

Building a Culture of Life Through a University Institute for NFP: The Joy of NFP-Only Healthcare Professionals

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ABSTRACT: This paper is based upon the recommendations from Pope Saint John Paul II for building a culture of life as expressed in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*. He promoted the development of natural family planning (NFP) centers, NFP in marriage preparation, effectiveness studies of NFP, involvement of Catholic Universities, health professionals, and scientists in NFP, and the importance of women in these endeavors. This paper illustrates how a university-based institute for NFP has participated in these endeavors through a University NFP teacher training program, numerous NFP effectiveness studies, and the innovations and joys of women health professionals in offering their services in online NFP centers.

POPE SAINT JOHN PAUL II in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (EV) made a connection between the use of contraception and abortion, indicating that they are fruits of the same tree.¹ However, in the same encyclical he also made recommendations for how to build a culture of life. This paper will discuss the recommendations for building a culture of life with a focus on natural family planning (NFP) services as presented in EV,

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¹ Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* (The Gospel of Life) in *Origins* 24/42 (6 April 1995).

planning, marital responses to family planning, and religious influences on human sexuality.

describe the NFP theory, practice, and medical application courses and program at a Catholic university, and provide examples of physicians' and health professionals' satisfaction and creativity in providing NFP services.

Besides describing the evils of contraception and its links to abortion in EV, the Pope also made recommendations for use of a moral means of family planning i.e., NFP. The recommendations for natural family planning (NFP) services as presented in the encyclical EV as a means for building a culture of life included having NFP Centers, providing NFP instruction for couples going through marriage preparation, encouraging health professionals to provide NFP services, promoting the true effectiveness of NFP methods, involving Catholic universities in this endeavor, and advocating women as the leaders in the new feminism that embraces life. This paper will now illustrate some of these efforts to build a culture of life through the provision of NFP services but, in particular, through the Marquette University Institute for NFP.

Pope Saint JP II in EV #88 said that many are the means towards this end...in building a culture of life, but that at the first stage of life, centers for natural methods of regulating fertility should be promoted as a valuable help to responsible parenthood. Over the years Marquette University, through the Institute for NFP, has trained hundreds of health professionals to be NFP providers. Many of these health care providers (i.e., professional nurses, physicians, and advanced practice nurses) have developed virtual NFP centers and online systems to reach thousands of couples around the world. Examples include Marquette Whole Mission (Lauren Vitale, RN, BSN at <https://www.mmnfp.com/instructors>); Totally Yours (Stephanie Kafie, MD at <https://www.totallyyoursfamilymedicine.com/about-us>); Vitae Fertility Education (Louise Boychuk, BSN, RN at <https://www.vitae fertility.com/>); and You, Me and NFP (Sarah Tremonte, BSN, RN at <https://www.youmeandnfp.com/>).

The Marquette Whole Mission online system provides a standardized NFP online charting system, user forms, and teaching system. With twenty health care professional NFP instructors, they have taught a total of 1518 couples since 2/2019, 151 of those are ongoing consult clients. They are teaching between 80-100 couples a month with 576 couples taught in 2021. A breakdown of clients includes NFP for Marriage Preparation 24.49%; use of NFP to avoid pregnancy 70.41%; use of NFP to achieve Pregnancy

11.22%; NFP use among women with regular menstrual cycles 21.43%; use of NFP for the postpartum transition 52.04%; and NFP help during perimenopause transition 2.04%. A listing of active MM NFP healthcare providers can be found at: <https://www.marquettethod.com/>

Saint Pope JP II said in *Evangelium Vitae* #96 that education in the service of life involves the training of married couples in responsible procreation. The moral law obliges them in every case to control the impulse of instinct and passion and to respect which makes legitimate, at the service of responsible procreation, the use of natural methods of regulating fertility. Kathleen Ravielle, MD, an NFP-only Ob/Gyn, the first woman president of the Catholic Medical Association (CMA), and I have developed a generic NFP PowerPoint program for marriage preparation or for introducing NFP to young couples. The program is free and includes commentary for each slide. It can be downloaded at a United States Conference of Catholic Bishops web site or the CMA web site. It is titled *Living with Your Fertility*.

Through Natural Family Planning: <https://www.usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/nfp-science-powerpoint-presentations>. Many of the MM providers are also involved with their diocesan marriage preparation programs and provide NFP presentations to marriage preparation couples.

