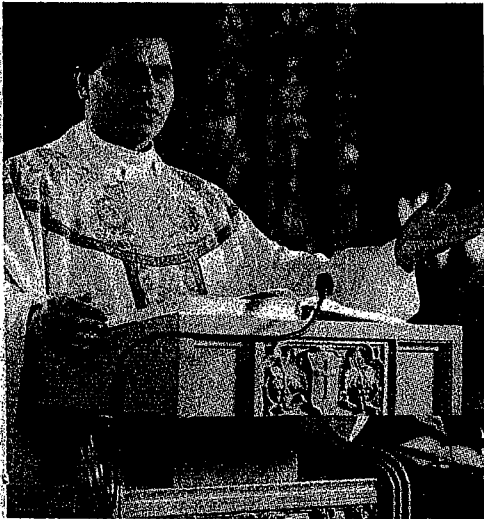


# TO BE A PRIESTLY ~~NFP~~-BACKER

By Sister Renee Mirkes, O.S.F.

I've heard priests say that the contraceptive issue is a dead one. I suspect that, rather than being an original insight, such a statement is a repetition of what married couples have told priests:



"We're contracepting and happy to be so, thank you. We're not about to go back to some method that will get us worried about a pregnancy just when, in our assessment of things, another child would be a disastrous development in our marriage. Besides, a non-contraceptive method didn't work for our parents, so why would we want to use it?!"

Should priests assume an active role in reviving natural family planning (NFP) methods? Is there any fire left in the ashes of promoting natural methods of family planning? Yes, yes and, again, yes. (While addressed specifically to priests, this article can benefit all involved in the marriage and family apostolates.)

The first step a priest might take in kindling the flame of NFP can be found in a custom that is regularly observed in rural Irish homes. The practice in Gaelic is called *grieshog*. Every evening, instead of throwing away the partially burned coals from the day, a member of the household protects the heat of these embers by putting them under a bed of ashes overnight. In the morning, it's relatively easy to fan the preserved embers into a new flame and, eventually, a vigorous fire, saving precious time and money from having to start over with unlit coals. In this article I propose to apply, metaphorically, this Irish practice to NFP evangelization.

In this image of *grieshog*, I see two goals for priestly evangelization vis-à-vis NFP. The first is conservative: Priests are called to prevent the warm coals of NFP evangelization from going out completely. The second is proactive: Priests are called to fan those warm embers into full flame, wherever and whenever possible.

But, before a priest can become skilled at "*grieshog* and beyond" with respect to NFP, he needs to be working with top-notch coaches. This aspect of

evangelization takes training, in other words. Two contemporary popes, Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* ("Of Human Life") and Pope John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* (on the role of the Christian family in the modern world), not only assume the role of coach but also set down a solid training program.

First, they lay out the game plan: "Here's what priests need to do vis-à-vis NFP evangelization. Here's your goal, and here's how you can accomplish it." Second, they describe the kind of players priests need to be in order to realize the goal they've set. Third, they enunciate what priests need to know in order to be effective NFP-backers.

### I. The Game Plan

Pope Paul VI lays out the basic game plan for priestly NFP-backers in *Humanae Vitae* (see no. 28).

Expound the Church's teaching on marriage and birth regulation, he exhorts. Family planning should not be the never-to-be-discussed issue, which lay people can never remember hearing a good homily. Rather priests are called to expound the truth about birth regulation.

But what would a bold delineation of the truth of *Humanae Vitae* entail? First of all, for Pope Paul VI, it's the challenge to teach this doctrine of marital love clearly and unambiguously. What the Pontiff is advocating is that if priests teach this doctrine with clarity, they must do so fearlessly.

*Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life"), Pope John Paul II's encyclical, spells out why fearlessness is essential to NFP evangelization. If priests or anyone else are going to be effective people of and for life, he counsels, then they need a good dose of the virtue of courage and persistence. "To be truly a people at the service of life we must

propose these truths constantly and courageously from the very first proclamation of the Gospel, and thereafter in catechesis, in the various forms of preaching, in personal dialogue and in all educational activity" (no. 82.1). Then, when a priest's courage is tested, Pope John Paul exhorts, he "must not fear hostility or unpopularity . . . [you] must *refuse any compromise* or ambiguity which might conform to the world's way of thinking" (no. 82.3, emphasis added).

