

# THE CULTURE OF LIFE: PRESUPPOSITIONS AND DIMENSIONS

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## DIVORCE RATE COMPARISONS BETWEEN COUPLES USING NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING & ARTIFICIAL BIRTH CONTROL

By Mercedes Arzú Wilson

### INTRODUCTION

Everyone would agree that divorce is the greatest tragedy that can befall a family. This is why the Catholic Church from time immemorial has been struggling to protect the family from the tragedy of divorce.

Wouldn't it be providential if the understanding of the natural signs of fertility placed by God in the woman's body during her fertile years would prove to be essential to a successful marriage? This practice is known as Natural Family Planning, from here on referred to as NFP.

Family of the Americas Foundation (FAF) has received the completed data collection of a study correlating marital happiness with Natural Family Planning. Since the early seventies, Family of the Americas Foundation has been conducting programs for couples that provide knowledge on the fertile and infertile phases of a woman's cycle, together with the importance of respecting the natural law and the teachings of the Catholic Church. For years we have witnessed the benefits our programs have provided to families, not only in Christian countries, but also Moslem and even Communist nations. Even though numerous scientific evaluations and statistical studies have confirmed its effectiveness, even superior to artificial birth control,<sup>1</sup> we have never been able to validate the benefits to the family that our teachers have been observing for many years.

Last year a scientific survey was conducted under the direction of a reputable independent statistician, Dr. Robert Lerner, a Sociologist from the University of Chicago with a degree in Economics. The protocol stipulated that he would not only evaluate the findings, but also compare them to two of the largest U.S. government funded surveys that asked similar questions of the respondents.

## **THE COMPARISON**

This study presents results from a survey of 505 couples that have been practicing Natural Family Planning, primarily the Ovulation Method, through the teachers of Family of the Americas Foundation. They are based on the first-ever survey of its kind. It examined the types of persons and the impact learning NFP has made in their family life, as well as their sexual and moral attitudes. The questionnaire itself was designed to match as closely as possible the questions asked in the two government surveys. A total of 683 questionnaires were sent out and 505 usable questionnaires were returned and entered into the database. This is a 74 % response rate, which is unusually high for a mail survey.

The NFP group studied consisted of middle class families of the United States of America, primarily Catholic, with a small minority of Protestants and Evangelicals, primarily white with a small minority of black and Hispanic families.

From this first study, however, (others need to be conducted to confirm our findings), we can ascertain that Natural Family Planning may become the major vindicator for the Catholic Church's strong stance in favor of respecting the natural law. It promises to be the best safeguard for the family against divorce.

In *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortius* and *Evangelium Vitae*, both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II repeatedly warned us of the consequences of violating the natural law through the use of artificial birth control, sterilization and abortion. These practices usually lead to promiscuity, cohabitation and ultimately divorce. Divorce is the most destructive force of the culture of death because it fractures the family and creates conflict among its members.

The report confirms that practicing Natural Family Planning, seems to be the authentic alternative as often stated in Pope John Paul II's writings.

## METHODOLOGY

The results of the survey come from three distinct sources



1) The NFP survey was undertaken by Family of the Americas Foundation, (FAF), of women who had taken instruction in Natural Family Planning at least three to over ten years ago. (505 women, 20 years of age and older)



2) The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), which was carried out by the U.S. Government's National Center for Health Statistics. (10,847 women, 15-44 years of age)



3) The National Opinion Research Center, a well known and highly regarded national survey research organization, conducts The General Social Survey (GSS) on a continuous basis. The data collection efforts in this instance are funded by the U.S. Government's National Science Foundation Social Science Data Program. (19,786 women, 18 years of age and older)



4) The sub-group (Ever Married Catholic) pertains only to GSS respondents who are Catholic, who have been married at some time in their lives, (including those who are currently married), and who range in age from 21 to 44 years.

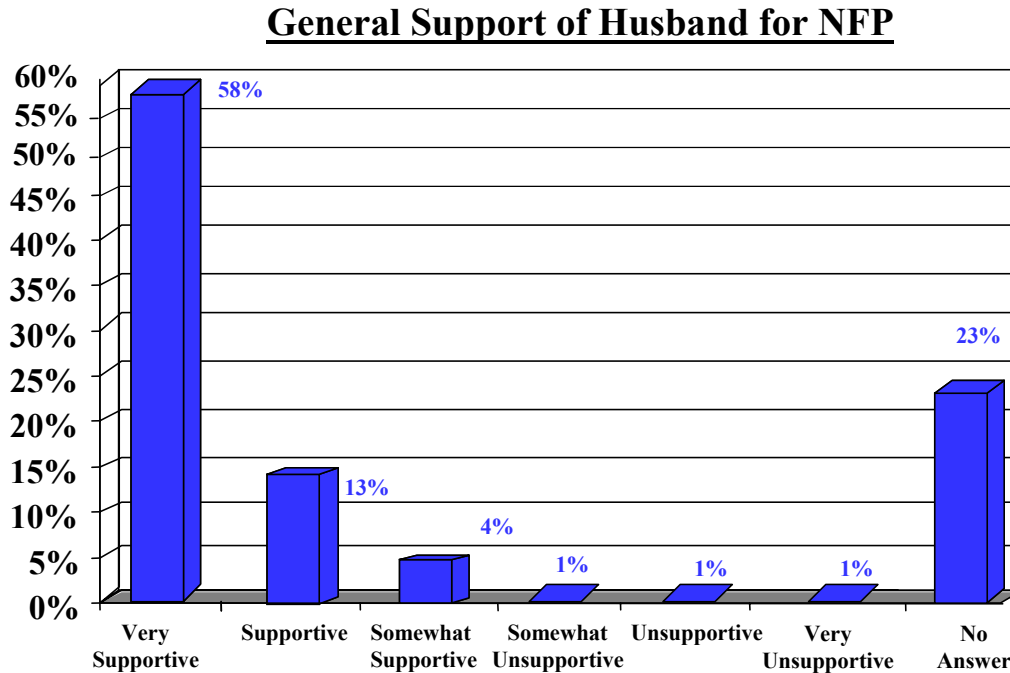
## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Following is a summary with brief commentaries on selected graphs. These commentaries pertain to the original author of the survey as well as some of my own interpretations from a Catholic viewpoint. These graphs were chosen to exemplify some of the most significant findings of the survey. The average length of time the couples in the survey had been married was 10 years. Judging by what is being reported worldwide, the Ovulation Method (OM) of Natural Family Planning, is the most widely used natural method anywhere.

## GRAPH #1 GENERAL SUPPORT OF HUSBANDS FOR NFP

The general support from the husbands for NFP was 75%, which is significant. The results presented from the three surveys analyzed reveals that compared to other women in general and to Catholic women of similar age in the government studies, 89% of NFP users seem to share a deeper intimacy with their spouse.