Pope Saint JP II also said in *Evangelium Vitae* #96 that an honest appraisal of their effectiveness should dispel certain prejudices which are still widely held, and should convince married couples, as well as health care and social workers, of the importance of proper training in this area. He also said that the Church is grateful to those who, with personal sacrifice and often unacknowledged dedication, devote themselves to the study and spread of these methods, as well to the promotion of **education in the moral values** which they presuppose. Faculty and clinical scientists have been providing NFP services through the Marquette University College of Nursing and the Institute for NFP since 1985. The clinical scientists also have been conducting effectiveness studies on a new method of NFP called the Marquette Method (MM) since 2000. The MM is one of the most studied and most effective in the world.

There are two effectiveness numbers provided for any method of family planning, i.e., correct, or perfect use of the method and typical or average use when methods are not used consistently or according to instructions. The correct use ranges from 0-5 and the typical rate from 2 to 23 (See Table 1 at end of the paper.) That table shows the most recent effectiveness/efficacy studies of NFP methods from the past 17–18 years including the classic study

of the Ovulation Method (OM). Marquette Institute for NFP scientist conducted eight of these twelve studies in the past twenty-five years and the only random comparison study since the early 1980s OM study. The MM method was listed as one of the most effective and best methods of NFP by other researchers.² We also published a multisite study of the MM this year.³

Saint Pope JP II said in EV #98 that a special task falls to Catholic intellectuals, who are called to be present and active in the leading centers where culture is formed in schools and universities. Furthermore, a special contribution will also have to come from universities, particularly Catholic universities, and from centers and institutes. **In section #89 of EV he said** that a unique responsibility belongs to health-care personnel, doctors, pharmacists, nurses, chaplains, And that, their profession calls for them to be guardians and servants of human life. Sadly, there are few Catholic Universities in the United States that provide academic training program for health professionals that wish to provide NFP services.

Georgetown University and its Institute for Reproductive Health has a two-hour online program to learn how to provide a simple calendar-based system of fertility awareness, but it is very restricted in use as it is not for women who have irregular cycles, are post-partum, nor perimenopause. Dr. Marguerite Duane, a clinical professor offers a review course on NFP methods for medical students, but it is not a NFP teacher-training program. The Saint Pope Paul VI Institute offers a NFP training program in the Creighton Model of NFP and continuing education for health professionals through

Creighton University, but it is not part of the university. The only university-based NFP teacher training program for health professionals in the United States is at Marquette University and the Institute for Natural Family Planning. The Marquette University College of Nursing Institute for Natural Family Planning (INFP) was established in 1997 for the purpose of providing professional education, research, and service in natural family planning

² Rachel Peragallo Urrutia, Chelsea B. Polis, Elizabeth T. Jensen, Margaret Greene, Emily Kennedy, Joseph B. Stanford. Effectiveness of Fertility Awareness Based Methods for Pregnancy Prevention in Prospective Studies, *Obstetrics and Gynecology*. 2019 Feb;133(2):382.

³ Mu, Q., Fehring, R., and Bouchard, T. (2022). Multisite Effectiveness Study of the Marquette Method of Natural Family Planning Program, *Linacre Quarterly*, February, 2022.

(NFP). The three goals of the NFP Institute are: 1) Provide NFP Teacher Training for Health Professionals; 2) Conduct Research and Scholarship in NFP; and 3) Develop and Offer Innovative NFP Services.

The Marquette University NFP Teacher Training program began in 1998 and at first included two three-credit in-person courses, a NFP Core Theory course, and NFP Teacher Training course. The courses were for credit and semester-long, and in 2000 we began to offer them online. The courses are no longer for credit nor offered in a semester format but rather a self-paced continuing education format. The courses are only offered for health professionals, i.e., physicians, professional nurses, advanced practice nurses, and physician assistants. In 2015 we also began to offer an NFP medical application course.

The NFP Core Theory has six modules, Module 1 - Introduction to the science of NFP; Module 2 - Scientific Foundations; Module 3 - Women's Health Issues; Module 4 - Special Reproductive Circumstances; Module 5 - Behavioral, Spiritual, Ethical and Module 6 – Marriage and Family Life. Our NFP Teacher Training practicum includes five modules: Module 1

– Teaching the MM; Module 2 – Intro to Charting; Module 3 – Case Presentation; Module 4 – Program Development; and Module 5 – Professional Principles.

Our NFP Medical Application course has six modules: Module 1 – The Menstrual Cycle and Health; Module 2 – NFP & Subfertility Management; Module 3 – NFP and PCOS Management; Module 4 – NFP and Unusual Bleeding; Module 5 – NFP and Common Health; and Module 6 – Case Studies.

