

TESTIMONIES
ON
GRACES FROM FIRES

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Carl Jung coined the term synchronicity (defined as the simultaneous occurrence of events that appear significantly related but have no discernible causal connection) It is a word based upon a combination of the Greek words syn, meaning "with" and chronos meaning "times". It was his way of expressing the fact that there are states or situations which occur at times together with other situations in such a way as to preclude the possibility of concluding that they happen simply by chance. He would maintain that there is apparently an external power working behind such extraordinary events – a supernatural power. This is something I have noticed many times as I have worked with the FIRES programs (explained below) in a number of different countries. I would like to share, in no particular order, some of the examples of graces that I have personally witnessed, or heard about, in those various places, as well as the submitted testimonies of many people from many different countries: men and women, old and young, Christians and non-Christians, individuals, couples, families, priests and sisters. I believe that they can be explained only by the working of a transcendent power. They are presented here randomly, more or less in the order in which they were received. Considering the millions of people throughout the world who have been positively influenced by Marriage Encounter (ME) and the FIRES programs, by no means can these relatively few testimonies be viewed as exhaustive, or the most outstanding. Anyone reading these testimonies would have to agree that herein lies much food for thought, and hopefully motivation for action.

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It all started in Japan in 1971 when Fr. Bede Fitzpatrick, O.F.M., on vacation in the States, availed himself of attending a Marriage Encounter. Being the pastor of the only English speaking parish in Japan, the Franciscan Chapel Center in Tokyo, (referred to as the FCC), he felt that such an experience would be helpful to the couples in the parish; but none of the couples belonging to the Chapel Center had ever even heard about ME), much less experienced it, so there was no way to get it started. The International Conference of Christian Family Movements (ICCFM), however was, just by chance (?), held in Ireland that very year. This gathering takes place every three years in one of the countries of the world that have involved members. Two English speaking Japanese couples went as representatives of Japan. During the conference ME was introduced, and both couples attended. On their

arrival back in Japan, Fr. Bede learned of this, and asked if they would repeat what they had experienced for the parishioners of the FCC. He invited me to attend that and I, in turn, asked them to do the same for Japanese couples that I would gather in Gumma Prefecture. It was an entirely new experience, and quite helpful to the participating couples; but obviously there was still much about the full message of ME that those two couples had not yet been able to grasp, having gone through what amounted to no more than an overview experience and, moreover, one not in their native tongue. Shortly thereafter a couple that had been involved with ME in America came to Japan and joined the English speaking parish in Tokyo. They conducted a ME which I attended; and having received a Manual from them, I set about translating that material into Japanese. From the beginning there were graces and workings of the Holy Spirit which must have been what it was like when the apostles experienced that first Pentecost. Yet at the time we could not imagine how much more there was to experience so that we could have a fuller and deeper appreciation of the full vision of ME.

The following year Armando and Barbara Carlo came to Japan to conduct a ME as well as to introduce the Marriage Retorno (MR) in English. This opened up even further the spiritual aspect of that original vision. It was they who made us aware that a number of changes had already been made with ME which were not quite in line with the original vision; and that piqued my interest. We had, nevertheless, witnessed many graces of conversions, reconciliations, special joys, etc. The Carlos themselves shared their impression of the Japanese couples they met who had already experienced ME. They wrote: "We joined the Japanese ME community in a parish hall where they shared their Ideas, struggles, and enthusiasm with us. They gave tremendous witness about how the Encounter could change parish life, as well as its ability to adapt to the special needs of any culture. We saw how their unique talents had fostered the growth of the Encounter. They also told us how the Encounter had helped their own spiritual growth, and even touched the lives of many who had no belief in God at all."

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The following is a sharing by Fr. Bede Fitzpatrick, O.F.M., as he recalls the circumstances behind the very beginning of ME in Japan.

ME at the FCC Roppongi, Tokyo

The foreign community of Catholic Christians who worshiped at the FCC in Tokyo were truly blessed when the Cursillo movement came to Japan. At first it was used only for men. It was a spiritual study–retreat made over the weekend that truly woke up many of the men and so enlivened their faith that they became very active in parish life, especially in serving on the parish council; and its influence extended to their life at home and in the world. That experience brought efforts on their part

to make a truly Catholic Family that put prayer into their family life, and draw all together in the love of Christ. It put efforts into their work to make their offices and work instruments of justice and peace.

But then we priests in the Chapel Center heard about another spiritually influential program that had also started in Spain, and was now spreading throughout the States – a program directly concerned with deepening family life – Marriage Encounter.

We decided to look into it and found that among the Japanese Catholics who were attending Mass at FCC there was a couple from the Azabu Parish, John and Teresa Nakamura. They had experienced a ME in Ireland, which was presented by the founder himself, Fr. Gabriel Calvo. This was held in conjunction with an international gathering of members of the Christian Family Movements.

We obtained the Encounter Manual and, with the help of the Nakamuras and the Sito and Sony Sison, a team couple from the Philippines, began to prepare to hold an Encounter for the English speaking people in Tokyo. Because we had several mixed Japanese–American couples, we decided to have the talks given in both English and Japanese, but that English would be used for all the other parts – Mass, discussions, meals, recreation, etc. The couples were free to dialogue in either language.

Fr. Fontes, S.J. and Fr. Bede Fitzpatrick, O.F.M. acted as spiritual directors. The Nakamuras, each fluent in both languages, and the Sisons, gave the couple talks. We made use of the Franciscan Retreat House in Kiryu, Gumma Prefecture for this first Encounter. That was in 1971.

Fr. Bede on his next vacation to the States attended the convention of the National ME in Chicago. There he met Amando and Barbara Carlo, a prominent team couple in ME, and invited them to come to Japan to train couples for an additional ME, and to introduce Fr. Calvo's MR. Fr. Bede acted as spiritual director for both of those experiences, again at the retreat house in Kiryu.

The Encounter caught on immediately. Soon Fr. Bede combined with John and Teresa and other couples who had made this first Encounter to plan for the next one. Before long we were having them several times each year, each time having between 10 to 15 couples in attendance.

For all of them it was an eye–opener. Many had lived several years of married life, borne children, and truly loved each other; but they had never really expressed their love to each other. It was taken for granted. And as most couples come to feel in their hearts, it is not enough to just take it for granted. In the course of time, little

doubts begin to spring up as to whether or not he/she really loves me? Through prayer and the deep communication engendered by the experience of ME, these doubts disappeared, and a new joy was found in their marriage. Soon several team couples were recruited, and in the ensuing Encounters they shared their experiences in line with the subject matter of the various steps that are covered in the course of the experience. In Japan from the beginning the ME in English was an Ecumenical experience. Couples from other Christian communities in Tokyo attended and some were recruited to be team couples. Fr. Campion used to alternate with Fr. Bede as Spiritual Director until 1976 when Fr. Bede was transferred back to Gumma Prefecture. Fr. Campion kept on until the mid 80's. Many families found new life through this gift of the Holy Spirit to us at the FCC, and to families all over the world. An outstanding grace among the Catholics was their turning to praying as a family – usually the rosary.

After a ME Weekend, the couples would gather for monthly meetings. Many became very close friends, relations with the other Christian communities were strengthened, and the children of the Encounter families soon knew that something had happened to their parents at the weekend. When they came home, although they were obviously still not perfect, there was a renewed love that was quite apparent, and less strong verbal exchanges.

How can we estimate the effects of such experiences, extending beyond their own families to others, to the Church and to society as a whole?

Many of the Encounter families, after returning to their homes in the US or other countries, kept up their friendships, and became active in their new parishes. The Encounter had taught them conjugal dialogue, a true way to enhance their love. It affected their life over all. The MR had immersed them in the Bible and showed them biblical ways to know Christ and become his true disciples. It deepened the spirituality of their dialogue, which most tried to do each day.

Fr. Bede and Fr. Campion, on their vacation trips to the United States, always managed to stop at some Encounter family homes. There the joy of their life in Tokyo at the FCC was recalled, and shared, and all thanked God for the gift that He had given to them. Those special graces live on in them, and hopefully will continue to live on in their children, thereby positively affecting the Church, society, and the world at large. Thanks be to God!

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The Lord continues the work He began to have the Encounters take root in Japan.

Fr. Donnon

A year after the MR I went home on vacation, and wanted very much to thank Fr. Calvo for the gift he had given us, I tried on two separate occasions to contact him by phone when I was in Baltimore (just one hour from where Fr. Calvo lives in Washington) to visit with my brother. Each time he was not home. Consequently I abandoned the hope of meeting him, since we had planned a family reunion in Pennsylvania before my imminent return to Japan, and of course my brother intended to be there. Well, the day before it was to take place he sprained his back getting into his car, and was unable to make the trip. With that I once again went to Baltimore, again called Fr. Calvo, found him home, and he agreed to meet me. During our conversation I asked him if it would be possible for him to come to Japan. This was in September. He replied that in November he was scheduled to go to the Philippines, and he could stop in Japan en route to his way back to the US.

While he was in the Philippines two incidents occurred that threatened to cause a cancellation of his trip to Japan. He developed a kidney stone causing him to collapse. The pain from that subsided, but then he was informed that his father, in Barcelona, was very ill and in danger of death. Should he go immediately to Barcelona to be with his father? His mother settled that dilemma by telling him to come to Japan because "Japan needs you."

At the time he introduced the Marriage ReEncounter (MReE), the Sons and Daughters Encounter (SADE), and the Family Communication Workshop (FCW). He has been to Japan a total of 6 times, and we now have practically all of his programs. This was the start of the FIRES programs in Japan. For those of you who do not know the significance of FIRES, the word itself is an acronym used to designate succinctly the various programs created by Father Gabriel Calvo, the founder of ME. Each of the current 21 FIRES programs has, as its final goal, the deepening of married and family life. **F** signifies *Families*; **I**, *Intercommunication*; **R**, *Relationships*; **E**, *Experiences*; and **S**, *Services*. The significance is that when you have **F**amilies that **I**ntercommunicate, they will have **R**elationships which will bring about good **E**xperiences which then enable such Families to be capable of meaningful **S**ervice to others.

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My initial thought was to do something that would be helpful to the couples and families of my own parish, never dreaming that it would go beyond that. But little by little people from other parts of the country came to our area to experience ME, and through them we were asked to go to other areas; so that in time we had teams criss-crossing the country to share with others the graces that they had received.

Then, in order to meet people in other countries who were involved in the family apostolate, I made it a point to attend the ICCFM gatherings held every three years, as well as regional gatherings of CFM members in Europe and Asia. To date that has brought me from Japan to the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Hong Kong, Kenya, Italy, Malta, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, America, and Portugal (Fatima). It was through the meeting of enthusiastic couples during those gatherings that I was invited to come to most of those countries to introduce the Original ME (OME) and the FIRES programs.

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Jesus told his disciples to go into the whole world to spread his Good News. Here is the story of a couple, changed by ME, who took Jesus at his Word, and did not hesitate to go into the whole world of Japan to spread the Good News of married and family life in the Lord.

Eishiro and Teruyo Matsumoto

ME was introduced in Japan in 1973. It was a time when the whole Japanese nation was concerned with economic growth, so that in many homes there was no time to stop and smell the roses. Amidst this spiritual poverty families were in crisis and breaking apart, causing a surge of crying out for help. We had just started a new job and my husband had no time to spend with his family, but rather he was totally taken up with his work, which became the prime purpose of his life. I was his book keeper as I passed each day trying at the same time to raise three kids – and I thought that’s the way it is, and there is nothing that can be done about it.

It was under such circumstances that it all began. Fr. Donnon enthusiastically invited us to attend a ME. So we had my parents baby-sit our 7 and 4 year old sons. Since I was nursing, we took along our 4 month old daughter for the three-day experience. At the time there was no such thing as any kind of formal preparation course for marriage, and although we were both Catholic, living like every other married couple around us was just something we took for granted, just like our relatives, friends and acquaintances,

Through the experience of ME, however, we learned that God has a Plan for marriage, that it is through the Sacrament of Marriage that we really receive life as a couple, that there is such a thing as Marriage Spirituality, the meaning of being a family in the Lord, etc., and all of this was a mind boggling discovery for us. Moreover, this became a unique opportunity not only for us, but for many couples and families, to deepen their relationships.

Fr. Donnon said that in the beginning he was thinking only of ways to help the couples and families in the Ota parish; but, before you know it, the participating

couples began to invite other couples throughout the whole Prefecture, more and more non-Christians began to participate, and in time countless others from other parts of the country made their way to the Franciscan Friary in Kiryu. Outstanding among those are the couples in the Tokyo–Yokohama areas, invited by Mrs. Oka. The circle of those blessed with the love and salvation from the Lord became wider and wider. Those “*Fires of Love*” spread from Hokkaido to Okinawa

This was a period when our energy was most taken up with work and raising the kids, so that we would have every reason in the world to say that it was certainly not a suitable time to do any service. But even so, we and two other couples accompanied Fr. Donnon in going here and there throughout the country to introduce ME. This was not at all, however, something we were doing under pressure. On the contrary it seems that we were being moved by a strange and wonderful power. When it required going to distant places like Okinawa, Nagasaki, Hokkaido, etc., it would not be possible to return home on the last day, so it would be require staying over an extra day. In the beginning this happened quite often. We did have the reality of work and our family and quite frankly, at the time, it was a source of concern. Nevertheless, like the other teams, whenever we were asked to go, we would say “Yes!” Now looking back we realize that that special energy was a tremendous grace.

When Fr. Calvo came to the Ota Church to introduce the Family Communication Workshop he asked us: “How many members are there in your family?” Of course each family would give the number of individuals in their respective families. But he would shake his head in disagreement until he finally said: “*Jesus said, ‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am, there in the midst of them’ (Matthew 18–20)*. Now, how many are there in your family?” This becoming aware of the presence of the Lord as a member of our family has had a strong influence on all of us. It was from that time on that we began to experience the joy of praying as a family. Our oldest son would play the guitar and we would sing together, then each would open the Scriptures and read a passage which we all listened to, and then we shared what the passage meant to each of us. Included would be sharing our individual problems, and thus through the healing of the pressures of our hearts, it became much easier to believe that Jesus truly is among us. What a tremendous grace to experience that, in this way, our love for one another became deeper. There is no way to count how the incidents of our lives have been led, supported, and helped by the Word of God. Walking with the Lord became a new way of life for us.

The oldest on is now a Franciscan priest, the next son is married with two children, and our youngest daughter is married with one child. At the age of 4 months, she made that first ME with us, and now she is a mother herself. We would hope that she received the spirit of the Encounters from us, and that she in turn will pass it on

to our grandchildren. Fr. Calvo once said: “It takes three generations to really begin a “Revolution of Love. So let’s start now.” At the time I thought: “Well, that’s a long way off”. But now that time has arrived. So now we have to ask ourselves whether our way of life has, or has not, been beneficial to our children.

It is a fact that the experiences of the FIRES programs have led us to a new way of life, and our attempts to live with the Lord has produced abundant graces. For our family those graces are a boundless treasure.

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It is a fact that for the most part children imitate their parents. One such daughter shares how this indeed does take place. What a consolation for parents who try to base their lives on the Gospel!

Eiko Matsumoto

It would be no exaggeration to say that I have grown up along with Encounters. As I look back, it seems that just about every weekend, including holiday weekends, someone was baby-sitting us. Then, without fail, on the third day we would be taken to the final Mass. I would be put on a chair near the altar, line up with the family that I had stayed with, and watch the scene. At a certain point everybody would raise their arms and shout “Shalom” and there would be a great deal of jovial greetings during which I would finally get to see my long lost parents. But they would be so busy greeting everyone that I remember having to hold on tightly to be sure to stay with them. Everyone’s face was lighted up with joy, and there were also many tears of joy, as they went around greeting one other, accompanied by a unique musical background. This is the kind of atmosphere that I remember as my earliest experiences with the Encounters. I began to enjoy seeing the joyful faces of everyone as they shared “Shalom” with one another. There were occasions when I wondered whether this time everyone would experience the same kind of joy as the last time – but there never was any reason for concern there. Every single Encounter was filled with joy.

Of course as a little child I was not actually participating in MEs, but inasmuch as a little child could, I do feel that I understood what it was all about. Precisely because of that understanding, whenever my parents would leave on holiday weekends for a ME, I would not only see them off without complaint, but I would have the feeling that in staying at home I also had my own role to play in the Encounter. I always wrote them a letter assuring them of my prayers. Of course for the team couples it was not just a matter of the three days of the Encounter itself. A tremendous amount of time was required in preparing their talks, and then after coming home being conscious of the graces they had received and putting them into practice in their daily lives. This has been repeated over decades.

As they would get close to the time of an Encounter they would take over the room where we had our TV, and put the Bible on the table, along with a mess of paper, pencils and erasers. You could hear them dialoguing until late at night, right up to the day of the Encounter. I wanted to ask: “Are you going to be on time?”

I was proud of the fact that my parents were involved in such an important service. No matter how busy they might be, or maybe precisely because they were busy, what never changed was their deep faith in God. With that spirit of faith they would first open the Bible to listen to what He had to say, and always saw to it that we prayed and worshipped as a family. Naturally there was nothing lacking in their efforts daily life to be suitable parents. In all the 18 years I lived together with them, before going off to college, not once did I ever feel oppressed by them, because they really continually lived out the message of the Encounter. For that very reason, even without actually participating in the Encounters, beginning with their life of service which overflowed into their home life, I think I received 20 times more graces than they did. Any joy that I now get out of trying to be of service to others is precisely because of the example that I received from them.

At present, living apart from my parents, I am involved with an NGO concerned with reaching out to the poor in mountain areas of the Philippines, as well as working with a group here in Japan. The first thing I think of when considering why, at the age of 34, I am involved in any kind of service is the constant advice I received from my parents that, if I pray, the Lord will show me what He wants me to do. These are words that I have heard repeatedly ever since I was a little child. And now that I am married and have my own child, what I have learned from my parents is food for thought as I ponder the joys and difficulties of raising a family. Namely, that God is Love, and that the family is a miniature Church. I want to pass on to my own children that faith is necessary to live life fully, and that we need to learn from Scripture what God wants from us. While walking in the footsteps of my parents, along with my husband and children, I want to build a strong domestic church.

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God works in strange, mysterious and powerful ways.

Fr. Donnon

When the gathering of the ICCFM (International Conference of Christian Family Movements) was held in Thailand some years ago, Fr. Calvo and I headed one of the group meetings and talked about FIRES. A young couple from Hungary, who started the Christian Family Movement in Hungary, chose to attend that group meeting, felt there was something to it, and asked afterwards if I would go to

Hungary to introduce those programs. Just by chance (?) a couple from Slovakia were right nearby and heard this conversation. They approached and said: “If you are going to go to Hungary you must also come to Slovakia; and remember we are right near to Russia”. Well, I did go to both countries seven years running and both countries now have all twenty of the FIRES programs. They had a national gathering of FIRES people in Slovakia, at which Fr. Calvo attended, and families comprising about 400 people from all over Slovakia showed up. The testimonies of a number of people from these former Eastern–block communist countries are included in this book.

In Hungary we had a special FIRES program for all of the Dominican Sisters in the country, based upon the format of the Priest Encounter (PE). The participating sisters were mostly young who, I think without exception, realized that to grow as persons, whatever their status in life, it is necessary at some point that people take some time to reflect on who they are; and that this is a unique and extremely fruitful way of doing so. I think an outstanding grace resulting from that experience was the deeper realization that a high degree of formal education should not be allowed to be an obstacle to spiritual growth. The interest on the part of the Dominican sisters is in large measure due to the zeal and conviction of a wonderful Dominican priest who was at the time working in the Ukraine. He had brought a number of the FIRES programs to the Ukraine, and is now involved with getting Fr. Calvo’s books translated into Ukranian. In addition a young Franciscan priest is working with the Engaged Encounter (EE) and is planning on getting the books translated into Russian.

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While numberless individuals, couples and families throughout the world have been greatly influenced by ME and the FIRES programs, it is rare that the involvement of one couple have such an influence on an entire nation. But the conviction and zeal of the couple (mentioned above) who offer the following testimony has indeed had an influence all throughout the country of Hungary and beyond. The power of the Lord in the lives of couples is immeasurable.

Balazs and Krisztina Menesi, Hungary

It is difficult to describe a sea by showing some drops of water, and it is equally difficult to express in a few words what FIRES has meant for us. We will try to give some vivencias like “drops of water” from an ocean of joy, thanksgiving, commitment, a whole new life in the Lord, which we have in our hearts because of FIRES.

(NB As utilized in the Encounter experiences, the Spanish word “vivencia” refers to lived experiences of the past which have an on–going influence on our lives. The influence is either positive or negative, depending on the experience

itself. What is important to note, however, is that any negative vivencias, however tragic they might be, have the potential to be a means to help us grow, providing we become aware of them and make the effort to utilize them.)

The first vivencia, which for us has come to be related with FIRES, goes back to a time when FIRES did not yet exist. In 1968, Krisztina's father, a young husband at that time, organized a service for helping families with problems. His colleagues were Christian friends: a priest, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, he himself a lawyer, etc. Within a short time the communist authorities noticed their regular meetings, and he was imprisoned for six months on the charge of organizing against the communist regime. It was not wise to let 3 year old Krisztina know what happened, lest she should talk about it in the kindergarten. Therefore her mother told her that her dad went to *Japan*. Thirty years later, at an ICCFM meeting held in Bangkok in 1998, Balazs and Krisztina met Fr Donnon Murray O.F.M. from *Japan*, for the first time. Through him the Lord gave us the opportunity for a service which has reached thousands of individuals, couples and families here in Hungary since 1999.

At the Bangkok meeting we listened to a talk given by Fr. Donnon and Fr. Gabriel Calvo about FIRES. After their talk was over, we had a desire to go and talk to them. Fr. Donnon told us about the Encounters he presented in Japan, and we were quite enthused. Krisztina asked, "Father, would you be able to come to Hungary and introduce the Original ME there?" To our surprise, Fr. Donnon said yes. The following year, in 1999 he came to Hungary and introduced the Original ME (OME). Then, for 7 consecutive years he came again and introduced each and every FIRES program. Another interesting "coincidence" was that when we invited Fr. Donnon to Hungary in Bangkok, a Slovakian couple stood nearby, and heard our conversation. Afterwards they too approached Fr. Donnon and invited him to neighboring Slovakia, where consequently all the FIRES programs were introduced and, just as in Hungary, have reached thousands of individuals, couples and families.

Since 1999, we have regularly organized FIRES programs in Hungary: EE five times a year, OME, SADE, SE each twice a year, MR and SR once a year, and PE once every two years, with usually 20 to 40 participants. We work with five committed couples who help with the different programs, with five priests and Bishop Laszlo Biro, bishop for the Family, who is the coordinator for the PE. Having been able to translate and publish 3 books by Fr. Calvo, we have been able to get the FIRES message to more than 10.000 readers.

We have countless vivencias from the FIRES programs. Some of them are included in this book written by the persons themselves – Gyorgy and Andi, Gabor and Tunde, Kalman and Vera, Imre and Zita. We have personally witnessed their stories, and they are strong vivencias for us also, announcing the glory of God.

Some other vivencias that stay with us:

- Our trainings with future team members. These sharings have always been real encounters with God through the humility, honesty and *confianza* of the team persons.
NB “*Confianza*” is another Spanish word widely used in the Encounters, because it has a special significance. It is translated into English by the word confidence. In the context of the Encounters, however, it has a much deeper meaning. Ideally it refers to a frame of mind wherein there is an intention to totally give oneself to another.
- The Saturday night liturgies. So many times in the divine presence, so many healings. We can never forget these most wonderful hours. One outstanding memory is from a Sons and Daughters Retorno (SADR) presented by Fr. Donnon in 2005. During the Saturday night liturgy of this program the group members pray for one another. At the end of this prayer one group invited Fr. Donnon, who was sitting by himself, to sit on their chair to be prayed for. After the prayer he stood up to see that not only that particular group but all participants (about 35 people) were standing behind him praying for him, with those who could not reach him laying hands on the person in front to constitute a united praying community.
- The changes of faces have always impressed us. The faces of participants arriving on Friday are quite different from the shining, smiling faces on Sunday. People are really changed, and not just for a weekend.
- Another memorable face is that of a priest. At the end of the PE the priests renew their priestly vows. We will never forget the tears streaming down the cheeks of a particular priest while he was renewing his priestly promises: “Yes! I want to serve God’s people...”
- We have also experienced many difficulties. Another book could be written on the ways the devil tries to discourage those who work for the kingdom of God. One time, after an Encounter that was very difficult and full of frustration, we told Fr. Gabriel about these difficulties, and he wrote: “Our calling is not to be successful but to be faithful”.
- We always remember the thanksgiving Masses celebrated by Fr. Donnon at the end of the Encounters he presented. He opened our eyes to the heavenly “New Jerusalem”, where all those who have loved us and whom we love are present, where there is no need for the sun and the stars because God Himself is the Light. This sight remains in our hearts forever.

The FIRES programs have indeed been very beneficial to many people in Hungary, but those who have benefited most are undoubtedly the two of us. Having been participants, organizers and teams for many FIRES programs has changed our life and powerfully turned us towards God.

It is a consequence of the FIRES programs that we began to pray together as a couple. Our enthusiasm as organizers gradually changed, the main emphasis being now on prayer. The Retorno was important because we realized that God the Father has a plan for us, God the Son teaches us how to realize that plan, and God the Holy Spirit gives us the strength to carry it out. I (Balazs) have made it the basic theme of my personal prayer.

It was also through an Encounter that praying the rosary came close to us indeed. Even if we are not part of the team, as much as possible we try to show our face at each Encounter program. These short visits are great opportunities for us to see how wonderfully our colleagues work; to see the participants; to have a short talk with the presenting priest and the host couple. We usually also pray together. One time during our visit at an EE, the priest invited us saying: "Guys, this is serious business. Let us go and pray the rosary." We did, and it was an unforgettable prayerful time. Since then we, as a couple, have made the rosary our evening prayer. After 10 pm we are not usually capable of praying more than two decades, but it is a wonderful, quiet night prayer, which gives us a lot of strength.

It was also through FIRES that we discovered the Bible. We heard at the Encounters for the first time in our lives that God speaks to us also personally through his Word. At first it was no more than a fact that we became aware of. It was at the 25th anniversary of FIRES, held in Rome in 2001, that we made the real commitment to read the Scripture daily. Since then we have experienced many times that the Lord does indeed guide us through the Scripture. Just one example: it is not always easy to cooperate in seeking unity. Years ago, at a time of extreme difficulty in this regard we opened the Bible and read: "*Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.*" (Acts 10:19- 20). At that time, we were ready to give up in seeking unity with certain individuals whose values and intentions were quite different from ours. Reading that Scripture passage, we felt urged to carry on working together with each one of those people, instead of saying goodbye to them when cooperation was painful. That has yielded an abundance of good fruits in CFM, and even in FIRES.

It was also through the Scripture that one of our helper couples accepted our invitation and became actively involved in FIRES. They feared they were too young to be a host couple. Opening the Scripture, they found: "*Do not say, I'm only a child. You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you*" (Jeremiah 1:7). Then they said yes, and they have been excellent organizers of EE ever since.

Our marriage has been strengthened through FIRES. It is a "joint project" in our

life, giving us the gift of common desires, hopes, difficulties and joys, which has greatly deepened our relationship. We have also benefited a great deal from FIRES with regard to our relationship with our kids. We have three teenage sons. The eldest has made two SADE's, and wants to make each and every SADE from now on. We consider the greatest possible praise what he said after his first SADE: "I give my consent to your continuing your work with FIRES".

We learned from FIRES that love which is not expressed is not love at all. We make conscious efforts at expressing our love in the family. We have also realized how important reconciliation is; how important it is to ask for forgiveness even from our children, treating them not as inferiors but as persons of equal dignity. It happened years ago that I – Krisztina – got very angry with one of our sons. He was about ten years old. I told him off. He too got upset, and reacted angrily. It was an ugly scene, which hurt me a lot. Therefore in the evening I sat by his bedside and said to him: "I am sorry I was so impatient with you; the problem was that you, too, were impatient with me. See, we are very much alike. We have the same weakness." Then he said proudly, with a radiant smile: "We have the same weakness!" Everything was settled, and we were both deeply touched by the joy of talking to one another as equals.

Who knows what our present marriage and family would be like without FIRES; but we are absolutely certain that we are inestimably richer because of it. We cannot be thankful enough to the Lord for making it possible for us to become acquainted with Fr. Calvo and Fr. Donnon, and for offering us the opportunity to serve in FIRES, through which he has been able to draw us closer to HIM.

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The Lord works in surprising and unexpected ways, and at no one point in time can we measure the extent of his actions. It doesn't take much of an imagination to realize the truth of this as we reflect on the repercussions of one person (in this case a priest) reaching out to another.

Fr. Donnon

A priest experienced a SE and was very much impressed by it. He was acquainted with a lapsed Catholic woman who had separated from her husband as well as from God, having discarded her Bible and anything else pertaining to the Catholic Faith. The priest met her and suggested that she make a SE to be held in Tokyo, five hours away by train. She reluctantly agreed and came, somewhat late, but felt out of place and decided to go home; but would wait until the next morning. She stayed right to the end and was absolutely transformed, immediately visiting her two sons living in Tokyo and telling them that she decided to live again with their father. She made the next SE held closer to Akita, her home city, and asked then to have a

SE in Akita. This was held at a retreat house now famous throughout the world as a place of pilgrimage because of a wooden statue of Our Lady that shed what have been analyzed as human tears a total of 100 times. (Some people have told me that they had witnessed this phenomenon). She gathered 40 people from seven different cities all over Japan among whom there was a priest (the same priest that had suggested that she make one), a seminarian, three sisters from the facility, two alcoholics and their wives, young people, old people, men and women, Christians and non-Christians for a wonderfully graced experience. Her husband, a non-Christian amazed at the change that had taken place in her, agreed to attend a ME to be held two weeks after that, which made her extremely happy. One of the participants at that aforesaid SE was a young housewife from the same city who had never been inside a Church in her life. She was walking by the local Catholic church and glanced at the bulletin board on the edge of the sidewalk outside the Church advertising the SE. She came, with not a clue as to what it was all about. She subsequently studied about the faith and was baptized. Is it possible to think that this was all just by chance?

One of the members of the team for that SE (suggested by this woman who planned it) was an alcoholic who has his own story of grace. One day in a drunken rage he picked up a knife and was about to stab a man. They called the police and put him in jail. The police, however, determined that he should be put into an asylum and sent him to one in Yokohama, four hours distant by train. There the doctors determined that he was not insane, but rather an alcoholic. They sent him to the local alcoholics anonymous group who heard his story and suggested that he attend meetings held in the Catholic church in his own home city. The first time he went he saw on the bulletin board an invitation to anyone to attend a SE in that city. Having no idea what it was, he did feel that he had to encounter himself, so he attended with his wife. He was so impressed he asked when and where the next one would be held. It was to be in the northern island of Hokkaido the next weekend. He drove up there (8 hours) and attended again. Then he and his wife began studying the catechism, and they were baptized along with their daughter. He hasn't touched a drop of alcohol since. He asked for a SE just for alcoholics and we did plan one, but only three people signed up, so we recruited other participants who were not alcoholics. One of those came with his wife. They too are now going to church and she was baptized.

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The winds of the Holy Spirit spread the Spiritual FIRES of his Love far and wide.

Fr. Donnon

One of our Franciscan missionary priests here in Japan is from Germany and has a brother who is a priest. At a SADE here in Japan that he attended there was a

young girl on the team who had lived in Germany as a child, went back to study there and is quite fluent in German (as a matter of fact she later married a German and is now living in Germany). He asked her if she would be willing to help him introduce the SADE in Germany, since she had planned to go there anyway. She agreed, they introduced the SADE, and even communist kids came from 500 miles away to attend. It was like a spiritual bomb that went off. The priest's brother got involved and, with the special help of one family in particular, now have most of the FIRES programs and are spreading them all over Germany. They even hope to introduce ME to Siberia. How this family got involved is another story of grace. The father kind of disappeared for about 13 years, coming back only on rare occasions. The mother was fed up and had divorce papers ready for the next time he came home. When he would come home he told the daughter that he loved her, and her response to him was that she did not believe him, because he was never around. Just by chance (?) he came home one time and the priest met him and asked him if he would cook meals for the kids at a (SADE), since his daughter was on the team. He agreed and while making the meals could hear the sharings of the team in the next room. He also heard his daughter's sharings. He was impressed, went home, and asked his wife if she would be willing to attend a ME. She was amazed, but happy. They reconciled, and as a family are now the most zealous proponents of FIRES in Germany. The daughter said: "My tears have turned into pearls".

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God's Word helps us to discern what He wants.

Fr. Donnon

When Fr. Calvo and I introduced the SADE in Rome a young high school girl was my interpreter. She had a boyfriend. Some years later we introduced the SADR and the same girl, now working at the Vatican, and expected by all to marry that same boy, was once again my interpreter. About a month after returning to Tokyo I received a long letter from her wherein she shared what happened to her since the Retorno. She felt that she was not meant to marry that boyfriend, had met a group of sisters unlike any she had ever met before, with headquarters in America. She felt called to join that Congregation and has already taken her final vows. She is one of many vocations to have originated from FIRES. In one Poor Clare Monastery here in Japan six of the nuns discerned their vocation from their experience of SADE. At a yearly gathering of people who have experienced FIRES programs I noticed that sitting three in a row directly in front of me were three women, two of whom are the mothers of priests and the other the mother of a Poor Clare nun. All three of their children had first felt that call during their experience of a SADE.

