

FORUM AMORIS LAETITIA (9-12 giugno 2021)

Pastoral Project:

WITNESS TO LOVE

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Hi, we are Ryan and Mary Rose Verret and we are the founders of *Witness to Love*.

Witness to Love is a marriage movement that was born of desperation and the Holy Spirit. In our work at the parish and diocesan level here in the United States of America (and now throughout the world) we work with engaged couples and the mentors that they choose. We form leaders in our communities to work with these couples.

Witness to Love is now in its 10th year and we have learned a lot in working with 80 different dioceses from around the world currently in English, Spanish, French and now in Vietnamese.

There are four elements of the *Witness to Love* methodology and process that are not only specific outcomes but also goals that are essential to us in our service to Christ and the Church.

We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life. (AL 37)

The first is that *Witness to Love* provides the appropriate setting for growing in authentic friendship. We see that friendship is the essential first starting point for any act of evangelization. The mentor couple is the essential tool of providing that authentic friendship.

In addition to the small circle of the couple and their children, there is a larger family, which cannot be overlooked. Friends and other families are part of this larger family as well as communities of families who support one another in their difficulties, their social commitments and their faith...This wider family can help make up for the shortcomings of parents. (AL 196 & 197)



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Secondly, *Witness to Love* highlights the proper setting for the formation of virtue. We know that grace builds upon nature, but it is very important that human activity and the relational virtues that are essential to marriage be something that young couples can practice and that it can also be coached in that practice through the gift of mentoring.

The complexity of today's society and the challenge faced by the family require a greater effort on the part of the whole Christian community in preparing those who are about to be married. The importance of the virtues needs to be included. [...]The Fathers also spoke of the need for specific programmes of marriage preparation aimed at giving couples a genuine experience of participation in ecclesial life and a complete introduction to the various aspects of family life. (AL 206)

Third, *Witness to Love* provides the proper context for the inclusion of newly married couples and young families into the parish life. They are not doing this just for an hour a week, but mentors and engaged couples are finding that the starting point of parish life begins in the domestic church. In the home of mentor couples, we have that first instance of welcoming hospitality into the life of the parish by meeting first in the home and then of course going to the parish on the Lord's Day.

We need to find the right language, arguments and forms of witness that can help us reach the hearts of young people, appealing to their capacity for generosity, commitment, love and even heroism, and in this way inviting them to take up the challenge of marriage with enthusiasm and courage. (AL 40)

I encourage Christian communities to recognize the great benefit that they themselves receive from supporting engaged couples as they grow in love. These couples are a valuable resource because, as they sincerely commit themselves to grow in love and self-giving, they can help renew the fabric of the whole ecclesial body." (AL 207)

Fourth and foremost, we are really rebuilding society. *WTL* is really rebuilding communities and generations of life long marriages through accompaniment and through this friendship that comes through the mentor couple.

We would like to speak to you more about the mentor couple, the accompanying couple. The couple who walks with an engaged couple before and after the wedding day. Traditionally mentor couples have been seen as the 'expert'; the couple that an engaged couple works with for a short time; the couple that knows everything; trained and assigned by the church to work with a young couple. However, in our work we've seen that if the young couple does not trust that mentor couple; if there is not an existing relationship; if they do not admire; or desire a marriage like the mentor's, then the relationship between them is not going to be ongoing; it is not going to be life giving; and it is



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not going to be life changing. Fundamental to evangelization are; attraction, relationships and trust. These are three pillars upon which the WTL evangelization model works.

They do not need to be taught the entire Catechism or overwhelmed with too much information. Here too, 'it is not great knowledge but rather the ability to feel and relish things interiorly that contents and satisfies the soul.' (AL 207)

We have seen this attraction occur in so many different ways, but that first point of attraction is where young engaged couples are today, and this is the same across every culture we have worked in. Young couples deeply desire to be in a committed relationship, and a committed marriage, but they have a fear and a hesitancy when it comes to sharing their true self. Attraction and trusting relationships provide the platform for conversations about marriage and family life with a mentor couple. In *Witness to Love*, the mentor couple, the accompanying couple, also provides a response to that deep innate desire that young people have today to be in a committed, safe, and sustained friendship.

At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families. This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God's grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite. (AL 36)

Too many young people today come from divorced families or parents who are unhappily married, or parents who were never married. Even grandparents who are divorced. Young people tell us that they have never been in a married couple's home. They say, "We have no one within our circle of friends who can give that model to us of what a healthy, holy marriage looks like." We all need that witness.

