

A Compendium of Questions and Responses
Regarding the Natural Family Planning Requirement
for Couples Preparing for Marriage

Fulfilling Policy Procedures:

Who is responsible for this requirement?

The priest or deacon who prepares the couple for marriage is the responsible person. It is his obligation to include this as a vital step in the preparation process when the couple is of childbearing years (up until age 50), explain why this is a requirement and do all he can to encourage the couple to fulfill it.

If a priest or deacon prepares a couple who is not required to take the course (e.g. not within childbearing years) he should still encourage the NFP education course for them.

What should be done if a couple refuses to take the NFP education?

To fulfill the responsibility to share the truth in a pastoral way, clergy should clearly communicate to couples preparing for marriage the wisdom of this requirement. If a couple is refusing to take the class because of a lack of understanding on the Church's teaching on life and love, the clergy may add additional meetings for the couple to allow for an increase in understanding. If the couple still chooses to refuse, then the clergy should call the Director of the Office for Marriage and Family Life and ask how to proceed. In all cases, these types of difficulties should be noted in the marriage file.

What is the suggested approach to use with couples?

The most effective way to enlist the engaged couple is to refer to the requirement as an expectation. Avoid using phrases like, "we encourage this course" or "we think this is an option". Always present NFP as an expectation of a robust and total marriage preparation program.

It is helpful to prepare a personal explanation of NFP that states the obvious meaning of the requirement. Here is a poor as well as a good illustration of stating the obvious value behind taking a natural family planning course.

Poor Example: Clergy to couple - "You must take an NFP course so you understand what the Church teaches about birth control." Couple to clergy - "We already know what the Church teaches. We don't need that course."

Good Example: Clergy to couple - "The Church wants you to experience a fulfilling sexual relationship in your marriage and has a required course that will help you achieve that. It's called NFP." Couple to clergy - "Hmmm. Okay. I guess we need that."

What happens if the couple wedding date is set before they are able to complete the full course?

In light of pre-marriage requirements, the date of marriage should be set with a view toward having the requirements met before that day. Couples should be made aware that they may have to adjust their wedding date to ensure that all pre-marriage requirements are completed. Parishes should make known regularly the time required for marriage preparation through

bulletin announcements. If a good faith effort is evident on the part of the couple, pastoral judgment may allow for completion of the training after the wedding day. Documentation of completion must be added to the marriage file which is turned into the Diocese of La Crosse.

Is this a requirement for just the woman, or do you expect that the husband-to-be will take the course?

It is important that both the man and woman go through the NFP course. The responsibility should not be placed only on the woman.

If unique marriage circumstances and questions arise regarding whether a couple needs to take the NFP class who should call the Director of the Office?

Clergy should contact the Director of the Office for Marriage and Family Life for guidance in fulfilling the preparation requirements for the Sacrament of Marriage. *Couples* should NOT be told to make that contact.

How will we know that a couple has completed the NFP education requirement?

Couples who complete the education are issued a certificate of completion. They should provide you with the certificate or a copy of the certificate. If you have any questions about completion, contact the Office for Marriage and Family Life.

Does the policy intend all priests, deacons and laity to implement NFP education requirement for couples whom they prepare for marriage, even if they are married outside of the Diocese?

Yes.

Does the policy intend to apply to all who are married “within the Diocese of La Crosse” even if they are prepared outside of the Diocese of La Crosse?

No. The Diocese of La Crosse accepts the preparation process of the diocese where the couple is prepared and does not mandate any additional requirements. Priest or deacons who witness a marriage where preparation happens outside of the diocese should extend an invitation to the couple to take the NFP education course after they are married.

Pastoral Concerns:

What are truly exceptional circumstances?

Truly exceptional circumstances may include the following;

- One or both of the couple have been rendered sterile¹
- The woman is pregnant during the preparation
- The couple has already taken a full course in NFP using a method that is approved by the diocese and can provide a certificate of completion

A couple that tells you they are using a contraceptive for medical reasons should not be granted an exemption.

¹ To be rendered sterile means that the individual lost their fertility because of a medical or physical condition rather than by personal decision. In most cases, a couple who deals with sterility because of these situations, experiences grave sadness. *Pastoral sensitivity must be shown to this couple.*

Can a couple who is on a form of contraception take the course and get something out of it?

Yes. It would be a mistake for clergy to exempt couples who are currently contracepting because most hormonal based methods interfere with the body in such a way that there can be long term effects on a woman's gynecological and overall health. For more specific information, couples should seek the advice of a qualified medical practitioner who is knowledgeable about NFP and committed to Church teaching. All couples who are preparing for marriage will realize some benefit from learning NFP. The use of contraception, therefore, should not be a hindrance in beginning NFP education.

