IN THE SERVICE OF LIFE: Promoting Natural Family Planning

Pasquale T. Giordano, S.J.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Life, calling forth to fullness of life. The Gospel of Life is at the heart of Jesus' Message: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). This life consists in communion with the Father, to which every person is called in the Son by the power of the Sanctifying Spirit. How is the Spirit calling the Philippine Church to respond more fully to the service of life? Any discernment on this question must make reference to the encyclical of Pope John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life).

John Paul II asserts that we are threatened by the “culture of death” manifested by threats against human dignity and life (3) and violence against life (10). This situation has arisen because of a cultural climate characterized by ethical relativism, utilitarianism, autonomy, individualism, subjectivism, and materialism (4, 70), promoted by powerful cultural, economic, and political forces (12). The specific issues of this “culture of death” are artificial contraception (13), abortion (13), artificial reproduction (14), euthanasia (15), the death penalty (56), and health care professionals as manipulators of life and agents of death (89).

At the same time, there is also the promise and hope of the “culture of life” characterized by many positive signs (26). This “culture of life” must be developed with skill and serious commitment (88), through education for cultural transformation. Such ef-
forts include the formation of conscience (96), education about the value of life (97), education towards a Christian vision of human sexuality (97), education of married couples for responsible procreation (97), and consideration of the mysteries of suffering and death (97).

This presentation focuses on the education of married couples for responsible procreation, the promotion of natural family planning. The publication of *Vademecum for Confessors: Concerning Some Aspects of the Morality of Conjugal Life* in 1997 by the Pontifical Council for the Family presents many insights for the Philippine Church to promote a more effective pastoral program in natural family planning (NFP). Since *Humanae Vitae* was published in 1968, there has been much written theologically evaluating the Church’s teaching on responsible procreation. This piece does not add to this. Instead, these reflections focus on the promotion of a more effective pastoral program in promoting the Church’s teaching on responsible procreation.

Most Catholic married couples do not practice NFP. Janet E. Smith, a noted philosopher who has done extensive research and writing on *Humanae Vitae*, comments (Smith 1993, 520):

Statistics show that few Catholics live by the teaching, and it seems safe to suppose that few Catholics have read *Humanae Vitae* or reflected upon it. Most simply accept the common view that using a contraceptive differs little from taking an aspirin. Furthermore, many theologians call into question the truth of the teaching and work to establish that Catholics have a “right” to dissent from it.

In the Philippines, depending on who has been President, the Government has waged a vigorous campaign with the help of foreign funding to encourage more of its married women to practice family planning. While natural family planning is one of the methods offered by the Government workers, there is much more focus on the artificial methods of birth control, especially the sterilization of women. The Government has an active program of motivating people to accept contraceptive methods, most of which are not ap-
proved by the Church. At times, this has erupted into open disputes between the Church and the Government (cf. Intengan).

Recently, the Commission on Population said in its *State of the Philippine Population Report* population growth must slow down and economic growth must speed up for the figures to meet so that all Filipinos will have a better standard of living. The country's population grew from 48.1 million in 1980 to 75.3 million in 2000 at the annual rate of 2.35 percent in the early 1980s to 2.02 percent in the last five years. The report also said that lack of education in birth control methods and a traditional view of men's virility—measured in the number of children—result in unintended pregnancies and abortions. Despite the high health risks and its illegality in this predominantly Catholic country, there are an estimated 320,000 to 480,000 induced abortions annually (Associated Press, 1).

The basic premise of this presentation is that it is beneficial for married couples to practice natural family planning, both for their marriage and for them personally. The pastoral challenge is to get married couples to realize that following the Church's teaching on responsible procreation is not a burden but a benefit, especially for their married life. Once married couples have this experience, they will come to understand and appreciate the wisdom of the moral teaching of the Church on responsible procreation enunciated in *Humanae Vitae*. Rather than imposing this teaching on Catholic married couples or condemning them for not practicing it, the Church should take a positive approach by attracting them to it, especially by encouraging them to experience natural family planning. This process is greatly facilitated by the pastoral directives enunciated in the *Vademecum*.

