

THE WORKS OF FR. GABRIEL CALVO

**The Origin and Spirituality of
Marriage Encounter
and the FIRES Programs**

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INTRODUCTION

The fundamental cell of society is the family, and the heart of the family is the couple, a man and a woman joined by God in a permanent union. "As the family goes, so goes the world" (John Paul II). It is no exaggeration to say that whatever problems that are prevalent in any society, they are all rooted in the family; but by the same token, it is precisely through the family that those same problems can be most effectively avoided or overcome. Therefore whatever inspires, fortifies or enhances marriages and families, will serve the good of the whole of society.

It was with the idea of strengthening marriages and families that Marriage Encounter and the FIRES programs were born in the sixties of the last century. These programs have changed the lives of *millions* of married couples and families during the last five decades. Many questions arise concerning the origin and the spirituality of these programs. What is their purpose? How did they begin and spread? What are the key elements of their spirituality? We will attempt to answer these questions by summarising the works and the spirituality of the Founder, Fr. Gabriel Calvo. We are presenting the life-work also as a tribute and an expression of our deep gratitude to Fr. Calvo, who celebrated his 80th birthday in February 2007, and who in our opinion has had a greater positive influence on married and family life than any other personage since at least the beginning of the twentieth century until the present day.

1. THE FOUNDERS OF MARRIAGE ENCOUNTER

The history of Marriage Encounter (the official English translation of the Spanish Encuentro Conjugal) started when Jaime and Mercedes Ferrer-Escola, a young married couple met with Fr. Gabriel Calvo, a young Roman Catholic priest in Barcelona, Spain. Both the couple and the priest sensed an inner call to fulfil their respective vocations in a deep and fruitful way.

JAIME AND MERCEDES FERRER-ESCOLA

Jaime Ferrer and Mercedes Escola got married in a chapel in the Benedictine Monastery of Montserrat on November 5, 1943. Both of them had been raised in Catholic families, and were involved in different Church activities after the Spanish Civil War.

After their wedding, the couple sought for a spiritual director. They asked Fr. Vicente Lores, the General Director of the Diocesan Labourer Priests, who lived at the seminary in Barcelona. Fr. Lores agreed to be their spiritual director.

However, Jaime and Mercedes were searching for more than just a spiritual director. They were looking for *something* in the Church that they could do as a couple. "The Church has married us", they said, "but has done nothing further for us as a married couple; in fact, it has separated us. In secular affairs we are allowed to do things together as a couple; but in the Church there are associations or groups for men alone, or for women alone; nothing for couples." They tried the existing associations in the Church, but found none of them to be a suitable guide for couple spirituality.

Yet they believed the spiritual dimension was the most important aspect of marriage. "If married life concerned itself with nothing more than enjoying physical union and accruing material things, we would not have married" – they stated. From time to time they asked Fr. Lores to help their spiritual development as a couple. When he asked them what exactly they wanted, they replied: "We want the Church to give lessons, a program or something so that we as a couple can hear about marriage spirituality." Fr. Lores was very understanding of their request; however, he was too busy to be able to organize such a program. So the Ferrers suggested that perhaps one newly ordained member of the Diocesan Labourer Priests could help them. Fr. Lores agreed. A time for the meeting between Jaime and Mercedes and Fr. Gabriel Calvo was set.

GABRIEL CALVO

Gabriel Calvo was born in Barcelona, Spain, on February 21, 1927. He was the first child of Gabriel Calvo Canet and Carmen Garcia-Manrique. He has two sisters; a brother died in infancy. Gabriel was raised in the Catholic Faith, but in circumstances that were not conducive to living one's Faith in a free and life-giving way. In 1936 during the Spanish Civil War, Barcelona was under Communist control; all churches were closed and many were burnt down. All Catholic practices were forbidden; in the schools the Communist doctrine was taught.

In 1941, when Gabriel was 14, a deeply significant event occurred in his life. One of his best friends committed suicide. Calvo sought an answer to his question "Why?" Through his search he was led to the decision to become a priest and work among the youth.

He joined the Institute of the Diocesan Labourer Priests because their principal ministry was to the youth. He entered their seminary in Salamanca, because this group had no seminary of its own in Barcelona. He pursued his studies in philosophy and theology at the University of Salamanca.

During his time in Salamanca the foundation for Calvo's spirituality was shaped. He read about a method of spirituality that was used by the Belgian priest, Monsignor Cardijn, in his "Jeunesse Ouvriers Chretienne" (J.O.C; Young Christian Workers), a movement for the youth. He now looks back and says he was "in love" with its methodology: "to observe, to judge and to act." For him this method of spirituality did not divorce or separate faith and life, but rather, it joined and united the Bible with reality. Calvo made this his method of prayer. During those years in Salamanca he was working with members of the J.O.C. movement in that city. He experienced training courses in the method and in this way intensified and deepened its practice in his own life.

He was also deeply impressed with Pius XII's great call, wherein the Pope emphasized that the world was changing "without knowing about the ways which could bring souls and bodies, the good and bad, civilizations and people into chaos... It is necessary that each of the faithful, each man and woman of good will, examine with the resolution of the transcendental moments of history, what each can and must do as one's contribution to the saving work of God, in helping the world of today which is going to ruin... It is a whole world that needs to be remade from its foundation, to be transformed according to the heart of God."¹

These words of the Pope burned with great intensity in the Gabriel's heart as he prepared for ordination. He was ordained a priest on May 31, 1952. He understood the Pope to be calling him to *something*. He prayed for guidance, openness and generosity of heart. He was looking for the signs of the times to know how he would be able to fulfil his mission.

FR. CALVO MEETS WITH JAIME AND MERCEDES FERRER

After his ordination Fr. Calvo was assigned as chaplain to two Church schools in Barcelona.

