

Ram's Horn

Marriage Retorno Newsletter
Fall 2006 Vol. 110

Strengthening Marriages
Through Scriptural Prayer



**Journey Together
To God**

From the editors

Mike & Maureen Oates

Greetings! Please make your reservation now for the *National Marriage* Retorno Conference to be held October 27-29, 2006 at The Trinity Center in Pine Knolls Shores, NC. See below for details.

In the Winter 2005, Vol 107, issue of this newsletter, there is an article, *Our Ministry: Fostering Couple Prayer or Presenting the Marriage Retorno Weekend?*, by Ben & Gladys Whitehouse. While reaffirming enthusiastically their *MR* experience, Ben & Gladys write "The time has come to focus our energy on fostering couple prayer in new and creative ways rather than focusing solely on the *MR* weekend experience." The articles by Fr. Mel Hemann and Mike & Maureen Oates in this current issue of the **Ram's Horn** are an attempt to respond to that challenge.

In this issue of the **Ram's Horn** you will find:

1. News and Notes
- [2. The Fall 2006 National *MR* Conference](#)
- [3. A report on an *MR* presented by Kevin & Kathie Stogsdill](#)
- [4. An article by Fr. Mel Hemann](#)
- [5. An article by Mike & Maureen Oates](#)

1. NEWS AND NOTES

We have heard, via Joe & Mary Ward, that Fr. David Clay from Manila is currently traveling in the US. He hopes to be at the *MR* Conference in NC in October. He is active in the *MR* ministry in the Philippines.

We received a letter from Terry & Mona Ball who made the *MR* with Fr. Mel and us many years ago. They are very active in their parish in Iowa City, IA. They are looking forward to retirement from teaching in the near

future in order to serve in the areas of music ministry and parish leadership.

We received an e mail message from Bob Kretschmer. He writes: *Thank you for your note and the suggestion to view the **Ram's Horn**. After traveling Turkey, England, France, I was with Joy as she got settled at Lee Abbey-her living quarters and AIU-her University. After a month in school, I spoke to her on the phone and she asked me a question, "How are you doing?" The question caught me off guard! After thought, I said "I am home in an empty house with your three cats and I miss both Mom and you!" She told me that she had gone through the valley where she considered chucking the whole thing and then made it to the top of the mountain with a smile on her face. She said, "I guess we are both going through a change!" At this point, she is half way through her first quarter. She is planning on finishing her degree in Architectural Design in three years by completing four quarters each year. The house is like a tomb without her around!*

*Wow! Colored pictures in the **Ram's Horn**! It was good to see the faithful few, a bit older, but still faithful. **MR** has touched a lot of people through this group planting the seeds. I finally retired at 73, three weeks ago so that is another change that I am addressing. Change is the key word in my life at the present time!"*

We received an e mail message from Kevin & Kathie Stogsdill (see the article below for a report on their **MR** weekend.) They write: *"Keep us in your prayers as we move on with God's work to present a Formation Weekend for a Kansas City Retrouvaille community this coming weekend. We are home for a week and half, then off to Washington DC for a Retrouvaille conference where we will be giving a "Healing Touch for Couples" workshop, as well as facilitating new ideas at a workshoppers' resource meeting.*

Unfortunately it looks like we will not be able to make the MR conference this year. After much prayer, dialogue, and discussion, we mutually decided to let 2 outings a year with Kevin's brothers take priority. These outings are usually scheduled in February and October. Since we have been so active in ministry, and I am working during the week, Kevin is doing most of the care of Mom. These 2 outings in nature with his brothers and our sons, is one of the ways he communes with God outside of Scripture. He needs these outings for self care and it is a form of prayer for him. It would have worked out better if it had been in November as usual. I had taken the time off work, as we had not fully decided whether to go, when we found out the date of the Conference was the same as his outing. However, God is telling me to stay home and use the time to have quality time with mom, as we have been gone so much lately. We have ordered the booklet Communities of Salt and Light and will be reading and sharing together the contents, so rest assured we will be thinking of you and hoping again to make next year's conference (if it is not in the last 2 weeks of October or the first weekend of October 2007 as they are always booked for us). We are still very committed to Marriage Retorno and working at training a new team who at the last minute had health issues interfere with their attendance this weekend.

