PASTORAL GUIDELINES ON
NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING AND
THE STANDARD DAYS METHOD*

Antonio J. Ledesma, S.J.

Over the past year, we have conducted several seminars and workshops on a new method of natural family planning (NFP) called the Standard Days Method (SDM). We also reviewed the limited results of our earlier program of NFP promotion over the past three decades. As a result of this self-evaluation, we have started anew several parish-based pilot areas for NFP and SDM promotion. We are doing this in response to the pastoral needs expressed by married couples themselves throughout the prelature.

On the other hand, we cannot disregard some reservations raised from certain quarters in the Church over SDM as an NFP innovation. These include questions about the propriety of the local Church working with government in the latter's own NFP program. In this regard, ongoing consultations with our family life workers and parish priests have brought forth many valuable recommendations.

Thus, in a spirit of dialogue and service to the Christian community, we are formulating these pastoral guidelines on NFP and SDM

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*This pastoral letter, amended on 14 January 2003, was disseminated to the clergy, religious and lay leaders, and the people of the Prelature of Ipil.
promotion—an issue of crucial importance for the well-being and peace of mind of Filipino and Christian homes today. May these guidelines help us to reach out to all families in their calling to wholeness and holiness in our present-day world.

1 Value formation is an essential dimension in our promotion of NFP because, more than just being a method, NFP is regarded as a way of life for Catholic couples.

This formation in Christian and human values includes a deepened understanding of personhood, human sexuality and fertility, the sacramental bond of marriage, intimacy and communication between partners, and the loving providence of God in the gift of procreating life itself.

At the same time, this value formation should also focus on the duties of married life—before God, between spouses, between parents and children, and between the family and society at large.

In sum, value formation spells out the meaning of responsible parenthood as the goal and vision for NFP.

2 SDM is an innovation we are introducing in our NFP promotion—not in order to compete with other NFP methods but simply as an added option.

Indeed, couples who have already adopted the earlier known NFP methods such as the Billings ovulation method or the sympto-thermal method should be encouraged to continue with their experience and share this way of life with other couples.

Moreover, our family life trainors who are already conversant with the earlier NFP methods should first give starting couples an overview of all modern NFP methods to enable them to choose the method most suited to their needs and circumstances. This can be done in our pre-Cana seminars.

We should also keep in mind that SDM is applicable only for women whose menstrual cycles range from 26-32 days. About one-fourth of all women are outside this range. Hence, we should also be ready to offer them other NFP methods.
On the other hand, we should not downplay the innovative break-through in the SDM approach and its potential in reaching out to many more couples because of the method’s standardized simplicity and ease in learning.

This is made more promising in the light of survey results that show that almost two-thirds of all Filipino couples are not using any modern method of family planning at all, whether contraceptive or natural. Moreover, as many as half of all couples are still relying on traditional NFP methods (i.e., based on trial-and-error periods of abstinence). In this light, it should not take much more effort on their part to shift to the more reliable and scientifically-verified SDM approach.

3 We welcome government’s interest in promoting and even mainstreaming NFP at this time and are open to entering into principled collaboration with government agencies.

A long-time family life worker has remarked that if both government and Church were really serious in promoting NFP, the use of contraceptive methods would die a natural death. This is our hope too.

We should keep in mind, however, that government workers and policy-makers in the past have not been transparent nor consistent in their promotion of NFP. If government is indeed sincere in respecting the cultural and religious values of Christian as well as of Muslim communities with regard to NFP, it should encourage the attendant value formation that gives the meaning and raison d’être for NFP in the first place. Government should provide logistical support for religious communities as the best teachers to inculcate these moral values as a prerequisite and sustaining element in NFP adoption.

The following guidelines are thus our terms of reference in the local Church’s principled collaboration with government:

a. We should always include value formation in our joint promotion of NFP—to provide the proper motivation and self-
discipline for couples in their practice of NFP. Indeed, as the local Church, we should be ready to share our value formation seminars with government workers, particularly those who share our Catholic faith. The term “natural” is itself a value orientation that both government and Church workers should take seriously and respect as a starting-point for collaboration.

b. We do not condone the mixing of artificial contraceptive methods (e.g., pills, condoms, etc.) with NFP methods, particularly during the fertile period when abstinence may be decided upon by the couple. This combination is no longer NFP, but rather its opposite.

c. We recognize the dangers of unbalanced population growth vis-a-vis the nation’s resources. However, population control cannot be the sole objective nor the overriding concern in NFP promotion. As couples learn the natural fertility rhythm of the human body, they themselves should be enabled to arrive at the proper size of their families as an exercise of their responsible parenthood—before God, community, and country.

d. Whenever cases are reported that NFP is merely being used to promote contraceptives or a contraceptive mentality, we should first verify from the parties involved whether this practice is due to the lapses of individual workers or a matter of official policy. If positions prove to be irreconcilable, the local Church should not hesitate to withdraw its collaboration in order not to compromise its moral principles.

e. Withdrawing our collaboration from a government worker or agency, however, does not mean withdrawing altogether from our own program of NFP and SDM promotion. Ultimately, the people we serve in our family life ministry are Catholic couples and other persons of good will. Our ministry is not contingent on collaboration with government.
4 In our promotion of all modern NFP methods, our ultimate objective is to guide and empower Catholic couples to exercise their own freedom of choice according to the dictates of their conscience.

This freedom entails an informed and responsible choice made by couples in consonance with their circumstances and their conscience. Neither the government nor the Church can make this choice for them. On our part, however, it is incumbent for the local Church to provide information on all NFP methods that have been proven to be reliable and recognized by the scientific community.

There should be no coercion on the part of government workers in the form of “false incentives”; neither should there be coercion on the part of Church workers in the form of “false condemnations.” In the same manner that we acknowledge the freedom of choice of those with different religious persuasions, so also mature Catholic couples have a right to be respected in their freedom of choice that is consistent with their understanding of their faith and their actual situation in life.

In cases of perceived error, however, our task is to guide couples in forming a right conscience and help them move toward the Christian ideal. This may involve a gradual process of conversion. We also cannot discount the possibility of invincible ignorance among those who struggle daily to live their faith within the concrete circumstances of their family life. As pastors and confessors, our role is to form, not force, consciences.

Whether or not NFP methods, particularly SDM, are subject to misuse by individual couples or government workers is not the foremost concern of the Church. The local Church cannot act as policeman nor as prophet of doom. We are rather asked to be the heralds of God’s love and compassion for all—indeed, that, with the availability of practicable modern NFP methods, today’s Christian family is good news for the third millennium.