GRAPH #1



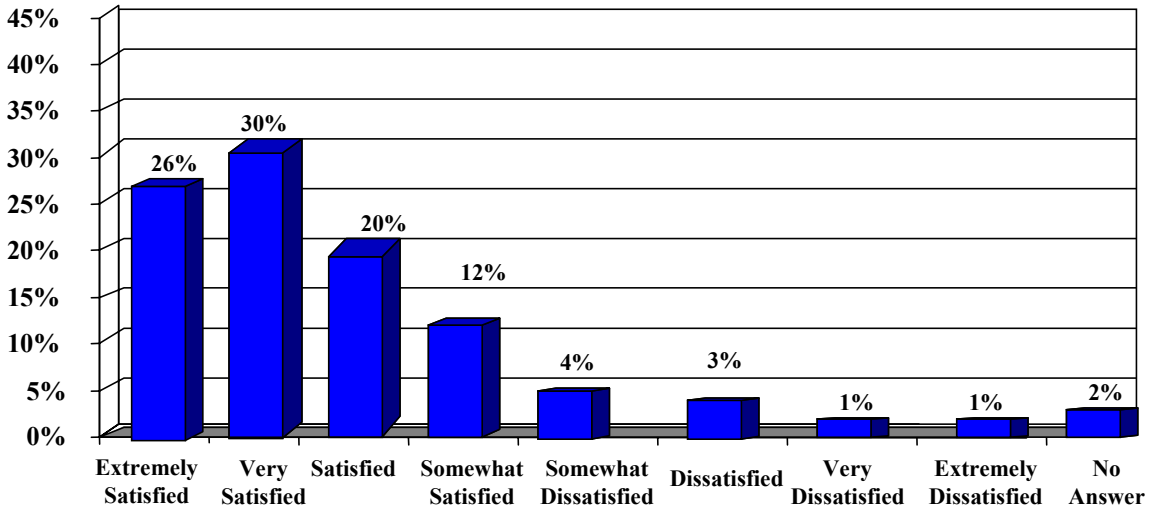
## GRAPH #2 NFP RESPONDENTS' COMMUNICATION WITH HUSBAND

The increased level of communication between spouses is without a doubt the fundamental ingredient that contributes to the success of any marriage. Through this sharing/bonding, both husband and wife accept mutual responsibility for either bringing life into the world or postponing pregnancy every cycle. It is not surprising, therefore, that the divorce rate among couples following NFP is so dramatically low.

Conversely, couples who use artificial methods of birth control, or have sterilized themselves, do not seem to experience this level of intimate communication. They appear to have made their love lifeless through unrestrained availability resulting in feelings of "being used", and "not being loved", while they deprive each other of the miraculous gift of combined fertility. Fertility should not be considered a disease, but a truly wonderful gift that enables couples to become co-Creators with God in the conception of new life.

GRAPH #2

### NFP Respondents' Communication with Husband



GRAPH # 3 METHODS EVER USED BESIDES NFP

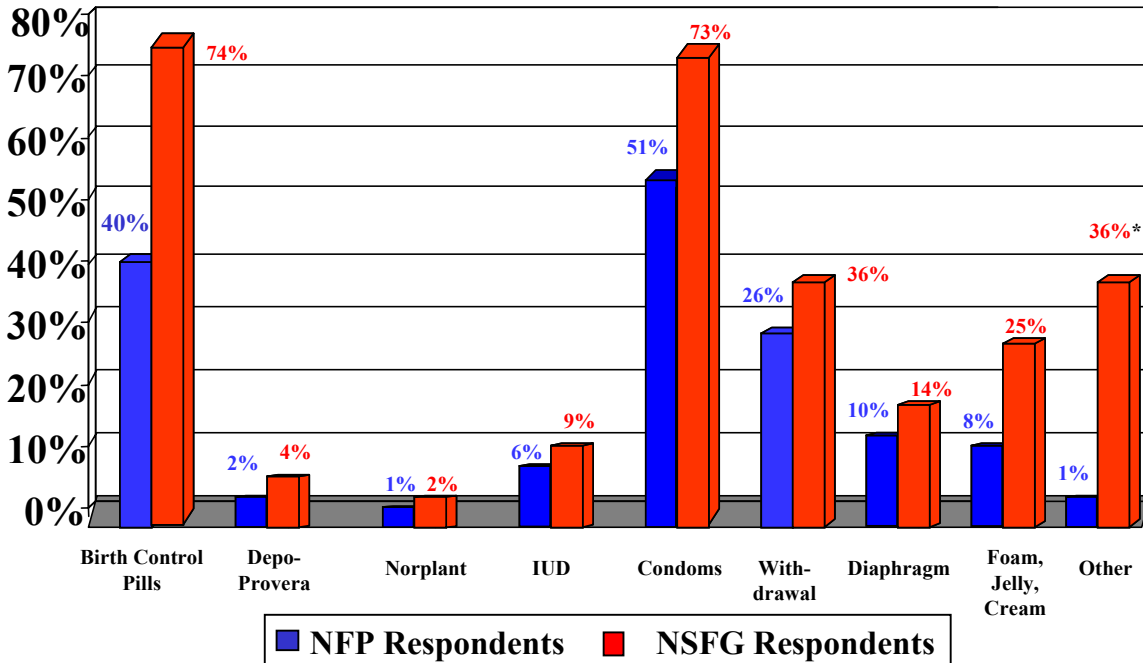
It is essential to note that even though 91% of couples surveyed were Catholic (6% were Protestant, 2% other religious denominations), many would assume that because of Catholic religious beliefs, widespread use of artificial birth control would not be prevalent in this group, anymore than abortion. However, the results reflect that Catholics, as well as non-Catholics, used some method of artificial birth control during their reproductive years. It is significant to note, however, that the percentage of use of artificial methods among Catholics is lower than those from government respondents.

The survey revealed that when NFP couples were asked why they wanted to choose NFP, the overwhelming response (87%) was “for moral, religious and ethical reasons”. If Catholic couples had been taught the benefits of discipline and self control as the ideal virtue in marriage, together with NFP during their marriage preparation, (including the serious side effects, and abortifacient effect of most artificial methods), they most likely would have chosen to respect and follow the natural law. Instead, most couples tend to experiment with artificial birth control. It is unfortunate that the widespread teaching of NFP as mandated in *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortium* and *Evangelium Vitae*, has not occurred. The consequence of this omission has resulted in serious moral, spiritual, and physical harm to the marriage. Needless to say, couples in general (Catholics and non-Catholics alike) if offered the choice and taught the truth, would select the authentic alternative, as Pope John Paul II correctly calls NFP. Our thirty years experience confirms this rationale as evidenced by our interaction with couples worldwide.

The success rate of any method of family planning is measured by the continuation rate of the users. Worldwide statistics have confirmed that the Ovulation Method of Natural Family Planning has a much higher continuation rate when compared to any of the artificial methods of birth control, as reported in various medical journals.<sup>2</sup>

GRAPH #3

### Methods Ever Used Besides NFP

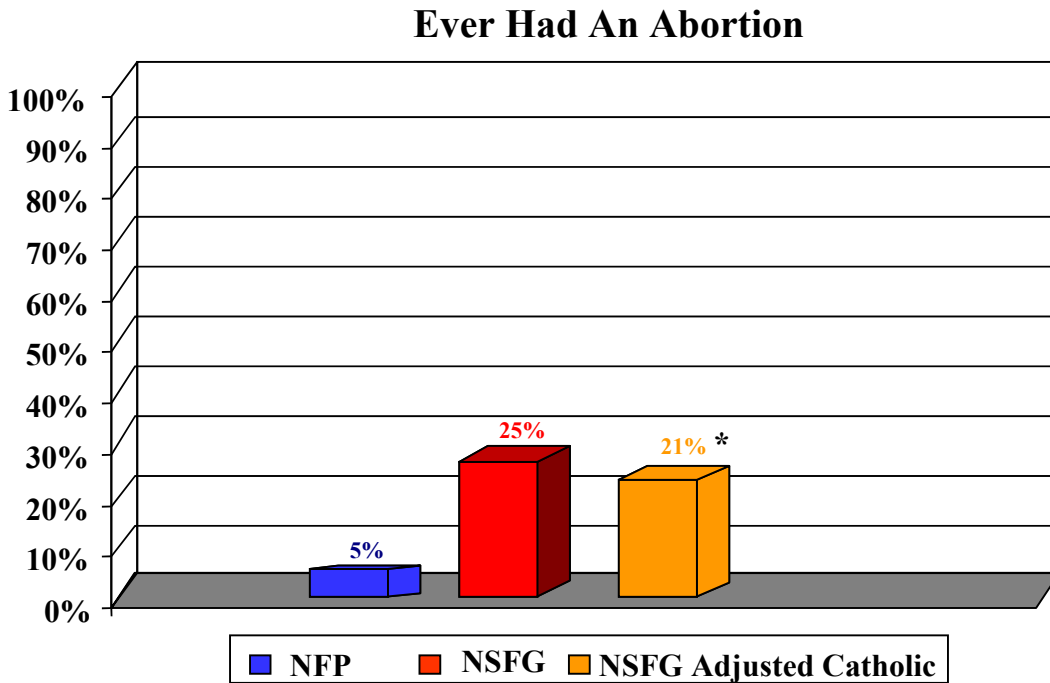


\*Other methods used by NSFG respondents include: Vasectomy 13%; Female condom 1%; Cervical cap 1%; Suppository 10%; Sponge 11%; Morning after Pill 1%

