



BISHOP'S LETTER - *Dakota Catholic Action*

March 2006

MAKE GOOD MARRIAGES BETTER

I usually don't think of myself as a procrastinator, but I qualified for that label when the invitation was extended on numerous occasions to attend a *Marriage Encounter weekend*. I want you to know that I was saying "no" to those invitations even when I was a priest in St. Louis, so it was not a current stubbornness. While in St. Louis I was a priest presenter a number of times at Engaged Encounters which are modeled fairly closely on the same structure. I was also a pastor in a parish where we offered several Parish Renewal Weekends, but for some reason I never chose to find time for a Marriage Encounter - UNTIL NOW! I actually attended the complete weekend several weeks ago.

In a period of about 48 hours I witnessed and took part in an experience filled with God's grace and a lot of hard work by the participating couples. There were couples who were married only a few years and others married considerably longer. One thing was common to all: they were good marriages joining the search to become better. The weekend is not a sign of weakness in a relationship but of strength.

I found myself drawn into each presentation given by a couple on the leadership team even though each one began by offering the disclaimer that they were not professional speakers. Speaking skills didn't seem to make any difference since it was clear that what was being said was directly from the heart. I wanted my presence to be a sign of support for married life in our diocese - and I hope that it was. But I must tell you that it became a time of great renewal for me as I reflected on my own call to the priesthood with my brother priest who was the presenter that weekend.

As the sharing continued throughout the weekend it became evident that their stories included times when one spouse outran the other and had to wait patiently for the other to catch up. There were times when they misunderstood each other, demanded too much of each other, and were insensitive to each other's needs. I do not believe that there is any marriage in which these things do not happen. The growth of love is not a straight line, but a series of hills and valleys. I suppose that in every good marriage there are times when love seems to be over. Sometimes these desert times are simply the only way to the next oasis which is far more lush and beautiful after the desert crossing than it could have possibly been without.

If only some couples would hang in there in their desert times - the times of their divorce - and hold out for the next oasis, the next stage, of their marriage which will be far richer than they ever imagined and which cannot be reached without the hard time, the death time, the purification time. This takes dedication to marriage itself and to one another.

Every good marriage is a visible sign of God united with us in love. Every forgiving marriage tells us of God's mercy. Every lasting marriage tells us of God's fidelity. Every enduring marriage tells us of God's patience. In other words, we know God from the way people live out their marriage. One thing for sure - God's love, forgiveness, fidelity and patience was certainly more evident to me after I heard the stories of those who came together that weekend.

Thanks to all who invited me to attend. It was a real gift that I will never forget.

Your Shepherd,
Most Reverend Paul A. Zipfel
Bishop of Bismarck