

Married life is better with NFP, say couples at synod

By Cindy Wooden, Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- Catholic couples who ignore church teaching on contraception "don't know what they are missing," said a U.S. couple invited to address the extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the family.

Alice and Jeff Heinzen, family life leaders in the Diocese of La Crosse, Wis., spoke at the synod Oct. 7, urging efforts to find new ways to share its teaching about the beauty of family life.

Although the couple has practiced natural family planning for 27 years and taught natural family planning -- Alice is a member of the NFP advisory board for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops -- they did not speak specifically about family planning in their presentation to the synod.

However, in an interview with Catholic News Service Oct. 9, the couple said church teaching about married sexuality, openness to life and against the use of artificial contraception is clearly a place where new ways of presenting the message are needed.

The good news, they said, is that natural family planning is good for a marriage, good for one's health and good for the environment.

"Natural family planning is really a skill set that allows you to maintain your vow of openness to life," Alice said. "When you look at other things, like being faithful to one another, if you're going to be faithful you better have the skill of conflict resolution so that you can work things out. If you're going to stay permanently married forever, well then you better be able to forgive one another. That's another skill set."

Once it became "part of our lifestyle, then it was pretty amazing because it led to a mastery for myself of my own human sexuality," Jeff said, "and for Alice it really ended up bringing a higher level of trust because I think that for so long women have been taught to be the gatekeepers and men to be the demanders. And it completely changed everything."

NFP courses in the United States are attracting more and more people interested in the methods simply because they are natural, not for religious reasons, Alice said. "However, after they start practicing and charting and discussing, they notice a shift in their relationship, they notice a deepening of their conversation."

When that happens, she said, instructors can point out: "This is God's plan. When you allow him into this whole process how can you not expect more joy, how can you not expect things to be better between you?"

Alice said their friends and even their three children noticed how it affected their relationship, keeping it fresh and vibrant.

If a couple can speak openly about their fertility and talk about when or when not to have sex, Jeff said, "well, the checkbook looks pretty easy and the finances aren't such a big deal."

The church is teaching truth, Jeff said, but sometimes it does not "package" it to sell. "It's a consistent product; all we have to do is figure out how we are going to deliver this to the population, especially to our young adults today."

Commenting on the synod discussions, including differing views on how the church should respond to those who do not follow church teaching on marriage and family life, both of the Heinzens said they are encouraged by the attention the church is giving to the issues.

"This is a new age; this is a new way of addressing the crises that are identified" in the synod working document, Alice said. "We're discussing them, we're wrestling with them -- that is hope."

Jeff said he is impressed that Pope Francis "has cleared his calendar to be in this room every day. Cleared his calendar. Not, 'Well, I can be here on Monday and then I can make an appointment on Tuesday afternoon.' No, he's here all the time."

Olivier and Xristilla Roussy, a French couple who are part of the Emmanuel Community and leaders of its Amour et Verite (Love and Truth) ministry for couples, addressed the synod's evening session Oct. 9 and were honest about their experience with artificial contraception and with natural family planning.

After their third child was born, Olivier said, Xristilla was exhausted; they thought that using the pill for a few months would help their marriage, "but it had the opposite effect." He said his wife was always "in a bad mood, desire was absent and her joy disappeared."

In addition, he said, they both "understood we closed the door to the Lord in our conjugal life."

Olivier told the synod that using natural family planning to space the birth of children is not always easy, especially because sexual desire increases during a woman's fertile period, but talking to one another and exercising discipline teaches trust and tenderness.

"We have found these methods are reliable," he said, "even though we must admit that when we did not contain our desire, an infant came nine months later."

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