



This is part of a series of articles on the church's teaching on marriage and openness to children.

With NFP, Couples Discover Deeper Partnership

By SUZANNE HAUGH Special To The Bulletin

ATLANTA—Chris Borgerding expected that when he got married someday, his wife would use artificial contraception. But when he met Carrie and became engaged, friends put them on the path to using Natural Family Planning instead, and there's been no looking back.

Bryan Sell and Matt Mills are husbands with similar stories, and the three men, along with their wives, now help bring to light—as NFP teachers—what Borgerding calls “one of the best kept secrets of the Catholic Church.”

Using NFP methods, couples pinpoint the fertile and infertile times of a woman's cycle and with that information can act to seek or to postpone pregnancy. Couples teaching NFP, who must be trained and certified, foster other married couples through a series of classes to learn one of the methods and successfully chart the wife's fertility.

NFP is the method of family planning the Catholic Church approves for married couples because it does not place an artificial barrier to conception.

Borgerding, Sell and Mills all say NFP has helped their marriages and the planning of their families and taught them a lot about the opposite sex. The men say they appreciate that their wives don't have to use contraceptive

methods that may have side effects or health risks.

For Borgerding, learning NFP has made him appreciate “the miracle of the body.”

“First, (NFP) reveals the amazing creation God made—the amazing system that operates and the well laid-out plan. . . . It builds respect and esteem for your wife and for the things that are working on such a complex level. And then also there is relief when you see it work.”

Mills married his wife, Elaine, after both graduated from Georgia Tech. He was uncomfortable with the medical findings on contraceptive use, pointing to more recent research on contraceptive implants and the difficulty women have “getting back to normal cycles again.”

“I just wouldn't want Elaine to do anything like that,” he

said. “I want her body to work like it's supposed to work and not treat (her fertility) as if something's wrong with her body. There is nothing wrong with her body and the way it works. Why mess with that?”

Both are Catholic and toward the end of their college years their connection with the church was re-established, and they were open to church teaching on NFP.

“We were going through a conversion, reversion or a re-awakening then,” Mills said. “We were trying to take everything . . . seriously and looked at what the church taught about contraception. Elaine did the research on what methods were out there.”

They were “blown away” after their first class on using the Sympto-Thermal Method presented by the Couple to Couple League.

“By the time we were married, we had a number of (monthly fertility) charts already done,” he said.

The true test came once they were married. Elaine had gone on to graduate school in chemistry. They were not ready to start a family, particularly since she would be exposed to various chemicals as she conducted her research. Their faith in NFP was put to the test, he said.

“It all sounded great when we were taking the class, but once we were married we really had to use it, and it really worked.”

Mills said the couple did not find much support among their friends.

“They were all skeptical about NFP, saying it was silly and that it wouldn't work,” he said. “We told ourselves we weren't seeking pregnancy for the first year just to show everybody.”

After a year, they decided to start a family.

“The cool thing is that we achieved pregnancy and knew where we were in her cycle,” Mills said.

They welcomed a child in 2003 and another child in 2005, both of whom were “very much planned,” as is their third child who is to arrive in June.

Sell met his wife, Kate, at a small college in Ohio. They converted to Catholicism close to the time they were married and providentially stumbled into NFP classes. When teaching, he encourages husbands to look at NFP from the “logical” and “purely medical side,” noting its low cost and research that shows complications and health risks arising for some women from contraceptives.

The Sells like to ask participants in their classes to guess what percentage of her life a woman is fertile.

“Most say 25 or 15 percent. . . . They think she's fertile a lot of the time. In our talk we tell them the answer is 2 percent,” Bryan Sell said. “She's not fertile all the time and so we use simple things to determine when she is.”

The Sells have four children—all of whom were planned.

“NFP was easy to learn. We mapped our way through it and realized that we don't have to worry about the flavor of the month (when it comes to artificial contraception) or what is new and improved. Natural Family Planning is what it is,” he said.

Outside of the knowledge needed to understand the methodology, NFP does require another important element, he said—self-discipline during the fertile period when couples choose to abstain from sex if they are not seeking pregnancy.

“Like everything else in life, you have to have self-discipline,” he said. “Many times we're not talking about a huge window—just a couple of days. For me personally, it's just a discipline thing like anything else.”

