NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING*
A Pastoral Approach

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In solidarity with the rest of the Church in the Philippines, we have begun our yearlong schedule of activities highlighting the Christian family. These are being held in preparation for the 4th International Meeting of Families in Manila in January 2003.

I. Pastoral activities

Our first activity last February was a seminar on Family Life and Responsible Parenthood for all priests, religious and selected lay coordinators of our prelature ministries. We first discussed the present situation in our parishes in terms of current family planning needs and practices. Much of the workshop reports indicated several pastoral issues:

- The common desire among young couples to plan the size of their families;
- The prevalence of artificial means of birth control for lack of any natural methods;

*This pastoral letter, addressed to the clergy, religious and lay leaders of the Prelature of Ipi, was read in churches on 7 April 2002.
• The condemnatory attitude of some clergy and Church workers toward parishioners who have resorted to artificial means;
• The distancing of the Church from the government's population programs because these are viewed as anti-life, contraceptive, and coercive; and
• The inaction of the local Church itself in providing a practical alternative for Christian couples.

On the second day, we had a chance to listen to our resource person, Ms. Mitos Rivera, explain a new approach to natural family planning (NFP) called the Standard Days Method (SDM). Because of its simplicity to teach and use, the SDM represents a promising new approach that is now being pilot tested in some areas in the Philippines as well as in other countries. With the help of a necklace of colored beads as mnemonic device, couples are aided to accurately determine the “fertile window” during a woman’s menstrual cycle when periodic abstinence may be decided upon. The NFP-SDM approach has been developed over the past six years and is still being field tested by the Institute for Reproductive Health which is affiliated with the Medical Center of Georgetown University, the oldest Catholic university in the United States.

After examining the SDM approach, we listened to Dr. Elena Semella-Ocoreza explain to us the medical background and health risks of various contraceptive methods. These include the likelihood of abortifacient effects of some of the drugs being used.

We also heard Ms. Elizabeth Benedicto, Assistant Region IX Director of the Population Commission, explain the government’s paradigm shift from the population control perspective of the past to a present-day concern for a balance among population, resources and the environment. This is anchored on the basic population policy of the 1987 Philippine Constitution which gives couples “the responsibility to decide how many children to have in accordance with their religious beliefs and the demands of responsible parenthood for sustainable development.”

In view of the pastoral issues raised and the presentation of our three speakers, practically all the parish priests signified their interest to introduce the NFP-SDM approach in their parishes, but first on a pilot scale. We agreed to mobilize our three ministries for KRISKA—BECs, Family Life Apostolate and Community-Based Health Program. We shall try to introduce SDM in pilot *kapilyas* or *seldas* with the understanding that “KRISKA is FLA” and “FLA is KRISKA”; indeed that our BECS may now also be called FECs or Family Ecclesial Communities. Furthermore, we also viewed family planning as a reproductive health issue, needing the support of our CBHP workers.

After the Phase One seminar at the prelature level last February, we are arranging for a Phase Two seminar for couple-trainors at the district level this April. In the succeeding months, each parish can schedule its own Phase Three seminar for couples coming from the *sonas* and *kapilya* communities.

As we push through with our action plan, several requests have been made that we clarify the local Church’s stand on family planning and related issues. It is in this light that I would like to recall a number of perspectives we have discussed and reflected on at the February seminar for priests and religious. These can serve as terms of reference for our pastoral approach to natural family planning.

**II. Responsible Parenthood as the Goal**

The Church is not against the goal of family planning. Neither is she simply for large families. The Church does have objections to methods of birth control that are deemed as un-natural or artificial. From a holistic perspective, the Church presents the goal of responsible parenthood for married couples. The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines thus states:

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Christian parents must exercise responsible parenthood. While nurturing a generous attitude towards bringing new life into the world, they should strive to beget only those children whom they can raise up in a truly human and Christian way. Towards this end, they need to plan their families according to the moral norms taught by the Church (PCP II 583).

Responsible parenthood encompasses the married couple's recognition of their relationship and duties toward God, their family, society at large and themselves. Some of the points we have discussed, based on Church documents and pastoral concerns, pertain to these relationships:

a) to God – the Church's traditional teaching on conjugal chastity with regard to the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act;\(^2\)
b) to family – the number of children that a couple would like to have and can adequately raise, including the spacing of children;
c) to society – an objective appraisal of the population issue in our country, and its implications on mass poverty and our efforts for the development of our communities;
d) to themselves – the couple's exercise of their freedom to decide for themselves based on an informed choice and a well-formed conscience.\(^3\)

By way of contrast, irresponsible parenthood connotes a couple's failure to take into account any or several of these relationships. As mature Christians, married couples have to be aided to pray and discern over their particular situation and "to deliberate deeply in a spirit of faith about the size of their family, and to decide the concrete mode of realizing it with respect for the moral criteria of conjugal life."\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no.50.

\(^4\) Pontifical Council for the Family, *Vade Mecum for Confessors Concerning Some*
III. Toward a Pastoral Approach Regarding the Means

Even as we re-affirm the doctrinal pronouncements of the Church’s magisterium with regard to responsible procreation and the regulation of births, as pastors we cannot close our eyes and ears to the practical difficulties experienced by many couples today with regard to their desire and unmet needs for family planning.