GRAPH #4 EVER HAD AN ABORTION

History has shown that when countries accept artificial birth control, they end up legalizing abortion. This graph shows a strong correlation between the widespread use and subsequent failure of artificial birth control, which often results in abortion. As reported in the government NSFG survey, when artificial birth control fails one in four women resorted to abortion. One in five Catholics in the (NSFG) survey had abortions, (only 4% lower than the non-Catholic government survey respondents). Among the NFP respondents, only one out of twenty had abortions, presumably before their introduction to NFP. Unfortunately, the NFP questionnaire did not ask the respondents whether the abortion occurred prior to practicing NFP. We presume that the abortions took place before their introduction to NFP, because it is well known that when artificial birth control methods fail, abortion often follows. NFP is not only very effective in postponing pregnancy, but it seems to lead the couple towards a much more religious and spiritual life. This inference is supported by the results in Graph #10 (Church Attendance) and Graph #11 (Frequency of Prayer). It also seems to lead the married couple into a more generous disposition towards life, as shown in Graph #9 (Number of Children) which reports a much higher number of children per couple.

GRAPH #4



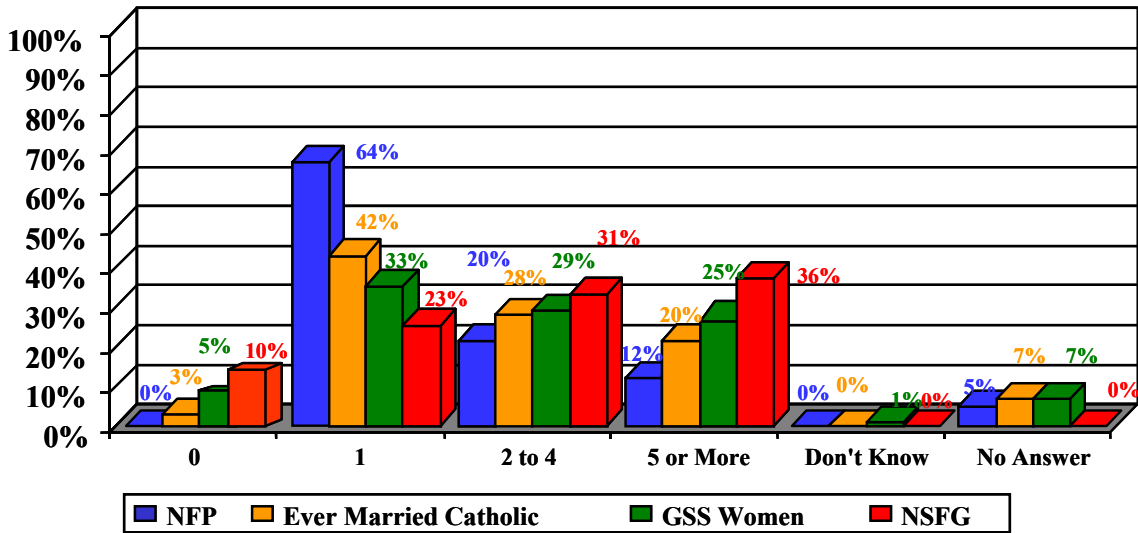
\* This figure comes from the NSFG Adjusted sample of Catholic women 21 to 44 years of age.

GRAPH #5 NUMBER OF MALE SEX PARTNERS

This graph gives further indication that the NFP group had a substantial percentage of licentious behavior presumably prior to their introduction to NFP, though similar to graphs #3 and #4. The NFP respondents were always less promiscuous, but by no means totally virtuous. Taking into account the similar trend that existed in the prior graphs, it seems logical to assume that the practice of NFP influenced their behavior towards a more virtuous life.

GRAPH #5

**Number of Male Sex Partners Since Age 18**

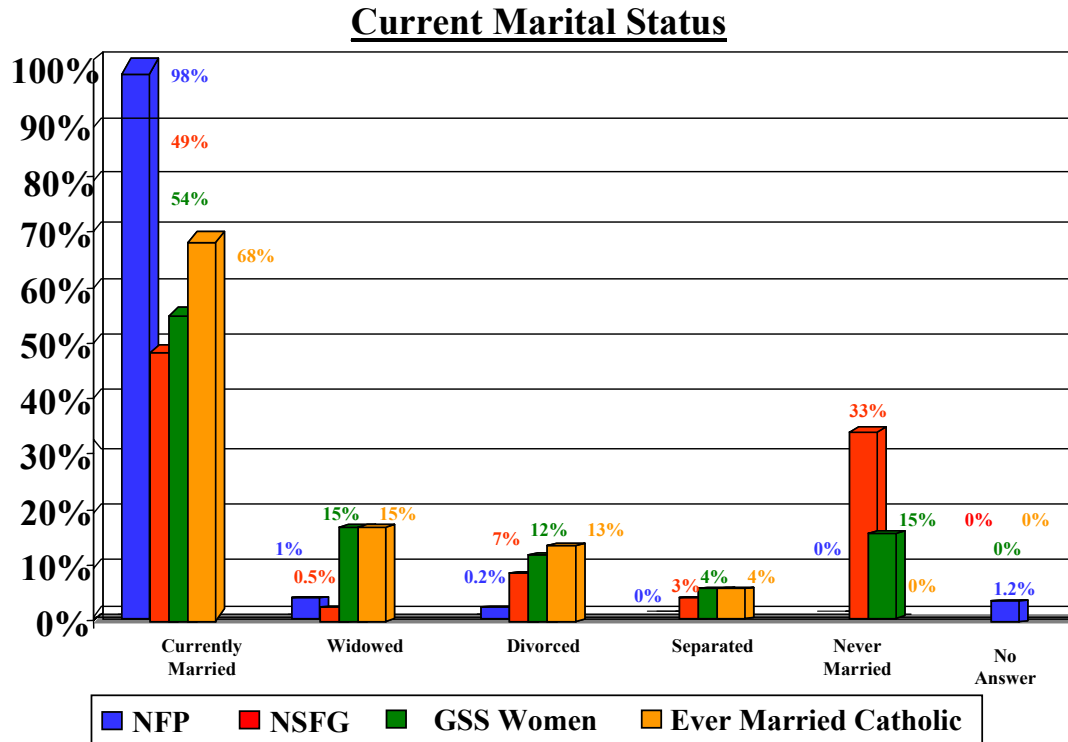


GRAPH #6 CURRENT MARITAL STATUS

At the time of the survey, 98% of the NFP respondents were married, while only 49% of the NSFG, 54% of GSS women, and 68% of ever-married Catholic women were currently married. Once again the NFP couples experienced marital stability and longevity, with only a 0.2% divorce rate, in contrast to the much higher percentage of the government studies. In the NFP survey couples enjoyed a higher level of education and income compared to the two government studies. It is well known that divorce causes the wife to drop into a lower income bracket, some mothers with children fall into the poverty level. This is an additional incentive as to the benefits of a permanent union.



