**RETAINING CONTACT WITH**

**NEWLY MARRIED COUPLES**

**Marriage**

 The Catholic Church believes the Sacrament of Marriage to be a lifelong covenant made between a man and a woman, and visibly expresses the invisible bond of love Christ has for His People and a relationship in which God’s Spirit dwells.

**The call**

 The most current driving document for visiting with those whom a deacon or priest has participated in a couple’s commitment to a lifelong marriage relationship is *Evangelii Gaudium* the Apostolic letter written by Pope Francis on November 24, 2013*.* Dr. Edward Sri writes in a reflection on this letter; “…he (Pope Francis) is not thinking only about how we let people in…Pope Francis wants the doors open so that we within the Church will dare to go out – to step out of our offices and the walls of our comfort zones to go out to the world…1”

**Our challenge**

The Sacrament of Marriage is a challenging and demanding vocation and although couples take part in required archdiocesan programs of preparation through which the covenantal aspects of marriage and other vitally important topics are presented, faced with living in a society which often conveys the marriage union in ways which oppose the Catholic Christian view of marriage, continued support and nurturing is paramount in order for their marriage to grow in intimacy and faithfulness.

 In the past and most often this support and nurturing is received through the encouragement and guidance of family. However as indicated by Pope Francis there is also a necessity for it to be offered by the entire worshipping community, most especially those who have received the Sacrament of Holy Orders and called to serve the community. This call to service is identified in the Ecclesial Documents of the Church and should not be unfamiliar to the deacon as he in conjunction with all of the faithful is called to transform the world according to the Christian order. As witness and presider to the Sacramental Vocation of Marriage, the deacon is called to extend his own diakonia to the couples as they continue to journey through life’s challenges and celebrations.

 Rediscovering the Heart of the Disciple, Dr. Edward Sri. P.33; *Our Sunday Visitor*

2 Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes, 40-45

 This continued nurturing is extremely important, most especially during the early years of marriage when couples are exposed to a certain degree of vulnerability as both together and individually they face the often unseen demands and anxieties engendered by the requisite of adapting to a new lifestyle, shared values, and responsibilities which accompany married life; such as household tasks, handling finances, and even disagreements which generally surface due to miscommunication. The stress becomes even greater if and when in those early years of marriage they also are confronted with the challenges of parenthood.

 A number of recent surveys conclude that within the first five years of marriage there is, on the average, a fifty-fifty chance that a couple will either seek separation and/or divorce; and so it is conceivable that couples who have expressed the fullness of their love for one another, sealed that love by the Sacrament of Marriage, and continue in their effort to be faithful to the teachings of the Church regarding the permanence of the marriage union, might also be seeking ways through which their marriage relationship can be strengthened and guided in times of challenge.

 Archbishop Charles Chaput in his farewell address to the people of the Denver Archdiocese after his appointment as Archbishop of Philadelphia made a comment which every priest and deacon that has been sealed with the indelible mark of Holy Orders should retain in their heart. The Archbishop *said ‘one day he would die after which God would call upon him when the faithful of Denver are called to approach the Throne of Heaven and ask of the one seeking entrance; “This man was your shepherd on earth did he do everything he could to make you a better Christian?”* This question of accountability is one which, in differing degrees everyone will face, but perhaps even more so will those clergy who have witnessed and extended the blessing of the church on couples through the Sacrament of Marriage.

 Quite often accountability for supporting and strengthening a couple in their marriage union will be addressed by the homilist and extended to those in attendance at the wedding celebration, however that does not exempt others from participating in this effort, conceivably and perhaps most especially the priest or deacon who witnessed and extended the blessings of the Church upon the couple. It is for this reason that it becomes vitally important to the Church, the institution of marriage, and to the couple that parishes establish programs through which newly married couples can be contacted.

 However in today’s mobile society couples may celebrate the Sacrament of Marriage in their home parish and then choose to move to a new location. In these instances it might be difficult to make a personal follow up and so it would be valuable to know in advance where they will be relocating after which it would be prudent to notify the parish of which they will be relocating.

**Initial contact**

 Whether a couple seeks to retain a relationship in the parish community where they celebrated the Sacrament of Marriage, or have chosen to establish themselves as members of a new parish community, it is conceivable that due to their new status they may also experience a sense of isolation. This sense of isolation might also generate within them, should serious marital problems begin to develop the anxiety that there is no place or individual to which they may turn to for help or support. It is for this rationale that a process of initial contact with the couple be established in order to overcome any sense of isolation.

 As the importance of the deacon being a representative of the Church is repeatedly emphasized the parish deacon might be the one notified so they can undertake the responsibility of making the initial contact with the couple and schedule a welcoming visit. This initial contact is a valuable expression to the couple that the Church cares about them and is not only interested in their salvation, but also their well-being. This will also provide for them a spiritual resource to who they may call upon for assistance should questions or difficulties within their new relationship arise, while at the same time promote a sustained relationship between the Church and the Sacrament of Marriage.

 After this initial contact and the newly married couple has established their relationship within the parish community, further and more personal contact might be made by the deacon extending to them the opportunity to have their place of residence blessed. This continued contact will further express to the couple that the Church has a vested interest in the success of their relationship and allows Jesus, the Servant, to expand on his love for the couple and their union. If after a period of time it becomes noticed that the couple have not have been regular attendees at Mass, another follow-up phone call might be made to acknowledge their being missed and the invitation be given to them to re-establish the practice of Mass attendance.