There are four main points in this presentation. First, there is the clear affirmation of the Church's teaching on responsible procreation, which includes promoting motivation and awareness of the benefits of natural family planning. The second point highlights the need for a pastoral sensitivity, especially acceptance of the law of gradualness. The third point presents the promotion of NFP in the Philippines; this includes realization of efforts already in practice as
well as the need for a positive, more active program. Finally, this piece discusses the question of the cooperation between the Philippine Catholic Church and the Philippine government, a cooperation that could be mutually beneficial.

**AFFIRMATION OF CHURCH TEACHING ON RESPONSIBLE PROCREATION**

The *Vademecum* presents the teaching of the Church on responsible procreation with extensive footnotes from *Gaudium et Spes, Humanae Vitae, Familiaris Consortio*, Letter to Families (*Gratissimam Sane*), *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and *Evangelium Vitae*. This is a valuable resource and guide for priests, seminarians, and married couples.

The *Vademecum* affirms that “Christian couples . . . must, therefore, be convinced . . . that it is possible to observe the will of the Lord in conjugal life with divine grace” (15). The confessor is to form the conscience of the penitent properly “to remind them in a positive way of the invitation to the sanctity of love, and of the importance of their duties in the area of procreation and the education of children” (3); his is not to approve erroneous opinions (4). The motives for limiting parenthood as well as the methods chosen should be verified (12). The evils of abortion should be made known (14, 18, 19). In addition, priests should maintain uniform criteria in catechesis and preparation of couples for marriage (16). There is also a need to have “consultors and centers available to which confessors could easily refer penitents in order to acquire adequate knowledge about the natural methods” (17).

Confessors, while dealing with great pastoral sensitivity and compassion with their penitents, are also called upon to inform the consciences of the penitents with the teachings of the Church on responsible procreation. The document realizes that a good time to do this is during the preparation for marriage and calls for a uniform catechesis. There is certainly a need for more effective pastoral modules on the teaching and training of young couples in the practice of
natural family planning. While most Pre-Cana Conferences cover this, it is not done effectively so that young married couples will truly be able to practice it. Realistically, the Vademecum calls for consultors and centers where married couples can acquire adequate knowledge about natural family planning. Unfortunately, such pastoral services are sorely missing in most local Churches.

In this author's analysis of the Church's promotion of her teaching of responsible procreation, two images emerge. Both are negative. The first image is that of "benign neglect." The Church is not doing enough to reach her people with the beauty and truth of her teaching on responsible procreation and teaching them effective ways of practicing it. The second image is that of the Church "imposing impossible demands" upon people in their married lives as if not understanding the difficulties they face in practicing responsible procreation. To promote a more effective pastoral program in responsible procreation, the Philippine Church must foster motivation, make readily available information on NFP, and present a positive image of a compassionate and sensitive pastoral approach, exemplified by the "law of gradualness."

Motivation

Married couples who practice natural family planning are often strongly motivated by their faith and their desire to follow the teaching of the Church so as to be in conformity with the will of God. Actually NFP is a way of life that is sustained by a deep spirituality. However, many Catholic married couples are deficient in the qualities needed to practice NFP. Therefore, it is imperative to help Catholic couples grow in their faith as well in mutual communication, respect, responsibility, sensitivity, and shared decision making. NFP must become part of the evangelization effort of the Church; it is not to be presented as a mere methodology or as something imposed upon couples but as value formation, as something beneficial to them. Couples must be attracted to it.

To make this all possible, an effective evangelization program with an effective catechesis on the Christian view of human sexuality is needed. While sex education should be taught primarily by
parents, many times they are unable to do so adequately. Catholic schools should provide effective sexual education programs. Female teachers can teach the female students how to chart their cycle of fertility so that they will be ready to practice NFP when they marry. In fact, the ideal would be that both young men and young women know NFP even before they marry. The image the Church should present is that as wanting to share what is good and true and beneficial to married couples. A negative image which condemns those who practice contraception must be avoided. Many Catholic couples have a negative image of the Church as imposing an impossible and difficult task upon them that threatens their married life; such negative imaging of the Church has often alienated her people. The faithful are to be invited to come to the fullness of life as part of the evangelization program.

**Benefits of Natural Family Planning**

To help motivate more married couples to practice NFP, there is need of the witness of married couples who will give testimony to the beneficial effects NFP has had upon their marriage. The practicing couple become sensitive to each other's sexuality and each other's needs, come to a deeper level of communication, manifest their love for each other in many ways, and sacrifice together for a common goal. The wife ceases to be a sex object ready on demand for her husband's needs; the couples' marital life revolves around the sexual rhythm of the wife. All this leads to a strengthening of the marital bond.