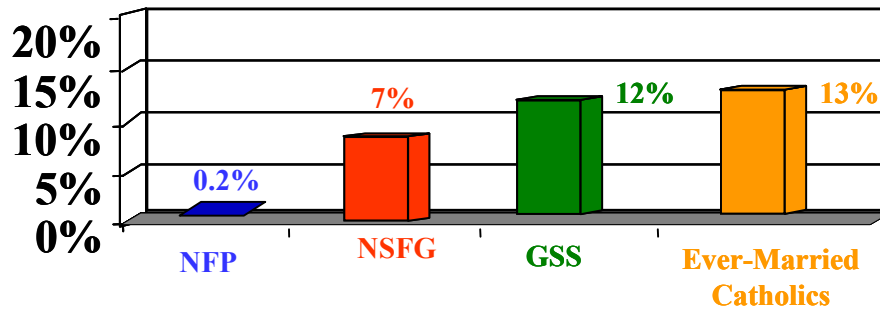
GRAPH #6



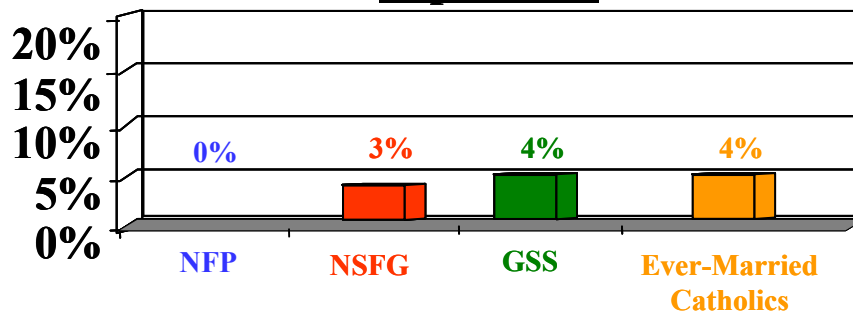
GRAPH #7 COMPARISON OF NFP COUPLES WITH DIVORCED, SEPARATED AND CURRENTLY COHABITATING COUPLES

This graph with its three components demonstrates once again the value of respecting the natural law through the use of NFP, as it compares those who have not been given this enrichment. Their lives continue in a state of instability as they move from marriage to separation, divorce and cohabitation, without ever experiencing permanence in the vocation they originally chose. Once again, if we compare ever-married Catholics in the government study to the NFP couples, we observe a striking difference in the divorce rate of 13% to 0.2%. In the separation rate, the ever-married Catholics had a 4% rate and the NFP couples none. In the currently cohabitating comparison, ever married Catholics have a 2% rate and the NFP couples had 0.4%.

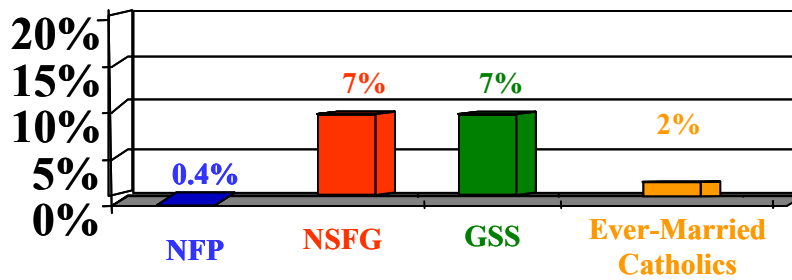
### Divorced



### Separated



### Currently Cohabiting

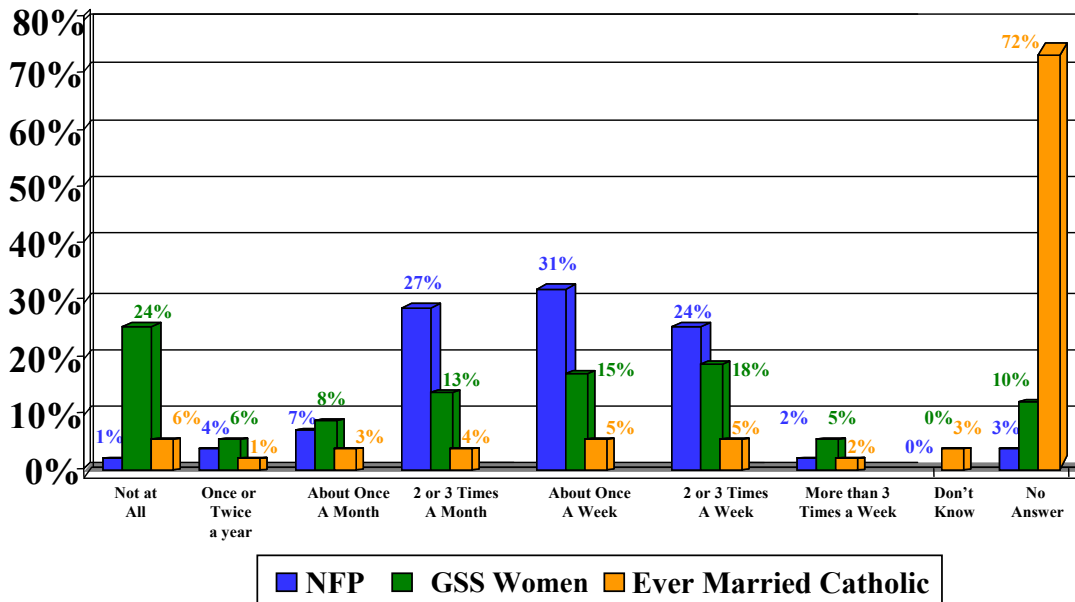


GRAPH #8 FREQUENCY OF SEX DURING LAST YEAR

Despite periods of sexual abstinence as required by the practice of NFP, the NFP respondents have sexual relations far more often than the government GSS and the GSS ever married Catholics who answered the question. This denotes that the practice of abstinence, necessary when following the natural law, enhances the loving relationship between the married couple, as they are respecting their bodies as the temples of the Holy Spirit. In return, the Holy Spirit is blessing their marriage, and the frequency of their intimacy leads to a deepening love for each other, hence, the low divorce rate among NFP couples.

GRAPH #8

**Frequency of Sex During Last Year**



## GRAPH #9 NUMBER OF CHILDREN

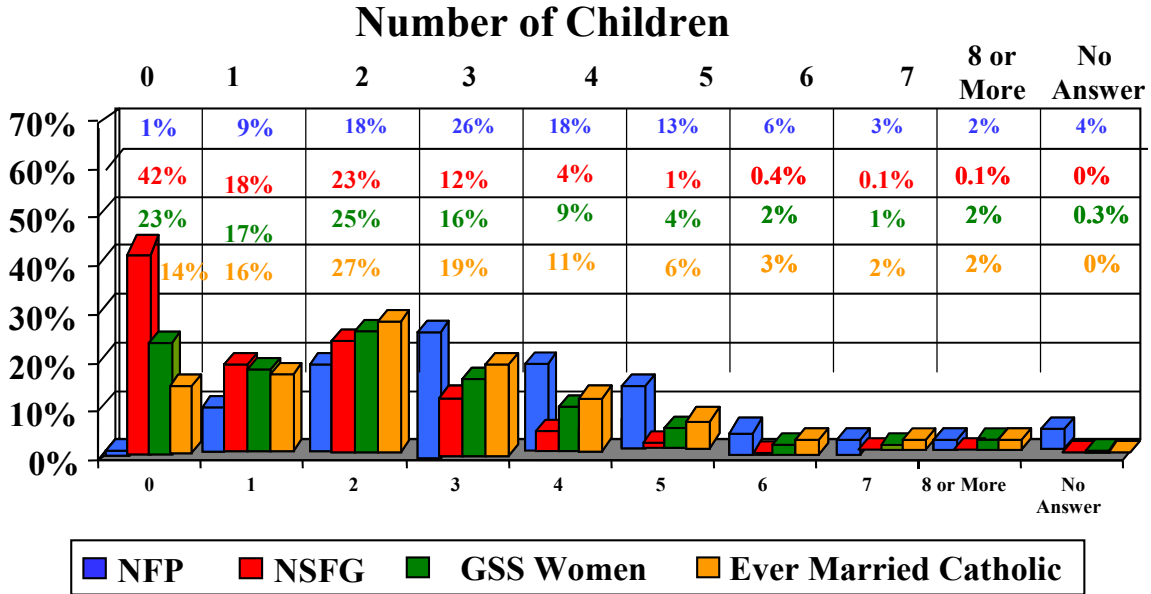
The category with the largest percentage of children per couple is the NFP group with 3 children. The category for the government GSS respondents and GSS ever married Catholics is 2 children and for the NSFG respondents is 0 children. 18% of NFP respondents have had 4 children, compared to 11% of GSS ever married Catholic, 9% of GSS women and 4% of NSFG respondents. 2% of NFP respondents, GSS women and GSS ever-married Catholic women have had 8 or more children, while the NSFG group had 0.1%.

