological” and “fertility is directed to the generation of human being” (*Familiaris Consortio*, #11), became more clear to them without us mentioning or quoting the documents. The

manner in which we taught the material and the reverence and conviction we have about fertility, conception, and marital sexuality served to illustrate the Church’s message.

We are convinced that NFP teachers and programs can creatively promote the values and principles of official Church teaching and avoid an overly time consuming or academic treatment of what must be lived out by married couples. The requirements as stated in the **National Standards** can be fulfilled by such an approach to NFP instruction.

One way to grasp our approach is to understand that we focus on the marital context of NFP as well as on NFP methodology. Full understanding of the Church’s counter cultural positions on fertility and family planning cannot happen apart from its teaching on marriage. Indeed, the integrity of Church teaching on sexuality, chastity, contraception, artificial reproduction, responsible parenthood, and family as “domestic church” converges in marriage.

Marriage is to be an intimate partnership of mutual self-giving (*Gaudium et Spes*, #48); it is to be faithful, exclusive, and total (*Humanae Vitae*, #9). Marriage is a participation in the creative intentions of God and enables spouses to cooperate with God for giving life to a new human person (*FC*, #14). Through love, fertility, and parenthood, a couple embodies, in the vocation of marriage, one image of God in the world.

Fundamentally, marriage is a covenant. It is cast in the image of Yahweh’s unconditional love for Israel, founded

on the covenant with Abraham (*FC*, #12 and 13). This love comes to fulfillment in the self-emptying, sacrificial love of Jesus. Thus, married couples are called to love unconditionally and sacrificially (as God has so loved us). This love is empowered, not by human will alone, but by the Spirit of Jesus. This is why marriage has the dignity of a sacrament.

To live marriage as a sacrament requires certain values, attitudes, and loving behaviors. Not coincidentally, living NFP requires the same values, attitudes, and loving behaviors. It is the concern of *Humanae Vitae* that living with the reality of God’s design for fertility be integrated into the marriage covenant. It is the concern of *Donum Vitae* that the unfortunate reality of infertility also be integrated into the couple’s relationship. Both teachings challenge couples (and others) to avoid reducing spouses or children to the level

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of objects. The two meanings of marriage, unitive and procreative, must be addressed in NFP instruction, so that the central principles of Church teaching have a proper context.

Our diocesan approach to incorporating Church teaching into NFP instruction may be unsatisfactory or too undefined for some. We do not use a “scripted” explanation of Church documents, but rather attempt to weave the language, meanings, and living witness to those values (as described above) into the whole of NFP instruction. We do this in two main ways: 1) by careful recruitment and training of NFP teaching couples; and 2) by helping client couples focus on the

values, attitudes, and loving behaviors which are necessary for marriage and for NFP use.

Around 1977, the Diocese of Beaumont decided to train married couples to be Billings/Ovulation Method teachers. Such a decision was not unique at that time since the Couple to Couple League and others were training couples to be teachers. Over the years, we have put together our own diocesan teacher training program which includes about 8 to 10 hours of study, reflection, and discussion on Church teaching related to marriage and parenthood.

We strive to help our teachers better understand and own the values of Church teachings. The training is ongoing. It is more than an educational head-trip or a memorization of quotes from *Humanae Vitae*, etc. Our NFP teaching couples are able to have lively discussions about what it means to struggle with and live out Christian values within their marriages. Their ability to embrace the belief that marriage is an "*intimate partnership of life and love*" and that marriage is an "*eminently human love because it embraces the good of the whole person*" (GS, #48 and #49) becomes very much part of their overall language of NFP instruction.

We form our teachers to be articulate witnesses to the beauty of Christian marriage as well as competent instructors in core NFP methodology. It isn't always easy to find couples who are capable and willing of such a task! But we believe that Church teaching is best exemplified, and more effectively com-

apologize for the values, attitudes, and behaviors needed for successful NFP use, which happen to be articulated in Catholic teaching on marriage.

NFP is different from contraception. Couples are sometimes baffled or even pleasantly surprised at the dynamics that NFP can reveal in their relationship.

