



Married for Life

A New Marriage Program
that's Personal and Powerful

by Theodore Mahne

Next month in Rome, bishops from around the world will meet for the Synod on Faith, Young People, and Vocational Discernment. This is the third article in our vocations series leading up to the synod. In it, we highlight a growing marriage ministry in which couples help other couples to strengthen their relationships.

Regan Setliff, a nurse, and Chris LeBlanc, a chemical engineer, met and became high school sweethearts in an English class. Seven years of uninterrupted dating later, in 2017, they started preparing for marriage in the Catholic Church. While some might call their journey the culmination of a fairy-tale romance, they have had no fairy godmother sprinkling them with bits of “bibbidi, bobbidi, boo.” The young couple recognized early on that they were being led by a much more important guiding force: the Holy Spirit.

Both Chris and Regan grew up in supportive Catholic families. But like so many young people, Chris found himself questioning Catholic teaching and slowly drifting from the Church during his college years.

“I never had a reason to come back,” Chris says. “My life was great. I had an amazing girlfriend, I was doing well in school, and my family was amazing.” So it’s no wonder that Chris was unexcited about doing Catholic marriage preparation. Regan, however, asked Chris to keep an open mind as they went through their diocese’s new program, Witness to Love.

When he first heard how intensive the program sounded, Chris was reluctant. It wasn’t just a few short meetings with someone from the parish. He and Regan would choose a mentor couple and have regular meals and conversations about marriage with them. They would complete the program’s videos, workbook, and journal assignments in addition to

meeting with clergy and going on a marriage retreat.

Soon into it, though, Chris realized he was learning more about himself, marriage, and God. He now says that Regan’s encouragement to attend Witness to Love was one of the most important things she has ever done for him.

Learning from “Real People.”

Chris and Regan chose as their coaches Raymond and Becky Rodriguez, who are celebrating their forty-fifth anniversary this month. The Rodriguezes had gone on a church-sponsored pilgrimage with Chris’ mother and had become family friends. That helped Chris and Regan feel a positive connection with them. Raymond was the bear-hug type who never met a stranger. Becky, although a bit quieter, was also warm and friendly. The two couples started getting together in the Rodriguezes’ living room.

“Raymond and Becky really lived the example for us,” Regan says.

“They helped me better understand my role as a man, including the need to be fully open with Regan,” Chris says.

“We don’t sugarcoat anything when we tell them some of the things we’ve gone through,” Raymond says. For the Rodriguezes, this included some of the strains in their marriage, particularly while raising children and during times of personal tragedy. Although these could have moved them away from God, Raymond and Becky say that turning to God together, as a couple, helped them to work through their difficulties step-by-step.

Witness to Love cofounder Mary-Rose Verret thinks that the program’s coaching model works because young people don’t tend to trust experts. They want to hear from “real people” to learn what marriage is about.

With the Rodriguezes’ guidance and friendship, Regan and Chris both believe that they are better prepared, not just for their wedding, but even more so for their marriage and the challenges that will inevitably come. They understand that living “happily ever after” takes work, dedication, and commitment—all with the grace of God.

Focused on Each Other and God. Early reports from the Diocese of Lafayette show that Witness to Love is an effective tool in helping couples to stay married. One parish’s divorce rate dropped to 0 percent (from 23 percent) each year for four years after they fully implemented the program.

In addition to the mentor couple’s guidance, the program materials offer practical suggestions to help couples work through their differences. “Raymond and Becky always told us that we would find the strength to communicate,” Regan says. “Yes, disagreements and fights will happen. But keep the focus on each other and on God.”

Halfway through their engagement, for instance, Chris and Regan disagreed about a part of the wedding. It was something small and simple, but they were both so busy with school, graduation, moving, and wedding planning that the next inconvenience aggravated them. They started arguing, and Regan got especially frustrated. She left and got in her car to go home, not wanting to deal with the difficulties that had arisen.

Putting some of his Witness to Love training into effect, Chris came outside, asked Regan to roll down



To prepare engaged couples for “real” married life, a mentor couple opens up about what has worked in their marriage, what has been difficult, and how they have turned to God.

her car window, and told her he didn’t want her to leave aggravated. He didn’t want Regan to go through it alone; he invited her to open up and tell him what was on her mind. It was exactly what she needed. She saw that he wasn’t bothered that she was upset; what bothered him was that she never told him about it. The whole situation reminded Regan of some of the reasons she first fell in love with Chris and ended up bringing the couple closer together.

Getting Real. Marriage preparation that is more personal and gritty—and that continues after the wedding

day—is a new approach for the Catholic Church in the United States.

Fr. Garrett McIntyre, pastor of St. Bernard Catholic Church in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, was among the earliest proponents of adopting Witness to Love. “I can give an engaged couple the theology of marriage, but the ability to hear from a couple who has been there, in an atmosphere of confidential trust, is vital,” he says.

In a society that puts so much emphasis on “saying yes to the dress” and on the commercial wedding industry, Fr. McIntyre said it is encouraging to see Witness to Love couples getting excited about marriage and not just the wedding day.

“People have forgotten what Christian marriage is all about,” he said. “They need to be formed.”

