



## History and Philosophy of Worldwide Marriage Encounter

*(This document was compiled January 5, 2006 and will be updated as more comprehensive information is gathered. If you print this document and want to check if an update has been made, check the "Updated date" shown at the lower right hand corner of each page. A more in depth research is under way to gather the past history of Marriage Encounter.)*

### How It All Began

The story of Marriage Encounter began in 1952, when a young Spanish Diocesan Laborer Priest, Father Gabriel Calvo, began developing a series of conferences for married couples. Their focus was on the development of an open and honest relationship within marriage and learning to live out a Sacramental relationship in the service of others. Each presentation ended with a question designed to encourage the couple to look at the concepts presented in terms of their own relationship. For approximately 10 years "The Marriage Teams of Pope Pius XIII," as the presenting teams were called, traveled throughout Spain with this series of conferences for married couples. They asked the participants for reflection upon themselves, their relationship with each other, and with God.

### Expansion

In 1962, Father Calvo presented the conferences as a weekend retreat to 28 couples in his native Barcelona. The experience enjoyed immediate success and rapidly spread throughout Spain as the Encuentro Conjugal. James & Mercedes Ferrer, one of the earliest couples involved with the conferences in Spain, addressed the International Confederation of Christian Family Movements (ICCFM) together with Fr. Calvo in Caracas in 1966. It was there that "Encuentro Conjugal" was born in the New World. The Weekend spread to Latin America and, under the aegis of the Movimiento Familiar Cristiano (MFC), to Spanish-speaking couples in the United States.

The Encounter movement began its growth in the English speaking world when, at the close of the Christian Family Movement (CFM) Convention at Notre Dame University in 1967, a couple from Mexico named Gomez and an American Maryknoll missionary priest from Mexico presented the weekend to 9 couples and 9 priests and nuns. The priest presented most of the weekend because the couple spoke very little English. Encuentro Conjugal received the active

support of CFM, and Pat & Patty Crowley, founders of CFM, invited Spanish couples and priests to come to the United States and conduct weekends for both Spanish- and English-speaking couples. In the summer of 1968, 50 couples and 29 priests accepted the invitation and presented weekends in the U.S. Fr. Chuck Gallagher, S.J., a youth retreat master, attended a Weekend in New Jersey in October 1968 and began to dream about the future of Marriage Encounter. Fr. Gallagher had actually scheduled a weekend for Nov. 6, 1968 at his old novitiate, St. Andrews on the Hudson, in Poughkeepsie, NY prior to attending his first weekend.

### Growth & Organization

By January 1969, American couples and priests were conducting weekends. A New Jersey couple, Jamie & Arline Whalen, called together those couples and priests who had presented two or more of what was now known as Marriage Encounter Weekends.

A National Executive Board was formed with Jamie & Arline as the first executive couple. Marriage Encounter remained affiliated with CFM. The second board meeting was held in 1969 at Notre Dame in conjunction with the CFM Convention. The first task of the Board was to develop guidelines for the Weekend and to coordinate the development of the movement in the U.S. and Canada. In the Diocese of Rockville Center, New York, under the leadership of Edward & Harriet Garzero, CFM President Couple, and Fr. Chuck Gallagher, the movement grew rapidly.

### Change & Development

Philosophical differences with the "National Marriage Encounter" Leadership began to appear.

In New York, follow-up activities for couples after the weekend as well as on the weekend program itself were implemented and made a priority. There was strong emphasis on the



development of Marriage Encounter “community” to provide support for living the values **learned on the** weekend, especially for the “dialogue” as a technique for communication through the sharing of feelings. In addition, the renewal of the Sacrament of Matrimony was a strong focus as a means for renewing the Catholic Church. The Long Island Leadership of the “New York Expression” of Marriage Encounter separated from the National Board. The “New York Expression” eventually formed Worldwide Marriage Encounter.

Worldwide Marriage Encounter and National Marriage Encounter now exist as two different expressions of the original Encuentro Conjugal of Father Gabriel Calvo. Songs from the musical *Man of LaMancha* were added to the Weekend. The Worldwide Marriage Encounter logo – consisting of a heart symbolizing life, two circles representing husband and wife, and a cross symbolizing the church – was created. And the song *I'll Never Find Another You (There's A New World Somewhere)* by The Seekers was adopted as the ministry's theme song.

### A Momentous Decision

In Fall 1971 the New York group (which for a year had been sponsoring Weekends weekly in the New York area) made the decision to spread the experience throughout the United States and other parts of the world. Teams of couples and priests traveled first to Grand Forks, North Dakota, with the assurance of financial help, training, and personnel support from the New York group until the new unit could support itself. The only condition was that once the area was self-supporting, the same assistance would be given to other developing areas.

By December 1971, the weekend had spread through Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and North Carolina, and reached Santa Barbara, California, the site of the first Worldwide Marriage Encounter Weekend on the West Coast. Through September 1972 Weekends were held in Washington DC, Boston, Detroit, St. Louis, San Antonio, New Orleans, Kansas City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

### Even Wider Expansion

At about the same time, Worldwide Marriage Encounter began its international expansion. Team couples were sent to Belgium and England in 1972. Chile, India, and Ireland were added in 1973. In 1974, Australia, France, Japan, Mexico, and Germany held Weekends. Worldwide Marriage Encounter also started presenting Spanish-speaking Weekends in San Antonio, Texas, Brooklyn, New York, Los Angeles, and Puerto Rico. One hundred thousand couples had been “encountered” in the United States.

