

## **“Great Expectations”**

### **How one diocese increased its numbers of engaged couples taking an NFP course by 500% without an NFP requirement during marriage preparation**

*Daniel Thimons, Director, Marriage and Family Life, Diocese of Columbus, OH*

Among my greatest challenges while working in diocesan marriage and family ministry over the past ten years has been to find effective ways to encourage engaged couples to choose to take a class in a method of Natural Family Planning (NFP) as part of their marriage preparation process. I’m writing today to report that I have finally found a simple solution.

It is true that a mandate requiring NFP instruction from the diocesan bishop is the preferred solution to quickly increase NFP class attendance. Family Life directors in dioceses which require NFP instruction as part of their marriage preparation programs can attest to the benefit of their efforts in training new teachers and spending precious time in meeting with priests, deacons, and pastoral ministers involved in the marriage preparation process. They have seen abundant fruit, including the conversions of those couples initially opposed to NFP now embracing and even seeking to share the good news of God’s design for married love.

It is wonderful if your diocese is working towards an NFP class requirement as part of marriage preparation. Requiring a full course of NFP is the ideal and preferred solution for providing engaged couples with all the tools needed to live their married lives according to God’s design. That said, what if (for various reasons) your diocese will not be implementing an NFP mandate any time soon? What can we do, as Family Life ministers, to increase the number of engaged couples taking an NFP class?

Here’s my “confession”— for ten years, I mistakenly thought that in the absence of an NFP mandate, the *only* thing that could be done was to strongly *encourage* engaged couples to take an NFP class. In my ministry, this strong encouragement of NFP has taken several forms including:

- Implementing the *Joy-Filled Marriage Program* for marriage preparation
- Inviting NFP teaching couples to present an NFP introduction during marriage preparation programs
- Inviting a medical professional well versed in NFP to explain the medical soundness of NFP during marriage preparation
- Providing discount “NFP vouchers” to those attending marriage preparation
- Providing a free first class of NFP to engaged couples
- Encouraging priests and deacons to ask the couples that they prepare for marriage to complete an NFP class

Unfortunately, the above “strong encouragement” of NFP education had a negligible effect in couples signing up for a full NFP class. Regardless of how strongly we *encouraged* NFP, the sign-up rate hovered around 6-8% over a five year period. Don’t get me wrong, we do need to continue to strongly encourage NFP among engaged couples, even if we are merely “planting seeds.”

But we have noticed a significant impact by moving from simply *encouraging* an NFP class to *expecting* one. This *NFP expectation* is a middle road between mandating NFP and simply encouraging NFP. Due to this new NFP expectation, we now have nearly 50% of our engaged couples signing up for a class. This amounts to a 500% increase in couples taking an NFP class over and above our best efforts at encouraging them!

The thought behind an *NFP expectation* is simple. It is in line with other expectations that the Church has with regard to marriage: we don’t merely encourage fidelity, we expect it. We don’t merely encourage indissolubility, we expect it. Likewise, we don’t merely encourage openness to life, we expect it. To be clear, at no time do we ever tell the engaged couples that “we expect you to sign up for an NFP class,” as such a statement will most certainly backfire! This *NFP expectation* actually occurs in a much more subtle way during the marriage preparation registration process.

Ok, so how does this work? During the marriage preparation registration process, we are careful to avoid using the word “encourage” or in any way give the impression that NFP may be “optional.” First, we express the expectation in the brochure given to the engaged couples outlining the “6 steps for a rewarding marriage preparation.” In this brochure, we do not require an NFP class, but we also don’t present NFP as “optional.” Below is the wording for Step 4, Natural Family Planning:

You will receive an introductory presentation on Natural Family Planning

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**STEP 4**

**Natural Family Planning (NFP)**

*When: Ideally, at least six months before your wedding*

(NFP). NFP is not only effective for naturally postponing pregnancy, it is also effective in overcoming

obstacles that compromise your ability to become parents. Attend an NFP class in order to learn how to plan your family in accord with God’s design for marriage.

Second, and more importantly, registration for an NFP class is integrated seamlessly during the actual marriage preparation registration process. We do this by allowing the couple to choose an NFP class immediately following their selection of their marriage preparation class. We also offer the NFP class at no additional charge to the couple. Here is how this looks as a couple is making their way through our online marriage preparation registration form:

## Marriage Preparation Registration

\* Required

### Marriage Preparation Program

Please choose one of the following classes \*

## Marriage Preparation Registration

### Natural Family Planning

A Diocesan Natural Family Planning Class Series is provided at no additional charge to couples attending the Diocesan Marriage Preparation program. Please select one of the following NFP class series:

Please choose one of the following NFP class series

We have discovered that when an NFP class is viewed as an “optional” piece of the marriage preparation process, about 92-94% of couples will opt-out; regardless of how well we encourage them to embrace NFP. Yet, when an NFP class is viewed as an *expectation* during the marriage preparation registration process, nearly 50% of couples will choose to fulfill this expectation. So, before couples hear why NFP is good for their marriage, before they hear all the health and relational benefits of NFP, and before they hear from an NFP teaching couple as well as an NFP medical professional, nearly 50% of engaged couples are already choosing to take an NFP class.

Now, I must add that this was a simple step for our diocese as we have a full-time NFP Coordinator who trains our own diocesan NFP teachers using the Cleveland Diocesan Model of NFP. She handles all teacher training, class scheduling, and registration “in-house.” Most NFP teachers come from third party NFP providers who are *Approved* by the USCCB’s *Diocesan NFP Ministry Standards* (e.g., Billings Ovulation Method™, Couple to Couple League, Creighton FertilityCare™, Family of the Americas, Marquette Model, and Northwest Family Services). It would be important to work with your local NFP providers to seamlessly integrate registration for their NFP classes into your online marriage preparation registration process. Perhaps these organizations could provide you with a unique link which would bypass any separate NFP registration fees on the part of the couple? Couples would visit this link as part of their online marriage preparation registration, prior to completing the registration process. I leave the details to you, but my point is to make NFP class registration a seamless part of the couple’s registration for marriage preparation. As far as the budget goes, presuming a 50% NFP sign-up rate, a diocese could then simply increase the cost of their marriage preparation class by 50% of the average cost of an NFP class series in the diocese and pay the NFP organizations directly when an engaged couple signs up for an NFP class.

To summarize, we have not in any way changed our encouragement of NFP during the marriage preparation programs. Marriage preparation is the appropriate place to offer couples the encouragement to sign up for an NFP class, outlining the various benefits of NFP. But by carefully avoiding presenting NFP as an “optional” part of marriage preparation, seamlessly integrating NFP registration into the online marriage prep registration form, and offering the NFP class at no additional charge, we have seen a 500% increase in couples taking an NFP class. Yes, this will take some administrative work cross-registering couples for marriage preparation and NFP in the same form, as well as working out the budget and payment process, but it is well worth the administrative time and effort! I encourage you, or rather, I *expect* you, to give it a try!

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