Second, priests must teach the truth about family planning, or the regulation of birth, with compassion, just as Christ taught with patience and goodness. Pope Paul confirms how important an unambiguous but compassionate presentation of this issue is in the pastoral care of couples. "In their difficulties," he says, "may married couples always find, in the words and in the heart of a priest, the echo of the voice and the love of the Redeemer" (*HV*, no. 29).

Third, Pope Paul insists that an important component of implementing his game plan is that priests need to teach the message of *Humanae Vitae* with confidence. Priests should, with conviction, explain to Catholic couples under their care that if they are open to the Holy Spirit, Who inspired the Magisterium to propose this doctrine in the first place, the same Spirit of Jesus will also illumine their hearts to live the truth of this message.

The Pope counsels that in order for couples to remain open to the Spirit, priests must help them develop a deep prayer life. They must invite married people to the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. Only in this way will spouses stay close to Jesus, in Whom they will find the grace to resist the discouragement that inevitably comes for

anyone who tries to do good in a world in which secular humanism prevails.

Pope John Paul II gives a twofold game plan for priestly NFP evangelization in *Familiaris Consortio* (nos. 33-37). He takes the basic game plan of *Humanae Vitae* — expound the teaching — one step further and articulates what's presupposed there. Pope John Paul asserts that, besides the doctrinal substance of the issues involved, priests need to know the "knowledge of the bodily aspect and the body's rhythms of fertility," which is vital, so priests may participate in the game plan of a "more decisive and more systematic effort to make the natural methods of regulating fertility known, respected and applied" (no. 35).

Sharing that knowledge which is both theoretical and practical, theological and biological, will ultimately involve every priest in the moral task of educating married couples in the self-control that is essential to the periodic abstinence of marital chastity. Priests should be ready and willing to provide couples with a personal witness to, and a spiritual motivation for, acquiring chastity for fulfilling their life's vocation.

## II. The Kind of Person the Priest Needs to Be

As celibates involved in a systematic effort to make the natural methods of regulating fertility known, respected and applied, priests will need to be grounded in a vital appreciation of their own celibacy. Priests must see with absolute clarity that celibacy and marriage are the two ways to live out genuine Gospel love.

It's a truism, although none the less true, that one cannot give what one does not have. Before priests can be about the important task of helping

couples develop chastity for their marital relationship — the *sine qua non* of using NFP methods — they must at least be on the way toward mastering that virtue themselves, a virtue that will help them attain the self-possession of a mature and integrated person. What Pope John Paul is prescribing, then, is that every priest must acquire the virtue of chastity that will enable him consistently, readily and joyfully to realize himself by making a gift of himself to others in non-genital ways.

Forming married persons in chastity demands that priests teach and live chastity as a positive virtue in their own lives. This means that a priest should personally experience chastity and help others appreciate it as a directional virtue that allows one's sexual desires and emotions to be integrated into the good of the entire person. Contrary to the so-called sexual freedom that is touted by the moral revolution of our age, priests can assist couples to see that chastity is the only means of being truly free in the area of sexuality. Promiscuity, adultery or any misuse of sex is ultimately, if not immediately, enslaving.

Above everything, chastity in the life of a priest should be the result of a positive choice on his part to give himself totally to God. After all, this is the only kind of chastity that will strike married couples as genuine, the only kind of chastity that they will view as an attractive and invaluable character trait. As recent presidential sex scandals have taught us, how one lives out his sexuality is not just a private matter; it makes society proportionately better or worse. Priestly chastity well-lived sends a critical message to our sex-saturated culture. Genital sex is not irresistible, and sexual union is not necessary for nor-

malcy. Furthermore, genitalia contact is not the only way, nor necessarily the best way, to express the depths of human love.

By becoming who he is meant to be, a person totally given over to Christ, totally in love with God, freely renouncing marriage for the sake of the Kingdom, a priest will continue to remind his children in the faith (especially married people) of the heavenly banquet to which they are called. Priestly chastity reminds married people that their physical paternity or maternity must be completed by spiritual parenthood. A priest reminds married people that as he lives now, espoused directly to God, they will live in eternity — without being married or given in marriage.