In 1975 the first Worldwide Marriage Encounter Convention was held at St. John's University in New York. The Weekend spread to Spain, Indonesia, Brazil, and Okinawa. Through

1976, Worldwide Marriage Encounter had been offered to 750,000 people and had expanded into Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Korea, Guam, Bolivia, Holland, Yugoslavia, Peru, Columbia, Guatemala, the Philippines, and the Virgin Islands. During 1977, Weekends were held in Rome, Fiji, Argentina, South Africa, Kenya, and New Zealand.

By 1978, WWME was 10 years old, and the International Council was formed, including leadership teams (one couple and a priest) from 7 secretariats: Asia, South Pacific, Pan-Africa, Europe, United States, Canada, and Latin America. The Worldwide Weekend expansion continues today in all 7 Secretariats. The number of countries in which the Weekend is given now totals 88.

### Reaching Out in Faith and Love

Although Worldwide Marriage Encounter began as a Roman Catholic experience, it has always provided openings for couples of other faiths. Many of these couples have seen the potential the Weekend offers for church renewal for their own denominations. In 1971, the Weekend was introduced to the Jewish and Episcopal faiths. Worldwide Marriage Encounter provided the initial financial support and guidance needed for these expressions to flourish.

The spread of the Weekend to other faiths has continued. Ten Protestant faiths are now affiliated with Worldwide. They, together with the Roman Catholic Expression, make up the Interfaith Board. An Interfaith Board meets twice a year for the sake of communication and support. The other expressions are Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopal/Anglican, Presbyterian, Brethren/Mennonite, Reformed, United Methodist, Seventh Day Adventist, United Church of Christ, and Orthodox. Affiliation with WWME requires a commitment of fidelity to the WWME outline (except for necessary theological changes), having all team members on a given weekend be of the same faith denomination and supporting the daily dialogue technique as a practice and value.

Today the Worldwide Marriage Encounter Weekend and mid-week experience is offered in 142 local areas in the United States (48 of them Spanish speaking) in all 50 states. In 2004, approximately 780 weekends were presented to about 13,500 couples (these figures include the 10 Protestant expressions).

It is estimated that over 1.9 million couples have experienced a Worldwide Marriage Encounter Weekend since 1969.

The National Board of Worldwide Marriage Encounter is made up of a couple and a priest from each of the 19 sections across the United States, plus the National Executive Team (1 couple and 1 priest). The National Office is located in San Bernardino, California.

### Basic Philosophy

The basic philosophy of Worldwide Marriage Encounter rests on the belief that the Sacraments of Matrimony and Holy Orders are a call to unity for the couple and the priest. For the married couple, this is a call first of all to unity with each other. That unity in love is a Sacramental sign to the Church of Jesus' love for all of us. They therefore not only receive the Sacrament of Matrimony, but their relationship becomes the Sacrament. Their daily "yes" to one another is also a "yes" to the Church that called them to a Sacramental way of life, not only for their own sake, but for the sake of the Church. They belong not only to each other, but are called also to a unity with others as their Sacrament.

The Priest experiences a call to unity with his people. They ask him to be their priest. Just as Matrimony is not a private affair for a couple, a priest's priesthood is not his own. He is, therefore, not his own man. The call to celibacy in the Western Church is not a call to chaste bachelorhood, but a call to intimacy, involvement, and belonging to his people.

### The Weekend Format

The Worldwide Marriage Encounter Weekend is designed as a series of presentations by a trained team of two or three lay couples and a priest. Each of these presentations involves a sharing of some aspect of their own relationship, concluding with a question for the personal reflection and discussion of the participants (couples, priests, and religious). The design is such that the Weekend is a private experience. There are no group discussions.

The experience begins on Friday evening and concludes late Sunday afternoon. It is usually held at a retreat house or hotel. Generally, 10-20 couples participate on a Weekend.

### Continuing the Journey

Worldwide Marriage Encounter sees its Weekend experiences as the beginning of the Encounter. Follow-up programs and the development of the Encounter community at the local level are seen as a vital part of continuing growth and support in their life journey. For the couple, these provide an opportunity

for continued discernment of their role and mission within the Church, usually lived out in the context of the parish.

Large numbers of encountered couples tend to become involved in parish leadership roles, especially in ministries relating to religious education, marriage preparation, family life programs, Liturgy, prayer, and spirituality. Diocesan or interparochial programs such as Right-to-Life and Natural Family Planning are also areas that involve many encountered couples.

For these couples, the Encounter community continues to be a source of continuing strength and support.

### Additional Benefits

The Weekend itself has also proved to be a means of evangelization. Typically, the couples experience not only a conversion to each other, but a real conversion to their church. Often, the unchurched or those who have been apart from the Sacramental life of the Church for many years experience Church in a new way and begin to develop a deep sense of their own importance to the Church as a Sacramental sign of Jesus' love and a sense of belonging. There is a new awareness of the significance of others in their lives.

Proselytizing those who are members of other faiths is never the goal of the Weekend, but the desire for intimacy and unity within the marriage relationship often results in the decision by the couple to embrace a common faith family.

### Gifts of the Weekend

At the heart of Worldwide Marriage Encounter's philosophy is the deep-seated belief that the Sacraments of Matrimony and Holy Orders are powerful and precious gifts given by God to the Church. The renewal of these Sacraments is the special gift that the Encounter has to bring to the Church in its own continuing self-renewal. Worldwide Marriage Encounter, therefore, happily sees itself as joining with other movements that bring their own gifts to the work of renewal, in providing new life for all people of God.