In the month of October 1952, Fr. Calvo met Jaime and Mercedes through his General Superior, Fr. Lores. The couple asked him to be their spiritual director. Fr. Calvo asked "Whose?" "Certainly ours, as a married couple," they responded. Fr. Calvo felt somewhat at a loss. To him this was a strange request because, at the time, everywhere in the Church spirituality was believed to be something private and individual; therefore, spiritual direction was for the individual. His life and training in the seminary had focused on the individual and not on couples and families. He openly explained to them his inner restlessness, telling them he became a priest to serve the young because they were the key for the transformation of the world and history.

But the Ferrers disagreed with him. "Father, where do young people come from? They come from families! And we, married couples are the key to a healthy and happy family." They insisted that a spirituality for couples was a necessity within the Church. They quoted the Gospel: "What God has joined together, man must not separate!"² Mercedes referred to the Pope's exhortation: "Do you not see? The Pope is calling families. We want to be one of these families. We want to serve the Lord as a married

¹ Exhortation by Pope Pius XII, issued February 11, 1952

² Mt 19,6

couple. We know dozens of married couples who think like ourselves and are looking for a new and different direction. Father, are you ready to meet with them?” He replied, “Yes”.

Finally they went to the little chapel in the house. Together they prayed before the Blessed Sacrament for the Lord’s guidance.

2. THE FAMILY MOVEMENT

THE BIRTH OF THE MOVEMENT

After the visit with Fr. Calvo the Ferrers contacted their relatives, friends and neighbors who they knew, like themselves, had long been searching for some means to help them to grow spiritually as married couples. The first meeting was held at the Diocesan Labourer Priests' residence in October 1952. Those couples in turn invited other couples, so at the second meeting their number had doubled, and within a few meetings there were twenty couples. This was too many for one group, so they divided into two groups.

Each of these couples were convinced they had a mission in the Church and in the world. Their answer to the call of Pius XII was their decision to transform themselves, their own marriages and families, "according to the heart of God", while also reaching out to other families to bring about a better world.

The couples began to meet regularly. They agreed that the purpose of their meetings was "to get together to pray and to study marriage spirituality and to share their own lived experiences". They decided to help each other "to live according to God's Will as revealed in the Bible.

Pontifical documents became the sources for this study, especially Pius XII's Discourses to the Newlyweds (1939-1943). Each couple prepared for the meetings by reflecting on and sharing together beforehand on the chosen topic and Scripture passage. The meetings were held every two weeks. Each meeting began with prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. After the prayer, the couples shared their experiences with the other couples. Finally each couple made an honest commitment as a couple to some action at home. They were using Cardinal Cardijn's methodology of "observe, judge and act" to renew and transform their couple relationship and family life "according to the heart of God".

Because these couples had as their goal to reach out to other couples, they began to invite to their prayerful sharings other married couples who were thirsting for spiritual growth as couples. It became necessary to form new groups. A group was composed of eight to ten couples; each group had to find a priest and a meeting place with a little Chapel nearby. All new groups followed the way and method of the original groups. These sharing groups began to refer to themselves as Teams.

Gatherings for all the Teams were held every six weeks. These meetings were called "retreats". Led by a married couple and a priest, these retreats were open to any married couples whether they intended to join a Team or not. Through these means married couples, together with the priests, came to understand married and family life as a way to holiness.

Before long, this new way of spiritual growth spread throughout the diocese of Barcelona. Helped by Fr. Lores, Fr. Calvo and the founder couples applied to Archbishop Gregorio Mondrego for an official Church approval. However, the Archbishop thought that the Team meetings might be dangerous both for couples and priests, therefore they should be discontinued. The couples obeyed. From March 1953 no meetings of the Teams took place. The monthly retreats, however, were permitted to continue.

Six months later Fr. Calvo, his Superior and three couples paid another visit to the Archbishop. The couples told him they wanted to live their married life as couples "in

the Lord”, and they explained this new movement of groups of couples in his diocese. The Archbishop listened very attentively and openly, and finally gave his blessing to their new initiative. The only requirement for formal authorization was that they give a name to their movement.

Fr. Calvo phrases even today: ”From the very beginning we were allergic to names and labels.” Neither he nor the couples wanted to make a new Church organization. They dreamt of an open, free “movement of the Spirit of God for service to marriage and the family”. After much praying and sharing they chose the name ”Matrimonial Teams for a Better World”. In November 1953 these groups received formal Church approval.

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

The ”Matrimonial Teams for a Better World” hoped primarily to form and enrich their growth in marriage spirituality. For this end the original couples, along with Fr. Calvo, thought it might be useful for them to experience other movements.

In 1952 Fr. Calvo visited Belgium to deepen his understanding of the methodology of ”observe, judge and act” used by Msgr. Cardinal Cardijn in the ”Jeunesse Ouvriers Chretienne” (J.O.C.) Movement. In July 1953 he went to Paris to visit Msgr. Henri Caffarel and his ”Teams of Our Lady” which started in 1947.

His next trip was to Mondragone, where he experienced the training of the Better World Movement. This training, offered to Church leaders and presented by Fr. Ricardo Lombardi, was based upon the Encyclical ”Mystici corporis”. Fr. Calvo was greatly influenced by two basic teachings of the encyclical: *unity* and *openness*. In reflecting on this Fr. Calvo realized that these two had to go together. The result was the idea of *unity for openness*, which became a principle deeply rooted in his thinking. He related it to the Sacrament of Marriage: a man and a woman are united as a couple in Christ, and are part of the Mystical Body, the Church, as a couple. They must always be careful to remain united as a couple and united to the Mystical Body. However, because a couple is not married solely for themselves or for their family, they must always be open to others. Through their couple and family unity they must act as a bridge from the Mystical Body to all couples and families in the world.