Both Pope John Paul and Pope Paul demonstrate why it is critically important, in helping couples grow in appreciation of their fertility, that a priest understand how similar the vocations of celibate priesthood and marriage are in respect to being icons of God's love. Those committed to these life vocations need one another to become healthy, holy and fulfilled as human people.

### III. What A Priest Needs to Know

As an inspirited and inspiring NFP-backer, *Humanae Vitae* argues that each priest must be learned — that is, conversant with the Church's well-developed marital theology. Based on my experience with married couples and their moral struggles, I have learned that husbands and wives respond best to a marital theology that is personalist in character. That of Pope John Paul II is a perfect example. His theology of the body speaks to engaged and married people and meets them where they are, in the sense of

reinforcing familiar concepts like the I-Thou relationship and the centrality of conjugal love for a successful marriage.

A personalist presentation of marital theology builds on those popular insights and opens them up to all sorts of added depth that will directly prepare the couple to accept God's plan for procreation. Most importantly, a personalist marital theology helps married couples to understand that following God's plan is His way of lovingly inviting them to fulfillment as individuals, as spouses and as parents.

Toward this end, priests need to demonstrate that the reciprocal self-gift between husband and wife that is essential to marital love is simply incomplete without the inclusion of the gift of their fertility. Furthermore, priests can lead couples in an understanding of how spacing children through abstinence guarantees that their fertile acts of intercourse will always be open to life. Conforming a couple's procreative plans to those of God brings blessings that can only accompany those who do God's will.

I encourage priests to fortify their theological competence with personal testimonies from couples who have successfully used natural methods of family planning. With the lived experience of these NFP couples as their substantiating "evidence" for the truth of the Church's teaching on family planning, priests themselves will come to know the real benefits to a marriage that flow from NFP. But, just as importantly, they will also be able to speak credibly to couples under their care with the authority of a "lived" theology.

In this manner, priests will be able, with conviction, to convey to married couples that blessings such as an

Continued on Page 55

# NFP

Continued from Page 45

increased bondedness, a growth in mutual esteem, a more complete knowledge of the many expressions of human sexuality are not some textbook list of NFP benefits but the harvest of real experience in the lives of couples who are natural family planning users.

The second aspect of the knowledge that Pope John Paul recommends to priests is that which pertains to "the bodily aspect and the body's rhythms of fertility." Space does not allow delineation here, but I would invite priests to attend the Catholic Leadership Conference that is sponsored twice yearly by the Pope Paul VI Institute. The four-day conference dedicates a portion of its lectures to the physiology and biology of human fertility. It equips the participant to understand the science and

physiology behind the natural methods of regulating fertility and to feel comfortable in speaking with engaged and married couples about this aspect of their life together as husband and wife.

This comprehensive knowledge, together with the grace of becoming everything a priest is called to be, will equip every priest to be an effective NFP-backer. It will enable each priest who submits to the training program outlined by two of the best coaches ever to fan the warm embers of NFP evangelization into a roaring flame. †



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Corrected chart to accompany "The Catholic Magisterium," by Father Peter Joseph (Sept/Oct 1998, Page 50)

Teacher	Level of Magisterium	Degree of certitude	Assent required
1. Bishop	Ordinary	Authoritative	Submission
2. Pope	Ordinary	Authoritative	Religious submission of intellect and will
3. Bishops proposing definitively, dispersed, but in unison, in union with Pope	Ordinary (and universal teaching of the Church)	Infallible	Catholic Faith* or definitive assent†
4. Bishops, in union with Pope, proclaiming doctrine at General Council	Extraordinary/Solemn (and universal teaching of the Church)	Infallible	Catholic Faith* or definitive assent†
5. Pope <i>ex cathedra</i>	Extraordinary/Solemn (and universal)	Infallible	Catholic Faith* or definitive assent†

\* That is, Divine and Catholic faith. Faith is demanded if it is part of the Deposit of Faith.

† Definitive assent is demanded if it is not revealed, but connected to Revelation.

"Extraordinary" or "solemn" teaching (nos. 4&5) is also known as doctrine defined *de fide* ("as of faith").

A "heretic," strictly speaking, is someone who obstinately denies, or doubts, a doctrine declared to be revealed and requiring divine and Catholic faith (at levels 3,4&5; see Can. 751).