

Convention Talk

Lee & Jan Kremer and Fr. Rich O'Brien

Good evening. We are excited to be here at this 35th Anniversary Convention not only as members of Section 7 who has hosted this beautiful event, but also as the International Coordinating Team. We are grateful for all you lovers who have been so faithful to carry on the vision and dream of our founding fathers. If it wasn't for Fr. Chuck Gallagher and all of those couples and priests who worked so hard 35 years ago to build this dream and then carry it across the world, most of us would not have the love and joy in our relationships that we gained from our beloved Worldwide Marriage Encounter Weekend.

All of us learned so much about our spouse on our Weekend. It reminds me of the story of a husband and wife who went to a marriage seminar on communication. They listened to the instructor declare, "It is essential that husbands and wives know the things that are important to each other." The instructor then addressed the men, "Can you describe your wife's favorite flower?" The husband leaned over, touched his wife's arm gently and whispered, "Pillsbury All-Purpose, isn't it?"

We wish to congratulate the United States on this occasion of your 35th Anniversary on behalf of the whole world. As we travel around the world, we hear the gratitude from so many countries for the gift the United States gave them by being missionaries and bringing the Weekend to married couples and priests in their countries.

As you know, Worldwide Marriage Encounter has a mission of renewal of the Church and change in the world by renewing the Sacraments of Matrimony and Holy Orders. What a beautiful mission that is and one so badly needed in this world – even more so now than 35 years ago. How do we go about making this mission become a reality around the world? We do this first through the Worldwide Marriage Encounter Weekend. We also provide ongoing support after the Weekends and we encourage the use of the greatest gift we received on the Weekend – our daily dialogue. What about all those couples and priests out there who haven't accepted the gift of a Weekend? On Sunday of each Weekend all participants are challenged to take their love as a couple and go out into the world to make a difference. We need to be visible signs of the goodness of Marriage and Holy Orders to the whole world – in our jobs, in our community and most importantly in our Churches. That is how we change the world.

That was the dream that began Worldwide Marriage Encounter 35 years ago. From that beginning dream which started in New York, the Weekend began to spread around the United States. There was so much excitement for the Weekend that other denominations began asking for the Weekend too. In 1971 there were Jewish and Episcopal Weekends. That has grown today to having the Weekend given in 11 other denominations. At the same time, the Weekend began spreading around the world. Many sacrifices were made and couples and priests began traveling to share the gift of

our Worldwide Marriage Encounter Weekend. In 1979 it was decided that we needed to organize this Worldwide Movement so the expansion efforts could be better coordinated. That was the beginning of the World Council.

Today the World Council is made up of seven Secretariats (or regions). They are Asia, Canada, Europe, Latin America, Pacific, Pan-Africa and the United States. As a Council we gather together every eight months. At these meetings we discuss items such as the outline for the Weekend, programs for ongoing support after the Weekend, expansion plans, financial needs, the priest shortage and how this affects us as a Movement. Each meeting an enrichment is shared from one area of the World. In this way we can share our resources. Some of you may have experienced the Languages of Love Enrichment. That was a gift from the Pacific Secretariat. Asia shared their Dialogue Journey which was helpful in creating the Journey Program here in the United States. At our upcoming meeting there will be an enrichment on Ecclesial Relationships. The World Council meetings are what links us together as a world Movement. It keeps us headed in the same direction. We learn of the needs in places in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

There are many exciting things happening around the world today in Worldwide Marriage Encounter. We'd like to share a few of them with you tonight. We have had the privilege of attending the 25th Anniversary Convention in many places around the world in the last two years. The Philippines had a wonderful celebration and paid special tribute to the couples and priests from Hawaii that made many many trips there to begin Worldwide Marriage Encounter. Also celebrating their 25th was Korea, Argentina, Mexico, Korea and New Zealand. Trinidad will celebrate this fall. There probably are more that we haven't heard about. In those early years the Weekend spread fast around the world.

Your leaders, Bob & Huli Tabone and Fr. Mark Willenbring have represented you well at the World Council. The dream is so alive in them. It was a very sad day for us personally and for Worldwide Marriage Encounter when Bob passed away. His passion for Huli and the Movement was incredible. Our love and support go to you Huli. Thanks for having shared Bob with us in Marriage Encounter.