Fr. Calvo desired that the Spanish couples of the Teams experience the Better World training at Mondragone. An opportunity came soon. Initiated by some Spanish bishops, a Centre for the ”Better World Movement” was established at La Granja, Spain. The director of the Centre agreed that, upon the initiative of the Ferrers and the Ricarts, courses could also be given for married couples. The only requirement was that the couples who were to be actively involved had to experience the central training course at Mondragone first.

In July 1956 twenty-two married couples travelled to Mondragone, where Fr. Lombardi himself presented to them the ideas of Pius XII. After their return to Spain, they shared with lots of couples what they had heard. The Better World training started in La Granja provided spiritual enrichment to more and more couples.

While at Mondragone, the Spanish couples came into contact also with the Oasis Youth Movement founded by Fr. Virginio Rotondi SJ. This movement attracted crowds of young people who were living in the ”spiritual desert” of the world but wished for some spiritual nourishment. After finishing the course of this movement, the young people pledged to live out – in Mary’s spirit – a ”yes” to all God asked of them, especially with regard to chastity. The ”spirit of yes” left a deep impression on the

hearts of the Spanish couples. Like the young people, some of the couples took a formal "vow of chastity", which in their case meant living their sexual relationship in accord with God's plan as expressed in the teachings of the Church. Through this explicit commitment they were to live more genuinely as Christian married couples.

The Spanish couples met with the Fac Movement in 1958. The name is a Latin verb which means: do! This movement, led by a Salesian priest, Fr. Paolo Arnabaldi, aimed primarily at renewing parish life, but it also influenced other groups. Besides being committed to the "spirit of yes", the married couples wanted to live out also the attitude of "if I can, I must".

GROWTH OF THE FAMILY MOVEMENT; THE TRIP TO THE POPE

Several bishops invited the couples from Barcelona to visit their towns, so the movement spread in several dioceses by the end of 1957. At the same time, because their name "Matrimonial Teams for a Better World" was confusingly similar to that of the "Better World Movement", they changed it. After the autumn of 1957 they used the name "Matrimonial Teams of Pius XII", approved by the Archbishop of Barcelona in May 1958.

The movement was becoming national. Fr. Calvo was nominated the National Chaplain and the Ferrers became the National Coordinating Couple for the Matrimonial Teams of Pius XII. They proposed that all the groups ought to have a united and formulated *raison d'être* and vision.

The concept "*movement*" itself implied constant proceeding, *spiritual growth*, persistent striving for Christian perfection. This progress required that husband and wife ought to plan their Christian life *consciously*, as a couple, helped by a spiritual mentor. They considered *mutual confidence* between the spouses, as well as a *life of prayer* and *sacraments* as the foundation for spiritual growth. This brought forth an attitude of *generous service* and *apostolic work*. The movement did not exist for its own sake; the purpose of each married couple, family and group was to *radiate the light of the Gospel* in the world.

These fundamental concepts were formulated with the aim to strengthen unity. For the same reason it was also decided that all couples and priests in the movement should experience the Better World training at La Granja. The regular trainings were very beneficial not only for the Matrimonial Teams of Pius XII, but also for other family movements and for the whole family apostolate in Spain.

However, Fr. Calvo and the Ferrers believed that a broader world-view, an international experience was also needed. So in August 1958 a group of a hundred Spanish married couples and seven priests took part in a new course of the Better World Centre. The program was conducted by Fr. Lombardi and his colleagues. It took place at Rocca di Papa, near Castelgandolfo.

The outstanding moment of this trip was an audience with the Pope on 10 August 1958. Pius XII addressed the couples in Spanish:

"In spite of the exigencies of time and place we have desired to receive you separately, most beloved children, in order to single you out for a short, but special greeting — not only to assure you of our paternal affection but also to demonstrate the interest we continue to have in your movement of Matrimonial Teams for a Better World /.../ What a formidable work this is - to remake the world from its foundations; but if you hope to accomplish it successfully, it is certain that the first thing you must do is to fortify that prime organic element which is the family, which has been repeatedly

called society's fundamental cell /.../ Make, then, your families true centers of sanctity, where the Lord is always present with his grace... where there is warmth and fire sufficient to irradiate to the benefit of those who surround you /.../ Convert this earth into a New House of Nazareth, in which the presence of the Christ child will be your example, your strength and your perpetual consolation.”

In October 1958, just two months after the audience, Pope Pius XII died. His death caused the Spanish couples to look upon his address as his last will and testament to them. This thought inflamed the desire within them to study and put into action his encouraging instructions.

THE FIRST ENCOUNTER PROGRAMS

The movement grew even more rapidly after 1958. Each new group was helped by a “promoter” couple from an active Team, who sometimes joined the newly formed Team. The duty of the “promoter” couple was to nourish an active desire for spiritual growth in the couples of the new Team, as well as to help them to avoid any deviation from the written principles of the movement. For this purpose the “promoter” couple strove to encourage the new couples to attend the retreats and the Better World trainings.

It was also necessary for all newly formed Teams to have a special meeting – “encounter”, (“encuentro”) with the Chaplain, which meant a special method of retreat. A necessary spiritual exercise to open the door for new couples to the movement, this “encounter” helped couples to become more fully aware of the deep significance of the Sacrament of Marriage, as well as their common objective and mission in marriage. During the years 1960 and 1961 Fr. Calvo developed three different grades of Encounter. Any couples entering the movement were expected to experience all three levels. These Encounters contained the basic elements of the Marriage Encounter Weekend and the Retorno.

The first Encounter (Encuentro de cero grado), held for two hours each evening for seven consecutive days, treated the topics of spiritual divorce, dialogue, conjugal love, responsible parenthood, the education of children, the Sacrament and spirituality of marriage, and the commitment of Christian marriage. The motivations were given by couples, who used their own lived experiences (vivencia) to give witness to each topic. The participating couples were given an “inquiry” about each of the topics considered.