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The key to unexpected graces is openness, and forgiveness.

Fr. Donnon

A young Japanese man married to an American Catholic girl, before meeting her and getting married, had left the Church along with his mother. This was partly because he could not forgive his father for building a house together with his mother and, on completion of it, discarding his wife and bringing in another married woman who had her own children. Just by chance (?) this young man attended a healing Mass we had in Tokyo and miraculously forgave his father. He insisted that his mother attend a similar healing Mass and she too forgave her husband. They both returned to the Church, and became wonderful apostles. The mother died, the father came to the funeral, cried over her casket and in that way became reconciled with his deceased wife, separated from the woman not his wife, and became reconciled with his children. In a telephone conversation with that young man he told me about a book in English answering 100 questions asked about the movie the Passion of Christ – a book that within a short period of time sold more than one million copies.

He said that he had translated it into Japanese and wondered if I could find a publisher. This was in Holy Week. After the Mass for the Blessing of Oils at the Cathedral on Holy Thursday, a lunch was served for all of the attending priests. Seated next to me was a young Japanese priest whom I had never seen before. I asked him whether he was a diocesan priest and he said no, that he is a Salesian. I then asked if he worked in a parish, and he said no, that he works with printing. I told him I was looking for a printer and he pointed out his boss seated nearby, a priest that I did not know. I approached the priest and told him the story. He asked for an English copy of the book, which I did not have. The next day 20 copies arrived so I took one to him. Arrangements were made, and the first printing of 10,000 copies sold out in three weeks even in movie theaters where the film was being shown, and another edition of 10,000 was put out. Now with the DVD out many more will be sold; and it is like a catechism.

His work had brought this same couple to America where they now reside. They did not forget the effect of the FIRES programs in their own lives. Through their efforts we have had in the Northeast of the States an OME, SADE, SE, several Family Communication Workshops (FCW), and there will be more to come. All because of a FIRES healing Mass. This by chance?

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“I have chosen you to go and bear fruit”.

Fr. Donnon

A priest who experienced a PE, during his homily on the following Sunday morning, pointed at four couples in his congregation and told them that he would like them to attend a ME the following weekend in Nagoya, three hours away by train. They obediently came and were very happy with the experience. One of the wives is in charge of religious education for the kids of the parish and thought they should have a similar experience through SADE. So they sent 15 kids from the parish to a SADE. The following year they sent 15 more, and the priest himself attended. Also present at that last SADE was an officially “ordained” Buddhist monk – a first for us. He came in all his Buddhist monk regalia. But he is unique. He attends Sophia University (a Jesuit school) where he is majoring in English. He attends Mass every day and goes up at Communion time with his Buddhist beads to receive a blessing from the priest. While with us he even blessed himself when we said prayers. In his case it is not a question of taking over the temple from a Buddhist monk father, something common here in Japan, because his parents have no faith whatsoever. So he could easily convert. Maybe SADE will be the catalyst for that.

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Wherever FIRES is introduced, the need becomes more and more apparent.

Fr. Donnon

A young Argentinian woman who spent many years in the United States and therefore is proficient in English, as well as her native tongue Spanish, had been a parishioner at our FCC in Tokyo. She married an American stationed in Hong Kong, and of course now lives there. I asked her to translate Fr. Calvo’s book on SE from Spanish to English, so that we could then have it done in Japanese. It has already been translated into Hungarian, and through the influence of a Hungarian couple will eventually be translated into German. In Hong Kong she met a young American man from the same parish, married to a Chinese woman, who is very active in the Church and was looking for something to bring a spiritual experience to couples and families. Through the combined efforts of the two of them we were able to introduce the OME, the SE, and the Family Communication Workshop (FCW) to English speaking couples, families, and individuals living in Hong Kong, as well as one day SE and a single overnight SADE. There is now a strong hope that a number of Chinese couples who are interested in deepening family life, will gather to experience a FIRES program in Cantonese, and in time all of the FIRES programs, which they can then possibly introduce to mainland China. What wonderful possibilities, and at a time when a spiritual understanding of married and

family life is becoming more and more needed in China to cope with the debilitating influence of material growth.

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An experience of PE immensely helpful for priests, and through them for other

Fr. Donnon

We had a PE in Washington which was the catalyst for completing the revision of the outline for the PE, which in turn was helpful for the special FIRES program which we had for all of the Dominican sisters in Hungary, as well as for the PE that are being conducted there on a regular basis by the bishop in charge of family life throughout the country. He is very much convinced of the power of FIRES.

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Graces are meant to be lasting.

Fr. Donnon

Some years ago a non-Christian Japanese couple living in Toronto were on the verge of divorce. Her sister and brother-in-law are Catholic with seven kids and have long worked with me in ME. He works in a juvenile house of detention – not the greatest salary – but they offered to pay the way if the couple would agree to come to Japan to make a ME. They came, reconciled, met the Lord, studied the catechism and were baptized as a family. Years later I had a SADE in a small town in New York State. They heard about it and drove down with two of the kids from Toronto to have the kids experience it.

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An Unseen Power, waiting to be recognized, is at work in the life of every couple.

Fr. Donnon

A young married non-Christian couple suddenly showed up for some counseling because they were seriously contemplating divorce. I asked them how they ended up coming to see me, since I had not known them. It seems that 15 years before, when she was a student in a middle school run by the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, I gave a SADE to the students which she attended. She recalled that experience when this problem came up. She found out from a relative, who just happened to have been married at the FCC, where I was situated, and convinced her husband to come with her to talk over their problem with me. I recommended that they participate in an EE to be held two months later. In expressing doubt that they could last that long, I suggested that they were welcome to attend a SADE two weeks later, advising them to be aware that the experience is for young unmarried people, and that more than likely the majority of participants would be middle or

high school students. They came, had a wonderful experience, decided forthwith not to get divorced, and immediately shared with their respective parents how much the experience meant to them, and the fact that they were not going to divorce. The parents were overjoyed with that decision. His father, a non-Christian of course, sent me an eight page letter expressing his gratitude, and how the experience brought about a deeper relationship between him and his son, as well as among him and his siblings. They did attend the EE, which is open to young married couples also, and with that requested a church marriage ceremony, since as non-Christians their marriage had consisted of simply registering at City Hall. About a month after the EE their respective parents made the journey of about four hours to Tokyo just to thank me for offering their children the opportunity to overcome their problem. Subsequent to the EE that young couple also experienced a ME, and following that a SE weekend. This is certainly unique in the world, that within the period of seven months a couple would experience SADE, EE, ME and SE., and then had fulfilled their desire to have a church wedding to celebrate gratefully and solemnly that they are man and wife. Many young friends, and people they had met at those various Encounters attended the wedding ceremony and there was a special joy experienced by all of them. After a honeymoon in Europe to religious places, they returned and attended another ME. It is not hard to recognize the working of an unseen power leading them to this point – and who knows what else in the future, because they have now begun to study the catechism in order to be baptized.

Following is the testimony of the young couple above

The fact of both my wife and her mother recalling their respective experiences conducted by Fr. Donnon became the background of our calling Fr. Donnon to ask him about when the next EE would be held. The answer was that it would be in February, and this was November. That would make it 3 months later. I told Fr. Donnon that by February we would already be divorced. So he suggested that we come to see him that next weekend.

We visited him on the first weekend of December. He suggested that we might think of the possibility of attending a SADE, which was planned to begin on December 26. He did caution us that most of the participants would be middle school and high school students. Moreover, up to that time, there were only a few applicants, so there was the possibility of having to cancel the program.; but that we were welcome to attend (as an exception, because we were in fact already married). I was apprehensive about the prospect of sharing with middle and high school kids, but since this was a last resort, we decided that we would attend.

During the intervening three weeks, we continued to wound one another so that we were both mentally exhausted. But even so, little by little there developed a sense

of mutual forgiveness, and with the support of our families and friends, we even began to talk about starting all over again. There were still tensions between us, but nevertheless, by three days before the SADE we actually decided not to get divorced.

Because of the support of our families and friends, and because of our own endeavor, somehow or other we were able to reconcile. So that, to tell you the truth, I thought that we might just as well cancel our application to attend the SADE. I thought it was no longer necessary for us. We decided, however, to go as a couple in order, at that late date, not to be responsible for the possibility of it being cancelled.

There were only 10 participants at that SADE - a real small group, comprised of 3 middle school kids, one high school kid, one collegian, and 5 adults, including us. My wife I were placed in separate small groups of five for the sharing. But each of us thought the same thing – that each was placed in a wonderful group, and just by chance the kind of group that each of us needed.

In the beginning we were uptight, but gradually, with Fr. Donnon leading us, listening to the sharings of the team, and then sharing in the small group, despite the differences in ages, we were able to share from the heart, and we both made many new discoveries. Each of us discovered how blessed we were in our upbringing, and how deeply we are loved. A young man shared how his family forgave the person responsible for the death of his father in an automobile accident; and another young man in my wife's group prayed to be able to forgive a person who tormented him. This gave my wife an appreciation of the grace of forgiveness and the power of prayer.

After the three days of SADE we were completely reconciled with one another. There was no longer any tension between us. On the contrary, we felt even closer than we were before the problem between us arose. In the short period of the three days of SADE we were able to come to the full reconciliation that our parents, siblings and friends sought to bring about during the preceding three months.

When couples are faced with big problems there is no way that they can overcome them by simple human means, and even less so through their own power. The most they can do is to return in some way to where they were before. But we learned that, through a Supernatural power (which Fr. Donnon referred to as God, as Jesus), they are able to receive help that will bring them to a condition far exceeding where they were before falling. They can receive a grace that you might call miraculous. This, I think, is the essential lesson of the Encounter.

Afterwards, with the period of six months, we experienced EE, OME twice, and SE

successively. And the bond between us has deepened immeasurably. In addition, on October 15, 2007, we had a marriage ceremony conducted by Fr. Donnon at the FCC.

Who would ever think that within one year we would reconcile and advance from a condition of darkness to the point that we ourselves, our families and friends would all attend a marriage ceremony with faces of joy.

Our heartfelt thanks to all those who had introduced us to the Encounters, all of those involved with the Encounters for their support, Fr. Donnon, and, of course, God.

Wife

My husband has already written about all that we have gone through but, at the risk of being redundant, I would like to share what graces I felt that I have received from the Encounters. It was with a mixed feeling of fear and trepidation, along with a sense of expectation, that I faced the first day of that SADE on December 26, 2006. As I look back now I am kind of surprised that we had the boldness to participate in a SADE as a married couple; but at the time, without thinking and without hesitation, we simply showed up at the Franciscan Chapel Center.

On the second night of the SADE one of the team member shared that his father had died in an automobile accident, but that his family had forgiven the person responsible. At first I thought: "Is it really possible to forgive someone responsible for the death of one's husband and father?", and I was half believing and half doubtful. But when I realized that that young man was really at peace with himself, I could feel that there is such a thing as a grace to be able to forgive. Moreover another young man in the group prayed that he would be able to forgive a certain person working in the same company, and that he was blaming. I had never even thought of such a prayer before. For a full two months, my only thought was: "I will absolutely never forgive my husband for this injury". Even after I had decided that it would be better to start all over again with my husband, when I would reflect on it, I really could feel nothing but resentment. I didn't want to think about it; and even though I would have liked to be able to forget about it, I simply could not erase it from my mind. Every day was full of pain and darkness.

At the greeting of peace during the Mass of forgiveness on the second day, since the theme was reconciliation, Father suggested that we greet one another with: "I forgive you". Well, as soon as I turned to my husband and said: "I forgive you", my heart, that had been so bound up with resentment, was immediately freed, and I suddenly felt released from a huge burden. At that moment I thought that this is really what I had really wanted to say to my husband! And I was at last able to say it from the heart. I remember being so happy that I couldn't stand still. Even now I feel that it was a mysterious moment, like a miracle. For two months before the

SADE, I felt boiling up within me nothing but anger and resentment that I found it impossible to repress. And yet, during that SADE, in a moment. I was able to put down those feelings of resentment. It was indeed like a miracle. Not even a year has passed since then, but now everything has changed, and all I feel is love and gratitude towards my husband.

When I first encountered this suffering, I thought: “If I hadn’t met my husband, I would have had to suffer this much.” But now my thought is: “If I hadn’t met him I would never have had such a wonderful experience, and I am so grateful for that. Just as Jesus changed water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana, so through Fr. Donnon we were able to encounter Jesus, and He has changed the water of our lives into wonderful wine.

Honestly speaking, however, it wasn’t easy writing this testimony. I hesitated for quite a while. It was hard looking back on something so bitter that happened just a year ago. But considering that our testimony might be helpful to someone in similar circumstances, we decided to write this testimony. Because the two of us were able to have this reconciliation, our love as a couple has been deepened. I join my husband in saying that we believe that this grace is due to the Encounter people we have met, to Fr. Donnon, who always welcomes us with open arms, and, of course, to God. And we are deeply grateful.

It is our prayer that the Encounters will continue to spread throughout the world and that more and more people will receive graces from them. And we pray for Fr. Donnon’s health and for many more blessings on his work.

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The following stands out for me as an indisputable example that there is indeed a transcendent Being at work in events and the lives of individuals, couples and families.

Fr. Donnon

Their pastor made the long trip from Hokkaido to Tokyo in order to attend a ME, and immediately recognized its potential in building up the spirituality of his parish through the fostering of couples and families in the Lord. The three couples he encouraged to make the bus ride, plane ride, train ride, and taxi ride to participate in something they knew nothing about were not at all enthusiastic, and did not readily agree – until he promised as a reward to take them to a famous hot spring located in the general area of the retreat house. This made them not only agreeable, but enthusiastic about making the trip. On the day of departure it began to snow, threatening a cancellation of all flights from that airport. So the priest prayed that it stop snowing – and it did. They arrived, had the experience and were finally happy

with it, and now looked forward to enjoying a stay at the famous hot spring. Low and behold that morning it began to snow (something unheard of at that time in that part of the country). Now the priest started to pray again, this time that it continue to snow, since his desire was that the three couples spend the final night not at a hot spring, but rather sharing with the local teams to plan for having a ME in their own area. And it did continue to snow, so much so that the buses scheduled to go to the hot spring were not running. The result of the meeting was that they would go ahead with plans to have a ME in their area.

Twenty nine couples signed up to participate. Three couples and a priest agreed to make the trip to initiate ME in that area. It was well known that at that particular time of the year the area of the airport is often locked in with heavy fog causing the cancellation of flights for days on end. Anticipating that, the 7 member team went to the airport early to ascertain whether it would be possible to make an earlier flight than the one for which they had reservations. It just so happened that exactly 7 seats were available. Once in the air it became clear that the flight was taking much longer than usual. The people on the other end, who had prepared so hard for this first ME, knew that the plane was delayed because of fog. They prayed that the plane be able to land. Finally the announcement was made to prepare for landing, although what could be seen is just one thick cloud. It was as if Moses was extending his staff to allow a passageway through the clouds. The plane landed, and it was later learned that that was the only plane that was able to land from three days before until three days after. In fact after the ME the 7 team members had to take a train to another distant airport in order to return home by plane. Needless to say, the ME was grace-filled and naturally followed up by many MEs and FIRES experiences throughout a wide area. Snowing that stopped; snowing that continued; exactly 7 seats available on the only flight that landed within a 6 day period. You figure!

In a similar vein, again a 7 member team were about to embark by plane to another part of the country to initiate ME there. It was announced that there was a strong possibility that the plane they were to board might have to be diverted to another airport because of extremely high winds in the area of their destination. Should that be the case, the need to take a train for the latter part of the journey would make it impossible to begin the ME that evening. Nothing more was announced, and the plane landed in very calm conditions. When one of the team members remarked that there must have been some mistake in communication, they were told that there was indeed a fierce storm, and that that particular plane was the only one to land at the airport that day. Needless to say, once again that ME was the starting point of many graces in that area. Once again, you figure!

It is understandable, of course, that to really appreciate the impact of his graces in the situations mentioned above, you would really have to know the people involved

personally, and observe first hand the result of the graces flowing from his love

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Yoko Kinai – Hokkaido, Japan

One of the wives of the three couples mentioned above shared the following testimony, all the more memorable and meaningful to her now, because her husband has preceded her to heaven.

Thirty years have elapsed since then, but our pastor at the time had already experienced ME several times, and promised himself that the next time he would definitely bring 3 couples with him. We were among those three couples that first had to be convinced. My husband was very busy with his work and had no desire whatsoever to attend this thing that he knew nothing about, in a place where he had never been, requiring a trip by airplane, and so he just kept refusing the continuous invitations – until the pastor mentioned that when it was all over he would take the 6 of us to a famous hot spring. Father should have mentioned that from the first, because my husband loved to go to hot springs, and with that decided he would take advantage of the offer. Well as the day approached I got more and more nervous, because I feared that nothing would come of that long trip from Hokkaido to Gumma.

On the evening of the second day each couple was given a candle and it was suggested that we go to our respective rooms and, in the light of that candle, share with one another about all the things that we ordinarily do not talk about. We were supposed to leave the conference room together, but he went out alone. I thought he might be going to the bathroom, but in fact he went to the second floor where there were snacks. On the stairs going up he ran smack into our pastor (who seemed to be avoiding us from the time we had entered the friary). Father asked: “So how are things going?”, at which I guess my husband’s face turned white.

Father had said to him: “If you experience a ME, you will change!” Now, my husband was a man who showed opposition to just about everything, yet he said: “Father, just as you said, I have changed!” This, of course, made Father very happy.

Towards the end of the experience I looked out the window and noticed that it had begun to snow. Because of the snow, the busses to the hot spring were not running, but despite the fact that a trip to that particular hot spring was the present that was induced us to attend the ME, by that time we were on a high and it didn’t really matter that much. Mr. Matsumoto seemed to have known that that would be the case, for he had arranged that we spend the night at a neighboring hotel with hot springs. The three of us couples and Father gathered in one room, joined hands, and prayed prayers of thanksgiving for the gift of experiencing ME. It was like a dream as though we were all on the road to Emmaus walking with I. With that as a beginning, we were able to introduce ME to our own city. We were able to share our lives as deepened by the Holy Spirit, and little by little our community began to grow spiritually.

This spiritual growth was the basis for making a decision to acquire new property and

build a new church. Naturally we encountered many problems in the process, but, with Father and the community being of one heart, we were able to see both spiritual and physical growth of the parish. The influence of ME on the entire parish was evident, and it became a very lively parish. In this day and age, when it is becoming more and more difficult for Christians to live their faith, it is precisely the message of ME that is needed in order to approach the kind of life–style that the Lord desires.

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I have heard a number of priests express the thought that ME is for couples, and that priests have nothing to gain from participating in one. In fact, however any priest who, for whatever reason, finds himself attending a ME (or any of the FIRES programs), cannot help but discover any number of things that can be directly applied to his priesthood and to his ministry – discoveries that can be made only by a direct association with the experience. The following sharing by a priest is an indication of how that was certainly true for him.

Fr. Paddy O’Hare, Marist

Here in the Kyoto diocese of Japan much importance is being given these days to “Faith Sharing” in small groups as an integral and essential element for living our faith, as well as for growing in faith. Seminars and workshops in faith sharing have become part of the diocesan program for faith development.

I first learned the value and the power of Faith Sharing from experiencing ME. I still remember vividly the sharing that touched me most profoundly and changed my whole understanding of the Sacrament of Christian Marriage. It dates back about 30 years to a M.E. weekend in Kiryu, where a team couple described how their awareness of ministering the Sacrament of Marriage to each other in ordinary daily tasks and chores brought new understanding and energy to their relationship. Until then, I thought I “knew it all”, having taught theology, worked with CFM and given pre–marriage talks! Not only did that sharing open up to me the depth and beauty of the Sacrament of Marriage in a way I had never previously imagined nor been taught, it also impressed upon me the power of a sharing by a committed, loving, Christian couple. I also realized that, as a priest working alone, I could only touch the surface of this extraordinary Sacrament, and needed to work much more in collaboration with couples.

I began to work with team couples in M.E. and participated in numerous (maybe 40 or 50) weekends as well as other FIRES programs, always looking forward especially to hearing the couples share their experiences of living the Sacrament. Since then too, I have always made sure that married couples have a key role in pre–marriage courses. One such course, staffed originally by couples who had experienced ME and wished to exercise their ministry, has continued successfully

for over 20 years.

I have to admit that personally I still find sharing to be quite difficult, but Fr. I's insistence on the 'vivencia' and how it always has to be tested by "what", "where", "when" and "how", still influences me, still rings fresh in my mind as a most useful help and criterion. Those lessons learned in M.E. ministry over the years have become a vital part of my personal faith development and my relationship with the Lord, linking me to a better appreciation of the sacredness of all I has created, especially the "ordinary" things, and how everything is a blessing to be received and shared.

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Another example that graces of ME are not limited to couples.

Another priest, now retired, but in the past for many years involved with presenting ME, and observing many graces in many marriages, shared the following as one grace that he himself experienced: "In my case ME has helped me to relate to women in a more human and truly Christian way. I had been very stilted, formal and somewhat afraid in relating to women. Now I have learned so much in listening to the honest and open talks of wives in the ME weekend that I am at ease and willing to listen to what women have to say about life and their relation to I without any quick judgment concerning feminine feelings."

● * * * * *

The following testimony by a couple associated with FIRES for more than thirty years is representative of countless couples throughout the world. It clearly shows that their experience of ME, far from being a short-lived psychological high, has rather been the basis for them to focus their entire lives on deepening their spirituality and witnessing that especially within their own parish community.

Takegami, Jin, Hiroko

In December of 1974, just when I was at my very busiest with my work, at the age of 39, as if I were being pushed from behind, I attended my first ME. I will never forget my amazement and wonderful feeling of joy. The following year we were asked to be a team couple, and for 27 consecutive years, right up to a MR in 2001, we were involved as a team. In the course of those years we received unnumbered and immeasurable graces. In reading over the notes accumulated over the years, one after another the things we have learned over a half a lifetime kept coming to mind. The more we read, and recalled, the greater the feeling of gratitude, and the greater the feeling of helplessness in putting all of those graces down on paper. Therefore, rather than try to list all of the graces we received each time we

experienced an Encounter, we have decided to share on those graces that we received from FIRES that are very much alive in our present lives.

Right now, no matter what happens around us, everything seems to be tied up with FIRES like limbs are attached to a tree trunk. Spiritual unity brings peace to our daily lives. During Encounters we have shared on the talk on Commitment many times, and that has resulted in reading and praying the Bible daily for the past 47 years, and we think that that has deepened our couple spirituality.

When we wake up in the morning we begin by praying for one another, put a lighted candle and the Bible on the altar near the kitchen table, stand next to one another and pray out loud. Then we turn to one another and greet each other with a light kiss, sit down at the table and read the Bible passage for the Mass of that day. While listening to me read the passage, my wife gets breakfast ready, and then as we eat we share on the Gospel passage as well as matters that have to do with our faith community.

We always have bread for breakfast, but without fail for desert we share an apple and a banana. We read somewhere a sentence that fits this atmosphere perfectly: "In the morning a respectful husband and wife will share an apple with one another."

After dinner, at a mutually suitable time we decide on a time for prayer. Presently we recite together the Liturgy of the Hours. We have come to realize that, in this way, by our continuing this custom of praying together morning and evening for unity, tolerance, humility, etc., the Lord has helped us to grow spiritually with a strength that far exceeds anything we could ever do on a purely human level.

Facilitating a Liturgy of the Word and being Eucharistic Ministers:

Ten years after Vatican Council II there was a gathering of lay leaders from all of the churches of Gumma Prefecture, and this was followed up by yearly gatherings for 10 years, up until 1985. On the occasion of the pastor of our church in Takasaki, Fr. Andre, going to Okinawa to join in the celebration of the blessing of the new cathedral there, he could not be here for Sunday Mass, and so we were suddenly asked to lead the community in a Liturgy of the Word. We were told that since I's plan is unity, and since you have here a community, then please bring to that community what you have learned through ME. That was the beginning of a number of times that we became facilitators for Liturgies of the Word and for being Eucharistic ministers. And through that we did try hard to impart to the community the lessons of love, unity and joy that we ourselves had experienced through the spirit of the FIRES programs. In our church, women can act as altar servers, which my wife has continued to do throughout the years.

Helping prepare couples for marriage:

We were told that since we spend our nights and days learning all about homes and families, and since we were a team couple for presenting ME, then we were a suitable couple to help prepare engaged people to be married, and so we have been involved in that apostolate for many years. This has been a grace, because there is no joy compared to the joy of striving to make people understand the love of the Lord.

Teaching Catechism:

For the past 16 years, every Tuesday from 7:00PM we have been teaching Catechism. But we have tried to do this not so much through reasoning, but rather through an attempt to help the candidates to experience the joy of faith and the beauty of mutual love that we ourselves discovered through the Encounter. Whether or not they go on to being baptized is something between themselves and I, I think that, however shallow our understanding of the theology of the Church might be, our task is to try our best to share our own experiences of the faith

Reaching out to foreigners through bazaars:

Nearby there is a facility dedicated to reaching out to foreigners who live in the neighborhood and there is a bazaar for them three days a week. The church of Takasaki takes care of that on the second and third Saturdays of each month, and we go there early in the morning twice a month, but not without having our regular Bible sharing first. We are picked up by a volunteer Catholic who takes us to the facility about one hour away. We have prayed over and over that he drive in such a way that we have no accident and that we accomplish our goal of being able to help those financially burdened foreigners. We do have the opportunity to mix with the people who come to the bazaar and enjoy the family atmosphere of the people from that neighborhood. We bring a lunch with us, and just hope that in some way the love that we have toward one another will rub off on the people we meet that day, whether they be the foreigners who come to the bazaar, or the people who live in the neighborhood.

Cleaning the rectory and watching over the church in the pastor's absence:

Every Monday my wife and another parishioner clean the rectory. The pastor is quite elderly so that, while cleaning thoroughly from top to bottom, they make every effort to create a lively and homey atmosphere. They then retire to the church office and take over those duties. This gives them an opportunity every Monday to meet and talk to the parishioners about many different things, so that there are those who time their visit to be there at meal time, or tea time; and it is a time that they treasure. It is a good place for meeting the community and sharing on family values, family communication, etc. Often the pastor joins them for afternoon tea.

Preparing for Saturday evening and Sunday Liturgies.

This responsibility is shared according to the areas of the parish. We take our turn on the first Saturday of the month. We divide up the work between cleaning the toilets, cleaning the church, preparing the altar, arranging the flowers, etc. Then we have tea together and have a period of sharing on the spiritual situation of our area, how we can more fully reach out to others, and this is very helpful in bringing about a greater unity in the community at large.

In this way we strive to be looked upon not as a couple that gets along, but as a couple that seems to have “something”. We cannot help but be thankful that in some way we are living out the graces that we have received. And it is precisely through the Encounter that we have come to appreciate the gift of faith, the need to live it out, and the mission we have to witness it to the best of our ability.

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FIRES touches people from all walks of life.

Fr. Donnon

How many times throughout the world have people shared experiences similar to the following actual experiences of people in Japan? “My husband prayed with me for the first time in our 32 years of marriage” (A housewife whose husband experienced SE). “Although I had hated God and Christianity, during an experience of the EE the Lord touched my heart instantaneously, and on the spot I made three resolutions which I have kept: to discontinue the field of gynocology which put me in the position of having to perform abortions; to involve myself full time in hospice work; and to be baptized” (A medical doctor who experienced the EE). “I can at last forgive the man who murdered my father” (A young high school girl who experienced the SADE). “We received the grace to forgive the young man whose speeding car resulted in the death of our 3 year old daughter, as well as forgiving my older brother who borrowed a sizeable sum of money from me and promptly disappeared. I found him and expressed my forgiveness, and now we are on very good terms”. (A couple completely changed by their experience of the ME). “During this experience I received the Word: ‘Truly the Lord is in this spot’, although I had not known it. It seems to me these words were written for me, for I had abandoned the Lord; but now I know that he is here” (A high school boy who experienced the SADR). “Until now I had never even thought about evangelization with and through the family”. (A middle aged diocesan priest who experienced the PE).

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The power of love and reconciliation

Fr. Donnon

He loved his wife, but could not bring himself to accept or forgive her mother, who lived with them. This caused a deep rift in their married life to the point of the possibility of a divorce. They had experienced a ME, but it did little to influence his relationship with his mother in law. Just when they were at their lowest ebb, we had planned a Re-Encounter, a vital aspect of which is reconciliation as a prelude to a deep encounter with the Lord, as a couple, through the experience of MR. This is in line with the admonition of Jesus to first go and be reconciled, and then come back and offer your gift. It is only with a forgiving heart that the Lord can be encountered in a special way. For whatever reason, by the night before it was to begin, besides them only two other couples had signed up to participate. I was ready to cancel the weekend. But to ascertain what God wanted, at random I opened the Bible to the story of Jonas and the Lord saying that this sinful generation was looking for a sign. Precisely! But the only sign given would be that of Jonas. He was in the belly of the whale three days, was forced to go to Niniveh, where he preached to the people and they converted. Now the three days that Jonah is portrayed as being in the belly of the whale and being released on the third day is interpreted as a prefiguring of the three days that Jesus was in the belly of the earth and rose again on the third day. In like manner the Re-Encounter is a three day experience, and it was to be held in a retreat house that is long and narrow, much like a whale. I felt the Lord saying: "Do it, and on the third day there will be a resurrection." So we decided that we would go ahead with it. By the next day we had 10 couples to participate, the aforesaid couple had an unbelievable experience of reconciliation with one another and he with his mother in law, became a wonderful team couple up until the time that she developed breast cancer and went to meet her Creator. He subsequently took care of his mother in law with loving care until the time of her death. There is a God! That God does work wonders through this instrument that the Spirit has given us.

In the same parish as the couple above there was a housewife who became their close friend. Her husband was not a Christian, and as far as I know was not going to church with her. They were invited to make a ME, where I met them for the first time, and was struck by the wonderful relationship that they had with one another. Although all the team couples working with me up to that time were both Catholics, I decided that I would ask them to be on the team, even though he was not a Christian. Well before I had a chance to talk to them about it, he secretly went to church and asked to study in preparation for Baptism. He wanted to surprise her, knowing that she would be overjoyed when the time came. Of course, he could not keep it a secret for too long, was baptized and they did become a team couple. As it turned out, she came down with stomach cancer at about the same time as her friend, and were hospitalized at the same time, although in different cities. Both of them accepted their illness, as well as their impending death, with strong faith in the Lord, and the faith of both husbands was deepened by the strong faith of their wives. As a response to the gift of faith given to him, the man who wanted to

please his wife by studying secretly is now very much involved in the activities of his own church; but he is also involved in reaching out to the poor in other countries by going there and sharing his expertise with them.

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Experiences stimulate conviction and action, insofar as we are open to them.

Fr. Donnon

He was a college professor with no interest at all in religion, she was a Catholic very much desiring to attend a ME. No amount of cajoling on her part could persuade him to consent to participate in something for which he felt no need – until she mentioned the word “divorce”, perhaps in jest, but which surprised him nonetheless. She asked him to at least consider going to the church to talk to Fr. Donnon. He agreed to that (perhaps unsure whether she had been serious about divorce), but still made it a point to assure her that he had no intention of participating. Toward the end of our conversation, I told him that if he attended, and at the end felt that he had gotten nothing out of the experience, I would give him the equivalent of \$1,000 American dollars. He asked if I was serious, and I said I was. So he decided to attend. By Sunday morning he said I would only have to give him the equivalent of \$5.00. At the end he said he would be willing to give *me* \$1,000.00. Well he immediately bought a Bible, began reading it daily, and was baptized within 6 months. I have used that same ploy many times since, to emphasize that no amount of money would ever be enough to purchase the gift that can be received through this experience.

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Meetings by chance aren't always chance meetings..

Fr. Donnon

Through the chance (?) meeting of a wonderful Sri Lankan couple in Singapore at an Asian Conference of the Christian Family Movement we were able to introduce to Sri Lanka the OME, SE, PE and the SADE. We had more than 70 young people attend the first SE there. A CFM member, the father of 3 invited his two daughters to attend, but did not directly invite his son, because he was very much taken up with his school studies. Both daughters refused, but the son, who heard his father invite them, said that he would go. As it turned out, all three participated. At a particular point of the program, in tears, one of the sisters shared with the entire group that she forgave her brother. Then the other sister stood up and shared that she also forgave her brother. This opened up a flood of sharings by others that they too forgave someone. I discovered later that, although these siblings lived in the same home, for whatever reason there had been absolutely no communication among the two sisters and their brother for an entire year.

The following year I was invited to their home to have a wonderful meal prepared by the sisters, and it was evident that the reconciliation in that family was not a temporary happening. Some years later, at another Asian Conference of the CFM in India, I had an opportunity to speak to the entire assembly about the FIRES programs. The two children of the above mentioned couple that invited me to Sri Lanka were there with their parents. So I asked them to stand next to me and share on their experiences with the SADE, because by now they had become leaders involved with introducing it to various parts of the country. Included in their sharing was the incident of the reconciliation that had taken place among the siblings, who were close friends of theirs. It had affected them deeply. The upshot of that sharing was an invitation to come to India to introduce the SADE. There is an expression that God works in strange ways, but He also works in obvious ways. Now that daughter is married and is living in Dubai. She asked about the possibility of my going to Dubai to introduce the Original ME.

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Discerning and living out correct values can be unexpectedly life-changing.