In the United States we are so blessed to have the technology and resources readily available to take the Weekend wherever we dream. Recently we received an email from a couple who moved from Texas to Arkansas. Their dream was to bring Worldwide Marriage Encounter to Arkansas. A few weeks ago, they were given permission from the Bishop to bring the Weekend to their diocese. Thanks J.C. & Debbie for dreaming and being present day missionaries. We know things like this are happening all over the United States because 'you believe'. This is Jesus being alive in you as a person, as a Sacrament.

Even though we are blessed in America with so many resources, it also leads us to a very fast paced life. A good example is the story I heard about Mary and Susan. Mary finally found a way to convince her continually harried friend, Susan, that she needed to find ways to relax. Mary invited her to dinner and, while she was busy cooking, Susan agreed to watch a videotape on stress management and relaxation techniques. Fifteen

minutes later, Susan came into the kitchen and handed Mary the tape. "It was good," she said, "but I don't need it." "But it's a 70-minute video," Mary replied. "You couldn't have watched the whole thing." "Yes, I did," Susan assured Mary. "I put in on fast-forward." That's the problem in America, we put everything on fast forward including our relationships.

We held the last World Council meeting in Budapest. It was a dream come true for this former Iron Curtain Country. They never believed they would be able to host such an event. The Weekend started in Budapest by couples and priests from Austria who memorized their talks and crossed the border to hold the Weekends in secret. They used the flat of one very brave and beautiful couple. Under Communist rule they could not have gatherings of people and if anyone was caught with written material that seemed like propaganda, they were imprisoned. Beginning the Weekend in Hungary was true missionary work. Today the Hungarian Marriage Encounter community is thriving.

We take for granted our freedoms in the U.S. These people value so much those freedoms that they waited years and years to get. There is a story about a state trooper who stopped a motorist for speeding. Instead of signing the ticket and continuing on his way, the driver, who said he knew he had been going over the speed limit, insisted on having a court hearing. On the appointed day the trooper and the man appeared before the judge. Found guilty, the motorist happily paid his fine. Outside the courtroom, the trooper asked him why he had bothered with a hearing. "I came to this country from Yugoslavia a few years ago," the man explained. "I never had the freedom to ask for a hearing. Now I do."

Asia is a Secretariat with a vast array of cultures and languages. They have a deep love for the Weekend. In the Philippines they are currently building a retreat center in the south to make it more affordable for couples to attend. In Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India they continue to struggle to have the funds needed to keep the Weekends going. It is through the generous donations from the United States and Europe that these three Countries have been able to have the funds to participate in the annual meeting in Asia.

Pacific is comprised of Australia, New Zealand and the Islands. In New Zealand recently they have reached out to hold Weekends for the Maori people there. The Islands of Fiji, Tonga and Solomon's have had much strife in their countries with civil war, yet the Weekends continue. They are currently working to do some reachout to the outer islands in Fiji.

We received an email from Bishop Gerry Loft, who was the main celebrant at the National Convention in Los Angeles four years ago. He shared with us about an Enrichment Weekend they gave on an island three hours away by canoe and outboard motor. They arrived and there was no fresh water available. They brought in water for drinking, but none was available for taking showers. He shares that one of the Team husbands decided to go out into the rain to take a shower. He soaped up and the rain stopped. On his return trip home they had a cyclone warning, heavy rain and rough seas. They arrived back home wet and miserable. Bishop Gerry went to the trade store

and bought the last meat pies they had. He states in the email "Back to my house, 2 meat pies into the micro wave, Bishop into the shower, then a hot cup of coffee and two gooey meat pies!!! BLISS. ALL MY NEEDS ARE MET.

Canada has miles and miles of miles and not a lot of people to cover those miles. They are working currently to strengthen their Weekends for the Spanish speaking and Korean speaking couples in Canada. They have dreams of bringing the Weekend back to some remote areas that ceased having Weekends a few years ago. They have to travel long distances – 10-12 hours by car just for meetings and for Weekends.