Another fruit of this weekend, is the desire of the couples to meet monthly to share Scripture. We hope to put this into practice soon in our local Retrouvaille community. We passed out the book Speak Lord, Your Servant is Listening, we might choose a topic and use those Scripture references.

*Apparently, the San Diego **MR** for ME we were hoping for in November has fallen through as the couple was unable to find a facility. They were looking for one that couples could go home. We will keep in contact with them. Much love to all, Kathie and Kevin"*

We received a reply to a letter we wrote. Lamberto & Sandra Rodriguez live in the Diocese of San Bernardino, CA. As you know, we were so pleased with our bilingual **MR** here in June, (see Summer 2006 issue of the Ram's Horn.) that we sent the Bishops of that diocese letters in praise and gratitude for the ministry of L & S. Please see the last page of this issue for [Bishop Gerald R. Barnes' response to our letter.](#)

2006 NATIONAL MARRIAGE RETORNO CONFERENCE

October 27-29, 2006

at

[The Trinity Center](#)

Pine Knoll Shores, North Carolina

Conference Theme: **Couple Prayer and Social Justice**

Cost: \$270 couple; \$135 single

Closest major airport is Raleigh (3hr drive)

or New Bern (30 minutes)

Ben's Taxi Service available at both airports if scheduled

The Conference will start with dinner Friday evening at 6:00 and end on Sunday with lunch at noon.

The cost is \$275/couple including two nights lodging and all six meals. RSVP to local host couple: Ben & Gladys Whitehouse. Phone them at 919-841-5594 or 919-906-0289 cell or send an e-mail to [Ben](#) or [Gladys Whitehouse](#) if you plan to attend.

Note: Presenters at the Conference will be using the US Council of Catholic Bishops booklet called Communities of Salt & Light as their resource. Rick, Deb & Mel have ordered and received 15 copies of the booklet. They are planning to provide a copy of the booklet to each couple on Friday night of the conference. Attendees who wish to read Communities of Salt and Light in advance of the conference can obtain a copy at: USCCB Publishing (see below). The price per booklet is \$2.50 plus shipping and handling. Request ISBN Number 1-57455-764-5 and Product Number - 5-764. Contact US NCCB by phone - 202-541-3029 or follow this link to their website - [USCCB Publishing](#)

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3. A REPORT ON AN MR WEEKEND, SEPTEMBER 15-17

by Kevin & Kathie Stogsdill

The Spirit was at work as usual this weekend. The 9 couples were mostly from Retrouvaille, as we had been asked to give the **MR** as an enrichment experience. The reconciliation service was reported to be a profound experience by most of the couples. (We used the washing of feet.) We had couples married 53 years to 2 years. Several couples were new to Scripture, but they had the hunger and longing to know more about God and re-discovered how God had been leading them even in difficulties of their marriage. They realized how God not only loved them but was empowering them as they looked back on their lives realizing that they were doing things that would never have been possible without God's graces. Gratitude was expressed for discovering how Scripture could be applied to their lives and not only improve their intimacy but keep open communication with God going on a daily basis. Many made



commitments not only to Scripture dialogue but to family Scripture sharing. We had one couple who had made *MR* with us 10 years ago. They found out we were having a weekend (thru the Spirit, because we did not advertise this weekend). They wanted to use the weekend to discern about adopting another child. They have adopted 2 already, but he was hesitant to add to the family. They told us that Kevin's sharing of self, and God's urging and affirmation in Scripture, have encouraged them to move forward. One wife shared that she prayed to



be able to see the Spirit in her spouse and behold, her prayer was answered when her spouse came back from his time in Scripture. He was radiant and excited speaking from his heart his discoveries. She had read the same Scripture he did, but was feeling very dry and did not get anything out of the reading. She was touched by her spouse's discoveries and witnessed the Spirit in him, the answer to her prayer. She told us she was used to thinking the Spirit only worked through her. She was blown away in a beautiful way. Praise God!