Fr. Donnon

He dated a girl for six years and she decided to become a Catholic because he was Catholic. He finally proposed, set the wedding date, reserved the date and time at the church, and sent out the wedding invitations. Then they attended an EE. In the course of dialoguing during that weekend, about things they had never touched on before, he realized that their values were too far apart, and for that reason decided that he could not marry her. So he called off the wedding, to the great surprise of both families, and everyone else. Then he attended a SADE where he met a wonderful Catholic girl with the same values. They are married with two beautiful children, and from the beginning of their marriage have been involved as a team presenting the EE. A very moving testimony that he shares during an EE is his having been cured of a cancer similar to leukemia which had progressed to the prognosis of only three months to live. It is generally believed that it was principally the prayers of the many people that he knows within the Encounter community that was responsible for his cure.

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With the Lord, no problem is insurmountable.

Fr. Donnon

They were a non-Christian couple whose marriage was on the rocks, and in her loneliness she didn't know where to turn. One day she happened to meet an acquaintance who was on her way to church and invited her to go with her. In church she became acquainted with a couple involved in ME and the FIRES

programs who suggested that they make a ME before taking the drastic step of divorce. They participated, and it had a profound effect on their lives. Not only did they decide not to divorce, they began attending Mass regularly and began to study the catechism. Then they attended a SE which affected each of them personally, but also had a further impact on their married life. They were subsequently baptized along with their daughter, and have since been on the team for several ME and SE weekends. Now they cannot believe that they were at one time ready to separate permanently.

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Today's trials may tomorrow be the key to salvation for oneself and that of others.

Fr. Donnon

She was a widow whose two children were affected, or infected, by the unique phenomenon in Japan known as “School Phobia”. Kids by the tens of thousands suddenly refuse to go to school and in the process become social misfits – not wishing to talk to anyone, including their parents and siblings, sleeping all day and going out at night; or simply spending all their time alone. No one can pinpoint the main reason why this happens, but it is never a question of talking it over with peers and deciding that this is what they will do. It is something they do on their own. Although it can suddenly happen to any child from the early years of grammar school through the years of college, it usually begins once a child has entered middle school. Bullying is the cause in some cases, but it seems that some kind of trauma in the family is largely responsible. In this case the children had lost their father to cancer. The daughter was able to overcome the problem fairly quickly; but the son’s case became more and more severe to the point of a failed attempt to release the gas on the stove in their apartment and ignite it. With that the people in the apartment building drew up a petition to have the family ejected from the apartment. As a response to help her son, and others like him, especially through association with the family members, this woman decided to go back to school and study counseling.

On completion of her studies she put an article in the newspaper offering to help in whatever way she could, and within a week had more than 300 requests from all over the country. For more than 25 years she has reached out to countless people seeking help; but her method of helping is unique and effective – prayer, rather than advice. It was in this capacity that we became acquainted, within a year of her beginning this apostolate. Some families with which she was working, most of them non-Christian, proposed the possibility of going to a quiet place for reflection. Someone suggested taking them to a retreat house to which I had been assigned just one week before. When they arrived a lay brother, who had intended to give them some spiritual advice, after learning that they were a group of people with this

common family problem, suggested that they ask me to do something for them, since I was working with families. The only thing those people had in common was that their children had been affected by this phenomenon. For me it was indeed a unique group, for I had previously never even heard of “School Phobia”. Well, not knowing what else to do, I put together an overnight program for them. Another Pentecost experience! That was the beginning of a tie-up of the Encounters and her special work. Her principle has been that if the parents do not change, the children will not change. A way for the parents to experience this change would be to attend a ME. Through her recommendation hundreds of couples have experienced ME and other FIRES programs, hundreds have been baptized, many children have overcome their problem and have stood out in academic achievement, many healings have taken place including her son, who made a SADE. He is now married and has a job.

Being involved in this sorely needed service this woman had the opportunity to give talks here and there. Present at one of those talks was a woman who had been her high school classmate in an entirely different location in Japan, just one of many more, and not included among her close friends. By this time they were both married with different names and living in Tokyo. It was more than forty years since they graduated high school and from that time there was absolutely no contact between them. But while listening to the talk, this former classmate became aware of something familiar and asked if her name had been so and so – an unusual and totally surprising reunion. With that the classmate contacted another classmate with whom there had been some contact. The three got together after more than forty years and reminisced. In the course of that conversation the woman invited the two former classmates to make a ME. They did, received the gift of faith, and a year later I baptized both couples together at our Chapel Center in Tokyo. Just by the way, this woman’s parents may possibly have been the oldest couple in the world to attend a ME. He was 86 and she was 84. Through that experience both were baptized. So here we have two more example of how the Lord utilizes negative experiences (the son’s being afflicted with school phobia) to bring about marvelous and unexpected graces.

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The SE experience is followed up by a Self Retorno (SR), during which it is suggested to write a letter to God. What follows is such a letter written by the above mentioned woman.

Sayako Oka

Dear God,

I thank you Lord, for giving me the opportunity to experience this SR. If I had not

met You, I know that my own life and that of my children would never be what it is today. This is also true of a great number of families that have surrounded me throughout the years.

When I think about it, in addition to the first 15 people affected by the phenomenon of “School Phobia” who attended that first FIRES experience of communicating as a family during that overnight retreat conducted by Fr. Donnon at St. Francis Friary 20 years ago, there have since then been any number of families similarly affected who have also had a similar experience of communicating as a family. More than 100 parents of such families have experienced ME; and they and their family members have also experienced the SADE, SE, MR, MReE, FE, etc., bringing about transformations in their lives as individuals, couples and families. Among them the majority have been touched by our Love and also received the grace of Baptism. They have become very active in their respective parishes, and have taken on responsibilities of leadership.

I was 45 years old when I undertook the task of being a counselor for hundreds of families throughout the country affected by the debilitating phenomenon of “School Phobia”. I started a support group of such people which we called “Mothers’ Club”. Since this has come to be a widely scattered social problem, our group was given prominence by the mass media. Many, therefore, turned to us, since they had no one else to turn to, and the first thing I recommended to such parents was to attend a ME, stressing that if the parents do not change, you cannot expect any change in the children. In addition, many of those couples discovered your Word through the MR, and the fact that through your Word you do indeed support us.

I have moved to Chofu from Koganei. Fifteen years ago. On April 19, 1988, I had a dream that I should search for a message from You through the Book of Joel. I opened to the *Book of Joel 2:25*: “*I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army which I sent against you.*” Those words gave me a realization of how well you knew me. I didn’t even know that those words were contained in my large Bible, but on reading them I could not stop the flow of tears. You mention repaying, and I believe that your repaying was perfect. I had indeed had my share of tribulations – losing my husband at an early age and being left to raise the children alone, having both of them affected by School Phobia, having had to cope with the extent to which that psychological wound had affected my son (even to the point of having the people living in neighboring apartments take up a petition to force us to move, because they felt he was a danger to them), and his subsequently living on his own and failing to keep in contact, etc. Fourteen years after receiving that Word from you, in September 2002, just when my daughter and I were discussing purchasing an apartment, I received a letter from my son, the first in ten years. On the occasion

of his wife's and my birthday (one day apart), he suggested that we celebrate together. He has married and is working now, but before that he made the SADE three times. And I thought: "At last you are repaying me, just as you said you would".

When it came to where we would purchase an apartment, I told my daughter that anywhere would be fine for me, so long as it is near a church. What she found through the newspaper was a wonderful apartment right on the edge of the grounds of the parish church and seminary of the Salesian Fathers, making it possible for me to attend daily Mass in the Church just a minute's walk away. My son and his wife have visited me a number of times.

I have often experienced that when I trusted you from the heart and put everything into your hands, it was you who moved first and made all these things possible. My parents also, as non-Christians, and at the ripe old ages of 87 and 86 respectively, experienced a ME. Maybe that makes them the oldest couple in the world to have experienced a ME. And because of the experience, they received the grace of Baptism, and were able to die in the Joy of knowing You. And then there is the joy I experience because of the opportunity to help prepare the meals for the EE and SADE held at the FCC.

My husband died of lung cancer at the age of 49, when I was only 38. Our son was in second year middle school, and our daughter in 6th. grade grammar school, when they both were affected by "School Phobia". It was as if I had lost them both, our home was taken away, and we had no money for our livelihood; but this ended up in my coming to know that I have a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother. The grace of knowing that Jesus is my Savior is a far more valuable present than any worldly treasure.

I have had the grace of attending more than 30 Encounters, and have often been on the team for SE. I have gotten back my son and daughter. And I am sure my husband rejoices with me from heaven. It gives me peace of mind to know that it is not just me and my family, but that "payback" that you promised me will also be experienced by many people that You have sent to surround me.

Finally, what a beautiful grace it is to have the opportunity, during this SE, to write this letter of gratitude to you. I also want to express my gratitude to Fr. Donnon for his work in spreading the FIRES programs not only throughout Japan, but to other parts of the world as well. Please continue to bless him and the Encounters. With love and gratitude.

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Angels may at times take human form, and humans may at time act like angels.

She was seated alone on a bench in the precincts of a Buddhist temple, disconsolate and weeping over her personal problems. A woman who just happened to be passing by approached her and asked her what was wrong. After sharing some of her problems the woman said: “You should attend a SADE.” Of course, not being a Christian or knowing anything about God, the young woman had never heard about a SADE. But she agreed to attend and that eventually brought her to the Church and Baptism. In the meantime she got her sisters to participate in a SADE, her parents to attend a ME, as well as a MR, and the entire family experienced a FE. One of her sisters was baptized a Catholic as well as her mother. The other sister was baptized in a Protestant denomination. The sister who became a Catholic has joined a Lay Institute. I don’t know who was the guardian angel that just happened to be passing by at that moment and just happened to suggest a SADE; but I do think we have here a very good example of “synchronicity”. Could there be any other explanation than the working of a “Higher Power”?

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If parents change, their children change. But very often when children change, their parents change with them.

Fr. Donnon

For 20 consecutive years I had the opportunity to present the SADE to the first year students, and the SE to the third year students of a nursing school attached to a hospital run by the Holy Spirit Sisters. The Christians among those students were minimal. The programs did not continue only because the nursing school itself was discontinued. Prior to the first experience of the SADE, each year for the incoming first year students there had been an overnight trip to the mountains, singing and dancing around a campfire, and all had a very delightful time. The sister in charge, however, decided that fun and games is OK, but nothing concrete comes out of it; that there should be an experience that would have an effect on their daily lives, and their future lives. She herself experienced the SADE and was convinced that this was the answer. When told that there would be no trip to the mountains, but instead a three day program requiring them to be closed in, listening to some talks, they were quite unhappy about it. And it was evident on their faces as they showed up at the facility that first day. The final day? Another Pentecost experience!

They went back to the school so exuberant that the second and third year students, who had only had the campfire experience, insisted that they have a similar experience – which had to be arranged for. Subsequent to that there was no longer any dissatisfaction expressed because of the cancellation of overnights in the mountains. Moreover all were well disposed to experiencing the SADE, which

became established as part of the yearly schedule for the third year students. The experiences were the catalyst for a number of baptisms; and each year the Encounters were listed by the graduating students as among the highlights of their years at the school. It is a pity that the school was closed.

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Following are the testimonies of the sister responsible for instigating the SADE in the school mentioned above, as well as the testimonies of a few among the approximately 500 students who had attended a SADE as an integral part of their yearly schedule – still non-Christians for the most part.

Sr. Murakami, Nagoya, Japan

On my return from studies in the Philippines in 1983 I decided to look into the possibility of having a SADE for our student nurses. But I couldn't really recommend it if I didn't have an experience of it myself, so when I heard there would be one in Sendai, I went there and attended it; and that was the beginning of SADE in our nursing school. The following year we planned to have one for the first year students in place of the camp gathering that we always had in the mountains for the first year students. When the upper class students heard about that, knowing nothing at all, of course, about the Encounter, over and over again they said to the first year students: "Boy, you are missing out on a great time in not having the opportunity to go on that camping trip. We had a wonderful time last year. Why can't you go? What is this Encounter thing anyway?" With that negative perception, by the time the first year students set out for the first SADE in Tajimi they were all sulking and angry.

My role was to prepare homemade meals as tasty and as plentiful as possible in order to satisfy them and thereby create a suitable atmosphere. They had ravenous appetites and by breakfast of the second day they chowed down two days worth of food so that I ended up with the predicament of having to fast; but I look back on that time now as a wonderful memory.

Well, by the end of the third day they were all exuberant and filled with joy.

When they got back to the dormitory and the upper class students saw their joy, they came to me and said: "Sister, we know that we will be graduating soon, but before we graduate we want to have the same kind of experience that the first year students had. Would that be possible? Please!"

At that time the days were filled with just planning for the graduation; but I didn't want to disappoint them, so after a lot of wrangling we were finally able to settle on a day for a one day experience. I asked Father Donnon to come and direct it. This was the beginning of the Encounter experiences in our nursing school, and it became an important part of our yearly schedule for 20 years. In the beginning we

referred to it simply as a yearly event, but from 1990 it became a formal part of the curriculum.

The age difference between the first and second year students gave rise to many difficulties due to differences in personalities etc., but before long everyone became aware that not only the relationships among the students, but also the bonds of affection with their respective parents and siblings began to be deepened. So many of them expressed how glad they were not to have chosen another student nursing school – how glad they were to have chosen this school, and what a wonderful opportunity they had in being able to experience the SADE, and how they realized how the three day experience helped them so much in deepening their daily lives.

On returning to the school after an Encounter we revert to the respective roles of teacher and student; but during the Encounter the teachers take on the role of being mothers, as it were, and as we prepared the meals we always prayed that the students would open their hearts and have a fruitful experience. Now our graduates are scattered all over Japan, but that common experience has helped us to develop a special bond that has continued throughout the years. I want to thank Fr. Donnon who for so many years gave our students the opportunity to experience the SADE and the SE, which has given the positive values on which to base their lives.

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I first experienced the SADE 20 years ago when I was a first year student of a Catholic nursing school. It was an experience that led me to be abundantly certain of how much I am loved by my parents. On the train on the way back to school after the experience, I felt that that, even if there were a fire, I would allow anyone trying to escape to go before me – such was the way my outlook on people had changed. I still remember, as if it were yesterday, how exceptionally beautiful the scenery was as I looked out from the train window. I could not but feel an extraordinary Power at work. I also attended the second SADE to be held for the students of that nursing school. In my testimony at the end, I just kept repeating over and over again: “Thank you! Thank you!”, because I was just filled with gratitude. After graduation I continued to work as a nurse at that same hospital, and I had the opportunity several times to be on the team for subsequent Encounters. I also experienced the SR, once again appreciating the beauty of family, the importance of striving for unity, the chance to be invited to heaven, as it were, and to receive so many graces from the Lord that it would be a formidable task to try to write them all down here

I experienced the presence of God for the first time, and with great joy felt that I had to respond to Him; and so five years after that first experience of the SADE, I

received the grace of Baptism. On the day of my Baptism I remember Fr. Donnon grasping my hand and saying: “Never abandon this faith! Don’t abandon it no matter what – even if you heard that Fr. Donnon himself left the faith.” I will never forget that admonition, stressing what an incomparable gift the grace of faith is. For that reason I will always be grateful for that opportunity at the age of 18 to meet Fr. Donnon and to experience the SADE that he conducted. It has ever since added a very important dimension to my life and will continue to be the foundation of my life in the future.

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As I enter the spring of the 6th. year working as a nurse, and as I look back on my experience of the SADE when I was a student nurse, I recall that I was at first apprehensive about what the experience would entail, since it was my first time to have such an experience, But as we began to share and open our hearts, that apprehension gradually disappeared. The uncontrollable tears of joy that I shed were a sign of that. For me the SADE became an unforgettable experience because, among other things, it taught me how blessed I was by having received such wonderful support from my parents and friends, and I realized how grateful I should be for that. I still have that letter from my parents which I will always treasure.

In April, just when I received a new post and became busier than ever with no time to take it easy, I was asked to reflect on my experience of the SADE and to submit a written testimony of that; and for me it was like a fresh breeze to recall the wonderful feeling I had on experiencing the Encounter during my days as a student. It was a moving experience that I will never forget, nor will I ever forget the kindness that I experienced at the time from my classmates. That common experience of joy engendered a deeper relationship with all of them. It is with a heart full of gratitude that I hope to continue to relate to people in the future.

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Twenty years have elapsed since I made the SADE for student nurses. It was an experience that really bound us together as fellow student nurses. Although it was something that happened 20 years ago, it is still strongly impressed on my memory. I can’t say that I remember every single detail of the program, but if I close my eyes the scene that rises up is our daily gathering for morning prayers in the Holy Spirit Chapel. It is a moment when we are all gathered around Fr. Donnon and sharing our respective lives. At that time the thing that struck me most strongly in my heart was that “forgiveness” was something very real and very near.

When you live a common life in a student dormitory there are indeed things that

foster friendship, but there are also stressful relationships, and mutual feelings of opposition. If there are those that you have no problem getting along with, naturally there are others that it is not so easy to accept. When things did not go well with my studies, practical training, dormitory lifestyle, human relationships, etc. there were not a few instances when I fell into self-hatred. I got fed up with acting as if I were happy and found it difficult to express in words my true feelings. That's the kind of person that I was.

But through the experience of the Encounter I came to be able to say humbly: "I'm sorry" and "Thank you", even to those I found it difficult to get along with, and to those that made me angry. Moreover I even came to the point of being able to say: "Well, this is me", and I learned to accept the person that I was. This made it possible for me to tear down that wall and at the same time with a refreshed attitude I came to believe that God knows me through and through and that He forgives me.

I think it was a marvelous grace for us students to become such a united group with all of us having the same goal in mind, even though none of us made any special effort to be trained to develop leadership qualities.

I don't think that I am alone in thinking that even now, so many years later, our hearts are joined in a special way precisely because we, who had eaten, slept, and studied in common, had that unique opportunity of experiencing the SADE that left us with such important memories.

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I attended the SADE 10 years ago. Among the things that I learned from the experience is the importance of being thankful and the importance of expressing that thanks. That lesson has been a support to me throughout the years. I feel grateful to my parents, my husband, my siblings, my classmates, my friends, not only for the strength that they give me, but also their support.

Recently two close friends of mine died one after the other, one from cancer and the other because of a traffic accident. Both of them were special friends who supported me when I was at a turning point in my life. Now as I look at their photographs I make it a practice of saying: "Thank you". I have certainly been sad at losing them, but I am also grateful to them for affording me the opportunity to look back on my thoughts about life and death and to re-consider what am I going to do with my own life.

Every day different problems arise, I am reminded of how difficult it is to live to the fullest, and I have the tendency to give voice to my anxieties and

dissatisfactions. But as I walk through life I do intend to make an effort not to forget each day to be grateful for all the wonderful things that do happen. It was the experience of the Encounter that gave me this awareness.

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When I was a student nurse I had the opportunity to attend both the SADE and the SE. I recall very well how Fr. Donnon, despite our immaturity, was able to present to us a very easily understandable and light-hearted experience that was at the same time deeply meaningful for all of us. They were programs that were not only interesting in themselves, but also occasions to think deeply about our relationships with our respective families and with our friends, that it is not possible for us to live our own individual and separate lives, and that we need to support one another. We also learned that we have to forgive one another, and the importance of expressing our gratitude.

Thanks to the Encounters we, the members of the 36th graduating class, have a very close relationship, frequently make plans to get together and share our memories. I have been working as a nurse now for four years and I think that maybe the very fact that I continue this work is because I experienced the SADE and met Fr. Donnon. Working as a nurse necessarily requires dealing with patients who have all kinds of afflictions. There are patients who have mental problems and there are many times when it is not at all easy to cope with such people. I feel that one of the most difficult things for a nurse is to humbly apologize to the patients and their families, and this difficulty is shared by the members of the staff too. Because of not being able to find the appropriate words, I often find myself unable to express my apologies to the patients and their families and this sometimes makes them angry. It is at such times that I sometimes think that I would like to hear a talk from Fr. Donnon on the need to apologize humbly and to learn some appropriate expressions. But if I had not experienced the Encounters and been made aware of the need for humbly admitting my mistakes, I probably would never given a thought to the idea that humbly apologizing and expressing thanks to others should be something taken for granted.

Now that I am a nurse I would like to have an opportunity once again to listen to a talk by Fr. Donnon. When I was a student I listened with a different point of view than I now have; but now that I have grown somewhat I am sure that I would understand and answer questions in a different light. Nevertheless I will never forget the precious lessons that I did learn from the Encounters, am very grateful for them, and intend to continue to utilize them as I carry out my duties as a nurse.

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I experienced the SADE in my first year, and the SE in the third year as a student nurse. For me they were wonderful opportunities to quietly reflect on my life. I was 18 years old at the time and thought I knew all about myself. I believed that I had it all together and that I was so strong that I didn't have to change anything. Therefore I was not at all open to accepting anything that was not in line with my thinking, and therefore I made friends with and associated only with those who were like-minded. But it was almost frightful to discover during the Encounter that little by little I was being freed from this attitude. On the second day I felt that there was not enough time to quietly reflect upon myself and to take the time to consider each of the questions adequately.

I had to show myself to be strong because in fact I was weak. I didn't want to show that weakness, and I couldn't accept the weak person that I was. Now in sharing with my friends, I even find it unbelievable myself that I can openly share this person that I created for myself, why did I think that was necessary, and what am I going to do about it in the future.

I have come to know and to recognize that I have many weak points, but refusing to give in to them I have come to be able to be kind to strong people. I find myself able to reach out to and to talk to weak people and to talk to them about myself. Every day I find that life is easier when you become honest with yourself and are forward looking. There are times in my daily life that I renew attempts to encounter myself. I attribute this to having learned from the experience of the Encounter the importance of this and how to go about it, and I am very grateful.

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When I first attended the SADE 7 years ago I was able to look back upon myself and my family, and it taught me the need to develop an understanding heart. What stands out in my memory most strongly is that when the letter from the parents was handed out during the Encounter, I was so moved by the letter that I received from my mother and the expression of her deep love for me that I broke down in tears of joy, and looking around was impressed by the fact that just about everyone was crying for the same reason. That letter from my mother was a tremendous support at the time, because it was my first time to live apart from my parents and to live a dormitory life to which I was not accustomed, I felt very lonely, and there were a lot of mentally disturbing hardships,

Now having graduated from the nursing school and working daily as a nurse, I am able to think compassionately about the people that I come across every day, and the various difficult circumstances of their respective lives. I think that that is due to the influence the experiences of the SADE and the SE had in giving me the opportunity to look back upon myself and learning the need to develop an

understanding heart. In the future also I intend to treasure that lesson, and to continue to work as a nurse who is concerned about the feelings of others.

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I am grateful for the opportunity share what a moving experience SADE was for me when I attended as a student nurse at the Holy Spirit nursing school. I remember considering both myself and my friends as being very special. Since I am a Catholic, I had the grace of being on the team for succeeding Encounters. Ordinarily participants receive letters from their parents, but I was overjoyed to receive a letter from Sister Murakami – which I still have and treasure. I am married now, and have a family. My husband, a Catholic like me, also experienced the SADE. We each have a copy of the Laughing Christ that we received during our respective SADEs.

After graduating and starting to work as a nurse, as a means of further study I once more attended a SADE, and there is one thing that struck me deeply and stands out in my mind. There was the pressure of unaccustomed work, no idea how to relate to the patients and the older nurses, and it was a period of darkness and trial. But then I had a chance to share with a classmate who also had been moved by SADE, fully understood what I was going through, and with that heart to heart sharing I felt my burden was taken away and I felt fulfilled. I was great to be supported by everyone in this way; and even now I feel that it was because of them that I am able to continue this work, for which I am very grateful.

There is within me the kind of heart that desires to share with others and to get them know them fully, and not just on a superficial level. I am now working as a nurse, but because of being the incurably immature person that I am, all kinds of obstacles occur. As long as one is a human being there are going to be the difficulties that arise from interpersonal relationships and all kinds of troubles. There are numerous occasions when I decide that there is no way I can get along with such and such a person, and before I know it, I find myself closing my heart to them. Yet it is precisely at such times that I make an effort to open my heart and to try to relate to those people. Through my experiences of the SADE I have been able to meet many people and to learn a great many things, but among the things that I learned I think this is the one grace that has produced the greatest fruit.

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When I was a student at the Holy Spirit nursing school in Nagoya, participation in the SADE was for me a very precious experience that continues to affect my life deeply. I learned the meaning and value of sharing from the heart, and from that time on I have been able to focus more deeply on people and things. I am now the

mother of two small children, and as such I appreciate even more deeply the letter that I received from my mother on the occasion of the SADE. I felt strongly how my parents put their whole heart and soul into supporting me and watching over me. In gratitude for that, I would like very much in turn to pour out on my own children that same kind of love, but I often feel anxious as to whether I am in fact doing that. The reality is that in the hustle and bustle of daily life I am not able to be with the children to give them the support that they need. I really feel sorry for them. This is a problem that my husband and I continually face and talk about, and we do try to cooperate every day in raising a real family, so that in one way or another so far we have been able to get by. But I feel that to be able to come to some kind of satisfactory solution is because of the opportunity that I had to experience the SADE. Precisely because of that, if the opportunity arises, I would like very much to experience a ME.

It is only because of the support of many people that I have come to be who I am right now. As I feel gratitude for that, I realize that there is no happiness that can compare with the happiness of being able to pass each day in peace and without quarreling.

I am grateful for that indefinable great Power that directed me into the path of nursing, because that is something much bigger than just being qualified to work as a nurse.

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With people one thing leads to another – naturally. With God He Himself leads one thing to another – supernaturally.

Fr. Donnon

Over a period of time it became a custom that the couples from the same general area as the above-mentioned Holy Spirit hospital, who had experienced a ME, would invite their friends, and on the yearly occasion of my going to the hospital to prepare for the SADE, spend an evening having a meal together and sharing. A young couple (their sharing in an article following this) invited to attend one of those gatherings volunteered to drive me to the hospital after the meeting, at which time I asked whether they had any children. They did have two daughters. Both were in junior high school.

I mentioned that three weeks later there would be a SADE in Tokyo, and why not invite their children to it. They were interested and did mention it to the girls, who both very strongly resisted for a number of reasons.

But the desire of the parents prevailed, and on the Friday of the first day of the SADE, the parents drove them to Tokyo, five hours distance by car. During the return trip home they spent the five hours animatedly and joyfully sharing their

experience, and demanding that their parents make a ME.

They did, and that resulted in ME and FIRES being introduced to the area by this family: ME, MR, MReE, SADE, SADR, FE, PE, SE, and a number of parish Retreats, Through the experience of the SADE the young adults of one parish became a very tightly knitted community for whom the Faith became the focal point of their lives.

The two girls, by the way, have what is probably a world record in attendance at SADEs, and Retornos – more than 20 times. They then made the EE together, and one of them has already married. One of the young adults in that community would always invite her mother to attend the one day Retreats we would have.

On meeting the daughter one time I casually asked her whether her mother had been baptized yet. She laughed and simply said no. But she went home and told her mother what I said, and was surprised to hear her mother say that she was willing to study. She was subsequently baptized.

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Testimony of he above mentioned couple.

Takashi and Hisako Otani,– Nagoya, Japan

We first became acquainted with Fr. Donnon and the various Encounter programs in 1995. Every year he used to have the SADE and SE respectively for the 1st year and 3rd year students of Holy Spirit nursing school, and in December of that year came to Nagoya to prepare for a SADE. On the occasion of being in Nagoya each year for that SADE, he used to have a small meeting at a house of a member of Hirabari Catholic church, mainly comprised of couples from that church that had attended ME. That year we were invited to attend the gathering. We did so with some interest because we had already quite often heard that ME had been a very meaningful experience for those who had participated in it.

As Fr. Donnon has already written when he touched on our experience, we had a potluck party, listened to father’s talk, and had a small sharing after that. We had gone to that gathering by car, so at the conclusion of the meeting we gave him a ride back to the Holy Spirit Hospital where he was staying. He told us that a SADE was planned for the end of the year in Tokyo, and asked whether we had any children. When we told him that we had two teen age girls, he suggested that we recommend to them that they make the SADE, adding that it was a “beautiful experience.” We were convinced by his enthusiasm, and decided that we would make every effort to get the girls to go.

But it was just at a time when our older daughter was in the last year of junior high school with only a couple of months left before the high school entrance exams. So we did wonder about the feasibility of having them attend at that time. Our daughters also resisted, not knowing anything about SADE, and in a complaining tone of voice asked: “What is it?” “Why do we have to go for such a meeting?”, “Why, at this most important time when we are preparing for examinations?” But despite their resistance, and our own skepticism, something told us that we should get them to participate as early as possible. So we somehow persuaded them, packed them into the car and took them to Shiomi Catholic church in Tokyo where the SADE was being held.

We returned on the third day to attend the final Mass of Thanksgiving and found our daughters beaming with joy as they saw our faces. Our uneasiness during those three days instantly disappeared. They were not at all anxious to leave their new found friends, who had shared the same experience. It was hard to finally get them into the car for the trip back home. All during the drive from Tokyo to Nagoya, they couldn't stop talking about their experiences during the three days, even though they must have had been very tired from lack of sleep. We will never forget the vitality, the excitement in their voices, or the light in their eyes. Our two daughters had already been baptized when they were still in kindergarten, but this was their first palpable encounter with the Lord.

Now they insisted that we had to participate in the next scheduled ME, to be held two months later. That was just before our older daughter's entrance exam, so common sense dictated that that would be impossible. In the first place we had never left our daughters at home alone. But they said: “We're OK, so please go!” So just as we had prevailed on them, they prevailed on us, pushing us out the door so to speak, and we finally left for Ota where the ME was held.

It was a beautiful experience for us! Even before the experience we had been a good couple. We thought we communicated quite well. So it isn't as if we overcame some problem through the ME. But for one thing it helped us to deeply re-confirm that we had indeed understood each other very well and that we did think alike. It was fruitful in that we had an opportunity to consider whether we were really living as a good Christian couple, trying to consciously walk with God. We had to conclude that we may have been a good worldly couple, but that there was still much to be considered before we could consider ourselves as a good spiritual couple. We had felt that it was a problem not to have been aware that there was still an enormous possibility for us to develop ourselves further as a Christian couple and a Christian family.

We sometimes wonder what kind of family we would be now if we hadn't met Fr. Donnon and subsequently experienced ME. We had surely been a happy family until

then, but totally unaware of how much more a family can grow. It seemed to us that an invisible curtain that blinded us was opened then, and we saw another world. We realized that if we search for deeper joy, we can find it. We started to think strongly that we'd like as many couples as possible to know the fruitfulness of the Encounter, and asked Fr. Donnon to have each year one or two of the FIRES programs in the Nagoya area: whether ME, MR, MReE, SADE, SADR, SE, Self Retorno, FE, PE, Family Communication Workshop, or one day parish retreats. And since 1966 we have been carrying out that plan, each time participating ourselves, and thus encountering ourselves in a new fashion each time. We thank God for giving us those opportunities to encounter ourselves over and over again.

It is so hard to write something for each and every experience because participation in each one has brought us an astonishing and amazing new discoveries. So we will write about the FE, since it is the one program that the whole family was able to experience together.

We had FEs in Nagoya in the summer of 1998 and again in 2002. Each one was a very deep experience of unity for us. Each time the preparation itself was a mini FE, a catalyst for becoming more fully united as a family. Even though each member was doing different things, our hearts became one through focusing on the same thing, at the same time and for the same goal. After the Encounter, as a family, we all felt as if we were wrapped in the enormity of God's Love. We didn't want to separate even for a short while, feeling as if there was a strong magnet pulling us together. We felt as if we were together even during the times that we were apart. It was such a wonderful feeling! Autumn came and schools began, and we went back to our daily hectic life again, but we never lost that special feeling. Now our daughters are both supporting themselves and living separately. One of them is married; but the feeling never changes. Even while we are living apart, we feel as if the FEs are still continuing.

I (Hisako) would also like to share an experience of reconciliation. My parents divorced when I was 5 years old. With that I made up my mind that when I got married I would do everything in my power to make mine a happy family; but I convinced myself that the divorce was not an unhappy event for me. In fact, however, as I grew up I was angry at my parents for putting me through such an ordeal, even though I covered up those feelings and tried to make everyone believe that I was happy. As I reflected on those hurt feelings during our first ME, however,, I realized that I needed to have a reconciliation with my parents. Subsequent to their divorce I had I met my father only once when I was 9 years old and several times later just before my marriage. After our marriage we moved to Nagasaki, so that I was unable to introduce him to his granddaughters before he passed away in 1984.

There is a liturgy for healing in the Encounter programs. During the third experience of ME I received the grace of feeling completely free from the pain of that inner injury. I felt as if I were being closely embraced by my father, just like he used to do when I was little. I felt a warm feeling of love overflowing me, something in my heart had melted away, and I could not stop the tears of joy that ran down my cheeks. At that moment I felt I was able to forgive my father from the bottom of my heart.

Later that same year, on my birthday, my mother told me a story that was really significant for me. I was born at home, and on the day of my birth, from 9 in the morning when I was born until midnight, my father never left me except when going to washroom – just sitting there beside me. Despite the fact that we lived apart later, my life was suddenly filled with light, knowing how much I was blessed and loved. I could now appreciate a special joy in the thought that I was born into this world as a child of this father and this mother.

There is another reason why I was able to forgive him. When I was about to get married my mother contacted my father, resulting in our meeting and having meals together a number of times. At that time I felt how much my father did love me, and how much he had continued to love me even while we were apart. This convinced me even further of the importance of intercommunication, making it possible to share love.

