

# IN THE TRENCHES

Father Matthew Habiger's fight to promote Natural Family Planning

*Article by Dan Madden | Photos by JD Benning*

Father Matthew Habiger understands why so many people turn a deaf ear to him.

"If something is nonsensical to you and it requires self-discipline, why bother," he says matter-of-factly. "We have the technology, why not use it?"

He notes that 85 percent of Catholics of child-bearing age are using contraception. Of those Catholics, 40 percent have chosen sterilization. When they hear Natural Family Planning they often think of the antiquated and faulty "Rhythm Method," he admits.

Father Matthew is bringing his experience and connections from 10 years with Natural Family Planning Outreach to a National Summer Institute co-sponsored by NFPO and Benedictine College July 11-16 on the B.C. campus. Father Matthew says the central question to the institute is: "How do you retrieve something we've lost: God's plan for marriage, spousal love and family?"

Father Matthew and his counterparts in the Natural Family Planning movement directly link this use to the 50 percent divorce rate among those same Catholics. "It is corrosive to the marriage bond," he says. "Contraception destroys the natural connection between love and life. The marital act has profound meaning. It means that the man and woman intend to make the total personal gift of self to the other."

There are many people sitting on the fence, he says. "They know what the Church teaches, but they don't know why. They know the dos and don'ts but they don't know the whys. We are appealing to anyone who brings an open mind and a good heart."

The institute, while open to the public, is focused on three primary groups: Marriage preparation and health science teachers;

clergy and diocesan communication officers; and medical professionals and hospital administrators and staff.

Speakers will include: Dr. Janet Smith, chair of Life Ethics at Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, Mich.; Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas; John Allen Jr., Vatican analyst for CNN and National Public Radio, All Things Catholic at the National Catholic Reporter, and author of "The Future Church;" Dr. Robert P. George of Princeton University, co-initiator of the "Manhattan Declaration"; and Dr. Jan Hemstad, president of the Catholic Medical Association and Medical Doctors of the Catholic Medical Association. There will also be presentations by Father Matthew and his colleague in the Natural Family Planning Outreach, Father Daniel McCaffrey.

Father Matthew and his partner in the institute, Benedictine College's Matthew Tsakanikas, a doctoral candidate at the Pope John Paul II Institute on Marriage and Family in Rome, are interested in the fence riders.

"Of Catholic gynecologists, only one percent is with us," says Father Matthew who can quote statistics like a man who has returned to them time and again looking for something he might have missed. "That's pathetic. The other 99 percent are part of the problem. A couple hears about God's plan from their pastor but then goes to their Catholic ob-gyn and gets prescribed the pill. If our main allies aren't doing what they are supposed to, we aren't going to go very far."

The problem, Father Matthew says, is that the doctors never received training on Natural Family Planning in medical school, and many doctors don't understand how effective it is. They don't realize, he says, that in many cases a couple trained in Natural Family Planning can have a more than 98 percent success rate, and that NFP is an effective way to overcome infertility.

In addition, pharmaceutical corporations that produce contraception put a lot of money and energy into influencing doctors to prescribe their products.

"There is big money in contraception," he says.

To counter this, this summer's institute will offer doctors 14 hours of continuing medical education credits and provide speakers that are respected medical professionals.

"We have to have peers talking to peers," Father Matthew says. "If we can get one Catholic ob-gyn to convert that will be a success. Our goal is to get that one percent up to five percent."

Father Matthew continues to fly to California, New York, South Carolina, Texas, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and even Africa. He goes wherever he is invited, preaching the gospel of Natural Family Planning. The tall angular priest looks younger than his 69 years, and his zeal shows



**Father Matthew Habiger discusses Natural Family Planning with Benedictine College students during Social Justice Week March 3. Father Matthew travels internationally to speak out against contraception.**



no sign of the fatigue of someone facing what some would say are insurmountable odds.

Catholics still are using contraception in massive numbers.

Father Matthew and his message are received well wherever he goes. He takes this as a sign of fertile ground. But he is blunt in his analysis. He and the relatively small band of movement champions crossing the country aren't enough.

He is critical of pastors and even bishops who won't take the message of God's plan for marriage, spousal love, family and Natural Family Planning to the pulpit. He decries ignorance of NFP in the community of marriage preparation leaders.

A moral theologian, Father Matthew spent 10 years immersed in the pro-life movement, travelling internationally to spread its message and

he still champions its cause and cheers the work of the U.S. Bishops in this area. But he is convinced that contraception is the "taproot feeding the culture of death," vital to the movement. And he says many clergy are plainly afraid to speak of it from the pulpit out of a fear of hurting feelings or offending Catholics who are so overwhelmingly using contraception. "There is a price to pay for speaking out on God's plan for marriage, spousal love and family. Some people may reject you while defending their lifestyle," Father Matthew says. "But there also is a price to pay for our silence at the pulpit: a 50 percent divorce rate, emotionally scarred children, an 80 percent cohabitation rate, an 85 percent contraception rate with 40 percent of those couples now sterilized and a drought of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. We clergy must decide which price we are willing to pay."

The Summer Institute, which was made possible thanks in part to a grant from *Our Sunday Visitor*, which paid for almost all publicity, will be an annual event.

But Father Matthew calls it simply a step in the right direction.

"These values need to be in every diocese," he says. "It needs to be in every parish."

In the meantime, Father Matthew continues to travel and talk to anyone who is interested. He sends an e-mail newsletter to 450 editors, family life directors and Natural Family Planning coordinators across the country. He writes columns. He delivers homilies. He takes heart that anything good must happen one person at a time.

"Here I am in my Podunk room at my computer," he says with a laugh. "Just look at the damage I can do."

For more information on the Institute, visit the Website: [Benedictine.edu/nfpo](http://Benedictine.edu/nfpo), or contact the coordinator, Matthew Tsakanikas, work phone: 913-360-7571; cell phone: 913-370-0197. E-mail: [mtsakanikas@benedictine.edu](mailto:mtsakanikas@benedictine.edu).