The second level Encounter (Encuentro de primer grado) was based on Scripture passages and treated four topics: marriage, the sacrament of marriage, the role of the family in the Church, and a concrete plan for actions for society. The overnight mental-spiritual program was presented by three promoter or animator couples, two priests and a doctor, and supported by a wide prayer network.

The third level Encounter (Encuentro de segundo grado) treated five topics:

- (1) the crisis of families;
- (2) the parable of the sower (for an encounter with self and reconciliation with one’s spouse);
- (3) the holy Family of Nazareth and the wedding feast of Cana (for an encounter with the Father, the Son and blessed Mary);
- (4) the Cenacle scene at Pentecost (for an encounter with the Holy Spirit; for conscious and active participation in the life of the Christian community);
- (5) a review and revision of one’s marriage and life through a series of questions, e.g. What do I like about you? What unites and what separates us? Do we pray and

read the Scripture together? How do we feel, think about our children? Where do we agree or disagree? What is our mission in society? Etc.

This intensive mental-spiritual program gave spouses an opportunity to meditate deeply about their relationship. It included personal witness, orientation talks, intimate and communal questionnaires, meditations, review, personal and conjugal prayer and a prayer background.

3. MARRIAGE ENCOUNTER

THE BIRTH OF MARRIAGE ENCOUNTER

While Fr. Calvo was serving the couples of the Teams of Pius XII nationwide, other couples began “knocking at his door”. These couples had serious problems with their marriages. Fr. Calvo felt and understood their pain and anguish. On the other hand, he saw the couples of the Teams of Pius XII he had been working with over the period of eight years: although they had similar problems in their daily life, they had found meaning and joy in their married and family lives.

Fr. Calvo felt the need to help those suffering couples. He shared his thoughts with some united and open-hearted couples of the Teams of Pius XII. They decided to pray for the Lord’s guidance in what they ought to do for the suffering. Then, in order to discover what it was that made them happy, he began visiting couples who seemed to possess the secret of marital and family unity. Through a series of deep, honest sharings he finally discovered the secret of a happy marriage. He experienced that all the happy couples were striving to live their marital relationship and family life through *mutual trust*, in accordance with *God’s plan for marriage as revealed in the Scripture*. This discovery was a decisive revelation for Fr. Calvo. It opened a new period of his priestly service.

The challenge was evident: together with the couples he set out to find the means that would open the way for the suffering couples toward a happy marriage – in his words, to fashion the “cup” and fill it in order to quench the thirst of those thirsting. To do this Fr. Calvo knew he needed Divine Guidance. He asked the couples of the Teams of Pius XII, together with their families, to pray and sacrifice at home and beg the Lord for guidance. He himself went for a time to pray and fast at the Benedictine Monastery of Montserrat.

Afterwards Fr. Calvo began to work. His starting point was the conviction that the resource for a united and happy marriage was already present in any conjugal union but couples were unaware of it. They needed a means to discover their “treasure hidden in the field”. Building on the sharings with the couples and the experiences of the first encounters, Fr. Calvo developed the methodology of a new program, and formulated a questionnaire for reflection.

When Fr. Calvo returned to Barcelona, he gave the chosen couples the questionnaire. They answered the questions but, even more than that, they enriched them with their wise suggestions and new insights. A couple of months later they had in their hands a new and precious program called Encuentro Conyugal - Marriage Encounter in English.

From January 5-7, 1961 an ecclesial Team composed of Fr. Calvo and Jaime and Mercedes Ferrer presented the first Marriage Encounter program for twenty-eight young, working class married couples at Corbera, a village 25 kilometers from Barcelona. Jaime and Mercedes reflecting on this moment said: “We were simply doing what Fr. Calvo had asked of us. He wanted to help these couples who were in need and we went along with his wishes. In our minds there was not the remotest thought that this would be repeated. Fr. Calvo had pieces of paper on which were written an outline and a few ideas. We, Jaime and I, filled out the theory with our own experiences.”

Fr. Calvo, however, felt that this was indeed the beginning of something new. The participating couples, who showed no sign of conjugal love on the first evening, were

shining with joy when the program finished. They cried with tears of joy: “We have found a new way of life! We got married again!”

The program was so enthusiastically greeted by participants and supported by the couples of the Teams of Pius XII that there was no question about the need to repeat it. More couples than could be accommodated desired to experience the next Encounter, which was planned for April. A third weekend was then planned. Marriage Encounter became a regular service of the Teams of Pius XII.

THE ESSENCE OF MARRIAGE ENCOUNTER

Happy and united marriages are characterised by a constant effort on the part of the couples to achieve mutual understanding and acceptance of one another. This comes about by developing an attitude of listening to one another through mutual confidence and communication. In Marriage Encounter this is prepared by a personal encounter with oneself, followed by several opportunities to engage in deep conjugal sharing.

However, natural means alone are not sufficient for realizing a suitable marital relationship. The most important message of Fr. Gabriel Calvo’s Marriage Encounter is that married life is not an accident of history, but a way of life determined by God Himself. God has a plan for marriage. According to the *revelation of the Word of God, the Bible*, a man and a woman united in marriage, being *made in God’s image*, have a mission to continually display the *love and unity of the Triune God* to their children and to the world.

But it is not sufficient for a couple simply to become aware that God’s Plan for marriage is *unity* and *openness*. Through the *Sacrament of Marriage* Jesus is present with His Divine Power in their bond. His Presence and Power places within the couple astoundingly powerful spiritual means to live their marriage according to the Plan of God. In order to achieve this, the couple – like the newly wed couple of Cana – must strive to *invite the Lord Jesus Christ* into the every day affairs of their married life.

