

# Pastoral Council hears plea to endorse renewal program

By Teresa A. Parsons

Last year an estimated 3,000 couples married in the Diocese of Rochester. During the same period, several hundred couples were granted annulments, and several thousand more participated in ministries to the separated and divorced.

So far this year, however, only 50 couples throughout the diocese have participated in Marriage Encounter — one of the only programs in the diocese designed to end and strengthen healthy marriages.

Those statistics alarm John and Pamela Notebaert, two leaders of the local Marriage Encounter movement. During a presentation to members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) on Saturday, Oct. 3, at Good Shepherd Church in Henrietta, the Notebaerts asked the council to pass a statement of "active support" for the Marriage Encounter movement.

"If this is a positive program in the diocese, we ask you to positively endorse it," Pamela Notebaert said. "It's not enough to stand by and watch it die of benign neglect."

In addition to a statement, the Notebaerts requested that DPC members consider signing up for a Marriage Encounter weekend, recommend it in their own communities, and support the re-establishment of a diocesan Office of Family Life.

"It's obvious to us that our children are going to need a program like Marriage Encounter more than our generation ever has," John Notebaert said. "Maybe if (Marriage Encounter) were more supported, there wouldn't be such a need for separated and divorced ministry."

Founded nearly 20 years ago in Spain, the Marriage Encounter movement aims to strengthen and renew marriages by teaching couples how to improve their communications skills during weekend retreats. Priests and religious also participate in encounter weekends to renew their vowed relationships to the Church. In addition to the initial weekend, Marriage Encounter offers a host of follow-up programs for individual parishes and groups.

The movement enjoyed tremendous popularity in the late 1970s, attracting more than 10,000 diocesan couples, priests and religious between 1972 and 1982. But the num-

bers have dropped drastically since then. During the last five years, only 750 couples, priests and religious attended Marriage Encounter weekends.

The lack of support illustrated by diminishing numbers of participants has caused burn-out among some Marriage Encounter leaders. "The dedicated few who are left are getting very, very tired," John Notebaert said.

One obvious reason for the decline in numbers is that the program's novelty has worn off. But increasing numbers of two-income families have also meant that fewer couples have time for weekend retreats.

Marriage Encounter has long suffered from the misconception that it is geared toward improving troubled marriages rather than strengthening those that are healthy. That misconception has grown more prevalent as the number of priests and pastors involved in the movement has declined.

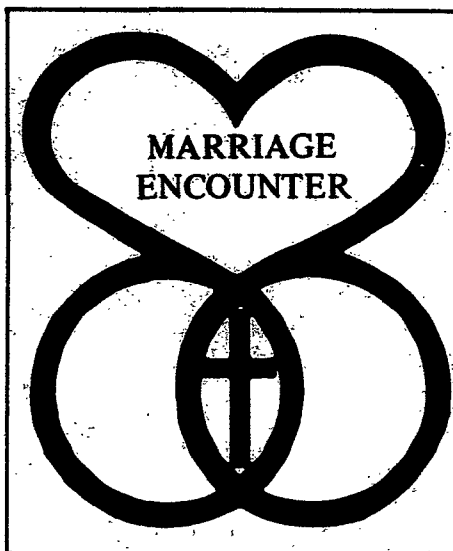
In addition, the Notebaerts pointed to an apparent correspondence between the diminishing number of priests involved with the Marriage Encounter movement and the shrinking numbers of couples participating. In 1972, nearly a dozen priests were active in the movement. Today, Marriage Encounter can claim the services of only two priests, one on a full-time basis and one part-time.

The Notebaerts recognize that the shortage of priests is likely to preclude a return to such extensive involvement in the future. But they still rely on pastors to recommend Marriage Encounter to parishioners.

"Our best advertising is by word of mouth," John Notebaert said. "We need active support from pastors to affirm couples to get involved ... and to encourage them to strive for greatness in their marriages."

DPC members did not act on the Notebaerts' request for a statement of endorsement at last Saturday's meeting, which was the first of the 1987/88 year. Members of the council's executive committee will discuss the request at their October meeting. Specific proposals are likely to appear on the agenda for the council's next meeting, which is scheduled for Saturday, Nov. 14.

Also included on last Saturday's DPC agenda was a report from Father Paul J. Ryan on efforts to recruit members of a new diocesan



Leaders of the Marriage Encounter movement fear that "benign neglect" may bring an end to one of the only local renewal programs geared toward strengthening healthy marriages.

mission team to serve in Tabasco, Mexico. Five men and women have already applied for the permanent team, and three for the summer team.

During the DPC's afternoon session, Sister Dawn Nothwehr, the diocesan Office of Social Ministry's associate director for justice and

peace, outlined the theological underpinnings and practical implications of the bishops' pastoral letter on Catholic social teaching and the U.S. economy.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark reported during the Bishop's Forum section of the meeting that 11 members had been appointed to the Oversight Task Force. The task force is charged with identifying what finances will be needed to implement the eight recommendations of the Five-Year Financial Planning Process Task Force. Meanwhile, eight subcommittees of the task force will also be appointed to deal specifically with each of the recommendations.

Bishop Clark also observed that the Joint Executive Committee, a group comprising representatives of the DPC, Priests' Council and Diocesan Sisters' Council, is continuing to study ways in which the three bodies can work together more effectively.

Ron Jodoin, DPC chairman, reported that at present members of the Joint Executive Committee do not appear to support merging the three groups into one consultative body — an alternative model that was outlined by representatives of the Diocese of Saginaw, Mich., last year.

Meanwhile, Jodoin noted, members of the Ministerial Review Committee (MRC) have decided not to produce their next semi-annual review of diocesan programs, scheduled in January. Instead, the DPC subcommittee will focus for the remainder of 1987 on evaluating and restructuring the way it operates.

## AIDS to be topic of seminar in hospital's health series

The Development Council of St. Joseph's Hospital will present another "To Your Health" seminar in the Assembly Hall of the Chemung County Nursing Facility on Wednesday, October 14, at 7:30 p.m. This month's program is entitled, "AIDS: The State of This Dreaded Condition."

Dr. John Schiavone, an Elmira-area internist, who has become known as one of the local authorities on the subject of AIDS,

lecturing on the topic to the general medical community and requesting audiences. Dr. Schiavone will focus on the treatment, prevention and general information surrounding the disease.

Admission is free to each program, which is open to the public. Reservations are encouraged and may be made by contacting the community relations office at (607)737-7810.

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