We have trained hundreds of health professionals in NFP and the MM in the United States, Canada, and other countries in the world. We have averaged over seventy new health professional students per year in the past three years. We are now in negotiations to develop a MM Teacher Training program at a nursing school in Uganda, Africa.

Finally, **St. Pope JP II in EV #99 talked of the role of women in building a culture of life**, He said, in transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action which is unique and decisive. And that it depends on them to promote a “new feminism” ... that is necessary...in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society. He also called on women to “Reconcile people with life” and to bear witness to the meaning of genuine love.

By far, most of the providers of the MM of NFP are young women, who are enthusiastic to teach couples NFP and innovative in doing so. I recently asked some of our MM NFP providers if they have joy in teaching couples NFP. I have ended this paper with responses from a select few of those who responded. In general, they had joy in teaching young healthy couples NFP, teaching about fertility and fertility health, integrating NFP with women's health, teaching the moral law behind use of NFP, and helping couples learn NFP who have challenging cases.

Examples of Health Professionals Having Joy in Helping Couples Integrate Fertility

Maria Meyers, MD

I can just say that even though I love being a pediatrician, I love, love teaching NFP to couples. I love teaching them that the union which God instituted himself has such a special and sacred place in their married lives. Teaching just fertility tracking alone may not provide that same degree of satisfaction. When couples first get married, of course, that excitement and romance is necessary for the desire for union in the first place, but NFP gives them tools for lifelong intimacy, intimacy that is in addition to the conjugal sexual union.

Brittany Kudrna, DNP, FNP-c

I am responding to your question about what my sense of joy in providing NFP services is. I am grateful to be reflecting on this question at this moment, as my career as a DNP in family medicine is challenging, to say the least. Health care and medicine are challenging. It is becoming increasingly difficult as our world can be so far from God so often. I am finding this to be exhausting in many ways and taxing my most important roles as a Catholic woman, wife, and mother.

However, what continues to provide immense joy in my life is incorporating NFP into women's health care in the clinic setting and teaching as an instructor in our community. It is a beautiful experience in teaching women/couples the very foundation of how our bodies and fertility work AND how God intended them to work together to be open to life can be so refreshing, eye opening for some, and simply just, right. In the situation there is a medical concern, again the ability to help women work with their body

and work toward finding and treating the root cause is not only a better long-term solution for their health but is truly respectful of their body and God's creation.

Stephanie Kafie, BHSc(H), MD, CCFP (COE)

My husband says he has never seen me happier with my work than when I teach a couple the Marquette Method of Natural Family Planning.

I spent most of my training trying to avoid women of reproductive age in order to avoid bioethical issues that would put me in a difficult position with my faith. I eventually realized that as a Family Physician, I could not avoid reproductive-age women in my practice. Instead, I needed to offer them a good, evidence-based alternative to contraceptives. Learning the Marquette Method was the answer. Offering this option to my patients has been the best part of my practice and the one I look forward to.

It is a true joy to walk with couples through periods of fertility and infertility. Teaching NFP has been an enormous gift to my life, practice, and faith life.

Emily Kirkwold, PharmD

Teaching women and couples to use natural family planning brings me incredible joy. Every time I finish an introductory class, I cannot help but smile because I know I am empowering women to care for and love their God-given bodies and God-given fertility. Before becoming a Marquette Method practitioner, if I had a patient who could not or did not want to take birth control, I did not have any resources for them. Now, it brings me so much joy to teach my patients how to effectively avoid pregnancy without shutting down their body's natural functioning. It makes me feel like a better pharmacist because my patients know all their options and they can make truly informed decisions.

Kathleen M. Raviele, M.D., Ob/Gyn

Teaching NFP made me a better gynecologist because I learned how to approach patients in a non-judgmental way and sort of lead them along to the truth about marriage and human sexuality. Even patients who were not living a right-ordered life were much easier to speak to. Couples that wanted to stop at two children because of a difficult delivery or pregnancy, gradually developed the confidence to have another child, and often another. Attending a Eucharistic Congress several years ago in Atlanta with about 25,000

Catholics, I ran into one of my couples and commented on how good it was to see so many children. The wife turned to me and said it is because of you! That gave me great joy!

It was a great joy to help engaged couples return to chastity before their marriage if they had become sexually active. One husband told me "Thank you for helping us with this." That gave me great joy!

It was wonderful to see women (and their husbands or boyfriends) come to understand their cycles and persevere in using NFP despite all the societal pressures to contracept. In my own family, my children and their spouses accepted NFP and blessed themselves and us with ten grandchildren. That has given me great joy!

