

FORUM AMORIS LAETITIA (9 to 12 June 2021)

Pastoral Project

Worldwide Marriage Encounter (WWME)

Daniel & Shelley EE – Singapore

A short paragraph on Worldwide Marriage Encounter

Worldwide Marriage Encounter traces its roots to Spain. In an effort to help married couples live their vocation more joyfully, Fr. Gabriel Calvo, a Diocesan Laborer priest, developed the Encuentro Conjugal in the mid twentieth century. This retreat was taken to Latin America and in 1967 to the United States. Fr Chuck Gallagher SJ and pioneering couples and other priests who lived this experience began to dream of using it to inspire spiritual renewal in the spirit of unity proclaimed by Vatican II. Today, Worldwide Marriage Encounter is present in almost 100 countries in Asia, Europe, North America, Latin America, Pacific and Africa and is presented in the language of the country. Worldwide Marriage Encounter's mission is to proclaim the value of Marriage and Holy Orders in the Church and in the world by accompanying couples, priests and religious to live fully intimate and responsible relationships through a Catholic "experience" weekend and offering ongoing community support for such a lifestyle.

Vision of WWME: Love one another as I have loved you. John 15:12

Mission of WWME: To proclaim the value of Marriage and Holy Orders in the Church and in the world.

Introduction

S: Hello everyone, I'm Shelley and I'm Daniel. We are from Singapore. We were married in Aug 1977. We have three grown-up children and two grandsons. Today we will speak about our couple spirituality.

S: Our early years of marriage had its ups and downs. The Holy Father stated in AL No. 126 that "marital joy can be experienced even amid sorrow; that marriage is an inevitable mixture of enjoyment and struggles, satisfaction and longings, annoyances and pleasure and so on". Soon after marriage we realized our family backgrounds were quite different. For example in Daniel's home they would eat rice porridge often but in my family we only ate it when one of us was not well. My parents would make sure we celebrated everyone's birthday with a cake and some food but in Daniel's family, birthdays were a quiet affair. Despite these downs, we faced many ups too! We experienced many happy moments together – going to the beach, to the amusement park, gathering with friends for meals.



Amoris Laetitia Family
Year 2021 - 2022

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D: After marriage, we lived with my mother in her house. It didn't dawn on me that this was not going to be "our home" in the long term. But Shelley could see that very clearly. I was reluctant to uproot myself. She wanted a place to call her own. We were unhappy that we could not see eye to eye on this matter. By the God's grace we attended a talk on family life given by a priest from India. We consulted him and he told me in very clear terms that I should consider setting up a home for ourselves and not feel guilty that I was leaving my mother's house. Somehow this advice from him made it easier for me to accept it. So we managed to find a house and we have lived there until today.

D: Our couple spirituality is rooted in three core pillars – Dialogue, Sexual Intimacy and Prayer.

D: To explain how these pillars have shaped our couple spirituality, we will share some aspects of our lives in relation to these pillars.

Dialogue

S: The Holy Father spoke about Dialogue in AL No. 136 where he wrote "Dialogue is essential for experiencing, expressing, and fostering love in marriage and family life. After four years of marriage, we attended a couple programme and learned about the importance of dialogue. We learned to share our feelings, to empathise with each other and to make decisions to love. We learned that feelings had no morality, they were neither right nor wrong. This is exactly what is stated in Amoris Laetitia no.145.

D: In this couple programme we learned to listen actively without judgment. BUT frankly the practice of it was easier said than done. Shelley kept going back to her way of preparing her answers while I was talking. And I kept reverting to my way of listening – which is to fix the problem.

And that was the last thing she needed. All she wanted was for me to listen to her. I had to consciously tell myself not to problem solve but to use the dialogue to make the decision to love her as is stated in AL No.94 which is "love is more than a mere feeling, love is to do good".

D: We dialogued about difficult issues as well as about happy experiences. Five years into marriage, Shelley was still unable to conceive. Then one day after praying the rosary together we felt prompted to 'surrender' to accept whatever was God's plan for us. We felt 'free' and relieved after making this prayer. A few months later, to our surprise, Shelley conceived and we were overjoyed. Dialoguing at the deepest level – revealing our anxieties, fears, our joy, helped us to walk in each other's shoes, to empathise and make decisions to love each other.

This brings us to the second important pillar, Sexual Intimacy.



Sexual Intimacy

S: And by this we are not merely referring to sexual intercourse. Sexual intimacy is much more than that. Our parish priest made this point at a couple enrichment session that we participated in. He spoke about being 'generous' in our 'love' for each other to relate to each other from the time we wake up in the morning. Daniel and I give each other a simple sign of affection like a kiss, a hug or even a tease. We try our best when one is speaking, the other does not interject. There were occasions when I felt sad about a family situation; Daniel would sit with me, put his arms around me and just listened to me. That comforted me whenever he did that.

S: Twenty years ago Daniel started working from home and I was concerned whether I might have too much of him. My fears were totally unfounded. It turned out to be a wonderful new phase of life. We live out our sexual intimacy literally throughout the day – now we had more time to go for long walks, visit new places and embark on new hobbies for example we took up assembling jigsaw puzzles!

D: With the build-up in sexual intimacy, sexual intercourse truly becomes a divine experience, beyond just the physical act of intimacy. We cherish each other even more and each time give thanks to the Lord for blessing us with each other. This is well laid out in AL No. 157.

