

## **Responding to *Humanae vitae*'s call to minister to married Couples:**

### **THE DIOCESE OF RICHMOND**

*By Karen D. Poehailos, MD, CFMCA*

Over the past twenty-one years, by God's grace, we have been able to successfully build a viable NFP program in the Catholic Diocese of Richmond (Virginia.)

In 1996, I moved back to the Diocese of Richmond after four years in the Diocese of Harrisburg, PA. In Harrisburg I learned the diocesan Sympto-Thermal Method (SouthernStar) and also converted my medical practice to be NFP-only. In the days before online NFP education, I arrived in the Diocese of Richmond hoping to find many local NFP teachers. It was more than concerning to me when I learned that the nearest NFP teaching couple for the Couple to Couple League (CCL) was seventy miles away in Richmond! In addition, another teaching couple lived in Virginia Beach (three hours away from me). Other than these two couples, I was aware of no other NFP teachers of any model in our large diocese.

In order to have a strong NFP-only medical practice, my patients would need a reasonable way to access NFP services. With this vision in mind, I contacted my mentor, Stella Kitchen, the then diocesan NFP coordinator for Harrisburg. I asked if I could be trained as an STM instructor. She and master teacher, Aleta Lazur did my instructor training on a return trip to Harrisburg. I was grateful for their support since I was outside their diocese. They both felt so strongly about what I was doing that they said it was worth the effort!

In late 1996, I offered STM classes for both my patients and other clients from my parish. I also offered presentations on NFP and marital sexuality at my parish and in the neighboring areas. As the program grew, I ended up training to become an instructor-trainer and have taught about ten instructors over the years. Most are not currently active, but one still teaches with me in my parish.

My friendship with Stella and later, Janet Kistler, a former NFP coordinator for the Diocese of Phoenix who was living in Fredericksburg, VA, led our Richmond team to pursue the process of meeting the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) *Standards for Diocesan NFP Ministry*. Theresa Notare, Assistant Director of the bishops' NFP Program, assigned Janet to work with me. Our first meetings were in my parish library. We enjoyed the support of several diocesan priests as well as the Dominican friars at my home parish.

In our meetings with Janet, she explained the USCCB's national NFP standards to our diocesan instructors. Stella also scheduled time to help me provide instructor training. Our program was initially endorsed in 2002 and we have maintained Endorsement renewing every five years. In early 2011, I became the volunteer diocesan NFP coordinator. Bishop DiLorenzo was excited to have a physician at the helm, as he felt it would give credibility to the diocesan priests and staff in promoting NFP services.

As my practice grew in its demands for NFP medical care, I realized I was continuing to struggle with an inadequate knowledge base on how to treat certain issues without recourse to the Pill, or other immoral means. When my sons were old enough that my absence wouldn't cause a huge burden on the family, my pastor recommended that I consider participating in the Natural Procreative TECHNOLOGY (NaProTech.) course in Omaha, NE. Charlottesville had our first FertilityCare™ Practitioner teaching, and this was the perfect environment to grow our services. He believed this would offer quality care to our couples as well as positively affect others in the diocese. Bishop DiLorenzo was highly supportive. He and my parish split the costs of my training. I donated my vacation time for the two weeks of training I would need in Omaha.

In 2017 we have diocesan instructors in the Creighton Model, Couple to Couple League, SouthernStar STM, and Billings Ovulation Method. We also have couples who access Marquette training on line. I am one of two NaProTech. Medical Consultants in our diocese. I am happy to say that couples and women have easier access to ethical medical care!

Our diocese has a video on NFP required of all couples participating in marriage preparation through our *Unveiled* program. My parish, and a few others, require a course in NFP as part of marriage preparation. We have a long way to go to my goal of having instructors in all methods for the major and more remote areas of our geographically very large diocese. I am grateful however, for telemedicine to have some of these needs met. My goal ultimately would be some form of NFP introduction instruction to be required of every couple marrying in our diocese. We need more teachers and support for this to happen.

In reflecting upon the past twenty-one years, I can report that we have come a LONG way. I'm grateful for those who have guided us in the journey, and for God's providential care. I continue to pray that in time, and with God's blessings, our NFP ministry will continue to grow!

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