I spoke to marriage prep programs for 27 years about NFP with a comprehensive, professional presentation that convinced many to take NFP classes. That gave me great joy!

Lastly, I went home each day from work as a physician, knowing I had helped women and girls with their gyn problems and infertility in ways respecting their dignity as God's "princesses," and that gave me great joy!

Table 1: Perfect and Typical Use Unintended Pregnancy Rates per 100 Women Over 12 Months of Use

Study	NFP Method	Indicators	Length*	Perfect	Typical
WHO ⁴	Ovulation (OM)	Mucus	(25-32)	3	22
Howard, et al. ⁵	Creighton (CrM)	Mucus	(25-32)**	0	14
Arevalo, et al. ⁶	SDM	Calendar	(26-32)	5	12
Arevalo, et al. ⁴	TDM	Mucus	(13-42)	4	14
European STM ⁵	STM	Mucus/ Temp	(25-35)	1	2

⁴ M. Arevalo, et al. "Efficacy of the New Two-Day Method of Family Planning." *Fertility and Sterility* 82 (2004): 885-892.

⁵ P. Frank-Herrmann, et al. "The Effectiveness of a Fertility Awareness Based Method to Avoid Pregnancy in Relation to a Couple's Sexual Behavior During the Fertile Time: A Prospective Longitudinal Study." *Human Reproduction* 22 (2007); 1310-1319.

Fehring, et al. ⁶	Marquette (MM)	Mucus/ Monitor	(21-42)	2	13
Fehring, et al. ⁷	MM	Mucus/ Temp/LH	(21-42)	1	11
Fehring, et al. ⁸	MM vs CrM	Mucus/ Monitor	(21-42)	2	12/23

⁴ World Health Organization. "A Prospective Multicenter Trial of the Ovulation Method of Natural Family Planning. II. The Effectiveness Phase"

⁵ M. P. Howard, and J.B. Stanford. "Pregnancy Probabilities During Use of the Creighton Model Fertility Care system." *Archives of Family Medicine* 8 (1999): 391402.

⁶ M. Arevalo, V. Jennings, and I. Sinai. "Efficacy of a New Method of Family Planning: The Standard Days Method." *Contraception* 65 (2002): 333-338.

Fehring, et al. ¹²	MM	Mucus/ Monitor	(21-42)	2	9
Fehring, et al. ⁹	MM	Monitor/ Mucus	(21-42)	0	7/19
Bouchard, et al. ¹⁰	MM Postpartum	Monitor	Variable	2	12
Fehring, et al. ¹¹	MM Perimenopause	Monitor/ Mucus	Variable	1.5	5

⁶ R.J. Fehring, et. al., "Efficacy of Cervical Mucus Observations Plus Electronic Hormonal Fertility Monitoring as a Method of Natural Family Planning." *Journal of Obstetric Gynecologic and Neonatal Nursing* 36 (2007): 152-60.

⁷ R.J. Fehring, M. Schneider, and M.L. Barron. "Efficacy of the Marquette method of natural family planning." *MCN The American Journal of Maternal Child Nursing* 54 (2008): 165-170.

⁸ R.J. Fehring, et al. "Cohort Comparison of Two Fertility Awareness Methods of Family Planning." *Journal of Reproductive Medicine* 54 (2007); 165-170.

⁹ R. Fehring, Schneider, M., Raviele, K, Rodriguez, D & Pruszynski. J. "Randomized comparison of two Internet-supported fertility awareness-based methods of family planning," *Contraception*, 88(2013): 24-30.

¹⁰ T. Bouchard, Schneider, M & Fehring, R. "Efficacy of a new postpartum transition protocol for avoiding pregnancy." *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine*. 26 (2013): 35-44.

¹¹ R. Fehring, & Mu, Q. "Cohort Efficacy Study of Natural Family Planning among Perimenopause Age Women." *J Obstet Gynecol Neonatal Nurs* 43(2014): 351-358.

Fehring, et al. ¹²	MM	Monitor/ +Mucus	Variable	1.6	4/7
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* Range of length of menstrual cycles in study.

** Rate includes only those participants with regular cycle lengths from this study.

¹² R. Fehring, Schneider, M, & Raviele, K. "Pilot Evaluation of an Internetbased Natural Family Planning Education and Service Program," *Journal of Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Neonatal Nursing*. 40(2011):281-91.

¹² R. Fehring, and M. Schneider, M. "Extended Effectiveness of an Online Natural Family Planning Service Program." *MCN The American Journal of Maternal Child Nursing*. 42(2017): 43-49.