

2009 Family Planning Survey for Married Catholic Women of Reproductive Age



Diocese of Phoenix Metropolitan Area
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Introduction

The Family Planning Survey was a great success revealing a higher level of NFP awareness and usage among Mass attending Catholic women in the Diocese of Phoenix than what is popularly assumed to be true. Catholic women in the Diocese of Phoenix survey also reported a lower percentage of contraceptive usage than the overall population. And, NFP users who also consistently attend Mass are not only more open to children, but reported overwhelmingly that they believed that NFP has had a positive impact on their marriage.

Survey Rationale

Although polls in recent times continue to report that there exists no significant difference between Catholics and other Americans on questions involving contraception (<http://www.alternet.org/reproductivejustice/83448/>), many faithful in Phoenix, Arizona have asked what would result from such a poll in our own diocese, *among those who are faithful to Mass attendance*. It was hoped that our results would be somewhat more promising than the national averages, since the Diocese of Phoenix has had Natural Family Planning classes available since 1974, and the Diocese has required NFP introductory courses as part of its marriage preparation policy since 1998. Nationwide, various studies show that the vast majority of married women are using some form of birth control, reported in 2002 to be 98% of sexually active women of reproductive age (<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/ad/ad350.pdf>).

In light of these generally accepted statistics, our survey sought an answer to the following question: Are *practicing* Catholics in the Diocese of Phoenix -- i.e., those who attend Mass on most Sundays and on most holy days of obligation -- *more likely* to use NFP than national polls would indicate?

Through its Office of Marriage and Respect Life, the Diocese of Phoenix has been working steadily to improve the effectiveness of our marriage preparation policy and has introduced significant changes that will begin in 2010. As we prepared for these comprehensive changes (called Covenant of Love), the Office of Natural Family Planning decided to conduct a simple survey. We wanted to assess the actual knowledge and practice of natural birth regulation as compared to the use of contraception and sterilization among those faithful who attend Sunday Mass in our diocese. This anonymous survey was conducted with the utmost sensitivity of women

parishioners, both for those who responded on paper while in church, and for those who answered online.

We hope the results of this baseline assessment will help us to respond more effectively to the needs in our own diocese through increased promotion of the natural methods of birth regulation. It will also give us the ability to periodically assess the success of our marriage preparation programs.

Methodology

A non-random sample of convenience of 23 questions was developed and vetted among the Advisory Committee of the Office of NFP. The 2009 Family Planning Survey for Married Catholic Women of Reproductive Age in the Diocese of Phoenix Metropolitan Area was translated into Spanish and printed in a way that allowed for the most anonymity, by having the questions, in both languages, inside a pre-folded form. As can be inferred from the title of the survey, the questions were directed toward married Catholic women of reproductive age, commonly agreed upon to be between the ages of 18-45. The questions were divided into four sections entitled: Demographics, Religious Influence, Natural Family Planning, Contraception/Sterilization.

The survey was first distributed in the following manner: Five parishes were randomly selected from among 50 in the Metropolitan Phoenix area that had reported 10 or more marriages in the previous reporting year. This geographic area has had access to NFP education for many years, and it was felt that it was this availability to NFP education that was being assessed. Two Masses were selected at each parish, and pastors were asked to choose one Mass in Spanish and one in English if both languages were represented in their parish. On Sunday, May 17, 2009, the surveys were distributed at four Spanish Masses and at six English-speaking Masses. Women were given a survey in both English and Spanish and invited to complete it, in either English or Spanish either before, during, or after Mass.

To further expand the scope of the responses, the Office of Natural Family Planning also created an online survey that mirrored the survey in paper form. The same 50 Metropolitan Phoenix area parishes were made aware of the online survey and advertised the online version in their bulletins and in announcements. The survey was also advertised on the *Catholic Sun* website. The survey remained active online from May 20, 2009 to June 20, 2009. In addition, hard copies of the survey were mailed or hand delivered to each of those 50 parishes to be available as an alternate way to respond for women without access to the internet.

A total of 523 women responded to the online version and 395 women responded via paper survey. The research presented here focuses on a composite of all women who responded to the survey, either in paper form or online, for a total

respondent size of 918. The survey did not require the respondents to answer all of the questions, though most did.

All surveys and polls, online or otherwise, are susceptible to sampling error, error associated with survey wording, response bias, and other factors. As a result, we have opted to follow the lead of other national online studies of this population – such as Harris Interactive – and not include error estimates as they only are meaningful when used to describe surveys of random samples of a population with 100% response rates.

