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Worldwide Marriage Encounter – USA
Bob & Joy Hernandez and Fr. Chuck Kosanke
United States Secretariat Team

February 18, 2005

Dear Bob & Joy and Fr. Chuck,

Each year since 1957, Franciscan Retreats, in the name of the entire Conventual Franciscan Order, has presented the Franciscan International Award to men, women, and organizations that represent the best values of our Catholic tradition.

The Franciscan spirit recognizes the work of God within the Church and far beyond the boundaries of Church. Award recipients represent Christians of many persuasions, and individuals from other dimensions of public life – sports, entertainment, politics, etc.

In 2006 we want to present the Award to Worldwide Marriage Encounter -- USA. You were selected by our Lay Board of Advisors; but, as it happens, all three of the priests presently serving at Franciscan Retreats have worked in your ministry. We have an enthusiastic love of Marriage Encounter and the Sacrament of Marriage.

Today, perhaps more than ever, the Church and the world needs your witness. Marriage, “the one blessing that was not forfeited by original sin nor washed away in the flood,” is threatened today first by the indifference of married people who neglect their own relationships; and secondly, by unmarried men and women who seek its respectability.

While many Catholic have great sympathy for the latter – they are often our own sons and daughters, brothers and sisters – we know in our hearts their relationships have little similarity to marriage. And yet we’re caught. We must not react with contempt, fear, or hate; nor may we react with an uncritical “tolerance” that only condones absurdity. If we cannot go to war for the truth, neither can we ignore our own truth. So how should we respond?

Marriage Encounter is one marvelous Christian response. It is a movement, summoned by the Holy Spirit, which calls husbands and wives to reflect on their experience, remember their personal histories, renew their commitments, develop their vocabulary, hone their skills, and celebrate their sacrament.

It is, of course, not the only Christian response. Cana Conferences, Engaged Encounter, Couple-to-Couple Ministry, and retreats for married couples are other responses.

As often happens, these religious and spiritual movements are not hailed by the secular world around us. They seem to move beneath the radar of the media, which may be just as well. So long as the news media thrive on controversy, lust, fear, and hate, we'll do better without their attention.

Franciscan Retreats has, since its conception, offered married couples a time and place to reflect on the "complex mystery" of married love. Although the friars are not married, we know from experience of our original families, from our ministry to married couples, and from our common life the challenge of living together. It is never easy to set aside ones fears and suspicions to make decisions with others. We know the temptation to dominance, which, as God predicted in Eden, sabotages affection. We know also the gentling power of grace which helps women and men to see one another through the eyes of God.

Marriage Encounter represents a tremendous surge of lay leadership in the Church. You show us what might have been obvious but needed revealing nonetheless – that like must minister to like. Married couples need the witness of other married couples. While celibate priests can certainly encourage and foster the Sacrament, we cannot speak with your wisdom or authority. You articulate and celebrate what we can hardly imagine.

You are generating a thorough reexamination of our theological and ethical doctrines as you bring new experience, thoughts, words, and concepts into our discourse. You reveal the Sacrament of Marriage as more liberating, joyous, and wise than celibate preachers, teachers, and counselors could ever imagine, much less describe.

I hope that you will accept this Franciscan International Award from us.

We plan to present the award to you or your representatives on Thursday, May 11, 2006 at a banquet hall in nearby Egan, Minnesota. We hope to gather a crowd of approximately 300 people that evening. Most are long time friends of Franciscan Retreats; many have experienced our retreat. Some will be married couples and many of them will know Marriage Encounter first hand.

I will look forward to your response.

Congratulations on the work you do, and congratulations on being chosen for this award.

God bless and keep you,

Fr. Ken Bartsch, OFM Conv.
Director
Franciscan Retreats