Chris and Regan experienced this firsthand when the topic of premarital sex came up in the program. After six years of dating, they had both decided that the time was right for them to start having sex, so they did. But as they talked with Raymond, Becky, and each other, they realized it wasn't about what "felt" right. Sex was both a physical and spiritual connection, and God had made it for a purpose. Chris says his eyes were also opened to the nature of lust. Regan and Chris say they never felt judged or pressured by the Rodriguezes but gently led toward a deeper understanding of sex and marriage. As a result, they decided to abstain for the remainder of their engagement.

The Gift that Gives Back. Like everyone involved in the program as mentors, Raymond and Becky are grateful for the grace it has brought to their marriage: strengthening it, increasing their self-awareness, and reminding them of how far they've come. They have mentored several couples now and have continued to stay in touch with them.

Reflecting on Regan and Chris, whose wedding took place in April, the Rodriguezes are impressed with just how mature the young husband and wife already are in their

The Witness to Love program began with kitchen table conversations at a house in Cajun Country, in Southwest Louisiana. Founders Ryan and Mary-Rose Verret saw a pressing need. Amid skyrocketing divorce rates, Catholic marriages were failing at rates near the national average. Traditional pre-Cana workshops and Engaged Encounter weekends needed help.

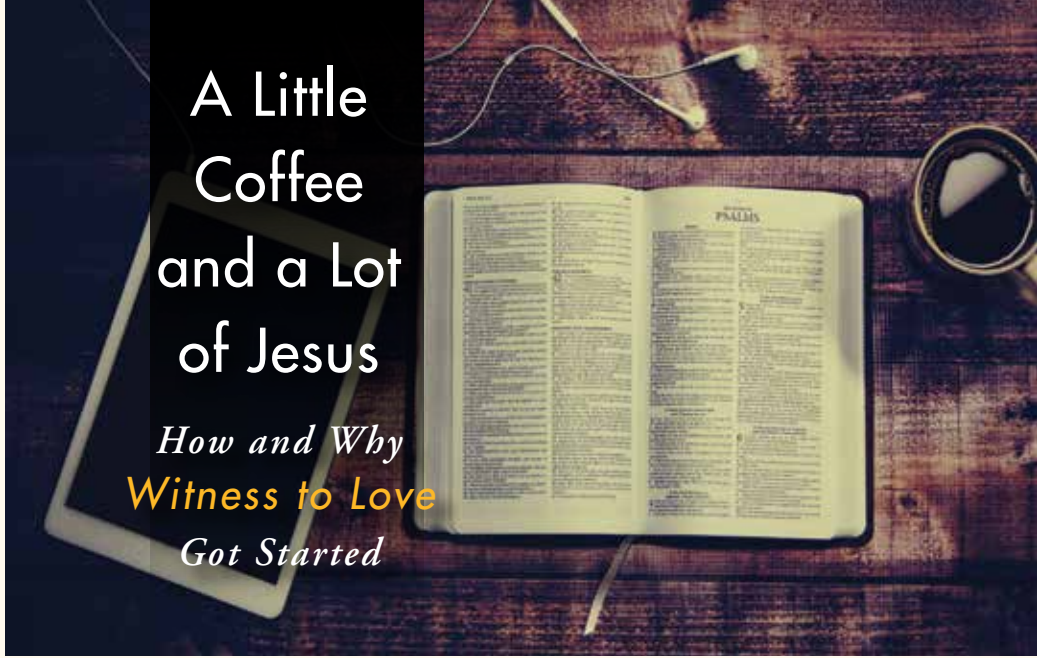
Mary-Rose and Ryan asked themselves what had helped their own marriage. They realized that marriage preparation needed to include the efforts of the full Church community, especially married couples.

"The home is the missionary outpost of the parish," Ryan says. "The home is a sacred space." After meeting with their parish priest, they received a challenge: to create a program that brought together both parish life and home life.

This was no small task! They started writing the book after dinner or bath time or in sessions from 9 p.m. to 3 a.m. "A little coffee and lot of Jesus" got them through, Mary-Rose says.

relationship. "Their communication skills are so high," Raymond says. "It took us thirty-five years to get to that point!"

Becky agrees, noting that her husband was always the strong,



A Little Coffee and a Lot of Jesus

*How and Why
Witness to Love
Got Started*

The book was a practical guide that immediately spoke to people. Both she and Ryan are convinced that their greatest contribution was leaving room for the Holy Spirit. They didn't set out to create a work of "high theology but of very practical virtue."

The resulting program was first used in just a couple of parishes. That grassroots effort quickly spread by word of mouth from priest to priest and couple to couple. Today, Witness to Love has spread to seventy dioceses across the United

States, Canada, Australia, and the Philippines. Both she and Ryan are convinced that their greatest contribution was leaving room for the Holy Spirit. They didn't set out to create a work of "high theology but of very practical virtue." The resulting program was first used in just a couple of parishes. That grassroots effort quickly spread by word of mouth from priest to priest and couple to couple. Today, Witness to Love has spread to seventy dioceses across the United

States, Canada, Australia, and the Philippines.

Ryan and Mary-Rose have talked about building an office for the program adjacent to their home. But for now, the whole operation is still run from their kitchen table. "We're one little domestic church," Mary-Rose says, "working with domestic churches all over the world to help bring God to his people." ■

You can learn more by visiting the website witnessstolove.org.

for others to see, is a part of God's plan. ■

Theodore Mahne is a high school teacher and journalist based in Metairie, Louisiana.