Sometimes it is feared that couples will use NFP, for the same reasons that couples use artificial methods of birth control, i.e., for selfish and/or materialistic reasons. This graph dispels such a fear as couples that practice NFP have many more children than those couples who practice artificial birth control. Mother Teresa often said, “Natural Family Planning is nothing more than self control out of love for each other”<sup>3</sup>. Equally significant are the words of His Holiness Pope John Paul II.<sup>4</sup>

“Natural family planning, in fact, does not have a merely technical character, but *always implies an essential moral dimension*. Therefore, it is not simply a question of acquiring scientific knowledge about sexual physiology and the methods for diagnosing female fertility. Above all, it is a question of *understanding the truth about human love in God’s plan* and of growing in sensitivity to the moral values involved in it. Thus, the increasingly accurate knowledge of the cycles of female fertility finds its appropriate horizon and the condition for its morally permissible use *in the context of conjugal chastity*, understood as a virtue of genuine marital love.”

“The so-called ‘natural methods’ are actually ways of diagnosing the woman’s fertile periods, which offer the possibility of abstaining from sexual relations when justifiable reasons of responsibility require that one avoid conception. In this case, husband and wife alter their sexual conduct through abstinence. The dynamics of self-giving and acceptance of the other person, which are proper to the conjugal act, are not denied.”

GRAPH #9

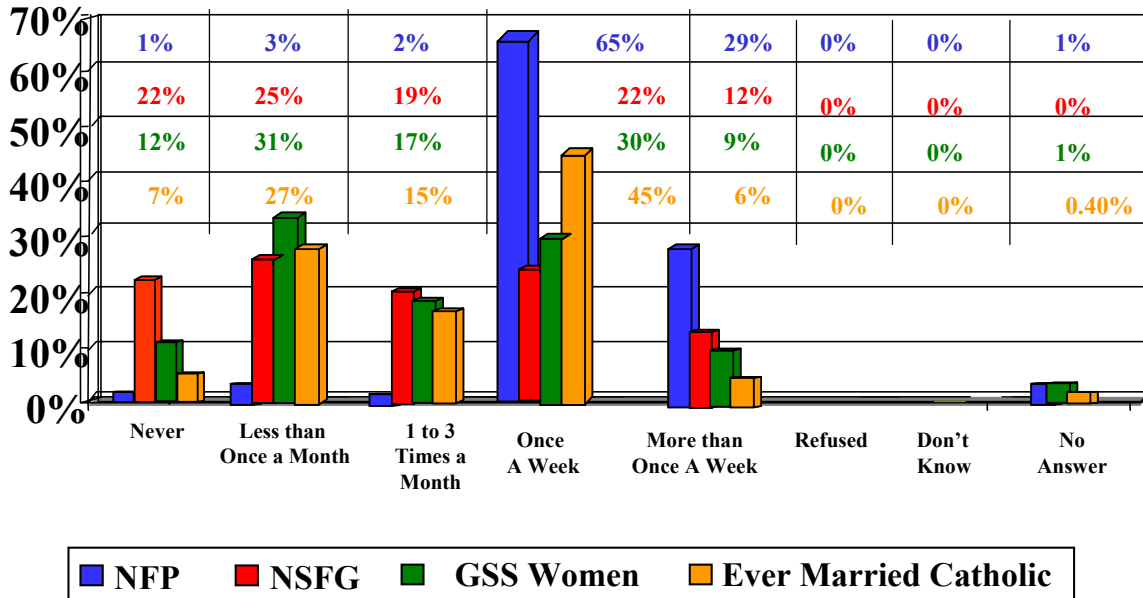


GRAPH #10 CHURCH ATTENDANCE

NFP respondents attend Church more often, incorporate prayer more in their daily lives and rely strongly on the teachings of the Catholic Church, the Bible and Almighty God. It stands to reason that married couples that are in harmony with the natural law, would share a deeper intimacy with God and acknowledge the importance of frequent attendance at Church to increase their spiritual gifts. Even though we failed to ask whether promiscuous behavior occurred prior to their introduction to NFP, we can conclude that this is probably a valid assumption, as evidenced by their replies. When NFP couples were asked what advice they would give to a young man or woman regarding ways of life, 92% recommended that they marry and not live together before marriage. In contrast, only 10% of GSS women and 7% of ever-married Catholic women thought that they should marry and not live together before marriage.

Graph #10

### Church Attendance

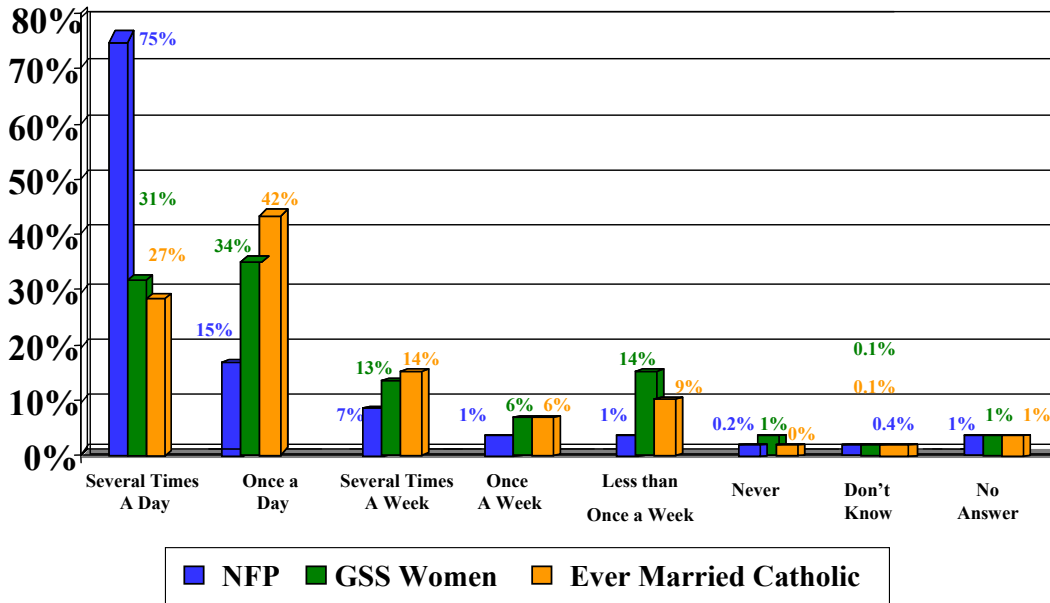


GRAPH #11 FREQUENCY OF PRAYER

The frequency of daily prayer is dramatically higher for couples that practice natural family planning, as compared to those in the government surveys. Also important to mention is that even among the ever-married Catholics, the frequency of prayer is much higher among the NFP couples. This is significant when comparing groups of the same religious persuasion.

