

Founder of natural family planning method, dies at 89

PERTH, Australia – The Catholic doctor who with his wife pioneered a revolutionary new church-backed method for couples to avoid or achieve conception died April 1 at a retirement home in the Melbourne suburb of Richmond.

No cause of death was given for Dr. John Billings, who was 89.

By the time of his death, teaching centers on the Billings Ovulation Method of natural family planning had been established in more than 100 countries and the government of China had officially adopted it for population control purposes. The method was supported by the church as a morally acceptable way for Catholic couples to plan their families.

In a message read at Billings' April 4 funeral Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne, Pope Benedict XVI described the Australian medical pioneer and researcher as a "noble soul."

"Having learned with sorrow of the death of your husband I offer my heartfelt condolences to you and your family and to all who mourn his passing," the pope said in his message to Dr. Evelyn Billings.

"I recall with a sense of deep appreciation the creative witness borne by Dr. Billings to the relationship between faith and scientific knowledge, and his outstanding contribution to family life by helping countless couples throughout the world live fully their vocation as faithful spouses and parents," Pope Benedict added.

Billings was named a Knight Commander of St. Gregory the Great by Pope Paul VI in 1969, the year after his encyclical, "Humanae Vitae," reaffirmed the church's opposition to methods of artificial contraception.

Pope John Paul II added a star to the papal knighthood in 2003, the year after John and Evelyn Billings were named international Catholic physicians of the year by the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations.

The Billingses were among 40 founding members named by Pope John Paul to the Pontifical Academy for Life in 1994.

John Billings was a neurologist working at St. Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne in 1953 when he received a request from Father Maurice Catarinich of the Catholic Marriage Guidance Bureau asking him for assistance.

The priest had found that fertility difficulties were an underlying issue with many couples seeking counseling. Some of these couples had serious medical reasons not to conceive, and the only method available apart from artificial contraception that was banned by the church was the unreliable "rhythm method."

Through his research Billings discovered that couples could learn to recognize the fertile period of a woman's menstrual cycle by observing the changes in her cervical mucus which precede and accompany ovulation.

In addition to his widow, a pediatrician, Billings is survived by eight children and 39 grandchildren.