

Marriage Encounter Comes to Japan

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(Excerpted from 1982 March-April *Worldwide Family Spirit* magazine)
Reprinted from *Columbian Mission*, October, 1980

"We were reluctant . . . fearful . . . hesitant . . . just plain scared!" Joh & Mikie were describing how they felt about attending one of the first Marriage Encounters ever held for all Japanese couples. Their feelings were understandable enough. So much in Marriage Encounter seems to go against the grain of Japanese mentality and training.

We both felt it to some degree when we joined a few American couples in the first Encounter ever held in Japan in 1974. And that even though my husband, Nori, is British, and I've had 17 years to get used to Western ways of thinking. Anyway, under the leadership of Jack & Judy, a beautiful couple from Philadelphia, and Father Ed Nemes, a local Jesuit who had his Encounter training in the U.S., the movement gradually spread among U.S. military people, and a few English speaking Japanese got involved too.

We all knew it wouldn't really take root in Japan, however, until local Christians using our own language became involved. The first step was to form a Japanese ME group in Zushi, near Kamakura, Kanagawa prefecture. But it took two years to form that core group, which commenced to translate the Weekend outline, a job and a joy that was indeed tedious, frustrating and, of course, so very time-consuming. And we kept wondering how Japanese couples would accept this Weekend which was full of love expressed so openly.

It was another year before we were ready for that Weekend we worked and prayed for so long. Three team couples and Fr. Ed gave the first all- Japanese Encounter for five couples, a Japanese priest and two Sisters.

Like Joh & Mikie (pronounced mickey-eh), that little group had reason to feel scared. "We had heard that the weekend was for people whose marriages were good and happy and we felt that ours wasn't all that good," they explain. "We were both going our own separate ways in leading our everyday lives and living together in the same house more like roommates than husband and wife! We were afraid we would be called on to change our ways and after so many years of letting our marriage get fixed into such a rut, we didn't welcome the thought of having to change."

Besides it is not customary for Japanese couples to express their feelings to or about each other. The wife especially is supposed to hide and repress her feelings and to be passive and give in to her husband.

For the Japanese husband to show his feelings to his wife or dialogue with her as an equal would be contrary to his status as the shujin, very definitely the boss.

Naturally the ME stress on marriage as an equal relationship is contrary to this attitude.

Again, Japanese couples are not accustomed to any sort of demonstrative show of affection, especially in front of others, and even alone kissing, embracing, holding hands and so on are regarded as being out of place, or for love-making only.

Actually it wasn't as difficult as we had feared for most of the couples. As Joh & Mikie both said, "it was easy for us to share the pleasant feelings but we felt negative, heavy and weighted down when we had to share the difficult feelings. Even now, it is not easy to share those negative feelings."

Joh pointed out that he couldn't get his feelings out during the Weekend because his sense of pride as a man made him resist sharing. It was only during the open-ended dialogue session on Saturday evening that he began to feel a little more willing to share with Mikie. And it was Sunday, after the "Marriage as a Sacrament" presentation, before he really began to open up.

Mikie had somewhat the same negative feelings. "Perhaps 'negative' isn't the right word," she says; "but we felt reluctant, embarrassed, and fearful about the other's reaction and acceptance when it came to telling anything about ourselves that might harm the nice image we hoped our partner had of us.

"When we overcame our reluctance to share the less attractive side of ourselves, we felt a deeper kind of love because we each knew our partner still accepted and loved us despite our shortcomings. From this, I came to realize that it's the same between me and God, and I learned to talk to Him in a more personal way than I ever could before. I can even complain to Him and show my seamy side to Him and know that He will understand and still love me, with all my faults."

At first, the sharing of more intimate feelings was a great shock, particularly to Mikie. But she soon realized it was helping her to have a healthier attitude and making her a better marriage partner and a better person, "because sharing these intimate things with my partner and listening to the sharings of the team couples and the priest help me to have a greater appreciation and understanding of sex in marriage. It has taught me that the traditional Japanese ideal of the wife's role as the ukemi, the passive partner who keeps all her personal feelings and preferences to herself, is not as good as the Christian ideal."

Joh felt very uncomfortable listening to the presentation of the husband because, it reflected himself. He felt Mikie could see through him and find all which he wanted to hide from her. But then he found out how surprised Mikie was to hear for the first time how "delicate a man could feel inside. I just couldn't understand how a man could be that sensitive, clearly expressing such feelings openly and in detail."

Though Joh & Mikie, who have been married 12 years, truly believed they were a couple that got along well together and were looked upon by others as a happily married couple, they soon realized they didn't know each other very well at all, and finding themselves again was a joyful discovery.

"We didn't experience any great change at the time in our relationship, as some more recently married couples appeared to do, as if they had fallen in love all over again, but ever since our Weekend we have been experiencing its good effects, gradually changing our marriage for the better," Mikie says.

"For us the greatest discovery was not about ourselves but about God and His Church. For me, a convert, it was wonderful to come to realize and to feel that God the Father and Christ are real, loving Persons who are close to me, concerned about me, loving and accepting me just as I am, and sharing with us and our family in our relationship as a "little church."

"That's what made me feel freed from disillusionment about the Church and about being Christian. I had been searching for something more, something better than what I found and now I felt that I had discovered it. I came to see that love is a decision and if that's what it is, then I can do something, about it, not only in my marriage but in my relationship with God and my attitude toward the Church."

Now both Joh & Mikie are active in Marriage Encounter. It is not easy, since they are not used to leaving their children alone. In Japan, couples seldom go out together and leave the children by themselves at night. And Joh has long working hours and he commutes a long way. But somehow they're finding time for ME as have so many other couples.

Itoko & I, as one of the original couples, find the impact of Marriage Encounter in Japan - 300 couples so far - truly satisfactory. Only Catholic couples have been on the Weekend so far, but mixed non-Catholic couples will be invited shortly.

At this stage ME cannot be said to be an evangelization tool, but off-shoot programs for single persons such as "CHOICE" have definitely such tendencies. Now we see more and more couples, young and old, not only working very hard to make their own marriages better, but trying actively to invite others to experience the Weekend.

This reaching out now has spread to Osaka/Kobe/Kyoto areas and Nagoya as well. With our Father's help, we can visualize Marriage Encounter spreading, in due course, to all of Japan. We are happy to be a part of it.