

The Cultural Value of Natural Family Planning

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This paper was presented by Marian Corkill and Marie Marshell on behalf of Dr Evelyn Billings at the Pontifical Lateran University, 9 May 2008, at a Congress to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*.

Your Excellencies, Rev Fathers, Sisters, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dr Evelyn Billings has entrusted us to deliver her paper on the Cultural Value of Natural Family Planning. We are honoured to have the opportunity to also acknowledge the huge contribution John and Evelyn Billings have made to all cultures and to the Church in its pastoral role for marriage and family.

“When John and I began to travel and teach out of Australia in 1969, the Ovulation Method of natural fertility regulation had reached its definitive point as far as scientific verification of Rules went, but we had much to learn about the teaching, and much to observe about its value to individuals, marriages and the wider culture. We were to see attitudes change, from the contraceptive one of “no babies” of Planned Parenthood, to the acceptance of the child in full understanding of the Billings Ovulation Method with Rules that mean what they say.

This Method can be used by all women throughout the world regardless of culture, religion or status. Every fertile woman can be taught to recognize the signs and symptoms of her fertility and the couple can then apply 4 simple Rules to manage their fertility naturally, whether it is their desire to achieve or avoid a pregnancy. Its greatest attribute is its simplicity: blind women are successfully using and teaching this Method.

The ongoing scientific works of Professor James Brown of Melbourne and Professor Erik Odeblad of Sweden, which validate our clinical studies, have been of invaluable assistance. We had a Method that would monitor reproductive health, and we came to value the woman's records as a diagnostic tool. This was particularly relevant after ceasing chemical contraception and where there were other remediable abnormalities. This diagnostic aspect has been particularly useful in the alleviation of sub fertility with successful results exceeding those of modern assisted reproductive technologies.

In our early travels we were warned that doors would be closed to us if we talked about family planning as people were being offended and harmed by birth control programs, so we talked about our children, and the barriers fell away. The people readily responded to the Billings Ovulation Method and our teaching methods became simpler. We were confident because the truth was proved by the scientific work and we soon realized that the couple only needed a simple instruction to grasp this truth and apply the knowledge.

The early trials were being done in the Pacific Islands and by the World Health Organisation, with excellent results. The biological pregnancy rate was uniformly low. The total pregnancy rate reflected the choices the people themselves made and we always maintained that these choices should be in the hands of the couple in the full knowledge of the Method. This conforms to the passage in *Humanae Vitae* where Pope Paul VI speaks about the responsible exercise of parenthood in which parents recognize fully "their own duties towards God, towards themselves, towards the family and towards society in a correct hierarchy of values." (HV10) At that time this was not acknowledged by people who regarded any pregnancy as a failure.

After a talk some time ago, a woman came up out of the shadows one evening, and said to John, "This Method is love." She then disappeared into the darkness. By its gentle discipline it strengthens love. Inherent in authentic natural fertility regulation is Truth and Love and it is this goodness which works in the lives of couples and ultimately has an effect on their community. Initiated by the essential ingredient of the Method, the need for the husband to understand his wife's reproductive physiology,

all communication between them is enhanced. It is the beginning of cooperation with nature and with each other and this is beneficial to their marriage relationship. In the early 70s we saw this happen in a Kenyan community where families were large and poverty acute.

With the introduction of radio and television to Africa, birth control programs have been advertised, and relief programs tied to propaganda to lower the birth rate have been introduced. We have heard many stories where the people's culture had been well-regulated by practices of managing fertility, with customs of abstinence, which preserved fidelity and family structures. After a child is born it is common practice for the husband to move to another house while the mother breast feeds the baby. Then, when the child is 2 years old and can talk, he is sent off with a gift to invite his father home. But the practices introduced by Planned Parenthood and like organisations have destroyed this fidelity persuading the man and his wife that they do not have to put up with abstinence. This has had dire effects, of which we know so much. However knowledge and truth empower people. When the couple is given information about the Billings Ovulation Method, and unnecessary abstinence is removed, they can resume a healthy and happy life together.

We know how HIV/AIDs has ravaged African families, but there are areas in Africa where there is a good story to tell. Instead of orphaned children parented by one old grandmother, we see families of 3 and 4 who are living happily with both a mother and a father who had been taught the Billings Ovulation Method by dedicated and accredited teachers. On a return visit to Malawi 11 years ago, a country where HIV/AIDs was rife, we saw the fruits of the work of a mission sister who had taught the Billings Ovulation Method to couples. The mothers were respected and the fathers worked to support them.

The Method fits easily into every culture, even in the worst social circumstances. Although HIV/AIDs remains incurable, in southern Tanzania a German doctor sister has had wonderful success treating and teaching men with sexually transmitted infections, curing many. She teaches the wives the Billings Ovulation Method, and then when the husbands return home, they can resume a healthy and happy life together protected by fidelity from reinfection.

Living the Natural Law once more, people returned to harmony within their families and their neighbourhood. One African who was an Animist said, "I used to beat my wife, but now I love her. Something wonderful is happening in my country."