Speaking from an American context, Janet E. Smith has extolled the benefits of natural family planning (Smith 1991, 127):

There is some interesting experiential evidence of the differences between the use of NFP and contraception. There is evidence that it is very rare for couples using NFP to divorce, whereas over 50 percent of all marriages end in divorce. Indeed, one researcher attributes 50 percent of the rise in the divorce rate from the early sixties to the mid-seventies to the increased use of contraception. Moreover, it is
very rare for women who are using NFP to have abortions, whereas most women having abortions have used contraception. Surely the reasons for these situations are complicated, but such information may well suggest that the differences between the two methods of limiting family size are profoundly different not only as acts but in their effects. Respect for the procreative meaning of sexuality seems to strengthen marriages and deepen respect for life.

The “Final Declaration of Meeting on Family Planning” held in Rome, December 9-11, 1992, under the auspices of the Pontifical Council for the Family proposed the authentic way for the true humanization of God’s wonderful gift of procreation (Pontifical Council 1993, 289):

We want to emphasize that the natural methods imply a specific life-style and ethical behavior, which appeals to the responsibility of spouses, and which is based on unconditional respect for the dignity of the person, the true nature of marriage and the primary and fundamental value of life—and the appreciation of sexuality as a gift of God.

When Catholic married couples can experience these effects in their lives through the practice of NFP, they come to understand and accept the teaching of the Church on responsible procreation. The reason why many married couples are not able to practice NFP is that many lack the necessary level of communication. Many husbands often want sex on demand and leave it up to their wives to take the necessary contraceptive precautions so that they do not conceive. There is no way a married couple will practice NFP if only the wife is willing. When both husband and wife are willing, there is effective NFP.

PASTORAL SENSITIVITY

The Vademecum portrays a remarkable pastoral sensitivity to the penitent, realizing the difficulties many married couples face in try-
ing to observe the Church’s teaching on responsible procreation. The confessor is urged “to receive the penitents who approach the confessional taking for granted their goodwill to be reconciled with the merciful God” (2); he is to have a “prudent reserve in inquiring into these sins, . . . to give help and encouragement to the penitent, . . . [and] to inspire all in a gradual way to embrace the way to holiness” (1).

While the document states that “absolution cannot be imparted in the absence of sufficient repentance or of the resolution not to fall again into sin” (5), it also affirms that “frequent relapse into sins of contraception does not itself constitute a motive for denying absolution” (5). “Sacramental absolution is not to be denied to those who, repentant after having gravely sinned against conjugal chastity, demonstrate the desire to strive to abstain from sinning again, not withstanding relapses” (11).

The Vademecum suggests that the penitent have a regular confessor to provide guidance to help him or her to improve in the sanctification of marital life (6). This will make possible the promotion of the pastoral “law of gradualness” which consists of requiring a decisive break with sin together with a progressive path towards total union with the will of God and his loving demands (9). This beautiful pastoral sensitivity acknowledges the difficulties married couples face yet encourages them to grow through God’s grace and their own strivings. The focus is not condemnation; it is abundant compassion.

The Law of Gradualness

Formation of conscience is an important responsibility of the Church in today’s world where many married couples do not practice responsible procreation because they do not know why or how. John Paul II in Evangelium Vitae (12, 18) approaches this reality compassionately:

In fact, while the climate of widespread moral uncertainty can in some ways be explained by the multiplicity and gravity of today’s social problems and these can sometimes mitigate
the subjective responsibility of individuals, it is no less true that we are confronted by an even larger reality, which can be described as a veritable structure of sin.

Decisions that go against life sometimes arise from difficult or even tragic situations of profound suffering, loneliness, a total lack of economic prospects, depression and anxiety about the future. Such circumstances can mitigate even to a notable degree subjective responsibility and the consequent culpability of those who make these choices, which in themselves are evil.