We try to help couples learn NFP in two ways: first, by living the discipline of the method (observation, charting, rules, etc.). And second, by acknowledging and living the values which are inherent

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communicated and integrated when couples teach other couples.

The second thing we try to accomplish in our diocesan NFP program is to help client couples reflect upon and discuss their relationship (engaged or married). We focus especially on topics that pertain to sexuality, intimacy, fertility, family planning, and parenthood. Couples who participate in NFP instruction often struggle with the contrast between the vision of marriage that NFP upholds (re: Church teaching) and the illusion of intimacy that contraception provides (re: secular society). We have many "ecumenical" couples and a few Protestant couples as clients. We do not proselytize them about fidelity to Catholic teaching. We also do not

in the marital context of the method. If, after all, fertility is more than biology, so must our teaching be more than methodology. It must also address the covenant commitment of marriage. It is through both of these paths (methodology and relationship) that couples begin to live the Christian vision of the integrity of marriage and responsible parenthood.

What follows are examples of a few of the ways that we help couples look at NFP from the angle of relationship:

Teaching couples take a few minutes (about 15 to 20) during the first three class sessions to present and/or discuss various relational issues. Such as, their personal beliefs and experiences with NFP; communication, commitment and intimacy skills which are important to marriage and NFP use; and the physical and interpersonal differences between NFP and contraception.

Client couples are given work sheets to take home which provide them with discussion questions on various topics. These work sheets cover a wide range of subjects such as, family planning goals; marital needs and expectations; couple support and strengths; and intimacy. All of the work sheets are written in such a way as to reflect the language or principles of Church teaching.

1993 25th Anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*

As you know 1993 is an important year for us. If your diocese or NFP organization is planning special events during 1993 to celebrate the anniversary of the encyclical, please notify the DDP. We will publicize all special events in the newsletter.

Chart review offers an opportunity for private time with couples to touch on additional issues related to their own situations. Conversation about actual Church documents is not usually part of chart review, although it does come up on occasion. Teachers may draw on the values and principles of Church teaching in order to help couples understand a particular struggle they have encountered or to help shed some light on an experience. One of the most rewarding aspects of chart review is listening to couples talk about their new understanding and appreciation of each other and their marriage.

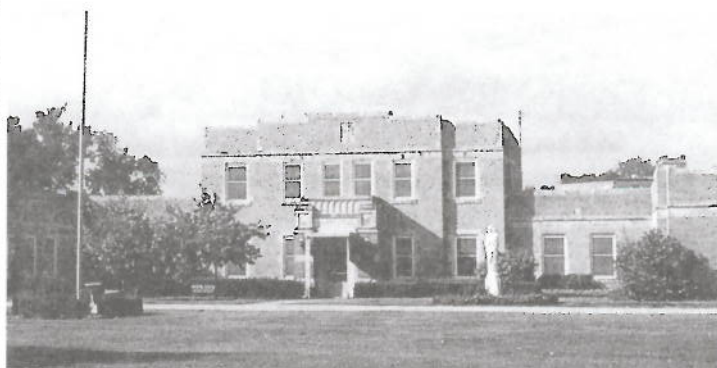
The description we have offered of our diocesan NFP program is only one example of how Church teaching can be integrated into NFP instruction. There are other creative possibilities and other examples from various NFP programs.

If you are a diocesan NFP coordinator (or in a position of leadership in NFP), examine your NFP program for how it reflects the values in Church teaching. Meet with teachers, and, if necessary, seek enrichment from a priest, teacher, Family Life Director, or anyone who is knowledgeable about Church teachings. Clarify and explore the possibilities for integrating this dimension into NFP instruction.

You will likely discover that you are already doing a number of things to promote the principles of Church teaching. Now could be the time to make those values and principles more conscious and alive for couples learning NFP.

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Photographic Essay of the 1992 INFPA Conference



The provincial house of the Hospital Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis has been the site of the Illinois NFP Association's Annual Conferences.

Mary Terese, President of INFPA, and husband John Egizio.



Participants of the INFPA 1992 Conference.

"NFP—A Product Worth Marketing"

Jenny Peters speaks on marketing techniques for NFP outreach.

