

Escape from Fuddledom

by

Sharon & Mike Phelan

“Do remember you are there to fuddle him.”

Screwtape to his nephew-devil Wormwood

Mike

This is a conversion story. My wife and I are converts from an offshoot of Catholic Christianity called Fuddledom.

Fuddles, as we might call ourselves, have grown up during the richest period of economic prosperity in the richest country in the history of the world. We know little of external suffering, and what we do know of internal suffering we usually entertain ourselves around. Most of the wounds we have acquired are self-inflicted. Additionally, our knowledge of history is often shallow, and we lack connection to the sufferings of the past. This makes growing up difficult. We Fuddles put off the markers of the grown up as long as we reasonably can—graduation, work, marriage, children, retirement savings, commitment in general. We flop around through our early years with a mixture of philosophies, passions, goals, and a bunch of diversions. Our adolescence can easily extend well past the point that our bodies reflect it.

The one area where many of my fellow Fuddles may lead the league in pain is in their broken families. Perhaps the lack of external conflict causes generations to circle the wagons and fire inward. This kind of suffering, though, doesn't help the maturity process but, rather, slows it. Alas, Sharon and I don't have this excuse. Both our homes were rock-solid Catholic foundations of love. But, if it weren't for love, I might still be fuddling through Fuddledom.

Sharon

Although I grew up Catholic, unlike Mike I had not heard of Natural Family Planning before we were engaged. My first thoughts were, “Oh, I think my parents did that.” Not a good thought to have at the time, since my next thought was “Look at our family...I'm the middle member of seven kids...YIKES!” (Seven fantastic, giving, loving kids, I might have added, but somehow that didn't occur to me at the time.) Plus, Mike and I both wanted to wait a couple of years before having children and we were pretty sure four was the maximum number we wanted. NFP surely did not sound like the path for us. In addition, I also had a question fostered I'm sure by the times, friends, etc.: “What right does the Church have to tell us how to run our sex life?”

Pedagogy of Hard Knocks

Mike

The world, the flesh, and the devil can be very persuasive. The weight of the sexual revolution and its inferred path to happiness, coupled with silence from the Christian point-of-view, adds up to a heavily one-sided paradigm on the issue of sexuality. Both of us bought, at least in part, the lie, and paid the price for our lack of discernment.

I found myself drawn to girls from an extraordinarily early age. I can remember in first grade hearing the girls at school talk about who they “liked” and wondering if anyone “liked” me. I had friends who were

boys, but the girls were special, mysterious, other than I was. Their beauty and difference called to me. This original call became twisted with my introduction to pornography and, more frequently, the pornographic thought-base of my peers as a teen. More and more, I found myself less and less able to view women as people. A paradigm of woman-as-object took root and grew in my mind, heart, and imagination. I recognized this in myself, and it made me angry. What was the problem? But shame kept me from asking the question aloud, and the silence from our home and the Church on the matter convinced me Christianity had nothing to say about it. Not that I really searched or investigated the claims of the Church; after all, Fuddles don't do such things.

Sharon

Every relationship before I met Mike was missing something no romance or great physical attraction could satisfy. It wasn't until after I had returned to my Catholic faith after some time away that God gave me the extraordinary gift of my husband whom I saw for the first time when I was a Eucharistic minister and he came in my line (slyly moving from another area in the church he told me some time later). Little did I know how telling this was, as I would be giving myself as gift someday to Michael the way the Lord gives himself to us in Communion.

Echoes in the Heart

Mike

But ... after "searching for love in all the wrong places" and several failed relationships, I found Christ again through a thriving parish and priests fully alive preaching an uncompromising gospel. When I eventually met Sharon at this same parish, God let me sense in her that same pure calling to woman I'd felt as a boy. Oh, she was *beautiful!* The first time I saw her, she gave me the Body of Christ as a Eucharistic minister. (Ok, so I went across the church to make sure I was in her line.)

Fortunately, I had heard about Natural Family Planning in college, so I was open from the outset to trying it in our marriage. The classes only served to strengthen my conviction that the manly thing to do was to protect my wife from the harm contraception could cause. The couples who taught it also inspired me. Their joy was palpable.

Sharon

My first exposure to NFP came as part of our engagement period when we took the required Introduction to NFP class. I sat in the class with my arms folded and an *almost* closed mind and heart. But, it was there I started to realize (although didn't yet want to admit it to anybody) that my thoughts about NFP came strictly from a place of ignorance.

