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Natural Family Planning Is the Way to Go

Terence Cardinal Cooke

I AM VERY pleased to be present and to offer a warm welcome to all of you to this first National Meeting of Diocesan Coordinators of Natural Family Planning Programs. As you know, the Bishops of the United States (NCCB) in 1980 adopted the Diocesan Plan for NFP Development as a national program. In doing so, they gave priority to the development of strong, integrated, and well-coordinated diocesan programs.

With the generous help of the Knights of Columbus, we have been able to set up a national office whose purpose is to encourage, assist, and coordinate the efforts of the dioceses. However, we know that a national program is only as effective as the diocesan programs that it serves, and so the major responsibility for long-term development and success is yours. Your presence here at the First National Meeting—coming from more than one-third of the dioceses of the country—is a sign of the progress of the past two decades, and of the vitality of the NFP movement in the various dioceses.

This meeting, then, and your participation in it, constitute a giant step forward. It is evidence of the good work that is being done, of the interest and enthusiasm of so many couples, professionals, and priests and religious. It indicates that—to use the words of Pope John Paul II—“A broader, more decisive and more

Terence Cardinal Cooke, Archbishop of New York, gave this opening address at the First National Meeting of the Diocesan Coordinators of Natural Family Planning Programs, Catholic University, Washington, D.C., July 18, 1983.

systematic effort to make the natural methods of regulating fertility known, respected, and applied" is certainly under way here in the United States.

The focus of this meeting is the role of the diocesan program, and your efforts at the diocesan level. However, I do not want to overlook the fine work of other groups, such as the Couple-to-Couple League, the Creighton University Program, and the Family of the Americas Foundation. Credit must also be given to the Human Life and Natural Family Planning Foundation, to the Human Life Center at St. John's in Collegeville, and to many other programs, such as Billings', which are too numerous to mention at this time. All have made a significant contribution in the past, and there is certainly room for all as we share in the on-going effort to create strong diocesan-based NFP programs.

In the light of the decision of the Bishops' Conference to launch this new diocesan-based initiative, I would like to briefly review some of the accomplishments of the Diocesan Program during the past eighteen months.

1. It has become clear that there is great enthusiasm and much activity in the dioceses. Responding to our recommendation, 151 dioceses have appointed diocesan coordinators, and in many cases have also designated other persons or couples to work in the diocesan programs.

2. The survey of Catholic hospitals has shown considerable interest, both among hospitals that presently have a program and wish to develop it further, and among hospitals that wish to initiate a program.

3. In response to Pope John Paul II's invitation to theologians to associate themselves with the Church's magisterium in "illustrating ever more clearly the biblical foundations, the ethical grounds, and the personalistic reasons" for the Church's teaching on responsible parenthood, we have conducted a consultation and have published a small booklet, authored by Monsignor James McHugh and entitled, *A Theological Perspective on Natural Family Planning*. This should assist teaching couples in integrating the insights of Pope John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio* into

their teaching formats. It should also be helpful to priests in explaining the Church's teaching in their pastoral efforts directed to engaged and married couples.

4. For the Washington office, consultation with the dioceses has been the major activity during the past 18 months. The consultation is to help individual dioceses evaluate their efforts, assess their needs, and plan for future activity. The consultation effort has included visits to dioceses, regional meetings of coordinators, and extensive phone consultation. It is difficult to describe tangible results, but many dioceses have expanded their activity and some have established a diocesan-based teacher training program.

5. We have reviewed some interesting and promising diocesan programs of adolescent fertility awareness, continuing education efforts for priests and religious, and seminary courses. These and many other topics will be subjects of discussion at this meeting.

Pastoral and Theological Issues

May we turn our attention to the substantive pastoral and theological issues which are the basis of our efforts in promoting natural family planning. First there is the *dignity of the person and of human sexuality*.

As Catholics we believe that human dignity is based on the fact that each and every human person is created in the image of God and has been redeemed by Jesus Christ. For us, this truth is the foundation of all human relationships. In his first encyclical letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, Pope John Paul II links the teachings on creation and redemption:

The Redeemer of the world! In him has been revealed in a new and more wonderful way the fundamental truth concerning creation to which the Book of Genesis gives witness when it repeats several times: "God saw that it was good." (*Redemptor Hominis*, 8)

Unceasingly contemplating the whole of Christ's mystery, the Church knows with all the certainty of faith that the Redemption that took place through the Cross has definitively restored his dignity to man and given back meaning to his life in the world, a mean-

ing that was lost to a considerable extent because of sin. (*Redemptor Hominis*, 10)

Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Family (*Familiaris Consortio*), develops this theme in terms of the vocation of the Christian:

God created man in his own image and likeness: calling him to existence through love, he called him at the same time for love.

