

Marriage apostolate serves couples before, after 'I do'

In 2012, Arlene Milon met with her parish priest, then-Father Jay Donahue, to brainstorm ideas to revitalize the marriages of their parish, St. Mary of the Assumption in the Pittsburgh suburb of Glenshaw. After brainstorming some ideas, they decided to host a date night that included a Mass in which the couples would be invited to renew their vows.

"We thought it was a great idea, and something never done before in our parish," Milon said.

Fifty-six couples turned out for the Mass, which was followed by a reception at a local winery. Couples were encouraged to bring their wedding photos and to share stories of how they first met. Father Donahue listened to the stories beforehand and worked many into his homily. As part of the Mass, couples went up to the sanctuary, held hands and renewed their vows.

"It was a ton of fun, and the positive feedback we received was tremendous," Milon said. "It was a beautiful thing to see so many couples look into each other's eyes and renew their marriage vows."

The feedback prompted Father Donahue and Milon to found the Renew the "I Do" Foundation, of which Milon serves as executive director, as a way to "cheer on" marriage. Additional date nights took place, first with St. Mary parishioners and soon after with parishioners from all over the Pittsburgh area.

Date nights and events

Date nights have included a Valentine's Day Mardi Gras ball, painting in a museum, square dancing, a comedy night and a Pittsburgh Steelers game. One particularly unique date night

was held in the locker room of the Pittsburgh Pirates, where a coach spoke about “keeping Christ in your marriage.” A dozen have been held since the foundation’s start, with about two to four per year since 2015. Attendance varies from between 60 to 100 couples.

Dori Monahan, a St. Mary parishioner, has attended multiple events with her husband, Dan, to whom she has been married for 27 years.

“It makes for a ‘meaty’ date night, rather than just going out for a movie or getting something to eat,” she said. Typically a speaker will talk about marriage, and there will be entertainment and socializing.

“It’s a nice way to go where marriage is supported, considering the difficulty it is having in our culture today,” Monahan continued.

The speaker’s marriage “pep talk” always leaves her with “food for thought,” and Monahan is pleased to discover that there are many couples who, like her and Dan, are committed to nurturing their marriages.

A recent event in which Monahan participated was a screening of the 2017 film “The Dating Project,” which follows the lives of four young people as they search for a spouse. The film is the first of a few events of particular interest to younger people, so Monahan brought the youngest of her children, a 21-year-old son, “after which we had a very good conversation about it.”

Marriage preparation

The success of the date nights led Renew the “I Do” Foundation to begin offering presentations to couples preparing for marriage. Currently, the foundation has three marriage preparation weekends each year and a Tuesday night series on marriage prep during the summer. As many as 40 couples

participate on weekend marriage prep retreats. Although the foundation is independent of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, its success has led the diocese to refer couples to the it.

“We supplement what the diocese is doing,” Milon said.

The marriage prep weekends begin with a pizza and beer Friday night welcome, followed by two days of seminars using the Joy-Filled Marriage preparation program offered by Ascension Press. Topics covered include communication and resolving conflict, finances, how to build happiness and an introduction to marriage as a sacrament. The weekend ends with Mass.

Once the weekend is over, the support continues by pairing younger couples with mentor couples who have had many years of experience with marriage.

“They walk with them as engaged couples and newlyweds, offering friendship and support as they go through their first potentially challenging years of marriage,” Milon said.

A common vision

Father Adam Potter is parochial vicar at Pittsburgh’s St. Paul Cathedral and serves as spiritual director to the Renew the “I Do” Foundation. In this role, he gives presentations at marriage preparation weekends and date nights and helps train mentor couples. Father Potter studied marriage at the John Paul II Institute in Rome and was recruited to assist the foundation by Father Donahue.

He likes to present on substantive issues related to marriage “to give couples something to chew on,” as well as “encourage couples to fight the good fight in a culture that laughs at them or dismisses them because of their commitment to Christian marriage.”

Among the challenging topics he tackles is that of artificial contraception, referring to Pope St. Paul VI’s 1968

encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

“Seeing couples’ reactions to this teaching is amazing, with many saying ‘Why didn’t anyone tell me this before?’” Father Potter said.

Others, he admitted, are unhappy to listen to this teaching “as it is not easy to hear.

“Yet overwhelmingly, if presented as part of Christ’s full vision of marriage, people will come to see that this teaching is a good thing, or even a beautiful thing,” he said.

Other favorite subjects of discussion include Pope St. John Paul II’s Theology of the Body, which is often a topic after the screening of “The Dating Project.”

According to Father Potter, the role of the foundation is to build a culture in which Christian marriage is more widely accepted and embraced, with married couples seeing their marriages as their personal path to holiness.

“If we can connect more people with this common vision, offering them encouragement and the sacraments they need, it will be a powerful thing,” he said.

Additional programs

Other aspects of the Renew the “I Do” Foundation apostolate include sending anniversary cards to couples on significant anniversaries or events in the lives of couples who participate in Renew events. One of these is the couple’s 19th wedding anniversary, because, as Milon noted, 43 percent of divorces occur around the time of a couple’s 20th anniversary.

“There are a lot of theories as to why this is, such as the emptiness syndrome or couples not having anything in common except their kids. We want to help couples through what could

be a difficult time for them," she said.

For couples who have divorced, the foundation offers an annual program to promote healing after divorce. Additionally, the foundation's influence has spread to other parishes in the Pittsburgh diocese, as couples take their experiences and resources the foundation supplies back to their individual parishes to put on events of their own.

For couples who want to have a renewal of vows Mass, for example, the foundation can offer a guide that makes suggestions as to such things as readings and music to be used.

"Many couples have had wonderful experiences at our events, and have come to a greater understanding as to the importance of marriage," Milon said. "They know that we want marriages to succeed, and we're here to cheer couples on."

"The people involved with the Renew the 'I Do' Foundation are visionaries," Father Potter said. "They want to change the world, one family at a time. Their enthusiasm is contagious and really fires me up. I'm really pleased to be part of their mission."

Jim Graves writes from California.