

FORUM AMORIS LAETITIA (9-12 giugno 2021)

Pastoral Project

## **ENCOUNTER OF COUPLES WITH CHRIST**

### ENCONTRO DE CASAIS COM CRISTO

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The Encounter of Couples with Christ - ECC - is a service of the Church to evangelize the family, the "domestic church" and "sanctuary of life", and to awaken couples to pastoral work, duly integrated into the overall pastoral care of the diocese, constituting a very strong instrument of family pastoral care.

In this way, the ECC seeks to build the Kingdom of God, here and now, starting from the family, from the parish community, showing clues so that couples may find themselves again with themselves, with their children, with the community and, mainly, with Christ. For this, it seeks to understand what it is to "be Church today" and its commitment to the dignity of the human person and social justice.

### **HOW THE ECC ORIGINATED?**

The ECC originated in 1970, in the Parish of Nossa Senhora do Rosário, in Vila Pompéia, São Paulo, through the initiative of Father Alfonso Pastore. Alfonso Pastore, a priest who dedicated his life to various works of evangelization involving families, and noticing the lack of pastoral involvement of these couples, this created a restlessness in his heart and from this restlessness, Father Alfonso, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, created the ECC.

The ECC is a reality in all of Brazil. Currently, our country has 280 dioceses and the ECC is present in 264 dioceses, that is, approximately 98% of the dioceses in the country. Since April 1970, almost three and a half million couples have experienced the ECC service throughout Brazil.



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### **WHAT ARE THE OBJECTIVES OF THE ECC?**

The ECC is a service to evangelize families and to awaken couples to participate in church ministries. There are many couples who only the woman or the man participate in church, or even couples who only attend mass but are not involved in the parish. The proposal of the ECC is to involve the couple pastorally in the parish pastoral work. The ECC is a strictly parish service, although it has a national, regional, diocesan organization, but it provides the service in the parish specifically.

The ECC seeks familiarity with the Word of God and with the liturgical rites. With Christian life. It is not only doctrine; it is above all reality and mystery. For this reason, the ECC also has the purpose of introducing couples to the life of the parish, participating in pastoral movements and services, in a life of personal and community prayer.

### **HOW THE ECC HAS DEVELOPED?**

The Encounter of Couples with Christ was conceived to be developed in three distinct, indispensable and interrelated stages, each with its own characteristics and purposes. One stage prepares the other and must be observed from a growth of its members and of their community.

The first stage, the 'Encounter', evangelizing and missionary, is the awakening, it is the call to couples who are far from the Church.

The first stage of the ECC aims to awaken couples to live their marriage and family in a human and Christian way. It awakens conjugal spirituality. To open avenues of growth for them to adhere to the Gospel and the Church.

The couples who participate in the 1st stage are invited to participate in a post-meeting, which is not yet the 2nd stage. This motivates the couples to begin their involvement in the community, to create a fraternal living together in the parish. The couples will participate in couples' groups, in small communities with other couples, where they will practice their formation, their participation, their integration into the community until they reach the second stage.

Unfortunately not all couples complete the second stage and many end up getting lost along the way. However, those who follow all the stages become involved in the parish and become active, living Catholicism, Catholic doctrine and engaged in the community.

The second stage, among its various objectives, has to reflect on the true meaning of baptismal faith and to study the documents of the Church. The couples who complete the second stage begin to have a more in-depth formation. If, during the first stage, the couple awakened to the Church, we can say that it was an appetizer for the couple to begin to love their Church, the second stage will give them a deeper dive, a more solid formation of the Church, by studying its documents, the directives of the evangelizing action of the Church in Brazil, etc. The couples who participate in the second stage of the ECC begin to have a deeper and more solid vision of the Church.



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Thus, the second stage of the ECC is the 're-encounter', it is catechetical, it is a deepening, a proposal of commitment, it uses reflection and is for couples who are engaged and those who wish to be engaged.

The third stage dives even deeper into study. These are couples who are very involved in the community and who reflect on their role in society, on the role of the family in society, on the dignity of the human person and on political questions. Couples who do the third stage have a very significant deepening of the Church, a very important ecclesiological notion. Thus, the third stage is the 'Commitment', which is transformative, and is for couples who seek to change the unjust structures of our society.

It is important that couples do all three steps.

Although the ECC is divided into stages, evangelization is continuous, similar to a catechumenal catechesis, so as to lead couples to build the Kingdom of God, starting with the family and the parish community, showing clues so that couples can meet again with themselves, with their children, with the community and especially with Christ.

### **WHAT IS THE SPIRIT OF THE ECC?**

The Encounter of Couples with Christ is not a movement. It does not aim to bind couples to itself, nor should couples want to be bound to the ECC. The ECC presents itself as a service of the Church to the families of the parish.

The ECC Family Ministry service is essentially parish-based. This is its fundamental characteristic. The parish will attend to its couples within its concrete reality and possibilities, promoting the evangelization and the engagement of couples in the parish pastoral activities.

The ECC wants to be a means, a stage, a passage, a bridge. The goal is not the ECC. The goal is the Kingdom of God in all the parishes.

The ECC is a service to families. It is done by couples for couples, aiming to awaken them to live their marriage, their family, uniting the spouses more, leading them to understand each other better, to establish a greater relationship and dialogue with their children, opening paths of growth, if they decide for the Gospel message, for Christ's Church.