Target Population and Respondents (The Sample)

As planned for as the target population, the women who responded to this survey were more likely to be regular Mass attendees than the typical population of American Catholics. In fact, 72% said that they always attend Sunday and holy day Mass and an additional 23% said they usually do. As is generally known, this is not reflective of the average Catholic women of reproductive age in our country. National statistics show that somewhere between 26-35% of Catholics attend Mass regularly, with a higher percentage of those being women, and with the added finding that women are the most active members of the church laity. (<http://cara.georgetown.edu/bulletin/>)

The marriages of the respondents were overwhelmingly likely to be sacramental marriages, with 80% married in the Catholic Church and 42% having civil marriages. As the data indicates, many marriages had both a sacramental component and a civil component, likely reflecting the marriage laws of Mexico where both a civil marriage and a Church marriage is the norm. This is not surprising, as many parishioners of Phoenix churches are Mexican immigrants. Length of marriages ranged from 7% married less than one year, 16% married 1-5 years, 23% married 5-10 years, and 55% married 10 or more years (see Figure 1). The age range of surveyed women is spread fairly evenly among three of the age groups: 22% were between 25-31 years, 37% between 32-39 years, and 36% between 40-45 years (see Figure 2). A plurality of women (49%) had 1-2 children in their families, 39% had 3-4 children, 12% had no children, and 12% had 5 or more children (see Figure 3).

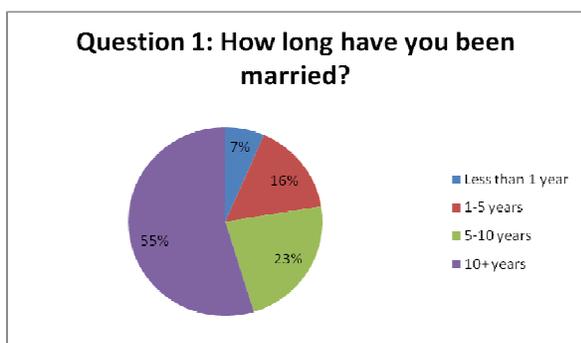


Figure 1

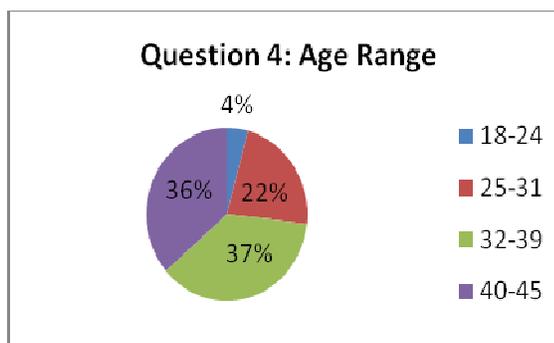


Figure 2

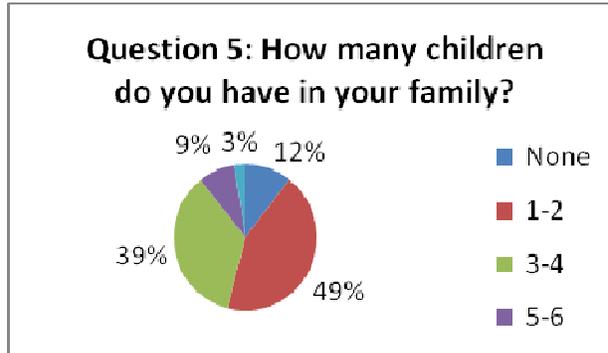


Figure 3

Results

Religious Influence on Knowledge/Usage of Natural Family Planning in Comparison to Contraceptive Usage/Sterilizations

In order to ascertain the relationship between religious influence and knowledge/usage of NFP compared to contraception use/sterilization, the respondents were asked if they attended Mass every Sunday and Holy Days of Obligation. They could answer *Yes*, *No*, or *Usually, but not always*. For the purposes of this survey, those who answered *Yes* and *Usually, but not always* were grouped together to get a picture of consistent, regular Mass attendance in comparison to non-consistent, irregular, Mass attendance.

All groups showed a high degree of ‘knowing’ about NFP, though it is evident that being a consistent Mass attendee is more closely correlated with taking NFP introductions and classes, and with the actual practice of NFP in their marriages. For married Catholic women in the Diocese of Phoenix, it was found that 68% of consistent Mass attendees vs. 47% of non-consistent Mass attendees had taken an NFP introduction, while 44% of consistent Mass attendees and only 20% of non-consistent attendees had taken the full series of NFP classes. It was also found that 67% of respondents who attend Mass consistently also had practiced NFP at some time in their marriages, while only 40% of non-consistent Mass attendees had ever practiced NFP.

Contraceptive usage and/or sterilizations among respondents were found to be generally lower than the national averages reported earlier. Overall, respondents who reported currently using contraceptives accounted for 41% of those surveyed. Additionally, 189 respondents (21%) acknowledged that they or their spouse had undergone a sterilization procedure, with most sterilizations taking place after five years of marriage and after the births of children (34% after 1-2 children born, and 50% after 3-4 children born).