God has given me the opportunity to encounter all kinds of people with varying types and degrees of problems. That has helped me to turn my own negative experiences into positive ones. But there is no doubt that it was precisely the experiences of the different Encounters that has made this possible. It pains me to see any child who has had a negative experience. For that reason I would look to see people all over the world experience the Encounters. I often feel frustrated when I am unable to convince people of how much they would benefit if they would only participate. As a child who experienced sadness, and as one whose injury was healed, I am strongly determined to continue this effort.

I often reflect on the start of our family life. Although my husband and I were raised in totally different parts of Japan, due to his work right after our marriage we started our family life in Nagasaki. When we moved there I knew no one and, because of loneliness, I cried for days on end. But our children were born, in time made close friends, and it was there that our children were baptized. Then we had to move to Nagoya, and again I shed tears of loneliness. My favorite prayer that supported me so much is: *“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.”* We talked about this to a principal of our daughters’ school who is a Catholic priest. He said to us very warmly and strongly *“You’ll be all right wherever you may go! Because the most important thing is the family. There is nothing for you to lose. It is not you but we that lose something.”* Those words encouraged us so much when we came to

Nagoya. Here in Nagoya, our apartment is close to Hirabari Catholic Church where we started to attend, and where we have made many friends. It was in that church that my husband was baptized. Quite a few couples from that church have experienced ME, which was how we met Fr. Donnon and experienced ME ourselves, and subsequently began to be associated with work the FIRES programs. When you think about it, it was precisely Nagoya, the one place that I least wanted to go to, where the encounter with Fr. Donnon was waiting for us and we were able to experience further unity in our family.

Thus we now know that what seems to be meaningless and even irrational when looked at with human eyes, very often in the eyes of God is precisely something that has deep significance. Therefore we would like to listen always attentively so that we can feel and distinguish God’s Will and put it into practice – always being willing to say: “Yes!”

All string instruments are basically empty boxes, and wind instruments are empty pipes. But the sounds of perfect harmony that emanate from an ensemble of those boxes and pipes are beautiful beyond words. If, as an instrument of God, each one and each family can play beautiful sounds, and if Fires Families in the world can perform a symphony under the direction of Fr. Calvo and Fr. Donnon, then, I believe, there will be more happy families and the world will become more peaceful.

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God’s choices are very often beyond our comprehension, but they are fruitful.

Fr. Donnon

A number of men who had experienced a ME asked about the possibility of gathering once a month for a talk about Christian values and a sharing among themselves. Eventually most of them were baptized. Among them was a non Christian man who, with his wife, may have a world record in having experienced ME, MR_eE, MR, and FE two times each, in addition to attending every one day retreats that we had held. The association of this couple with ME resulted from their daughter having been affected with “School phobia”, and because of that coming to meet the woman previously mentioned, who is involved in serving such people. The daughter attended a SADE, overcame her problem, and is now married with her own children. This man took upon himself the responsibility of reminding the men in the men’s group of the monthly date decided upon, and encouraging each one to be there. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that he was so much taken up with the various Encounters, he often made it point to emphasize that he was a Buddhist and had no intention of ever becoming a Catholic like his wife. He was on very good terms with a Catholic priest who was quite famous in conducting retreats and giving lectures on how Catholics can utilize the principles of Zazen,

the Buddhist way of praying, to deepen their own spirituality. This man attended all of those retreats.

Then suddenly one day, after a gathering, the priest encouraged the man to be baptized. The man agreed, and the priest said: “OK. Let’s do it now!” He went home without telling his wife that he had been baptized. Some days later the priest visited his home and, the husband not being able to drive, the wife drove the priest home. On the way she casually remarked to the priest how great it would be if her husband were to be blessed. The priest said: “Well, he was!” In being asked to explain, the priest told her the story of his being baptized. In spite of the fact that this is something the wife desired very much and had prayed for a long time, she was angry— momentarily — that he did not tell her. Anyway this man, while still a Buddhist, remarked to me on a number of occasions that the Encounter experience should not be limited to couples — that there were all kinds of people who would benefit greatly from the Encounter message. My response was always the same; that I agreed with him, but was too busy to take on anything more. But he continued to insist until finally I relented and told him I would do something if he would help get the people together.

After what was a really fruitful experience, I mentioned to Father Calvo that it might be a good idea to have an experience for people from all walks of life: Christians, non-Christians, married, unmarried, single, divorced, men, women, young, old, priests, religious, etc. He agreed, and thus the SE FIRES program was born. Up until now it has been presented in the United States, Japan, the Philippines, Italy, Hungary, Slovakia, Germany, Hong Kong and Sri Lanka. Fr. Calvo has always claimed that the real impetus of the programs that he has initiated came from the people themselves, and their expressed desire for something to help them grow in their lives. In this case the initial desire was expressed by one who, at the time was a Buddhist. Who would have expected that?

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Who can foresee or even imagine to far-reaching results of God’s graces?

Fr. Donnon

Through her association with the kindergarten in the parish where I was pastor she became a Catholic. He was not, and like most Japanese men, had no interest in religion. (Their own testimony will follow this). Having heard a great deal about ME, she had a strong desire to attend. Each time she broached the subject, he would simply refuse. They had a baby girl just several months prior to the dates of a ME that she wanted to attend. This of course was just another good reason for him to refuse. But she was so persistent, and in tears, that he finally relented. The night before it was to begin the baby came down with a high fever. On the one

hand, this concerned the father, but on the other he was happy that there would now be no question about having to attend a ME.

His wife called one of the sisters working in the parish whom she trusted deeply, and was told that they would indeed make the ME. Then the sister came to me and said: “Come on, we are going to their home to pray for that baby.” Well, I administered the sacrament of the sick to the baby that night, and the next morning she was perfectly healthy with no fever whatsoever. So, a promise was a promise, and they did participate. In order to do so they first had to take a two hour drive with the baby to have her sister and brother in law care for her during the Encounter. Although that couple were both Catholics, the brother in law reproached them for taking a newborn baby, recently sick on a two hour drive and leave her for three days without her parents. The young father agreed completely. When it was over and they went to retrieve the baby, the young father insisted that his in-laws who had taken care of the baby must also make a ME.

They did, and agreed to be a team couple. But before they could undertake that service he was transferred from a city near Tokyo to Hokkaido. In that parish there was a couple who had attended ME and wanted to do something about it, but had no one to work along with them. One Sunday morning in the Church parking lot they noticed a ME sticker on one of the cars, found the owner, shared their experiences of the Encounter, and made concrete plans to begin it in that area.

This latter couple is now in their eighties, but they have been very close to ME throughout the years and have witnessed, just by their closeness and the unwavering depth of their faith, that the spirit of ME has been central in their lives. They sent in a sharing which kind of sums up how a couple with such conviction can help others to re-discover themselves. So I will summarize that sharing here, for I have mentioned the role that they were given to bring ME and FIRES to a whole new region of Japan. They speak of a conversation they had with a non-Christian couple about ME. They were asked a lot of questions to which they answered that you have to go through the experience to understand. When asked then if what results from the experience is already determined beforehand, the answer was that since every couple is different, the graces they receive are different.

This occasioned a curiosity in the inquiring couple which made them decide to attend; and as usual the result was exactly as they had been told. They received the grace to renew their love for one another (something they sorely needed), their relationship with their children was deepened, and most important they realized the need in their lives to come to know the identity of the Power that they both felt directing them through the experience of the Encounter. They decided, therefore, to study about the Faith. This particular sharing of graces is concerned more with one

example of how, when there is a reaching out, other couples can then receive unexpected graces from the Lord; but that then is a grace also to those who have reached out. The Lord works wonders through witness.

A Sister, the principal of a high school run by the sisters of the Sacred Heart, along with another Sister, attended one of the MEs for which the above mentioned couple was responsible. Through that she learned about the SADE, and determined to attend one planned for the youth of the parish to which those two couples belonged. She had long been involved with education, and continually sought something substantial to afford students an experience that would give them an understanding of the meaning of life, and the importance of God's role in it. And she discovered that this was what she had been looking for.

In spite of the misgivings of most of the Sisters and teachers of the school, she was determined to make the SADE a part of the yearly schedule for first year students, and little by little arranged that both the Sisters and teachers experience it with the students. Gradually all came around to giving their full support. The program has been presented yearly in that school for the past 20 years, with an average of 80 students a year. Therefore up to the present time about 1600 students from that school alone have experienced the SADE, with marvelous and far-reaching results.

The young father previously mentioned (whose baby daughter recovered from a high fever, making it possible for her parents to attend a ME) began preparations for Baptism, they became a team couple, and have worked on many MEs. They prayed daily as a couple and the Scriptures were the core of their prayer, believing that through his Word he would guide them in making important decisions. That became particularly meaningful when he was asked by his company to take over the presidency of a factory in China, with the condition that he would not be able to take his family. There would be a raise in salary, but the question in the minds of both of them was whether this is something that the Lord wanted. They prayed, asked advice, and most importantly sought the Lord's counsel from the Scriptures. The answer that they discerned was: "Don't go!" So he refused. Next he was asked to take over the presidency of a factory in the Philippines. This time he could take his family. Again they went through a discerning process through prayer, and again sought the counsel of the Lord through the Bible, and again they discerned that the Lord was saying: "Don't go!"

Once again he refused, something quite unheard of in Japan for the fear of losing one's job, but also because few would want to lose the opportunity for prestige and more money. Subsequent to that he was given a special job to do, and he did such a good job that his boss said: "Boy, it's a good thing that you didn't go to the Philippines!" And they gave him a plaque in recognition of his good work.

Thereafter they asked him about the possibility of going to take over the presidency

of a factory in Mexico, while residing in San Diego. This time the Word he was given was: “*As for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.*” (Luke 9:60). His wife told me that he took the job more to be a witness of the Lord than to be the president of a factory. Even so, it seems that under his direction the factory had a greater and smoother production than under any of his predecessors. And he was asked to stay on beyond the years agreed upon. They decided to return to Japan in order to be with their family. But while in California we had a gathering for Japanese in the area as well as a ME in English for mixed couples. And in other ways they attempted to reach out, especially to Japanese in the area who had many problems, and were very lonely. All of the above could possibly be traced back to the overnight healing of a little baby. That baby now has two babies of her own.

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The following is the testimony of the couple mentioned above whose graces have had such far-reaching effects.

Masahide Yamanoi – Gumma, Japan

We first experienced ME thirty years ago. Our son was four years old and our daughter just three months old when Sister Guadalupe suggested that we attend. Just prior to the Encounter the baby came down with a high fever which common sense would dictate that it would not be possible to participate. Conveying this to Sister Guadalupe she said: “If we get Father to come and pray for her, and she is restored to health, would you consider going?” At the time, I was not a Christian, and thinking that she was not going to get better overnight just because of prayers, and thinking also that this would give me a good excuse to refuse to attend (since I did not at all want to attend this Religious thing in which I had no interest whatsoever) I said indifferently: “If she gets better I’ll go”. So the day before the Encounter was to begin Fr. Donnon and Sister Guadalupe came to our house and Father anointed her. And although there had previously been no sign of her fever going down, from that time on it receded and by the next day she was fine. Now I had no reason to refuse to go. We asked my wife’s sister and her husband who are both Catholics to look after the baby for the two days of the Encounter (their home was a two hour drive from ours) and although they were surprised at our lack of common sense, they agreed to look after the kids and we were able to attend.

Before the Encounter I thought that we already talked about every little thing and had nothing more to talk about, but I discovered that was a big mistake. Before making the ME, I had been an unbeliever. But I was very strongly impressed by the words “*God is love*” 81 John 4:16); that God made the family to be one; that in the home it was desirable that there be mutual trust and a sharing from the heart about everything; that this fire had to be conveyed to the children; and that the spirit of the Encounter must be lived out by each member of the family – and with that I decided that I was going to be baptized.

In order that the fire of ME not go out, we attended MR and MReE, the kids experienced the SADE, and finally we made the FE, all of which resulted in innumerable graces for us as a couple and for our family. Not the least of those graces was the mutual trust that developed in our family, and the fact that we could share as a family about everything. For example, there is the stress that arises out of the inevitable problems that occur between a bride and her mother-in-law. There is the standpoint of the husband, who feels it unreasonable to be concerned about such petty things, versus the standpoint of the wife, who feels wounded by a chance remark made by her mother-in-law. It would be unbearable if things were left there at a stand still; but we came to the point of being able to share even the slightest things, and to understand one another's position and weaknesses.

Through coming to know what each of us is feeling by sharing everything, we have a more intense intimacy. This has naturally been conveyed to our children. Both of them are married now. Our son has been blessed with three children, and our daughter with two. In both cases there is agreement that the father works to support the family, and the mother is with the children and takes care of the household. They love their children and carry out their responsibility toward them and make every effort to convey warmth and tenderness to them. We feel that our being able to be somewhat of a model in this is another grace that we have received from ME.

Our children are Catholic but neither of their spouses have any faith, and for that reason our children are unable to get to Mass every Sunday. Even so they have had their children baptized, send them to a kindergarten run by the church, and at times are able to pray with the children before and after meals. These are the little graces that the Lord has given to our family, and little by little, I think, will influence their unbelieving spouses.

Recently our daughter told us that in sharing with her brother he said: "My ideal is to raise my family in the same way that we were raised". It is things like this that help us to realize that the spirit of the Encounter has indeed been conveyed to our children. That our kids are aware of this is another wonderful grace. We trust that the "spiral" will indeed gradually fan out from couples to children to families, to relatives, to friends, to acquaintances, and to society. We have been married for 35 years. At last the foundation of our "spiral" has been laid, and it will take time, but we intend to make every effort to expand it in the future.

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Jesus said: "By their fruits you shall know them" (Mt. 7:16).

Fr. Donnon

Certainly it is true that when a couple steadfastly strives to live their lives in accord with the Gospel, that becomes apparent because of the fruits displayed in their whole way of life. It also leads one to wonder what might have been the catalyst for them to commit themselves to a way of life that would produce those fruits. A couple from Barcelona were among those first couples looking for “something” to deepen their lives in the Lord. After being married for only four years, they met Fr. Calvo who, through MFC, otherwise known as CFM (Christian Family Movement), introduced them to Marriage Spirituality. They realized that this is what they and other couples were seeking. After a long period of meeting weekly to pray and to share, the Spirit led those couples to develop the service that we now know as ME, the first one being presented in 1961. This couple attended the second ME to be held in the world, and soon became involved as a team couple.

They shared that this was kind of a summary of what they had previously been experiencing over the four or five years since they had first met Fr. Calvo. They feel that it was the opportunity to serve as a team that helped them to synthesize all that had gone before, and to determine to grow as a couple. That experience, they share, helped them to open up to one another, and it made them fully conscious of the need for the love of God in their married lives.

In the spirit of ME, which is not a Movement in itself, but a service of ministry to couples, families, the Church and society, they have since, right up to the present time, in the more than 50 years of their married life, been deeply involved in MFC within Spain and internationally. They have served on the board as International Executive Couple as well as in other offices, nationally and internationally. In addition, throughout the years, in their capacity as true friends truly grateful, they have assisted Fr. Calvo in many ways, not the least of which has been their financial assistance, “*By their fruits you shall know them*” (Mt.7:16). Even a casual glance at the fruits of this couple would tell us who they are. But I think they would agree that, if there have been any spiritual fruits in their lives, in no small measure their experience of ME, many years ago, had a powerful and long-lasting influence on that. Because of the deeply spiritual impact ME has had on their lives, it has pained them to observe that there are instances of ME being presented with more of an emphasis on psychology – stressing what is considered by some to be the non-negotiable importance of couples dialoguing on a feeling basis, etc., to the detriment of emphasizing the essence of Marriage Spirituality and all that it entails with regard to the Word of God, the Plan of God, the Sacrament of Marriage, etc. They are dismayed at this unfortunate lack of understanding.

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She was a teller in the bank where we deposited the parish funds. On taking care of my deposit she asked whether anyone at all could come to church, and, of course I

invited her to come. She did, and joined the young adults group where she met a nice young man who had just moved to the parish from the northern island of Hokkaido. From a non-Christian bank teller with no formal religion to the following:

Masako Mizuno – Gumma, Japan

We experienced a ME the very year that we began our married life, from which time we made it our aim to be a “Family in the Lord”. Two of our daughters are married now, and we have three grandchildren. One of our grandchildren went to heaven just a week after being born. This was that daughter’s first child, but sad as it was, it brought that couple closer together and made them decide that they would share everything with one another; and they said that they want at least four or five more children. Thanks be to God!

One of the many things that we learned from ME was the importance of sharing on Fr. Calvo’s booklet “*Around the Table*” – that is, frequent and deep family sharing. But that has extended itself to many and all kinds of people on numerous occasions surrounding our kitchen table to join in wonderful sharings of their lives. At such times, I have often shared some of the discoveries I myself have made through the experience of ME, such as the importance of an Encounter With Self, Fr. Calvo’s admonition to live a spiral way of life (i.e. being open to everyone and not closed like a circle), and to come to love and accept oneself. I have to realize that just as a spiral continues to rise, but only gradually, so I too can’t allow myself to give up, no matter what problems or trials occur.

One of the things that has always been a wonderful support in our married life, and for which we are both very grateful, is the prayers of the Poor Clare nuns from Kiryu. About 28 years ago all of the nuns of that community attended the same MR that we did. I was amazed to learn that these were nuns who spent every say, all day, in a life of prayer. Prayer had not been one of my strong points. I was very much moved by their sharings, and throughout the past 28 years, have kept in contact with them through letters and in various other ways. Something that I have always prayed for is that one of our children would receive a vocation to religious life. Our son is 31 years old, and still unmarried. I still haven’t given up hope on him. There are many many more graces over the years that come to mind, but suffice to say that the Encounter experiences have been for us and our family a source of strength that has kept us close to one another and to the Lord.

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The constant need for reconciliation is a theme that can never be overstressed. The following are some testimonies of the grace of reconciliation resulting from experiencing Marriage Encounter.

The experience of ME was a very meaningful experience for me and my wife. In ordinary daily life we would never even think about sharing on the topics that we had the opportunity to consider. During the ME we prayed for a participating couple that we know who were having a problem with their marriage, and at the same time we prayed for our own son who also had a crisis in his marriage. Both couples are doing fine. It was precisely the experience of ME that prompted us to pray from the heart.

The liturgy on the theme of reconciliation and the need to forgive, plus a deeper reflection on how often we blame the Lord for unhappy circumstances, and therefore for that reason also have to reconcile ourselves with Him, was a lesson that has stayed with us throughout the years.

Last New Years we went to Mass with our four children. That was an occasion to recall that twenty years before we had not been getting along at all, which presented a real crisis in our marriage. It was suggested that we make a ME, and with that we were reconciled and decided to cooperate in running the business that we had in our own home. Each of our children has grown up and are doing very well; and we are so grateful realizing that we would never know this joy if our family had been broken up at that time.

We are an older couple now living with our daughter and her husband. Through the experience of the FE we were able to be reconciled with our daughter, and now are very grateful for the opportunity to look after our grandchildren. It is the joy of our life.

My parents were concerned that we would be financially troubled after they were gone, so they decided to share their inheritance with us. Precisely because of having the inheritance my husband stopped working, used up all the money, and we became financially strapped. This was the cause of endless arguments, so that even our kids suggested that I divorce him. As a last resort, we attended a ME which afforded both of us an opportunity to have an encounter with ourselves. Now we are both working, are financially back on our feet and the two of us have started going to church

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It is never too late to reconcile with God.

When I was young I was involved with the young adults group at church, but after that became alienated from the Church right up to the age of retirement. At that

time I decided to take stock of my life, and on returning to the Church I was amazed at the change that had taken place in people who were going to church regularly. At that time my wife and I were invited to attend a ME. That was the catalyst for me to become involved in parish activities, and the following year my wife was baptized. Now you will see the two of us seated together at Mass every Sunday.

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The following is a testimony by a couple who have experienced practically all of the FIRES programs, and share their recollections with regard to the experience they had with each of them – a very good summary of how the programs are so meaningful in the lives of couples and families

Toyoko Imamura – Gumma, Japan

What a grace to have been given the opportunity to look back and, with tears of regret due to our former ignorance, and even more tears of forgiveness, to reflect on how deeply we have been influenced by ME and the FIRES programs throughout the past 33 years. In looking at the present state of our children and their families the words of Fr. Calvo come back to mind. We ourselves may not be able see the results of what we were encouraged to begin, but certainly the foundation has been laid. It is a joy to believe that little by little the fruits will become obvious, whether it is our own children, our grandchildren or future generations that will be able to see them clearly. It will not be easy to summarily express all the experiences that we have had over a long period of time, but we will give it a try.

The Holy Father has spoken of the need for an “inner renewal” and there is no doubt that through the FIRES programs we, individually, as a couple, and as a family, have been given the opportunity for “inner renewal” In the Book of Deuteronomy there is the unforgettable lesson from the Lord that He has set before us life and death, good and evil and He commands us to love Yahweh, our God, and follow his ways – that if we observe his commandments we will live. Through all of the events to which the Lord has led us in order to make us happy, we cannot help but feel the tremendous love of God the Father and give thanks for it. In a few short years we will be celebrating our 50th wedding anniversary. This is a great opportunity to reflect on the path that we have walked, our history, and how our values have so greatly changed through the varied experiences of the FIRES programs.

Marriage Encounter:

When we first experienced ME we were 38 and 37, our son was 12 and in 6th grade, and our daughter 8 and in 3rd. grade. My husband had been busy with his work, and since the kids no longer needed me to be with them all day, I joined the Legion of Mary. Despite the fact that we were materially well blessed – the family

was healthy, and we had no outstanding problems – I still felt unfulfilled. I felt there was something missing, and I wanted us to be a better couple. At that time we joined the Christian Family Movement and attended the monthly gatherings. Then we made a ME. I was glad to have this time as a couple; but it was a shock to me to realize that, ostensibly for the sake of the family, my husband was using his work, as an escape. In his own mind the need he had to run around all over the country freed his conscience in turning over to me the running of the household, and raising of the kids

By being provided with the opportunity to separate ourselves from the routine of our daily lives, we were able to objectively observe our selves individually, our couple relationship, and our relationship with God. We learned that God’s plan for marriage is unity, and that we have a mission to witness that to others. I recall very well, in the effort to encounter myself, how difficult it was to accept any good points that I might have, and what an ordeal it was to admit the suffering that I brought into both of our lives by failing to die to myself in daily life. It was a precious chance to re-align our values; to become aware of the need to strike a balance among things like prayer, work, study, etc; and to discern what we had to do to bring about a complete change of life.

We learned how important is the lesson to “Observe, Judge, and Act.” During the step on “Evaluation of our Life” we each wrote a long reflection and, for the first time dialogued deeply on “Why do I want to go on living”, and “Why do I want to continue to live with you”. Ever since these two questions have been questions that we ask ourselves virtually every day.

One of the biggest shocks was the fact that, even though we were a Christian couple who had received the Sacrament of Matrimony, we were living our married life without being aware of the importance of the Sacrament, and how we had a mission to be witnesses of it. There is a banner depicting Jesus with his arms on the shoulders of a couple and leading them on the way to unity. That made a lasting impression on us, and from the heart we desired to live out the grace that we had received. From that day to the present every morning we join hands and say the “Couple Prayer” (a suggested prayer, recited daily by the couple, whereby they offer to the Lord all the actions of that day as a means of deepening their relationship with the Lord, as a couple). In this way we re-affirm the Sacrament that we have received, and, being mindful of our mission, we offer up each day to the Lord.

We went through that first ME kind of in a daze and not really grasping the depth of everything that was transpiring. But we did understand what couples should be like, what God’s desire was, and what the purpose of life is. We were filled with joy. Although it has taken some time, and only by degrees, changes have definitely

taken place in our lives. We have become more open to one another. We were told that it is really necessary that couples come to the point of sharing their innermost thoughts, desires, feelings, spiritual condition, even, At first, because of fear, we thought that this is really not possible. But as we began to really be conscious of an experience that Jesus actually does live within us, that fear began to wane. Little by little we have become more and more open to one another. Wearing masks has become less and less necessary. We have become more patient in putting up with one another's weak points. We are able to forgive one another, be more considerate toward one another, encourage and comfort one another, warmly accept one another, and, no matter what, have the humility to say: "I'm sorry".

It has recently occurred to me that our values, thoughts, feeling, etc., have really become more and more alike so that we have the joy of living with one heart. This is precisely because we are able to continually be witnesses to one another of the presence of Jesus within us through the Sacrament of Marriage. And despite our many failures, our attempt to live out the Sacrament of Marriage has, we feel, produced the grace of "parenthood" that has influenced our children in a positive way. They are faced with the daunting task of raising their children in a world of so many undesirable values, but they seem to be coping in a Gospel way precisely because of the grace of the Sacrament that we have tried to witness to them. Thanks be to God!

Marriage ReEncounter:

We experienced the MReE when our son was in high school and our daughter in middle school. They had grown up to be big kids now, and we apologized to them for our lack of harmony, for not taking the time to listen to them because of being so pre-occupied with work, for brandishing our parental authority and pressuring them, etc. We assured them that although we were not very adept at expressing our love, we did in fact love and trust them. Moreover, we decided that, as a present to our kids, we would show them that we really did love each other. Because of the experience of the Re-Encounter we were able to share with our children with an attitude of equality. As luck would have it, it was just at that time that the kids experienced the SADE which helped them to grow immensely. They began to open up and share from the heart, and to share themselves with us through letters. We still have those letters from the kids, and will always treasure them.

Family Encounter:

We experienced the FE when our son was in college and our daughter in high school. We experienced how deeply we love one another as a family. We also came to realize more fully that Jesus, Who loves our children so much more than we could ever love them, lives in them and that we should never allow our egoism to kill that presence of the Lord within them. As a family we shared that whatever our weaknesses and limitations, we have to accept and forgive one another, and as we

recognize one another's good points, we have to walk together in the same direction. We came to know that our kids had been praying for us, and we tasted what it means not just to be their parents, but also that we must be their brother and sister "in the Lord".

We were very blessed indeed. If only we had experienced ME earlier perhaps we could have become a better couple and family. Just at the time when we were introduced to the various FIRES programs the kids had reached a suitable age to face different challenges, to make their own judgments and decisions, and to seek Faith on their own.

As a Catholic couple it was our desire to pass on to our children a lively faith, and we are deeply grateful that through the FIRES experiences the kids themselves received the experience and the direction to appreciate the meaning of their Faith. We were amazed to see the change that took place in their lives after experiencing the SADE and the SADR. Having just entered high school, our daughter had plastered on the wall of her room a huge poster of a popular rock star. Perhaps because of relief in passing the test to get into high school, she would spend time in her room every day playing her guitar and singing rock songs in a loud voice. But after the experience she removed the poster of the rock star, built an altar and placed an open Bible on it, and started singing hymns instead of rock songs. From the time when they were little we had recited the rosary every night at 8:00. After the SADE we started singing hymns of praise and had Bible sharing as well. It was the kids who took the lead and actively built up an environment of prayer. Before they left home to go to college they were the ones who made prayer a pleasurable time for the family. Even when they were living separately, it was a joy to know that they continued to make it a point to pray every night at 8:00PM, thereby spiritually joining the family in prayer. This is one more experience of grace due to the FIRES programs.

Marriage Retorno:

This was the first time as a couple that we experienced the significance of the long period of time that we had been praying together and sharing on spiritual matters. Not only did we begin to be aware of the working of each person of the Blessed Trinity – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – in our lives, but we also began to treasure our spirituality as a couple and not just as individuals. We had often heard the expression that unless there is a true encounter with self there can be no communication, unless there is communication there can be no reconciliation, and unless there is reconciliation there can be no real experience of unity. Consequently an encounter with self is the starting point for all of this. But what caused concern was to learn that if you do not love yourself (in the Gospel sense), you cannot really love others. The Retorno experience, through tasting the Word of God, led us to a reconciliation with our own personal selves. In the Book of Wisdom we read

that we have been made in love from God the Father who made us good. In the eyes of God we are precious, our very existence being the reason for our value. It was through Scripture passages like this that we were led to reflect on, and share on, our respective wounds, both from our early years, as well as the wounds we had from married life. We really felt deeply how we look in the eyes of God. We had spent our days in confusion because of not loving ourselves, in fact hating and not accepting ourselves, and yet at the same time feeling supported and safeguarded by the unchanging love of God; and because of that we were able to recognize the love that we had for one another and our trust was thereby deepened.

Since that experience of MR some outstanding changes were that we have come to believe that God is present with us, and that He does indeed speak to us through his word, through others, through events, and through the mysteries of nature. We now especially perceive the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives and frequently ask the Holy Spirit to help us to understand the Scriptures and to give us the power to love. We were faced with one big problem after another – sickness in the family, job changes, problems that arose in the marriages of the children, financial difficulties; but we were able to confront them without fear neither escaping from them nor trying to avoid them. Since we believed that all of the trials that arose from those experiences were opportunities for the Lord to change into something good, we were able to put everything into his hands.

St. Paul said that we know that God makes all things work for the benefit of those who are called to live in accord with his plan. These are words of Scripture that we always tried to keep in mind amidst all those various trials. There were times when we wanted to ask: “Is this too meant to be for our benefit?” For example some years ago, when it was diagnosed that my husband had cancer, the two of us prayed together and, in fact, the Lord used his hospitalization and operation to deepen our love for one another and to improve our relationship with others so that we were able to say with joy that: “Indeed the Lord works all things to the good.” (Romans 8:28).

Priest Encounter:

On one of his visits to Japan Fr. Calvo introduced the PE. Bishop Shimamoto was among the 45 priests from all over the country that participated. Priests who attended were from all different countries and of all different ages. The youngest had been ordained just two weeks prior to the PE. There were also priests more than fifty years ordained, Diocesan priests from a number of different Dioceses, as well as priests from 10 different Religious Orders. In line with admonition of The Church In The Modern World, i.e. “*Toward evangelizing through the small Church which is the family*”, we team couples who had experienced ME were there to serve the priests by giving them the opportunity to reflect on their vocation from the point of view of those they serve – couples and families.

The purpose of the PE is to give each participating priest an opportunity to deeply encounter himself and God. As in every Encounter the participants are encouraged to look deeply into themselves in order to “Observe”, and then go on to “Judge”, and finally to “Act” in a concrete way. Just like us, priests too encounter many crises in their lives because they too live in a pluralistic world. We were able to see the lonely Christ in observing the priests humbly reflecting on their lives, openly sharing themselves with us, and sacrificing themselves completely because of their love for us. In the four days that we spent with one another in prayer and sharing, it was easy to feel, as the themes suggest, that we are all truly Human beings, Christians, Brothers, Servants, and members of the same Family in the Lord – people who need one another. It was kind of a mystical environment that made us all experience that love does indeed spiral out.

During the Encounter one priest telephoned his mother and said: “Thanks mom for making me a priest.” This really surprised his mother and she said: “What’s this all about?” But his face was shining. These were priests who looked at the realities of their life as priests – filled with many difficulties, recognizing their failings, but also their possibilities, and with conviction determined to serve people to bring about a renewal in their hearts and the Church at large.

For the Mass on the final day so many people showed up that the concelebrated Mass with 45 priests had to be celebrated in the garden. It was an amazing Mass of joy! In his homily Fr. Calvo applauded the newly ordained priest and asked the many young boys gathered there to think about a vocation to the priesthood. After the Mass a young woman came up to him and asked why he was singling out only boys. Fr. Calvo said: “You are right. I think you should join the Poor Clares. She did, and has been extremely happy ever since.

At the final Mass, much like John Paul II, Fr. Calvo delivered his message in Japanese, for us a wonderful expression of his love for us. Alluding to St. John, Bishop Shimamoto with joy in his heart announced: “I am going to report to the Bishops’ Conference what I have seen, what I have felt, what I have touched with these hands, the strong faith all of you have, the love in your homes, and your desire to be witnesses by spreading to other homes the fires of love. In short, all of the things that I have experienced at this PE.”

The PE was a precious opportunity to reflect once again on how we have been helped by priests, and all the graces that we have received that can come only from the working of priests in our lives. We live in a society filled with values that lead people astray, but we have been taught by our priests how to confront problems and live a Gospel way of life. If our family now appreciates Christian values, it is only because of the leadership of our priests. It is with grateful hearts that we have tried

to share these things with you. Through the Encounters, beginning with ourselves, then with our children, and then with priests we have received the hope of becoming one people of God and one family in the Lord.

After undertaking the service of being a team couple:

We wanted to share with others the wonderful things that the Lord had done for us; so we willingly undertook the service of being a team couple. At the time we really had no idea what we were doing, but little by little, after all kinds of experiences, we began to understand, and, with that, our conviction in the power of the Encounters was deepened.

One evening as we were driving up the hill to the facility where a ME was about to take place I suddenly felt that a couple with such an unstable relationship like ours had no right to be doing this kind of a service, and I wanted to go home. But as we went into the chapel and knelt before the life-sized image of the crucified Jesus, who abandoned Himself completely for love of us, I realized that although ours was not exactly a model way of life and we were certainly not witnesses of unity, we could not help but decide to share ourselves just as we were. With that I was able to be at peace with myself. But the question still remained, how in the world did we ever become a team couple? Neither of us feel comfortable talking before a crowd, or is any good at public speaking.

Nevertheless just as we read in the Book of Samuel: *“People see the exterior, but God sees into the heart”*, I feel joy in the knowledge that God has seen into my heart and directed me in my wanting to love him more and to respond more fully to his love.

