

## **Original Encounters: Creating families in the Lord**

**by Susan Brinkmann**  
**Catholic Standard&Times Correspondent**

The woman was a lapsed Catholic, separated from her husband, estranged from her family. A priest convinced her to go on a Self Encounter weekend to get back in touch with herself and God.

She agreed, but was so reluctant she almost left the first night. She decided to stay for the night, then ended up staying the whole weekend. She left a transformed woman.

On fire for her faith, she stopped on the way home to visit her sons and tell them she intended to reconcile with their father. When her husband saw the dramatic change in her, he was so amazed he agreed to go on an Encounter with her, this time a Marriage Encounter. A once broken family is now healed and on the road to a new life together.

This true story is only one of thousands that could be told about couples, individuals and families who have experienced profound healing by attending a special weekend known as a Marriage Encounter.

The Original Encounter program, which shares the same source but has a different vision than the better known Worldwide Marriage Encounter, is flourishing in Asia and Europe but is barely known in the United States. Father Donnon Murray, O.F.M., a native of Olyphant, Pennsylvania, has been involved in the original Marriage Encounter program in Japan for the last 30 years and has seen unbelievable transformations in individuals, couples and families as a result of these Encounters.

"We have had hundreds of couples who came to an Encounter as their last resort before divorce — and in all these years, I only know of three couples who got divorced," he said. "Just before I came home, I had a couple like that, and I asked them how they found out about Marriage Encounter. They said it was through a Web site. I asked them what was the key word they were looking under? The word was 'divorce.' They went home very happy."

The original Marriage Encounter was started by Father Gabriel Calvo in Barcelona, Spain, in 1961, when a couple asked him to help them discover the deeper meaning God has for married life.

Father Calvo told them he was too busy working with young people, but the couple insisted. "Father," they said, "you must start with the couples if you want to do anything with the kids."

He realized the wisdom in their words, Father Donnon said: "They got together weekly for nine years, to pray and share, and formulated this program called Marriage Encounter. From the very beginning, their whole thought was to do something, not only for couples, but for the whole family. Their thought was to help them become families united in the Lord."

A typical Original Marriage Encounter weekend begins at 7 p.m. on a Friday and ends at 5 p.m. on Sunday. It begins with an orientation by a priest or another clergy person, depending on what faith is sponsoring the Encounter.

Working with the clergy are "team couples" who have previously experienced a Marriage Encounter, and who give a talk about their own lives. After the talk, the participants are given questions to answer.

"For example, if it's the encounter with self, the couple will share who they feel they are, where they're coming from, what kind of influence they had from childhood or society, and so forth. And they're doing this in a personal way," Father Donnon said. "There's no group sharing. Couples return to their rooms, or go outside, and reflect on the questions, and share their answers with one another. This is the process for each of the nine steps."

The second day is a powerful encounter with reconciliation. "The theme of the Mass that day is reconciliation — with one another, but perhaps with a parent or brother or sister. Before we can meet the Lord, remember, He said to first be reconciled with your brother, then come back and offer Me your gifts. You will meet Me only if you reconcile."

When couples look into themselves with the help of the Holy Spirit, they begin to identify problems in relationships that may be affecting not only their personal lives but also their married and family lives. They realize something must be done about those problems, and spend the day working on them.

"Then comes what we call 'the Saturday night of suffering,' Father Donnon said. "Not that everyone's going about in the doldrums, but this is when many will begin to think, 'Well I've been here all day and nothing great has happened yet. Why not?' They feel there must be something more."

And there is. The next morning is the marriage feast of Cana, when each person must invite Jesus into their lives. "Jesus already knows our problems, and has given us the solutions in His Word," Father Donnon said. That is why the Gospel is presented without compromise at Encounter weekends, even in those involving non-Christians.

"If you invite Jesus into your life, He will turn the water of your life into the best and most overflowing wine," Father Donnon said. "Otherwise, you'll never overcome your problems."

The Encounter does not stop there. Couples return to their families, where, in living out what they've experienced, they encounter other issues within the dynamic of their families. As a result, there are now 20 different Encounters designed to deepen family life on all levels.

There are also Family Encounters for the entire family, Engaged Encounters for those planning to marry, Self Encounters for individuals in all walks of life, Priest Encounters, and Son and Daughter Encounters for people aged 13 and older.

Because there are now more than 120 different versions of Marriage Encounter in the world, most using the methodology of the original version but not all reflecting the same vision, Father Calvo revised and updated the original version, which is now formally called the "Original Marriage Encounter" in order to differentiate it from all the others. In this way, Father Calvo hopes to avoid misunderstandings concerning the original version and the spirit of Marriage Encounter.

In the Philadelphia Archdiocese, couples who have attended marriage encounters have participated in the Worldwide version rather than the Original Marriage Encounter version.

All of the Original Marriage Encounter programs come under the acronym F.I.R.E.S. which stands for "Families, Intercommunication, Relationships, Experiences and Services." They also include Re-encounters which help couples deepen their Marriage Encounter experience, and the Retorno which means "return to the Lord" in Spanish.

Atsushi and Christine Shiiba of St. John Chrysostom in Wallingford met Father Donnon in Japan, where the Shiibas met, became engaged and went on an Engaged Encounter together prior to their marriage in 1991. They have stayed in touch with Father Donnon through the years, and have served as a team couple for Encounters. The Shiibas' family of seven recently served as a team family for a family communication workshop that was attended by 10 families at Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish in Morton.

"It was a time of discovery, where we could identify our strengths and weaknesses," said Christine Shiiba. "We discussed issues which we normally don't have time to discuss because we're running from activity to activity." Family members were given time to communicate with one another on a deeper level, and reveal their hearts to one another.

There's a big difference between listening and hearing, the families learned: "Hearing means we heard with our ears. Listening involves our hearts," Shiiba said.

They also learned how to live out the realization that Christ is present in their families.

"In our family, each member has a line of communication with God, and each person has a line of communication with one another," Shiiba said. "Each time one line of communication is broken, it affects everyone."

Repairing those broken lines of communication is important. During the Encounter, everyone was given an opportunity to write down something for which they wanted to apologize to someone in the family.

"Forgiveness is key in family life," Shiiba said. "We all wound each other."

Father Donnon returns to the United States every summer. Anyone who is interested in attending a FIRES program can contact Atsushi and Christine Shiiba at 610-543-3880 or on the Web at: [christine7@stanfordalumni.org](mailto:christine7@stanfordalumni.org).

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