We have to realize that all of us are a complex mixture of light and shadows. The other person is much more than the sum of the little things that annoy me. Love does not have to be perfect for us to value it. The other person loves me as best they can, with all their limits, but the fact that love is imperfect does not mean that it is untrue or unreal. (AL 113)

In *WTL* we also propose that church communities have couples that they hold up and say, young couples if you don't know anyone who's married you admire to walk with you, choose from among these couples. It is fundamentally important that they are able to choose. In the older models of marriage preparation we see this assigned mentor. Here, couples do not have a choice, they do not know them, have never met them before, but must share their life with them. This does not work



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with the way we were created! It also doesn't work with young people today, with their lack of trust with the church and of authority. So, in allowing an engaged couple to choose a couple, even if it's among that group of couples you have offered at the parish, they are investing in the process. They are discerning, often for the first time in their lives, what kind of marriage they want. What's it going to look like? What's it going to sound like? How does a father treat his children? How does a mother interact with her husband? It is so important that we allow couples this choice. It sounds like a very small suggestion, a very small intervention, but couples being able to choose and to tell us what they are attracted to and what they desire is a fundamental need that young people have today.

That innovative approach, which is very unique in *WTL*, of engaged couples choosing a mentor is where the attraction and desire moves into a relationship. A virtuous relationship. A relationship that is very much modeling the generosity and kindness of Christ. We see that the experience of the mentors is unique because they are not experts. Our approach does not put them in a position of having to be well versed in moral theology, philosophy, psychology or anything like that. They are just really coached by parishes and the pastoral team to share their marriage. And in that sharing of their marriage, that kindness and generosity becomes the platform for catechesis because we know it's not just about being formed to be a nice couple that gets along, we really want them to become a Christian couple. So, similar to the New Testament where Pricilla and Aquila opened up their home to receive couples who were going through a conversion, we see in a similar way which is very much rooted in the Holy Father's direction of *Amoris Laetitia*, that it's generosity and kindness that really unleashes the Gospel.

Quality is more important than quantity, and priority should be given -along with a renewed proclamation of the kerygma - to an attractive and helpful presentation of information that can help couples to live the rest of their lives together "with great courage and generosity." (AL 113)

When that relationship is established they move into a posture of trust where these engaged couples and newly married couples not only trust their mentors, but they really grow to trust the Church, even God the Father and to be reconciled in relationships in so many different areas.

It could also be helpful to ask older married couples to help younger couples in the neighbourhood by visiting them and offering guidance in the early years of marriage. Given the pace of life today, most couples cannot attend frequent meetings; still, we cannot restrict our pastoral outreach to small and select groups. Nowadays, pastoral care for families has to be fundamentally missionary, going out to where people are. We



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can no longer be like a factory, churning out courses that for the most part are poorly attended. (AL 230)

One of the other important aspects of Witness to Love is the order in which things occur. A mentor couple, again they're not experts, but they come really humbled that they have been chosen to share the witness of their marriage with this young couple. The two couples come together in the home of whomever the parish coordinator or marriage point person is, and they are coached in their journey. The young couple and their mentors meet over a period of time. They go on a double date together. They go to church together at least twice a month. There is a sharing of life that occurs. About five months in, they go on a retreat together, and then the mentor couple invites Father or Deacon and the engaged couple into their home. And all of this applies to also civilly married couples seeking a convalidation. There is an encounter in the home of the mentor couple who may have never had Father or Deacon in their home before. They come to a deeper understanding that their home is a missionary outpost of the local church. Their home is a stepping stone back into the life of the church. They are able to ask questions that would never otherwise be asked or answered. This is an incredible opportunity for evangelization within a small intimate group setting. There are conversations that we as a Church have not had because we do not create the opportunity for them. This is that opportunity. It is not just any couple that becomes a mentor. It's couples where grace builds on nature and these are couples who have been married five years or more, they are active in the Catholic church and they have a marriage the engaged couple admires. Those are the foundational starting points for a couple to become a mentor. We can work with these couples. The Catholic Church can work with these mentor couples. So, we ask the engaged couples to bring those couples to us. The church forms these couples and gives them back as a gift to the community. This is across any culture, an opportunity and an encouragement to those married mentor couples to Be Light to the world.

This opportunity to welcome new couples and families into the life of the church extends in a very specific way also to those cohabitating or civilly married couples. This is the most critical point in the new evangelization, to reach out to those Catholic couples who are civilly married. Approximately 20% of all sacramental marriages are convalidations. The number of sacramental marriages in the United States has dropped from 294,000 in 1995 to 144,000 in 2017, a decrease of 50%.

Many of these young families are missing from the life of the church and our parishes. These civilly married couples need mentors, who themselves experienced a convalidation. These couples play a critical role in reaching out to those civilly married couples in our communities. The Church, until now, has not responded to the needs of this vast demographic who are the missing young families, the needed future families of the Church. *Witness to Love* has worked to develop the first ever



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national initiative to reach civilly married Catholic couples. Parishes that creatively use the CMI will experience an increase in convalidations.