It is precisely in fostering the pastoral practice of the "law of gradualness" mentioned in the Vademecum that the Church will promote a positive image that will attract her faithful to gradually practice her teaching on responsible procreation. Married couples will come to realize that the Church is not heartlessly imposing an impossible demand upon them; rather, she fully realizes how difficult it is to follow her teaching and notes that with the help of God's grace what seems humanly impossible is indeed possible. The Church is acknowledging that there is need for patience, sympathy, and time in order to help her married couples understand and practice her teaching on responsible procreation. This compassionate and sensitive image is very important in evoking a positive response from the faithful. This is precisely the image presented by the 1980 Synod of Bishops in Rome in their "Message to Christian Families" (20) when, after reaffirming the teaching of Humane Vitae, they declared:

As we reach the end of our message, we wish to say to you, brothers and sisters, that we are fully aware of the frailty of our common human condition. In no way do we ignore the very difficult and trying situations of many Christian couples who, although they sincerely want to observe the moral norms taught by the Church, find themselves unequal to the task because of weakness in the face of difficulties. All of us need to grow in appreciation of the importance of Christ's teaching and his grace and to live by them. Accompanied and assisted by the whole Church, these couples continue
along the difficult way toward a more complete fidelity to the commands of the Lord.

The law of gradualness gives much support for Catholic couples once they realize that the Church is not heartlessly imposing impossible demands upon them. While she realizes how difficult it is for married couples to be faithful to her teaching on responsible procreation, she is constantly encouraging and supporting them in their efforts to be faithful. The Church maintains her teaching on responsible procreation and she makes a conscious effort to be compassionate and sensitive to the difficulties many married couples experience.

The best definition of the "law of gradualness" is presented by two experts in the field of medical ethics: Benedict M. Ashley, O.P. and Kevin D. O'Rourke, O.P. They develop it very well in HealthCare Ethics: A Theological Analysis (298):

The "law of gradualness" or of development is not a gradualness of the moral law, but of persons in their subjective development as Christians coming to a practical understanding and effective acceptance of these objective obligations in their own lives through their own experience, reflection, and prayer, assisted by compassionate yet principled pastoral guidance.

In presenting this compassionate and sensitive image in her pastoral approach, the Church is inviting her people to a fullness of life. This effort to inspire motivation is to be accompanied by an evangelization program which brings the beauty of her teaching on responsible procreation to the consciousness of her people while providing ready access to effective methods to practice NFP.

PROMOTION OF NFP IN THE PHILIPPINES

What is the actual practice of family planning in the Philippines? The National Statistics Office recently provided this data (National Statistics, 9):
Almost three-quarters (72 percent) of currently married women in the Philippines have had experience in using family planning methods. Modern and traditional methods are almost equally popular; 53 percent of currently married women have even used a modern method, while 50 percent have used a traditional method. The pill and withdrawal are the most commonly used methods, each having been used by about one-third of currently married women. About one in four married women has used the calendar rhythm method at some time, while 14 percent have relied on condoms.

Overall, 46 percent of currently married women in the Philippines are currently using a contraceptive method. Use of modern methods (28 percent of married women) outstrips use of traditional methods (18 percent). The most widely used methods are female sterilization and the pill (10 percent each), followed by withdrawal and calendar rhythm (9 percent each). Four percent of married women use IUDs, while 2 percent use injectables and 2 percent use condoms.

Especially interesting is the information in Table 5 "Knowledge and Use of Family Planning Methods" of this report (Ibid., 8). While about 20% of women know about the Mucus, Billings Method, and Basal body temperature approaches, only 1% practice them. While about 10% know the Sympto-thermal method, only .1% practice it. While about 15% know the lactational amenorrhea method or LAM, only about 0.4% practice it. These figures presented in general terms give a clear picture of how few are the married women who know or are motivated to practice NFP, especially with the newer more effective methods. Most who do practice NFP use the rhythm method. Most Catholic couples think of the rhythm method as the only "Church-approved" NFP method. Even if Catholic couples have heard about the Billings and Sympto-thermal Methods, they do not know how to practice them. The Church has really failed in educating her people in how to practice NFP.

One of the reasons why there was such a negative reaction to the teaching of Humanae Vitae on responsible procreation was be-
cause married couples realized that the rhythm method did not work effectively due to irregularities in the cycle of a women's fertility. However, since 1968, better methods of practicing NFP have been developed such as the Billings Ovulation Method and the Sympto-thermal Method. In fact, a combination of these two methods is more than 99% effective. However, there is massive ignorance among most Catholic couples about these two methods.