Chris Borgerding likes to refer to this as “the drama” NFP provides with a constant “courtship/honeymoon cycle” in the marriage.

“It's not a good movie without the suspense,” he said. “NFP makes for more drama. It's not all settled. There's that intensity and drama. With contraception, all is said and done. With NFP there's the drama . . . and it provokes communication. It makes for a more dynamic marriage.”

He shared a common running “joke” in his NFP classes aimed particularly at the men.

“I ask how are you doing with the discipline. They say it's been a great few months—they've been to the gym more than ever and feel more buffed up. There are other ways to use that energy—use it to do something in a positive way,” he said.

The tension fosters what Borgerding also calls “the mutual admiration society” of husband and wife.

“The women see their husbands struggle and that builds up respect for him. There's more respect and it encourages love,” he said. “Husbands appreciate their wives and their bodies.”

For couples using NFP, discerning whether to seek or postpone a pregnancy promotes constant communication.

“With contraception you're in a default mode of not wanting to have a child. Then one person finally says OK, and the other says I was ready a year ago and didn't say anything. With NFP it's not a done deal. (The tension's) always there,” Borgerding said.

Elaine Mills has many friends who are interested in natural methods of birth control, “green but not Catholic,” and have become interested in NFP. Some have turned to NFP in order to become pregnant.

“NFP lets you take charge of your fertility,” she explained, and added later also “it's not just for one type of Catholic.”

As adults getting married in the church, she and Matt decided to follow the church's teaching.

“We never felt the church had the responsibility to change for us. Our responsibility was to understand the church's teaching,” she said.

She recalled researching different NFP methods, calling up teachers in the area and asking questions that included how many kids each had and if they were all planned. “At the time my attitude about having children was different than now.”

As “products of the 70s,” she and Matt grew up with the notion that two kids were sufficient for a family.

“But when you do NFP you're graced with the reality every month to think about children. You open your heart to be a little more generous. It puts it in your face more often. And really, children are a lot of fun. It gets you thinking about important things more.”

She added that remaining open to life “scares some people about NFP” who might equate using the method to having a large family. While



(Clockwise from back left) Kate and Bryan Sell stand with their children, Jacob, 2 1/2 weeks old, Lilah, 2, Luke, 5, and Noah, 7, after Palm Sunday Mass, March 16. (Photos by Michael Alexander)



“some couples are called” to have a large family, she said, it is not a correct assumption about couples using NFP.

Like the other couple teachers, she likes to emphasize “responsible parenting ... taking stock of life and where you are emotionally, socially, financially.”

“We’re taking it easy, taking it slow,” she said.

The Sells have used NFP to “take a breather” and postpone pregnancy. “There are definite times in married life when you don’t feel you can (seek pregnancy) and other times when you say, ‘yeah, we could.’”

They recently welcomed their fourth child. “In our family, we go one child at a time.”

Kate Sell “was blown away” by how scientific NFP was when she first learned the methodology.

“It was a great way for my frat-boy husband to understand my cycle and for us to explore each other’s fertility. It was beautiful,” she said.

Her newfound knowledge led her to identify a hormone imbalance she had.

“I knew by charting what my problem was. I was scoffed at by my doctor. He said, ‘How could you possibly know?’ But he conducted a test and then I started to take a supplement,” she said. “Medically, NFP is a no-brainer.”

Growing up within an evangelical Protestant family, Kate said she and Bryan are a “lone ranger couple,” being the only Catholics in the family and also practicing NFP, although their witness to NFP changed the hearts of a cousin and his wife who now practice it.

“My friends from college ... so many hate contracepting,” Kate said. “I tell them, ‘Why mess with that? Try this—it’s easy and there are no health risks.’ It’s 99 percent effective if used right.”

She added, “There’s something so attractive to women, so attractive about understanding your own body and how men view their wives. Her fertility is not to be suppressed but is something to be cherished. It’s important, cool, intriguing.”

Carrie Borgerding, who converted to Catholicism before marrying

Chris, echoed a similar sentiment. She found learning about her cycle with her husband to be “very comforting” as he helped her to interpret her charts.

“I thought ‘thank goodness I won’t have to fight him on it.’ We were totally on the same page,” she said.

The couple postponed starting a family in order “to travel, to get a little more financially stable ... and to spend some time together.”

