

November 1978

## From the Vatican...To Terence Cardinal Cooke, Archbishop of New York

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### Recommended Citation

Villot, J. (1978) "From the Vatican...To Terence Cardinal Cooke, Archbishop of New York," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 45: No. 4, Article 3.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol45/iss4/3>

## *From the Vatican... To Terence Cardinal Cooke, Archbishop of New York*

Dear Cardinal Cooke,

May 18, 1978

The Holy Father has learned with deep satisfaction of the forthcoming special Symposium entitled "Natural Family Planning: Ten Years of Progress — 1968-1978," with which the Committee for Pro-Life Activities of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States, together with the Human Life and Natural Family Planning Foundation, wishes to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

His Holiness has directed me to convey through you his encouragement for this Symposium, which aims at reviewing the scientific progress of the past decade, and at generating greater understanding of, and support for, the Church's teaching on conjugal morality, family life, and responsible parenthood.

The participants at the Symposium will be well aware of recent interventions of the Church on these precise topics. While repeating previous teaching, the Holy Father wishes on this occasion to draw attention to some issues of particular pastoral importance in the matter of natural family planning.

The first area to which he wishes to draw attention is that of *research*. It is encouraging to note the increasing amount of rigorous scientific research that has been carried out in the area of natural family planning in the years following the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. It is important that this research be continued in an open manner, so that the natural methods of birth regulation may be scientifically vindicated on a wider scale and thus become accepted with greater confidence by more people. It is also satisfying to note an ever growing scientific collaboration, not only in research but also in evaluating results, and in developing teaching-methods.

The second area which His Holiness would stress is that of *promotion*. He repeats his encouragement and gratitude to all those who work for the promotion of natural family planning, whether directly with couples, or in medical and social endeavors. He also earnestly requests that the task of placing the results of scientific research at the service of couples around the world be pursued with intense effort.

Growing respect for the rights of conscience and the right to follow one's religious convictions, together with the renewed interest, especially among young people, in forms of life which respect the patterns of nature, should be an encouragement for those bodies that have responsibility for the positive development of society, to take a greater and more constructive interest in the natural means of family planning. It is important that public authorities and international bodies, medical personnel and social workers, marriage counselors and educators should recognize the high positive values that are to be found in the natural methods, in which the dignity of the human person is fostered: a knowledge and understanding of fertility help to assure personal autonomy by liberating couples from artificial means, while leading them to a degree of sexual self-mastery which is in

direct contrast with the permissiveness and promiscuity that today constitute grave social problems to be solved. It is earnestly hoped therefore that public agencies will demonstrate corresponding interest in and support for couples and organizations which are led by their convictions to follow these high ideals.

The third area of pastoral importance which the Holy Father emphasizes is precisely that of the ideals which must inspire any program of natural family planning. Natural family planning is not another method of birth prevention. As the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* clearly teaches: "The problem of birth, like every other problem regarding human life, is to be considered, beyond partial perspectives — whether of the biological or psychological, demographic or sociological orders — in the light of an integral vision of man and of his vocation, not only his natural and earthly, but also his supernatural and eternal vocation" (no. 7).

The successful practice of natural family planning requires a personal commitment of both husband and wife. With this commitment it becomes an effective means for attaining, with God's grace, oneness in marriage and conjugal love, which the Second Vatican Council had previously declared to be "ordained by their nature toward the begetting and educating of children" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 50).

The Church truly recognizes that childbearing and parenthood require courage and generosity; she also recognizes the various challenges and sacrifices inherent in them, but also the joys and promises. In our day, when the child is often looked upon primarily as a burden, as a restriction on the freedom of the couple, it is necessary to proclaim that the child is the living witness to the love of the couple. It is also fitting to add that among couples who fulfill their role of procreation with generous human and Christian responsibility "those merit special mention who with wise and common deliberation and with magnanimity undertake to bring up properly even a larger number of children" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 50).

The Holy Father stresses that — as must be the case in all areas of the Church's pastoral mission — programs of natural family planning must present the authentic teaching of the Church in its entirety, with due attention to the full exigencies of God's plan for marriage, which is "the wise institution of the Creator to realize in mankind His design of love" (*Humanae Vitae*, 8). At the same time, couples must be assisted with Christian understanding and patient pastoral care, so that, with divine help, they may successfully face whatever difficulties may arise from physical, economic, psychological and social conditions, or from other trying circumstances.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that the fostering of natural family planning programs forms part of the Church's contribution to universal integral advancement. It is a specific service to couples who are striving to fulfill faithfully their proper duties as spouses and parents. It is vital that those who dedicate themselves to the work of teaching and promoting natural family planning should receive adequate formation, recognition and support from the Church communities and their leaders.

The Holy Father offers to the reflection of the participants at the New York Symposium the Church's vision of natural family planning, namely that natural family planning cannot remain merely on the level of techniques or scientific research, although these are essentially linked to it. Programs of natural family planning must rather address themselves concretely to the challenging task of education to conjugal chastity. This education will be assisted and sustained through prayer; for Catholics it will be powerfully completed in the Sacraments of

Penance and the Holy Eucharist. Programs must aim at the development of an integral vision of the human person, in which conjugal love is intimately linked with openness to life, and in which joy is not isolated from sacrifice and sexual self-mastery. The realization of this vision, and its presentation to today's troubled world, is the duty and the specific contribution of all Christians, but especially of Christian married couples, called by virtue of the Sacrament of Matrimony to the building up of God's Kingdom on earth.

It is a source of satisfaction for the Holy Father to know that the organizers and participants at the New York Symposium share these high Christian ideals regarding marriage and human life itself, and that they have already shown their commitment to these ideals in years of tireless effort. To all who work together in promoting the dignity of conjugal love, the importance of the Christian family and the sacredness of human life in all its stages, His Holiness expresses his profound gratitude.

With paternal affection in Christ Jesus he extends his special Apostolic Blessing to all those assembled, as well as to their loyal collaborators, begging the Lord, the Source of life and love, to continue to pour out His sustaining grace on their future activities.

With every good wish for your own devoted support of the Pro-Life activities, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,  
J. Card. Villot

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