Promoters of NFP in the Philippines

It is not enough for the Church to simply proclaim her teaching; she must also provide the effective means to practice NFP. There have been many efforts by the Philippine Church to promote NFP and to present them gives a good picture of some effective efforts that should be magnified.

Msgr. Jesus Y. Varela, D.D.

As Bishop of Sorsogon and former Head of the Commission on Family Life of the CBCP, Bishop Varela has vigorously promoted NFP in the pastoral programs of his diocese. He instituted a six-month preparation for marriage. NFP can be taught effectively to the couples during this six-month period. He has also been in the forefront of promoting NFP throughout the Philippine Church when he was the head of the Commission on Family Life of the CBCP (1983-2000).

Fr. Vicente San Juan, S.J.

This Jesuit priest has been a very active member of the CBCP Commission on Family Life since he organized the body in 1969; he has served on the commission faithfully and remains a consultant until the present (2001). He has conducted Value Orientation Seminars on Family Life at Camp Phillips, Bukidnon since the 1970s for priests, religious, and laity. During this seminar, the participants live with married couples who practice NFP. The graduates of these seminars are those who have become most active in promoting NFP. In 1993, this author gave a lecture series about the Church's teaching on responsible procreation to the clergy of the Ipil Prelature in
Mindanao. The only parish priest who noted that he had any kind of program promoting NFP said that he was able to institute it because of a married couple who worked for the parish who had completed a Family Life Seminar at Camp Phillips. This Family Life Seminar has been a major force contributing to promoting NFP in the Philippines.

**Elias and Felicidad Porsuelo**

Living also at Camp Phillips are a married couple that have been outstanding in their promotion of NFP, Mr. and Mrs. Elias (Nanding) and Felicidad (Feling) Porsuelo. Feling was a health worker in Phillips Memorial Hospital, who was inspired by Sr. Helen Ford, CSJ, to join her in promoting NFP. The management of the Del Monte pineapple plantation was very supportive in this effort. Feling and her husband Nanding have been active in promoting NFP since the late 1960s. They have a wealth of experience and knowledge based on many years of work in the field. They have become well known and have been appointed as members of the Pontifical Council of the Family, traveling to Rome to meet with the Holy Father and other members of this Council.

When this author taught at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Cagayan de Oro, the Porsuelos were often invited to lecture in the classes on medical and sexual ethics and to share with the seminarians their knowledge and experience in promoting NFP. Their experiences show how difficult it is to get married couples to practice NFP. They related that when they first started their promotion of NFP, they invited Fr. Frank Madigan, S.J., a noted sociologist from Xavier University in Cagayan de Oro, to lecture on his research and studies in this area (Madigan, 51-61). They said at first many people came, but gradually, the number of those attending the lectures dwindled. Feling emphasized that it is not enough to have a lecture, invite couples to come, and expect them to practice NFP.

Feling said that the only way she found to have an effective NFP is through the couple to couple method. She said people know where she and Nanding live. When these couples want to know how to practice NFP, they come to see them. She also said that many
couples have come to see them over the years and have themselves become practitioners of NFP. Feling and Nanding often travel to different places to give seminars on NFP, but these seminars have to be followed up by intensive work with the couples. She said that it is not easy.

NFP works if only both husband and wife are interested; thus, couples need a strong motivation to continue because at times they get frustrated. For this reason, it is very helpful to have another married couple lead them in learning NFP so that they can share their own experiences and difficulties. Occasionally, the period of determining the cycle of the woman’s fertility may take some time, maybe as long as six months to one year. However, once the period is clearly determined (the fertile period, the safe period, the in-between period), a couple can be assured of an effective NFP as long as they keep their love-making to the safe period. Feling said that she and Nanding work as a team. He is able to communicate effectively with men; she is able to communicate with women.

Furthermore, Feling said that for NFP to be successful, the focus should not be merely on limiting and spacing children and learning the methodology of NFP but on forming attitudes and values. Four key values that must be promoted are: love making and love giving; awareness of the coming child; no unwanted children; and, promoting the relationship between husband and wife. Mr. and Mrs. Danding and Feling Porsuelo have given outstanding witness of how a married couple can promote NFP.