4. A *MARRIAGE RETORNO* VISION

by Mel Hemann

Those of you who have been around awhile remember Ron and LC Vail. They were very active in Marriage Encounter and *Marriage Retorno* in south Florida and were at the annual *MR* conferences. Ron died suddenly almost 25 years ago. Following his death, LC was called upon quite frequently to share her grieving process with a variety of people who were coping with the same experiences.

Meanwhile I was, among other things, heavily involved in similar experiences throughout the land. Both of us were dealing with individuals who had lost a spouse either through death, separation, or divorce.

Both of us came to the realization there was a large community of hurting people out there who needed help. While the Beginning Experience weekend and similar events are very successful in helping bring closure to the past, they do not address the emptiness resulting from not having that special someone with whom to share those intimate spiritual moments. It was obvious that what was needed was a *Marriage Retorno* experience for singles that would make them more comfortable in sharing prayer with another. To our surprise, we discovered nothing like that existed. The better part of the following year was spent putting together a weekend experience we named THE NEET EXPERIENCE (Needs Encountered; Experiences Transformed). The next few years we offered THE NEET EXPERIENCE to groups in over a dozen dioceses. As with so many other worthwhile projects, it passed from lack of local leadership. The one exception was my diocese, the Archdiocese of Dubuque. We had the good fortune of turning the program over to a deeply committed and devout Catholic divorcee, Ginny. We haven't had a NEET EXPERIENCE weekend for a number of years but she continues to respond to the needs of those who have, by holding an annual reunion retreat. The past few years numbers had dwindled but the spirit of NEET served them well as they responded to the common needs they experienced within each other. As time and age continued to take its toll each year, the future looked bleaker. But for this year's NEET gathering, to be held in a couple of weeks, the number registered has more than doubled. WHY? Because the faithful few have continued to share their experiences and invited others to join them.

For about the last 10 years or so the annual *MR* Conference experience has been very similar to THE NEET EXPERIENCE, with questions about the future and about weekends. The NEET people are proving that a willingness to share and invite does bring results. The Spirit is at work. Are we an obstacle, a hindrance, or do we honestly and in a positive way attempt to continue sharing what Fr. Calvo and his visionaries have given us through the years? This is something to reflect on as we prepare for *MR* conference 2006.

5. THE BLESSING OF BEING A SPONSOR COUPLE

by Mike & Maureen Oates

Our Saint Patrick Parish, Cedar Falls, IA, is well-known to the Marriage Retorno community, since we have hosted two **MR** national conferences, as well as several **MR** weekends. We believe that being a sponsor couple is one way we have to witness and share the joys and benefits we have gleaned from our **MR** experience.

It is not our intent to favor one method of marriage preparation over another. In its wisdom, our Church promotes a number of approaches, including Engaged Encounter, Pre-Cana Conference, and Sponsor Couple. But since the latter is used in our parish, we would like to identify a number of blessings derived from our experience in marriage preparation involving a couple-to-couple process.

In this parish, the adoption of a sponsor-couple approach places a value on the lived experience of married couples. This is a vital affirmation of how we couples try to respond to the call to be faithful to our sacrament. This approach means that sponsor couples are collaborators with their pastor and/or pastoral associate, who are the first to meet with engaged couples and interview them. Once the couple has that initial meeting in the parish office, they are assigned to one of the sponsoring couples. The sponsors contact the engaged couple and invite them to their home. Typically this involves sharing a meal after which each future spouse fills out the elaborate FOCCUS questionnaire.¹ Subsequently, this questionnaire is machine scored and then serves as the basis for discussion in future meetings.

