

AUG. 7, 2009

THE CATHOLIC FREE PRESS

Spend time for a lifetime

By Margaret M. Russell

How much time does the average couple spend planning their wedding day? They are taste-testing food for the banquet, choosing the right wedding gown, picking out the perfect flowers, planning the honeymoon trip. In the end, a celebration that lasts but a few hours costs thousands of dollars.

Contrast that with how much time the average couple spends preparing for the sacrament of marriage. In short, how much time, money and energy do they spend on preparing for the commitment of marriage that will (all hope) last a lifetime?

The Diocese of Worcester is asking couples to spend a little more time (and relatively little money) in preparation for the sacrament of marriage.

"This will help couples focus on how to live the vows after they leave the altar," Msgr. F. Stephen Pedone said about the revised diocesan marriage preparation policy put into effect by the bishop yesterday.

Msgr. Pedone sees marriages from both sides; before and after. As chaplain of the Engaged Encounter Weekend he has the opportunity to help couples communicate about the realities of their relationship and of married life. As judicial vicar for canonical affairs, his office deals with the fallout from failed marriages.

"It is imperative that couples have solid marriage preparation," he said.

Couples who work with the newly engaged say often the process starts out as an obligation but often ends up as a fulfilling, honest exploration. Couples get out of it what they put into it, they said.

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— BILL MANCINI,
ST. PETER PARISH IN NORTHBRIDGE

"A lot of time they go through marriage preparation kicking and screaming," said Allison LeDoux, director of the Office of Marriage and Family at a recent dinner meeting with the team members who facilitate the new component, "God's Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage."

The end result, however, is often "amazing," the couples said.

"We put a focus on the fact that the sacrament of matrimony is not just a wedding day," said Bill Mancini of St. Peter Parish in Northbridge. He and his wife of 32 years, Kathy, have been working with couples for 10 years.

For the past year the team has been studying the "God's Plan" program which is based on Pope John Paul II's teaching called the Theology of the Body, and developed by Christopher West. It is less interactive and more instructive than couple-to-couple ministry they said.

However, "it is done so it is inviting not imposing," said Pat Pizzimenti of St. Mary Parish in North Grafton. He and his wife, Jean, have been couple-to-couple ministers for six years. They come equipped with 36 years of married life experience.

Sandy Piwowarski of

Sacred Heart Parish in Webster said the key is to teach the couples God's plan instead of the world's plan for marriage.

"Look at it as a special gift. Take these teachings in to your marriage," Mrs. Piwowarski said.

Her husband of 17 years, Mathew, said it is an honor to share the pope's teaching. The young couples often are amazed and say "a pope wrote this? ... It is all about s-e-x."

Rightly, it is about human sexuality and God's blueprint for man and woman. It is not a lot of rules, but a concept to think about, Mr. Pizzimenti said.

"We plant a seed and hope it has a positive impact," Mrs. Mancini said.

All three married couples volunteer their time to spend a full day with the engaged couples. Two sessions have already been offered and the next sessions are scheduled for September, October, November and December. They said they are always looking for new ways to improve the presentation.

"Each time we see a tape, we learn something new, see something different," Mrs. Mancini said.

"The key message: The world has lied to us all these years, turned sex into trash. It is a lie. God's plan for our sexuality is so beautiful, so precious," Mrs. Piwowarski said.

"We hope the couples come away with a greater respect for each other," Mrs. Pizzimenti said.

Over time the flowers wilt, the dress turns yellow, and you only look at the photo album on special occasions. But the seeds planted through this marriage preparation program can blossom in the years to come, the couples said.

"We want them to trust that God's plan leads to happiness," Mrs. Piwowarski said.

— Information about the dates and cost of the program can be obtained from your parish or the Office of Marriage and Family, 508-929-4311, aledoux@worchesterdiocese.org.