

Our Life With NFP

by James and Ellie Hrkach

"The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life" (Mat 7:14)

This past summer marked the 30th anniversary of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* by Pope Paul VI. One could safely guess, however that the majority of North American Catholics were not celebrating. Recent figures suggest that over 90% use some form of artificial birth regulation in direct opposition to Paul's 1968 document re-affirming the church's well-established teaching that Natural Family Planning was (and still is) the only moral form of birth regulation.

The Pope used the above quotation from Matthew in his encyclical to indicate compassionate understanding on the part of the church. After all, using natural forms of birth regulation can be a hardship, can't it?

Actually, we have been using NFP for our entire married life and find it rather difficult to identify any extraordinary hardships that have arisen as a result of NFP, aside from ones we would have faced anyway through the normal living of life. In fact, our involvement with NFP has reaped so many blessings on so many levels that we are moved to share our experiences at pre-marriage courses, through teaching NFP classes and in articles such as this one.

When we became engaged in 1980 (at the young ages of 19 and 22) we decided not to have sex until we were married, which was a miracle given our cultural context. Discussions about what exactly was going to happen after the wedding day began approximately six weeks before the celebration. Since we were living 500 miles apart, we thought that a chance to mature together before having children was a good idea. But we were not quite sure how to go about this.

"I know someone using NFP", said James. "Rhythm?", replied Ellie, "My mother said she used that four times and had four kids." Well, despite the uncertainty, we found ourselves taking classes on how to observe the temperature and mucus signs of the menstrual cycle. It took a while for it to sink in that "Hey, this really is working!"

It took an even longer time, however, for us to grapple with the morality of it all. There were no problems with the method's effectiveness but how were we to answer to the matter of its morality?

We began researching the church's teaching, including *Humanae Vitae* and began to see that there was a wealth of understanding and beauty behind the Catholic interpretation of God's gift of sexuality. We had never encountered such a spiritual view of the sex act.

That, of course, was all very intellectual. The real revelation hit after NFP had been in our lives, and the lives of those to which we had taught the method, for quite some time. The revelation came for instance, from learning that the divorce rate amongst NFP users was less than 2%. The kind of communication and mutual respect naturally developing from such an intimate cooperation with each other and our fertility gave us real evidence for why the divorce rate was so low.

Also, NFP requires a period of abstinence from the sex act while avoiding or spacing pregnancy and this imposes a pattern on a couple's sexual expression. This can be dwelt upon as a 'hardship' or it can be seen for what good results. When we abstain, we are challenged to love each other in non-genital ways (which tend to be precisely what the weak marriage lacks.) It is ironic that the first fear a couple has of their possible use of Natural Family Planning, namely that it will ruin an otherwise perfectly romantic relationship, is so far from the truth as to be the extreme opposite. It has preserved ours.

NFP is also great for planning pregnancy; although we have lost a total of six babies before birth due to medical problems, we now raise four boys between the ages of 2 and 11.

And does NFP have any effect on how we raise our kids? Pope Paul VI, in 1968, told of natural methods fostering "self mastery" and parents' tendency to "drive out selfishness" and "deepen their sense of responsibility" when embracing these methods. We accept whole-heartedly the chance to give real witness to our children regarding the development of their sensual and spiritual faculties in harmony and within moral order, thereby "creating a climate favourable to ... chastity." We are hard evidence to them that the church has wisdom in matters of sexuality.

Humanae Vitae was a voice of truth during the sexual revolution of the 60's. The Pope rightly expressed concern for those who would find it difficult to live out or preach the church's stance on birth regulation within that social climate. For those of us who struggle with abstinence or being open to new life or even trusting in God's will, "the way *is* hard" (emphasis added). But who ever imagined just how easy NEP would make it for us to love each other and our children?

The 90's don't seem to have brought much more understanding or hope in these matters than what was available across North America 30 years ago. That's why we praise God for the opportunity to share our story. That 1968 encyclical was written for today, too, and we take it with us into the new millennium with every hope and prayer that the truth, which has no date, will soon spread fast concerning the gift of Natural Family Planning.