

Promoting *Humanae Vitae* and Natural Family Planning in the Parish

by Janet E. Smith, PhD

Priests often ask me what they can do at the parish level to promote *Humanae Vitae* and Natural Family Planning. What must first be established is the importance of this task. I firmly believe that if priests inspired their parishioners to do just two things, most everything else they want to do with them and for them would be significantly easier. These two things are: Promoting Eucharistic Adoration and, promoting fidelity to the Church's teaching on sexuality.

Catholics who do both are generally receptive to all the teachings of the Church and much inclined to be generous with their time, talents, and money in various apostolic activities. They are likely to have happier marriages as well, and that brings an abundant number of blessings on the family, the Church and society. If pastors only knew how the faith and happiness of their flock would increase by engaging in Eucharistic Adoration and in avoiding fornication, contraception, sterilization, adultery, and immoral reproductive technologies, they would work hard to find the best ways to promote Church teaching in these areas. A tremendous resource for priests who wish to serve their parishioners by preaching the truth about sexual morality is the set of tapes entitled "NFP Talks for Clergy."¹ Father Randy Moreau speaks of how he preaches NFP in his parish and the remarkable consequences of that preaching; couples tell of their experience with NFP; and Drs. Philip Fleming and Michelle Rabideau explain why contraception is bad medicine and NFP is healthy.

Priests should never underestimate the influence they can have. A physician friend of mine told me of a conference of Catholic physicians who at one time did abortions and prescribed contraceptives where each individual spoke of what had led to his or her conversion. She said over 99% said a priest had confronted them about the incompatibility of what they were doing with their Catholic faith, and that this

conversation had led them to stop doing abortions and prescribing contraceptives. She said the Catholic physicians whom she knows who continue to prescribe contraceptives have been told by a priest that it is morally permissible for them to do so. Priests make all the difference! If priests speak to the Catholic physicians in their parishes,² they have the opportunity to convert their souls, to have an enormous influence on their fellow doctors and patients, and a powerful effect on the parish. If the Catholic physicians in the parish are known not to prescribe contraceptives, that news gets out and is a great witness to the other parishioners.

Priests often quake at the thought that they should be giving some fire and brimstone homily against contraception and I think that they fear that their parishioners would be angry to the brim and would stone them after such a homily. I don't want to discourage and in fact, want to encourage homilies³ (although, of course, there is no need that they be fire and brimstone homilies). Certainly, it would be right and natural to include mention of contraception in any homily concerning the life issues. After all, *Evangelium Vitae* calls contraception and abortion, the "fruits of the same tree."

Still, some pastors may be shy about preaching against contraception; they should realize there is much that they can do in addition to giving and perhaps as preparation for giving homilies. Many might find it easier to preach against contraception after they do some cultivating of the parish. Specific things can be done to promote the teachings of *Humanae Vitae* and Natural Family Planning through other educational vehicles of the parish. Over the years I have known priests who have used the following techniques.

Educate yourself

1 Several groups offer education for priests on *Humanae Vitae* and Natural Family Planning. I mentioned above a terrific set of tapes, "NFP Talks for Clergy." See for instance the Couple to Couple League (CCL)⁴ and a group called "God's

Plan for Life."⁵ The latter also promote "Culture of Life" weekends that combine preaching from the pulpit with extensive lay involvement in NFP promotion with the help of volunteers and CCL teachers. Other groups also occasionally hold conferences on the topic.

2. Another great tape is "NFP: A Preachable Message"⁶ featuring priests and bishops who promote NFP.

3. Christopher West's tapes "A Crash Course on the Theology of the Body" are an excellent treatment of Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body.⁷

4. You may be interested in my series of tapes "Humanae Vitae and Veritatis Splendor."⁸

Plant seeds

1. Certainly, homilies on the nature of the Church itself, as the Bride of Christ, as a divinely instituted entity that is guided by the Holy Spirit, should help Catholics become more receptive to Church teachings.

2. Include a flier in the parish bulletin about the benefits of Natural Family Planning with the address and phone number of local teachers (there are many good NFP groups represented on the Internet who have great materials). Follow up with inserts on *Humanae Vitae*, information on the abortifacient nature of many contraceptives, sterilization, and in vitro fertilization. (Again, get surfing on the Internet—or have a zealous parishioner help you out!).

3. During the prayers for petition priests could pray for "an end to abortion, euthanasia, contraception, sterilization and in vitro fertilization." They should be prepared to have parishioners ask "What did you say, Father? I thought the Church had given up its opposition to contraception and sterilization." Others will kiss your feet!

4. Keep the pamphlet rack in the Church well supplied with brochures on Natural Family Planning, with copies of *Humanae Vitae* and *Casti Connubii*; have copies of my tape "Contraception: Why Not?"⁹ available for loan (maybe just for free). In fact, it is wise to find some energetic individual with deep pockets who will supply the pamphlet rack; it is a tremendous

apostolate for someone and of great service. There are terrific pamphlets and tapes available on many important topics. Having a tape-lending operation is also very beneficial.

5. Consider having a daylong mission done by Father Dan McCaffrey. He brings in a team—a doctor, a couple, and himself to explain the benefits of NFP. He will often preach at the Masses that weekend as well. He sometimes gets standing ovations!¹⁰

Identify couples using NFP

1. After you do 1 and 2 above, couples will identify themselves to you as practitioners of NFP. Get to know them; refer couples that have questions about NFP to them.