Marriage spirituality requires that every action of marital life be performed with the intention of deepening the couple’s relationship with the Spirit of Jesus. This spirituality is the basis for *authentic testimony*. Couples give testimony of the Sacrament of Marriage by becoming living witnesses of the presence and activity of Jesus Christ in their relationship.

THE METHODOLOGY OF MARRIAGE ENCOUNTER

The above message is conveyed by a weekend program consisting of thirteen steps. Although it is not itself a topic for any of the steps, nevertheless the underlying theme for the entire second day, as brought out and realized through the various Liturgies, is *reconciliation*; that of the third day is *unity* - with one’s spouse and with others as well as with God. The flow of the program is described here according to Fr. Calvo’s Original Marriage Encounter Revised and Updated Manual published in 1993. It utilizes Cardinal Cardijn’s methodology of Observe – Judge – Act.

Step 1 includes an introduction, an explanation of the facilities and the flow of the program.

OBSERVE

Step 2 "Encounter with Self" provides an opportunity for participants to encounter with themselves by individually reflecting on their strong points, weaknesses, masks, positive/negative values.

Step 3 "Actual State of our Marriage" consists of two parts: Firstly, the couples reflect on the actual state of their marriage and share about symptoms of spiritual divorce. Secondly, they concentrate on certain topics for conjugal sharing in order to prevent or overcome symptoms of separation in their marriage.

JUDGE

After reviewing the actual state of their marriage, couples examine what their marriage is supposed to be like in the light of Sacred Scripture.

Step 4 is a reflection by the participants on the Parable of the Sower³, to discern whether and to what extent they are open to the Word of God.

Step 5 "Our Marriage in God's Plan" conveys the central message of the program. It starts with God's revelation on marriage. God is the Creator of marriage; married couples, being made in the Image of God, are called by God to become one, through complementing each other despite their differences; and they are also called to be co-creators of a new family⁴. Realizing the *ideal of unity*, couples reflect and share about how they can live their married life in accordance with God's plan.

Step 6 "Mutual Confidence and Dialogue" calls attention to the importance of unconditional confidence and honest conjugal dialogue as the most obvious natural means of achieving the ideal.

Step 7 "The Wedding Feast of Cana" aims at making couples aware that the only sure way to perfect the quality and to experience the real purpose of marriage is to consciously invite Jesus into their lives. Jesus is willing to help and perform miracles in their marriages and families, changing the water of their lives into the best wine. His Mother Mary has an important cooperating role.⁵

Step 8 "The Sacrament of our Marriage" has as its essential point the fact that Christian marriage is the living sign of the relationship of Christ with his Church, and thus that of the unity with the Lord.⁶ "Through the Sacrament, Christ establishes a permanent presence in every marital relationship."⁷ "The Spouse of the Church comes into the lives of married Christians through the sacrament of matrimony. He abides with them thereafter so that just as He loved the Church and handed Himself over on her behalf, the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-bestowal. Authentic married love is caught up into divine love."⁸ Married couples are called to give witness of the Presence and Action of Christ in their marriage. Their witness, helped by the graces of the Sacrament of Marriage, should manifest itself to their children and to the whole community.

Step 9 is a deep personal reflection for about 90 minutes, during which time the spouses prepare for the greatest conjugal dialogue during the program (**Step 10**)

³ Mt 13,1-13

⁴ Gen 1,26-28; 2,18-25

⁵ Jn 2,1-11

⁶ Ef 5,32

⁷ Pope John Paul II to the Italian *Marriage Encounter* Communities, Rome, 3. XII. 1983

⁸ Gaudium et spes 48

ACT

Step 11 "Our Marriage Spirituality" deals with deepening the relationship with the Spirit of Jesus. Couples can offer to the Lord not just prayer, but any activities, events, circumstances, all the areas of their normal and ordinary daily life with the intention of deepening their relationship with God as a couple. "The classes and duties of life are many, but holiness is one - that sanctity which is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God, and who obey the voice of Father and worship God the Father in spirit and in truth. These people follow the poor Christ, the humble and cross-bearing Christ."⁹

Step 12 "Our Christian Commitment" aims at making some concrete commitments based on the discoveries of the whole experience.

Step 13 is a Holy Mass of Thanksgiving, the final Step of the program.

THE GROWTH OF MARRIAGE ENCOUNTER

(In Spain) In April 1966, at the request of the bishops of Spain, the different family movements in the country formed one united organization, the Movimiento Familiar Cristiano. The Conference of Bishops appointed Fr. Calvo as the National Chaplain of the MFC. Each of the former movements brought with them whatever could be of service to this newly founded national movement. The Teams of Pius XII offered the Marriage Encounter Weekend as a service for the MFC. The MFC committed itself to the spread of Marriage Encounter. The program became well known throughout Spain before the end of the decade. The first complete Marriage Encounter outline in Spanish was published in 1967.

(In Latin America) As a result of frequent international contacts between MFC Spain, MFC Latin America and CFM USA, the International Confederation of Christian Family Movements (ICCFM) was established in September 1966. During the international meeting in Caracas, Venezuela, where the establishment of ICCFM was formally declared, Fr. Calvo and the Ferrers spoke about Marriage Encounter. As a result of their talk they were invited to Mexico. They introduced Marriage Encounter in Mexico City and in other towns as well. From Mexico the Marriage Encounter program spread into nearly all Latin American countries where MFC was active.

(In the USA) Invited by a Mexican couple, Fr. Calvo gave the first Marriage Encounter in the USA in November 1966. Seven Spanish speaking couples and two priests experienced this program in Miami.

The first Marriage Encounter in English took place in August 1967 at Notre Dame, Indiana, during an international meeting of MFC/CFM. Participant couples came from five continents.

One year later, in August 1968, 51 Spanish couples and 17 priests flew to the USA. Invited by MFC/CFM USA, they gave Marriage Encounters in 30 towns especially for Spanish speaking couples living in poor areas.

