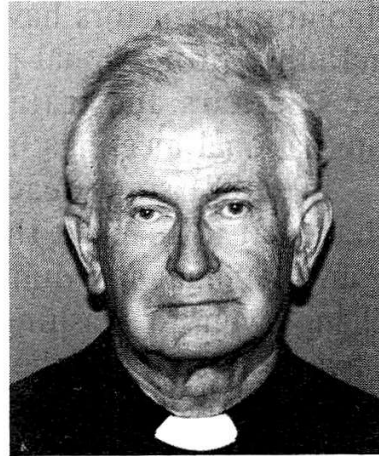


China and Natural Family Planning

by Peter Brady, S.J.

In China, as in other parts of the world, doctors, medical workers and ordinary people have been showing increasing interest in modern methods of natural birth control. These methods are reliable, effective and involve no risk to health. Furthermore, they are inexpensive and so place no financial burden on poor people. Moreover, they are morally acceptable to all, including Catholics and Muslims. For



these reasons they are very appropriate for use in developing countries. In this article, some information is provided about the promotion of NFP in China. It also includes a brief description of the different methods, their effectiveness and estimates of their cost.

Reports from China

At an international seminar on Natural Family Planning in Hong Kong in 1988, Dr. Tien Kai-hui from Changsha spoke about the use of natural methods in China. In ancient times the Chinese used the changes in the moon to predict the time of conception. Nowadays, according to Dr. Tien, many Chinese use the so-called "safe period" method, but because they do not use it properly they have many unplanned pregnancies. He estimated that about 30 million Chinese are using this method. Because of the disadvantages of the other methods in use, modern effective natural methods could become one of the most attractive options for Chinese people, according to Dr. Tien.

Three cities: In 1986, Dr. Billings, who developed the Billings Ovulation Method, was invited to Beijing. He was cordially welcomed by scientists and doctors. They showed much interest in this method and were impressed by its simplicity. Some doctors said that they wished to introduce it into the

villages where they worked.

One year before Dr. Billings went to Beijing, Dr. Ramon Ruiz, the Chairperson of the Hong Kong Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, established contact with the health authorities in Guangzhou. Since that time Hong Kong Natural Family Planning instructors have been going to Guangzhou and doctors and other professional people have been coming to Hong Kong for seminars and training courses. They have also attended international meetings in other parts of the world.

In 1988, some teachers of the Ovulation Method went to Shanghai to teach it there. In September, 1993, a specialist from the Shanghai Municipal Family Planning Commission, Dr. Zhang, went to Washington, U.S.A., to report on the results of a two-year study of the Ovulation Method. This had been carried out in both urban and rural areas. Of those taking part in the study, only 16 per cent had attended high school or university. According to Dr. Zhang, for avoiding pregnancy, the Ovulation Method was 98.82 per cent effective. She said that in China the Intra-Uterine Device had an effectiveness of 75 per cent and the contraceptive Pill an effectiveness rate of 70-80 per cent. An expert from the U.S.A. remarked that it seems easier to spread the Ovulation Method in China than in the U.S. "We are used to having a pill for every illness," she said. "We regard fertility as a disease to be treated rather than as a real gift."

A misunderstanding: Thirty years ago, many people in Western countries considered that only well-educated people could use natural methods. They claimed that these methods are too complicated for people in undeveloped or developing countries, and especially for uneducated people. In her report about Shanghai, Dr. Zhang confirms that other investigators have discovered: people with little or no education can use natural methods very successfully. This was shown many years ago by Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Mother Teresa is one of the most enthusiastic promoters of NFP. Her nuns learn how to teach these methods and put their knowledge to good use whenever they have the opportunity. When they began teaching these methods in Calcutta in the 1960s, they made very slow progress. They visited families in their homes. Sometimes they would spend the whole day visiting

and not even get one couple to learn the method. When the nuns wanted to give up and do something else, Mother Teresa used to say, "When you help one family, you are helping a generation of families. If I help one woman today, she will later teach her children before they get married, teaching them the right thing. You are changing society." Mother Teresa did not lose hope. After three years, 140 couples were using the method. About ten years later, around 50,000 were using it. Most of the learners were Hindus; they have little or no education. After they had learnt the method they would say: "Before, we used to be afraid that there might be another child. We didn't know what to use. We used the Intra-Uterine Device and we gave it up. We used the Pill and we gave it up. Now we know everything that is needed...and we keep telling others and they come...." The Sisters could not cope with the number of women who wanted to learn and they had to get volunteers to help them and these work, not only in the city, but in the villages. All over the world, but especially in Asia and in Africa, nuns, whether doctors, nurses or non-specialists, have been among the leading promoters of NFP

Modern Methods

While women of many cultures have had some knowledge of the fertile and infertile phases of the menstrual cycle and passed on this knowledge to their daughters, it is only in the last 60 years that the scientific basis of these physiological changes has been studied. As a result of new findings, it is now possible to provide accurate guidelines which women can use to help them to know when they are fertile and when they are not.