A few benefits of this approach:

A sign of community. Sponsor couples get to model and affirm their membership in the Christian community of which they are part. They are a visible sign to the engaged couple that the parish community is there and wants to support their marriage. Anytime a husband & wife work at their marriage, e.g., try to listen to each other, admit wrong, remember to give a hug, share positive body language, they are a sponsor couple to all they meet. This is true, we believe, whether or not they are actually getting the chance to specifically help someone who is engaged. However, if we do get to serve as sponsor couple, then an act of faith is in order: namely, if we do our best, God's grace will do the rest. We must believe that our effort will make a difference.²

A grateful heart. We start by thanking the engaged couple for giving us an opportunity to reflect on our own marriage. In this process, the sponsor couple gets to share who they are and, in doing so, to reassess and deepen their own commitment. We admit, from the start, that we aren't experts and that, no matter how long we have been married, we must keep working at our own marriage relationship. Jesus chose rough fishermen, repentant sinners, and tax collectors to be His disciples. We are therefore in good company. After all, unless we have a few "warts, bumps, and bruises" in our own marriage relationship, how can we possibly have empathy for the couple who comes to meet with us?

A chance to affirm. Sponsor couples are given a special opportunity to reinforce the beauty of a vocation to the sacrament of marriage. The world, conversely, is full of "put downs" when it comes to marriage. There is, therefore, a great need for affirmation to the engaged couple that the marriage covenant they are making will be a primary source of sanctity for them and for those (e.g., children, friends, and family) whom they will serve. We need the strength that comes from solidarity with others who have made similar choices in life. That is, of course, also true for French teachers, religious, weight watchers, those in AA, etc., but our society is not providing lots of good models for marriage and so we think it's helpful to tell couples that they have to be pro-active. One of the best ways they can help their own marriage is to actively affirm the marriage of another couple.

Spreading the good word. This couple-to-couple approach has proven to have a multiplier effect. The engaged couple often informs family and friends about how they are preparing for their marriage. In a number of cases, they have even become a sponsor couple for others, and we know of at least one four-generation "sponsor family"

in our own parish. Let's do all we can to reflect happiness with our choice in life. From time to time, we need to stop, reflect, and then exclaim "It's good to be what we are!", namely two average people who happen to be blest by God in their commitment to each other. We are pleased and proud to be married to each other. This is the message we must announce, verbally and non-verbally, in the places where we live, interact, and grow.

Yahweh, we know You are near. Sponsor couples are given a golden opportunity to encourage the engaged couple to invite God into their marriage preparation. While there isn't any 100% fool-proof guarantee that their marriage will be successful, couple prayer comes as close to promising success as we can get. Statistics show that this is true. Therefore, we make sure that every time we meet with an engaged couple we share prayer with them. We need to thank God every day for our spouse and do our best to see her or him as a reflection of the incredible love that God has for us. This is true whether we are struggling or not, whether we are mad at each other or not, whether we dislike something one of us has done or not. This partner, my spouse, should be one of the best glimpses I am going to get of God's love.

1 Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding & Study, An Inventory for Marriage Preparation, FOCCUS, Inc.

2 Radical Hospitality, Homan and Pratt, Paraclete Press, p. 86.

DIOCESE OF SAN BERNARDINO



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

June 21, 2006

Michael and Maureen Oates, MA
Archdiocese of Dubuque Marriage Retorno
127 Kaspand Place
Cedar Falls IA 50613-1683

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Oates:

Thank you very much for your kind letter regarding the Marriage Retorno. I had not heard of this particular ministry, but I am very glad to hear that you have done well in reaching out to married couples.

Our diocese fosters the value of collaboration, so I am quite pleased to hear that faithful from this diocese have been of assistance to you in this endeavor.

May our Lord bless you in your efforts to strengthen marriages and bringing Hope to those you serve.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Gerald R. Barnes".

Most Reverend Gerald R. Barnes
Bishop of the Diocese of San Bernardino

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Bishop of the Diocese of San Bernardino

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