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Promoting Natural Family Planning

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How can a Catholic physician promote natural family planning (NFP)?¹

The Catholic Church, particularly through papal teachings, has called on Catholic physicians and other health professionals to not only promote natural family planning (NFP), but also to use, teach, develop, and research NFP. As early as 1951, Pope Pius XII instructed Catholic health-care professionals that it was their duty to learn about natural methods of birth regulation.² In other addresses, throughout his pontificate, he stated that Catholic scientists and medical personnel should do all they can to develop scientifically sound methods of natural family planning.³ In 1968 Pope Paul VI, through his encyclical *Humanae vitae*, called on scientists to develop natural methods of birth regulation and asked health-care professionals to acquire knowledge on the topic of reproductive health and to provide wise consult and healthy direction in the area of natural family planning.⁴

Pope John Paul II addressed the use of NFP in his talks, allocutions, and encyclicals throughout his pontificate and in particular through his development of the theology of the body.⁵ He encouraged physicians to enhance the welfare of families and of societies in their

concern to harmonize human fertility with their capabilities. He also instructed nurse midwives in the important contribution that they can make in providing advice and practical guidance to couples wishing to carry out responsible procreation.⁶ Our current pope, Benedict XVI, recently expressed gratitude to physicians and researchers who work on ways to alleviate infertility within “the aim of preventing the causes of sterility and of being able to remedy them, so that sterile couples will be able to procreate in full respect for their own personal dignity and that of the child to be born.”⁷

Therefore, the Church’s charge for Catholic physicians and other health-care professionals includes the development of and research on effective NFP methods, obtaining education about these methods, providing NFP services to couples, and helping in the proper prevention and treatment of infertility. The popes have been clear that the guiding principles of this charge are the dignity of the human person, the divine law, the primary role of the family and the responsibility to married couples.

The Role of the Catholic Physician in Promoting NFP

The first role of the Catholic physician in regard to the promotion of NFP is to learn all that he or she can about this topic (and of course, if married, to use NFP in his or her married life). There are many opportunities available for this to happen through online and in-person training programs. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Department of Natural Family Planning has a listing of couple training programs in NFP (listed by states) and NFP teacher training courses.⁸ All of these programs have met the USCCB standards for NFP service and teacher training. There are special teacher training programs in all of the major methods of NFP. Marquette University has an online program specifically for health professionals wishing to provide NFP services,⁹ the Pope Paul VI Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction has an intense NFP teacher training program and a training program in how to integrate NFP into women’s medical care called NaProTechnology,¹⁰ and the Georgetown University Institute for Reproductive Health has a two-

hour online training course in the provision of the standard days method of NFP and other simplified but effective NFP methods.¹¹

Although many Catholic health-care institutions offer women's health and obstetric services, relatively few include NFP as part of these services.¹² Catholic physicians could be instrumental in advocating that Catholic hospitals provide NFP services and help these institutions to develop infertility programs that integrate NFP and follow Church teaching. NFP is invaluable for couples with infertility by helping them to target the most fertile days for intercourse and for the physician to time diagnostic tests, to time treatments, and to assess for menstrual cycle abnormalities. Catholic physicians could also help develop and/or sponsor teen chastity programs that could be offered in (or sponsored by) Catholic health-care institutions. There are several teen chastity programs that integrate fertility appreciation (i.e., menstrual cycle monitoring) as a means for decreasing teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections such as, TeenSTAR¹³ and Northwest Family Services.¹⁴ Furthermore, the American Academy of Pediatrics and American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists have advocated that menstrual cycle tracking be used as a fourth vital sign and diagnostic tool to spot menstrual cycle pathologies among adolescents and young adults.¹⁵

Catholic physicians and health-care providers have an important role in helping to integrate NFP services into marriage preparation. Physicians and professional nurses (in particular) are appropriate persons for providing information to young couples about NFP and, by their professional status, lend credibility to NFP. Physicians and professional nurses involved with the local guilds of the Catholic Medical Association often provide NFP presentations in marriage preparation programs sponsored by the local diocese. These presentations are especially important and often difficult to present because many engaged couples are already sexually active and using contraception.¹⁶

