

My Story of Experiencing a Marriage Encounter Weekend

by Fr. Steve Sotiroff - Vandalia, Illinois
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I am a diocesan priest in the Springfield Illinois diocese. I have been ordained a little over eleven years. For the past three years I have served as pastor in the rural town of Vandalia. I am the only resident priest in the county. My parish, Mother of Dolors, has 225 families; there is no Catholic school here. My other responsibility in this assignment is to be part-time state prison chaplain of a 1000 – inmate facility just north of town. I have no special training in prison ministry.

It took the persistent prodding of friends to make me agree to attend a Marriage Encounter Weekend. Like most priests I imagine, I wondered how I, a celibate, could possibly fit with couples talking about marriage. I wondered what benefit there could be to my sacrament of priesthood as some already encountered couples told me there could be. In the end I kept an open mind, thinking if anything, it would be an experience of a movement in our Church that maybe I should be aware of for pastoral reasons. It was also a weekend away from such a hectic schedule at the church and prison. I risked feeling awkward and the fear of being put in a situation of having to reveal myself.

As the weekend unfolded my fears were calmed. What I overwhelmingly found instead was a weekend where couples and priests gently and lovingly examined and experienced their own relationships; the spouses with one another, the priest with the people of his parish, his family and friends. For me it was a life-giving and affirming experience. For the couples around me it was life-giving and renewing.

For a few years I had a nagging awareness. It seemed my work as a parish priest was being done in a vacuum. I was enjoying a progressing and successful career, reaping the benefits of hard work faithfully and responsibly done. I was content knowing I was doing good work, but seldom had a measure of just how well I was doing. That was the vacuum. There were times when I wondered if my preaching was in touch with people's needs. I always felt convinced of the Church's teachings, but was puzzled why others seemed unenthused. I thought I understood the difficult times we live in where it is so easy not to put God first in one's life. I knew that worldly interest absorbed people instead of people absorbing Christ in the Church and one another.

What the Marriage Encounter weekend did was not only tell me that my work and the Church's teachings and sacraments were indeed valued, but it gave me a chance to experience it in myself and witness it in the couples changing attitudes about life, love and God, right before me. The Marriage Encounter not only taught but showed where Catholic couples priorities should be. As a result you could see their joy in one another come alive again as the weekend continued. For them there was a human renewal in their shared life, and perhaps for the first time, a spiritual awakening of their sacrament. For me there was joy knowing that the work of my past ministry in the Church, echoed through the team priest and couples giving the Marriage Encounter, was the cause of this remarkable change to those on the weekend. The more the couples grew close to one another, the more my presence as a priest was accepted. The more I realized my importance as a priest to others, the easier it was to be present. They and I got a glimpse of how the Church works, priest and married couples supporting one another by simply living their sacraments well. It made perfect sense why, I, a priest, was asked to attend the weekend.

It matters that we priests live our sacrament well, not just for our sake, but for those we serve. Hard work and faithfulness, persevering in a difficult world are not enough for us or others. Joy and happiness are essential too. During a Chrism mass several years ago as we were about to renew our priestly vows, our Bishop asked that we take a good look at ourselves in the mirror on the next morning. The Marriage encounter weekend helps the priest to take a good look at himself through the dialogue questions tailored to his priestly role and his life as a friend and family member. It gives him the chance to talk about these important relationships in his life with the team priest or a fellow priest on the weekend. What we all should find is not just areas that need to be improved, but goodness that needs to be encouraged too.

I could go on to tell you how supportive Pope John Paul II is of Marriage Encounter throughout the world, and how he believes it is a path toward renewal in the Church. I could get more specific on the details of the weekend's well planned and thorough schedule. I could tell you how especially valued you are by couples who have gone on a Marriage Encounter, happy that you accepted God's call to priesthood for their sake as well your own. I could try and explain why you should take a second look at Marriage Encounter couples. They are, after all, eager to share their new found enthusiasm for one another and the Church.

However, all I hope is that you understand a bit better the experience of one priest who kept an open mind, took some time out of his hectic parish work, and risked a couple of small fears that proved to be unfounded.

It was refreshing and satisfying to see the Church so life- giving. Witnessing and accepting the goodness of the married couples was a precious gift. I felt more blessed and convinced of my own sacrament. For the couples and myself it was a moving encounter of what Christ's presence is in each of our sacraments.

As we were departing on Sunday night there was an unspoken acknowledgment that we had all been restored to a deeper goodness that wouldn't be forgotten in the days ahead.

[1993 *Matrimony* Editor's note:

Jim & Sue Hoenninger of East Lansing, Michigan asked Fr. Steve if he would capture his experience of his Marriage Encounter Weekend in words so they could pass it on to the priest in their Diocese.]

Suggested dialogue questions:

When was the last time I asked a priest to make a Weekend? HDIFAMA?

How has my/our life been touched by a priest lately? HDIFAT?

How have I/we supported our priest(s) lately? HDIFAT?