

We Remember Fr. Paddy Colleran on The Fifteenth Anniversary of His Death

by Dick & Barbara McBride
(Excerpted from the Fall 1992 *Matrimony* magazine)

Paddy was a pretty ordinary fellow. He loved to laugh, and he did his own fair share of crying. He believed that a hug could do more for the world than every war in history. Paddy did not have a lot of enemies. Oh, some people didn't quite understand what he was doing with his life. A few people thought he didn't know his place. But Paddy was well liked.

Paddy Colleran became a priest not because one out of six Irishmen do, but because he wanted to serve. When he lay face down on the marble of the cathedral floor, Paddy was not quite sure what was going to happen to him for the rest of his life. But he was sure that whatever he got himself into, it was going to be God's will.

Paddy spent some time being a parish priest. He loved the work, and he was pretty good at it. He loved most of all the moments of each day when he celebrated the Eucharist. Paddy had some doubts about his life. There were days of frustration, fear, loneliness, and uncertainty. Paddy would always bring those heavy moments with him to the altar.

But in the midst of a very ordinary priestly career, Paddy's life was changed in one weekend. He had just picked up the telephone, and he couldn't believe his ears. "You want me to come along on a retreat for married couples?" The voice on the other end explained at length that it wasn't really a retreat for married couples. It was something much different. Besides, the group that was sponsoring these weekends really needed more priests to get involved. "But what am I supposed to say to married couples? I am not married and to be best of my knowledge, I have no immediate plans..." "You don't have to say anything. Just come along."

So Paddy Colleran went to spend a weekend with some married couples. And something happened to Paddy. Before too many calendar pages turned over, Paddy had dedicated his life and his priesthood to marriage. Paddy Colleran became the spiritual director of Worldwide Marriage Encounter. This group had been founded in Spain to strengthen and deepen Christian marriages. The movement has as its purpose to make the sacrament of Marriage come to life and a real force for good in the church and in the world.

The heart of the movement was a simple weekend experience - the same weekend experience that Paddy shared. The weekend experience, called a "Marriage Encounter" is based on a very simple premise: Christ has given married couples the graces needed to live full and productive, happy and powerful lives, but the couple needs to work a bit at using those graces. And they have some of the best tools right at hand: their love, their willingness to dialogue and communicate, and their willingness to grow. The weekend helps them do that.

Paddy became the "marriage priest". Yet, he was fond of telling anyone who would listen that the work he was doing with married couples had helped him in his priesthood. He and his brother priests needed to know the power of love, the need to dialogue, and the challenge of growth, too.

Paddy was doing great things. He was in his glory when thousands of married couples came to Los Angeles in the summer of 1977. Marriage Encounter was holding its annual convention at the Memorial Coliseum. Priest, sister, brothers, and married couples from all fifty states and four foreign countries were in attendance. The highlight of the convention was a mass celebrated in the coliseum by the cardinal. One priest told Paddy, "That mass was one of the happiest moments of my ministry. All of us were celebrating our commitment to the lives God has called us to."

Paddy felt he had just begun. He knew now he could use his priesthood to help his brothers and sisters reap the harvest of another great sacrament Marriage. He would not rest until every couple who so desired could make a Marriage Encounter weekend.

All Saints Day was a holiday. So Paddy went with his brother, Des, to do some swimming and diving in the ocean. Paddy never came home. Paddy drowned. The thousands of couples who had been touched by Paddy's priestly ministry were stunned.

Paddy-must have been smiling down on Vatican City recently. Pope John Paul I was talking to a number of English-speaking bishops. The pope urged the bishops to do everything in their power to help troubled marriages and to restore the dignity and holiness of marriage. After a brief prepared statement, the pope allowed the bishops to ask him question. One bishop raised his hand, "Your holiness, what is that we must do to help married couple with their problems?" "Just be priests," Pope John Paul replied. "Be more pastoral, and less administrative."

Paddy was grinning. He learned about that at a very special weekend. Now both he and Pope John Paul - the loving man who was pope for only a month - shared the truth of it - forever!

Fr. Paddy Colleran was National Executive Priest for Marriage Encounter when he died in 1977. He served with Dick & Barbara McBride. Everyone who knew him remembers the spark of life, twinkle in his eyes and Paddy's song, "If I can help somebody, then my living will not be in vain."

(Reprinted from the *Worldwide Family Spirit*, Nov. 1979)