We have had the opportunity to meet Fr. Calvo on a number of occasions when he came to introduce the Spiral Encounter, the PE, the At Home ME, etc. and have received from him a lot of unforgettable key words. Fr. O’Hare, a Marist priest who works in Nara, once said that Jesus used to gather his disciples and take only them to special places, and that’s precisely what the place of team training is. Each couple feeling a call to mission, gathers at the feet of the Lord to learn, and then are sent to serve other couples and families. They have the joy of learning along with their sons and daughters, as a family. We have to live out the innumerable graces that we have received, and not allow them to go to waste. We have to always keep in mind what St. Paul says: *“Lest in preaching the Gospel to others, I myself might be disqualified”*. (1. Cor. 9:27)

When we had a national team training during the Spiral Encounter with Fr. Calvo, he said: “The key to happiness is the Word of God. To listen to the Word and God and always keep a spirit of repentance”. The Spiral Encounter was also an experience of grace for us. If you have a heart open to the Word of God, even if

something happens in daily life that might cause a separation from God, through the Scriptures you can once again discover his love and come closer to him. This is the message of the Retorno, and we are convinced that this is a fact – that the Word of God is indeed the key to happiness.

Looking back over more than 30 years since we first experienced ME we want to thank Father Calvo, Father Donnon and so many other people for their support and their prayers. It is very much like the Lord freeing the Israelites and leading them out of Egypt. We were steeped in the values of the world, but the Lord stretched out his hand and led us, healing the wounds we had from our upbringing and making us free. Despite our many sins he was patient with us and did not abandon us. While in prayer I read the words of the Psalm: “*He led his people out of the wilderness.*”,(Psalms 135:16)” and tears came to my eyes. Just about the same time that we attended the Encounter we also joined the Secular Franciscans, and made a promise to live the Gospel in the spirit of St. Francis. We are grateful for the job change that put us in touch with the Franciscans and thereby encountering St. Francis, and for the Holy Spirit leading us into the opportunity to experience the various FIRES programs, The Lord is alive. We have received so much from Him and we ask Him to deepen those graces is the years that are left to us.

* * * * *

He was a Hungarian Jew who happened to marry a Catholic, happened to meet up with the Christian Family movement, happened to attend an EE and then become active as a team member for other EEs, happened to participate in the SE Retorno program, thereby just by chance resolving a longtime inner conflict he had had with his understanding of the Catholic Church, and then just happened to be baptized. Or was it all by chance? Here is his story as related in a letter to Fr. Calvo:

George – Hungary

Dear Father Calvo,

I started writing the story of my baptism several times, but now, thanks to God, I have been able to finish it. I am a Jew. This defines a lot of things for me today, and also defined a lot of my past, for example the way I saw the world and my relation to Christianity. My family lost their faith in God during the persecutions and the need to keep in hiding during World War II, so my parents were raised without the Jewish religion, and this is how they raised me and my sister. They described the world for us as gently balanced powers of nature, and said, if God exists, he is just watching you and after your death he will judge you. I received a different approach to God from my grandmother, who did not belong to any denomination, but she believed in God. She always told me that bad events are always possibilities for God to create something good and they can easily change

our life. I remembered that, but it wasn't my attitude to life till I found my faith. This happened in the following way.

I was nineteen in the freshman camp of my college when I met my wife, Andrea, who was eighteen. We drifted toward each other because neither of us fit in with that particular group in the camp. So we spent all our time walking and talking about our life, our families and ourselves. After the camp this encounter became a courtship, and it lasted for three and a half years. During the courtship, a few things happened that influenced my personality. The most important was that when I was in the second year of college, my mother died of cancer. She was only forty-seven. Because my father had previously divorced my mother and he had re-married, he did not know that my mom was very ill. I had to take my mother's place and help my sister Ann. After school, I worked in a part time job to add to the money our father sent us each month. Of course our family, and later our father, helped us a lot, but those were tough times.

Andrea and I began planning for marriage and almost one year later, after my mother's death, we became engaged. After our wedding both of us thought how sad it was that we didn't have some friends, couples with similar thinking, that we could share with concerning our lives, our problems, experience and other things. So we started to search for such a group. Andrea heard in her school about a course on couple relationship held by the Association of Large Families. Both of us thought it would be very interesting, and we took part in it. We also hoped that we might be able to find some friends there.

Although it did not happen, we heard a talk by Krisztina and Balazs Menese about their marriage, and they talked about the Encounter programs also. After the presentation we talked with Krisztina and Balazs, and they told us that we should make an EE. Andrea, who had grown up as a Catholic, wanted to go, but I was fearful, because my upbringing was totally different, and I also had very little knowledge about religion. So I thought I would be an outsider in that environment; although before that time we had started visiting Catholic churches almost each Sunday. For me the moral content of the homilies was interesting, but I was indifferent to the other parts. Andrea, on the other hand, liked the whole ceremony. Both of us knew we had to do something, because these differences caused some quarrelling, especially when we talked about our future children's faith. So I took a deep breath and registered for the EE. I was afraid, but I thought at least it is worth trying to get to know Andrea's Catholic faith, and I hoped that during this program I could manage it.

There was another problem I had encountered early on in life that is connected with my upbringing. There were times in its history that the institutional Church and some of its clergy very much lacked the virtues and values that they preached.

There were glaring instances of narrow-mindedness resulting in such things as the inquisition and the abuse of power, even among some members of the clergy. Because of our origin, being Jewish, I think my family easily met with these circumstances, and my parents tried to give me an objective picture about this part of the human history also. My parents always told me that I should avoid communities where a small group of people tells the whole group what they must think about things. First I had to put this emotion and image in the right perspective, and recognize that today's Catholic Church should not be equated with wanton life-style of some of its members in the past. In this I was greatly aided by the speeches of Pope John Paul II, all of which we listened to as a family. The process began before the EE program, but truly it was the experience of this program and the people whom we met there that helped me to say in my mind: "I forgive the sins that were apparent in the Catholic Church in the past. We took part in the EE after three years of marriage. The experience of the program, the honest sharings, sometimes with self-irony, from Kalman and Vera (the organizer couple), from Fr. Domonkos, and from the team couples, helped me to understand that indeed the Catholic Church today is not at all the image that I had harbored in my mind.

Besides guiding us to this EE program in February 2004, God also helped us to realize that the EE is not a fly-by-night temporary experience that loses its attractiveness in the humdrum of daily life. Vera and Kalman told us there were CFM regional meeting for a lot of CFM groups, and that among those we were sure to find the kind of community that we had been searching for. But at that meeting Vera and Kalman needed some help. One of their team couples got sick, so they asked us to be a team couple for the next EE. We were shocked. I'm not a Catholic and yet they are asking me? We said we needed some time to decide, because we were confused. In the evening we did the same as what we had done at the EE program. We opened the New Testament to ask help from God. He answered. We opened at *Matthew 9:37*, "*The harvest is great, but the laborers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send more laborers to his harvest.*" So with such a message from the Scriptures, we said that we would do it.

We joyfully prepared for the next program with the help of Vera and Kalman, and the second program was also a very great encouragement for us that we were on the right path. From that time, we took part regularly in the EE programs as a team couple and we received encouragement from God each time.

Parallel with the afore-mentioned CFM meeting, we started to search for a CFM group near our house, which could help us to live in our daily life the experience that we found in the EE program. Because we couldn't find an appropriate group, we decided to start one ourselves with the help of some other local couples. This group comes together every two weeks.

Another important milestone in my Christian life was the SE Retorno experience introduced by Fr. Donnon. Again it was Vera and Kalman who invited us. They told us it would be very good, and they were right. The personality of Fr. Donnon, the events of the weekend and the topic about the Holy Trinity helped me a lot to understand my relationship to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. I remember that I recognized something important. God the Son in the person of Jesus suffered also for my sins, past and future. And still He calls me his friend. I must do everything I can to avoid sins because I don't want to cause pains to One who truly is my Friend.

From the moment I received that inspiration I realized that I wanted to be baptized. After the program presented by Fr. Donnon, the only question was where and when this important day would be. We live in Tokol, a small suburban town next to Budapest. I asked for some books on the Catholic faith from the local parish priest. But I knew that my baptism should be held not in the church of our town but rather during an EE. I asked Kalman and Vera, the two persons from whom I received the greatest example and gift for my Christian life, to be my godparents. They graciously accepted, and we decided that the baptism would be during the Thanksgiving Mass of the EE in February 2006. It was a wonderful sunny day and every team couple was there. I felt they all helped my spiritual growth and I was so happy that they were there. Fr. Domonkos, who is now my spiritual director celebrated the Baptism. I saw that my wife was also very happy that we now have a common Faith. After the celebration Kalman gave me a present. It was a stone from the shore of the Red Sea. I was very pleased because this stone represents for me that the ancient and the new is together in one piece. We keep it on our small home altar where it holds all the memories of this wonderful event.

We are busy with our work, and sometimes we make mistakes; but the Faith I have in common with my wife and our CFM group helps us to keep striving on our path towards God.

With respect and love
Gyorgy (George)

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The abbess of a convent of Poor Clare nuns, who totally dedicate themselves to the Lord in the contemplative life, has joyfully shared how the message of the Encounters is really the message of the Gospel, and therefore something beneficial to all, whatever their state in life. This is her sharing on the very first Encounter for Sisters held anywhere in the world:

We, the Poor Clare nuns of Gumma Prefecture in Japan, were blessed to have Fr.

Donnon Murray, OFM, direct us in a “Sisters’ Encounter” – our own version of SADE, i.e. Sisters And Donnon Encounter. This was first the first case of an Encounter devised and given by him just for Sisters. It was like “being away” for three days; and on “coming back”, finding everything changed. The truth is that we really had new eyes to see with—eyes washed clean by a new knowledge of oneself, of each other, and of the Lord. Personally, I was so happy to see the wonderful works that God has done in the nuns, and their heroic fidelity to Him and their vocation. *Luke 6:35 reads: “Lend, not hoping for any return, and your reward shall be great.”* It seems to me that years of generous “lending” are being rewarded by God’s gift of us to each other in this new and deep way.

A very important aspect of the Encounter is sharing oneself with others; and Father provided the tools, the motivation and the atmosphere for it. It was a deep sharing of those experiences that have changed or molded our lives: self-examination, community-examination, sharing our feelings and impressions during the Encounter, sharing Scripture, prayer, liturgy and song. A beautiful para-liturgy of healing crowned the second day. Within it all, it is Jesus speaking through each one and to each one because we are gathered in his Name. In Jesus, “our Peace”, walls between us were broken down, and we experienced a new unity in Him. It was fitting that at the Eucharist closing the Encounter we should raise the roof with a “shout of joy”, trying to catch the meaning of those “shouts of joy” spoken of so often in the Psalms. With Father to lead us, and trying not to be outdone by him, we shouted “Shalom!”, and then gave Shalom to each other. (I guess that was a “first” too – shouting in the chapel!) The fruits of the Encounter we hope to preserve in weekly sharings, and in a new personal relationship with the Word of God given to us individually. Shortness of time and the depth of sharing kept us from answering all the questions Father gave us, so we had lots of homework. The Scriptures have become for each of us a very personal love-letter from our Heavenly Father – one to be read and meditated on for each and every occasion, a means of constant dialogue with the Lord. It is a special blessing for us to be inspired and consoled in this way because, although we are Poor Clares, this experience has made us rich interiorly. We cast our cares on the Lord, and try to keep our treasure in heaven. In an exhortation to the Poor Ladies, St. Francis told them: *“Do not look at the life without, because that of the Spirit is better.”* These words are so much more meaningful to me now, and so much easier to practice, having discovered the treasures within our four walls. Praise the Lord!

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Among the many things discovered in Encounters is that in some fashion or other everyone repeatedly experiences in life a pattern that can be called Illusion, Disillusion, Joy. A housewife shares that the experience of ME was for them a source of joy, promise and hope. Nevertheless it was followed by an unexpected period of anxiety, not brought on by ME, but more poignant because of the enhanced awareness of the possibility of a really united and loving family. But joy ensued.

Yuko and Goro Yoshida – Gumma Prefecture

A wonderful grace received through our experience of ME was the fact that it led to my husband's Baptism. We were both filled with joy that we could now walk the same path with the same faith. But a big trial occurred that became for us an opportunity to come to know the love of God even more deeply. It was our custom to faithfully attend Sunday Mass with both of our daughters. Out of the blue we were confronted with a totally unexpected change in our younger daughter that caused a great deal of suffering. We were thoroughly perplexed. Although we thought we were raising her in the same way, with the same values as her older sister, she began to dye her hair, she not only stopped studying, but refused to go to school, and she began living a life wrapped up in worldly values. For the two of us who had tried our best to live a normal decent life we just took it for granted that our children would be serious students with good marks and naturally go on to get a college education. It was very difficult to accept this situation.

Every night we would lecture her and try to reason with her about how to live as a real person, why it is necessary to study, acting as if we were perfect and didn't have a fault in the world. We didn't even realize that we were taking that attitude. The gap between us only got wider and we ended up with no conversation at all. We suffered painfully every day.

It was precisely during those dark times that we were asked to serve as a team couple for ME. That was a wonderful gift from the Lord, giving us the opportunity to take another look at ourselves as a couple and our relationship with our children. It wasn't easy to encounter ourselves just as we were, and to consider the quality of our relationship with the children. It was through that experience that we discovered to what extent our family is loved by Jesus. We could not help but feel the merciful glance of Jesus on our family, that had been falling apart. We realized that we had not transmitted to our children this love that we had received from Jesus.

We had been parents concerned only with our own self-satisfaction and giving precedence to the values of the world. We could do nothing more than say that we do love our children. But when we were able to be truly grateful for the gentleness

and compassion that the Lord has shown us, we were at last able to accept the children just as they are.

We did experience all kinds of sufferings and wounds because of our younger daughter. But when she left to go to Tokyo to continue her studies she said with real humility: “Mom and dad, thanks for everything that you have done for me”, I cried for joy. The days in the past of sorrow and suffering are over and forgotten, and the only thing that remains in the depths of our hearts is the warmth of God’s love.

Now she has a job in Tokyo. What a joy to receive affectionate cards from her on our birthdays, Mothers’ Day, Fathers’ Day, and other occasions. We are now spending our days in joy and enfolded in the love of God. We thank Him for helping us to abandon our pride, to share with the children the love that we have received from Him, and, for the first time, to be able to communicate with the children.

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The Lord turns even the greatest tragedies into sources of unexpected joy.

Akie Watanabe – Gumma, Japan

It is already nine years since my husband passed away. While driving he had a heart seizure and lost consciousness. Fortunately the person next to him in the passenger seat was able to break the car and no one was injured. He was taken to the hospital by ambulance but died after 17 days at the age of 63. I was completely in a daze at the wake and the funeral Mass. I can recall each and every circumstance surrounding the incident, but I have no recollection of my state of mind.

Just when the trials of my husband’s death, my own physical problems, and other unexpected circumstances became seemingly unbearable, I seem to have heard the Lord give an encouraging reply to my prayers that filled me with joy – that I have suffered enough and that He would take care of me. With that conviction I could not help but recall that this is precisely the spirit of ME and the FE that we experienced: when we put our lives into the hands of the Lord, He will take care of everything. I am able to share deeply from the heart with my son, who treats me so warmly and lovingly, with his wife, whose disposition is completely different from mine, and therefore adds something that I lack, and with my middle school grand–daughter. Among the three of them, they have restored the emptiness left by the death of my husband. It has become my motto, that when I am gone, to insure that there will be no need for anyone to undergo some of the sufferings that I myself had to endure, the secret is to live out the spirit of the Encounters. This is a joy that I am now experiencing. The Lord lives! He is living in me! How can I possibly respond to that tremendous love that He has for me? Tears come to my

eyes just thinking about that.

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A taste of heaven on earth is possible, as people who live with the Lord all know.

Sanae and Tomohisa Asaoka –Shizuoka, Japan

A Japanese poet expressed that he sought for happiness in this world but could not find it, and wondered if it could be found at all. We think it can be found, and that it is very near. It has been more than 20 years since we made our first ME and even now recall it very vividly. There were many banners hanging from the wall, each expressing the significance of the various steps. The one that made the deepest impression was a banner that expressed through two candles the progression of going from Disunity to Encounter With Self, to Communication, to Reconciliation, and finally to Unity. We became aware that happiness lies in the love that flows from unity, but that Unity can be experienced only after going through those different stages.

We were, and even now, so many years later are, grateful to the team couples who traveled a long distance to share with us the little incidents of their daily lives, encouraging us and opening our eyes to something entirely new, so that we could no help but agree, saying in our hearts: “Yes! Yes!”

That was the first time since we were married that we opened our hearts to one another. People had said of us that we were a couple that got along so well together. We never thought we were perfect, but we did think that we more or less had it all together. How conceited can you get? If you take a good look at yourself you are bound to discover any number of things. I became conscious of the fact that I have been scrutinized by my wife and I had no suitable answer to whatever criticism she might make. But we looked at our mutual good points and could respect them, and understand them. In other words we came to understand that we truly loved one another. As the program progressed, with listening to Father’s talks and the sharings by the teams, just about everything seemed to strike home, leaving a feeling of helplessness that brought tears to our eyes.

Before the weekend my only thought was that 3 days is a long time and it is sure to be boring. In fact it was over before we knew it. We returned home full of joy, and when our daughter, who minded the house for us, saw us she said: “What beautiful smiles!”

When I was in grammar school and studying the catechism a sister told us the story of Adam and Eve; and all I got out of it was that God made man. But now it became clear that God made man and woman to become One – in bodies, minds,

hearts, souls, feelings, thoughts, plans, in every aspect of life. What the Book of Genesis says is that a husband cannot live a full life without his wife. The holiness of marriage lies in their togetherness. That was what struck me about that banner. That a husband and wife are meant to strive to become, as it were, one candle, with two flames intertwining, indicating the retention of their respective personalities.

We have had the grace to attend a number of MEs, the MReE, and the FE, and each and every time there has been a feeling of fulfillment and a feeling that our home has been blessed. Now, God willing, it is my intention to listen to my spouse, to humbly acknowledge my mistakes and to live with a more open and humble heart. I also want to sow the seeds of the joy that we have received as widely as possible and to widen this spiral of joy.

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The above couple also wanted to share the following letter that they received from their non-Christian son-in-law, which he wrote to them as soon as he got home from making a ME.

Rikiya Saito

Many many thanks for suggesting that we make a ME. What a wonderful experience! To be honest with you, when Aimi mentioned it, I was perplexed and uncertain. But at the same time I was interested and thought I might want to go, because she said that it was a joyful experience that helped couples get along better and make their life together happier.

In the 22 years of my life I had had no association at all with the Catholic Faith and had no belief in God. It was a strange feeling to be among a lot of Catholics sharing about all kinds of problems.

Once the program got under way I learned a great deal from Fr. Donnon's talks, and found that we could relate to many of the problems that were shared by the team couples. I felt a closeness to them.

We were able to share openly on the various questions that were handed out, each of us sharing on things that we had not adverted to in our daily lives, and we got to know one another so much better. It was rally refreshing.

We came to realize the importance of reconciliation, talked in detail about how we can and must make that a vital part of our lives, and, through that, to come to an experience of unity.

It remains to be seen whether we have changed because of the experience of ME, but the answer lies in how we live our lives together from now on. We do want to

become one, so that others will look at us and be able to say: “*There is a united couple.*” It will take time, but we hope to advance little by little by walking together.

We want to attend the next ME and we want to begin it as a better couple. Again, many thanks for giving us the opportunity to attend a wonderful ME.

P.S. It is our aim to be in the future the kind of wonderful couple that you are, and to always be a close knit couple.

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Walk with the Lord and changes that take place without notice will, in time, become clearly evident.

Setsuko and Akira Miki – Gumma, Japan

Husband

We have not the slightest doubt that our experience of ME and the FIRES programs has deepened the quality of our family life. It was the starting point for our growth as individuals, as a couple, and as a family. For our family, participating in ME and the various FIRES programs was an incomparable gift from the Lord that gave us an opportunity to aim at becoming a “*Family in the Lord*” and to discover how to do it.

We first experienced ME in 1977, having been married for 13 years at that time. My wife had received the grace of Baptism two years prior to that, and our son and daughter were in grammar school at the time. Before experiencing ME, I thought we didn’t have a problem in the world – that we had an ideal life. But with that experience, it was a shock to discover that, in fact, we were making a big mistake in how we treated one another as a family.

Subsequently we had the opportunity to attend MReE and other programs, the kids were baptized, our third child, a girl, was born. The kids attended the SADE which helped them to grow immensely. I myself received the grace of Baptism and finally felt that I, as it were, was now accepted as a true family member. Just a few days after my Baptism our older daughter, who had been working at a Catholic kindergarten, announced: “Since we have only one chance to live in this world, I want to live for the world”. With that she entered a convent of the Poor Clares, choosing to live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience in a contemplative Order.

My wife and I come from the same area in Japan, were both brought up in Buddhist households, and at that time in Japan (and especially in the countryside) it was taken for granted that the husband was the master of the household. It was an era when the

thinking remained that, in the case of marriage, it was the husband who received the bride, and, from her point of view, she is to realize that she is the one who is received. This is the kind of household in which we were both reared, so that at the beginning of our marriage we had had absolutely no chance to have any knowledge of the Catholic faith or of the spirit of ME. My mother was completely obedient to her husband always answering: “Yes, Yes”, and never even thinking about saying “No!” It is this environment that we were raised. As I reflect my thinking at the time was that this is the ideal kind of parents to have.

With this background, I unconsciously considered myself to be the master of the household. With this frame of mind I was living far removed from the spirit of ME that encourages couples and families to communicate, continually seek to be reconciled, strive for unity, etc. If we had not discovered ME, it is very likely that by this time we would have a divided and broken family. That experience made our family aware that our way of life was totally mistaken. We discovered the importance of family communication and shared values. Our kids once said: “Dad, we remember that you have always given us a lot of presents, but we don’t remember you ever dialoguing with us, or sharing your memories”. That was a shock to me. Since I was raised at a time when Japan was very poor, I tended to think materialistically. I concluded, mistakenly, that in my relationship with the kids, they would be satisfied if they simply received whatever things they wanted. It is saddening now to realize that this kind of thinking resulted in putting a distance between me and the children.

I am now so thankful to the Lord for the grace to have come to discover, through ME, the need for communication with the kids, reconciling with them, and together seeking unity. I see how much they have grown and observe how each of them are living so happily in the path of life that each has chosen.

With the support that our family has received through ME and the FIRES programs to strive for unity, we are endeavoring to reach out to as many families as possible to join us in the struggle to build our families on a foundation of solid rock.

Wife

We first attended a ME 30 years ago. In the meantime each of our 3 children experienced the SADE and were able to grow as they became involved as team member. All of them are now living their lives in accord with the seed that was sown.

As my husband shared earlier, our elder daughter experienced the SADE and as a result is living as a member of the contemplative Poor Clares. As a nun who has taken the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience she is living a dedicated life of prayer, sacrifice and work. Our son experienced the EE under Fr. Donnon’s

direction, and was married by him in the Chapel Center in Tokyo. They now have 2 children, and are looking forward to making a ME. Our younger daughter graduated from a nursing school and now works in the hospital that runs the school. She attended the EE before getting married.

The two of us are now alone, but we both feel that we have grown considerably and become more united since our experience of ME.

There is a saying that “God does not make junk”, but as I looked at myself, on the one hand as always I found a hopeless person that I found it difficult to love, while on the other hand I have been able to take note of my strong points and have been able to look at not only myself but also my husband in a new way.

At present we participate in at least one ME a year as a team couple. We are trying to share with one another more intimately and to become more and more united.

We encourage young people to experience the SADE, we serve by helping to prepare the meals for the participants, and we try to be actively engaged in the various church activities. The Word of God has become a vital part of our daily lives, believing that the Lord speaks to us through his Word, as well as through the circumstances of our daily lives. We attempt to accept difficult people, not to judge others, and, even if people might speak ill of us, we try to live out the words of St. Paul: “*Be joyful always, pray continuously, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you.*” (1 Thess. 5:16) as words being spoken to us. Like everyone else, we have our ups and downs, but these words always give us a lift.

Through ME we cannot help but believe that the “*Divine Energy of Love*” is a mysterious Power that does indeed dwell in us abundantly. Thanks be to God, now and forever.

* * * * *

In the following testimony the daughter of the above couple expresses one more example of what we so often witness among young people; that despite having been raised in an environment of deep faith, they eventually find themselves alienated from the Church and from God, and yet find themselves coming back with an even stronger faith. We may forget God, but He never forgets us.

Ako Miki

My parents experienced ME before I was born, and my brother and sister experienced the SADE when I was just a baby. Then, when I was 12 and in 6th year grammar school I myself experienced the FE. Later, I too experienced the SADE, and both in middle school and in high school I was on the team for SADE.

So for me, attending Encounters was a very natural thing, and taken for granted. Each time was a source of wonderful graces.

With going on to college, however, graduating and working as a nurse, before you know it, I found myself gradually drifting away from the Church, and from the Encounters. Amidst the busyness of each passing day, I became less and less conscious of the existence of God within and around me. I just got wrapped up in the routine of daily life. In fact I did feel a great emptiness.

As a nurse I have the opportunity to meet many kinds of people, and being constantly faced with the realities of “death” and “life” I could not help but realize that what I was really seeking is a deep relationship with God, and that was the reason for that feeling of emptiness. There are things that I cannot understand or sort out just with the head, which I have been able to understand through the Lord speaking to me through the words of the Bible. When the patients and their families are faced with suffering and the fear of death, I believe that in some way Jesus heals them through me, and I always pray to our Blessed Mother. When I realize that I am not alone, and that I am energized in doing this work with the help of the Lord, the weight of what I have to do as a nurse gets lighter.

This is a grace, I believe, that I received from the Encounters. Being able to feel the presence of God is something I received from my parents since the time I was a baby, and later through the friends that I met through FIRES and through Fr. Donnon. This has had a strong influence in how I now try to fulfill my mission as a nurse.

Now that I am newly married, we will be starting a new family, and with that, a new way of life. It goes without saying that our marriage preparation course was the EE. Once again, I very strongly determined, with the help of God, to strive for unity as a couple and as a family. I firmly believe that through the Encounters I myself, as well as the family that we will have, will receive many blessings from the Lord. Thanks be to God!

* * * * *

The older sister of the young woman who submitted the above, and both of whom are the daughters of the couple above, shares her testimony about her vocation, and the inevitable trials that accompany any vocation – followed by joy.

Sr. (Seton) Naoko Miki, O.S.C.

*“In my distress I called upon the Lord.
To my God I cried for help.
From his temple he heard my voice
and my cry to him reached his ears.”*

Psalms 18:6

Although our family lived under the same roof, because we lived our lives knowing nothing about sharing for the sake of real communication. Whenever any kind of problems arose, whether as individuals or as a family, we always ended up with nothing more than a clash of feelings. My parents often had heated arguments. One day, when I returned from school, my mother, in tears, shared with me the troubles she had in life, and how she thought she was sorry that she ever got married. I was afraid my parents were going to get divorced. I wrote them a letter asking them please not to get divorced. I kept that letter in my pocket for weeks, but just did not have the courage to give it to them. This was a painful time for the whole family, and there seemed to be no solution. But it is apparent that our pleas as a family reached the ears of the Lord. One after another couples who had made a ME visited my parents, encouraging them also to attend, and so they finally acquiesced. An acquaintance took me along for the final Mass of the Encounter. At the end of the Mass, when the participants approached the altar to receive a memorial banner from the priest on the team, my parents went up side by side – holding hands. This is something I had never seen before.

*“The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed
that someone took and sowed in his field.
It is the smallest of all the seeds,
but when it has grown
it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree,
so that the birds of the air come
and make nests in its branches.”*

Matthew 13: 31–32

Through the FIRES programs, God has sown seeds within my family. Indeed they were very small seeds – beginning with things like facing one another in the morning and greeting one another, or eating our meals together, things that other people might take for granted. After a number of years a sense of intimacy developed. We began to open our hearts and share whatever problems might arise, our joys and our disappointments. Most importantly, we began to pray together as a family.

One time I caused a traffic accident. Every day I was getting threatening calls from the plaintiff. Everyone in the family was concerned, as if each one was the person responsible, and they all prayed fervently for me. My father took care of the insurance paper work and my mother handled all of the telephone calls. Strengthened by the prayers of the family I was able to gather up the courage to negotiate with the plaintiff, and was finally able to solve the problem.

During our prayers as a family we prayed not only for ourselves, but for all of the people that each one of us would meet, especially those confronted with all kinds of problems. Moreover through our prayers we came to be able naturally to discern in what way we could concretely reach out to those people. We had as neighbors a young couple who were doing their best to raise their children, but they were poor, and the young mother often came to have a talk with my mother. We prayed for that couple also and, in a sense, looked upon their problems as if they were our own. One time the husband shared that their daughter said she would like to take piano lessons, but they had no money to buy a piano to practice with at home. Hearing about that, my older brother remembered that we had an old electric organ that no one was using. He suggested that we give that to the little girl. We immediately let them know about that, and they were delighted. So together we cleaned up the organ and together carried it over to their home.

“Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:37)

It is in this way that the small seed of experiencing the Encounters has grown to be a big tree in our family. My younger brother is married and is the father of two children. His wife is not a Christian, but they have a Crucifix hanging at the entrance of their home, and in their room they have an open Bible with decorations around it. My younger sister is married, and even before getting married, her fiance had a big problem, with tears in her eyes she prayed for him. She is constantly seeking direction from the Bible as to what she should do in the circumstances of daily life. Both of my siblings share with their non-Christian partners the graces that they have received from participating in the FIRES programs.

I am living the life of a cloistered nun. I also have experienced FIRES programs, and there are especially two things that I learned from the experiences that I feel are important for me in my present way of life. One is to open my heart so that God can enter into my daily life, and that I know what path he wants me to take; and secondly, that I seek through his Word, the Bible, to discern how to carry that out.

One time for several months there was a strained relationship between myself and one of the sisters in the community. I conferred with Mother Abbess. I did try to mend that relationship by having a heart to heart talk with the sister in question, but was not able to solve the problem. I tried smiling and being kind to her, but just ended up mentally exhausted with the effort. Nevertheless I did not let a day go by without asking the Lord to intervene in this situation between us. I often opened up the Scripture in search of his message. I read the words: *“My commandment is this: Love one another as I have loved you”*. (John 13:34). I passed each succeeding day holding onto this commandment from the Lord. And love has conquered. That sister and I have been reconciled, and our communal life has returned to overflowing joy and gratitude.

I am not in a position now to be actively involved with the FIRES programs, but I personally, and we as a community, do pray for all of the programs held throughout the year in different parts of the country, I am grateful for all of those who are directly involved, and it is my prayer that as many people as possible, and many, many couples, will avail themselves of these wonderful experiences.

* * * * *

The husband of the Hungarian couple that shared the following testimony once told me that his priorities are God first, then his wife, and then his children. That in itself was a testimony of the message of ME and the FIRES programs.

Kalma and Vera – Hungary

We would like to share with you some of our experiences and how important to us is the spiritual world that FIRES offers. We do, however, constantly face our human limitations and weaknesses. Even at this writing, as we are preparing for an EE, the devil keeps telling us in various forms, but, in fact with boring monotony: “If you cannot be perfect, it is not worth struggling or living for others, for you will not be authentic enough. Even without this you have enough problems anyway...” Such temptations have caused us to ask ourselves: “What is the reason for starting CFM groups, for making Encounter programs, or organizing them, and on each occasion supporting the participants in spirit and in prayer? Because we were raised in Christian families, we could find dozens of ready-made answers one is supposed to give in response to such questions. Instead of these, we would like to share some vivencias, taking turns sharing, just like is done at the Encounters.

Kalman:

Adding up our ages, the two of us are already 67 years old, and we have lived one third of our lives together as a married couple. Vera has been living out her motherly vocation for six years, but, having been formed as a musician and a teacher of classical guitar, later on she would like to teach again. I am basically an economist, having wandered in several industrial branches in business life; at present I try to do my best in the field of public administration.

Vera:

We celebrated our tenth wedding anniversary last summer. God has entrusted us with four very lively kids so far: three boys, Bence (6), Agoston (4), Mate (2) and a girl, Maria Veronika (1). They are all experienced FIRES persons; at least they made several Encounters while they were in my tummy and during the first 14 months when I was breastfeeding them. Indeed, it is a rare case if none of them is with us at an Encounter. We believe that the children, although God entrusts them to us for a period, basically belong to Him. A deeply touching symbol of this is that

whenever a new baby was born to us, we consciously placed him or her under the protection of the Blessed Mother at different pilgrim places of the Holy Virgin. They were still in the womb, about 5 centimeters in size, when we asked the Blessed Mother to protect and guard them and guide them to her Son so they may choose the way that He has prepared for them.