The ECC is also a service that seeks to present to couples a clear and living vision of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and of the Church today, through its Documents and Encyclicals, and its Social Doctrine.

The originality of the ECC in relation to other movements and services of the Church to families lies in that it, under the guidance of the National, Regional and Diocesan Councils, is organized and carried out at Parish level. "This is its vital characteristic. Whoever removes this characteristic from it tears out its soul. It is a family and parish service", words of its founder, Father Alfonso Pastore.



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In every ECC service, one truth is fundamental: man is only an instrument. It is God who converts and changes people. We are only servants of God.

The spirituality of the ECC is founded on five basic points:

- a) **GIVING** - essence of Christian life;
- b) **POVERTY** - evangelical attitude fundamental for reaping the Kingdom of God;
- c) **SIMPLICITY** - attitude that translates into a simple, spontaneous and authentic style in relationships with others;
- d) **JOY** - is born of the certainty of the victory of the good and is experienced in meeting, sharing, giving, communion with others;
- e) **PRAYER** - is a personal relationship of man with God in Jesus Christ.

Added to these values are **FRATERNITY**, **GRATUITY**, and **MISSIONARITY**.

Remembering that, the purpose is to seek out estranged couples, to love them, to position them, giving them a vision of their reason for being as a vital cell of humanity; to open for them ways of fraternal communion in the parish community and to enable them to be co-responsible in pastoral service. Its mission is to reach all couples residing within the parish boundaries (intellectuals, illiterate, poor, owners, workers, bosses, teachers...). All together participating in the same Gathering. This is the sign that it is Church. The characteristic is parochiality.

### **WHAT'S THE ECC PARISH STRUCTURE LIKE?**

The first stage of the ECC in the parish is organized by a Leading Team composed of the priest and five couples from the parish. This team has, among its attributions, the coordination of all the activities related to the 1st Stage of the ECC, and to reflect on the involvement of the couples in the pastorals of the parish, giving them conditions for this. Thus, four of the couples have as their main function the organization of the meetings of the 1st Stage, while the fifth couple has as their function the continuous evangelization and the relationship of the couples with the other activities of the parish.

The 2nd and 3rd stage meetings are organized at diocesan level, but couples from the parishes are invited to take part in their organization.



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### **HOW DO THE MEETINGS HAPPEN?**

The meetings are held on weekends: Friday night, Saturday all day, and Sunday until late afternoon. It is composed of lectures, testimonies, group dynamics, and other activities. All activities are geared towards the couple, husband and wife, who will have the opportunity to reflect on various aspects of married life, of family life.

Absolute secrecy about the content of the meeting must be maintained.

Trying to fulfill its missionary action, aiming to keep alive the initial spirit of the ECC, its purposes and characteristics, its unity and integrity, the ECC has a document, at a national level, that allows it to provide all dioceses and parishes with a secure orientation, seeking to improve its evangelizing line.

Thus, the ECC follows its own norms contained in the National Document. This is valid for all ECC in all parishes in all parts of Brazil.

In order to give continuity to the service that the ECC gives to the Church and to the improvement of its leaders, National and Regional Congresses are held periodically.

### **WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN THE ECC?**

Couples who have the sacrament of matrimony, or who have no impediment to receive it.

### **IS THE ECC HELD ONLY IN BRAZIL?**

The ECC appeared in Brazil in the 1970s, and during this period some implantations were made outside the country.

In 1999, the ECC was implanted in the Archdiocese of Miami, USA. We do not know if there was continuity there.

In 2005 the ECC was implanted in Venezuela, Archdiocese of Barquisimeto, and called "*Encuentro de Matrimonios con Cristo - EMC*". As far as we know it is going well.

In 2008, the implantation was made in Mozambique, in the Archdiocese of Maputo. We have no information about the progress of the ECC there.

In 2018, the implementation of the ECC was carried out in Canada, Archdiocese of Montreal. Five couples and a priest from Brazil went to Montreal to accompany the implementation of the first



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meeting and, so far, two meetings have been held successfully. The National Document of the ECC is being translated into French, which will make it easier to hold the next meetings in that country.

The ECC has a very valuable proposal. It is a service that brings great contribution to the Church. In these 50 years of ECC in Brazil, it has helped in evangelization, it has improved catechesis, many people who have experienced the ECC participate as pastoral agents in their parishes, and vocations have been born from children of encounterers. In short, the ECC is a joy of God, of Christ for our Church.

Let us pray to God that the Holy Spirit, who inspired Father Alfonso Pastore to create the ECC in 1970, may continue to guide us in the work of this beautiful pastoral work of evangelization of the families of our Church.

*We believe in Life. We believe in Family.*

### BIOGRAPHY



We have been married for twenty-nine years, and we have two children.

We are from the Diocese of Bauru from Brazil.

Our service in the Church has been in Fraternity Campaign, Baptism Pastoral, Leading Team of the 1st Stage of the Encounter of Couples with Christ (ECC), Diocesan Couple of the ECC, Couple responsible for the ECC in the Regional South 1 of CNBB (São Paulo State) and Members of the Diocesan Family Pastoral. Currently

we are in the coordination of the Diocesan Couples' Retreat "Holy Family" and of the Diocesan Missionary Action Sector.



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