Graph #11

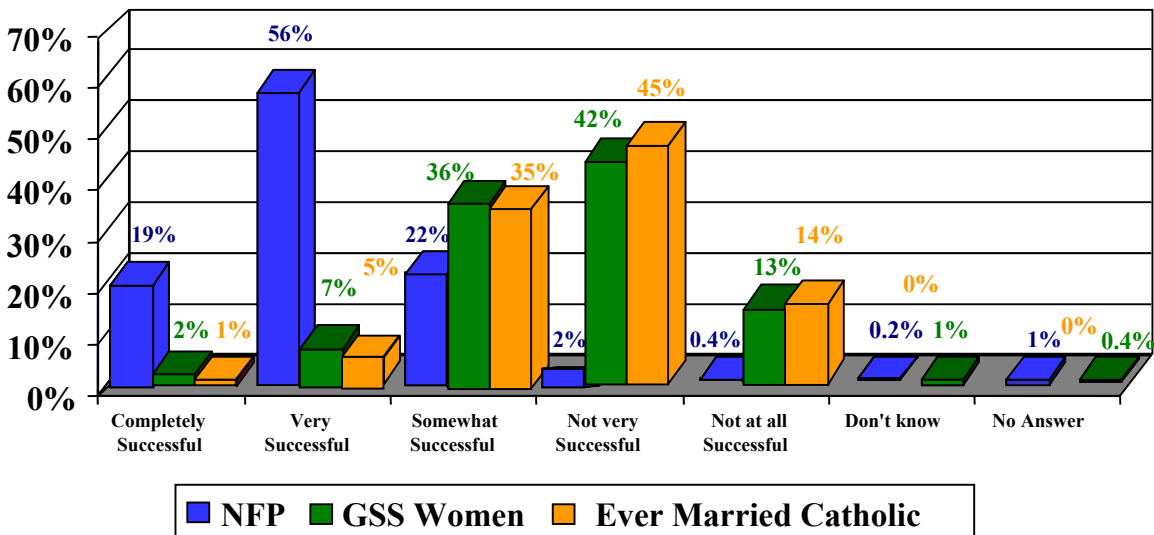
### Frequency of Prayer



GRAPH #12 SUCCESS IN FAMILY LIFE

A majority of NFP respondents think of themselves as completely or very successful (75%) in their family life. Conversely, only 9% of GSS women and 6% of ever-married Catholic women regard themselves as completely or very successful in family life.

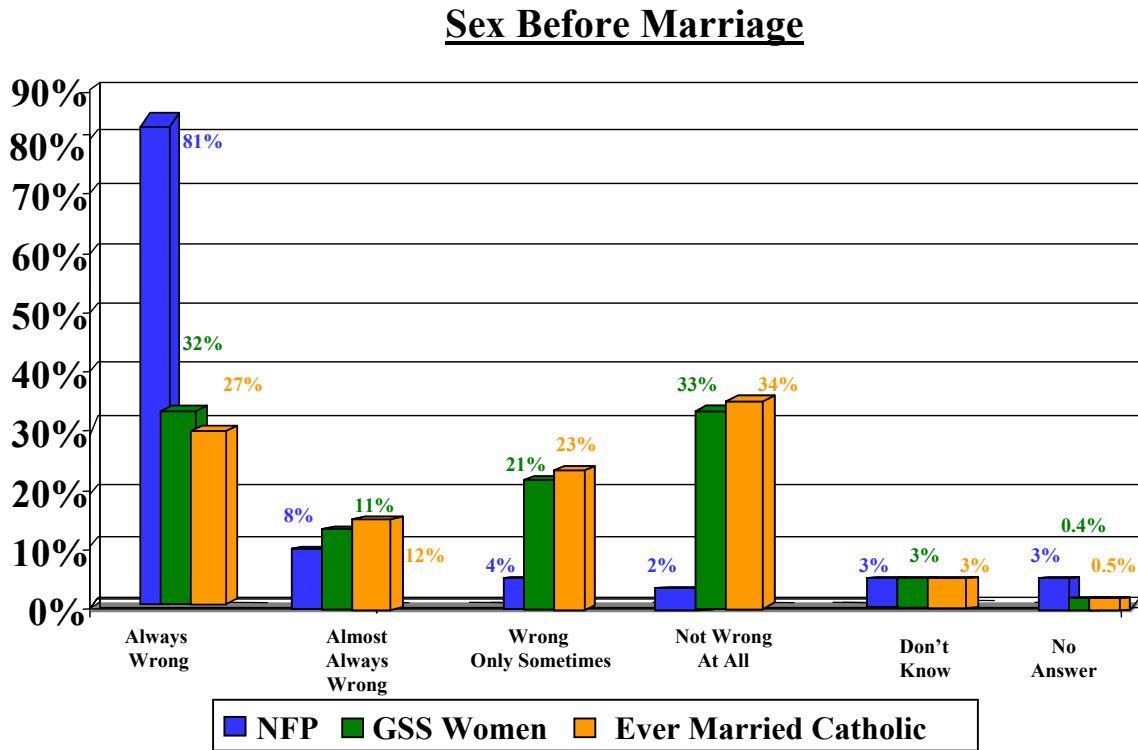
Graph #12 **SUCCESS IN FAMILY LIFE**



GRAPH #13 SEX BEFORE MARRIAGE

Even though 20% of NFP couples reported having 2 to 4 partners and 12% reported having 5 or more partners since age 18, NFP respondents are now significantly more opposed to sex before marriage than the other two government study groups.

Graph #13



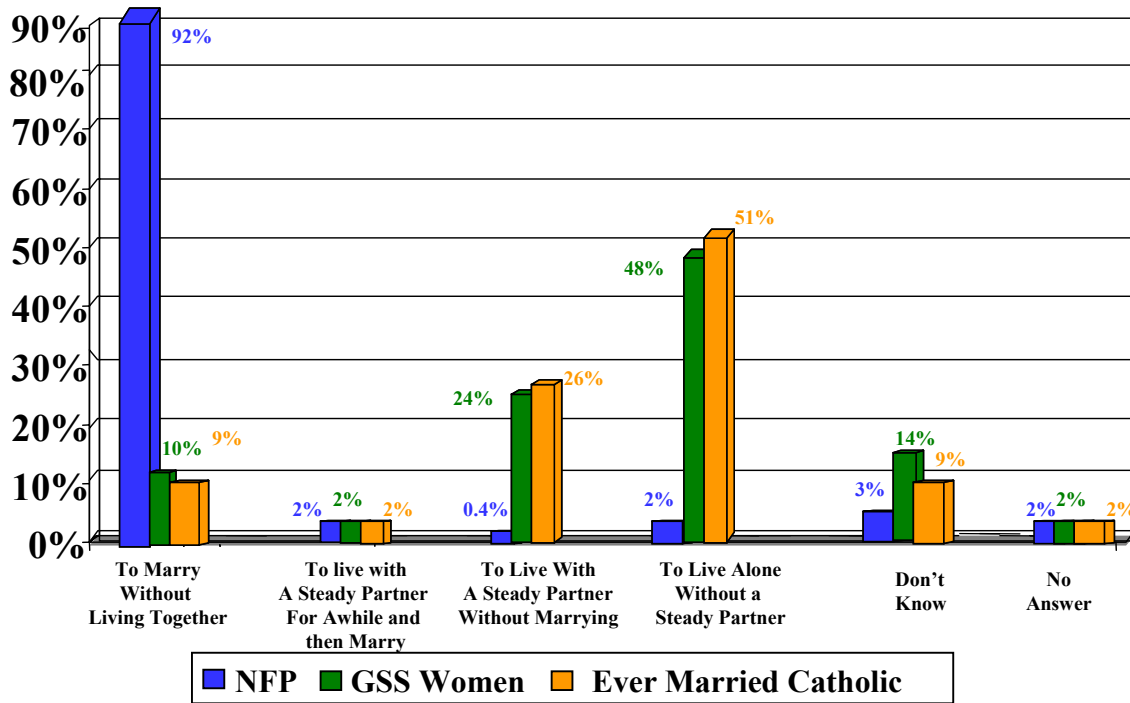
GRAPH # 14 ADVICE TO A YOUNG MAN/WOMAN REGARDING WAYS OF LIFE

There is little difference, for all three groups, regarding the kinds of advice they would give a young man versus a young woman. The overwhelming majority of NFP respondents (92%) believe in marrying without living together first, compared to only 10% of GSS women and 7 % of GSS Ever Married Catholics.

