

Marriage

Weekends renew wedded bliss

Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

All it takes to experience a Marriage Encounter (to "enrich" marriages) or Retrouvaille (to improve problem marriages) program is the desire and a telephone. Both international programs are offered regularly in the diocese.

Actually, organizers realize it often takes more to pick up the phone — "intestinal fortitude" for some, Jerry Monaghan, a diocesan Retrouvaille coordinator, said. Perhaps that's one reason why so many call Marriage Encounter at 800/795-LOVE. Since the toll-free number was established in 1993, it has received more than 20,000 calls — including some from within the diocese, according to area leaders. Callers' names are referred to the nearest contacts.

Taking the next step, callers have brought to more than two million the number of couples who have taken part in Marriage Encounter weekends in its 26 years, according to a press release. Retrouvaille, which came to the United States from Canada in 1982, has reached about 50,000 couples, primarily in the United States, according to Diocese of Philadelphia resident Bill Zwan, an international coordinator for Retrouvaille.

The numbers continue to grow. Marriage Encounter

weekends in the Diocese of Rochester are planned for March 22-24 at the Brookwood Inn in Pittsford and the Days Inn in Bath; for April 26-28 at the Brookwood Inn; and June 14-16 at the Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua. Information is available from John and Belinda Brasley of Bath, 607/776-4870, and Carol and Gary Stevens of Brockport, 716/637-0601.

"In addition to strengthening a couple's marriage and communication skills within the marriage, the weekend does renew your faith and teaches couples about being a sign of the sacrament," Belinda Brasley said of Marriage Encounter. It also emphasizes learning to prioritize. "My husband and I are constantly reprioritizing, seeing what takes away time as a couple, even volunteer work," she said.

The Brasleys, of St. Mary's Church in Bath, became presenters after their 1992 weekend. They are one of three couples who, with a priest, present a talk to the entire group during the weekend, held at a hotel. Afterward, each couple has private time to reflect on the talk and to practice communication techniques. No group discussion is required. The weekend encourages each spouse to concentrate on the other.

"My husband and I had a good marriage before we

went, but we had settled into a routine," Belinda said. "Over the weekend we kind of reawakened the romance, the love. ...It was a wonderful weekend for us. And it lasted. It has kept us so close."

Retrouvaille ("Rediscovery"), on the other hand, readily accepts couples who have separated or are considering a separation. Monaghan and his wife Trudy, of Our Mother of Sorrows Church in Greece, coordinate Retrouvaille programs and also have worked with Marriage and Engaged encounters. Monaghan explained that Retrouvaille was developed for couples with troubled marriages. Its approach isn't to solve problems or provide miracle cures, he said.

Like Marriage Encounter, Retrouvaille involves a weekend of presentations, help for communicating and time to practice it. While Retrouvaille weekends tend to be more somber, Monaghan said, they offer "a pocketful of hope."

The hope is for troubled marriages in particular, he said. There's little chance of landing in the wrong program. "When Marriage Encounter interviews people who plan to attend, if they determine there is a problem they refer them to us. And we do the reverse, if a couple is looking at Retrouvaille and considers their marriage to be in good shape."

A Retrouvaille announcement in her Holy Trinity Church bulletin in Webster ap-

pealed to Mary Rita Whitcomb, separated at the time from her husband Scott. Married nine years, they'd had four children.

"We just couldn't communicate without an argument. It was difficult. Now we rarely argue," Mary said, with a laugh. "We may raise our voice and say, 'Are you listening?'"

"The weekend is very important," she continued. "It teaches you the basics. It teaches you the heart of your marriage, and then you can deal with any other problem."

Mary remembered when Scott was laid off from Rochester Telephone and she was eight months pregnant with their fifth child.

"Before, it would be devastating," she said. "But we were able to communicate to get through that."

Scott is now studying full-time to become a physician's assistant, and works full-time as an LPN.

The Whitcombs were so sold on Retrouvaille, they soon became presenters for Retrouvaille weekends. But they are concerned for its future. "One of the biggest obstacles is finding clergy," Scott said. "This



ministry will die if we can't get that."

Father Leo Klem, longtime chaplain for Retrouvaille, Marriage Encounter, and Engaged Encounter, is retiring. Retrouvaille flew a New Jersey priest here to co-present, hear confessions, and say a closing Mass for a recent weekend.

"We don't receive funding," Scott said. Donations from couples cover costs.

Recalling that he and his wife could not afford a donation for their weekend, he said, "I don't ever want money to be a reason somebody doesn't come on the program."

Monaghan wrote letters to diocesan priests but to no avail.

For now, Retrouvaille weekends are planned for March 22-24 and Sept. 20-22 at the Marketplace Inn in Henrietta. Further information may be obtained from the Monaghans at 716/621-2901.

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