In August 1969 another CFM convention held at Notre Dame offered two Marriage Encounter experiences. Participants came from America, India, New Zealand, the Philippines, Scotland, England and Ireland. Through their enthusiasm the Encounter was introduced to the Philippines, Taiwan and New Zealand within a couple of months.

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⁹ Lumen Gentium 41

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After this, however, this rapid progress suddenly slowed down. While Marriage Encounter in Spain and Latin America has remained a service of MFC for the families ever since, Marriage Encounter in the USA separated from CFM and, from 1971, divided into several different branches.

Variants of Fr. Calvo's Marriage Encounter with diverse techniques and interpretations began to appear. Today dozens of such variants exist. Best known among them is the New York version with its strong emphasis on feelings and diminished emphasis on the family. This variant has spread throughout the world primarily through the activity of Fr. Charles (Chuck) Gallagher SJ and is widely known as "Worldwide Marriage Encounter".

The spread of these variants has, on the one hand, made it possible for part of the message of Fr. Calvo and the first founding couples to reach many couples throughout the world. On the other hand, however, this division has resulted in considerable confusion and rivalry, which in turn has caused a great deal of pain, and a weakening of emphasis on some points considered by the founders to be essential.

Moreover this same division, albeit arising with good will and out of ignorance and not at all because of any self-aggrandizing motives, nevertheless has precluded the possibility of the Original Marriage Encounter and the other unbelievably Graced programs initiated by Fr. Calvo from being introduced and utilized in most countries of the world.

This is what moved Fr. Calvo when he published the Original Marriage Encounter Revised and Updated Manual in 1993:

"This fully revised outline attempts to clarify the original message – which essentially remains unchanged – in a way that, it is hoped, will automatically preclude some distortions that have crept in and sometimes caused confusion... It is our fervent prayer that responsible persons within every "Expression", and within every country, will utilize it as the norm for a "New Beginning"... helping all to be united in the common mission to deepen marriage and family life "in the Lord", by presenting to the world a Marriage Encounter united in spirit, purpose and message while totally allowing each culture to freely express itself... This has been and it remains our most precious ideal: ONE Marriage Encounter with MANY FACES."¹⁰

¹⁰ G. CALVO, Original Marriage Encounter Revised and Updated Manual

4. THE FIRES PROGRAMS

Invited by Mons. Patricio Flores, Bishop of San Antonio, Texas, Fr. Gabriel Calvo flew from Rome, Italy to San Antonio in April 1974. He spent two years assisting in the marriage and family ministry among the Hispanic communities in San Antonio, then he was appointed by his superiors to live in Washington, to be able to dedicate all his time and energies to marriage and family ministry.

A great plan, the idea of a new series of spiritual programs began to take shape in his mind: programs which could efficiently get the Gospel of the family not only to married couples, but to each and every member of the family. The name of this series of programs is FIRES, an acronym for: **F**amilies, **I**ntercommunication, **R**elationships, **E**xperiences, **S**ervices. Its meaning or basic idea is: if *family* members have deep *intercommunication* among themselves, their *relationships* get stronger. Such families with good relationships will accordingly enjoy wonderful *experiences*, which will enable them to really *serve* other families.

Fr. Calvo created nearly twenty different FIRES programs. Here follows a short explanation of each one of these programs.

Each FIRES program has two main parts: the “horizontal”, which, in line with the admonition of Jesus to first go and be reconciled¹¹, emphasizes *reconciliation* with oneself, one’s spouse, one’s family members, with God, and with others as the case may be; and the “vertical”, which is concerned with faith and deepening one’s relationship with God.

PROGRAMS FOR MARRIED COUPLES

The first program devised after Marriage Encounter was *Marriage Retorno*. This was initiated in 1967, a number of years prior to the beginning of FIRES; and with the permission of Fr. Calvo it had already been in use among variant groups. Therefore, strictly speaking, it is not included among the FIRES programs. This three-day program was born from a desire on the part of couples who had previously experienced Marriage Encounter to be afforded the opportunity to receive “food” necessary for their spiritual growth as a couple. The purpose of *Marriage Retorno* is that the participating couples experience an encounter with each of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity. This happens in three steps: Observe (quiet reflection about handout questions), Judge (quiet reflection about Bible passages), Act (couple sharing, commitments). The heart of *Marriage Retorno* is the Word of God. Therefore the purpose of the program, a deeper encounter with God, is based on listening both individually and as a couple to what He is saying through His Word.

Another three-day FIRES program, *Marriage Re-Encounter* was born in 1978 as a natural response to facing a major obstacle for many couples to encounter the Lord - the fact that very often, before there can be a deep encounter with the Lord as a couple, there must first be a reconciliation with each of the children, be they still in the womb, or already married with their own children. The build-up of this program is similar to that of Marriage Encounter. Its topics include: encounter with self, reflection about one’s marital relationship, relationship and reconciliation with God and with one’s children, so that it is intended as a further deepening of the Marriage Encounter

¹¹ Mt 5, 21-25

experience, along with a consideration of the need to be reconciled with each of the children, in order to prepare for a profound Marriage Retorno.

PROGRAMS FOR FAMILIES

Fr. Gabriel Calvo designed his *Family Encounter* program in 1977. This three-day program offers families – parents and their teenage children participating together – an opportunity for encounter, reconciliation and intense, profound communication. Participating families are invited to reflect on themselves and their family relationships, as well as to share as families about their values, difficulties, faith and inner development.

One year later, in 1978, Fr. Calvo created a six-hour program called *Family Communication Workshop*. This program gives families a taste of the main themes of the Family Encounter. A program with a relaxed atmosphere, *Family Communication Workshop* offers an opportunity for honest family communication, reconciliation and an experience of the joy of family unity.

