

COORDINATOR'S CORNER

Whistling a Different Tune

Stella Kitchen

For years those of us in NFP ministry have sung the same old song of complaint "the priests don't preach on NFP, the doctors don't support us and we are all alone" (sung to the tune of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm"). Well, I recently experienced a breakthrough with regard to that old melody in our diocese and I'm now whistling a different tune.

A while back I had done a clergy education day where, among other information, I went over the details of action and health risks of various contraceptives. Unbeknownst to me at the time, my words eventually bore fruit in a very committed and creative priest. In October 1995, the priest (who shall only be known as Fr. John—to keep him humble), preached a Pro-Life homily at a Sunday Mass in his parish. In his remarks he informed his congregation that the "pill", in all its forms, has the potential to be abortifacient. This is a fact that is not news to those of us in NFP, but which many people still know nothing about. One person in his congregation, a physician, took exception to this bit of information. She later told me, "I couldn't believe he was telling the truth." Her immediate thought was that he "had to be wrong." So she promptly decided to do her own research to get down to the bottom of things. Much to her surprise,

she found that the good Father was right. This was a revelation for her! Now she was in a real crisis because she had been proscribing oral contraceptives for a number of years. She also was in a crisis of conscience because she thought that if she was wrong on this, what else could

she be wrong on? After much prayer, and an NFP class for her and her husband, a major change took place in her personal life. This change also affected the way in which she practiced medicine.

She knew what she had to do. During Holy Week she met with her partners to break the news to them that she could no longer prescribe oral contraceptives. In addition, she would only promote NFP to her patients. She was prepared for the worst, but to her surprise, her colleagues supported her and even asked her to supply them with NFP information! Great story you say? There's more . . .

The same humble priest brought the wisdom of the Church into the life of another couple in a creative and even unorthodox way. A parishioner struggling with NFP sought his help. The young wife was seriously worried about limiting births in her family due to some pretty severe financial problems. Her family was under great stress because her husband could only find a job out of state and was home infrequently. To complicate matters she was not too sure

*She was prepared
for the worst,
but to her surprise,
her colleagues
supported her. . . .*

of her NFP information. Father's response to her needs? He was compassionate, faithful, and very practical. Firstly, he advised her to contact me to assist her with interpretation of symptoms and to build up her confidence in using NFP. And, to alleviate some of the stress geographic separation placed on the marriage, he paid for her travel expenses so she could visit her husband during her infertile times. This was facilitated by the aid of the parish family, among whom he had arranged for baby-sitting for her young children. Now, far be it for me to recommend this solution to everyone—I am not. All I am saying is that within his means, and that of the parish family, good people were able to pull together in order to support a couple in need. That's what Church is all about.

I am very grateful because now in Harrisburg we have two Pro-NFP physicians, with the possibility of one joining the already established hospital satellite ObGyn office that has the services of an NFP teacher on-site. We also have the model of a priest willing to preach the truth and "put his money (literally) where his mouth is." And conversions have come! My advice to other coordinators? Keep plugging away at both priests and physicians! Share your knowledge with them. Take the opportunity when it presents itself and dare to speak up when it does not. You will never know how your words will bear fruit. Finally do not forget to congratulate the priest and physician that supports you in your ministry. They need our encouragement and our gratitude too. By the way, "memo" your Bishop when something positive like this happens. I'm sure he must whistle his own sad songs and needs to know that we have some brave souls out there. Happy whistling.... ■

Stella Kitchen, a member of the NCCB's NFP National Advisory Board, is the director of NFP services for the Diocese of Harrisburg, PA.