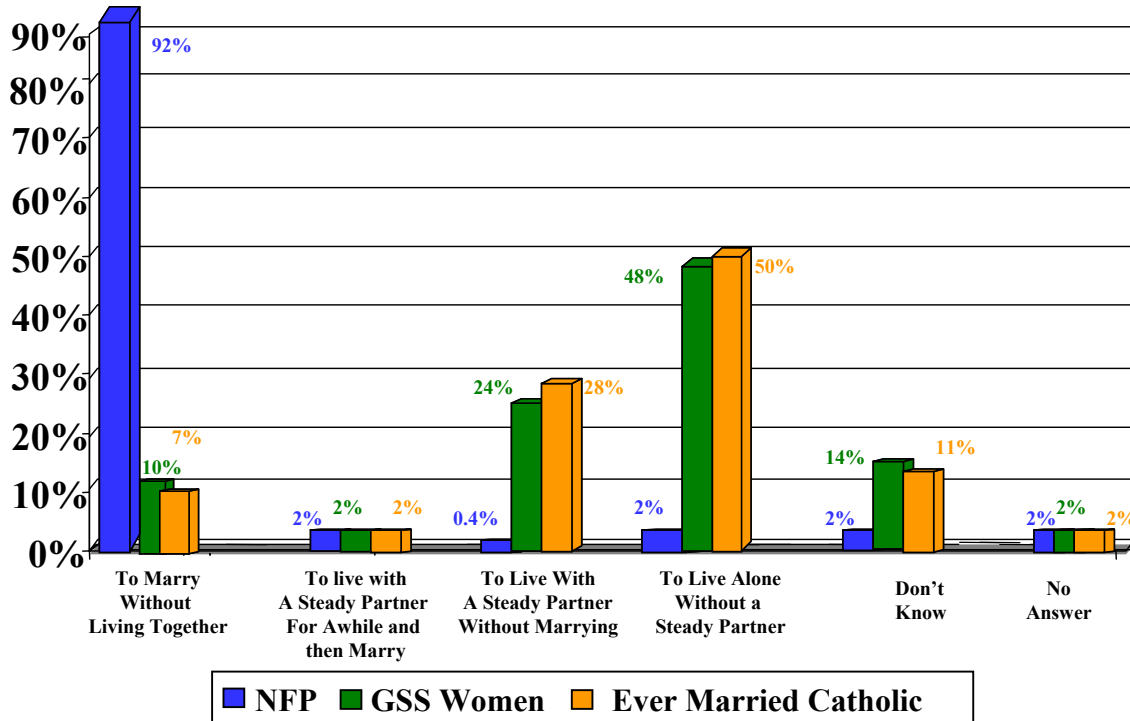


Graph #14

**Advice to a Young Man Regarding Ways of Life**



**Advice to a Young Woman Regarding Ways of Life**



## **ADJUSTED TABULATIONS**

The tabulations presented here are adjusted so that the NSFG sample and the NFP sample are more directly comparable to each other. It is useful to use some kind of adjustment procedure because the NFP sample consists almost entirely of married Catholics who range in age from 21 to 66 years old, while the NSFG sample consists of women of all faiths including those who have never been married, and who range in age from 15 to 44 years old. These factors – religious affiliation, age, ever married or not – may play a role in accounting for the results obtained thus far.

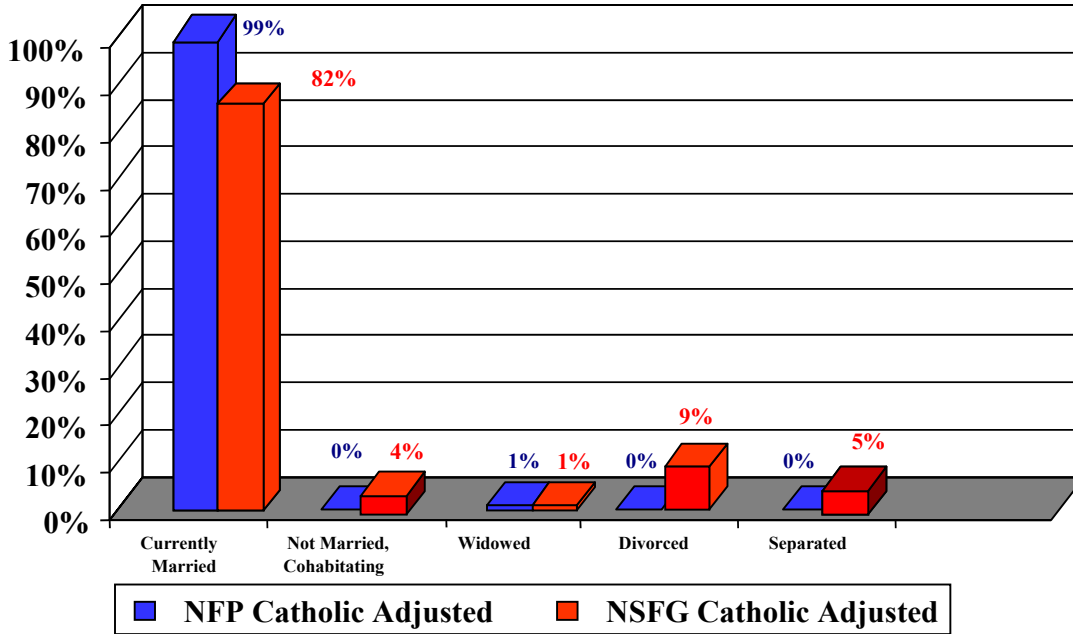
Therefore, all the upcoming results from the NSFG are only from those respondents who are Catholic, who have been married at some time in their lives (including those who are currently married), and who range in age from 21 to 44 years old. Similarly, all the upcoming results from the NFP survey are only from those respondents who are Catholic, who have been married at some time in their lives, (including those who are currently married), and who range in age from 21 to 44 years old. These results are referred to as “adjusted tabulations”. The main objective for conducting this study is that those who use NFP are less likely to be divorced than those who do not. The following two tables provide support for this presupposition.

### Graph #15 (ADJUSTED) CATHOLIC WOMEN 21 TO 44 YEARS OF AGE CURRENT MARITAL STATUS

The NFP respondents are far more likely to be married than the Catholic NSFG respondents. They are also far less likely to be divorced, separated or cohabitating than the latter. Thus 18% of the NSFG Catholics of the purified sample are either divorced, separated or cohabitating as compared with 0% of the NFP respondents.