Kalman:

We would like to be clever enough to find the limit within which we can organize CFM and FIRES programs and support young couples in spirit, and still not neglect our own spiritual enrichment and the unity of our family. How do we discern the limit of our service? Considering the extent of that work, which often exhausts us, how do we avoid it becoming harmful to our kids? We would not like our kids to have the impression that our service for the Church and others would, for them, be something like: “Oh yes, evangelization is when you disappear and are not with us”. We are consciously striving to find any opportunities for them to be able to join our service or feel that our common preparation for any program is also theirs. Every evening we pray as a family for the CFM groups and for the next FIRES program. Should we forget about it, our eldest son immediately warns us. He always keeps it in mind. Another opportunity for us as a family is team trainings. We try to begin these meetings with a dinner together with our kids and the team couple to be trained. Then, before starting the training itself, which is a long sharing between the two of us and the team couple often lasting 4–5 hours, we all pray together in the kids’ room. To tell the truth: during this prayer we often ask silently that at least this time our kids will behave a bit better, not doing any harm to one another, to their environment nor, of course, to the guest couple. Perhaps as a result of our prayers, the kids usually want to sit in the laps of our guests and they stay quiet for a while. Our sons recall these meetings again and again for months afterwards. Last year we went to help our friends, the other organizer couple, with preparing the big room before an EE. Therefore we appeared on the scene on Friday afternoon. Our sons felt so honored that they even forgot to be naughty (although the cat that lived there may have different memories of that afternoon).

Vera:

The first ME we made was in 1999. That is when we met Fr. Donnon and several couples of different CFM groups. We have remained good friends with these couples; during that first Original Marriage Encounter (OME) some kind of spiritual bond was created among us. In each succeeding year we have made Encounters either as participants or as a team couple. In 2002, we made an OME with our CFM group. That was the first time we personally experienced how the work of the Holy Spirit can really change lives through this program – something we have experienced each time since then through the feedback or testimonies of couples who have made an Encounter. We have been organizers of the EE since October 2003. Invited by Fr. Domonkos, we have also been in the Ukraine several

times, assisting him in FIRES programs.

Kalman:

After moving to Erd, a small town near Budapest, we helped starting the third CFM group there. This group was formed from couples whom we met at the church door after Mass. They hardly knew each other even superficially. There was an unbelievably deep common basis: their sincere desire to search for and to follow Christ. We made the above mentioned OME together. This program deeply transformed me personally, and it healed inner wounds I had had for decades.

Vera:

This CFM group of ours in Erd is a powerful support to us. Although we intended to join them just for one meeting in order to start their group, we ended up staying with them. The unity of this group comes from our group prayers and praise through which we have so often experienced God's power which makes one free. During this prayer the couples have an opportunity to share their problems, difficulties or even fears without having to be ashamed. Sometimes it gets so long that there is hardly any time left for sharing on the planned topic.

Vera + Kalman:

Besides the invisible, yet perceivable power of the prayer background, our greatest helpers are the committed team couples. They take part in the preparation in a way often unnoticed by outsiders. They take the small, unspectacular jobs. Without them, we would not be able to get everything ready for any Encounter program. Last week we wrote a letter to them saying that, together with Balazs and Krisztina Menesi we consciously offer CFM groups and FIRES programs to God from time to time, asking that He may show us where the Spirit is calling us. As we were waiting attentively in silence, the desire was born in us to have an opportunity to meet with these couples, to have time to be in communion with them, building the Kingdom of God also in this way. Some of them had told us how good it would be to get to know one another and to meet with those who had also been teams in earlier FIRES programs. Because other couples also organize EEs, it happens that we do not meet with all team couples or do not know them at all. It was during an Encounter in Spring 2006 that the Holy Spirit whispered to us that it was time to put this idea into a concrete form. Now we have such a day when all the team couples were able to spend time together.

We feel it a basic need for us to do this service in CFM/FIRES. It is so easy unconsciously to breathe in the worldly way of thinking, producing unsuitable patterns into our family. We feel that there is a greater chance that, in spite of our failures, we can stay close to God, if we continue to serve within CFM/FIRES. But we want to be open to others also, especially by supporting young couples and married couples in prayer.

* * * * *

The following is a testimony from a couple whose work brought them from America to Japan, and from Japan to Ireland where they currently live. They have kept in touch and have often expressed how their participation in an EE and subsequent service as a team has helped them so much in their marriage – another example of the power of grace from FIRES.

Christie and

Loren – Ireland

We attended a 2–day FIRES EE course in 2002 under the spiritual direction of Fr. Donnon Murray, OFM, in Tokyo, Japan. We did not know what to expect from the course when we signed up other than, after completion of the course, we would have met the marriage preparation requirement to be married in the Catholic church. The course was very well laid out and covered a number of topics which are crucial in our preparation to become husband and wife, as well as understanding the vocation of marriage. During the course, we each experienced a different kind of grace that makes us better individuals, thus providing a strong foundation for our marriage.

Christie:

For me, the highlight of the course was when I felt an utmost love from God during the Mass for healing, as He revealed to me the source of my pain and suffering that I kept deep in my heart for many years. I never understood why I was such a cold and uncompassionate person. I thought these traits were just part of the typical character of a person, until Fr. Donnon touched on the topic of our past and how a negative experience from our childhood can shape the person we become if we do not seek healing and forgiveness.

Growing up in a big family (I am the second oldest of 12 children) I felt I did not receive a lot of attention and love from my parents. I had to become independent and looked after myself and my younger siblings at a very young age. I did not think my parents loved me nor gave me their time and attention. Because of this experience, I grew up feeling a lack of love for myself, making it difficult for me to accept others. During the Healing Mass I realized for the first time how this experience had paralyzed my ability to be a caring, warm, loving, compassionate person, and the source of all this suffering derived from my childhood. The healing process was slow but very fruitful. Because of the prayer I started on that day, God has given me the grace to forgive my parents and an appreciation of their situation. Without this course, I would probably still be a cold and heartless person and our marriage would suffer tremendously. Today I can proudly say that I am a happy, loving, caring and compassionate person and have a great relationship with my parents. I hope to be able

to transmit that to our child.

Loren:

We attended the Encounter weekend not really knowing what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised at the depth of the questions and how it inspired me to live out my faith in all areas of my life. In exploring together each area of our lives and how it related to the will of God, Christie and I renewed our pledge to use Natural Family Planning. I feel this choice has strengthened our relationship and brought us closer together.

* * * * *

I have related the story of Sister Lucy's vocation. This is her own testimony.

Sr. Lucy Kinoshita O.S.C– Gumma, Japan
“Please Lord, don’t let this flame go out.” The first time I attended a SADE, while we were joined in a circle and praying, the candle that I was holding began to sputter and was about to go out and that’s when I asked the Lord not to let it go out. That flame, at that time, was a mirror of my life. During the experience of the SADE, through the process of reflection and sharing, I was finally able to retrieve that flame with full force. In addition, during the time when I had the grace of being able to travel here and there to introduce SADE, I learned the importance of prayer, and that has taken hold as a very large part of my personality. In order to share oneself totally the first thing you have to do is swallow your pride. How I prayed to be able to do that! After the end of a SADE in Nagasaki, everyone had gone and I was alone praying in the Chapel. I was, at that time, so filled with the Light of the Lord that I thought my heart would burst. At that moment I became fully convinced that I was being called to religious life. Actually, before going to Nagasaki, I fully intended to get married; but the Lord Himself upset all of my plans and took over as the director of my life. Now the question was, which congregation will I enter? I wanted to become a missionary.

Just at that time, at the Franciscan Retreat House in Kiryu, there was a PE conducted by Fr. Calvo and Fr. Donnon. Priests from all over the country assembled, and among them was Bishop Shimamoto, the Bishop of the Diocese Urawa, where the PE was held. I attended the final Mass at which I was deeply moved. It was as if I was in a time tunnel and had returned to the moment of the Sermon on the Mount, and I thought: “Ah, if only the whole of life were like this!”

When Mass ended, and everyone was scattered all over the place, in the evening as I was about to return home, I came down the stairs from the second floor and there, standing in the lobby and about to depart, was Fr. Calvo. He looked at me and said:

“You should go and take a look at the Poor Clares.” To put me at ease, because I looked so surprised, he continued: “Since that is a religious order that has the power of prayer, at least go and have them pray for you.” With that he got in the car and departed. I recalled being able to revive that sputtering flame and, although joining a contemplative Order was not what I had in mind, I decided to follow his instructions and to visit the Poor Clares, and with that visit I was certain that this is the place that God wants me to be.

This was the place where the first Encounter for Sisters in the world took place, and their hearts were completely open. Pope John Paul II said that the very life of St. Clare was Eucharistic – a continual sacrifice of thanksgiving. What I had asked for during that final Mass of the PE was brought to fulfillment in this way. Now, 23 years after entering this contemplative way of life, everyday I keenly feel the truth of those words of the Holy Father.

There are at present 16 nuns in our monastery in Kiryu. Among them 6 had experienced the SADE, and 3 had been active as team members. I offer up special prayers daily that we will have a second Encounter here, and not only I, but the whole community prays daily for the FIRES programs.

Like a reed blowing in the wind, but unbroken, Lord, you did not allow the sputtering flame to go out, I thank you and praise you from the bottom of my heart. Also thanks to you Fr. Calvo, and Fr. Donnon.

* * * * *

I'm OK, You're OK. What a great lesson to learn and live out!

I had never even heard the word “ME”, but we needed some kind of salvation in our family, so I decided to attend. In the beginning I didn't understand much of what was being said but, searching for some hint as to how to preserve our disintegrating family, I listened very intently to what Fr. Donnon had to say. In his talk, he used all kinds of symbols, and among them was Snoopy and his companions, Charley Brown and Lucy. This touched on something within me that had for years been a source of pain. In connecting Snoopy with a book entitled “I'm OK, You're OK” Father pointed out that Snoopy would be an example of a person who looks upon himself as “I'm OK”. But he also looks upon everyone else as “OK”. There are those who think of themselves as OK, but not others. A third kind are those who consider themselves as not OK, while everyone else is OK. Finally there are those who consider themselves and others to be not “OK”. Those words struck me deeply. It made me reflect on how I considered myself to be OK, but was continually judging others and considering them to be “not OK”. I realized the need to accept humbly whatever differences there might be between myself and others. I have to begin a life trusting more in God. It was with such inspirations that

I began to understand the meaning of the words in the “*Lord’s Prayer*”: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”

I once read: “The words that slip out of a person’s mouth reveal his real character”. I should know better at this time in my life, but it’s embarrassing to think of how audacious it was of me to have wounded so many people. I know that I am not going to change overnight, but keeping in mind Jesus’ admonition: “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt. 11:29). I am going to try my best to grow. I am very grateful for ME which gave me the opportunity to become aware of this need.

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Becoming a “Family in the Lord” requires a constant awareness of its importance, and a constant effort to achieve it. But if God wants it, and He does, it can be done.

Yoshiko and Teruo Odashima – Sendai, Japan

Husband

It has been 30 since we were first invited to make a ME. The biggest change in that time has been the custom we now have of doing everything as a family, something that is now taken for granted. For example, whenever there is a church bazaar, various groups like Sunday school, the women’s club, the men’s club etc. each sell their goods at their respective stands. But we have always had our own stand as a family. At Christmas, we go around to the homes of acquaintances and sing Christmas Carols. One of the most important events for us is to gather as a family around a bonfire. Gathering around a campfire in a joyous atmosphere has become a tradition that we cannot imagine going without. We have also established another custom, celebrating birthdays that occur between the months of August and January. With the kids now scattered all over (five out of the seven) it is not possible for all of us to gather around a birthday cake, so using a PHS, no matter where the kids are, we start off with a slow tempo and gradually increase the tempo in singing Happy Birthday – something peculiar to our family.

When we first attended ME my impression was that this is something worthwhile, but after I was transferred to Morioka, and invited to attend again, I honestly didn’t feel any desire to go. But this time we were asked to be on the team and, still without any particular enthusiasm I kind of reluctantly agreed. That was an unforgettable opportunity to be filled with the Holy Spirit. At the end of the Encounter we decided that we would experience all of the FIRES programs. So, in the course of that year we attended the MReE and MR, each time experiencing more and more joy.

But even then, I began to feel that there must be something more. We were given the grace to be filled with the Holy Spirit, but what are we doing, what can we do,

to help others to have the same kind of experience. So we decided that we would continue be available at any time to share our vivencias with others as a team. After that, far from there being any feeling of resistance, the Encounters began to be something that we simply could not do without. With each succeeding experience there was a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the joy of witnessing the same thing happen in the lives of couple after couple.

If I had not become involved with FIRES, there is a strong likelihood that we would have divorced. Through involvement with FIRES, I have been able to dig down deeply into my inner self, especially at those times when I was in most need of it; and each time I have had a new and deeper encounter with my wife. Precisely because of the Encounters, we have been able to continue to live as husband and wife, and parents.

ME has been a help not only to scratch the surface, but rather a hoe that gradually helps us to dig deeper and deeper and to discover, and touch on all the little stones and obstacles that we had not heretofore adverted to. In crushing that hard soil we have been able to discover new light, new wellsprings, as it were. The seed that was sown has developed deeper roots, larger limbs and leaves. In this way FIRES has brought us along as a couple and as a family.

I work in a prison, and have always been concerned as to what kind of a lifestyle these young people had had that would cause them to end up in prison. Together with them, I to want to discover what can be done to free them from the problems of their past. I will be retiring before long, and I am thinking about the possibility of becoming a teacher. The job of such a teacher would be for people belonging to all different religions and denominations to help the inmates of a jail or reformatory to get back to normal life through the instrument of religion. If I should become a teacher, I have a big dream of perhaps maybe starting something that does not yet exist in Japan, that is, an "Encounter In Prison." Naturally it is not a dream that can easily be brought to reality, but with God nothing is impossible. Recently I have begun to think that this indeed can become a reality. I feel that even having such a dream in the first place is one of the fruitful graces that I have received from FIRES.

Wife:

When Father first suggested that we be a team couple my first reaction was: "No way! The kids are too small and I am even now carrying a baby around with me. Once the kids get bigger and I have the time, I would be glad to do whatever I can." With that Father just laughed and said: "No matter where you look, you are not going to find anyone with the perfect condition to do something." With that, I became aware of the fact that precisely because this is not the most comfortable time of life, it is something that we can share that will make sense to the

participants. Since that time I haven't counted the times that we have been a team couple, but we have always shared our pains, sorrows, wretchedness, all the aspects of our lives just as they are. In the course of time the Encounter became not just a special 44 hour experience, but rather a vital part of our daily lives – our very way of thinking and living. It seems that every time we had an Encounter I was either pregnant or nursing babies. In this way, we raised 7 kids, and, as each reached the suitable age, each of them experienced the SADE, as well as being teams for it, up until they became adults. In a short time it will be three years since we lost one of our special sons at the age of 16. The letter written by him to the family during a SADE, that was left in his computer, is considered by all of the family to be a letter of love to the family. When he was still in the womb Fr. Donnon said, "Big families have their own mission as big families." In our son's sharing during a SADE he writes: "I am filled with joy to be a member of this family. Our lives have always been filled with deep love for one another". For him to express himself in this way before a crowd was really something. He stated several times: "The family is something wonderful!"

He has been a support to us no matter what happens, and, even though he is not physically present to us, he is still living in each one of us. Even in the midst of this terrible sadness, there is a sense of calm peace. If we did not have the strength of the spirit of the Encounter to support us, I don't know how I could have survived.

We intend to continue to allow the Lord to use us as his instruments. I don't know in what concrete way this can be accomplished. One time the Bishop asked us to do something and we replied, "We feel that as a family we have been called to reach out to other families". If we had not experienced ME while we were still young, who knows what would have happened to us as a couple and as a family. Without a doubt, everything would be so different that it is frightening to even think about it. We have only one life to live, and I think it is best to respond to any call from the Lord.

* * * * *

The following is the testimony of a Doctor of Psychology and his wife, Gabor and Tunde Feller, from Hungary. They are quite humble not to mention that they are the organizers and hosts of OME in Hungary, something they have humbly done with great zeal and lots of energy and prayer for quite a few years now.

Gabor and Tunde Feller –Hungary

The first Original ME we made was in December 2001. We had been invited by family members several times before, but we had always refused the invitation of the Holy Spirit with all kinds of excuses. We had never really considered that it might be an opportunity for us. We shrugged our shoulders thinking we didn't need

it since we were all OK, and we didn't have time for it anyway. Thanks, however, to the constant call of the Holy Spirit, after several opportunities we did heed the invitation, and finally agreed to attend. On that weekend we seriously re-evaluated our whole life, and the actual state of our marital relationship. We would like to briefly share this with you.

Tunde:

At that time, I often remembered what we had been told at our wedding, that we should build bridges between the two of us. Rather than this, what stood out were the signs of spiritual divorce that I perceived between my husband and myself. After our three kids were born, the job of raising the kids was mainly on my shoulders. I tried to live out my vocation as a mother, but was not happy in my role as a wife. Gabor did his best working as a doctor, trying to fulfill himself in his profession. All this resulted in our intimate sharings getting less and less frequent. I often perceived that we were talking only about our kids and our joys and problems concerning them, rather than our relationship as husband and wife. Although this is quite natural, we did fail to perceive the need to share with one another our own personal feelings and desires. We got farther and farther away from each another.

Gabor: Everyday life became duller and duller. Our communication included very few topics, our sharings became shallow, finally even our confidence was shaken to the roots. Perhaps it was only our kids that kept us together. Even they began to show signs of confusion, however: our elder daughter fell behind significantly in her school work, our son developed the unconscious habit of blinking, and the youngest bit her nails. I worked more and more, even taking on tasks that I was unable to perform as professionally as I used to, or as I was expected to.

My need to perform well and my tendency to be overanxious, both rooted in my personality, gained more and more power over me. Although I myself am a psychologist, involved with the care of mentally unstable people, I became mentally ill myself. A struggle began, which lasted for years and finally led to hospitalization. Only then, at the deepest point did I realize what a terrible mess I was in. My thoughts were confused, my aims were uncertain, my self-esteem was in ruins, I had humiliated myself before others. Since mutual confidence and dialogue had come to an end in our marriage, my wife had no effective way to help me. In the beginning she tried to turn me in a softer way and in a kind and loving manner; later a harder and stricter attitude was not successful either. Powerless and frightened, she had only one hope, that God might hear her prayers and everything might settle down and get back to normal again.

Tunde:

At the time of our difficulties I was able to turn to God deeply and sincerely. I went to the Carmelite church in our town every day, praying to Saint Rita for strength,

for endurance and for the desire to fulfill ourselves in our marriage. I prayed that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we might become one heart and one soul by turning back to each other again. A long time passed and I felt my prayers were not being heard. Then, in the midst of that uncertainty my sister-in law said to me: “Believe me the time will come when you will rejoice at remembering these hard days”. It was very difficult then to believe her, yet it gave me the encouragement to continue to pray. It was then that we received from her a registration sheet for the Original ME.

Gabor:

When we arrived at the facility, full of doubts and uncertainty, we both were distrustful. The orientations given by the priest are still in my ears. Like a tuning fork, the vivencia shared by the team couples brought up in me the deeply buried, unresolved issues. I shared on most questions with my wife, at first in a rather shy way, then more and more freely. The Saturday night liturgy was a catharsis - an experience we can never forget. It was like a second birth. On Sunday we both knew that something new had begun in both of us with the help of the Holy Spirit. We were tuned to one another and we were able to pray together.

Tunde:

During the days of the Encounter we received such spiritual strength and support that we were able to overcome our crisis, and began to rebuild the above mentioned bridge. Our deep sharings helped us get closer to one another and, as a couple, we developed a deep relationship with God. Our life gradually returned to normal, and it was only then that we thought we had to give also to others what we had received through the OME, because people *do not light a lamp and put it under a basket, but rather they put it on a stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house (Mt 5:15)*. Since then we have joyfully witnessed Jesus who lives in us, and we have been trying to live with open hearts and ears so as to hear the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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If there is a desire to spread the “Good News”, the Lord will provide the way.

Shuko and Hikari Fukazawa – Iwate, Japan

Husband:

One day, while my wife and I were praying, the passage of the Bible that we opened to was *Ephesians 3:14–19*. “*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you*

may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

This Scripture passage renewed my awareness that being rooted in the Father is precisely what gives meaning to every family. In the course of 20 years, through more than 20 Encounter experiences, we individually, as a couple, and even with our kids as a family, are all thoroughly convinced that the fact of the family is a gift from God that is definitely the rock on which our house is built.

We were married and our first child, a daughter, was born, and I was baptized shortly afterward. She was two years old when we first experienced ME. At the time we thought we had a very happy life together. But if we had not attended ME, more than likely I would never really have experienced God, nor would I have ever known the deep significance of the Sacrament of Marriage.

In the first verses of Ephesians, Paul emphasizes that in God we have the first family. For me, when I read the word “Father” in the Epistle, Fr. Donnon comes to mind as: the “*Father*” that strongly made us aware of the importance of family; the “*Father*” that told us that we all have the possibility of considering ours to be the best family in the world; the “*Father*” that, through the sharing of his own personal experiences helped us to realize that “Jesus is alive and present here”; the “*Father*” that even showed us his tears because of his love for family; the “*Father*” who forgave and embraced the prodigal son that I am; the “*Father*” we traveled with and ate with; the “*Father*” that has often shown me Jesus Christ. If this “*Father*” had not been a part of our lives, we would not have this 7 member family.

We may still be a long way off from being “*the best family in the world*”, but we do feel that the graces of the Encounters have led us to look upon ourselves in a favorable light. In other words the spirit of the Encounter may not yet be overflowing, but little by little it is spilling out into our lives.

In the path that we have walked as a family throughout the past 20 years along with the Encounter we have been able to “*live with firewood.*” There are millions of people throughout the world who split wood and burn it. They use it for heating and cooking. But few, if any, at the same time, think about their families, and tie that up with what they feel about marriage spirituality. God has given our family the grace of having the chance to be able to share on that, through the unusual task writing a book about it. The book has two themes: “Splitting Firewood” and “Living with Firewood”; but, in fact, it is a book on the importance of family. The printing company has nothing at all to do with Christianity. Nevertheless, the book is filled with things like the fact that every day, together as husband and wife, we pray the Peace Prayer of St. Francis; we share on the Bible passages on deepening

family relationships. The editor accepted the book just as it was. That kind of a book is not what you might call a best seller (of course in the plan of God it may possibly someday become a best seller) nevertheless shortly after it was published it was treated of by the mass media on television, radio and newspapers. The point that was most focused on was “*deepening family relationships*”. If it were a book that simply treated of the material facts concerning practical aids in the use of firewood and the burning of it, it would not only be considered as something obvious, but it would also not touch the hearts of the readers.

During this year in our Prefecture on two succeeding TV channels, there were two programs, one 15 minutes and the other a whole hour on the theme: “*Living With Firewood To Warm The Family*”. The television director who planned the one hour program had read the book and seems to have been very much affected by it. The actors were the members of our family. The broadcast was limited to our Prefecture, but I think that some families felt something in their hearts and were influenced by it.

What I have really been saying up to now is that the source of energy for us as a couple and as a family for the past 20 years has been the Encounter, through which we have discovered the tremendous energy of the family. The Lord has given us the opportunity to be a witness of that energy, showing the importance of family, through the instrument of a book. What makes us very happy is that we value gathering with our 5 children to pray, and that the children as they grow older, pass on this spirit of the Encounter. What is going to happen in the future? My wife and I look forward to it with hope and joy.

As a couple, we pray to God that through the living out of the Encounter and deepening our sacramental life, we will be able to continue to evangelize with the message of the warmth of the family.

Wife

The graces that we have received from the Encounter have been manifold, even though they have not been earth-shattering, but rather something flowing quietly and warmly within our family. We were married 22 years ago. We have completely opposite personalities so that, even though we truly want to be the kind of family that the Lord wants, almost every day we quarrel about the most insignificant things, misunderstand one another, and often find ourselves in a state of disunity. My husband and I: he is very warm and listens intently, I am feather-brained; he does everything to the best of his ability, I take the easy road give up easily; he very severely tells me what I should do and not do, I immediately cave in and agree to follow his instructions. We are very much like Charley Brown (I’m not OK, but you are) and Lucy (I’m OK but you are not) that Fr. Donnon often refers to in order to illustrate different temperaments. But one of the many things that have become

clear to us is the need to strive to become like Snoopy, which Fr. Donnon uses as a symbol of one who expresses a desirable personality trait: I'm OK, and so are you"!

When we first attended ME, one of the things my husband said in answer to the question: "What is something that I find it difficult to share with my spouse?" was that I thought nothing of putting on the table a soya sauce bottle that has the soya sauce spilled all over the outside. It was a revelation for me to discover that such a trivial incident of daily life was the subject of something difficult to share, and that alone was a big source of grace for me during that first ME.

Twenty years have passed since then, and every year I have received more and graces from the Encounters, but every time we prepare our talks as a team I recall the spirit of the soya sauce bottle, and realize that it is not meaningless to share on the most trivial things. I have learned that, even though my husband and I don't have a great deal in common, the effort to get to know one another better is something that the Lord desires for our family. That is an important step. This is really a great grace.

In the course of twenty years the children have increased to 5. Obviously our environment has changed. As we get older, we realize that our own power is inadequate to deal with communicating about the children, our respective parents, our economic situation, our health, etc. etc. This has been a source of anxiety and uncertainty. It is precisely because of that that we feel the need to participate in the Encounters, seek out Father Donnon's guidance, share with one another, pray with one another, and spend quiet time together. The Encounter is always a place where we can return to God.

Especially as the parents of children who are maturing into adulthood, their beginning to date is a source of worry for us as their father and mother. We have tried to get the message to them that learning to really love someone of the opposite sex can be a beautiful thing. We have emphasized that it is important to respect that person, to be open, and never do anything on the sly. Both our oldest daughter and our son are dating now and they have introduced their dating partners to us. As parents we have been pleased that they wanted to introduce them to us. This too is a grace that we have received from the Encounter.

This is the testimony of the oldest daughter of the above couple:

Kai Fukazawa

God has continually said to me: "Everything is going to be OK"! But it was Fr. Donnon, through the SADE, who helped me to appreciate that expression. I am a person who is always worrying. People have said to me, "Why are you letting such a little thing bother you so much?" When I am worn out with worrying, I

sometimes feel like shouting out in a loud voice: “Am I really OK?”

I remember well that, before the experience of the SADE I was unable to find anyone to respond to my shouts of pain. Each succeeding day was one of suffering. But through the “Encounter with self” step of the SADE, I was able to discover someone to respond to my plea and say with the same tone and the same softness: “Everything is going to be OK”. That was precisely the message I received when Fr. Donnon responded with those words. It was some time ago, but my brother once said: “Father Donnon has the scent of the sun”. For me he is a “Sun” that enfolds everything, is always warm, and is always present, and for that reason gives me with a feeling of security.

I am now in college, and the theme of a dissertation that I am writing is: “The Role of the Family”. What strongly influenced me to choose that theme was a “Gathering of Families”, and the Encounter for couples, which took place before I made a SADE. Through this study, I have strongly felt that the mission of the home is to help us to safeguard, express, and communicate love. That’s why I feel strongly that I want to become a mother, have a family, and pass on to my children the many lessons that the Lord has taught me through the Encounter.

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Even the most trivial expression can have a profound influence.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the pastor of our church and to all of those involved with ME. Beginning with graces I received from the Cursillo, and continuing with my experience of the SADE, the subsequent gatherings and sharings there developed a wonderfully warm environment which was a tremendous support for me who had just been baptized.

I remember Father Donnon mentioning how his mother, in a little thing like taking a drink of cold water would say, “Thanks be to God”; That really touched my heart, because it made me realize how grateful I should be for the many wonderful gifts that the Lord has given to me. Another simple expression that I heard at the Encounter and that has been a support to me, especially at those times when I have felt down in the dumps was: “*God does not make junk*”. Indeed, I have once again been made aware that the Lord does work in our lives in apparently inconsequential ways, and I just wanted to share that I consider that to be a grace for which I am grateful.

Another testimony:

Fr. Donnon

Another person seems to have been helped in daily life by an expression used

off-handedly during the ME to illustrate that we too often get upset about trivial things: “It doesn’t matter”. She considered being made aware of that kind of an attitude on life was itself a grace. There are, obviously, important things that do matter very much. Much of what upsets us can just as easily be dismissed as unimportant in the long run, because eventually things will work out. She shared that she might say: “God is taking his time coming”, or “Oh, what a mistake I made”, or “I’m not very good at this”, etc. The best attitude to take at times like that would be: “It doesn’t matter”. She wrote that one time in conversation with her husband they were conversing about a certain problem, and calling to mind what Fr. Donnon had said about getting upset about trivial things, said to her husband: “It’s OK, it’s OK!” He scolded her and told her she was irresponsible. Nevertheless, despite his response to a situation that she considered not important enough to worry about, she was grateful for the grace to be freed from the tendency that she had had to be overly concerned about minor matters. She had discovered through the Encounter that this is something that can be applied to daily life.

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The response of one sister asked to share her experience.

Sr. Maria Goretti Inesawa – Tokyo, Japan

Dear Fr. Donnon,

I totally agree with your plan to compile a booklet containing the graces people have received through ME and the FIRES programs, because I think it will help to spread the “*Spiral of graces*” wider and wider. When I read your letter requesting testimonies, I thought I would like to add mine among them. My own role in the history of ME in Japan is very small, and you may even have forgotten all about it, but I thought I would share it anyway.

I believe it was in 1976, when you returned from your vacation in the United States, that you were in the churchyard, raised both hands and shouted, “Sister I brought back something that will be very good for our parish!” (ME had already begun, so it was probably the news and, with it the expectation, that you had met Fr. Calvo and that he had promised to visit Japan.) Two days later you came into the teachers’ room of the kindergarten and asked me to check on some papers that you had written in Japanese. It was fairly deep stuff, beyond my comprehension, but after hearing your explanation I put it into appropriate Japanese. Next it had to be printed. Do you remember? The mother of one of the kindergarten children had one of those old Japanese typewriters and she typed and printed it. This became a ritual, with all of the kindergarten teachers also helping – sorting and stapling the papers, etc., They were filled with joyful excitement. Indeed something new and wonderful was in the process of being born in the parish. After that the couples who participated in the Encounter began to do the printing, so the teachers did not have to do it anymore. But your enthusiasm, and the enthusiasm of the ever-increasing number of participating couples overflowed into the entire church as well as the

kindergarten, and this resulted in a wonderful atmosphere. The fact that all of the kindergarten teachers but one (and she was an exception only because the man she married objected to it) were baptized is a manifestation of this. It was a joy to have had a small part in the early days of ME in Japan, and each of the teachers (who also attended the SADE) although they are now spread out here and there, is each in her own way living out the spirit of the Encounter.

Through the experience of ME, many of the husbands and children of the Catholic women in the church, as well as of the kindergarten, were baptized. We had many families who came to know the joy of having the same faith. For me, who have worked in other kindergartens where the influence of ME did not exist, that was a miracle. I think it would be a good idea to look into the number that have been baptized up to now.

* * * * *

Whenever graces are received, they become even more meaningful when they are shared, as is inherent in the following testimony. For 25 years Tom and Trudy Ryan have been very close associates of Fr. Calvo in delivering the message of FIRES throughout the world, acting as his "Helper Couple". They have done this by not only planning his itineraries for his many trips, but inevitably accompanying him to whatever place in the world he has been called. In responding to this call from the Lord, they have been a great support to Fr. Calvo.

Tom and Trudy Ryan – USA

In 1981 we learned that Father Calvo was living in Washington, D. C. We were so grateful to him for the gift of ME that we wanted to meet him. Trudy wrote him a note asking him to come to our home. We were thrilled he accepted.

So one cold December evening Tom picked up him and Jose Fernandez his assistant, to bring them to our home. On the way, they kept telling Tom about all these wonderful FIRES Programs, and he kept telling them we were so involved in M.E. we didn't have time to be involved in FIRES. We had a wonderful evening sitting by the fire talking with Fr. Calvo and Jose. After Tom took them home, he was so excited about FIRES himself that we called the Priors in Pennsylvania and signed us up to do a training for MReE in Pennsylvania. That was the start of our 25+ year involvement with FIRES.

The Lord has blest us with a wonderful, godly family. We believe a big part of this is due to our association with Fr. Calvo and Jose Fernandez, his assistant..

In 1982 we started to work with Father Calvo and Jose in the FIRES Ministry as the Helper Couple. During the summer of 1982, we made a FE AT HOME. Father

Calvo and Jose came to our home to present it to us and our five sons. It was a wonderful, godly, deep, sharing experience.

At one point our son, Rick, confided that he never felt loved. We were devastated. We all rallied around him and showered him with love and affirmation, which has continued through the years. That was 25 years ago. It is really heartwarming to see the wonderful husband and father Rick has become. Once again, the deep, open and honest sharings Father Calvo advocates paid big dividends for Rick, his brothers, and us. ME taught us God's priorities – the Lord first, then self, each other, our children, family and friends. Regular and loving communication is the key to a happy marriage.

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Small graces have a way of being great graces.

Hiroko and Hideyuki Tokura – Maizuru, Japan

The Encounters and our family:

Our involvement in the FIRES programs has had an enormous influence on our family. That is what we would like to share. When we were college students in Niigata Prefecture in Japan, we attended a SADE but our real involvement began with our attending, in the fall of 1998, an EE at FCC in Tokyo as our marriage preparation course. Subsequent to that we experienced ME and became a team couple both for the EE and ME. We are now a family of four with children ages three and one.