The Calendar Method: During the last sixty years two doctors, one in Japan, and the other in Germany, made an important discovery; they found that ovulation takes place around 14 days before the end of the menstrual cycle. They then showed how a woman, using simple calculations, could predict the beginning and the end of the fertile phase. This method, known as the "safe period" method, became well known and is still used in China, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and other countries. Unfortunately, it is not a very reliable method and people

frequently do not know how to make the calculations correctly. Besides, if the wife's cycles are not regular, the couple may have to abstain for long periods. Hence, promoters of modern methods do not recommend the use of the Calendar Method. It can sometimes be used in combination with other methods.

The Temperature Method: During the 1940s a new way of determining the end of the fertile phase began to be used. Around the time of ovulation, the temperature rises to a higher level, about 0.2 deg. C above the previous normal temperatures. It remains at this level until the end of the cycle. After three or four days of higher temperatures the woman is certainly infertile. Since it does not indicate the beginning of the fertile phase, the method can require long periods of abstinence. However, teachers began to use calculations based on the Calendar or on the Temperature Method to determine when the fertile phase begins. These calculations are quite reliable. By using them women can predict when conception is likely to take place and so do not have to abstain in the early days of the cycle.

The Mucus (Ovulation) Method: During the 1950s, two Australian doctors, Dr. John Billings and his wife, showed that by observing changes in the cervical mucus during the menstrual cycle, women could recognise when they were fertile and when they were infertile. This is a very simple method and it has become the most widely used of the modern natural methods of family planning.

The Sympto-Thermal Method: This is not a completely new method but a combination of some or all of the other methods. Teachers of this method combine the methods in different ways, the Mucus Method with the Temperature Method, or they may use a combination of all three methods, Mucus, Temperature and Calendar. Couples who use this more complicated method consider that it is worthwhile following the extra rules in order to achieve greater effectiveness.

Advantages and disadvantages: Natural methods have many advantages: they can be used to achieve or avoid pregnancy; they do not interfere with a woman's physiology and have no harmful side-effects; couples who use them find that mutual

communication and relationships improve. The couple respect one another and the life-giving process and do nothing to destroy the capacity to give life or to prevent life from coming into existence. By using these methods the couple can express their love for one another and also their respect for human life in an appropriate way.

Natural methods have also some disadvantages. Although some couples can learn a method quickly...in four or five hours, others may take much longer and have to be carefully supervised. Husbands and wives must agree to cooperate and must be strongly motivated; poor people are often more highly motivated than those who are better off. Couples must know the rules of the method well and follow them carefully. Even when they keep the rules there is always a small possibility of pregnancy. Sometimes, couples who wish to avoid pregnancy may have to abstain for a long time. But if they face their difficulties in a loving and generous spirit, they will grow in appreciation and love for one another

Effectiveness and Cost

A writer in a well-known Hong Kong newspaper recently claimed that NFP methods had a failure rate of over 90 per cent. That means that for every 100 women who use the method for one year, more than 90 will become pregnant. Experts tell us that if women use no method at all about 80 per cent of them will become pregnant. It seems that according to the writer quoted above it is better to use no method at all to avoid pregnancy, rather than use a natural method.

What are the facts? In the *British Medical Journal* for 18 September, 1993, Dr. R.E.J. Ryder presented the scientific basis for NFP. His article aroused very great interest. He said that according to a World Health Organisation study carried out in every continent, 93 per cent of the women who participated could identify the symptoms associated with fertility and infertility. Besides, according to many recent scientific studies, the effectiveness rates for natural methods are as high as those for artificial methods. The following are some of the unexpected pregnancy rates per 100 women with experienced teachers quoted by Dr. Ryder: 0.2 (India, Calcutta); 3.6 (Italy); 0.8,

1.8, 2.3 (Germany); 2.7 (Britain); 4.3 (Liberia); 0.3 (Zambia); 4.7 (Chile). One of the best results came from the study mentioned above which was carried out in Shanghai, 1.18 pregnancies per 100 women per year. (Dr. Ryder mentions it in an article in another magazine.) When people are highly motivated and well taught, e.g., the 19,843 women in the Calcutta study, very good results can be obtained. Dr. Ryder himself personally checked some of the data in Calcutta. On the other hand, when the teaching is poor and couples are lacking in motivation, the results will be disappointing.

Cost: All modern methods of family planning cost money. How does the cost of natural methods compare with that of artificial methods? According to recent research in Britain, the cost for one couple using NFP for ten years (at 1990 prices) was U.S. \$78. The costs for artificial methods were as follows: the contraceptive pill, \$400; barrier methods, \$400; intra-uterine devices, \$345; injectable contraceptives, \$320. For the first year, NFP, teaching included, cost \$35.65.

Conclusion

It is clear from scientific evidence and from the testimony of many users that natural family planning brings great benefits to married couples and their families. It has been shown to be effective, without side-effects, cheap and acceptable to people. Unfortunately, many people know nothing about it or have wrong ideas. In many countries the Catholic Church has played an important role in teaching modern natural methods. By helping those who are now promoting them in China, the Church could make a notable contribution to family life and to society.