Latin America is mainly a Catholic region of the world. Their Weekends have been strong for many years with waiting lists. However, the current economic conditions in most of Latin America has made it very very difficult to keep the Weekends going. In Uruguay with the financial help from the US and Europe, they were able to schedule 4 Weekends in June and filled them all. It has brought new life back to their Community. When we were in Argentina a few months ago, they shared with us that every Weekend they lose money because many couples are unemployed or have little to donate. They have cut down on the number of Weekends scheduled, not because of lack of couples, but lack of money. When we were there, we went to the Friday night of their Weekend. We were amazed when we walked in to the Retreat Center. There were about 100 Marriage Encounter couples there to greet the 18 couples attending the Weekend. They lined the hallway and sang and clapped as the Weekend attendees walked down the hallway to begin their Weekend. The attendees were hugging everyone and crying. It was incredible to see the love and excitement in the Retreat Center that night. If we tried that in the U.S., it would probably scare all the couples away.

Africa is a large continent with many struggles to keeping the dream alive. The roads are terrible, most don't have cars to travel in. In Malawi the National Leaders have to walk 10 miles to town for meetings. When the Presbyterians brought the Weekend to Kenya a few years ago, they said that the couples came walking for miles, the wives carrying the bags. When the couples left the Weekend, the husbands carried the bags. The cost for most Weekends in Africa is \$20-30 per couple, but the average donation is only a few dollars. Some bring chickens or coffee beans to donate because they have no money. Getting the Presenting Team to the Weekends can be a challenge because travel is so difficult. In the country of Congo, because of civil war, they have been disconnected from the Pan-African Secretariat for over five years, yet the Weekends continued. They were not aware that there was a new Outline until our beloved Fr. Mario Barbero was sent to Congo. He sought out the Marriage Encounter people there and through email has reconnected them to the Movement. They now have the most current outline and are rewriting their talks. The Weekend has been brought recently to Uganda and Botswana through the sacrifice and determination of the Marriage Encounter couples and priests from other countries in Africa. They have the couples wanting the Weekend, but they find it difficult to make things happen because there are so many obstacles.

There are many more exciting stories from around the world that we don't have the time to share with you tonight. It has been a true privilege for the three of us to be able to visit our Worldwide Marriage Encounter family around the world. And they are family. When we are in a Marriage Encounter group – whether we speak the same language or not, we feel the love and connection we have through the Weekend. We are united by those 44 hours we experienced and our daily dialogue.

Thank God for our dialogue. When I started working every day at our business, we dialogued about how that would affect my responsibilities at home. Later, Lee agreed to share in the housework. He was surprised by the amount of effort involved in keeping the house clean and suggested that we shop for a new vacuum cleaner. I was thrilled. The salesman gave us a demonstration of the latest model. It came equipped with all the newest features. Lee wasn't quite convinced. He asked the salesman, "Don't you have a riding one?"

As we begin the 21st Century we are faced with many needs of our movement all over the world. We are still a missionary movement. We are still trying to reach many areas of the world where the Weekend and Marriage Enrichment are needed. In Brazil, Argentina and many other countries in Latin America there are many Dioceses that want the Weekend but there are no resources to bring it to them. In Africa there are waiting lists in some countries, but they cannot have the Weekends until they have raised enough money to pay the retreat centers. We are still reaching out to many of the countries there who have not experienced the Weekend at all. Transportation is difficult, if available at all, to bring Teams into remote areas. The cost of one airline ticket is similar to here in the United States, but the cost of one ticket for them is usually more than a professional person makes in a year!! Many leaders cannot get off work to go to meetings very often, so the Secretariat only meets every 12-18 months.

In the Pacific we have requests from Samoa and other areas in Oceania to bring Marriage Encounter to them, but we are unable to get there until much later. In Europe we are still working to bring the Weekend to the former communist countries in Eastern Europe. We have some great success in some areas, but many of the countries are so devastated that they have to worry about getting food to eat before they can think about their marriages-----if they even bothered getting married.

The World Council is the body that holds all of this together and continues to provide guidance, materials, finances, inspiration and hope to those struggling areas. The World Council works constantly toward unity of our mission in the world, while respecting great differences in cultures and philosophies about Church, marriage and family life. But in order to even get together as a movement once every 8-9 months we need to buy airline tickets for the Africans and many times for the Latin Americans and Asians. The funds to do this come mainly from the generosity and apostolic efforts of the United States. It would be easy for us just to say we should stop meeting as a World Council, but we have no doubt that this would lead to very quickly having 7 different movements. And probably the missionary Africa movement would cease to exist because of the lack of support and encouragement.