During the ME, Fr. Donnon said that the greatest gift that a father can give to his children is to love the mother, and the same is true of the mother, i.e. to love the father. He also said that when a small child is raised in the environment of the parents continually arguing with one another the child has a tendency to blame himself for their failing to accept one another. For the first 5 years of our married life we feared that we would remain childless and, during that time we only dimly understood the meaning of that phrase, but once our first child was born we soon realized how true it is. When I would return home from work, I would eat first, while my wife and the children would be engrossed in watching television. Now I was raised in a family where you could watch television only for designated programs. With that background I wanted to take time to have a conversation with the family. Accordingly, I tried my best to encourage my wife not to spend so much time watching television. My wife, on the other hand, was raised in a family where the television, in a sense, took the place of a radio, so that it was always on; and she just had this custom of sitting down before the television after doing the housework all day. I simply couldn't accept that, because it deprived us of the possibly to share with one another in a relaxed environment. So I bluntly made it known that I found it unacceptable. That made for a frosty atmosphere. I don't recall the precise

incident, except that we were conversing in an unusually strained fashion and the baby suddenly began to cry bitterly. With that I immediately remembered what Fr. Donnon had said, thinking that even though she is so little, she seems to understand and feel this strained relationship and is crying out of loneliness and anxiety. I then began to think that after spending the whole day minding the kids and doing the housework she has the right to do whatever she wants when that busy day is finished. And she, at the same time, knowing that I don't like television very much, made every effort not to spend that time watching television, and she began to ask if it would be alright to watch some special programs that she wanted to see.

Another thing that Fr. Donnon brought out in one of his talks that has helped me to be more aware of how much I am responsible for tensions that arise. He pointed out that one way to avoid or overcome symptoms of spiritual divorce is to consciously use the first person as the subject of a sentence. In this way, you take responsibility for your own negative feelings. Using the subject you are too often construed as putting the blame on one's spouse for one's negative feelings. For example instead of "You are always late for dinner" saying something like: "I am disappointed that you were late for dinner again." When we were first married I continually spoke in a sarcastic way by saying things like: "When are you going to clean this place up" or "Are you going to wait until they get moldy before you wash the dishes" rather than: "I think the place needs to be tidied up a bit" or "I think it would be good if you would wash the dishes before you watch TV". I began to realize that taking responsibility for my own negative feelings, and not putting the blame on my wife, is indeed a helpful way to express oneself.

We moved recently, and I handed my medicine box to my wife to keep it separate from the mountain of boxes that had been packed. She neglected to put it in the place where I always kept it, and when it came to for me to take my next dose it was nowhere to be found, so we both ended up searching for it and found it in the kitchen. The point is, if this had happened before we experienced ME I would certainly have said in an angry tone: "From now on be careful about where you put things!", and she would shoot back: "Even before we got married you were always saying things that made me feel foolish". But through the influence of ME both of us have changed in our attitude toward one another.

Again through the influence of ME, we have grown considerably from the first days of our marriage. We are now more understanding of others, and especially our children, when they are bold or selfishly demanding, which otherwise might be considered bold or selfish demands. We can now look at their good points, and consider the loud demands of little children to be something normal.

Up to now there has never been a time when we were able to attend Mass without our daughter demanding that she be taken outside. As a matter of fact, from what I

remember when I was a child, I found the time of Mass to be long and boring, and I too had insisted on being taken outside. But recently I simply said to her, “You have to be quiet now”, and although she did flit around nearby, she was quiet right to the end. We were able to attend a full Mass. It was as if the Lord Himself were watching over her. When I saw how she made every effort to behave I could say to her from the heart: “You were good a good girl today!” I really think this was a small result from the fact that my wife and I have taken the time to share with one another in a loving way, and our daughter has not had to experience episodes of tension that would make her unconsciously blame herself for our explosions of temper. The afternoon of that same day our daughter did display some boldness, but we both could excuse it because we had that day been made aware of the power of the Mass.

It is in such small details of daily life that we have experienced many graces from the Encounter. We are truly grateful to Fr. Calvo, Fr. Donnon, the teams, and the many people who have prayed for us. When speaking about vivencias during the first step of ME, Fr. Donnon mentioned that Fr. Calvo felt the first call to become a priest as a result of one of his close friends committing suicide. Committing suicide itself is not good, but because of that friend, millions of people throughout the world have been positively influenced, so we would like to thank that friend too for the positive influence he has had on us. May he rest in peace!

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The Self Encounter has been a wonderful source of grace for many unmarried people who have been touched in many small but meaningful ways. The following is just such an example.

In experiencing the SE there were many topics for reflection that gave me an unique opportunity to reflect on and make discoveries about myself. For that reason it was a very valuable experience for me; and I could understand why Fr. Donnon puts so much energy into this important work. I have been sickly ever since I was a little girl and also suffered from post-operative illness. But during the Encounter, through spending time together and sharing with others about many different things, I was able to learn a great deal. After the Encounter, in retaining a relationship with fellow participants, I have discovered that I have been freed from the psychologically weak person that I had been.

I have been blessed with a desire to improve my health. I am thankful for the grace to look toward the future with hope and joy. I really want to thank my friend for inviting me to attend. It is my hope and prayer that more and more people will come to understand the depth and the power of this experience, and will then make every effort to share that light with others.

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So often joy ensues not in spite of, but precisely because of difficulties that arise.

I went to church for the first time the year I graduated from high school. My life had been at a standstill. I thought that I might find salvation through the Church, because I had tried everything else, and nothing seemed to satisfy me. At the time I thought: “Even if I go to church, this strange, empty feeling probably will not go away. But in fact I did become a catechumen, and Father encouraged me to attend a SADE.

At the end of the final Mass on the last day, Father calls each one up to the altar to receive the notebooks that the participants had used during the Encounter, as well as a memento banner. I happened to be seated on the left and very near the altar. When my name was called and I stood up to approach the altar, the large crucifix hanging from the wall behind the altar was in my line of vision, and I had the distinct impression that Jesus was looking directly at me. It was kind of a severe glance. Nevertheless, at a time when my mental attitude was such that living itself was painful and I was really lost, I had the feeling that there was Someone who was able to see and the state of my condition and understand it.

The next day I was in that very same spot and looked up at the Crucifix, but this time I felt that Jesus face was not in that same line of vision. I learned later that many people were praying for the participants of the Encounter. Could it be that because of their prayers the Lord gave me that special grace? Maybe it was just my imagination, or maybe somebody slightly moved the position of the crucifix; or maybe there was something more. The suffering in my heart did not go away, but the thought that there was Someone there to support me gave me the mental power to carry on.

At the end of that Encounter a girl, who later entered the convent, said to me, “You know, Judas wasn’t the only one who betrayed Jesus. Peter did too. The difference is that Peter repented.” Several years later I was baptized. Since then, 24 years have elapsed. Because of his weakness, Peter failed to obey Jesus; but he wept tears of repentance and followed Jesus. But Jesus loved Judas too, even though he was betrayed by him. It helped me a great deal to come to understand the power of repentance.

In the course of time I experienced Encounters many times. I had been raised in a family with absolutely no connection with Christianity, but I did envy people who came from Christian families. Through sharing with others I came to realize that even people from Christian homes have their share of sufferings, and that

realization is itself a grace.

I have received graces from the Lord through experiences other than the Encounters. My husband and my daughter are also Catholics, and our family life is a very happy one precisely because our faith engendered a Christian environment. I credit the happiness in my life now to that first experience of the SADE 25 years ago. Thanks be to God!

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The following testimony exemplifies that Rome was not built in a day:

Noriko Amada – Osaka, Japan

At the time of our marriage, I was a Catholic but my husband was not. I was forever making demands from him, and never feeling fulfilled, I bickered with him every day. My father died shortly after I was born, so I never knew the love of a father. Therefore, I wanted from my husband what I was never able to receive from my father. I wanted a person who would satisfy me by loving me deeply, be kind and tender-hearted and hold me close. This was something that I constantly demanded from my husband, but which I felt that I did not receive from him, and therefore I was always dissatisfied. I was self-centered and immature and, for that reason, we were always clashing with one another.

It was with that kind of a relationship that we were encouraged to make a ME. We attended with the hope that it might help us to communicate at least a little bit better; but in fact with us the opposite was true. We began to clash even more vehemently. Having experienced ME, my demands from him increased, because now I wanted to live out the spirit of the Encounter and felt even more dissatisfied, because I felt I could not do that with someone who has no faith. We were not living as one, but going along on parallel lines.

We made a second ME, and my husband realized that we could not continue to live separate lives on parallel lines, so he decided to study the catechism. After a year and a half of study he was baptized on Holy Saturday of that year. How happy that made me! Now we are a family with the same faith, and now my desire that we pray together can be fulfilled. But the reality was things did not go as I had planned. My husband seemed to consider faith more from a rational point of view rather than from the emotional point of view that I had, making it difficult to express in words. I simply couldn't accept that attitude, even though I should have been grateful for the fact that my husband had been baptized. I couldn't humbly express my gratitude. So for a number of years, since this was too contrasting with the ideal picture that I had in my mind, I continued to be a demanding wife.

As I look back now I realize that the grace of the Encounter was, in fact, gradually working in our lives. Even within our clashes, little by little, we began to deepen our communication, so that we came to be able to accept one another just as we are. I still blow up on occasion, when things don't go my way, but I have been able to overcome that weakness. I am very thankful for that, and the fact that one step at a time we are walking toward unity, which is the most important message that we have received from ME. It had been a long parallel road with all kinds of problems, but now, thanks to ME, with truly heartfelt gratitude we are walking together

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It is always prudent to seek the Lord's Will – as discovered through his Word.

Hioki –Hachinohe, Japan

We first experienced ME 28 years ago when our youngest son, now 31, was only 3 years old. It is with deep gratitude that we recall once again and share with you a very concrete way that we have been helped by a lesson received from the message of ME.

It was at the time that we were living in Tenri in Nara Prefecture, Japan. Both of my parents, who had lived in the homestead in the city of Fukuoka in Kyushu had died, and my younger sister suggested that we tear down the old building and rebuild it together. We went ahead with final plans. My sister received advice from a builder, had the final plans drawn up, and then came to visit us for a final discussion.

We gathered as a family and discussed everything until late at night. Even our high school son, shared the big dreams he had for a new house. So with the expectation of having a beautiful home, we decided that we would sign a contract with the builder. That night, however, I suddenly woke up about 3:00 o'clock, and I had a feeling of uneasiness. Is this really the right thing to do? I mentioned this to my husband and he said, "Come to think of it, remember during the Encounter Father Donnon saying, 'Before buying a car, a house or whatever, did you think about asking the Lord what he thinks by seeking his advice through praying the Scriptures?' Let's pray about this as a family!"

The next morning we lit a candle, surrounded it, and as always, opened the Scripture at random to the passage: "*Which of you intending to build a tower does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it. Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish it, all who see it will begin to ridicule him.*" (Luke 14:28–29). All of us were astonished. We understood this to be a message from the Lord. As a matter of fact, we were planning to go ahead without sufficient funds to pay for a new house. I did feel sorry for my sister who made that long trip in order to receive our agreement to

build the house, but in the long run she is the one who received the greatest grace. The initial plan was to build a single 650 square meter house for our family in the middle of the property. But after the discernment we made, having sought the Lord's desire, we decided to divide the property in two parts of 325 square meters apiece. My sister then built a 3 story building with 15 apartments on her portion. As a single woman, with the income from that, she can live quite comfortably. And we, on our part, have sufficient property to build a dwelling for our family on the other half of the property. Thus, the final decision was an experience that greatly helped all of us to live our respective lives in a more suitable way.

This is only one of many graces that we have received from the Encounter. We have lived in three different places in the country, and in each place have had the opportunity to be involved as a team for the experience. We have three sons. Each of them, because of the Encounter, have come to realize the importance of family. They are all out in society now, but they all talk about someday in the future living together as a family. We are confident that as long as we live out the spirit of ME each one of us will be able to carry out the will of the Lord. We believe that in some way the relationship that we have as a couple now will continue even after we have left this world. We are making every effort to live our lives in this world by going in the same direction. We would like to thank all of those who have made it possible for us to experience ME in the first place, and to have been such a wonderful support to us throughout the years.

* * * * *

Praying together is important – and easy – but it requires taking that first step.

Fifteen years ago we learned the importance of praying together as a couple and as a family. Before that it was only on particular occasions, like praying for the recovery of someone close who was sick, when one or the other member of the family was celebrating a birthday, or some other special time that we would pray together as a family. We might both desire to be able to say: "Let's pray", or "We have to pray over this", but neither one of us had the courage to overcome the obstacle of embarrassment in order to take that first step. We simply did not communicate.

In May of 1997, we attended a ME and received the grace of being able to take another look at ourselves as individuals and as a couple. At the time my husband had a serious illness. He went to heaven seven years later. Despite so many years of living together as a Christian husband and wife, it was only in the last seven years of our time together that we prayed together as a couple. But I am deeply grateful for those seven years, as comparatively short as they were.

We prayed before a statue of the Holy Family that we received when we were first

married. Even then my husband could barely kneel, so we remained standing and prayed from the heart a prayer that he himself wrote. For me that is an important treasure that even now brightens my heart. Right now I am living together with my husband's younger sister, but I am sure that from heaven he joins his prayers together with ours.

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Sabine, the coordinator for the SADE in Germany, submitted the following testimonies by participants.

Sabine Rhein – Germany

Some vivencias from a few of the participants of a recent SADE:

It was a very deep, very good, and very fruitful for each of the participants. The boys and girls were very open – during SADE I talked to many of them...

...Moni and Stefan told me that during SADE they decided to seek God.

...Barbara decided to look for help (spiritual director or therapy) in order to let the wounds brought about by the death of her father be healed.

...When she got the letter from her mother, Verena cried and cried and cried... for joy!!! Now she dreams of becoming a team member.

...Katharina couldn't stop smiling happily during the whole weekend.

...Fabian decided to renew the relationship with his father's second wife (his mother has died).

...During the step "understanding in the family" a young boy who was responsible for our meals (kitchen team) was suddenly sitting in our group room, listening to Fr. Bernhard's words and to the vivencias – I know that this boy has many problems with his father and, although he was there only for the one step that had to do with understanding, he listened intently. In this step Fr. Bernhard told about his own father and also a girl on the team told about her father... I felt the heart of our kitchen boy trembling... thanks to God!!!

A vivencia of Sabine – a dream about the FIRE of FIRES in Lauda (june 2007)

If one person is dreaming alone...

On the night to the 27th April 1999 I had a dream: I dreamed that we were planning a SADE in Lauda. I was very happy about this dream, because I felt how precious SADE was for my own life – and I also felt the great desire to share this treasure with others (tears are becoming pearls!). One day after my dream, on 28th April

1999 I was at my parents' home, celebrating my grandma's 85th birthday with my family. Suddenly the door bell rang. My father opened the door and everybody was deeply touched. FR. URBAN SAUERBIER from Japan stood in the doorway. He had never visited us – he didn't even know exactly where we lived, and no one had expected him. Of course he didn't know that we were just celebrating a great FAMILY feast. Fr. Urban is the priest who brought SADE from Japan to Germany. As soon as I saw him I thought: "YES, yesterday's dream will come true!"!! On the 29th of April I wrote a little letter to God praying that he might fulfill my dream. Until today I have kept this little letter on my bedside table.

If two persons are dreaming together

In September 1999, I invited three girls from Lauda, Nicole, Lena and Moni, to a SADE in Eschwege with Fr. Heribert. On Saturday evening during this SADE, Nicole said to me: "What do you think about making SADE in Lauda?!" I was so touched!!!

In April 2000, on the day of my father's 60th birthday, the first SADE in Lauda took place. Six other SADEs followed. SADE became the spiritual heart of my work in Lauda. More and more participants and team members came, felt the *fire* in their hearts, kept burning and longed to share this *FIRE* with others. Our 7th SADE in Lauda took place from April 27–29, 2007 – exactly 8 years after my dream!

If many persons are dreaming together...

Seven SADEs have been held in Lauda. A theologian once told me that 7 is the number of fullness (3+4, heaven + earth), the number of the fulfilling of a dream... The number 8 leads to something new, to a new birth. After the 7th SADE I will leave Lauda and with my departure the SADEs for young boys and girls will stop. The SADE team has decided to look for a new way of keeping the *FIRE* burning. YES, we trust, that there will be a new birth!!!! And, we all dream together and sing:

If one person is dreaming alone, it's only a dream.

If many persons are dreaming together,

It is the beginning of a new reality!

Keep dreaming our dream!!!

(Dom Helder Camara)

On May30, 2006 Fr. Gabriel Calvo wrote to me:

„Dearest Rainbow Sabine... keep dreaming JESUS' DREAMS."

Thanks be to God for enflaming the *fires* of the SADE in Lauda. Through the Powerful *fire* of the Holy Spirit may this *fire* continue to burn and spread, which is *his* Dream too.

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Testimony of a sister of the Annunciation who experienced the graces of ME and observed their effect on a parish.

Sister Suwabe – Osaka, Tokyo

ME exudes the breath of love. I first heard about ME when I was assigned to the church in Takasaki, Gumma Prefecture. Fr. Joseph Ehrhardt was the pastor at the time, and Yuri Takahashi was the catechist. The Takegamis and the Yamadas were team couples. It was a very lively community filled with the Breath of the Holy Spirit. There were many baptisms of young and old, men and women, married couples, couples about to be married, and entire families. Indeed the Church was not a building, but the Body of Christ, and a community spiritually bound together by the love of Christ.

Now, 20 years later, I would like to share the things that rise in my heart as I recall encountering Jesus through ME and, how through it, Jesus became the Gospel in my life. The experience began with the participants introducing themselves, followed by a period of encounter with self and a series of other talks and sharings, receiving prayer cards indicating that we were being prayed for, and each couple receiving a banner as a memento of the experience. One of the large banners hanging from the wall that made an impression on me was a banner depicting Jonathan Seagull on which were the words: “Deeper and Higher”. I can never forget the fact that we were being prayed for by people that we did not even know, the realization of all the planning that is entailed in presenting a ME, the help offered by the priest and team couples, etc. I was filled with gratitude toward my family, especially my parents, and I recommended to my parents that they also experience it; and they gladly accepted the invitation. They renewed their marriage vows, and even now at the ages of 89 and 83 respectively they are well, living in harmony and still very much in love with one another.

In present day Japanese society, as a result of bullying, abuse, division between parents and children, divorce, etc., there are about 4 people who commit suicide every hour. People are lonely, there is little support or love within families, and so we have a society that is dying. We should want to become a Church whose members witness the Gospel within this kind of a society, witnesses of Jesus and planting the seeds joy, a Church living with Christ and working together seeking the joy that He promised to us.

At present I am at the Ikuno church in Osaka. Last Sunday a couple from the Hyogo church came to introduce ME and, after Mass, encouraged people to participate. I also would like to see as many couples as possible attend. I encouraged my acquaintances to do so. I am a very small and weak messenger taking a very small step in an attempt to bring about the Breath of Love.... But I do pray: “Send forth your Spirit. Renew all things”.

* * * * *

Balazs Menesi from Hungary sent the following letters

Dear Fr Donnon,

The recent Retorno was a wonderfully grace-filled experience. The ages of participants varied; indeed, it was more of a Self Retorno than a SADE Retorno.

One vivencia we found to be amazing and quite similar to what has already happened in Japan to a man named Peter. This man, also named Peter, registered just one day before the Retorno began. During Sunday morning prayer, when each opens the Gospels at random and read a few verses, the verses that he opened to and read were, “*Jesus asked, Peter do you love me? ... Feed my lambs.*” (John 21:15). He was deeply moved and said, “Before this morning prayer, I wished just one thing: that it should not be this passage...” Later we learned that he has struggled a lot with himself over his possible priestly vocation.

And in another letter

Dear Fr Gabriel, Fr Donnon, FIRES Family,

We are glad to inform you that almost one hundred people took part in two different FIRES programs last weekend. We had a SE with Fr Tibor (over 30 participants), and our friends Kalman and Vera had an EE with Fr Domonkos (over thirty participant couples). We have received a lot of feedback showing that the programs have meant a lot for everyone.

We quote some of what participants said at the end of the SE:

A middle-aged non believer:

– The acceptance and love I have experienced in the small group has meant a lot to me. The small group prayer for one another (laying on of hands) was especially moving.

An elderly woman:

– I have never been at a retreat which treated so deeply the healing of human relationships.

A young man in his twenties:

– I went to a church school and some years have passed since then. For all these years this is the first time I have felt interested in, and touched by, a program related to faith.

A non believer (?) in her thirties:

– I have never been in the company of so many loving people. During the Saturday

night liturgy, I experienced a warmth and peace I had never felt before. Maybe this is indeed the way I must begin again to live my faith. .

An elderly woman:

– I used to go to a school run by religious sisters. We used to deal a lot with knowing oneself. I would not have believed that I could learn anything new about myself at the age of 68.

Another non-believer:

– Now I know what to expect. I will definitely come and make the next SE

A young woman:

– The Saturday night liturgy brought spiritual healing for me. I began to reconcile with my late grandmother, with whom I used to have a very bad relationship.

“This weekend has been a very special one. I cannot compare it with anything I have ever experienced in my life. Afterwards, the week began differently than any other week. It is difficult to put it in words but something has changed. Something has changed in me. I felt as if I had put on more colorful, happier eye glasses in the morning, which I have been wearing ever since the SE program. I hope to wear them for a long time. We had wonderful experiences in my group. We opened up to one another. There were moments full of emotion that made an impact on us which we cannot, and do not want to, shake off. Therefore we decided to keep in contact and meet regularly. In the meantime we will support each other’s spiritual development with the help of the opportunities offered by modern techniques. I do not know yet what I really want, but I have found my Bible (it was on the very bottom shelf of a cupboard) and I have started reading the New Testament. Slowly but surely, I will read it from beginning to end. I will try Sunday Mass, too.”

* * * * *

The following are a few of the testimonies from among the 53 participants at a Family Communication Workshop in Hong Kong

Dear Father Donnon,

My family thought the workshop was very worthwhile. It benefited us so much that I enthusiastically told my friend the next day at Bible study about it, and recommended it to her family to sign up when the opportunity comes again.

After we got home, our family talked about the day. For the children, they liked the workshop because they were given the opportunity to speak about their true feelings about their parents and siblings. For the adults, we get to hear what heartfelt perceptions each member of the family had of each other. It was valuable

because we heard some revealing surprises in our family.

Getting the family together and taking time out of our normal busy lives is such a good way to spend the day. That a family can be led to be honest with each other is so needed, for everyone.

We also liked the setting/locale of the Family Workshop. Shek O is a beautiful site, and it is not a place that most people go often, so there was a small touristy bonus to attending the workshop. The food was great, thanks to good planning and equally good contributions. The timing was great, a public holiday in the middle of the week, and the length was great, no overnights.

The message: the transforming power of love (the morning's theme) and reconciliation between family members and reconciliation with God (the afternoon's theme). Another message we got, was how much love the priests have for God and his people. Father Donnon, your entire talk, filled with illustrations of how Jesus died for us, and how much God loves us, and was an example of dedication and conviction, not to mention, humor. Father Wurth's dedication too was evident, for staying the whole day with us. It definitely, should be continued.

Dear Father Donnon,

Thank you again for being with us in Hong Kong and for the Family Workshop. We had a good day and I thought it was worthwhile. In particular, the questionnaire that you asked us to fill out and the opportunity to share those thoughts within the family was very good. You were quite right to encourage everyone to be totally honest. The family prayer session was also good... getting everyone to participate on an equal basis. I read Vivian Lee's evaluation and surely agree with it. It's certainly very thorough. I'd judge everything by the results and comments of the participants. Surely the Family Retreat was itself reason enough to justify your efforts. The few participants I talked to thought it was very helpful for the family. That's enough for me. Anything that builds up our families is a good thing. I'll support all parish events and will take part when time and energy allow. All the best always! Thanks for your leadership efforts to build up our community.

Fr. Wurth

Dear Father Donnon,

The workshop was a powerful experience for me and my family. What I mean by powerful is this: It enabled my children to pray in ways that I have not heard. The spirituality they showed was not what I expected, so I was overjoyed with the gift that God gave me and Dennis that day. I prayed for the Holy Spirit to fill them and he came!!!

The discussion on communication was particularly helpful and provided us all with

insight on how differently we perceive each other. It essentially reminded us of the importance of “talking to each other” more rather than just “being with each other” in our busy life-style here in Hong Kong.

The message was clear: communication with each other is as essential as our communication with God is.

I believe that every family should have an opportunity to attend the Family Workshop, to see why God created the family in the first place!! It was a real eye-opener and a blessed time. It definitely should be continued.

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Living in Illusion, Disillusion, Joy

Fusako Iwamoto – Yokohama, Japan

We attended ME at the Franciscan Retreat House in Kiryu in 1988. That was 19 years ago. On the second night, I heard that there were a number of people lined up on the second floor to talk to Father Donnon. I now know that it was a line to go to confession, but at the time I was totally ignorant of that, got in the line and when my turn came I sat down in front of Father’s chair. I asked him, “How do you get to be a model couple like the team couples?” Father just smiled and said:, “There is still another day to go.” At the greeting of peace at the last Mass all kinds of people, smiling joyfully, came leaping toward. I didn’t know what was going on and I was overwhelmed. My husband became uncommonly full of life, and on the train ride back home he just kept talking and talking. He was still full of joy when we arrived home and I remember our daughter saying, “If this Encounter thing changed daddy so much, I’d like to experience it too.” All I could think of was what in the world happened? But I did strongly feel that this was exactly what we both needed, so after that, with full confidence, we experienced each of the Encounters many times. (*The time of Illusion*)

By no means, however, did everything go smoothly. Both of us experienced hot and cold attitudes in our experience of the Encounters. Even just before boarding the train to go to an Encounter, and while on the way my husband would say things like, “What’s the use of a couple like us attending. I’m not going to go.” Then during the dialogue time of the Encounter there were a number of times that he would just lie there on the bed and make no attempt at dialogue.

I started going to Mass at St. Ignatius, the Jesuit Church in Yotsuya, and to attend the RCIA process there. I experienced tremendous peace when I spent time in prayer. At that time, faced with trying to take care of my mother who had cancer but was living at a distance, our older daughter’s wedding, our younger daughter struggling with examinations for a qualification license, a somewhat dissatisfied

and out of humor husband, all of this added up to a daily life of suffering. Yet amidst all those problems I felt uplifted by the words of Jesus: *“Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28)*. That became for me an encounter with God.

When my husband retired, he studied the catechism with Fr. Donnon and on Easter Sunday in April, 1994 we were baptized together. But that did not make life any easier. In August of 1997 it was discovered that my husband had advanced lung cancer due to long years of heavy smoking. It was diagnosed as being in stage three and that he had only about one year to live from the time it started; and it was thought that it started about March. At a weekend in which we were involved as a team for ME at the Family House in Ota, which Mr. and Mrs. Matsumoto had built just for FIRES programs, during the night he suddenly had difficulty breathing. Actually toward the end of that same month of March, I had already left the house to help out at a SADE in Shiomi and my husband had gone to attend a reunion of fellow workers from his former company. Just at the time he was to have delivered a speech his voice gave out on him. Hearing that husky voice, the doctor surmised that the problem had re-occurred, and he sent him to a hospital for an examination to determine whether or not to operate. He was taken to a room for the examination and it wasn't until nine hours later that he was returned to his own room. My daughter and I waited and waited, and we kept praying all during that time. In the end we were faced with the sudden verdict that, from the time the problem began, he had at most one year to live. By that time we were into August, and if the doctor's prediction was right, he now had barely six months to live. When I informed Fr. Donnon I will never forget what he said, “God's power reaches far beyond medical treatment. We just have to keep hoping. God's ways are not our ways.” On another occasion when he came to visit my husband, when he was leaving he said, “There have been great improvements in medicine, so we have to put our trust in them too. More than likely he will have intravenous injections. At those times tell him to say a prayer like, ‘Lord enter into my body now and heal it, while imagining that with each drop the healing power of Jesus will be entering into his body. And anoint him with oil, ok?’” I will never forget those words, and I encourage anyone reading this also to keep them in mind.”

In October of 1994 we went on a tour to Rome and the Vatican. This was on the occasion of a “World Family Day with the Pope”. At that time we met Sato Satoshi and his wife Ikuko for the first time. They are from Hakodate and made a special trip to Tokyo to visit my husband in the hospital. While praying for my husband Satoshi said, “Even if you have to go by wheel chair, we're going to take you to Lourdes.” I thought, “Have I ever done anything like that for anyone?” We also received a number of letters from the Uemuras from Sapporo in which were included words of encouragement as well as photographs and a cassette tape that they always listen to. This too was a great source of hope and strength. I had the

wonderful feeling that FIRES people were even closer to us than our relatives.

At first my husband's recuperation went smoothly but, on September 9th, without ever informing us that his sickness was cancer, the antidote medicine was inserted directly into a draining tube that had been attached to his side, and with that the state of his health declined sharply and he was in terrific pain. I had the intuition that there was something odd going on and on asking the doctor, for the first time he explained that the medicine was a medicine to prevent adhesions. But on questioning him further he revealed that it was a medicine to treat cancer. Now this was an unusual type of cancer, and patients afflicted with it inevitably die, I wondered, being a university hospital interested in the study of illnesses, whether this was a case they were utilizing for the sake of writing a dissertation. I thought: "I've got to save my husband!" I got on the elevator to go down and have a talk with the doctor in charge, and while I did wonder whether the cancer had spread to other parts of his body, without thinking I kept repeating: "Jesus" as I breathed in, and "Savior" as I exhaled.

When I met the doctor I felt no fear at all. I was calm and collected as I began to talk to him. I felt a calm that I had never before experienced and looking him in the eye, I was able to have a serious conversation with him. He apologized, and coming from the mouth of a university hospital doctor, that really surprised me. I felt strongly that I had an unseen helper with me.

As I went through the trial of nursing my husband I would open the bible, and over and over again the place I opened to was Romans 8:18: "I consider that sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed in us". Believing that the Lord would reveal his Glory, I was able to continue praying full of courage. I drove to the hospital every day, and on the way, would always say the rosary. At last an amazing thing happened. A cauliflower shaped nodule about two centimeters in diameter that had been at the entrance to my husband's lung disappeared. A CT scan was taken to confirm this. All I could think of was that the Glory of the Lord did indeed shine through, and I thanked the Lord for his Word. After four months of hospitalization during which he was treated thirty times with chemo therapy and many dosages of medicine for the treatment of cancer, on the 126th day (Christmas Eve) my husband was released from the hospital. But the doctor told me that even though he was released from the hospital, the cancer would spread to his bones, and that I should be prepared to accept that that would end in his death. Fr. Donnon had said, "There is no need to say that to your husband, because as long as a person lives, he is the one who knows his condition better than anyone else." For that reason, my husband knew that he had cancer, but I didn't tell him what the doctor had said.

At the end of September 1998, the prayer of Mr. and Mrs. Sato was fulfilled. With

a desire to meet the couple from Barcelona ultimately responsible for the existence of ME because of their request to Fr. Calvo that he be their spiritual director, and on the occasion of the 25th. anniversary of FIRES to be celebrated in Rome in conjunction with World Family Day, the two of us, along with our daughter Saori, joined a group of 20 pilgrims to go to Lourdes. We arrived at the airport in Barcelona at 11:00 PM September 26. But despite the late hour, Jaime and Mercedes Ferrer were at the airport to welcome us. I remember that as soon as I laid eyes on them I had a very warm feeling. We stayed four days at a monastery where they had reserved rooms for us. They had told their friends that for those days they would be “in Japan”. In other words that for the time of our stay in Barcelona we were to be their priority. Even though they were both over 80 at the time, they were full of life and really gave us a warm welcome. With Fr. Donnon acting as interpreter for their sharing with us, they guided us through the famous Church of the Holy Family, the Church of Tibi Dabo, and the famous monastery of Monserat, all of which bring back fond memories. The recalling of all of those places, the warmth of our welcome, even the blue sky is something that will always be precious for me.

But the deepest impression I had in Barcelona, more than all the famous places, the delicious food, etc., was the image of a true couple that Jaime and Mercedes Ferrer presented to us. When we left of that couple at the Barcelona Airport, it was a separation that no one could have imagined. Words cannot describe the deep feeling of love and gratitude that we all felt in our hearts. I cannot help but thank God for that wonderful grace.

Another thing that I will never forget is the special joy experienced in attending the early morning Mass in Japanese that we had at the Grotto in Lourdes, with only our group being present. That was a real Gift from the Lord. I thanked the Lord that my husband was able to attend that Mass with us. On the evening of the day that we arrived in Lourdes, while taking part in the daily candlelight procession, he became tired and wanted to sit down, but there were no benches available. It began to rain lightly, and I tried to support my husband who many times appeared as if he were going to fall. I kept thinking over and over again that he has got to rest! Finally we were able to separate ourselves from the crowd in the procession and find a place for him to rest. I told him to wait and I ran to our hotel, quite close to the entrance to the grounds, I grabbed all of the bath towels in our room, borrowed a wheelchair from the hotel, thinking of nothing else but the need to get him back to the hotel to get some rest, I ran into hordes of people returning from the procession and desperately ran around to the side to get to the place where my husband was resting. By chance I ran into my daughter who was walking along the side of the crowd. She assisted in getting my husband into the wheelchair. We put the bath towels around him, and pushing him up the hill, we finally returned to the hotel. At this point, since he was too weak to do anything for himself, we removed his shoes, put

his pajamas on him, and got him into bed. He was exhausted and slept soundly. But I was all tired out and didn't even have the desire to take a bath. I spent the night wondering if we would be able to continue the trip to Rome and Assisi.