 Parishes which have developed a personalized process through which they can maintain contact with newly married couples within their parish, as well as ways to meet and greet those who have become new members of the parish community are making the first step in an effort to offer the ongoing support necessary, and at the same time make a combating effort against those forces which challenge the Holy Union of Marriage.

**Continued contact**

Once this connection has been made and have established themselves as part of the worshipping community then, contingent with their abilities, an further invitation to participate in a greater way may be extended.

 Those who may have a good singing voice may be encouraged to join the choir, those who have good oratory skills might be invited to become a lector, and those who may simply have an inviting and welcoming smile might be invited to be an usher or greeter. This greater participation will allow the couples the opportunity to interact with a greater part of the faith community, both singles and married couples.

**Building a stronger marriage relationship**

 As couples choose to involve themselves in a greater way with the worshipping community this then allows for the opportunity to extend an invitation to them to participate in those parish programs offered that are designed for the purpose of strengthening marriages, such as a newly married couples mentoring program where veteran married couples share with the newly married couple ways through which they themselves overcame the challenges which had confronted them in their married life.

 Another couple to couple program is “Ministry to the Newly Married” offered by offered by Agape Catholic Ministries. However for those couples who may be apprehensive about participating in a couple to couple program there are groups programs also available. These programs are specifically designed to enhance a married couple’s bond through the continual development of relationship skills, while at the same time broaden their understanding of one another as they work together in living out the covenantal aspect of marriage. “Partners on a Journey” is one of those programs. Another is “Covenant of Love” and a third is “To Seal and Strengthen Love.” These types of offerings are designed to not only strengthen a newly married couples marriage, but are a valuable resource for all married couples who seek to prevent marital problems before they even begin to exist.

 Parishes might also want to consider a self designed program perhaps titled as “Marriage Preparation Relived.” This program would utilizes as its guide the pastoral letter issued in 2009 by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and youth titled “Marriage-Love and Life in the Divine Plan.” In which the Catholic Church’s key teachings on marriage are reviewed, as well as contemporary challenges which newly married couples experience.

**Adding strength to established married couples**

 Reminding married couples of the Grace which comes to them through the sacrament of Marriage and how this Grace can assist them in growing closer in their marital relationship, and their relationship with Christ cannot nor should not be taken lightly and so further follow-up of all marriage relationships might also include letters sent at periodic intervals that are designed to assist couples to face the many adverse situations which arise.

 The Chicago Archdiocese offers an E-Newsletter at a minimal cost which once subscribed to the married couple will receive each month a newsletter written by a marriage expert offering suggestions which will guide them in achieving a loved filled, lifelong marriage relationship. Parishes might also sponsor a special once a year “Marriage Celebration Mass" inviting those couples who have begun their lives together during that year are acknowledged and presented with the book authored by Deacon James Keating titled “Spousal Prayer-A Way to Marital Happiness.” In addition to generate community atmosphere a dinner, hosted by couples who themselves are celebrating a special wedding anniversary year might also be offered. A further option would be for parishes to sponsor a once a month date night where couples might come together in the parish to share a meal, light snack and watch a movie.

**Final goal**

 Clergy and parish communities must always strive to assist married couples to continue to live a life of holiness and so the possibility of building and establishing an archdiocesan computer base to assist clergy in their following up with newly married couples is also being discussed. This program would allow priests and deacons to track the couples should they relocate thereby making it easier to retain contact with those who were recipients of their blessing. In addition to retaining standard contact information the program might also be expanded to include additional information such as individual talents which they might be invited to use for the greater glory or God as well as information such as the hospitalization of one of the spouses, the birth of children, etc.

 In closing I refer to a survey conducted by the USCCB in which the responses indicated that there was a general consensus that married couples would like to have more educational, spiritual, service-oriented and social groups to support their marriages on a parish level and increase fellowship among couples. These programs should be manageable in terms of time commitment and if possible might also include childcare. Once a parish commits itself to actively support and offer programs such as those few suggestions made in this report, parishes will become an intricate asset in minimizing the current 50/50 divorce rate statistic.

**Suggested Resources**

1. “Ministry to the New the Newly Married” by Agape Catholic Ministries [(www.agapecatholicministries.com/ministry-to-the-newly-married](http://(www.agapecatholicministries.com/ministry-to-the-newly-married)
2. “Partners on a Journey” by The Gottman Institute available through the Marriage Ministries Resources [(www.marriageministriesresources.com](http://(www.marriageministriesresources.com))
3. is “Covenant of Love” by The Alexander House Apostolate [(ww.thealexanderhouse.org)](http://www.thealexanderhouse.org)
4. “To Seal and Strengthen Love: A Resource Manual for Ministry with Newly Married Couples” offered through the National Association of Catholic Life Ministries [(www.nacflm.org)](http://(www.nacflm.org))
5. “Marriage-Love and Life in the Divine Plan” a pastoral letter issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and youth ([www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org))
6. Marriage E-Newsletter offered by The Chicago Archdiocese [(ww.familyministries.org)](http://www.familyministries.org)
7. “Spousal Prayer-A Way to Marital Happiness.” authored by Deacon James Keating