Early in our teaching experiences, in the poverty of Calcutta's crowded slums, we met women who had been taught the Billings Ovulation Method by Mother Teresa's nuns. These sisters taught in conformity with the Magisterium of the Church, which according to *Humanae Vitae*, "does notcease to proclaim with humble firmness the entire moral law, both natural and evangelical." (HV18) All this in the face of strong opposition from government enticements and coercion. To condone the contraception, sterilisation and abortion package, out of false compassion for their poverty, is to damage the stronghold of their union and introduce the worst poverty of all – the poverty of love, of which Mother Teresa of Calcutta often spoke. In *Humanae Vitae* Pope Paul VI warns of involvement of government bodies eroding conjugal life by these programs. (HV17).

Throughout the world, in places where the Billings Ovulation Method is teaching a reliable way of resisting the imposition of artificial methods of birth control, there is a strength which can say to these authorities, "There is a better way. Keep away from our people. Do not harm our women" and the people are happy.

Catholicism is deeply embedded in the culture of the Latin Americas but in El Salvador, in the early 1970s, families were large and unsupportable because of severe poverty and the Church was finding it difficult to persuade people that contraception was bad. The anti life, contraceptive mentality ran counter to the Church's teaching and the clash brought much disquiet to consciences. Church attendance was low, children were unbaptised and moved from family to family. The Billings Ovulation Method came to El Salvador through three American missionaries and a change was observed. They took the teaching out to the homes and the people could see that their Church cared and they responded by coming to church, getting married and the children were being baptized. As these children grew to adulthood some were becoming priests and religious. The whole community, centred on the Church, was becoming strong. The problem of fertility regulation was acute and when it was solved, as it was in El Salvador at that time, a

cultural healing took place. A Mexican priest recently told us, "I no longer have difficulty in the confessional with the problem of fertility regulation, I simply send them to an accredited centre for teaching." We experienced these every encouraging signs in the early days before the WHO trials.

Similar circumstances existed in the Philippines, and other parts of the Christian world, where great damage was being done to good families by the birth control programs but Church communities were restored and rebuilt with the support of Billings Ovulation Method teaching programs. Our programs in the Philippines are showing the success of good teaching by dedicated people. Our teachers are working with the poor, street vendors, fishing communities, jail inmates, those living in dumpsites and other depressed areas. They report improved couple communication and relationships. One woman stated: "I was about to leave my husband but when we learned this Method, he loves me more. He learned to respect my fertility. He learned to abstain which before he could not. We are now talking to each other." Other women confided that they can now take Holy Communion because they are no longer using contraceptives. Another couple believes it was the Billings Ovulation Method that saved their marriage and helped them to realize the presence of God.

As has been the case in all societies where the Method has been taught, the change from servitude of the woman to respect by her partner has come about through the practice of the Method itself. Inherent in the Method is the loving discipline which is obedience to the Natural Law when men and women live a more generous life together, no matter what their creed or belief.

Recent communication from an accredited teacher in Pakistan of Ba'hai faith, states, "The Method is so simple and practical that you can teach it at any time, in any place – during travel, social gatherings, informal meetings and intervals between workshops. I enthusiastically teach this Method." She writes, "When one is following the rules of nature he/she can feel a deep peace within." This teacher, teaching mainly Muslims, expresses the sentiments of *Humanae Vitae* (10): couples "conform their activity to the creative activity of God", an elegant way of saying "follow the Rules." It is inherent in the Method that a dynamic power is developed which operates to regulate the marriage. It is within the Creator's plan for marriage. The

teachers in Pakistan are gradually overcoming the social challenges to get better husband cooperation in a culture which is male dominated. Couples are now coming together to be instructed and both men and women are actively involved in the teaching of new couples.

In Lesotho, a small land-locked country in Sth Africa the men all wanted to be chiefs. Their role changed when they began to realize that it was the women who had the knowledge about their fertility. The men listened to their wives and became more cooperative in marriage which resulted in improved social harmony.

A group of Indonesian women was asked whether there would be any difficulty in informing the men about fertility. The response was, "If we know, we can make sure they know." The men had expressed some uncertainty about the women having all the knowledge and so they were keen to learn. The Method was taken into their culture, again effecting an important cultural change by the men simply listening to their wives.

Pope John Paul II spoke often about the development of society passing by way of the family. So it is seen in any culture where the Method is introduced. He also spoke of Truth and Love, and it is for this reason that we are adamant that the Billings Ovulation Method that is taught is in conformity with the scientific findings and the authentic teaching without variation. Couples are entitled to the truth, as much as they are entitled to the exercise of their free will.

The blessings of Truth are constantly apparent to teachers of the Billings Ovulation Method. In January of this year, we began a teaching program in Vietnam. In preparing this paper we received the glad news of two new pregnancies achieved by couples who had suffered from the pain of infertility. One for 17 years and the other for 8 years.