In the classes I learned the effectiveness of NFP and it's scientific basis. I was amazed. I also loved that from the beginning Mike didn't want me to submit my body to any harmful side effects that the chemical alternatives like the pill might have. Most importantly I learned that the pill had the ability to act as an abortifacient; no one had EVER told me that, and I had been on the pill for a short time years before. We used NFP for the first 3 years of our marriage to avoid pregnancy. It "worked!" Or so I thought it did, with my naive definition of "worked" at the time. Others were surprised that we didn't become pregnant within the first few months of being married.

Sell all you Have — The Connection Between Financial and Sexual Trust in God

Mike

The next turning point was our introduction to John Paul II's Theology of the Body. The conversion and healing I experienced following Christopher West's presentation of the Pope's poetic words overwhelmed me. A desire to deeply learn and share this with others began to grow. But how? We first had

to go to Washington DC, across the country, and be immersed in the Christian vision for marriage and family at the John Paul II Institute.

Our trip from Phoenix to Washington, in August of 2003 raised amazement and alarm from many we knew. On paper, it seemed to be financial suicide. We were going to uproot from two solid jobs in well-developed careers. The house would have to be sold. The retirement and college savings put on hold. Knowing my responsibility to the family as husband and father, this gave me pause.

But the pause was brief. God had allowed conversion in this area of life early in our marriage. When we talked and prayed in the first year of our marriage about the control of our checkbook (following a sermon by a priest whose name I forget but who I hope to thank some day in Heaven!), we began to tithe and trust — and peace followed. Looking back on things, this was also the end of our financial struggle. Money simply ceased to be a problem. We did not become rich, but we were able to rid ourselves of debt, freeing our family for this future adventure. And the peace that settled on us was the peace of placing our checkbook in the lap of our heavenly Father. God moved one financial difficulty after another out of our way, calling us to deeper conversion all the while.

I don't think it is accidental that most divorces occur over the central agitations of sex and money. Looking back, I'm convinced that trusting in God's provision in the area of finances, and more slowly in the area of our sexual relationship and openness to children, were deeply connected. The issue, in either area, is fundamentally not about correct numbers but about to Whom (or whom) we entrust our family.

Sharon

I can honestly say that my real trust in God came when we started to live NFP after our first child was born. I started to give up control of the issue, which made it increasingly easier to trust Him in all other areas of our lives. The financial area is one that had been especially tough for me. So, you can imagine my reservations when I heard from Mike the first time about his desire to move our family of now five (Jonathan and Liam were our next gifts showing NFP was "working") to Washington DC for him to get his masters degree at the John Paul II Institute for Studies in Marriage and Family. After much prayer, time in adoration, and a talk from a priest that God sent directly to me (you know the one...you go to hear a speaker in a church full of parishioners and you feel like He's talking right to you through this person), I was ready for my next leap of faith.

Be Not Afraid

Mike

There seems to be much to fear in living out the vocation of marriage in a Christ-imitating, self-emptying fashion. What will people say about our large family? Can we really afford this (does it really cost \$300,000 to raise a child)? Will we be able to give them the time, love, and guidance that they need as individuals? What about my wife's body? Can it withstand another pregnancy?

Whatever the reasons we hold back from the gospel's calling to us as married couples, Christ will move us past them if we simply trust. "Trust? But that's hard!" Yep, until you realize that you're trusting *someone* to take care of your family. That someone is probably yourself, and I think if we look back at the panorama of our own lives honestly, and if we've had any experience of answered prayer, we'll admit that God is a far more reliable basis for hope than we are. And for some reason, he desires this hope to take practical form in at least these two areas — money and sexuality. Teaching NFP for seven years and talking to couples about these issues, Sharon and I have *never, not once*, met a husband or wife who says about this giving with body or money, "It's the dumbest thing I ever did." We consistently see a mixture of surprise, joy and peace. And surprise, joy and peace are really good things for a marriage.

Sharon

A final note on the idea of NFP “working.” Recently we announced the wonderful news that our fourth child is on the way. We received many comments like “That NFP really works, huh?” Mike and I found it interesting to observe that to most folks for NFP to be “working” means you *don't* get pregnant. We know it can work in that way but one of the things that really happens through living with NFP over the years is that you are *awakened* and realize how wonderful children are, that they are truly gifts from God. NFP has seen me through the journey from fear, to acceptance, to a great joy in my fertility. So now I can say with confidence finally that NFP is *working* for Mike and me! We are so grateful that he has brought us to this point. We have been befuddled about many things in our lives, but NFP has been key in a faith life that is difficult to see as possible without the sacrifice it calls for. We don't know what our next step is in Phoenix when we return, but we surely know that continuing to get the word out about NFP will always be a big part of our lives.

The Phelans and family live in the Diocese of Phoenix..