

Introduction to the Consultation on Sustaining and Enriching Marriages

H. Richard McCord

Among the various components of the National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage are “forums of pastoral leaders” and “select meetings with groups of experts”. Both gatherings are envisioned as topic-oriented or ministry-focused. They provide a specialized and concentrated opportunity to learn about a certain area of marriage or marriage ministry that will inform the Pastoral Initiative and enhance the work of leaders in the field.

Marriage enrichment (also called marriage education or formation) is aimed at strengthening and sustaining the couples’ marital vocation. It is a necessary, but under-developed, aspect of the Church’s total pastoral care of marriage. In the past decade a broad-based “marriage movement” has begun in our country. This movement has sparked creativity and activity in many sectors of society, including the churches. The availability of federal and state money for marriage strengthening programs (Healthy Marriage Initiative) has played a major role in this new effort. So also has the Smart Marriages coalition. Previous consultations within the National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage have pointed to the need for the Church to become more intentional and creative about ministry to marriage beyond simply preparing couples for marriage.

This consultation focuses on the ministry of marriage enrichment and specifically on five models or approaches that are used in the Catholic community. The participants were asked to reflect on the significance of each model, including its strengths and weaknesses, and to inquire about how each model might help the Church to become a better community of hope and healing for all marriages.

Each presenter was asked to structure his/her remarks around the following questions:

- (1) What is specific and unique about this model of marriage enrichment? Describe how it can be used within the broad context of pastoral ministry with married couples.
- (2) What are some strengths and limitations of this model? What beneficial outcomes are associated with it?
- (3) In what ways has this approach evolved in response to the contemporary needs of married couples and in the light of new communications technology? What recommendations do you have for strengthening the Church’s ministry of marriage enrichment?