Is it policy to require couples to stop using the birth control pill or other contraceptive devices or barriers, and what is the pastoral responsibility/response to these couples?

The pastoral responsibility is to always teach the truth: namely, that the use of contraception is immoral. It is important to distinguish between questions of morality and questions of policy. The new policy, strictly speaking, is that couples are provided NFP education before getting married. A close reading of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2366-2371 gives wise counsel in this matter. Additionally, *Familiaris Consortio* reminds us of the following.

"In fact, the faith of the person asking the Church for marriage can exist in different degrees, and it is the primary duty of pastors to bring about a rediscovery of this faith and to nourish it and bring it to maturity. But pastors must also understand the reasons that lead the Church also to admit to the celebration of marriage those who are imperfectly disposed"

"...the decision of a man and a woman to marry in accordance with this divine plan [of marriage], that is to say, the decision to commit by their irrevocable conjugal consent their whole lives in indissoluble love and unconditional fidelity, really involves, even if not in a fully conscious way, an attitude of profound obedience to the will of God, an attitude which cannot exist without God's grace. They have thus already begun what is in a true and proper sense a journey towards salvation, a journey which the celebration of the sacrament and the immediate preparation for it can complement and bring to completion, given the uprightness of their intention." [*Familiaris consortio* n. 68]

It is helpful to provide the couple with a copy of the **In Perfect Union** booklet (copies are available through the Office for Marriage and Family Life) along with an opportunity to discuss the questions within the booklet with the clergy or a representative chosen by the clergy. Additionally, the section of the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the Sacrament of Marriage, #1601-1666, and on the Sixth Commandment, #2331–2400 can be offered to the couple. These teachings should be discussed with them.

If a couple is living together, isn't it too late to talk about NFP?

It is never too late to share the truth regarding love and life with the engaged. In preparing a couple for marriage, counseling should focus on abstaining from sexual activity before marriage. It is crucial for clergy and any other representative chosen by them to assist in the preparation to challenge engaged couples to live chastely during their engagement and to support them in their efforts to live as brother and sister until they are married.

How can clergy help couples deal with the fear of NFP ineffectiveness?

Both married and unmarried couples should be assured of the scientific effectiveness of NFP methods. A pastoral approach of understanding and encouragement can be helpful in most situations. Couples should come to understand that married love means being open to children and to embracing, with courage, God's plan for love and life in their marriage. The Office for Marriage and Family Life has resources to assist clergy with this pastoral concern. In addition, clergy may identify parishioners who can provide support to couples in this situation.

How should clergy advise couples who are entering marriage where one or both are permanently sterilized?

If one or both of the persons are permanently sterilized², they should receive instruction in the *Theology of the Body* in order to help them understand the full meaning of conjugal love that is both unitive and procreative. Clergy should discuss the moral implications of sterilization with couples or individuals who have been sterilized. It is also appropriate to discuss the possible spiritual and moral benefits of pursuing a reversal procedure. The Office for Marriage and Family Life can provide information for physicians who may provide reversal services at a reduced cost.

How should a clergy advise couples who are entering marriage where one or both have been rendered sterile?

Clergy must extend a pastoral approach that is sensitive and loving to couples who have lost their fertility by indirect means (e.g. cancer treatment, physical abnormalities, diseases). In most cases, these couples experience grave sadness at their loss of their ability to have children.

The clergy should provide these couples with information on Catholic Church teachings on infertility. Here is a brief synopsis of that teaching.

Struggling with infertility and miscarriage is certainly a great burden for couples to bear, especially when they so deeply desire to have a child and live out their vocation to be open to life and welcome the gift of children from God. It is important to remember that despite infertility, couples "can have a married life that is filled with love and meaning." (*see Married Love and the Gift of Life*) As Blessed John Paul II has said, infertile couples are able to be fruitful when their married love is "open to others, to the needs of the apostolate ... the needs of the poor ... the needs of orphans" and to the world. (John Paul II, Homily, 1982; quoted in *Married Love and the Gift of Life*)

usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/resources/infertility.cfm

The document [Life Giving Love in the Age of Technology](#) should be offered to the couple.

Should civilly married couples who come to the Church for sacramental marriage be required to take the NFP education course?

All who come to the Church for the sacrament of marriage deserve the benefits of pre-marriage training as outlined in diocesan policy. In this respect, couples of childbearing age seeking convalidation should meet the same requirements, including NFP education, as all other couples.

² Permanent sterilization is the result of a personal decision to become infertile for any number of reasons. Permanent sterilization is the direct result of tubal ligation (surgical or chemical) or vasectomy.