

Couple teaches Serena Natural Family Method as part of living out the sacrament of marriage

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

SASKATOON – For Elizabeth and James Couture, an important part of living out the sacrament of marriage in the world is sharing the good news about Natural Family Planning.

Married for 19 years, the Saskatoon couple has been teaching the Serena sympto-thermal method of Natural Family Planning (NFP) since 1994.



“We were always Serena users, and at that time we heard a quotation from Pope John Paul II, saying the church needs couples to make the methods of NFP better known,” said Elizabeth of the call to be a teacher couple. “It was something that was really on our hearts.”

Since responding to John Paul’s call 13 years ago, the Coutures have taught other couples the sympto-thermal Serena method founded in Quebec in 1955. Studies have shown a success rate of over 99 per cent in using Serena for planning or avoiding pregnancy, or in spacing the birth of children. It works in harmony with the women’s natural reproductive cycle and makes fertility a shared responsibility of husband and wife.

By observing and recording natural signs of fertility that occur in a woman’s body, couples using Serena identify fertile and infertile phases of the menstrual cycle. This information empowers the couple to freely choose to engage in or to abstain from intercourse during the fertile time, depending on their decision to achieve or avoid conception.

In the process, Natural Family Planning enhances the communication between a couple, often strengthening the marriage relationship and the couple’s intimacy, said James. “Every month Natural Family Planning requires you to enter into this very deep dialogue. When other things come up in the relationship, you then have these very deep communication skills in place.”

In their own marriage, NFP has enhanced and strengthened the respect that they feel for each other, said Elizabeth. “Because James is very much aware of my cycle and my fertility, I feel that he has a deep respect towards me, and I think that has improved our marriage,” she said. “I have never felt used. Even from a natural or holistic health point of view, it’s been wonderful for me to be totally chemically free, because we are not using any kind of chemical contraception.”

Many couples are seeking that healthy alternative, noted James. “We’re at a time where people are gaining a greater ecological sense. There’s a real impetus to finding an alternative to chemical interference.” More women are questioning the long-term effect of artificial contraception, particularly with girls now being placed on the birth control pill at a younger and younger age, he added.

Often couples who are having trouble conceiving a child will also come to Serena to learn more about their fertility cycle in the hope of achieving a pregnancy. “In the medical community there’s a sense that NFP can help you get pregnant,” James noted.

A similar confidence in NFP as a method of avoiding pregnancy is sometimes lacking, he admitted. “The discipline to take a pill every day and go to the doctor every few months is different than the discipline of charting a woman’s signs every day, and dialoguing as a couple and making a decision as to whether to abstain or not. But we firmly believe that Natural Family Planning is a discipline well worth developing, given all the blessings and benefits that come from it,” James said.

For James and Elizabeth, those benefits have included spiritual growth and graces.

“It does a wonderful job of creating a beautiful appreciation that we as sexual persons are not just about the pleasure of the marital act, but also the gift of life that comes from that act,” said James. “That all becomes part of our dialogue as a couple, and it challenges us to take an honest look at where we are and where we’re at -- whether mentally or emotionally or financially – and then we must make some decisions as to how God is calling us to live that out. We have always chosen to accompany that dialogue with prayer.”

In his theology of the body, Pope John Paul II talked about Christ as the spouse to his bride the Church, said James. “Part of that requires sacrifice on Christ’s part. We can make that incredibly deep connection with Christ by sharing in that experience of sacrifice within our marriage relationship, especially from the husband for the wife,” he said.

Many Christian denominations today talk about making Christ the Lord of all aspects of our lives, he added. “Natural Family Planning really challenges couples to say ‘okay, you are truly Lord over everything in my life’,” he said, whether that be entertainment, finances or sexuality. “Christ enters the bedroom with us, and is there with us, because marriage is a covenant, and that mean’s it’s wrapped in Jesus Christ and in the Trinity.”

Throughout scripture, the purpose of every covenant is to give life, James noted, stressing that marriage is a covenant. “As a society, too often we have embraced death ... that can be seen in abortion, or in the abortive action of many contraceptives on the market today, and also in the death of holiness.”

Marriage itself is a call to grow in holiness, said Elizabeth. “I think Jesus wants all of us to have the most beautiful marriage that’s possible. He’s calling everyone to holiness wherever they are in their faith walk.”

Understanding the beauty of fertility and the wonder of the woman’s cycle is a powerful way to encounter God, added Elizabeth. “I’ve often found a kinship with Mary and her *Fiat*, because you realize how incredible it is to say yes to another life,” she said.

The parents of seven daughters and two sons, James and Elizabeth said that with each child they were very conscious and aware of their cooperation with God in bringing new life to the world. “In our situation, we were always wanting a large family, so it was wonderful to use Serena many times to achieve a pregnancy and to space our children out,” said Elizabeth.

Involvement in Serena as a teacher couple and as board members has been a large commitment for the Coutures. The busiest season is the spring, with couples preparing for marriage and calls from marriage preparation teams asking for someone to speak about Natural Family Planning. As a Serena teaching couple they also provide ongoing support and follow-up sessions for the couples who come for training in the NFP method.

Right now there are three teacher couples in Saskatoon, and several others in centres across the province, including Regina, Humboldt, Prince Albert and North Battleford. Several couples are undergoing training to become teacher couples.

The Coutures recently returned from the national meeting of Serena Canada in Ottawa, where they presented information about a new correspondence course for teacher trainers presently being developed in Saskatchewan. It will provide needed flexibility for couples willing to become instructors of the method, but who can’t always attend scheduled training sessions, said Elizabeth.

The correspondence course will include talks on audio CD, along with written material from the training manual, which couples work through on their own time frame, paired with a senior teacher couple, who will act as mentors for the process, explained James, adding that more instructors are always welcome and needed. Board members and volunteers also assist in many other areas, including fundraising and presentations.

Anyone interested in learning more about Natural Family Planning can contact Serena Saskatchewan at 1-800-667-1NFP.