PROGRAMS FOR SONS AND DAUGHTERS

Experiencing that young people were less ready to participate in the Family Encounter program than their parents who had previously made a Marriage Encounter, Fr. Calvo created an Encounter program for young people in 1977. A comparable experience to Marriage Encounter, the *Sons and Daughters Encounter* was designed not so much for young people or teenagers apart from who they are as members of a family, but rather for young people in their role as Sons and Daughters. Its title refers to a beautiful, sometimes forgotten relationship. The program considers teenagers not as individuals separated from their family background, but as persons whose behaviour, values, relationships and faith are decisively influenced by their families. Its 12 topics include self-determination vs. outside influence, self knowledge, family relationships, values, vocation, love, faith, relationship with God.

Just like married couples, young people who had experienced the Sons and Daughters Encounter also expressed their desire to have some kind of follow-up. This is how *Sons and Daughters Retorno* was born in 1979. Retorno means *return*. Participants of this three-day program get an opportunity to turn and *return* to God and to renew their relationship with each Person of the Blessed Trinity by listening to God speaking through the Scripture.

PROGRAM FOR ENGAGED AND NEWLY MARRIED COUPLES

The *FIRES Engaged Encounter* was born in 1990. This three-day program offers young couples a unique opportunity to review, rethink, deepen and re-evaluate their relationship, helping them with their serious decision regarding their life-long marriage commitment. Topics include: encounter with self, knowing and understanding one another, values, difficulties in marriage, openness, the meaning and real purpose of marriage, faith, relationship with God. Periods of quiet reflection and couple sharing about handout questions help participants not only to have a better knowledge of themselves and their partners, but also to get closer to God. This program is also an excellent opportunity for outreach: this deep experience leads many non-believers back to the Church or, it motivates them to get baptized.

PROGRAM FOR UNMARRIED COUPLES LIVING TOGETHER

It is important to mention here the most recent program by Fr. Gabriel Calvo, *Pre-Conjugal Encounter*, which was designed in 2005. Like in earlier instances, it was real actual needs that motivated the Author to create this program. In our days, it seems that the majority of even baptized young couples in the Western world live together without the benefit of asking God to bless their union. They forego a marriage ceremony before a priest, a minister, a rabbi, or a form that is in some way accepted as the norm for a valid marriage, depending on the Faith of the individuals, or the conditions laid down by the State in the case of those without any particular Faith, as the case may be. Being convinced of the enormous potential of a marriage lived in accord with God's Plan and His blessing on the marriage, Fr. Calvo considers it a tragedy to ignore, or not be aware of this. He considers it extremely important for couples to have an opportunity to learn and realize the depth and the richness of graces of sacramental marriage. Participants are helped by the testimonies of Catholic married couples who had lived together before getting married in the Church. After the three-day program has finished, participating couples may join a parish community that will accept and encourage them.

PROGRAMS FOR INDIVIDUALS

Realizing the tremendous need for an urgent, meaningful and efficacious marriage and family ministry, and at the same time, the division, competition and fights between the different organizations and movements that are supposed to walk and to work together united and open in God's Name, Fr. Calvo designed the *Fraternal Encounter* in 1973. In accordance with the dream of Jesus who asked the Father that his disciples be united in the Lord¹², this FIRES program offers an opportunity for Christian communication for leaders of organizations and movements concerned with marriage and family ministry. Through reflecting and sharing about the reality of their lives and listening to the Word of God, the participants are invited to share their different charisms and build a common plan of action, according to God's merciful Plan of Salvation.

Another program by Fr. Gabriel Calvo for individuals is the *FIRES Self Encounter*, born in 1994. Like all other FIRES programs, it provides an opportunity for participants – adult individuals –, young, old, men, women, single, married, divorced, widowed, believers, non-believers, priests or religious, people from all walks of life, to review and renew their relationships with themselves, with other people and especially with God. This three-day program brings about deep changes in the hearts of most participants: it helps them deepen their self knowledge, encourages them to honest communication and sharing, helps them see the worth of positive thinking and living, makes them feel how much they need God in their lives. Being open to non-Catholic or non-Christian adults in any stage of life, *FIRES Self Encounter* is an effective means of the pastoral care of the divorced as well. The importance of this activity has often been emphasized by the Church: "I earnestly call upon pastors and the whole community of the faithful to help the divorced, and with solicitous care to make sure that they do not consider themselves as separated from the Church, for as baptized persons they can, and indeed must, share in her life."¹³

¹² Jn 17,20-21

¹³ Familiaris Consortio 84

PROGRAM FOR PRIESTS INTERESTED IN FAMILY PASTORAL

In February 1974 the Bishops of Spain asked the General Superior of the Diocesan Laborer Priests for a priest as a spiritual director of the Pontificium Spannis College in Rome. Fr. Calvo was chosen for this service. While in Rome, besides his College work, he was also called to collaborate with the Commission of the Laity Council and the Committee of the Family in the Vatican. This was also the time when he designed his four-day *Priest Encounter* program for priests and religious. A revolutionary program even today, the *Priest Encounter* differs from any other well-known retreats in that participants can encounter themselves with the help of team priests as well as committed Catholic married couples, who share their lived experiences, honestly expressing how much they count on the service of priests, as well as their expectations of how priests should fulfil their roles and whether or not they feel that their needs are being fulfilled. Such facilitating couples represent all the couples, families and individuals from whom the priest derives his purpose. Participating priests and religious are invited to rediscover the beauty and potential of their vocation and to share their discoveries with fellow priests/brothers/sisters. This program greatly contributes to personal growth, and it confirms full commitment to Christ and to the sacrament of Holy Orders.

