

Is your parish a “marriage-building” community?

By Richard McCord

World Day of Day of Marriage (February 13) and National Marriage Week (February 7-14) provide us with an opportunity to celebrate, reflect and give thanks for the gift of marriage; also to realize the uniqueness of this call and its importance for the good of society.

The continuing vitality of marriage as an institution cannot be taken for granted. This is a lesson learned during the past four decades when our nation – including its Catholic population – has experienced a retreat from marriage. The marriage rate has declined; the cohabitation rate has increased; and the high divorce rate is holding steady.

A recent national study reveals the weakness of marriage among middle class Americans. Another raises the question of whether marriage has become obsolete as the basis for family life. National surveys are finding an increased acceptance of so called “same-sex marriage” particularly among the younger generation of twenty-somethings.

The continuance of negative social trends is not inevitable. Today’s data are not necessarily tomorrow’s destiny. Nothing will change, though, if we don’t take action now.

This is why the U.S. bishops established the National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage in 2004. They extended and deepened their commitment when they adopted the strengthening of marriage and family as one of their five priority goals in 2009.

The Catholic Church has a long and rich history of teaching about the meaning and importance of marriage and family life. Happy and holy marriages are a work of God’s grace combined with our human effort. Marriages are strong and enduring when they rest on three pillars: a transcendent *vision*, a range of *skills* that can lead to virtuous relationships, and a supportive *community*. Through theological, spiritual and pastoral resources, the Catholic faith tradition can help couples and communities put these pillars in place and thereby build strong marriages.

The centerpiece of this resource-based strategy is the 2009 U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter, *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*. The annual observance of Catechetical Sunday in 2010 also provided many educational resources on the sacrament of matrimony, and a new pamphlet series for engaged and married couples is also underway.

A second stage of the highly successful “*What have you done for your marriage today?*” public service announcements campaign is now in production, this time emphasizing the social value of a good marriage. The 2007 radio and television spots, which utilized the comments of persons-on-the-street, got extensive airtime (equivalent of more than \$20 million) and won several industry awards.

A major resource is the “for your marriage” website (www.foryourmarriage.org), a one-stop location featuring “resources for a happy and holy marriage.” It has articles on a wide range of topics, blogs, book reviews, daily marriage tips, Church teaching and even practical help for

planning a Catholic wedding. These English-language resources have a Spanish-language complement in the website www.portumatrimonio.org and in a radio campaign that is currently in production.

In light of recent social and political developments, the bishops have also felt it necessary to organize an effort aimed at protecting the legal definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman and at promoting a better understanding of this truth that is based on right reason and divine revelation. This project, consisting of catechetical materials and public policy advocacy (see www.marriageuniqueforareason.org), responds to a growing challenge in our society. It affirms the teaching that marriage must be preserved, protected, strengthened and renewed in keeping with God's plan for the good of humanity.

All these resources will not be fully effective unless they are joined to an even greater resource, namely, the Catholic people themselves. A huge potential force for good exists in the witness and service of married couples and families who live and worship in the more than eighteen thousand parishes throughout our country. What a difference it could make if every parish committed itself to become a "marriage-building community"!

This effort would not be a new program but rather a new attitude and approach to what the parish may be doing already. It would incorporate the three elements of a Christian vision of marriage, skills that lead to virtuous living, and supportive ministries within the community. Becoming a marriage-building church, particularly at the parish level, is what the bishops envision in their pastoral letter when they urge "a renewed commitment by the entire Catholic community to helping those called to the vocation of married life to live it faithfully, fruitfully, and joyfully."

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