Sr. Mary Pilar Versoza, R.G.S.: Pro-Life Philippines

Another key promoter of NFP has been Sr. Mary Pilar Verzosa, RGS, National Coordinator of Pro-Life Philippines, a non-profit, interfaith organization of citizens who are concerned about issues pertaining to the inherent value and dignity of human life. Every two months they publish a newsletter, Pro-Life Philippines: Life Is For Everyone; it advocates pro-life concerns. This organization has many activities, including NFP training, teen chastity programs, pregnancy counseling centers, promoting pro-life chapters in the provinces, as well as making available video-tapes and literature to promote pro-
life activities. Pro-Life Philippines is also very active in holding national pro-life conferences each year, thus bringing these issues to a greater public consciousness.

**Mitos Rivera: Institute of Reproductive Health.**

Michael Tan in his column in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* has given some incisive comments on the natural family planning situation in the Philippines (Tan 2001, 8):

NFP requires intensive motivation, training and follow-up, but government has not given enough money to sustain such efforts. Medical and nursing schools give little attention, if any, to NFP, so in our research last year almost all the doctors we interviewed were opposed to NFP because they still equated this with rhythm, which they consider ineffective. Finally, there's the Catholic Church which for all the talk about approving of NFP, has done far too little to support such programs.

Furthermore, Michael Tan went on to cite the program of the Institute for Reproductive Health (IRH), an agency working on NFP attached to the medical school of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. The country coordinator of IRH is Mitos Rivera who through the years has been promoting NFP. She has presented the objectives of IRH in a personal letter (Rivera):

The Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University Medical Center, conducts research, advances scientific information, and provides policy support for natural family planning (NFP) and reproductive health awareness. For the last three years, the Institute has worked in the Philippines in partnership with the Department of Health on the mainstreaming of NFP. Among the researches and activities conducted here are: the development of NFP Implementing Guidelines; the development of a Competency Based Training curriculum and materials on the Mucus Method of NFP; a policy review of NFP; the documentation of an NFP clinic
in a hospital setting (Makati Medical Center); testing the integration of NFP in the nursing and midwifery curricula in twenty-seven schools; a project on male involvement in reproductive health awareness.

The Department of Health has also taken up NFP as one of its services and is beginning to conduct NFP capability-building at the regional and LGU levels using the tested curriculum. Recognizing the vast opportunities for meeting a great demand for NFP in our country, the Institute is at this time, in the process of establishing its office in the Philippines to be better able to carry out its objectives.

In his column, Michael Tan mentioned also the research report of Health Action Information Network (HAIN) that was commissioned by IRH to review the policy environment for NFP (Tan 2000). The extensive research makes clear how few married couples know or practice NFP in the Philippines.

**Natural Family Planning Clinic: Makati Medical Center**

The IRH has already published the research they did in cooperation with the Makati Medical Center: Natural Family Planning Clinic, a large urban hospital which has made a commitment to the promotion of NFP (Dequina-Dioko). In August 1994, Sr. Mary Magdalino Namuag, RN, BSN, a Religious Sister of Mercy, started giving NFP services upon the request of Makati Medical Center Medical Director Dr. Raul G. Fores. It has grown into a Natural Family Planning Clinic with a staff of five. Such an effort to develop an NFP Clinic should be a model for other hospitals.

**The Need for a Positive, Active Program**

Many programs and movements in the Philippines today promote mutual communication among married couples. Among them are the Center for Family Ministry (CEFAM), the Christian Family Movement, the Marriage Encounter, Couples for Christ, and various Marriage Enrichment Programs in different dioceses. While they do great work in promoting mutuality in family life, they could also be
more active in promoting natural family planning as an effective way to foster that mutuality. Aside from these groups there are other Charismatic communities such as *Ligaya ng Panginoon*, Brotherhood of Christian Businessmen and Professionals (BCBP), and various Church groups each with their own unique charisms; yet, how many of them promote NFP?

Is NFP promoted in the programs of the Basic Ecclesial Communities in the dioceses throughout the Philippines? An effective way to promote NFP would be to have couples who practice NFP give witness to fellow members of their basic communities and enabling them to practice it. This could also be shared among Church workers and faculties of Catholic schools. Of course, there should be no coercion, just sharing of a way of life that can lead others to a greater fullness of life. All these Church groups and organizations have memberships that are highly faith-motivated; they could prove to be an excellent place to begin an effective campaign to get married couples to practice NFP.

