

A LOVER WHO SPANS THE WORLD

by Jeff & Dianne Johnson
(Excerpted from Spring 1993 *Matrimony* magazine)

We are among the lucky ones, but so are many, many of you who are reading this article. We have been touched by the hands and love of Father Martin Weber. After more than 25 years in the United States, Fr. Martin soon will be returning to his homeland of Switzerland. Martin's sense of humor, love of life, excitement for his people the church, and his absolute love for the Marriage Encounter Weekend have endeared him to many. This article is intended to say thank you, Martin, from all of us, especially the lovers in Section IX, and specifically those of us in the Denver and Northern Colorado areas who have been so very privileged to have served with you. We love you Martin, and hope that all your dreams come true. You are our beloved "Don Quixote".

Recently Fr. Martin Weber presented a weekend in Ft. Collins, Colorado, in the same location he presented his first weekend in 1975. With tears of joy streaming down his face, Martin told us that this might be the last weekend he would present in the United States and how happy he was that it would be in the same location as his first. In between those two weekends Father Martin has presented 156 weekends. Or as Martin says, "Three years laid out in a row of presenting every weekend". He has presented in 20 of our beautiful states. Most of those weekends have been rookie English-speaking Weekends, but he also has presented Spanish-speaking Weekends, Veteran Deepers, and Engaged Encounter Weekends. He has served as Area Executive Priest for three terms, Section Executive Priest and also as Section Cadre.

Fr. Martin Weber was born Jan. 2, 1917 in Switzerland. When he told his parents he wanted to be a priest they responded, "Well, Martin, then you better be prepared for hard work." Hard work has never stopped Martin and on March 24, 1945, he was ordained to the German-speaking order of Bethlehem Fathers. In September of that year he went to Zimbabwe to Mission Shona. He spent 22 years doing mission work in Africa, which in Martin's words mean, "Loving God's people and sharing His words with them." Martin reminisced about his early priesthood days in Africa where he was involved with lay people in pastoral work training them for becoming responsible for their own church, or as we hear it on the Weekend, for being church.

In 1967 he was transferred to Denver, Colorado to do parish work. In 1968 the Bethlehem Center, the site of many Marriage Encounter Weekends, was opened on the north side of Denver for the purpose of religious education and retreats and in 1975 Martin was made superior of the Bethlehem Fathers in the Denver area. This was a tremendous change in focus for Martin and "Since I had no fulfilling job I joined Marriage Encounter." One of the reasons Martin came to the United States was to get better acquainted with the lay movement. He saw his involvement with Marriage Encounter as an avenue for fulfilling one of his dreams: that is, to organize Lay ministers for missionary work in foreign countries. Martin believes that all the church, that is all of us, has to be involved in the evangelization of the whole world. Marriage Encounter added impulse to his pursuit of these thoughts as Martin saw his dream of couples and families, doing mission work together with a priest, come closer to reality. Martin told us that he learned Spanish by himself because he had the impression that in

the Denver area there were many people who did not speak English and they were being neglected. He went on to say that he thinks every priest should have at least a smattering of Spanish because priests work for relationship and community, and that can't be accomplished if they cannot communicate with the people we call church.

When asked how the Marriage Encounter experience has affected his life he responded, "For me personally, the experience of Marriage Encounter has intensified my priestly spirituality. I always thought the priest was the servant of the people, but it is through Marriage Encounter Weekends that I gradually have learned that the priest is a lover of the people, and that is why he serves." He went on to say that "If opportunities are offered I will probably continue to present weekends in Europe in German and in English, but possibly also in Spanish because there are many Spanish workers in Switzerland and Germany."

We asked him if he could share with us his hopes and dreams for the Marriage Encounter movement. What he said brought tears to our eyes and an ever-deepening love and respect for this wonderful man who still dares to dream. Martin hopes to see the Marriage Encounter "breaking out of middle-class mentality". We haven't yet reached the very rich or the very poor. Having come from Africa I would have liked to see the Weekend extended to our black brothers and sisters. (Martin, our love. this is now becoming reality.) We may have lost the commitment. We still have the commitment to the relationship but I am not sure if we still have the missionary commitment to reach out and be ready to make sacrifices. We must make more effort to reach out. I don't see that the enthusiastic commitment is present anymore." We believe the commitment is still alive and thriving in many of you wonderful lovers, but maybe Martin is right, maybe the enthusiasm is missing. Perhaps we're only able to commit within our comfort zones. His dream of families serving together with a priest in mission work has not yet come true. Are we willing to reach across the Nation? Are you?

As Martin was preparing to leave our home, he left us with some sage advice. "It doesn't matter whether a couple has been married 3 years or 33, presenting Weekends 1 month or 25 years, couples and priests still can be inspirational when their commitment to one another and to the mission of being for others is there. Commitment is the key. Live the weekend!"

Fr. Martin will probably be returning to Switzerland this summer. He is currently serving a short term assignment at Holy Trinity Parish in Colorado Springs. If you would like to drop him a note and let him know what effect he has had on you and your relationship, or how you are living the Weekend with enthusiastic commitment, his address is:

1522 Hollyhock Drive
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80907

[*eMatrimony* Editor Note: The address given above for Fr. Martin is no longer valid. But, if you would like to send your story to editors@eMatrimony.org we would love to post them for others to read.]