

Engaged Encounter: — A Personal Experience

By Dale Wright

This particular weekend marked the last one of the summer that Meg and I would spend together: she would spend the rest of them working as a nurse's aide in an infirmary. Meg and I were engaged and expected to get married in nine months. We had discussed the possibility of going to the lake for the weekend. I envisioned three days of laying in the sun, swimming and sailing. This was our favorite way to occupy a weekend together.

Meg arrived at my house at 5 p.m. Thursday. She bounded out of her car, wrapped her arms around me and kissed me. "Guess what, Dale? We're going to Engaged Encounter." Engaged Encounter (EE) is a retreat for engaged couples sponsored by the Catholic Church. Meg is Catholic, but I am not.

What? I thought. No lake, no sun, no sailing. You've gotta be kidding. You certainly can find something better to do with our weekend than to spend it in a monastery or something.

But Meg was so enthused. I didn't want to disappoint her by telling her I wasn't going, or even by suggesting I wasn't looking forward to it. I forced a smile on my face and tried to sound excited. "Great," I said. "That should be fun."

My attitude towards EE had not changed by the time our car was packed and we were on our way the next evening. I viewed it as a necessary evil in the long process of preparing for marriage. I thought that the fact that I wasn't Catholic would mean endless classes on the doctrine of the Church.

Our arrival at St. Michael's Seminary was no different from that of any other retreat. We registered, were shown to our rooms, and went to the conference room for the opening meeting. I sat in my chair, nervously sucking on the end of my pen, waiting for the meeting to start.

"You'll get out of this weekend whatever you put into it." I had heard those words so many times before, but somehow they hit home this time. I immediately became excited about and expectant of what the weekend would hold. "Let's go for it," I whispered to Meg. Things got even better when I was told there would be no doctrine classes, and when I discovered about half of those in attendance were non-Catholics.

The leaders, or team as they called themselves, consisted of two married couples and a priest. They immediately warned us that at times we would become tired because of the vigorous schedule. We would want to quit, not give 100 percent or just sit back and relax. "Whenever that temptation comes, push a little harder. Do it for your fiancée," said Father. We were also instructed that we were to concentrate on our fiancée, not make new friends.

The couples on the team were very open and honest. They didn't paint the picture of marriage as a bed of roses without any thorns. They used their experience in explaining common problems and various ways of solving them.

Obviously, Father had no wife or fiancée, but he

masterfully integrated the same ideas and principles into his relationship with the Church. He used his experience in counseling and talking to other married couples in relating to us.

After each session involving a talk from one or both of the couples and the priest, everyone was handed a set of questions. The couples then split up and answered the questions in writing. Afterward, we would reunite alone with our fiancée, read and discuss each other's answers.

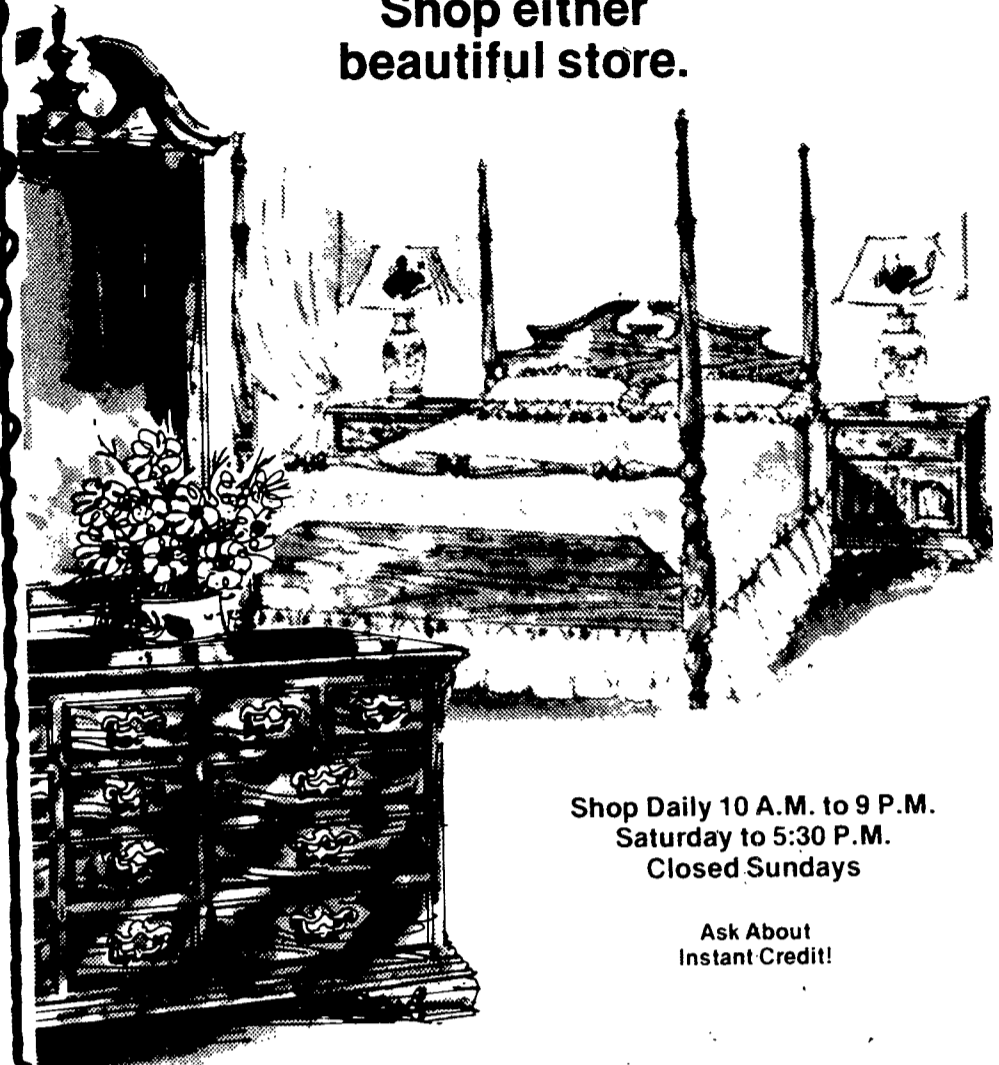
There were several reasons for writing and being separated while doing so. By writing there were no "yes, buts" injected in; I couldn't interrupt Meg and she couldn't interrupt me.

I could really concentrate on talking to Meg through my answers.

At the end of the weekend we were told that a specific family had been praying for us, and would continue to do so. We were handed a letter from that family. Our letter said that a candle had been burning in their home, as a reminder of us on our weekend. What a neat feeling to know that someone we didn't even know was praying for us by name.

We drove home Sunday afternoon exhausted but happy. Our weekend had been the best three days of our life together. We learned so much about each other, about our decision to love and about our future. Engaged Encounter is an excellent and very beneficial program. I just wish more couples would take advantage of it.

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