After almost nine years of marriage they have two children.

She and Chris enjoy teaching other couples NFP, sometimes referred to as “marriage insurance” because of the low divorce rate among couples practicing it.

“They are so eager to learn it. ... They catch on really well. It’s fun to watch them discover each other.”

She remains thankful that “the church has not fallen to the pressures of secular society.”

“We’ve seen how it has blessed other marriages. The men come with their wives skeptical and we have seen afterward how they’re full of joy. It is life-changing.”



Kate Sell, standing left, teaches the first part of a Natural Family Planning class in the religious education building at St. Monica Church, Duluth. Her husband, Bryan, standing right, holds their newborn son, Jacob, until it’s his turn to lead the class instruction.

NFP Is Part Of Family Life Office Ministry

By SUZANNE HAUGH Special To The Bulletin

ATLANTA—It’s never too late for couples to learn Natural Family Planning, according to Lynn Crutchfield, NFP program coordinator for the Family Life Office of the Atlanta Archdiocese.

NFP is not the rhythm method of old. Methods used today allow couples to effectively determine the time of ovulation and then to seek or to postpone conception through the observable signs and symptoms of a woman’s fertile and infertile phases.

According to the archdiocesan Web site, three methods of NFP are used effectively across the nation: the Sympto-Thermal Method, the Ovulation Method, and the Multi-Index Method. All teach couples to identify natural body signs related to fertility and infertility. These methods are taught in both English and Spanish through the archdiocesan Natural Family Planning program. An ongoing schedule of classes is available on the archdiocesan Web site, as well as contact information for teachers that teach by appointment.

When Crutchfield and her husband, Larry, were married over 35 years ago, they used artificial birth control. Then they began helping engaged couples prepare for marriage and learned about NFP. They were attracted to many aspects of this approach.

“With artificial birth control I felt like it was just me” making decisions and taking responsibility, said Crutchfield, who is the mother of three grown children. “With NFP I felt like it was us. We had more understanding of me as a person—emotionally, physically—the whole package. It’s helped us in so many ways.”

Using NFP increased the Crutchfields’ appreciation for the power of sexual intimacy and encouraged communication in their relationship. She noted the need for couples to develop their ability to communicate sexually and non-sexually as they will need to maneuver through life’s ups and downs together. NFP fosters both.

“The whole natural aspect is a plus, too,” she said. “A lot of people do appreciate that. People now think twice about what they put in their bodies, like they think about the food they eat.”

She challenged couples to look at NFP “with a different lens—not like

something you have to do but, as if to say, ‘Yeah, there are a lot of benefits to it.’”

Crutchfield admitted that it can be a difficult topic for couples but said NFP classes are offered in a nonjudgmental atmosphere.

“I think we do a good job here approaching NFP. We don’t shake our finger if you haven’t been using it. We just want to share the good it’s done for relationships.”

Msgr. Bill Hoffman, parochial vicar at St. Patrick Church in Norcross, is an enthusiastic supporter of NFP and is also well versed in its methodology. Evidence of his commitment to NFP includes orchestrating the translation of educational materials into Spanish in the 1980s and educating Peruvian campesinos he ministered to there when serving as a missionary priest.

He noted that the church’s opposition to artificial contraception is not new and dates back to Roman times when “(the Romans) had their own concoctions and were looking for ways to have sex without conceiving.”

He called attention to how by design the male and female bodies naturally “fit together” and the fact that God provides for married couples discerning not to seek conception.

“Study why God made females fertile only part of the time,” he said, adding that the fertile period of a woman’s cycle is short, leaving “a big window of opportunity for sex when she’s infertile.”

He is unafraid to rhetorically ask married couples, “Have you had perfect sex lately?”

“Perfect sex is when fertility is being shared,” he explained, adding later, “Wives, when they’re fertile, are most interested in sexual relationships. ... God also gave (women and men) brains to recognize that and to act accordingly.”

Reminding married couples that they are “a believing people,” he challenged them, saying, “As I’ve said all of that, why don’t you just love each other and leave children in God’s hands.”

For more information on Natural Family Planning, visit www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp or www.ccli.org.

For information on classes in the archdiocese of Atlanta, visit the Family Life Web site at www.archatl.com/offices/familylife/nfp.html or call Lynn Crutchfield at (404) 885-7450.

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