Graph #15

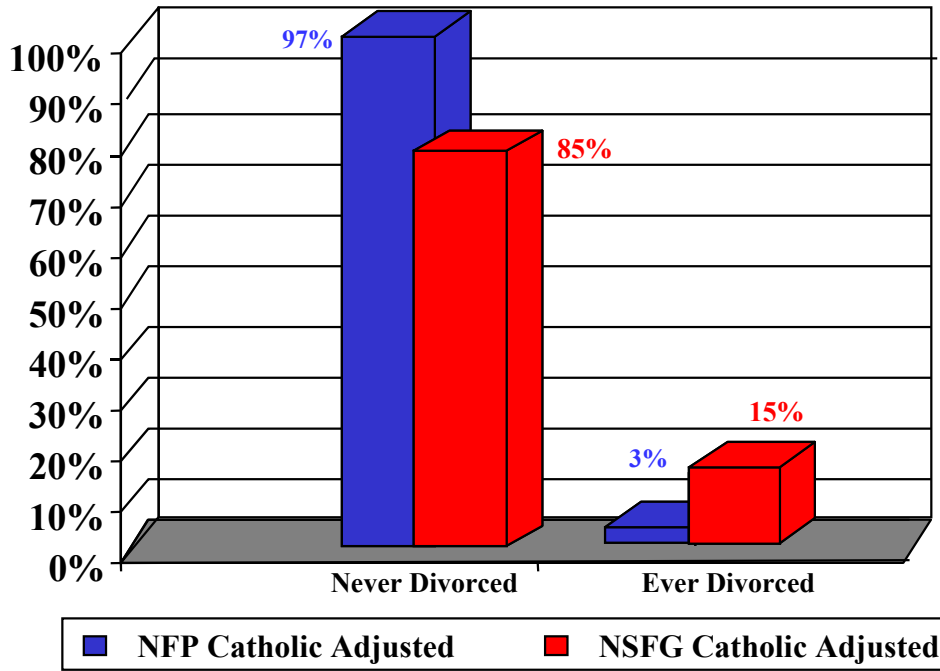
**[Adjusted; Women 21 – 44 years of Age]  
Current Marital Status**



GRAPH #16 (ADJUSTED) CATHOLIC WOMEN 21 TO 44 YEARS OF AGE  
PERCENTAGE EVER DIVORCED

These last two tables provide support to conclude that using NFP among Catholics is associated with family stability. Keep in mind that the reason the divorce rate among NFP couples increased from 0.2% to 3% in the adjusted tabulations is because the statistician is using a smaller number of couples in a concentrated age group. The divorce rate in the Catholic NSFG group increased from 7% to 15%. The NFP Catholics who have never divorced is 97%, while the NSFG Catholics is 85%.

### [Adjusted; Women 21 – 44 years of Age] Percentage Ever Divorced

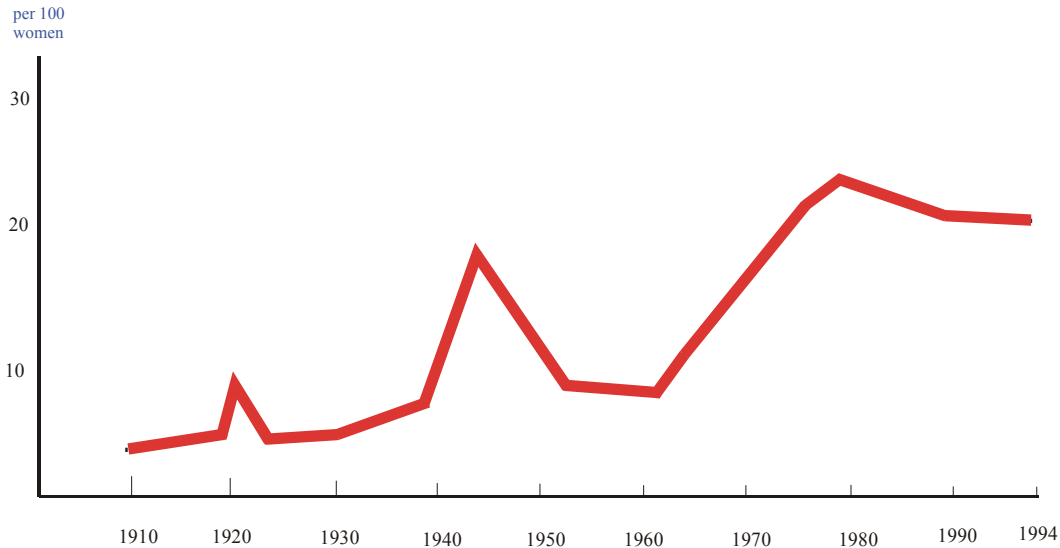


### GRAPH #17 U.S. DIVORCE RATE <sup>5</sup>

Pollster Lewis Harris has claimed that “the divorce rate 50% in the United States was an inflated number, due to the Census Bureau noting that during one year there 2.4 million marriages and 1.2 million divorces. Someone did the math without calculating the 54 million marriages already in existence” However, this graph shows how the divorce rate climbed after World War I and World II, but went back down each time. Yet in the mid-sixties, after the introduction of birth control, the rate climbed steadily for nearly 20 years and then leveled out.

Graph #17

## U.S. Divorce Rate (Among married women 15 and older)



### CONCLUSIONS

Despite the length of time since they took their NFP classes, the 505 respondents to the NFP survey are still likely to be practicing Natural Family Planning and have seldom drifted into using other forms of artificial birth control.

We can conclude then that the continuous violation of the natural law has serious consequences. Robert T. Michael attributed the rise in the divorce rate to the increased use of artificial birth control.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the former U.S. Secretary of Education, William Bennett, reported a 400% increase in the divorce rate from the 1960's to the 1990's.<sup>7</sup>

The increased use artificial birth control, sterilization and abortion has contributed to the present moral crisis in the Western World. This plight is soon to become more common worldwide as the liberal governments of the Western nations continue to impose programs that are contrary to the natural law upon the poor nations of the world. These nations are striving to survive and are forced to concede to programs that are in violation of their traditional moral values. Hence the importance of making known the positive results and effects of Natural Family Planning to the basic unit of society – the family.

Pope John Paul II says: “Everything passes by way of the family”. Therefore, the most important foundation of society to keep safe and healthy, physically, morally and spiritually, is the family. If the family is suffering physical, mental and spiritual degradation, society is placed in grave peril as has repeatedly been the case in past civilizations. When unprincipled societies are the powerful ruling forces, as it is happening in today's world, the whole of humanity is endangered. Modern technology today can extend the forces of evil throughout the world at an alarming rate. It is our

duty and responsibility, therefore, to do likewise and broadcast this good news to all men and women of good will.

I will close with a prayer from Mother Teresa who would be so proud of the results of this effort, as she always enthusiastically supported our work. She was so instrumental with her Sisters in successfully teaching the Ovulation Method of Natural Family Planning to her poorest of the poor in Calcutta and other parts of the world.

*THE FRUIT OF SILENCE IS PRAYER  
THE FRUIT OF PRAYER IS FAITH  
THE FRUIT OF FAITH IS LOVE  
THE FRUIT OF LOVE IS SERVICE  
THE FRUIT OF SERVICE IS PEACE  
Mother Teresa, M.C.*

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Billings, "The Billings Method Controlling fertility without drugs or devices" North American edition 2000.p. 215-217.

Mercedes Wilson, *Love and Family*, Ignatius Press, 1996. p. 250-255.

Mercedes Wilson, *Love and Fertility*, 1998, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Hatcher, Trussell, et. al. 1998, *Contraceptive Technology*, pp. 408, 514, 470 & 471.

Evelyn Billings, "The Billings Method Controlling fertility without drugs or devices" North American edition 2000.p. 79

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Mercedes Wilson, *Love and Family*, Ignatius Press, 1996, p. 254-255.

Mercedes Wilson, *Love and Fertility*, Family of the Americas, 1998, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. p. 72,

<sup>3</sup> Mother Teresa, First International Congress for the Family; Guatemala, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Pope John Paul II address to participants in training course on NFP, January 10, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> National Center for Health Statistics Report on Divorce Statistics, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Robert T. Michael, "Why did the U.S. Divorce Rate Double within a Decade"? *Research in Population Economics* Vol. 6 pp. 367-399, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> William J. Bennett, "Quantifying Americas Decline", *Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 1993.