2. Ask one of these couples to arrange to have an introductory session for NFP at the parish. Precede this with several Sundays of endorsements from the pulpit. Invite an attractive articulate couple to say a few words about the benefits of NFP after the masses (shorten your own homily a bit!)

Make marriage preparation a top priority

1. Priests tell me that 85% or more of those coming to them for marriage preparation are already having sex and about 50% are cohabiting. Both activities are very bad preparation for marriage. There is much good material out there now about how bad a preparation cohabitation is for marriage. Many dioceses and the US bishops have put together good statements about cohabitation and marriage preparation.¹¹ These materials will help you learn what kinds of questions to ask and what kinds of guidance to give cohabiting couples.

2. Have the couples listen to my tape, "Contraception: Why Not." One More Soul has a copy of a questionnaire about the tape that couples should fill out—it helps them listen better!

3. Many parishes and dioceses require that the couple attend the introductory classes or the full set of classes for Natural Family Planning.

4. Give the couple a list of books about marriage that will help them understand the Catholic Understanding of Marriage. John Kippley's *Marriage is for Keeps*¹² and *Christopher West's*

Good News About Sex and Marriage¹³ are particularly good. The parish should consider making my tape and one of these books as a gift to each couple. **Familiaris Consortio** should also be recommended reading.

5. Ask the couple to cease having sex and living together before the wedding (at least sleep in separate rooms). Consider permitting them to have a large wedding only if they comply. See the statement of the U.S. Bishops mentioned above for some thoughts on this matter. Also look at the statements of several bishops' conferences; see, for instance, the statement of the Pennsylvania Bishops¹⁴ and the statement of the Kansas Bishops.¹⁵

6. I know one priest who offers to hear confession for all Catholics attending the rehearsal. He explains that they would give the marrying couple a great gift on their wedding day if they offer their Mass and communion in a well-prepared state.

7. This same priest meets with the couple two months after the wedding and a year after the wedding. Among other assessments, he asks them about their family planning practices.

Parallel ventures

1. Find a lady in the parish to spearhead a mothers-with-young-children group. Let them use the parish hall one morning a week for a gathering. They will likely want to get some childcare and bring refreshments. They will decide how to spend their time, but the networking they do and the encouragement they do of each other will be invaluable. Types of activities:

- Pray the rosary for their families.
- Have a speaker on such topics as discipline; family activities; family prayer; finding and dealing with babysitters; meal preparation; time management; etc.
- Slowly read and discuss a church document together.

2. Find a professor, teacher, or good presenter in the parish to hold a discussion group on Church documents. The group could meet after Saturday morning Mass or early Sunday afternoon, once or twice a month. They need read only a very small portion of the document ahead of time or they can just read aloud a small portion of the

document and discuss it. There are many fine documents on the family.

3. Find someone who can help parents provide their children with sex education. Have this individual do a presentation or series of presentations for the parents on how to educate their children about sexuality.

4. Have someone in the parish do a summary of various Church documents for insertion in the bulletin.

5. Have a Family Night periodically at the parish. Show a good family movie and provide popcorn and snacks.

6. For many of these activities the involvement of the priest need only be minimal; his talent needs to be in finding the right person to coordinate the effort. He should also promote the activities from the pulpit and in the bulletin and show up occasionally at the beginning or end of the activity to show support.

I suspect there are many other ways that priests can promote the teachings of **Humanae Vitae** and Natural Family Planning. As they do so, they will be amazed at the testimonies from couples who discover a joy in marriage and a love for the Church they never knew was possible.



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*author of **Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later** and the editor of **Why Humanae Vitae Was Right** (Ignatius Press, 1993). She is also the author of many articles on ethical and biological issues. Nearly half a million copies of her cassette recording "Contraception: Why Not," have been distributed.*

Notes:

¹ www.omsoul.com (800) 307-7685. Also available is a pastoral resource book with sample homilies and other material presenting the Church's wisdom on marriage and sexuality: **Called to Give Life** by Jason Adams.

² There are some good materials for physicians. See, for instance, "NFP: The Medical Link" (www.boma-usa.org/page3.htm#Audio) and *Physicians Healed* (www.omsoul.com)

³ For sample homilies, go to www.godsplanforlife.org/Homilies.htm.

⁴ www.ccli.org/seminars/priestlearn.shtml

⁵ www.godsplanforlife.org/Announcements/Generic_Clergy_Announcement.htm

⁶ www.boma-usa.org/page3.htm#Audio

⁷ www.giftfoundation.org

⁸ www.saintjoe.com/

⁹ www.omsoul.com

¹⁰ www.nfpoutreach.org/index.htm

¹¹ www.nccbuscc.org/laity/marriage/cohabiting.htm

¹² www.ccli.org/seminars/priestlearn.shtml

¹³ www.catholicity.com/market/servant/

¹⁴ www.archdiocese-phl.org/pressvi/pr000178.htm

¹⁵ www.petersnet.net/research/retrieve.cfm?RecNum=397

Priests who promote the Church's teaching on sexuality will be amazed at the response from couples who discover joy in their marriage.



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