In this regard we included in our reference materials for the seminar a key document from the Pontifical Council for the Family, entitled “Vade Mecum for Confessors Concerning Some Aspects of the Morality of Conjugal Life” (Vatican City, 1997). The pastoral guidelines enunciated in this document for confessors may also provide the bases for our pastoral approach in dealing with family planning concerns in the prelature.

A Compassionate Lord

The primary image that a confessor should represent to a penitent in matters of responsible procreation is the example of a merciful Lord. So also with our pastoral programs on family life and responsible parenthood. In our pre-Cana seminars for couples preparing for marriage and in our public statements, our primary task is to explain the Church’s lofty understanding of marriage and the marriage act. This does not necessarily have to go together with an outright condemnation of those who do not share the same understanding.

The Vade Mecum document goes on to recommend a prudent reserve in inquiring into sins, help and encouragement to the penitent to reach sufficient repentance, and “advice which would inspire all, in a gradual way, to embrace the path of holiness.” It includes a guideline that “in general, it is not necessary for the confessor to 

investigate concerning sins committed in invincible ignorance of their
evil or due to an inculpable error of judgment.”

**Balancing Our Perspective**

While the Vade Mecum document takes into consideration the
situation of “invincible ignorance,” it is regrettable that some Church
workers go the opposite direction and, taking advantage of the igno-
rance of ordinary people, impute equal or greater guilt and culpabil-
ity for actions that should be clearly distinguished. For instance, con-
traception is *not* the same as abortion. In the first case, there is no
conception; hence, no life is involved. In abortion, an innocent life is
taken away and represents a serious violation of the Fifth Command-
ment.

It is true that the Church is more and more concerned about the
use of means that have an abortifacient effect. In such cases, the
morally safer course is to be followed. The Church is also concerned
about the connection that oftentimes exists between a contraceptive
mentality and abortion. Nonetheless, it is important to keep a proper
perspective. Otherwise, by absolutizing the lesser evil, we run the
risk of relativizing the greater evil.

Similarly, several questions have been raised in the course of our
clergy discussions. Can we make blanket statements like: “artificial
contraception is mortal sin”? (This was painted once on the wall of
one of our parish formation centers.) Can we “excommunicate” cat-
echists or FLA workers from approaching the sacraments or con-
tinuing with their volunteer services to the Church, simply because
they are known to have used contraceptives? (Some of our ministry
coordinators have reported this in the past.)

It seems to me that matters of conscience cannot be publicly
judged nor made a matter of ecclesial ostracism. The act itself may
be considered as intrinsically evil and a grave matter, but there is a
host of circumstances surrounding the persons involved that have to
be considered—matters that are best left in the internal forum of

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9Ibid., 29-34.
one’s conscience, between the penitent and the confessor, and before the mystery of the Father’s mercy.

In the net balance of what is evil or less than ideal in the world today, it seems that there are many more social sins that need to be denounced publicly (from drug-pushing to corruption in public office) rather than stigmatizing the private failings of married couples.

**Principled Collaboration**

Lately, some government agencies have indicated their interest in including the Standard Days Method in their program of activities. Should we then work together with a government that has been pushing its own secularized program of family planning which includes contraceptive methods deemed immoral by the Church?

Natural family planning is the Church’s approved method, whether or not the government promotes it. The Church can and should always make clear its own stand—which includes respecting the freedom of choice and the dictates of conscience of married couples, Catholic or non-Catholic. These principles are also recognized by government agencies along with the clear constitutional prohibition against abortion. On several occasions, the present administration has indicated its sensitivity to Catholic ethical principles regarding family planning and population issues.

It is in this light that we should explore the possibility of moving from the Church’s earlier position of critical non-collaboration with government to one of principled collaboration. Aside from tapping the resources of government to promote natural family planning, a collaborative effort would enable the Church to share her value orientation with government workers, many of whom are Catholics of good will. Would this not be a way too for the Church to enter into a dialogue on family life in the marketplace itself?

We should highlight the positive in our natural family planning approach. Even in a “cafeteria approach” adopted by the government, the NFP-SDM approach can stand out on its own merits as being:
1) Natural  It works with the natural rhythm of the human body.
2) Safe    There is no risk to health, unlike many pills.
3) Affordable There are no financial costs involved.
4) Practical It is easy to learn, regardless of educational level.
5) Integral It respects the totality of relationships in responsible parenthood, in particular the moral demands of our Catholic faith.

Admittedly, the NFP-SDM approach will require the active and disciplined cooperation of both husband and wife, particularly in observing periodic continence. It is in this light that the witness of a celibate life among priests and religious can provide an evangelical faith-dimension and a source of inspiration for couples in their practice of natural family planning.

On the other hand, the earlier negative attitude of the local Church toward government programs on birth regulation—including keeping a blind eye to the population issue—may have only dented the Church’s credibility, particularly if no significant efforts are made to provide Catholic couples with a viable alternative. Instead of closing other doors, let us open our own door for natural family planning, with or without government support.

May our observance of Divine Mercy Sunday today also open the door to the Risen Lord’s presence into our Christian homes now and in the years to come.

―This includes other NFP methods introduced earlier like the Billings or mucus method. The rate of acceptance, however, of the Billings method in the 1998 National Demographic and Health Survey is only 0.2 percent. Cf. Commission on Population, 33.