Differences between consistent and non-consistent Mass attendees continued throughout the family planning questions asked in the survey, with 74% of regular Mass attendees reporting that they believed that NFP had a positive impact on their marriages. Only 53% of non-consistent Mass attendees reported this positive impact. Only 25% of consistent Mass attendees stated that they were currently using a form of contraception while 46% of non-consistent Mass attendees reported current contraceptive usage. Among those reporting a sterilization procedure done to either themselves or their spouses, 19% were consistent Mass attendees and 27% were among those who don't regularly attend Mass.

Foundational Texts for NFP Usage

Asked if they have ever read or studied *Humanae Vitae*, or the *Theology of the Body*, 29% of all respondents answered affirmatively. For those couples with consistent Mass attendance, this figure rose to 35%, while only 14% of non-consistent Mass attendees had read or studied these teachings (see Figure 4).

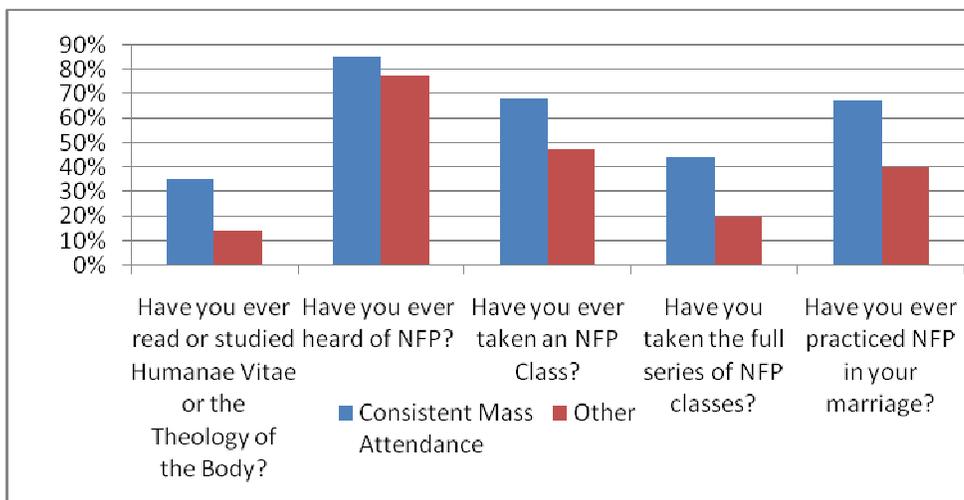


Figure 4

Natural Family Planning Users

One major area of difference between those who used Natural Family Planning instead of contraception is in openness to having more children. Those who use NFP were twice as likely to be more open to having more children (see Figure 5). It could be reasoned that those who are more open to children tend to be more open to using natural methods to regulate births. Or, it could be that once Church teaching is understood and the use of NFP is begun, hearts and minds are opened. As one woman who formerly used contraception and now uses NFP explained:

“Some people think we have a large family because NFP doesn’t work. Nothing could be further from the truth! We have a large family because the discovery of Church teaching and the understanding of NFP *have changed our hearts* and made us open to welcoming more children into our marriage.”

More in-depth survey work would be needed to discover the full reason for this difference in openness to more children.

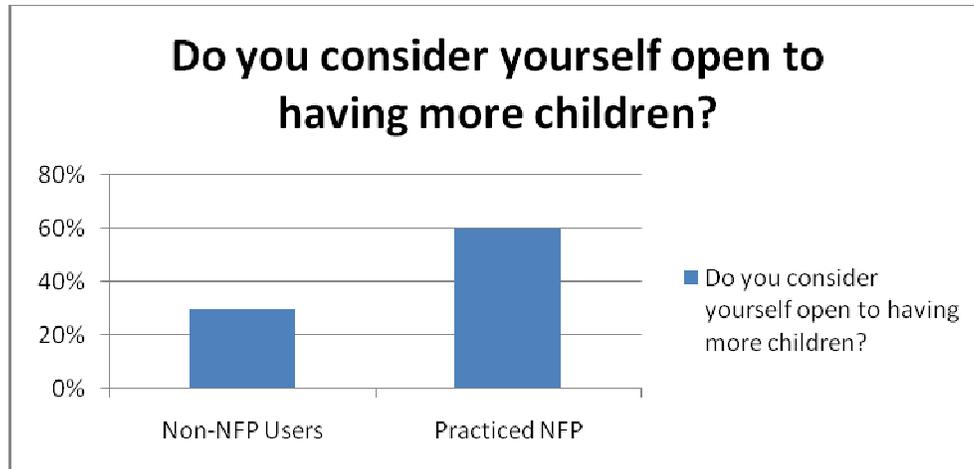


Figure 5

Another interesting finding: NFP-using women were asked if they ever also used contraceptives during the fertile time. A sizable majority (67%) did not, as Figure 6 shows.