5. BOOKS, GUIDEBOOKS

Today's families are seriously threatened by the outside pressure of materialistic society. But they may suffer even more from inner problems, especially the lack of communication, understanding and acceptance among family members. Besides his programs, the books and guidebooks by Fr. Gabriel Calvo were also born with the conviction that, despite all negative tendencies or experiences, there is a mysterious "thermonuclear energy" of love hidden in each family. This energy of love can be and is in fact "liberated" when parents and children truly encounter and honestly communicate with each other. Fr. Calvo's works give motivation, questions and ideas for such sharings.

The booklet *Around the Table*, published in 1977, contains twelve opportunities for parents and sons and daughters to personally reflect about questions, to share and listen to each other, to understand and encounter one another, and, therefore, to grow as a loving family.

The *FIRES* booklet (1977) offers questions for personal reflection and concrete orientations for five family sharings, based on the letters and key concepts of the acronym FIRES: **F**amilies – **I**ntercommunication – **R**elationships – **E**xperiences – **S**ervices.

Also in 1977 three "at home" guidebooks by Fr. Calvo were published. Designed to be utilized by readers in their homes, *Marriage Encounter at Home*, *Self Return At Home* and *Encounter With Myself At Home* are meant to share the spirituality of the live programs with as many readers as possible.

The booklet *Dialogues for Sons and Daughters*, published in 1980, contains fifteen outlines for meetings of teenagers and young adults who are ready to continue the deep and honest sharings started during the Sons and Daughters Encounter about themselves, their families, their vocation in life, their faith.

Face to Face, published in 1988, is a "home version" of the Original Marriage Encounter programme. It is a summary of all Fr. Calvo's experiences during the decades of his marriage and family ministry. The publication of this book calls the attention to the fact that it is not enough to accompany couples up to the wedding. Marriage needs even more attention after the wedding both from married couples themselves and from those who help them, for marriage is the starting point and the final goal of the family.

Family Energy was published in 1992. It is not a book of theory, but – like other books by Fr. Gabriel Calvo – a guidebook for communication between parents and their sons and daughters.

Hand in Hand, was written and published in 1995 as an aid for young couples preparing for marriage. It is not a theoretical work, but a workbook, a guideline, which offers the reader lots of wise thoughts, questions, ideas to think about, practical advice and topics to talk about. It can be utilized by engaged couples and young married couples as well as priests and lay Christians who work for engaged couples.

Fr. Calvo's most recent book, *Within and Beyond* (2002), invites readers to an exciting journey towards the deepest part of their being. Instead of giving his solutions, the Author encourages them to find their own answers by encountering themselves through answering simple questions. His questions are the gently challenging questions of a man who has suffered for, and found, the answers in his own life. "Fr. Calvo, past

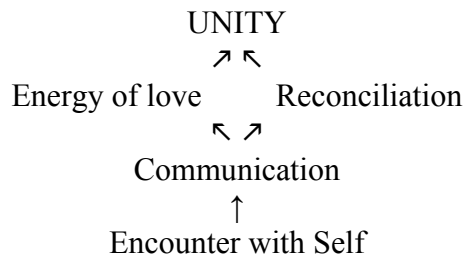
his golden priestly anniversary, having given himself totally to the spiritual care of families, has summarized the experiences of a whole lifetime. He writes with such simplicity, transparency, with such insight of depths that only the wise have” – says Bishop Laszlo Biro, Bishop for the Family, Hungarian Catholic Bishops’ Conference in his recommendation of this book.

CONCLUSION

We have reviewed the life-work of Fr. Gabriel Calvo, a key personality of 20th-21st century family apostolate. The review considered theoretical, historical and practical aspects. As a conclusion, we wish to summarize the most fundamental idea of the life-work.

Fr. Calvo starts with the basic conviction that in each person, each married couple or family there is a mysterious inner *energy of love*, which can be liberated when people or family members begin to deeply, honestly *communicate* with each other. Deep *communication*, based on an *encounter with oneself*, has a double effect. It kindles the fire – or energy – of *love*, while at the same time it makes the way for *reconciliation* in our human relationships so gravely burdened with sin. Then, with *love* and *reconciliation*, *unity* becomes possible.

Fr. Calvo considers the *unity* of the Holy Trinity as the most fundamental pattern, the ideal, the aim that every human community – couple, family and society – must strive for. The more fully unity becomes a reality in our lives, the more perfect images of the Triune God we become. Unity, or similarity to God, brings about – as its consequence – marital, family, personal fulfilment or happiness. The idea can be illustrated as follows:



Fr. Calvo's programs are based on this discovery also in their methodology. Participants not only hear about the importance of communication, but they are given an opportunity for deep sharing. In the course of their honest communication they experience how love indeed revives in their hearts. During each program there are team members who help creating an honest atmosphere by giving their personal vivencia, or testimonies, as a motivation to couple or group sharings.

Even though based upon marvellous discoveries, all of these are, of course, merely human efforts. The real depth and the permanent effect of Fr. Calvo's programs are ensured by their transcendental dimension. Besides an indispensable prayer background, during each Encounter program special attention is given to God's message, often deeply personal, transmitted by the Holy Scripture.

The influence of Fr. Gabriel Calvo's life-work is inestimable. Having spread to more than 100 countries on 5 continents, his Encounters have helped millions of families transform their lives "according to the heart of God". His programs, undoubtedly Gifts from the Holy Spirit, are among the most efficient and fruitful means of the family apostolate that exist; a tremendous, yet only partially utilized opportunity all over the world. Yet, these programs created decades ago, are more modern and more up-to-date

in these days than ever. In our age which rejects Gospel values, family and life itself, they can be signs of hope, for – in Fr. Gabriel Calvo’s words:

In spite of the unparalleled crises
that exist in marriage and family life
in this modern world,
we firmly believe that
in God's Plan
it is the Family
that is the heart
of the world
and
of history”¹⁴

¹⁴ G. CALVO, Original Marriage Encounter Revised and Updated Manual

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