The foregoing data leads to the realization that the promotion of NFP is an important apostolate of the laity, especially of married couples. Priests and religious as celibates should not be the instructors in NFP. However, it is very important that priests and religious promote and support the efforts of the laity in this regard. Without the support and encouragement of the hierarchy, the laity will never be able to have an effective NFP program. This is often a problem because one hardly ever hears about NFP during homilies or in the pastoral program of parishes.

Part of the problem in developing an effective NFP Program lies with the clergy themselves. For most of them, NFP does not have a high priority in their pastoral ministry. They may not be convinced of the teaching of the Church in this matter, or they may not even know it well. They may also be reluctant to enter into this matter which is so private to the married couples. For these reasons there must be effective courses on the Church's teaching on responsible procreation and on the promotion of NFP in seminaries so that upon ordination young priests will be knowledgeable in this area. In
addition, there should be seminars given to update and inform active priests who may not be fully aware of the Church’s teaching on responsible procreation. Actually, the exposition and discussion of the Vademecum would be an excellent topic for such a seminar; it presents the Church’s teaching on responsible procreation clearly and gives excellent pastoral guidelines for confessors.

It is a fact that very little of the Church’s resources in manpower and finances has been given to this apostolate; this is understandable when one realizes all the demands on the Church. Although the Church is strong in her opposition to the government’s family planning programs that often promote contraception and sterilization, she has not established an effective program of her own. It is not enough to be negative. The Church must also present a positive response to help her faithful practice NFP. The pastoral program of the Episcopal Commission of Family and Life may look impressive on paper; yet, it has not been widely implemented throughout the Philippine Church, especially on the parish level. The Commission lacks resources and finances to implement its programs widely and effectively. This leads to an exploration of the possibility of cooperation between the Catholic Church and the government in promoting natural family planning.

CATHOLIC CHURCH AND PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT COOPERATION

One controversial point to consider since the Church lacks the personnel and financial resources to effectively implement its pastoral program promoting NFP is whether the Philippine Church and Government can cooperate in promoting NFP as a family planning method. The Government does have resources to help the Church implement its program. About 85 percent of Filipinos are Catholic; most of the government workers in the Department of Health are Catholic. Yet, is such a proposal possible, especially because of the many past disputes and polarization of positions? Can NFP be as effective as other contraceptive family planning methods and be without negative side effects?
Many Filipino families are poor; they would be justified in limiting the size of their families if they so chose. They too are called to responsible family planning. As long as the Government respects the wishes of the couple on number of children, the promotion of NFP can result in the lowering of the birth rate which is the primary goal of the Government on the population issue. The Church does not want the Government to promote artificial contraception and sterilization. However, promoting NFP would be a trainor intensive program depending on trained facilitators rather than focused on the issuing of pills, condoms, IUDs, and performing tubal ligations.

The Philippine Church and Government can work together, each helping the other to achieve its goals. The Church can foster the motivation and values so necessary to the effective practice of NFP; the Government can provide the personnel and finances to teach the couples the Billings method and Sympto-thermal methods. The Philippine Church and Government can work together to build a nation where family values and the fullness of humanity are fostered. Is such a proposal so unrealistic? In a Catholic country like the Philippines where the influence of the Church is so pervasive, efforts at dialogue towards cooperation may one day become a reality.

Bishop Teodore Bacani, Jr., auxiliary of Manila, has raised the question of cooperation between the Church and government in family planning (Bacani, 6):

The Church is set against contraception and sterilization. But while it will always oppose these as a means of birth control, there may be reasons for tolerating the government's making them available to those who want them. Toleration does not mean approval or encouragement. In this country where the majority are Catholics who believe in the divinity of Christ, preaching by the Iglesia ni Cristo denying the divinity of Christ must be tolerated by Catholics, though no one sees that toleration as approval or encouragement. And the Church's teaching about the divinity of Christ is infinitely more important than its teaching on the immorality of contraception.
There is, however, one big practical difficulty. The intrauterine device (IUD) and some (perhaps most) contraceptive pills have also a built-in abortifacient mechanism. When their contraceptive mechanism fails, they make the womb inhospitable to the fertilized ovum and prevent implantation. From the Catholic perspective, this is already abortion and not merely contraception. This, the Church cannot tolerate. The Constitution, which mandates State protection of the unborn "from conception," does not and should not be made to tolerate the distribution by the government of such birth-control means.

For a government program to be tolerable (and in that sense acceptable) to the Church, the IUD must be banned, and any contraceptive pill to be distributed must be free from any abortifacient action.