Catholic physicians can be active in promoting NFP in Catholic parishes. Pope John Paul II felt that there should be NFP teachers in all Catholic parishes to help couples learn NFP and to help prepare those seeking marriage. He instructed faculty at the Sacred Heart Medical

School (Milan, Italy) that “the moment has come for every parish and every structure of consultation and assistance to the family and to the defense of life to have personnel available who can teach married couples how to use the natural methods.”¹⁷ Physicians could be involved with individual couple preparation or with group presentations on NFP, and support the parish priest in the areas of NFP and human sexuality. The physicians could also collaborate with the Catholic parish nurse (if available in the parish) in helping to integrate NFP services in a parish. This integration of NFP services could involve organizing NFP introductory sessions, teaching NFP to couples, organizing couple support groups, and developing presentations on topics of women’s health related to NFP.

Conclusion

Catholic physicians have been consistently called by their Church and Church leaders to learn about, help develop, and provide effective NFP services. Few physicians, however, have answered this call. Those who have need continued prayer and support, since they often work in systems that, at best, pay little attention to and often are hostile to their efforts. However, NFP services can help to insure that the provision of Catholic health care involving the transmission of new life is life-giving, ethical, integrative, marriage building, and family oriented. Catholic physicians can learn about NFP through the resources noted above, make their expertise available to their parish and their diocese, and promote NFP through activities such as pre-marriage preparation programs.

Notes

- ¹ See R. Fehring, “The Catholic Physician and Natural Family Planning: Helping to Build the Culture of Life,” *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 9 (2009): 305–323, for a more in-depth answer to this question.
- ² Pope Pius XII, Address to Italian Catholic Union of Midwives (October 29, 1951), in *Natural Family Planning: Nature’s Way—God’s Way*, ed. Rev. Anthony Zimmerman (Milwaukee, WI: DeRance, Inc., 1980), 229–230.
- ³ Pius XII, Address to the National Congress of the Family Front and the Association of Large Families (1951), in Zimmerman, *Natural Family*

- Planning*, 231; Pius XII, Address to Hematologists (1958), in Zimmerman, *Natural Family Planning*, 228.
- ⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Humanae vitae* (Of Human Life), (Boston: Pauline Books, 1968).
- ⁵ Pope John Paul II, Address to Promoters of Natural Family Planning (1980), in Zimmerman, *Natural Family Planning*, 258–259; John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* (The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World), (Boston, MA: Daughters of St. Paul, 1981), n. 52; John Paul II, encyclical letter *Evangelium vitae* (The Gospel of Life) (1995), n. 97, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangeliumvitae_en.html; Zimmerman, *Natural Family Planning*, 258–259.
- ⁶ John Paul II. Address to Midwives (1980) in Zimmerman, *Natural Family Planning*, 259–260.
- ⁷ Zenit, "Pope: 'Humanae Vitae' Sheds Light on Spouses' Yes," October 3, 2008, <http://www.zenit.org/article-23800?l=english>.
- ⁸ See <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/>.
- ⁹ See <http://www.marquette.edu/nursing/NFP/>.
- ¹⁰ See <http://www.popepaulvi.com>.
- ¹¹ See <http://www.irh.org/>.
- ¹² R. Fehring and C. Werner, "Natural Family Planning and Catholic Hospitals: A National Survey," *Linacre Quarterly* 60.4 (November 1993): 29–34.
- ¹³ See <http://www.teenstar.org/>.
- ¹⁴ See <http://www.nwfs.org/>.
- ¹⁵ American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Adolescence, and American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, Committee on Adolescent Health Care, "Menstruation in Girls and Adolescents: Using the Menstrual Cycle as a Vital Sign," *Pediatrics* 118 (2006): 2245–2250.
- ¹⁶ A generic digital slide presentation on NFP (with commentary for each slide) is available to members of the Catholic Medical Association by contacting the Marquette University Institute for Natural Family Planning at instnfp@marquette.edu, or by using the Member Login at <http://cathmed.org> and clicking on Members Only.
- ¹⁷ John Paul II, "To Teachers of Natural Family Planning," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English), January 22, 1997.

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