NFP users as an overall group were also fairly satisfied with the level of NFP education that they had received: 48% stated they were very satisfied, 27% stated they were somewhat satisfied, 18% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and only 7% were dissatisfied with their NFP education. Satisfaction level rose with Mass attendance: 79% of regular Mass-goers were either very or somewhat satisfied with their NFP classes, while only 18% of non-consistent Mass attendees showed the same level of satisfaction. These two findings should be especially encouraging to the NFP educators in the Diocese of Phoenix, as it reflects not only on the level of education provided but also on the actual assimilation of the method after the instructive phase is completed.

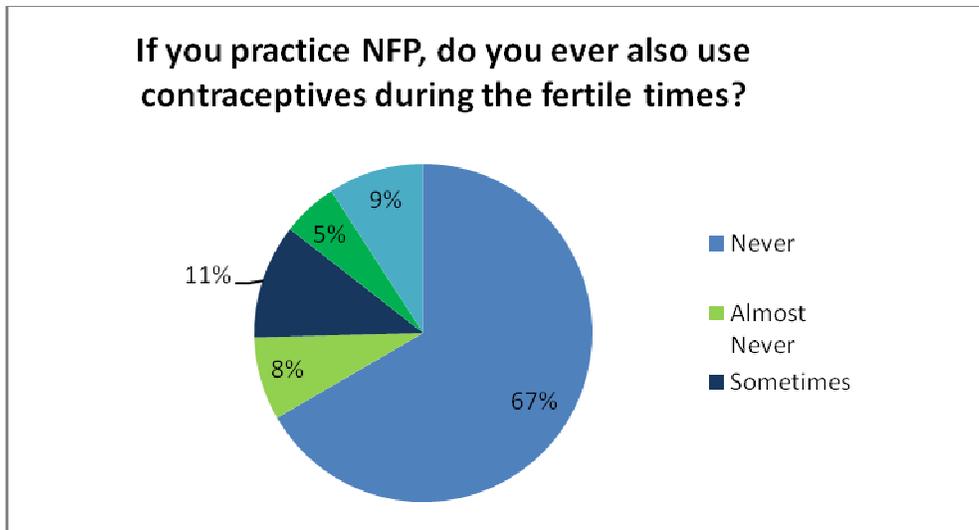


Figure 6

Conclusion

Natural Family Planning education has long been offered in the Diocese of Phoenix. Founded at St. Joseph’s Hospital in 1974, the nonprofit organization, Phoenix Natural Family Planning Center, offered introductions and a full series of classes in the sympto-thermal method throughout the Diocese until 2008. In July of 2008, the personnel of the founding nonprofit became the Office of Natural Family Planning of the Diocese of Phoenix. This change reflects the long association between the two organizations and the deepening commitment on the part of the Diocese of Phoenix to require full Natural Family Planning courses for engaged couples as a major part of the new marriage preparation policy, Covenant of Love.

This survey was undertaken to assess where church-going members of Diocese of Phoenix stand in relation to NFP vs. contraceptive use, providing a clearer picture of the culture in which we find ourselves as we begin this new initiative. We had hoped to find that NFP knowledge and usage by regular Mass-goers would be higher than the general population, and that finding has been confirmed. We can certainly thank all of those who worked long and hard to establish the Phoenix Natural Family Planning Center, and who worked tirelessly to train teachers, medical providers, priests, marriage prep lay leaders and couples. The mustard seed that they planted and tended is now a sturdy tree, providing shelter for our couples from the influences of popular culture.

It is hoped that another survey will be taken in approximately five years to re-assess the state of NFP vis a vis the new marriage preparation policy in the Diocese of Phoenix. When that happens, there will doubtless be more questions, as this survey was rudimentary and brief. It will be interesting to discover continuation rates of all family planning methods, to expand the survey to the entire diocese, and perhaps even

to assess effectiveness rates. Regardless of how the next survey is conducted, we will be able to use these results as a baseline assessment to respond more effectively to the needs in our own diocese through increased promotion of the natural methods of birth regulation, especially in areas of the diocese which have previously been underserved.

A final beneficial effect in bringing to light the findings of this survey is the very real encouragement that it provides for those who volunteer their considerable time and talent to provide NFP education in this diocese. These highly trained educators and promoters are not giving their services for any worldly reward, but for the joy of sharing the teachings of the Church which are a refuge from and an antidote to the culture's misuse of human sexuality. However, it is a wonderful gift to be able to share with them the actual responses of those surveyed and to see the impact that their teaching has had in promoting a Culture of Life in our diocese. They need not wait until their heavenly reward to hear the words of our Lord, "Well done, good and faithful servant." These findings are the first joyful whisperings of those words, which will one day loudly be proclaimed to each of them.