

NFP Program Gives Young Couples Answers to Why They Should Follow Church Teaching

By Susan Klemmond

Tell a young couple they shouldn't use artificial contraception because it's a sin and they'll ask you why.

But tell them that as persons they are of incredible dignity and value, that their bodies are the expression of this dignity and that violating a healthy functioning part of their body, such as reproduction, hurts not only them but the one they love, and they'll get it.

That's the hope of the Couple to Couple League (CCL), which recently redesigned its Natural Family Planning instruction program to appeal to a younger audience whom it believes will better grasp moral precepts when explained by the Theology of the Body, Pope John Paul II's comprehensive teaching on human love and sexuality.

John Paul II has given us a new way of explaining the faith, and for NFP, his explanation of why the Church teaches that certain sexual acts are immoral and sinful is much clearer to most people, said Fr. Richard Hogan, who serves on the advisory council to the CCL board of directors and who developed the moral/theological teaching for CCL's new materials.

Along with transforming the program's moral instruction, CCL incorporated the latest medical advances, overhauled the remaining content and upgraded presentation technology. The "extreme makeover," as the organization calls it, comes near the 40th anniversary of the monumental encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, which lays out the Church's argument against artificial contraception.

Not long after the encyclical's release, CCL was founded in 1971 in the Twin Cities. Now based in Cincinnati, it is the oldest and one of the largest providers of Natural Family Planning training, annually teaching 7,000 U.S. couples to use the Sympto-Thermal method of NFP, the most comprehensive, scientifically proven technique.

The three-fold core of CCL's program consists of training in this scientific method for postponing or achieving pregnancy by crosschecking several signs of fertility, as well as the moral underpinnings of NFP and the role of breastfeeding.

CCL presents the moral foundation for NFP to give couples a strong reason to persevere with a practice that may be easy to learn but at times challenging to live out, said Linda Kracht, who chairs CCL's board of directors. "When push comes to shove, abstinence isn't easy for many couples. If there's no reason for them [to use NFP], other than maybe health, and some new technology comes along, they may think it's just as healthy as the old one" and decide to try it, she said. "Whereas couples who are using NFP and combining it with morality, spirituality, health and marital and all the other reasons, they're going to stay with it."

CCL previously used the concept of an Old Testament covenant—with God and in a marriage—to explain the moral teaching behind NFP, Hogan said. However, in part because the younger generation doesn't have as much knowledge of the Old Testament

and because they don't see avoidance of sin in itself as a strong motivator, the approach is less effective than it used to be, he said.

Now, in a different way. Hogan offers couples a moral and theological explanation for why they should remain open to new life by using NFP. In three talks on DVD, he uses John Paul II's approach. "With the Theology of the Body, the reason for them not sinning is not just that it's against God and you might not get to heaven, it's also against yourself," he said. John Paul II "says in one point in his writings, sin is suicide, attempted suicide, not in a physical way but in a spiritual way because if we're made in God's image and likeness, then as human beings we're called to act like God. To not act like God is to try to undo what God did when he created us in his image."

Moral teaching is essential to the program, especially because it draws many couples who come only because their diocese requires it for marriage, and who, lacking a faith background, may not be open to the sacrifice involved in practicing NFP, Kracht said. "The ones who are there because they're required, I know that it changes some hearts," she said. "We've seen it and some it doesn't, but it's still planting some seeds for further down the road."

Whether or not they accept the moral instruction, the program focuses on teaching couples to apply NFP rules to their cycles. CCL rewrote the medical aspects of its program to include the latest technology developed by two European doctors, Kracht said. The material also has been condensed and made easier to understand. The thick reference manual has been replaced by a full-color workbook with graphics that couples can write in during class.

Also, to make class sessions more appealing to tech-savvy couples, CCL replaced outdated Kodak slides with an instructional DVD embedded with video clips of experts, including Hogan and a medical doctor. Outside of class, couples can purchase scientific software to chart their fertile phase. And those who take classes will soon be able to access a members-only website containing NFP information and a forum where they can connect with other couples.

CCL encourages couples to stay connected after taking the course. Instead of teaching all aspects of NFP at once, the organization now encourages couples to take classes again to prepare for the different stages of their fertility, Kracht said.

While it's harder to gauge course-attendee response to the updated program, she said instructors have been very enthusiastic about it.

Students of CCL's courses find that in practicing NFP, they improve communication with their spouse—in many areas of their life besides intimacy. It also can reveal other problems in their marriage. "NFP can point out that your problems are deeper than the NFP chart, Kracht said. "There are probably so many layers of communication that we hope couples [can] start talking about many different things, like what's hurting them, or what's bothering them."

It's a challenge to practice NFP in today's culture, but young couples are doing it, she said. "To me, the miracle is that with all the contraception, sex ed, porn and junk that's out there, and how twisted everybody's relationships and lives are, that there are some people who really embrace the Church and the Church's teachings covering sexuality."

CCL is offering a generation of young couples, in a language they understand, a message which is as timeless today as when it was stated in *Humanae Vitae* 40 years ago:

“But to experience the gift of married love while respecting the laws of conception is to acknowledge that one is not the master of the sources of life but rather the minister of the design established by the Creator.”