

Marriage and “Family Planning” in “One in Christ Jesus”

by Janet Smith, Ph.D.

The bishops have taken on a difficult job in addressing the situation of American women in society and the Church. They are to be commended for their hard work. But it is my judgment that the document still needs much work; otherwise I suspect it will do little good and may even come to be an historical embarrassment for the Church.

In general the document still seems too much a litany of complaints; it sounds like what women do best is complain. And for all of that, I wonder if some of the most important complaints I know Catholic women have were heard. The chief concerns of Catholic women I hear from include issues not even mentioned in the pastoral:

Are our children in Catholic schools really being formed in the faith? Are the sex education programs promoting a “Planned Parenthood” view of human sexuality or promoting the Catholic view of sexuality? Why are diocesan offices and religious education positions filled by those who are working to change Church teaching rather than to promote it? In a different vein, do the liturgies lift hearts and minds to the Lord and do they serve to form children in worthy modes of worship?

Many women are concerned that daycare is not in the interests of children and family and that current legislation will make it difficult for the woman who chooses to remain at home and dedicate herself to caring for her children. There is also concern that federal legislation will make it more difficult for churches to provide daycare. Were these views not expressed at the listening sessions or were they not recorded?

Here I am going to concentrate on the section on “Family Planning” since that is my area of expertise. Section 71, as does so many of the sections, begins with complaints — the validity of which is never questioned. Women claim that their marriages have broken up because of the Church’s condemnation of contraception. Wouldn’t it be wise here to cite the studies that show that

marriages break up because of the use of contraception? Couples using NFP rarely divorce. This should be mentioned. We are told that women leave the Church “after lives of marital pain and frustration.” What kinds of marriages do they have that cannot tolerate periodic abstinence from sexual intercourse? Again, I suspect there is much wrong with these marriages that leads to their breakdown. A deeper and clearer appreciation of the Catholic view of marriage and a greater commitment to living by it may, in fact, strengthen these marriages rather than weaken them.

Those who do not accept or live by the Church’s teaching on contraception need some help in thinking through their relationship with the Church. Are they still eligible to receive communion? Is this a matter between them and their confessors?

Section 72 is excellent and should come first before we hear from those or about those who do not recognize the wisdom of the Church in this area. It might mention that Pope John Paul II has done an extensive catechesis, explaining that contraception not only violates the procreative but also the unitive meaning of marriage.

Section 74 rightly and wisely notes that there is a great misunderstanding and misrepresentation of what the Church teaches. Here the bishops could pledge to do their utmost to set straight members of the Church and others about what the Church teaches and why. Priests should be better grounded in Church teaching and all Catholic educators and other representatives of the diocese should be enthusiastic about the teaching and as adept as possible in defending it.

Section 75 doesn’t clarify the teaching in the way I think necessary. It states “People are inclined to believe that the church urges couples to have as many children as possible.” This is certainly false and the view ought to be corrected. But the next sentence that cites *Humanae Vitae* 16 is not accurate. It is hard to find in *HV* 16 what

the document says appears there. (What the document is looking for is to be found in *Gaudium et Spes* 50. But I do not think the message our times needs to hear is that it is all right to limit family size.) Rather, we are a very materialistic and hedonistic society that finds it hard to make material and spiritual sacrifices. The Church in all its many documents on marriage calls on spouses to be generous in their child-bearing (e.g., see *HV* 10). We are also told that spouses need "serious reasons" to practice NFP (e.g., see *HV* 10 and *HV* 16). Few Catholic couples have pondered what it means to be generous with God in one's childbearing and why that is a wonderful thing. Few understand what reasons are suitable for attempting to limit one's family size. Here the bishops could help women understand better the vision that the Church has of the family and motherhood that might inspire many women to become more committed to motherhood.

Section 76 calls for more instruction and that is excellent. But I often think that any instruction will constitute more instruction. That is, I have heard from many couples that their Church sponsored marriage preparations courses treated contraception as a acceptable option. They report that little enthusiasm was conveyed about NFP. And that seems their one and only chance to hear what the Church's teaching is. Sermons about contraception are virtually non-existent, nor do the adult education programs of a parish sponsor talks on the Church's teaching on contraception. Section 76 tells us that "Catholic theologians, spiritual directors, educators, psychologists, and experts in human sexuality provide courses in sex education and offer spiritual formation, but more needs to be done." Where are these courses being provided? I have been on Catholic campuses and know the state of most Catholic campuses. It is mighty difficult to find theologians, etc. who support the Church's

teaching. In fact, on many of the most notable Catholic campuses, such creatures are impossible to find.

Section 77 does mention NFP and that serious reasons are needed to use it. And it wisely strives to distinguish NFP from rhythm. All this is to the good. But we do hear that "some couples find natural family planning cumbersome and are not convinced of its effectiveness." It would be useful to know if they have tried it and for how long. Most of the Church's teaching on occasion can be "cumbersome" and not yield the results that we would like, but this is not a deficiency in the teaching.

The bishops are to be lauded for their willingness to be reflective about ways they and the Church may have been sexist. Are they also ready to reflect upon whether the institutions and offices under their control are pursuing policies fully in accord with Church teaching?

The document speaks to women as those who have been greatly wronged by society and by their Church. Everyone has been wronged in one way or another by society and maybe even sometimes by the Church. But the reform most of us are immediately responsible for is that within ourselves. I am eager to read a document that calls upon women to offer the distinctive kinds of service to Church and society suitable to their femininity. I am eager to hear women called upon to put family and home above their careers; to have more concern for the wellbeing of society than for their own personal advancement and pleasures. Being called to be a Christian is being called to a life of service and too little of that call is heard in the document. It is urged that women nurture their talents and skills but it seems more for the fulfillment of the women themselves than for the good of the whole.

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