

Australian Lovers, World Council Team 1989

By Liam & Sue Davison and Fr. John Rate
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I, Sue, was born in Boston, Mass., USA where I lived until I was five years old. We then moved around quite a bit; Akron, Ohio where my mother still lives, Texas, Argentina, then Belfast, N. Ireland. Presently, I am a part-time Marketing Rep for the Schools' Provident Fund, an organization established by the Archbishop of Melbourne to raise finance for the development of Catholic schools and parishes.

One day, at Queen's University Belfast, a handsome man with fabulous blue eyes came up and rather shyly asked me to have coffee with him. I nearly fainted! I said "yes" and I clearly remember that by the time we got to a table most of the coffee was in the saucer because my hand was shaking! We became friends.

Then one day my mother asked me if there was anyone in the gang who would like to earn some money because she had some jobs around the house. I asked Liam. He hesitated but then agreed. He arrived at the house on St. Patrick's Day and we started to wash the walls to the background of Handel's "Water Music!" Three weeks later, he asked me to spend the rest of my life with him. I couldn't get the "yes" out fast enough! So began a love affair which still burns after eighteen years of marriage.

I, Liam, was born and raised in Belfast. As Sue says, we met; it would seem, by coincidence. The beautiful thing was that we had gotten to know each other very well as friends before we fell in love and so had a very solid base on which to build our romance. Looking back, I can see that our meeting was providential, definitely not accidental! Presently, I am the principal of John Paul College, a large Catholic co-educational high school in Frankston.

After we married, we found it difficult to think about settling in Belfast and making a life together with children because of the political and economic situation and we knew that we would have to leave.

We made the very painful decision to leave Ireland and move to Australia. After nine months of waiting we said our tearful and fearful good-byes to family and friends and left for Australia.

Now 17 years and five children later, we are very happy and settled in our adopted country and know that Australia is home. We never forget our roots though and still some small things can trigger a real dose of homesickness for our countries of origin and the family members still there.

Our courtship and early married years were a beautiful time...nothing was too much trouble, no effort too great; we talked for hours about ourselves, each other, and our life together, trusting our thoughts and feelings to one another. We were "number one" in each others' eyes and hearts and we would not settle for less. That's romance.

Even with the best of intentions, however, the pressures of life crowded in, mortgage, bills, beautiful children to clothe and feed, work stresses, and the big one, time.

We found that our talking time was taken up with finances, how to raise the children and work. We talked about romance in the past tense and time for us seemed to find its way to the bottom of the list, if it got there at all.

The great expectations of our great love affair evaporated into "this now must be what they call 'reality' and 'face it, the honeymoon is over.'" We began to suffer from a lack of intimacy in the way we spoke and acted with each other. We slipped, almost unnoticed, away from those precious moments when we had shared so much of our inner selves with one another. "There's no time" became the familiar phrase.

At this point in our journey, a priest friend told us about a weekend for married couples and said we should go. At first we were a bit taken aback because we thought he was trying to tell us that there was something wrong with our marriage. We did go however, and we thank God to this day for that invitation. That weekend opened the door for more joy that we thought possible and still it grows.

We have been involved in Marriage Encounter in various ways since our Weekend. We have been a Weekend presenting team couple for 11 years and have been called into various leadership positions in that time; Area Coordinators in our state of Victoria, Unit Coordinators for the three southeastern states of Australia which included membership of our National Council. Until our selection as World Team, we were the Pacific Secretariat Team with Fr. John. We had the honor of representing Australia, Fiji and New Zealand on the World Council.

We have had our greatest support and our greatest challenges from our five beautiful children. Without their generosity we could do very little. They cheer us on and they keep our feet firmly planted on the ground.

So many wonderful things have happened to us, we have met so many beautiful people, have made very dear friends but the most significant of all would have to be our Marriage Encounter Weekend. We have such a yearning for others to experience a Weekend. It is almost an ache for them.

I, John, am the eldest of three, with an English father and an Irish-Australian mother. I had always wanted to become a priest and can even remember practicing saying Mass as a tiny tot. The Brothers at High School really encouraged us to think seriously about devoting our lives to the service of God and His people and even took us out to visit all the seminarians. I am sure that the example of so many good people, combined with the strong faith of my Mom planted the seeds of my vocation deep in my heart.

At seventeen years of age I joined the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, a French religious order who specialize in teaching and foreign missions. After my ordination, (19

May 1973) I was appointed to the Minor Seminary in Rabaul, Papua-New Guinea and enjoyed the people, the weather the vibrancy of Church and even the frequent earthquakes. Then came three years of study in Europe, Major Seminary work in Australia and at last in 1981, a parish in the Sydney beach suburb of Coogee.

Coming into a parish was a traumatic experience for me. I had always imagined myself as a teacher of seminarians, locked away from the outside world in a relaxed and prayerful environment as seminarians were. I guess that I had a deep-seated fear that close involvement with people would be stressful for me and that the gifts I had were more suited to the quiet life. Well, what a wonderful new life awaited me in my new parish. I will never forget the faith and commitment of so many parishioners who made the Church a flesh-and-blood reality. I honestly believe it was the people in my parish who really formed me into a priest and all this happened some seven years after my ordination.

What really made all this experience of the people of God into a new vision of Church and priesthood was my Marriage Encounter Weekend which I went on with a number of people from my parish in July 1982. Never had I had such a profound experience of Church and of being loved as a priest. I can still remember the comment of a good friend of mine a young husband, as we all packed to go home, "If heaven is only half as good as this, it's going to be one hell of a place.

Fairly soon I was involved in leadership on a State level (1983-85) and then after a short break, found myself on the Pacific Secretariat and World Council (1985-89). I'm excited at being the pastor of a wonderful parish in Adelaide, S. Australia and enjoy the support of my people for my Marriage Encounter work. In fact, in May, we plan an M.E. Weekend just for our parish.

My Mom and Dad made the Weekend a few years ago, after forty one years of marriage, and loved it. My sister Colleen, has just had her sixth baby. (Colleen and her husband, Wally are presenting team in Melbourne.) My brother Paul, and his wife, Alison, have done Engaged Encounter. It's been great for us all to have that bonding and experience of Church.

Sue and Liam and have never lived in the same city (Adelaide is almost five hundred miles distant) but my family in Melbourne and Marriage Encounter business have meant that we see each other on a monthly basis, at least. One of the things I love about us as a team is that miracle of dialogue helps to bring us closer together despite the miles that separate us.

We have lots of hopes and dreams for Marriage Encounter. Our movement sprang up to answer the needs of married couples in a world where the value of relationships was coming under more and more pressure. It was a time when the Church needed to see sacramental love relationships which were an enduring sign of Christ's love for his people. Those same pressures have increased relentlessly The Church continues to need renewal through the vitality of couples and priests passionately in love.

We see the need for the Weekend as urgent as it ever was. Our world has changed in that many of the modern world pressures have become more subtle and more alluring. One great obstacle continues to be material poverty but an even more insidious one is the spiritual poverty which comes with affluence. The modern world tells us that everything is OK when we are racing around being independent and busy with things which draw us away from intimate emptiness.

We must encourage people to realize that the pain of a so far, no further, relationship is greater than the pain of growth towards an authentic love relationship. Our way of life as a result of making the Weekend should bring about a joy and enthusiasm which is visible and contagious.

It is our hope that Marriage Encounter will continue to serve the Church by renewing the sacramental relationships of Matrimony and Holy Orders. We are Good News for the people in our own communities. We can change the world! We are changing the world!