

NATIONAL PASTORAL INITIATIVE FOR MARRIAGE THIRD YEAR REPORT (2007)

In the National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage (NPIM) the U.S. Catholic bishops call attention to the meaning and value of married life for the Church and for society. Bringing Catholic belief into dialogue with contemporary needs, the bishops urge the Catholic Church to become a community of hope and help for marriages and to join others in building a culture of marriage. The Initiative weaves together the Catholic faith tradition and its pastoral practice, the data of social science, and the experience of married couples to offer guidance and resources, including a pastoral letter, in order to promote, strengthen, sustain and restore marriages. More information about the Initiative is available at www.usccb.org/npim.

In 2007 the Marriage and Family Committee largely wrapped up the Initiative's research and consultation activities and moved into the communication and education phase. The year featured the launch of radio and TV Public Service Announcements on marriage, a new website (www.foryourmarriage.org), and initial work on a pastoral letter on marriage.

Below is a summary of activities during the third year of the Initiative.

RESEARCH AND CONSULTATION

Starting in 2005, the Committee has held numerous consultations with theologians, practitioners, priests, married couples and others with a direct stake in healthy marriage. The process has yielded important information about marriage-related issues, church teaching and pastoral care. In addition to their value for writing a pastoral letter, the consultations have created a broad sense of responsibility for marriage strengthening.

Consultation on sustaining and enriching marriages

In conjunction with its January meeting, the Committee held a consultation on marriage enrichment. Marriage enrichment (also called marriage education or formation) is a necessary but under-developed aspect of the Church's total pastoral care of marriage.

The consultation focused on several approaches or "models" that are used in the Catholic community. They include the marriage conference model, encounter model, skills-based program model, the parish community and marriage enrichment, and the Hispanic experience in marriage enrichment. Presenters discussed the significance of their particular model, its strengths and weaknesses, and how it can help the Church to support married couples. The presenters' reports are available at <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/marriageconsult.shtml>.

Diocesan priests' focus groups

Several Committee members sponsored focus groups with priests in their dioceses to discuss their ministry with engaged and married couples. They discussed the challenge of preparing couples for marriage in today's culture, opportunities for teaching and evangelization, parish support for married couples and other issues.

In March Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, chairman of the Marriage and Family Committee, sent a summary of the focus group findings to all bishops. He encouraged them to hold focus groups in their own dioceses, offering a template that can be adapted to the local situation. The summary is available at:

<http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/focuspriests.shtml>.

CARA research project on Catholics and marriage

At the Committee's request, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) developed and conducted a research project that has two related purposes: (1) identify misperceptions, gaps in knowledge, and other needs in the Catholic population that can be addressed in the forthcoming pastoral letter on marriage and in subsequent activities of the Pastoral Initiative and (2) identify correct understandings, beliefs, positive perceptions, strengths and other factors that can be affirmed in the pastoral letter and become a foundation upon which to develop pastoral ministries to marriage.

The project was funded by a \$50,000 grant from the Knights of Columbus. The Committee reviewed a report on the findings at its October meeting. The Committee will make the report available to all bishops in early 2008 before releasing it to the public.

Consultations with marriage and family organizations

Committee members and staff visited the annual meetings of Marriage Encounter, Retrouvaille, Engaged Encounter and Christian Family Movement. These meetings provided an excellent opportunity to discuss the Pastoral Initiative and receive feedback. The groups enthusiastically welcomed the Initiative. They see it as a major resource for their ministry and will work with the Committee to promote it.

COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION

A major goal of the Initiative is to communicate positive, helpful messages about marriage. Communication efforts intensified in 2007 as the Committee used various print and electronic media to disseminate these messages.

Bishops' backgrounders/Making the Case for Marriage

Between October 2006 and May 2007 a bishops' backgrounder, in English and Spanish, was sent each month to all bishops. A special backgrounder, on same-sex unions, was sent over the summer. Each backgrounder demonstrates how current social science research reinforces or confirms church teaching on a particular topic. They are

intended to help bishops write and speak on marriage-related topics and thus to extend the reach of the Pastoral Initiative.

All the backgrounders are posted at www.usccb.org/npim under the heading, *Making a Case for Marriage*. The backgrounders were also compiled into a bilingual resource that was available at the bishops' November meeting and may be requested from the Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth.

“FOR YOUR MARRIAGE” CAMPAIGN: PSAs AND WEBSITE

The campaign, launched in June 2007, consists of 60-second and 30-second radio and television Public Service Announcements and a website called www.foryourmarriage.org. Both the PSAs and website were funded by a grant from the Catholic Communication Campaign.

The campaign, particularly through the PSAs, has three related, public awareness goals: (1) offer an attractive, hopeful image of marriage and married couples/families; (2) connect the Catholic Church with a positive, helpful message about marriage; and (3) motivate people to personal action, including going to our website for more help. The campaign also creates readiness for the pastoral letter in 2008.

The PSAs ask people on the street the question “What have you done for your marriage today?” They convey a simple, upbeat message about the necessity of couples participating in their marriage—often in small, daily acts of love and care—in order to build commitment. The website, which continues to grow, offers information, help, inspiration and encouragement to couples who want to learn about marriage and deepen their commitment.

Archbishop Charles Chaput spoke on behalf of the Committee at a news conference and launch of the PSAs and website in Denver on June 27. Both resources were received with enthusiasm and gratitude by members of the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers and other experts present for the occasion. Print media stories about the campaign were generally positive.

The spots are being released in three waves. During the first wave, spots were sent to 1,200 TV outlets and nearly 7,000 radio outlets around the country. Through November, the TV spots had been broadcast over 8,000 times and the radio spots nearly 53,000 times. The estimated value of the donated airtime is \$4.4 million.

Diocesan offices of communication and family life were encouraged to obtain a complimentary copy of the PSAs. They can also order customized versions to include the identification of the diocese.

Diocesan participation in the Initiative

The Committee considers it essential that dioceses, to the extent they are willing and able, participate in the Initiative by (1) promoting the Initiative and its resources within each diocese and (2) developing local “For Your Marriage” campaigns.

At the November bishops’ meeting Archbishop Kurtz offered information and suggestions for dioceses that want to make such an effort. For example, dioceses can link to the For Your Marriage website, promote it at diocesan and parish events, order “For Your Marriage” bookmarks from USCCB Publications, and discuss the Initiative at Province meetings. A list of suggestions for diocesan involvement is available on the For Your Marriage website (see “Pastoral Initiative” under About Catholic Marriage).

2008 ACTIVITIES

The year begins with a newly-reorganized Conference. On January 1, the Marriage and Family Committee became a temporary Subcommittee of the Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth. The Subcommittee will continue through 2008. In 2009 the new Committee will assume responsibility for the continuing development of the Pastoral Initiative.

The **research phase** will conclude this year with the release of findings from the CARA research report on Catholics and marriage. **Consultation** with national marriage groups and organizations will continue.

The **communications phase** will focus on the development of the pastoral letter, which the Committee expects to bring to the November bishops’ meeting. Other activities include the release of the second and third waves of radio and TV PSAs; a billboard campaign; and enhancements to the website.

Finally, the Committee will work with dioceses and national marriage and family organizations to plan for the implementation of the Initiative.