God is love and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity of responsibility of love and communion. Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. (*Familiaris Consortio*, 11; hereafter *FC*)

The innate vocation of love touches every one of us. For some it is realized in a life of celibacy or virginity. For the vast majority it is realized in marriage. And within marriage, human love takes on new qualities and unique characteristics. As the Council has told us, conjugal love is “eminently human” and involves the good of the whole person. “It can enrich the expressions of body and mind with a unique dignity, ennobling these expressions as special ingredients and signs of the friendship distinctive of marriage. This love the Lord has judged worthy of special gifts—healing, perfecting, and exalting gifts of grace and charity.” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 49)

One dimension of conjugal love is sexual love, that is, the intimate and life-giving union of husband and wife in conjugal intercourse. This conjugal embrace should be total, faithful and exclusive, and life-giving (see *Humanae Vitae*, 9). Again, as John Paul II notes:

This totality which is required by conjugal love also corresponds to the demands of responsible fertility. This fertility is directed to the generation of a human being, and so by its nature it surpasses the purely biological order and involves a whole range of personal values. (*FC*, 11)

The point that I wish to make here is that sexuality, and natural family planning as well, are not just biological or scientific realities. In the contemporary world, especially in the developed

countries, sexuality is often trivialized, as is evidenced in the growing tide of pornography, in the promotion of sexuality permissiveness, in the increase of out-of-wedlock pregnancy, in the efforts to legitimize homosexual and lesbian unions and place them on a par with the marriage union. In addition, the promotion of "contraception," including sterilization and abortion, drives the wedge between the two purposes of conjugal love—that is, a deepening of conjugal intimacy and an openness to procreation. In effect, many people become victims of the contraceptive mentality, and seek only the technologically most efficient and effective method of avoiding procreation.

We cannot and must not accept this predominantly technological approach. We must recapture and reemphasize the dignity of the person and human sexuality. Again the Holy Father reminds us:

The great task that has to be faced for the renewal of society is that of recapturing the ultimate meaning of life and its fundamental values. Only an awareness of the primacy of these values enables man to use the immense possibilities given him by science in such a way as to bring about the true advancement of the human person in his or her whole truth. (*FC*, 8)

Thus, NFP should be seen primarily in the context of the dignity of the persons as spouses and their conjugal love. It is not simply another method of birth control. It involves a fundamental approach to human sexuality that places conjugal intimacy in the larger context of marital rights and responsibilities. It fosters marital intimacy, interpersonal dialogue, and sexual self-mastery. It preserves an openness to life and a willingness on the part of the couple to share life and love with their own children and with generations yet to come. It prepares a couple for the generosity and self-sacrifice that are necessary in so many other areas of married life.

You know all too well in your work as coordinators of NFP programs the negative attitudes which so many have toward our efforts. "It is not effective . . . It's just another form of rhythm. . . ." This negative reception must motivate us to work even harder on behalf of a positive, strengthening approach toward life, toward

conjugal love, toward relationships between husband and wife, between parents and children.

This leads me to another all important consideration in the work which we are promoting in our dioceses, and that is *the centrality of the family*.

I came from the 1980 Synod of Bishops more convinced than ever that we must give priority to the family apostolate. At that world Synod, I was impressed with the variety of family structures in the different nations and cultures, with the similarity of problems that families face, with the contributions that families can make in ministering to one another, and with the importance of the Church's teaching and its pastoral care of families. I say these things to you to urge you to continue to give pre-eminence to the family. I know that family life is one of the major themes of this meeting, and the primary reason for the cooperative effort of the National Center for Family Studies here at The Catholic University of America in co-sponsoring this meeting. It is important that you, in the NFP apostolate, learn as much as possible about the family. For NFP is at the service of the family; it is not simply a reliable method of individuals to control procreation.

The latest Census Bureau statistics tell us that the average age at marriage is increasing, that our birth rate is barely two children per family, and that in a great number of marriages both spouses are employed full-time. Similar studies show a very high divorce rate and a widespread pattern of fertility expectations limited to two children.

At the same time there have been a number of recent studies of the American family indicating that marriage and family life have not been rejected but continue to enjoy immense popularity; that religious commitment and family life are mutually reinforcing; that children are considered important and parents are willing to sacrifice for their children. When we read some of the unsettling reports about the family we have to keep in mind the high aspirations of most people, and the fact that the family has consistently adapted to changing conditions. We might recall the words of the Bishops at the 1980 Synod in their message to families:

In our discussions of family life today we have found joys and consolations, sorrows and difficulties. . . . We are encouraged by the many good and positive things that we see. We rejoice that so many families, even in the face of great pressure to do otherwise, gladly fulfill the God-given mission entrusted to them. Their goodness and fidelity in responding to God's grace and shaping their lives by His teaching give us great hope.

Our view of the family is not based only on the social sciences. It is a viewpoint informed by faith. In *Familiaris Consortio* the Holy Father outlined four general roles of the Christian family:

1. Forming a community of persons.
2. Serving life.
3. Participating in the development of society.
4. Sharing in the life and mission of the Church.

