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Making marriage work

In-depth programs for engaged and married couples were not the norm when Sue and Jim Munroe tied the knot. Rather, they said, couples from that era simply met with the celebrant prior to the wedding day, assuming they'd stay together for life.

"We were in it for the long haul," Sue said.

Indeed they were: The Munroes were among the honorees at a Mass for couples married 50 years or more, held on Valentine's Day at St. Patrick's Church in Owego — the site of the Munroes' nuptials more than 51 years ago. This annual parish event parallels the diocesan-wide Wedding Jubilee Mass, presented each year for couples married 25, 30, 40, 50 or more years.

But the Munroes are well aware that the long haul, so to speak, is harder to travel for modern newlyweds. Two of their nine children have experienced divorce, and Sue blames some of her children's struggles on shifting cultural values.

"Our kids did their best. But the times, they were a-changin'," Sue said, citing the 1964 Bob Dylan song.

She noted that society's increasing openness toward sex before marriage, sexual content on television and divorce were not commonly accepted in her generation: "It was pretty much of a disgrace to get a divorce. People just kind of whispered the word," Sue said, adding that she knows several married couples who struggled but remained together. "In today's world they probably would have gotten a divorce," her husband remarked.

"The statistics are facing



After 54 years of marriage, Alice and Bill Cyganovich renew their wedding vows Feb. 14 during the annual anniversary Mass at Owego's St. Patrick's Church. They were joined by three of Bill's siblings and their spouses, as well as 10 other couples who were celebrating 50 or more years of marriage.

us; we know what we're up against. We're a throwaway society," agreed Betty D'Arcy, who coordinated the Feb. 14 anniversary Mass in Owego. D'Arcy serves as pastoral associate for St. Patrick's and Blessed Trinity parishes, both based in Tioga County.

To strengthen the often-fragile state of this supposedly lifelong commitment, the Diocese of Rochester has increased its focus on mandatory marriage-preparation programs as well as marriage-support ministries, said Sister of St. Joseph Karen

Dietz, diocesan coordinator of sacramental catechesis.

Sister Dietz acknowledged that engaged couples sometimes ask her why they're required to spend a full day or more answering questionnaires and taking part in sharing sessions. "We're not trying to make them jump through hoops. It's to give couples every opportunity to make the marriage work — to give it every chance in a world where commitment and marriage are not necessarily valued," she explained.

She said that today's church has an important responsibility to offer assistance in this area. "When I think of when my parents were married (in the 1950s), their own parents were married and their neighborhood was full of couples who were married that you could go to for advice," Sister Dietz said. "I just think the support system was different and better."

MANY PROGRAMS

For engaged couples, marriage preparation — or pre-Cana — is offered as a one-day session either through the diocese or a parish. The diocese also endorses Engaged Encounter, a weekend marriage-preparation program, as well as Unitas, a relatively new program spread over a six- to eight-week period. Unitas is based on the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, emphasizing a couple's relationship with an entire parish community.

Another recent addition to marriage-preparation offerings is FOCCUS, a counseling tool that guides couples to examine such issues as lifestyle

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