

Forum Notes Pre-Cana Value, Need for More Instructors

By MARTIN TOOMBS
Southern Tier Editor

Elmira Heights—The importance of marriage preparation and the need for more pre-Cana instructors were points of agreement at a Southern Tier forum on pre-marriage programs at St. Charles Borromeo Dec. 1.

Twenty representatives of pre-Cana programs in Corning, Elmira, Horseheads

and Owego met with staff of the diocesan Family Life Office to discuss marriage preparation programs.

James and Donna Fitch, who recently took responsibility for working with diocesan pre-marriage programs, outlined their goals for the future, emphasizing that they intend to serve pre-Cana volunteers, not direct them.

Also attending the session were Frank and Susan

Staropoli, Family Life Office co-directors, Father Edward Palumbos, liaison to Marriage Encounter, and Sister Kathleen Kircher, coordinator of ministry to the divorced and separated.

The Staropolis related that their department includes efforts in marriage preparation, family enrichment, Natural Family Planning, respect-for-life issues, Marriage Encounter and ministry to the divorced and separated. Staropoli called family enrichment the "most undervalued," and also noted that much effort is needed in the pre-marriage programs, including high school education, engaged encounter, pre-Cana, and, a new consideration he said, preparation for those entering a second marriage.

Donna Fitch told those pre-Cana instructors attending that she and her husband had been on the job for only one month, and needed the instructors to "tell us how you need us to be," what services are most needed, and how the diocese can best assist local efforts.

Elmira couples working in pre-Cana reported that their current five team couples are overworked. "We wear couples out" presenting as many as eight sessions each year, causing a high turnover, it was reported. They also noted that they have difficulty holding the sessions to a maximum of 18 couples, adding that couples from two of Elmira's parishes are providing instruction for the entire city. The situation is such that they have contemplated refusing couples from parishes that don't support the program, they said. And to further complicate the overcrowding, they often receive couples from as far as Hornell and Geneva. Instructors from St. Mary Our Mother, Horseheads, reported that they also have had couples from Geneva enroll.

Corning pre-Cana instructors noted that they have six active couples, who all work on the two sessions they offer each year, a system that has been working, they said. They also reported that when they first began, they visited all the priests in the four parishes of Corning and

Painted Post, asking for their support.

An instructor from St. Patrick's, Owego, noted that his parish has five couples who offer the program on a couple-to-couple basis.

The half-hour discussion was spirited, as those attending explained their methods and their problems, which centered on recruitment of instructors. Also discussed was the need for a greater awareness of the need and purpose for pre-Cana, to counter the often negative attitudes toward the classes on the part of couples participating.

Responding to questions concerning programs in other localities, Staropoli said that "we're just starting to learn who has pre-Cana," something they discovered when they tried to send out notices that the meeting was being offered.

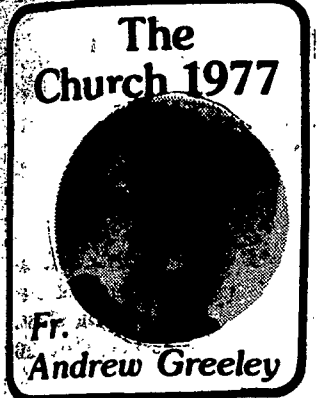
Also raised was the need for Natural Family Planning (NFP) instructors, especially in Elmira. Currently one instructor in Hornell is the only one teaching NFP in the Southern Tier. Susan Staropoli commented that the pre-Cana explanations of NFP can be a problem, because if all the couples decided to learn NFP, "we don't have teaching couples to back that up."

Staropoli noted that a training session for NFP instructors is under way and 15 couples are participating, and he believed that four were from the Southern Tier. He added that another training session is planned for the Spring

Father Palumbos emphasized the need for married couples to be at the front of pre-Cana programs. He also told the instructors that pre-Cana "is a ministry, not a job," and that couples should show the participants that they are offering the program because "you care about their relationship so much."

Sister Kathleen Kircher pointed out that many divorced people would make good advisers for pre-Cana instructors.

She emphasized that the members of the divorced Catholic groups are much opposed to divorce, and she challenged the instructors "to think of the gifts these people can bring to pre-Cana programs."



Princeton University's Professor Charles Westoff is one of the best sociologists in the country, preeminent especially in the study of fertility, attitudes and behavior. In a discipline permeated by anti-Catholic feeling he is totally innocent of that bias.

Unlike most sociologists, however, Charles Westoff has excellent reason for being anti-Catholic. In recent years, on two occasions, his careful research has been the target of irresponsible, outrageous criticism by a Catholic bureaucrat, Msgr. James McHugh of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. I don't think Professor Westoff has a low opinion of the Catholic Church, but if he does, after Msgr. McHugh's criticisms I wouldn't blame him one bit.

Westoff's most recent study confirms what anybody who has heard confession or anybody who has looked at survey data knows: for all practical purposes the church's ban on artificial birth control is a dead letter.

But Westoff and his colleague, Elise Jones, say, "Almost all Catholic women married after 1966-1970 have abandoned church teaching on birth control by the time they have been married ten years." Of course, projection based on present trends might change. Those Catholics who are practicing birth control now might change their minds and a new generation of Catholics might come along and enthusiastically embrace the old birth control doctrine.

Both events seem extremely unlikely. No one I know of who has done any research on the matter has uncovered the slightest indication of such change, and the inherent improbability of a grass roots movement reversing the decision married Catholic people made in the 1960s that Pope Paul VI was wrong in "Humanae Vitae" should be obvious to all.

But Msgr. McHugh, in an incredibly fatuous critique of the Westoff-Jones report, alleged that he was optimistic about the church's stand on family planning's capacity to gain more adherence. The 1960s, he argued, was a special decade in which there was an expectation of change in the birth control doctrine.

Now that the decade is over and the expectation of change is gone it would seem that Catholics will gradually drift back to accepting the doctrine. To which one must say, "Monsignor McHugh, name me a single person!"

Msgr. McHugh then asserts that there is a "greater interest in the church's teaching on marriage and family life." The only evidence of this greater interest he cites is the marriage encounter movement.

One is so appalled at such an argument that there is nothing to say. Is Msgr. McHugh trying to persuade us that the marriage encounter movement seriously attempts to reverse the decision of the Catholic laity on birth control? And does he seriously argue that this attempt is having any success at all? Does he take on the country's most competent fertility researcher and offer unspookably bad advice to the national hierarchy about directions of the thinking of the Catholic laity based entirely on the very slender reed of the marriage encounter movement and that movement's alleged (though invisible) success in reversing the laity's thinking on birth control?

In a recent study done in the archdiocese of Chicago (hardly funded by the archdiocese, heaven save us) only 17 percent of Catholic adults were found to support the teaching of "Humanae Vitae." Is that a sign of the reversal which Msgr. McHugh seems to think is taking place?

Msgr. McHugh may actually believe what he says. Then he is surely one of the most incompetent and uninformed bureaucrats serving the American hierarchy.

What else is new?

Business in the Diocese

Anthony DeMeo of Clover Street in Mendon has been named manager of the hardware and garden department at Fairport Home & Garden Center. DeMeo is a graduate of St. John Fisher College where he was named to Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities. A native of Geneva, he is a graduate of DeSales High School.

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CARDINAL DIES
Rome (RNS) - Cardinal Luigi Traglia, dean of the Sacred College of Cardinals, died in a Rome clinic Nov. 22, following a long illness. He was 82.
His death reduces the number of cardinals to 132, and the number of Italian cardinals to 34, six of whom, because they are over 80, are ineligible to vote in a papal election.

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