The Church has always been at the service of life because life is a precious gift from God. We must do all that we can to nourish, sustain, and enhance life at every stage of its existence. This is the basic reason for our care and concern for the innocent unborn child, for the aging, for the sick, for the disadvantaged. We must also work to improve the circumstances of modern living so that they support and do not endanger human life. For this reason we work for peace and justice; we work to eliminate economic inequity, poverty and oppression, violence and crime. You can see that I am describing the goals of the Respect Life Program. Unquestionably! For Respect Life originates in the family and flows out to the larger society, and again, as John Paul II tells us, "The future of humanity passes by way of the family." (*FC*, 86)

However, the family is first of all a community of persons who are called by God to live together in love and mutual respect, and to share their love with one another and with the larger society of which the family is a part. Fundamental to family life is the commitment of the spouses to a life-long, faithful, exclusive union in which they share with God in the on-going work of creation. Because of the responsibilities and the risks of childbearing, a negative attitude has developed toward parenthood—and often toward the child. God has called them to cooperate with Him in a special way in the work of creation. Others who are unmarried

do not share this God-given prerogative, nor do they have the right to take it on themselves. And the child, who stands as a testimony of God's creative love, is also a lasting testimony of the love and mutual commitment of his or her parents. In your educational efforts you must emphasize this, and not become distracted by the problems of the moment nor preoccupied just with the reliability of NFP simply as a means to avoid child-bearing. Your pedagogy must include a balanced emphasis on conjugal love *and* responsible parenthood, always remembering that parenthood is a privilege and a gift.

The NFP Apostolate

In recent years Pope John Paul II has addressed various NFP groups and has devoted a special section of *Familiaris Consortio* to NFP. In effect, the Holy Father has outlined the responsibilities of the Church in regard to NFP. May I comment on these points in terms of our efforts here in the United States.

First, the Holy Father states that "the ecclesial community at the present time must take on the task of instilling conviction and offering practical help to those who wish to live out their parenthood in a truly responsible way." (*FC*, 35) It is a task of the "ecclesial community," that is, the Church. In other parts of *Familiaris Consortio* and in other addresses, the Pope makes clear that the task involves the efforts of couples, doctors, marriage counselors, priests and religious, and other experts. It must be a cooperative effort, one in which all can collaborate, but an activity of the ecclesial community, that is, responsible to the bishop. There may well be other efforts, independent of the Church, but they do not replace or eliminate the ecclesial responsibility. As representatives of your dioceses or through your association with the Diocesan Development Program, you are part of the ecclesial effort and must have concern for one another.

Second, recognizing the different natural methods and pedagogical approaches, Pope John Paul II says that "it is providential that diverse methods (of NFP) exist." (Address of July 3, 1982) The Holy Father insists that the Church will not canonize one or the other approach, because the very diversity is *providential*,

that is , part of God's plan, and because the differing approaches address the specific needs of individual couples. That is why the Diocesan Program calls for the availability of all methods within the diocese. The Holy Father urges all in this apostolate to avoid limiting their efforts to only one approach, and also to avoid anything that will detract from a commitment to NFP.

My third point is that authentic teaching on NFP must be based on and remain loyal to the Church's teaching on marriage, sexuality, and birth control. It must perceive and "study further the difference, both anthropological and moral, between contraception and recourse to the rhythm cycle." (*FC*, 32) Your efforts must be faithful to the teaching of the magisterium, and also include patience, understanding, and positive encouragement in enabling couples to learn and practice NFP.

Finally, in speaking to NFP organizations, the Holy Father states that "it is necessary that various groups . . . appreciate their respective work, mutually exchange experiences and results, firmly avoiding tensions and disagreements that could threaten so important and difficult a work." (Address of July 3, 1982) We are all aware that various NFP organizations exist, each committed to a specific approach. While it may be ideally better if each organization could offer all natural methods, we understand the reason for specializing in one. Nonetheless, cooperation can lead to better knowledge and improved pedagogy, and greater reassurance for couples who are just learning about NFP.

I conclude this evening with words of gratitude and encouragement. Your apostolate is part of the Church's pastoral responsibility to the family. Your efforts are extremely important and probably indispensable, just as they are difficult and challenging. Along with my fellow bishops, I thank you for all you are doing in the family apostolate.

These words of Pope John Paul II express both the difficulty and the challenge of your commitment in the Church as coordinators of natural family planning. I conclude with them because I believe they apply to all of us gathered here:

. . . we are not able to make the obstacles to Christian living disappear; we are not in a position to lift all the burdens that weigh upon our Christian families; and much less are we authorized to attempt to remove the Cross from Christianity. But we are in a position *to proclaim the great dignity of marriage*, its identity as an image and symbol of God's everlasting and unbreakable covenant of love with His Church. We are able to love the family and in this pastoral love to offer it the only criterion for the real solution to the problems that it faces. *This criterion is the word of God*; the word of God in all its purity and power, in all its integrity and with all its demands—the word of God as transmitted by the Church.

May God bless each of you, as well as the wives and husbands and families with whom you work to foster His life and His love. May the Lord bless you and grant you His peace.