We must be creative and bold for the future families of our Church.

Consequently, pastoral accompaniment needs to go beyond the actual celebration of the sacrament (Familiaris Consortio, Part III). In this regard, experienced couples have an important role to play. The parish is a place where such experienced couples can help younger couples, with the eventual cooperation of associations, ecclesial movements and new communities 227. All pastoral work on behalf of the family must allow people to be interiorly fashioned and formed as members of the domestic church through the Church's prayerful reading of sacred Scripture. (AL 223)

WTL is an experience that has been deeply rooted, and we can see, in Amoris Laetitia in this catechumenate approach to marriage formation that the Holy Father has asked for us to provide.

Stressing the witness of families themselves and by grounding marriage preparation in the process of Christian initiation. (AL 223)

After that experience of marriage preparation, that nine month to a year long process, the engaged couple, the newly married couple now also begins to participate in a five year process with their mentor couple. Where they go from a process of learning how to belong together in the first year of formation. In the second year, a process of believing and learning about the truths of the Faith. The third year is about becoming, so being deeply rooted and configured to Christ. The fourth year is the year of beatitude where they really learn to live Matthew 5-7 in a gospel approach to marriage. And finally, the year of *Be Light* where these newly married couples have gone through a whole five year process with their mentor couple to now themselves be evangelizing spouses.

We should not be trapped into wasting our energy in doleful laments, but rather seek new forms of missionary creativity. (AL 57)

So, in summary, we leave you with this invitation to not basically just settle for the same old, same old when it comes to marriage formation, but to see in the gift of existing marriages, those mentor couples that are already available, an opportunity to really welcome new families and new couples into the life of the Church.

With the help of missionary families, the couple's own families and a variety of pastoral resources, ways should also be found to offer a remote preparation that, by example and good advice, can help their love to grow and mature. Discussion groups and optional talks on a variety of topics of genuine interest to young people can also prove helpful.



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All the same, some individual meetings remain essential, since the primary objective is to help each to learn how to love this very real person with whom he or she plans to share his or her whole life. Learning to love someone does not happen automatically, nor can it be taught in a workshop just prior to the celebration of marriage. (AL 208)

In conclusion, we firmly believe Amoris Laetitia is providing us with a new infrastructure of evangelization and discipleship. We'd like to offer the following reflection questions as an examination of our current evangelization efforts in light of Amoris Laetitia and our personal experience:

- 1) When it comes to mentoring, discipleship and evangelization of couples, are we really trusting in the Holy Spirit and acknowledging that there is a gap that must be filled, which is out of our control? Amoris Laetitia talks about the weaknesses and the challenges of couples, and we know from experience that the Holy Spirit must be called into this place. The Holy Spirit can do what we can not.
- 2) Is our apostolate having the desired impact? How are we verifying and studying the impact? Are we collaborating? Are we being innovative? Are we looking at data, growth, statistics? Are we just saying, "Let's make a space for the Holy Spirit"; or are we also actually measuring our impact and working with others?
- 3) Are we truly looking at and understanding the needs of young people? Do they desire what we propose? Are they responding to that which we propose to them? Are they showing up? Are they participating? We need to take to heart the relational model that Pope Francis has talked about. The model of Priscilla and Aquilla, is a model for our times where we're not just focused on more content, but we are focused on authentic friendship and relationship in the Church.
- 4) Finally, the most important take away that we would like to share is that there is no movement, there is no innovation, there's no program, there is no idea that will bring anyone to Christ if we first do not have a relationship with Christ. That is foundational. So, we, mentors, accompanying couples, clergy- no one can witness the love of God to a young couple without already having that relationship with God. Also, we need room for the Holy Spirit to act, as we said earlier. It is vitally important to include the Holy Spirit in our plans and be open to the surprises that He has for us and those we serve. Again, wanting to underscore what we said earlier, "We need a new infrastructure for evangelization and discipleship." That is foundational. We can do that with collaboration among those who serve couples, marriage and families.



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We share [here](#) with you information on the underpinnings of Witness to Love and we invite your collaboration and request your prayers. <https://witnessstolove.org/yearofthefamily/>

BIOGRAPHY



Mary – Rose and Ryan Verre are the co-founders of Witness to Love and the authors of Witness to Love: How to Help the Next Generation Build Marriages that Survive and Thrive. Together Ryan and Mary-Rose speak on issues regarding evangelization, marriage, discipleship, fertility awareness and medical ethics. They are frequent guests on Catholic TV and radio and they reside in the heart of Cajun Country in Louisiana with their five children. Their passion is teaching couples to share their marriage with others and to understand that their home is a missionary outpost of the local parish.

Video Link: <https://vimeo.com/536570757/dfa168908e>



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