

Married and on a Mission!

Media Release

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A renewed focus on marriage formation is needed across the Catholic Church if it is to effectively empower married couples to respond to the challenges facing contemporary couples, say marriage formation facilitators Byron and Francine Pirola.

The Sydney-based Pirolas, are the directors of Marriage Formation for the Pastoral & Matrimonial Renewal Centre (Australia), which has over 60 trained marriage facilitators worldwide and runs courses such as Celebrate Love and Embrace. Speaking at the Renaissance of Marriage Mini-Conference series in Christchurch and Wellington in October, they told dozens of couples that while the Church has invested deeply in pre-marriage preparation, the investment has not been matched in other stages of marriage formation.



Francine and Byron Pirola

While the work of the PMRC addresses the four stages of marriage formation – remote (children), proximate (youth), immediate (engaged couples) and enrichment (married couples), as spelt out by the Pontifical Council of the Family in 1996, the Pirola's proposed that a fifth stage of marriage formation be adopted: empowerment.

"Enrichment helps the couple to develop their sacramental awareness and couple spirituality and is a necessary precursor to empowerment", Francine said. "Empowerment however goes further than this. It transforms the couple from a passive, yet wonderful example of married sacramentality, into active couple-leaders within the Church.

"Empowerment takes couples from the mentality of 'ministry' to 'mission'", elaborated Byron. "The difference is crucial. Ministry is the good and vital work a person does under the direction of another, like children's liturgy, sacrament preparation or youth groups under a parish priest. Mission, however, demands something more. Mission requires a mentality of ownership, a sense of dedication and responsibility for ensuring the work is accomplished."

This call to mission is not new. In May of this year, Pope Benedict XVI addressed an ecclesial conference for the Diocese of Rome on Church Membership and Pastoral Co-responsibility. He called for a "change of mentality," especially regarding laypeople, shifting from "considering themselves collaborators of the clergy to recognizing themselves truly as 'co-responsible' for the being and action of the Church."

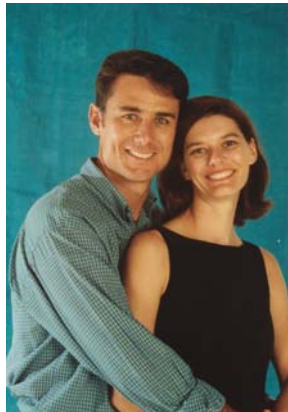
"While being accountable to the Church and loyal to its teachings, empowered couples do not rely on 'Father' to direct or motivate them. Nor are they daunted by setbacks or criticism. They are literally 'Married and on a mission!'" said Byron

Francine said that married couples are uniquely equipped, through their sacrament, to highlight Jesus' nuptial relationship with the Church as described by St Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians and richly elaborated by Pope John Paul II in the Theology of the Body. "The charisms of their sacrament are the primary tools (rather than their individual talents or professional skills) that can lead the Church in deepening her understanding of the spousal meaning of the body.

“When a couple is truly empowered, their life-giving energies reach beyond themselves and their children. They become active leaders in many areas of parish life bringing a particular relational sensitivity to their outreach,” Francine said.

As a practical first step in formally embracing this empowerment stage, the Pirolas called on their colleagues to broaden and deepen the significance of their work beginning with a simple change in language from ‘marriage education’ to ‘marriage formation’. “Marriage Education involves the transfer of information and skills” Byron said. “Marriage Formation, however, is more than this. It involves integrating the skills, their spirituality and the practice of their faith. Good formation assists the couple to develop the virtues and spiritual strengths necessary for successful marriage.”

Good decisions – good marriages.



Luke and Vanessa
Van Beek

Presenting with the Pirola’s in New Zealand were their Perth-based colleagues, Luke and Vanessa Van Beek. They gave practical insight into couple decision-making processes and demonstrated the PMRC’s “Values Based Decision Making” framework.

All couples develop strategies for making decisions. Sometimes these strategies are respectful and fair, other times the strategies themselves can subtly undermine the couple’s unity. For example, many couples use the strategy of the going with one with the strongest feelings. One problem with this strategy is that if they both feel strongly, the decision making process becomes a battle over whose feelings are stronger rather than a rational consideration of

what the best decision might be.

“Every person has deeply held values” explained Vanessa. “These values drive our feelings and preferences. Most of the arguments couples have over decisions are not about the details of the decision, it’s about feeling that their values are being ignored or dismissed”.

Arguments about money, for example, often boil down to the relative value people place on financial security. One spouse might have a very strong value for security and so have a bias for saving rather than spending. The other spouse might have a value for gift giving and charitable generosity. “It might start as a disagreement about how much to spend on their nephew’s wedding present, but if they can learn to articulate their deeper values about money they can make decisions that respect the values of both spouses,” Luke said.

A relationship counselor present found the workshop particularly insightful. “I deal with couples all the time who have become entrenched on opposite sides over a decision. The Values Based Decision Making framework will be very useful in helping them to get out of the grid lock.”

Developed specifically for couples, ‘Values Based Decision Making’ makes the pre-eminent value in any decision the couple’s unity. This is like the trump card. Before a couple commits to any decision, they should ask: will this decision advance our unity? With this basis, every decision a couple or spouse makes will draw them closer and strengthen their marital bond.

For more information about the PMRC and its resources, visit www.thepmrc.org