Since 1995 we have devoted much time to the teaching in China, where we have visited more than twenty times in company with senior teachers from the Education Committee of WOOMB International (World Organisation of the Ovulation Method Billings). We have been accompanied on each occasion by dedicated teacher/translators from Caritas in Hong Kong. Many of these young women have themselves become Billings Ovulation Method teachers.

Our travels began in China in 1986. The main concern of the Chinese Ministry of Health who invited us to come to China was the burgeoning population and unpopularity of the solutions provided, which was witnessing a huge cultural change in families. Increasing age of the population, the scarcity of young people to care for the old, the unnatural boy:girl ratio and the non-compliance with the regulations, particularly in remote areas, created a problem for the Government. Several concessions from the one child policy were made, for ethnic groups of low numbers, for dangerous occupations of the father, but coercive measures were operative as well. The doctors were concerned also by damaged reproductive health of the women and also by their infertility. They had explored all alternative birth regulation strategies and decided to invite us to visit them to teach the Billings Ovulation Method. We confidently accepted the invitation, which was a great challenge, knowing the government's abortion policy. We were asked what will you do if a woman becomes pregnant? Abort her? We told them, "The Billings Ovulation Method has nothing to do with abortion. If the Rules are applied correctly there will be no pregnancy in 99.9% of cases if the intention is to avoid pregnancy. The choice is free. If as a matter of choice, conception does occur, then this baby must be accepted and nurtured as we ourselves have been acknowledged and protected."

In China the abortion rate has dropped sevenfold in those areas where Billings Ovulation Method instruction is available. The IUD has long been the chief means of birth control in China. When we introduced the Billings Ovulation Method the doctors in charge of birth control were skeptical. As is well known, the IUD targets the implanting conceptus – it is an abortifacient. We suggested to them to teach the Method to those couples who were being given an IUD. The Rules of the Billings Ovulation Method for avoiding conception, by avoiding genital contact on recognised days of fertility, meant that there was no conceptus to be destroyed. The figures showed a greatly reduced pregnancy rate. It was acknowledged that by removal of the IUD, the woman would no longer suffer from pain, bleeding and infection, caused by the IUD. When the couple relied on the BOM alone, the pregnancy rate fell to close to one percent.

The couple is now united in a knowledgeable independence which enables them to manage a most private part of their lives together. Gone are the visits to that hated "service station" for the mandatory abortions and fitting

of IUDs, gone is the woman's resentment towards doctor, state and even her husband, for the pain and grief of the insults inflicted on her.

Through Billings Ovulation Method teachers working in Caritas in Hong Kong the Method has now spread into the large Catholic communities of mainland China, many of which are very poor. Huge numbers of Catholics are embracing this Method and the people themselves are now becoming trained teachers and spreading this information to other Catholic groups as far flung as Inner Mongolia. The Government is happy about this development as previously these Catholic communities had been resistant to any pressure to reduce the size of their families. This good news is also being offered to engaged couples so that they enter married life with knowledge which enables them to manage their fertility naturally. The Catholic faith is central to the lives of these people and large numbers of priests and nuns have embraced the Billings Ovulation Method, supporting the couples in living their lives in faithfulness to Church teaching.

The misery has left the faces of the women in China as they love their dependable menfolk and live in obedience to the Natural Law.

In *Humanae Vitae* (9) the Pope speaks of the totality of love. The woman now comes to trust this man who learns to listen to and cooperate with her. He becomes a loyal protector, a real husband, as they "conform their activity to the creative intention of God, expressed in the very nature of marriage and of its acts, and manifested by the constant teaching of the Church." (HV10). The passage of man and woman together from this culture of death, where their children are routinely sacrificed in ignorance, to a well-informed, healthy and orderly self-regulated culture of life is a great joy to all involved in this service who could see how readily the Chinese people accepted the precepts of the natural regulation of fertility and its philosophy.

When teachers of natural fertility regulation are trained, they are trained to impart Truth and Love to all alike. This is the Essence of the Method which leads couples to live in health and happiness. It has been seen to benefit large populations and in time will effect social changes more widely still. It will bring about reversal of many harmful trends we are seeing today. There is great optimism, spreading through couples who teach their children and through organisations which train teachers to take this message of Truth

and Love to the world, thus fulfilling the prophetic words of Pope Paul VI in his Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (31) “Truly a great work, as We are deeply convinced, both for the world and for the Church, since man cannot find true happiness – towards which he aspires with all his being – other than in respect of the laws written by God in his very nature, laws which he must observe with intelligence and love.””

*John and Evelyn Billings responded with great faith to the call Pope Paul VI made in *Humanae Vitae* (24) for men and women of science to work to find a "secure method for a regulation of birth founded on the observance of natural rhythms". They devoted their lives to this work and we gratefully acknowledge the gift they have made to men and women of all cultures. We salute them.*



Drs John and Evelyn Billings with Pope Paul VI, author of *Humanae Vitae*



Acknowledgement

OMR&RCA acknowledges partial funding of this publication by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing through a grant to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference which is administered by the Natural Family Planning Board of Management.