The comments of Bishop Bacani show how complex the issue of cooperation and toleration can be. While the Church can call for its members to practice NFP, they can not impose this on other religious groups, like the Iglesia ni Cristo, who have come out in favor of contraception for its members. That is the meaning of toleration. The real challenge for the Church is to enter into the process of public dialogue to show how attractive NFP can be for married couples. The Church is called to proclaim the truth, and to help people see the value and attractiveness of the truth. If done properly, NFP is as effective as any artificial contraceptive method, except perhaps for sterilization; it does not have any of the obvious negative consequences. It is ecologically friendly and does no harm to the woman's body. The real challenge for the Church is not merely to be negative, to simply be against government policy, but to take a positive stance to attract her people to NFP.

The liberating event of People Power II at EDSA in January 2001 marks a new beginning for the Philippine nation with immense possibilities for social transformation. The Catholic Church played a key role in the unfolding of the events that brought down President Joseph Ejercito Estrada and brought Gloria Macapagal Arroyo
to the Presidency. There are new possibilities for cooperation in population policy. When President Macapagal Arroyo spoke before the Asia Pacific Conference on Reproductive Health at the Philippine Trade Center on February 15, 2001, she said that her administration welcomes scientific breakthroughs in the field of reproductive health and population control: "I am glad to share that efforts have already been made to develop more reliable natural family planning methods" (Arroyo, 11).

In return, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) commended President Macapagal Arroyo’s decision to push for natural family planning methods as part of the government’s reproductive health policy. Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, CBCP President, said: "If the Arroyo administration will consider the view of the Church on natural family planning, well and good" (Kabiling, 1).

There certainly are possibilities for dialogue and cooperation between the Catholic Church and the government in the Philippines in promoting a population policy that would benefit by the promotion of natural family planning. The Catholic Church can contribute the promotion of values and consciousness that will attract married couples to the practice of NFP, while the government can provide the personnel and technical resources that will give married couples ready access to the practice of NFP.

CONCLUSION

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Life, calling forth to fullness of life. A clear invitation of the Holy Spirit is to promote the "culture of life." This presentation states that the promotion of NFP is one way to realize this call of the Spirit today. To concretely implement this call, there should be the clear affirmation of the Church’s teaching on responsible procreation, promoting motivation and awareness of the benefits of natural family planning. There is also the need for
a pastoral sensitivity, especially acceptance of the law of gradualness. In addition, the promotion of NFP in the Philippines includes the realization of NFP efforts already in practice as well as the need for a positive, more active program. Finally, the question must be raised regarding the cooperation between the Philippine Catholic Church and the Philippine Government, a cooperation that could be mutually beneficial.

The Jubilee Year and all the activities it included have been a special grace for the Filipino people culminating in the liberating event of People Power II at EDSA in January 2001, a time of new beginnings for the nation with immense possibilities for social transformation. It is as if the Holy Spirit breathed upon the Filipino people, calling forth a new creation, and the Filipino people responded with courage and commitment. A similar response of the Philippine Catholic Church to the challenge of the promotion of NFP will truly lead to the renewal of married and family life, a renewal that is urgently called for in the “Message of the National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal” (NPCCR). The Consultation lists nine pastoral priorities, saying that each of these pastoral priorities calls for a radical conversion of mind and heart. One of the pastoral priorities is: “The family as focal point of evangelization.” It is the position of this paper that any evangelization effort concerning the family should include the active promotion of NFP.

This position takes on even greater meaning in light of the preparations for the World Meeting of Families with the Holy Father in Manila in January 2003. This gathering of families with the Pope takes place every three years at different sites throughout the world. Would it not be a special sign of the Holy Spirit in the service of life if the Philippine Catholic Church would initiate an intensive effort at promoting NFP to mark the event? Could it be the beginning of serious collaboration between the Philippine Catholic Church and the Philippine Government in joint projects for the promotion of NFP? Such initiatives could greet the Holy Father and the other delegates as they come to Manila; they would truly bear witness to the Holy Spirit active in the service of life.
REFERENCES


Dequina-Dioko, Ma. Teresa. 2000. A Documentation of the Hospital Based Natural Family Planning Service Delivery at the Makati Medical Center. Makati City: Makati Medical Center, Natural Family Planning Clinic.