As a worldwide movement we are one family, sharing our resources of time, capabilities and finances to spread the hope of better marriages and priesthood to all of the areas of

the world that need it so very much. In your registration packet there was a page explaining some of our financial needs and an envelope to use if you wished to help us by giving what you can to help around the world. What to you is a small amount of money is very large in other parts of the world. We thank you for giving even a little bit to help make the Weekend continue around the world.

The challenges for the future are many. The opportunities are many. We are having a second meeting next month in Kansas City with the International Coordinators of Engaged Encounter and Retrouvaille to begin a worldwide cooperative effort in the Church to provide our bishops and priests with the help they need in the parishes to build strong marriages and help the struggling ones. This effort we hope will give us a united front with our bishops and priests to be a Afull service@ marriage enrichment service, and provide ongoing help for our priests to stem the tide of divorce in our Churches. We hope that all 12 faith expressions will join us in this effort to form a unified effort to make this the most viable force in the world in this area.

After 35 years of Worldwide Marriage Encounter we are faced with the challenge of supporting and including the surviving spouses in our Movement. We are happy and grateful to have some of you joining us here this weekend. We know you still cherish your Sacrament and love our Movement.

We also challenge you to get back to the basics of Open and Apostolic. We are asking you to do what we profess on our Weekends and get back to our parishes with our Couple Power. We believe that we, as a movement, have become too inward focused, and we need to look outward into our parishes and the world to see what we need to do to help ALL marriages and priests, whether they go on our Weekend or not!! Our mission in the Catholic Church is to provide a Catholic Aexperience@ to renew marriage and the priesthood. It does not say that this can only be our Weekend. The Weekend is still our objective for all couples and priests because that is where the conversions happen. But, let's face it, we are not very successful at getting over 99 percent of the couples to go ON the Weekend. But we can get into our parishes and provide enrichment for ALL married couples and help ALL of our priests in their struggle to stem the tide of divorce.

We challenge you to help us! If you want to fill your Weekends we KNOW that you can do it by first getting the couples in your parishes to come to a 2 or 3 hour enrichment in your parish, offer baby sitting and then they will see that you do not have two heads, and the Marriage Encounter is not just a private club that you need to go on the Weekend to enter. We know you can do it because we do it in our parish and we have couples on every Weekend in Rockford Diocese.

We will need the help of the Church in our efforts to make this happen. At the Holy Father's World Meeting of the Families in Manila in February, we challenged the Cardinals, Bishops and Priests to help us. We told them that we believe we have the tools to make the Sacraments of Matrimony and the Priesthood strong and healthy. We told them we need them to speak the values of good marriage vocations as well as good priesthood vocations, and to support us in Worldwide Marriage Encounter in our efforts.

We have seen the reaction of Bishops when we talk about a concentrated effort in the parishes to help ALL married couples whether they go on our Weekend or not. We

have millions of couples around the world that CAN make a difference if we empower them and help them to work in their parish by giving them the materials they need. We don't have to be a Presenting Team to make this happen. All it takes is the desire to make a difference and to present simple, relatable enrichments in our parish on the items that are important to all couples today. Things like Raising children in today's world, Praying as a Couple, Conflict Resolution, Time Management in the Home, Balancing Work and the Home Life, etc. In today's fast paced world there are so many excellent topics – like both husband and wife working, especially because that is one of the reasons we can't get couples on our Weekends. There is a story about a husband and wife who both work. Their family eats out a lot because of the schedule. One evening they were having a rare home-cooked meal, when the wife handed their three-year-old a glass of milk and told her to drink her milk. The daughter looked at her mother bewildered and replied, "But I didn't order milk."

We have programs already available to take to your parish and make it happen. All you need is to have a few couples to do it. It is easy and fun, and VERY successful. The challenge for all of us is to follow in Jesus footsteps. He asked us to go out two by two into the world and spread the Good News. He didn't say it would be easy, and he told us that many would reject us. But, we challenge you to shut off the TV and the computer and get out there and make a difference. **YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE!**