Prayer

D: The third important pillar is prayer. Motivated and challenged by the retreats we had attended, we moved from saying individual prayers to praying as a couple. Praying as a couple reminds us that God is at the centre of our lives. Every night we give thanks to God as individuals and as a couple. We share our concerns, our joys and learn to count our blessings together.

S: During the day, we would pray the rosary either we would sit at the altar or when we go out for a walk. We pray for our children, our family and friends because we know the power of praying the rosary.

When the children were young, we would gather for night prayers. They'd pray out loud their thanks to God, then they would voice out their petitions. We believe that this family prayer provided the Catholic foundation for each of them when they left home for further studies overseas. AL speaks about the importance of family prayer in AL No. 29.

D: Since 1989, we have been with a prayer group – 3 couples and 1 husband. Over the last year, we had to resort to meeting over Zoom because of Covid-19. A French priest, now Singaporean, who turns 91 years old in July, helps us unpack the readings of the week. He gives us fresh insights into the readings. We reflect on scripture and share our personal life stories related to scripture. Our prayer life has been a critical pillar that helps us to complete the other two pillars.



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S: You might ask, "what about forgiveness, where does that come into your couple spirituality?" Looking at our 44 years together, we see that true forgiveness came when these three pillars of dialogue, sexual intimacy and prayer were practiced. When I did something wrong, I could acknowledge it, seek forgiveness and Daniel was able to forgive me. This we did and it worked both ways. With the three pillars supporting our marriage, I really found it possible to die to myself, to my pride. Over the years, cold wars have become fewer and far between.

Being light to the world

D: Jesus told his disciples, "Love one another as I have loved you." So too, we have to share our couple spirituality with our own family, extended families, our Church and with people whom we come in contact with every day.

Since 1983 we have served as a couple in the ministries in our Church. We each have our gifts, talents and ways of working. We have learnt to leverage off each other's strengths. For example, Shelley is creative and often she would ask me, "What do you think of this idea?" And I, on the other hand, am a somewhat boring logical thinker, and would think of how the idea can be implemented, how would people be affected by it and so on. When we put our heads together, often we find that the conversation leads us to some very good ideas. We have learnt to apply the same principles of leveraging off the strengths of others when working with other people or couples.

D: One interesting feature of our service as a couple is working with priests. We have come to value and respect priests as shepherds of the flock as well as friends. We have come to appreciate their true selves as men with strengths, with weaknesses and vulnerabilities. And by sharing our life stories with each other, we have grown spiritually and as human beings.

S: In Amoris Laetitia, the Holy Father is encouraging all married couples to trust that God has a plan in bringing us together. And he gave important instructions on how to bring this plan to reality. In our case, we depended on our three pillars of dialogue, sexual intimacy and prayer. We are still a work in progress.

What lessons can we draw from our own spiritual journey as a couple?

- Priests, religious sisters and brothers and experienced 'senior' **couples formed in family life skills, have provided us with much needed accompaniment and mentoring** during our early years of marriage (AL No. 202 and AL No. 203 refer to adequate formation



Amoris Laetitia Family
Year 2021 - 2022

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of priests and pastoral workers in the areas of engagement and marriage, that they themselves attain the maturity and psychological balance needed for this ministry).

- We ourselves **received critical formation from marriage enrichments, parenting courses and spiritual programmes**. AL No. 228 talked about the importance of parishes, movements and other church institutions to support families with relevant talks, marriage counselling and other forms of support.
- **Serving as a couple contributed to our couple spirituality**. This is covered in AL No. 225. We would encourage dioceses and parishes to make it possible in their organization and invite couples, where appropriate, to serve together rather than as separate individuals so that they can use their respective gifts as 'one' for the benefit of the Church.



Amoris Laetitia Family
Year 2021 - 2022

BIOGRAPHY



Daniel & Shelley are the Immediate Past International Ecclesial Team Couple of Worldwide Marriage Encounter (WWME). They served in this leadership role with Fr Nathaniel Gomez of the Philippines for five years beginning from 2014 till 2018. During this period they led the Movement and chaired the World Council of WWME. They also presented couple enrichment and formations sessions for their communities in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America and the Pacific.

They have been Team Presenters for the Marriage Encounter Weekend and related couple enrichment programmes since 1991 and held the Singapore followed by the Asian leadership roles from 2007 to 2013.

Married in August 1977. Citizens of the Republic of Singapore.

Children: Elizabeth, Michael and Clare and grandsons, Noah, 3 years old, and Asher, 11 months old.

Shelley is retired from the workforce. She was an executive officer in the Singapore Government Service from 1976 to 1987, working in the finance, defence and home affairs ministries.

A qualified primary school teacher, she decided to devote her time to care for the children full time and to serve in various church ministries such as Rite of Christian Initiation (RCIA) programme, Pregnancy Counselling, Teens programme (children from single parent homes) and the Canossian Schools Management Committee.

Daniel is chairman of Keppel Infrastructure Trust and Olive Tree Estates Limited and sits on the boards of Ascendas Real Estate Investment Trust and the Singapore Mediation Centre.

After graduating with an engineering degree, he worked for 10 years in the public sector before moving to banking where he served another 14 years.

Involvement with the Church

Daniel serves in the parish as a funeral minister. Often assisted by Shelley, he accompanies the family of the deceased and guides them in the funeral Mass and prayers. They also serve as choir members in their parish with their adult daughter.

As a couple they have served in Infant Baptism Preparation, "Jesus Invites Us to Love" (a teens programme), Basic Christian neighbourhood community, Faith Formation Committee and Parish Pastoral Council.

