

Hope in the Lord

Bishop Joseph E. Kurtz

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Make good marriages better

Marriage Encounter helps couples celebrate the dignity of the sacrament.

Last weekend I journeyed to Gatlinburg along with 35 married couples for the experience of a lifetime. Over a 48-hour period I witnessed and took part in an experience filled with God's grace and a lot of hard work by the participating couples. Good marriages were on the road to becoming even better.

I had heard about Marriage Encounter (ME) for years. In fact, about 20 years ago I was a priest presenter on half a dozen Engaged Encounters, modeled fairly closely on the same structure. I had also heard that ME is not a quick fix for ailing marriages. This is true, and it is important to know.

Some couples, I am told, are attracted to the idea of improving their relationship in Christ but don't want to get involved in something that appears to be counseling. Rest assured: the weekend is not a sign of weakness in a relationship but of strength. Those who took part were of varied backgrounds. On the weekend were a couple married only a few years and at least two couples whose marriages spanned more than four decades. One thing was common to all: good marriages becoming better.

My decision to go was at first based on the thought that my making the weekend would be a clear sign of my priority in strengthening married life in our diocese and supporting those who do. I suspect it will have this effect. But far more powerfully the weekend was a great experience of renewal for me, as it likely will be for other priests or religious. As I listened and reflected on the sanctity of marriage, on the call to holiness of married couples, on their zeal for each other even after years of married life, I found over and over again a profound similarity with the call to the priesthood.

Perhaps the phrases "being countercultural" and "swimming upstream" are being

overused today. Clearly they are right on the mark in describing ME. Rather than see marriage as living the single life but sharing expenses, ME makes real St. Paul's insight from Ephesians that the love of man and woman for each other is a clear mirror of the very love of Christ for his bride, the church. Moreover, children are raised to their rightful place of dignity. Our Holy Father has an eloquent way of describing children in marriage as a gift to be received and cherished, not a burden to be borne or a possession to be grasped and smothered. ME upholds that gift of new life, so essential to our Christian view of marriage.

There is a lot of press about the need for clarity on marriage as a union of one man and one woman. Father Xavier Mankel's article in this space a month ago clearly upheld our church teaching on the sanctity of marriage and the great dangers to society from those who seek to justify unions outside of marriage. Our church teaching, which rightly speaks of the dignity of every person regardless of his or her sexual orientation, clearly opposes behavior that challenges marriage as a permanent, faithful, and exclusive union of a man and a woman, freely given and open to the great gift of children. I stand with our Holy Father and our church teaching in proclaiming that truth and in supporting efforts to ensure a society that supports that truth. ME has a way of making sure that marriage is raised to the dignity it deserves.

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