The next day, although my husband had not yet recovered from his ordeal, he got in the wheelchair and we took him to the baths. He weighs 80 kilo, and it wasn't easy pushing him. In Lourdes those on stretchers and in wheelchairs are given special preference. At the Grotto during the daytime Masses they are even placed behind the altar where they can see the water flowing from the fountain. Ordinary pilgrims have to wait in line, but since he was in a wheelchair my husband was given a special place so that at last he was able to see the abundant and crystal clear water bubbling out from the fountain. One of the men in charge, although we had no idea what he was saying, pointed at the wheelchair and told us that the wheelchair tire was flat. It was obviously not meant to support the weight of one as heavy as my husband. No wonder it was so hard pushing it. He gestured for us to wait while he went to get some help, but a big man, dressed in the uniform of a volunteer with a belt used to support a stretcher, suddenly appeared. I had seen such a uniform in a book on the miracles of Lourdes, so I immediately recognized him as a volunteer. I thought he would take us to a place where we could get the flat fixed but going along the path to the right of the Grotto I realized that we were going in the direction of the hill that leads to our hotel. As I walked alongside I noticed that the face of the man was slightly reddened and that his left leg was handicapped. I felt sorry to put him out in this way, but I kept silent because I don't understand the language. He too went on in silence. Little by little our hotel came into sight and before I knew it, we were in the lobby of our hotel. Our eyes met and he had a soft and beautiful smile. We never told him what hotel we were staying in, yet here we were. I was really surprised. I was so surprised that I could not understand what had happened. I don't remember how I thanked him. Without saying a word, he left us just suddenly as he had appeared, and I could no longer see the back of his uniform.

Because I had taken my husband to the baths by wheelchair, we were not able to visit Bernadette's home. At first I was disappointed at that, but somehow I now feel that it was God's way of saying that we will leave that until we can take another trip to Lourdes. That's why I would like to go to Lourdes again; and the next time I pray that we will take our older daughter and our grandchildren.

Ten years have passed since my husband was diagnosed with cancer. Even now he has several ailments that accompany daily life. Every day there is the tension of not knowing when we might have to call an ambulance to take him to a hospital. Since he had been afflicted with such a serious illness that was life-threatening, it goes without saying that the whole of his daily life is somehow connected to sickness. For that reason I would like him to take better care of himself. I am weak myself.

Having to support my husband along with the need to overcome other difficulties is at times very trying. There are times when I can't eat or sleep, I am afflicted with depression, and there are times when I have to use a cane to walk. I am improving little by little, but I still find it difficult to meet and talk to people. I fully realize, however, that I am not alone in this. "*Disillusions*" crop up in the lives of everyone in all different forms and degrees.

Everyone is given a mission, and as I reflect on my life, I find that there are things that I have to make every effort to face with determination. It is my personality to try to do things thoroughly and whole-heartedly. Too often that results in collapsing, and invites all kinds of sufferings. But paradoxically, as I look back on my life, that is precisely where the third dimension of *Joy* comes into my life. It is because I had experienced many difficulties that I was able to encounter Jesus. What a grace to know that there is someone to go to in order to be relieved of our burdens. Initially we had the gift of being introduced to ME, which resulted in our Baptism as a couple, as well as the Baptism of both of our daughters and a grand-child. Through FIRES we met many who became friends even closer to us than relatives. We were able to go to Barcelona, Lourdes, Rome, Assisi, Greccio and La Verna where we had what you might call mystical experiences. My husband was healed of lung cancer to the extent of giving him 10 years more of life up to the present time. We believe that God will not abandon us, but will continue to guide us on our way. Through the gift of faith we have the realization that there can be no resurrection without the Cross, and that we can hope for an eternal resurrection precisely because of the crosses that have come our way. The repeated pattern of *Illusion, Disillusion and Joy* is part and parcel of human life, and therefore unavoidable; but through our experience of ME we have come to believe in the *JOY* that follows *DISILLUSION*. I intend to go through the journey of life trying to live out God's Plan and to carry out my mission as well as possible – with praise and gratitude. In conclusion, I refer again to the words of St. Paul: "*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed in us*". (Romans 8:18).

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Another example that graces produce fruit when they are fully appreciated.

Since 1975, we have experienced many FIRES programs either as participants or as a team couple. Through those experiences we have received many messages from the Lord, have become acquainted with many people, and have received wonderful graces for which we are truly grateful. We would like to share just one of these graces that has continued to live within us throughout all of those years. When we first attended ME 32 years ago we received a prayer card from a couple that we had never met. We were greatly touched and grateful to realize that a couple completely unknown to us had been praying for us; and it made us more aware of the

importance of prayer. Because of that experience throughout the past 32 years and right up to the present day, the two of us have joined our hearts in continuing to carry out the commitment we made to pray for the participants of every succeeding Encounter, to say daily the “Couple Prayer” that we were given during the ME, and to listen to the Scripture in order to have the strength to pray. That experience of 32 years ago has ever since continued to be a very important part of our lives.

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Circumstances say, “No way!” God says, “There’s My Way”!

Yoko and Kazumi Miyamoto – Ibaraki, Japan

Wife

In 1975 my husband was transferred from Okinawa to Ota in Gumma Prefecture. We no sooner met Fr. Donnon, the pastor of the Ota church, than he said, “Wait just a second”. He went to pick up an application form for ME, handed it to us, and proceeded to explain it briefly. On learning that it was a two day experience requiring getting someone to watch our kids in a place completely new to us, where we knew no one, I had my apprehensions. First of all, would there be any such people who would take in the children of strangers? Well in fact there was no need to worry about that at all, for a couple immediately volunteered. There is no way to ever thank them enough.

Husband

When I was transferred to Ota my wife, being Catholic, went to Mass every Sunday, and I was her non-Christian taxi driver. So when we were invited to attend a ME, I did not at all object to participating. What struck me most strongly about that first experience was that, at the time of the greeting of peace during the final Mass, a virtual stranger, a man, greeted me by saying: “I love you”. I certainly had heard the passages from the Bible saying that, “God is Love”, and “Love your neighbor” etc.; but this was the first time in my life that anyone expressed that directly to me. It was a surprise, and a shock. But it did give me a feeling of acceptance. That was a first, along with hearing the open sharings of couples just like ourselves. I think I can say that the experience really changed my life.

Wife

Even now 30 years later, it is with great joy that I recall the warmth of the couples involved and all the effort they put into the preparations, the great food, etc. I also remember how difficult it was for us to communicate deeply. A big surprise was how many couples from the area who had previously experienced ME came to celebrate the final Mass with us, joyfully shouting “Shalom”! and embracing one another at the greeting of peace. This was an entirely new experience for me. And I am eternally grateful to Fr. Donnon, the couple that watched our kids, the fellow

participants, and especially my husband for making that ME a life-changing experience - a grace beyond description.

Husband

The final Mass was a thing of joy which all spontaneously expressed during the greeting of peace when, with absolutely no sense of embarrassment, all embraced one another, sharing from the heart the Peace (Shalom!) that Jesus had promised. It was easy to understand how, in that ideal atmosphere of true peace, a man could say from his heart, "I love you" to one who was, at the time, a virtual stranger: love, the love of spouses for one another, the love that is God - what an experience to be given the opportunity to think about all of this!

After that I joined a group of middle aged men in their study of the Bible. As my wife has shared, a year later all of us were baptized. But I will never forget that prior to the Baptism Fr. Donnon said, "You know, you have to desire Baptism from the heart". I got the impression that he was reading my heart, for which I am thankful.

Wife

For me one of the most wonderful and unexpected graces from participating in ME was the decision of my husband to study the catechism and be baptized, along with 10 other men who were similarly influenced. My husband joined that group of men late in their preparation, and while I thought it might be too early to expect him to seek Baptism, nevertheless it was the first time since we were married that he accompanied me to Mass, something which had always been a dream for me. I did desire with all my heart that he be baptized, to the point of very often shedding tears of joy as he sat next to me at Mass. Sister Guadalupe and other friends in the church often encouraged me by telling me to pray, and promising to offer their prayers too. Eight men in that group of ten had already declared their decision to receive Baptism, and then so did my husband. That left only one who had not yet decided. It so happened that one time that man attended a gathering of ME couples without his wife and joined the two of us in a small group sharing. He was relieved and comforted by my husband's sharing about his previous reservations. It seemed to be just what he needed to make that decisive jump. Ultimately all ten were baptized that following Easter Sunday; and the faith has been important to all of them, both young and old, throughout the past thirty years. I will never forget the smile on Fr. Donnon's face that day. Our son, at the time in fourth year grammar school expressed his joy by simply saying, "Yes!" And I concurred. My husband said, "I asked for Baptism in order to experience peace in the family."

I am very grateful to many priests, sisters, couples and individuals for all their prayers and encouragement throughout the years of that journey to faith that my husband and I have made. It is especially the grace of experiencing ME that

resulted in our receiving the Sacrament of Marriage and becoming a couple with the same values and seeking the same goal.

Husband

After about five years, we had to take leave of that crazily joyful parish and go to Bangkok where we met fellow Japanese Catholics who gathered frequently to share the faith. We were encouraged from time to time by priests and bishops coming from Japan who offered Mass for us. Being a government worker, I have been transferred a total of seventeen times. Wherever we would go my wife would end up being surrounded by friends from the churches. So that despite all the changes, she was able to cope because of having many friends with the same faith and ideals. I am grateful for that too.

Wife

As my husband has said, five years after his Baptism he was transferred to Thailand. With Fr. Donnon's permission we took with us a banner made by Sister Guadalupe (each week she drew one as a pictorial explanation of the theme of the Gospel and homily of that Sunday). This one happened to be a drawing of the blessed Mother with her arms outstretched over the church in Ota, We hung it on the wall in our parlor there. Coincidentally, Fr. Lucian Mulhern, who had built that church in Ota, when he would come to Bangkok, often visited us to say Mass in our home, for Catholic people living in Bangkok. That banner is now in the "Mori House" in Tsukuba, Ibaraki Prefecture. The influence of the graces we have received as a couple and as a family, far from waning with the passing years, continue and seem to grow progressively stronger. There is no doubt in our minds that this is an immeasurable gift from the Lord.

Husband

One outstanding grace for me that has its origin in my being baptized as a result of attending a ME, was the opportunity to go to Rome to attend the Beatification of Fr. Damiano. On this trip to Europe we also went to Brussels, Paris and Lourdes. During our first night in Lourdes I had a dream of an apparition so enwrapped in light and darkness that it was unclear to me whether it was Jesus or Mary. What was clear to me is that I have come a long way from being a Sunday morning taxi driver to one transformed into a believer; and moreover, one who could accept the presence of either Jesus or Mary in an apparition – if only in a dream. The graces from ME continue in our marriage and the life of our family.

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Rene and Inday Promstroller - Philippines

A couple from the Philippines, long involved in Family and Life Ministry as members of the Christian Family Movement, sums up their graces in the following way:

We, Rene and Inday, as husband and wife have been in the Family and Life Ministry since we were married 43 years ago, but our FIRES Original ME experience of 1991 stands out as the most meaningful program we have been through. The learnings can be summarized in the Daily Couple Prayer that was given to us at that time. It has become more and more meaningful to us as we continually strive to improve our relationship with each other and with others through becoming closer and closer to the Lord.

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Whenever God is placed at the center of married and family life, there is no reason to fear that there will be an adverse result.

Nami Yamaguchi – Gumma, Japan

We first experienced ME in the spring of 1975. At the time I was pregnant with our third child, but at the strong recommendation of Fr. Donnon and the team, and since my husband consented to it, we were able to attend. Looking back now, due to each of us having an “Encounter With Self” and our mutual acceptance of each other, that first experience of ME was the starting point of a striving for unity as a family, with God at the center. We were young at the time and I was especially immature. I was born in 1944. My father died in the war, and my mother died when I was only five years old. The three of us children were raised by a severe grandfather and we all lived with my uncle and aunt, who were no less severe. It was no fun for us to have to grow up in that atmosphere of anxiety and uneasiness. And I was glad to have the opportunity to marry a man who worked in the same bank as I. Ever since I had lost my parents my dream was what a wonderful thing it would be to have an ordinary family. And I was thrilled that getting married gave me the opportunity to take a first step in the fulfillment of that dream. After giving birth to our oldest son, however, I struggled with the fact that, since I had not been raised by my parents, I had no idea how to raise a child. So without giving any thought to our son’s personality or ability, I was only concerned about making him study.

In addition my husband, caught in the midst of a time concentrating on Japan’s economic growth, put all of his energy into climbing the corporate ladder. He wasn’t able to spend much time with the kids, let the raising of the kids completely up to me, and was what you might call a workaholic.

I had already received baptism and was now married with children, but with this kind of a daily stressful life I wondered: “What is happiness anyway?” It was at that point that we experienced ME. And there is no way to measure the graces that we received from that experience. What especially made me happy was that, during the Encounter, my husband and I were able to be open to one another in sharing

many things; and he, being a non-Christian and up to that time exhibiting no interest at all in Christianity, through ME became acquainted with the Bible and went to church to study about the Catholic faith with one of the sisters. Now the church became a topic of common interest between us, and it was a joy to experience the deepening of our relationship through this constructive sharing.

I had been very concerned about my relationship with my oldest son, but through the experience of ME, I realized how I had failed in so many areas to be a suitable mother. Shedding copious tears of self-examination I wrote him a letter of apology, and this was a start of a journey toward reconciliation. He is now married with two children of his own and they joyfully come to visit us.

We also attended a MReE, and were even a team couple for ME. In 1992 my husband was baptized. Our second son attended the SADE a number of times, graduated from college, discerned that he had a vocation to the priesthood and was ordained a Conventual Franciscan priest in 2004. Thanks be to God! The graces that we received through ME, and especially the realization of the importance of family (we have four children) have become more and more apparent, and grow with each succeeding year. Where would we be now if we had not experienced ME? More than likely we would never have had the opportunity to encounter our true selves, and probably not have come to realize the importance, the beauty, of family. I want to once again thank Fr. Donnon for giving us that opportunity, and pray that we will be blessed with many more graces in the future.

On our voyage as a family there will certainly be future joys and sorrows, ups and downs. But we intend to continue this journey as a family along with the Lord, and without fear.

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In post Communist Hungary, in the midst of spiritual dryness in the Church, the Lord has been active in the lives of many individuals. Indeed He will not leave us orphans.

Imre and Zita - Hungary

We received the Sacrament of Matrimony in 1978, at the age of 19. Zita was a Calvinist but she did not practice her faith. I had been baptized a Catholic, but since the age of 14, I had crossed the threshold of a church only at Christmas and Easter. After a short acquaintance, Zita got pregnant. Several family members suggested that she have an abortion; but we decided to get married. Unfortunately, we lost the baby shortly after our wedding. Zita was devastated because she had been eager to have the baby.

At that time, having no financial means to buy an apartment of our own, we lived

with Zita's mother. Then the time came for me to do my military service, which lasted 2 years. During that time, for family reasons, my mother also had to move and live with my family. Having finished my military service, we wanted to build a house. Despite the fact that we did have the building site, however, it took six years for us to get a building permit.

Our financial conditions were not good. We quarreled a lot. We wanted a baby, but unfortunately Zita was unable to bear a child. She had seven miscarriages. There were frequent times of friction between us because of each other's family members. We finally began to build our house, but the building process only added to the tension. With little money and almost no experience, putting together a suitable house was difficult physically, economically and psychologically..

We never went to church except at Christmas, and we never prayed. It just never came to mind; although I think my Mom must have prayed for us. Seeing our hard struggle must have been hard for her too. The tension between my wife and myself grew so much that we even separated for about eight months before the building process ended.

We refused to acknowledge our own personal faults, but kept blaming one another. Zita was not interested in the Catholic faith. She seemed to enjoy making taunting remarks when my mother went to church or came home after Mass.

My mother died in 1990. Her last words were, "Be careful" – but she was unable to finish it. I was sorely tried by her death; it took me more than a year to get over it.

Then some friends of ours called our attention to a New Age group called "Silva Mind Control". They told us many interesting things about it. So, thinking that since Zita was not interested in Catholicism, and somehow or other some positive thinking had to come into our life, we made the basic course. We felt a new world opened to us, so we went on making further courses.

After a while, Zita became less interested in all of these, which led to more tension between us. She wanted to solve our problems with a divorce. Her parents had also divorced when she was only five years old. And for my part, my father died when I was only six, so both of us had been raised in broken families. Yet, she still eagerly wanted a child, and did not give up hope, although I myself did give up the hope of ever having a baby. Even so, in accord with Silva Mind Control, I decided to meditate more often so that she would have a successful pregnancy and that the hormone treatment which had been receiving for several years should not harm her in any way. At the end of each meditation, however, I also said a prayer. I felt that this made it a whole. When finally, after 18 years of marriage, and after a very hard pregnancy full of difficulties, our daughter was born, I thought it was my meditations

that helped us – although I admit I had always dreamed of having a boy...

Now I know for certain that it was really the prayers to God that helped us. By that time we were already living in our own house. We were very happy with our little daughter, but the tension still remained between us. In the meantime I read lots of New Age books. We attended some more courses. The next thing was yoga, which was only my interest, since Zita could not accept that at all. With all my exercises, vegetarian way of life and meditations I felt healthy, but our marriage was in a state of agony. It was our child who suffered most. Zita continued to say that she wanted to get divorced, which I wished to avoid by all means. Finally I complained about the whole situation to a young mother I knew. The only thing I knew about her was that she regularly went to church, and that Zita valued her opinion. I asked for her advice. She suggested our making an Original ME.

We did not know what it was, but we thought we had to give ourselves this chance. We went there waiting for a miracle. We met many married couples there, and we were surprised to realize that we all – quite apart from what we did for a living or what education we had – struggle with the same everyday problems. All of us seemed to have been bent on destroying our spouse's life, and yet we were to discover that there is a solution for these problems. There we understood that God was working also in our marriage. He speaks to us not just individually but in a special way as a couple, once we live in Sacramental Marriage. He wants very much to make it better, and if we realize this and ask for his help, he will make it better. This sounded very encouraging. Yet it was also shocking for us, because we began to see all of the mistakes that we had made. All the problems we had swept under the carpet for twenty years suddenly came out and inundated us.

During those three days we lived again all the difficulties we had faced during the previous years. We were tremendously upset. Both of us had hoped for reconciliation, yet Zita wanted to get divorced even more, and I grew even more desperate.

But thank God when we went home our daughter was there, and neither one of us could leave her. She held our hands, and we felt we could not break this chain. I felt, if God had given us a child despite all our faults and unworthiness, it would be an irreparable sin to throw her away or damn her to a life without a father or a mother. We had both experienced what it meant to grow up without a father.

We realized that we were responsible not only for ourselves but also for those who have been entrusted to us. We were surprised to realize that we were important to someone both as individuals and as a family. Fr. Donnon opened our eyes. Through him we were able to experience the gentle fatherly love that had been missing from our lives until that time, which, because it had been missing, we had been unable to give to one another or to our daughter. Father Donnon told us how important it was for

us to pray daily for the unity of our marriage, and to read the Bible, because the Holy Spirit cannot come out of a closed Bible. He told us that whatever is against the unity of a couple or a family, cannot be in accord with God’s will, even if it is a wonderful and holy thing in itself. I could not accept this statement for a long time, but finally I came to realize it was true.

Then we started praying and reading the Bible together; although I must confess that at first I only sought parallel truths to what I had heard in the New Age and yoga teachings. But what I found in the Bible added more and more weight to the scale of love, justice and truth. This led to my burning our whole collection of New Age books. Our faith was also strengthened by this. We learned to share with one another. Of course we had arguments even afterwards – we still have them today. But now we can forgive one another without being offended and angry for days. We began to go to church regularly, Zita started learning about faith, and finally converted to Catholicism. And, as a result of the constant prayers of our daughter, a baby boy was born to us in 2003, even though medically speaking there was no chance for it.

There are several CFM groups in our town, and we became members of one of them, with five other couples. We meet monthly and share on topics that are similar to the Encounter topics, as well as sharing, of course, about our own joys and difficulties. If any one of us faces difficulties, we pray for them together, and these prayers have always been helpful. It is wonderfully encouraging to hear the others pray for us when we are in a spiritual desert and cannot see the way out of our problems.

We have made several Original MEs since then. These programs, as well as our CFM group meetings, keep our faith alive and strengthen it, which is something we badly need, because everyday life keeps trying to gradually turn us away from God. These occasions give us new hope each time, and help us experience God’s endless, faithful, love again and again. Thanks and blessings to our brothers and sisters who, through their prayers and witness, have helped us find the way back to God!

It is our hope and prayer that whoever reads these words will experience and live out God’s love through their association with a like-minded community seeking the truth and the hope and joy that arises from that.

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The problems that people encounter seem always to be insurmountable and far greater than those of others. It is helpful, therefore, to be reminded that everyone has problems, although they take many different forms. There is a little card with a short letter to Jesus saying: “Dear Jesus. I have a problem. It’s me” And then Jesus’ response: “Dear child. I have the answer. It’s me.” The following exemplifies that answer of Jesus.

Hiroko Imai – Sagamihara, Japan

We first experienced ME 19 years ago. Our daughter was 6 years old and our two sons 4 and 3. At that time we had been married for 8 years. Within 10 months after getting married my husband changed jobs and, not being used to his new type of work, it was a time when he became completely absorbed in it. Two years before I knew anything about ME our daughter entered kindergarten and forthwith refused to continue to go, so it was suggested that I consult with the people in the city in charge of the education of kindergarten children. I was told that perhaps the Montessori method might suit her. This, however, did not change her attitude toward school, and I was at a loss as to what to do. My husband was completely taken up with his work. Every day I would complain about the difficulties in raising the kids and would show it by putting on a very glum face. His response was that he didn't like having to confront such a face every day and refused to talk; and so this went on day after day.

Both of us were far removed from being suitable parents, we had no regard for one another's feelings, and we had no one to turn to for help. We were living in a housing development provided by his company, and because our daughter was very shy in meeting people, there was no possibility of having someone to look after her, even for a short period of time, thus allowing me to go shopping, or just to take a short rest. The stress was unbearable. By the time it got to be 8:00 in the evening I was at my wits end and would blow up at the slightest little thing. I knew it was wrong, but there was nothing I could do about it. I knew exactly what Paul was talking about when he wrote: "*I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*" (Romans 7:19). The heart that I was displaying was the complete opposite of the heart that I wanted to display.

It was just when we were at our lowest point that my younger sister and her husband told us about ME. I called Fr. Donnon at the Chapel Center and told him that we would like to attend, but there was no one to look after the children during the three days of the Encounter. He told me not to worry, that he would find someone to watch the kids. I had never met him and had never spoken to him before, so I was amazed at his response. He did find a couple to take care of our three kids, and later on two other occasions another couple took care of them. There is no way that we could ever adequately thank those two couples for giving us the opportunity to experience ME.

Through the experience of that first ME my husband changed beyond belief. During the Mass of Reconciliation he turned to me and said, with tears running down his cheeks: "I was so wrong. Please forgive me!" I was absolutely amazed. Up to that time no matter how angry I might get, he never argued or even came near to arguing, but to apologize and shed tears of self reproach was something I never dreamed possible – and what a warm feeling I had because of that.

After that he made every effort to listen to anything I had to say and he began to spend much more time with the kids. But we were still not out of the woods. All through elementary school and middle school our daughter almost never went to school. Throughout all of that time I would say to her: “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to”, but in my heart I desired with all of my heart that she be like other kids, and this caused a lot of turmoil in the family. I knew that it was a losing battle; that in the midst of that friction each of us was expressing our real selves. But it took a tremendous amount of energy. I was torn on the one hand with wanting to put her completely in the hands of the Lord, and on the other holding on to my desire that she go to school just like everyone else. And I found myself not really ready to put everything into the hands of the Lord.

During those years, in addition to ME, we also experienced MReE, MR, FE, national FIRES gatherings, and became a team for the EE. In the process of all of those experiences I slowly began to really see myself.

I was baptized at the age of 22, and married at the age of 24. As I look back, I realize that I had never really accepted myself, my husband, nor my children just as we are. I did try to fit everything into the ideal, but there was always the dissatisfaction of realizing that we were nowhere near the ideal. I had yet to have a real encounter with myself. It was something easier said than done. Because of the stress in my life, and my own immaturity expressed through words and attitude, I had wounded our daughter since the time she was very little. Coming to acknowledge that, everyday I continued to blame myself. What a terrible thing I have done! What a miserable life I have made for this little angel. I must be the worst person in the world. There’s not a single good thing about me. In spite of the fact that I am sorry for it all, I still get upset and angry, have no confidence in raising kids, and there is nothing I can do about it.

Then one day, as I was considering how ashamed I am about my mistakes, what came to mind was Jesus hanging on the Cross and I felt strongly that: “It was precisely because Jesus offered himself on the Cross for me that I am forgiven”. I will never forget the gratitude that I felt in my heart at that moment. From that time on I decided to concentrate not on what has happened in the past, but rather to be forward looking and consider what can I do for my daughter from now on. This is something that I had learned at the FE. It is one thing to be an ideal family; but I am going to have to accept my own family just as it has been up to now, and to start from there to strive to become a somewhat ideal family. This is something to be striven for in little things on a daily basis.

About ten years ago my sister invited us to attend a bi-yearly national FIRES gathering, and there we met a couple who invited us to be on the team for the EE.

For 8 years we did that twice a year and with that came to understand more fully the fact that the final goal of every marriage is “Unity” – something that Fr. Donnon has always strongly emphasized. Furthermore we always felt strengthened by the other team couples, the staff that cooks the meals, the humility of the participating couples, etc. We never quite carry out what we promise ourselves, but the fact that we never lose hope and continue to struggle on is precisely because of our experience of the FIRES programs; and this in turn is due to the incomparable support that we have received from my sister and her husband who have so fully immersed themselves in the FIRES programs.

We are grateful to Fr. Donnon and so many others directly involved with FIRES who have been such a support to us for the past 20 years. We are now in our 28th. Year of marriage, our kids are all grown up, and nothing gives us greater pleasure than to have meals with and take trips with our kids.. There will be unexpected trials and problems in the future also, but sharing the Scriptures and praying together, continually thanking the Lord and putting everything into his hands, and in spite of occasional arguments, we commit ourselves to sharing, reconciling, and striving for Unity. We also intend to do whatever we can to make known to other families that we meet the importance and beauty of real trust (*confianza*) that we ourselves learned from FIRES.

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The influence that parents have on their children, whether for good or for bad, can never be over-emphasized. Here is one more example of that.

We experienced ME at a troubling time when our oldest son had just quit college. He was afraid of his father and I wasn't exactly the ideal mother. Moreover I had my own irritation with my husband. His father had been a soldier and died during the war. After that, surrounded by his mother and his younger sister, he was raised by relatives. This was a family where education meant everything, and for my mother in law it was taken for granted that her grandchildren would go to Tokyo University (the very top). For financial reasons my husband did graduate from high school, but what was being demanded from him was out of the question, even under the best of circumstances. From the time he was born he had never seen his father's face, and therefore had no idea how to relate to his children. Being a man born before the war, he had believed that it was a sign of weakness to think about one's family and children, and that a man lives for his country. It is under those circumstances that we attended ME.

Because of that experience my husband realized that life in the Church was a good thing. He began to understand the importance of family and children, and decided to cooperate with me in raising our children as Christians. It was a big step for him

to change his mind so drastically.

At our urging our oldest son experienced the SADE, and our next oldest boy, having gotten married early at the age of 23, decided to make a ME. His wife was very much moved by the experience. Her parents were both school teachers and she grew up in a home atmosphere where study was the first priority, and it was a revelation to her to discover what marriage is supposed to be, and what it means to be a couple. They were both subsequently baptized along with their two children.

Our oldest daughter, in her desire to learn how to raise children properly, has enrolled her children in Sunday School. I have five children, and when the youngest, who is now 28, was in middle school, he was getting out of hand because of being influenced by the worldly values of his friends. I kind of forced him to make a SADE. Now whenever he has a problem he prays. He will soon be a father, and says that he intends to teach his children about God.

To tell you the truth when I first experienced ME, I felt that there was something artificial about setting a mood by putting out the lights and burning candles in the darkness, anointing with oil as a sign of seeking healing, etc. I felt that this was a form of brainwashing; and not understanding the importance of signs and symbols as aids in going beyond the purely intellectual into something that touches the heart, I felt uneasy. Then, when I heard Fr. Donnon's talk about what it means to be a real couple, I thought: "This is wonderful. In Japan there is never a chance to hear anything like this. Nobody teaches us anything. I wish high school kids could have a chance to hear something like this".

I think it will be some time before Japanese people generally will have the openness that can be found in the Encounter experiences. But times are changing, and I hope that this openness will become more and more a part of family and social life. However, I am happy to see that my sons and their wives are in agreement on how to live their lives.

It is so sad to see the present day condition of families in Japan. Young couples are at a loss as to how to raise their children, and there is a great deal of stress because of that. The difficulty of trying to raise kids without God being accepted as the center is becoming increasingly apparent. We are very grateful for having been made aware of so much through our experience of ME.

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It is a problem to think that there are no problems.

Yukiko Fujii – Kodaira, Japan

In 1999, after eight and one half years of marriage, we thought that we were a great

couple with no particular problems who shared with one another about everything. Both of us were thirsting for some kind of spiritual experience and decided to look for a place where there might be a retreat during the long holiday weekend the following March. For various reasons our applications were not accepted at the two places where we had applied. Finally an acquaintance suggested we attend a ME. So with some trepidation we called Fr. Donnon who, in a cheerful voice said, "Looking forward to meeting you." With the help of the Holy Spirit, I was able to convince my husband, naturally a shy person, to attend; so in March of 1999 we attended ME for the first time at the Family House in Ota.

The team couples in Ota welcomed us warmly, as if they were welcoming us into their own homes. Then they openly shared the crosses and difficulties they encounter in their lives, as well as their joys, all of which really struck a chord in the hearts of the participants. Their sharings, along with the teachings from Fr. Donnon, soaked into our hearts like water permeating dry sponges. That was the first time I heard from anyone what it means to be a couple, something that in my heart of hearts I dearly wanted; and I realized that it isn't enough to be a couple that gets along well together; we have to be a couple for whom God is the center of our lives. I became convinced that there is no limit to the possibility of us growing. And what a joy to make that discovery!

In the past, when my husband was especially busy, some priests and sisters, observing the state of our marriage, advised me that I have to be self-sacrificing as I try to support my husband. I couldn't agree with that. In my heart I would shout: "It's lonely to continue on as this kind of a couple; I can't go on living with him; we never have an opportunity to sit down and quietly share as a couple, so how can we even be called a couple?"

From the first day I was moved by the testimonies of the team couples, but while the other participants were shedding tears, I just felt washed out and was unhappy with the cold face on my husband. I was afraid that this is the way the three days are going to end. And my husband seemed to be of the same mind.

For four years before we were married, and for seven years after, my husband worked as a leader in a facility for juveniles from newly borns to the age of 20. That facility has an 80 year history of preparing children to one day become independent. This is the type of work that my husband had always dreamed about doing, and I always wanted to back him up. But the reality was that he would have to take his turn staying over at the facility, sometimes several days a week, since someone always has to be with the kids. He would come home late, then have to get up early the next morning and be off once again to stay overnight at the facility. The continuing of this way of life did not make it easy for us as a couple.

I was not physically well, had a bad case of skin rash, exacerbated by having to spend the whole day at home feeling lonely. My family lived nearby, but that didn't make up for my husband not being home. I pleaded with him to quit his job, but he felt he had a responsibility to fulfill and continued in that work for seven years after our marriage. He finally realized the tension this was creating, quit that job, and began to work at a senior citizens home run by the church. It was a year later that we experienced ME.

I had had the feeling that he was not going to change at all, but the Holy Spirit had other ideas, and the Breath of the Spirit filled his heart. That was on the third day of the ME. I think that it was exactly the time when the team couples and Fr. Donnon were praying the rosary for the participants. According to my husband, he was climbing the mountain in the back of the Family House, found a place to pray, and feeling a light breeze around him, prostrated himself and cried out from the heart: "Lord I think I am the only one making this Encounter who feels nothing. Please give me the grace that you want to give me!" And at that moment he seemed to feel all the winds of the mountain swirling around him – surely, he thought, this is the wind of the Holy Spirit.

After that prayer he came down from the mountain, and at the time on the last day when the couples lay hands on one another and pray for the grace to forgive one another, an unbelievable thing happened. While I was praying over him, he began to cry. And in the midst of those tears, he then he asked me to forgive all of the times he had injured me in the past. Here we have a man who simply does not cry, and never admitted his weaknesses, asking for my forgiveness with tears running down his cheeks. I was totally surprised, to say the least.

We received the gift of my husband's remorse and our reconciliation. And he said that, with his repentance, he felt that he had received the Lord's forgiveness for all of his sins, so that he felt totally refreshed in body and soul. And as for me, I feel that with our reconciliation, we have at last become something of what a couple is supposed to be. It might seem to be an overstatement, but it was just like the wonderful radiant feeling of getting married all over again. We began our journey to be a real couple, and that has continued up to the present. We intend to use all of our strength to focus on becoming one in the Lord.

From the years 1999 until 2002 we were a team couple for ME, and it was a great joy to share our testimonies with the participants. And the graces continue. In 2002, on the 450th. anniversary of St. Francis Xavier (one of our favorite Saints), our long desired son was born.

As I mentioned previously, before we were married both of us were encouraged by priests and sisters to think about becoming a priest and a nun; but both of us felt

that we were called to married life. Now, because of ME, we believe that if a couple strives for unity, married life is a wonderful calling, and we want to shout that out to others. Considering that Christians do not even comprise one percent of the population of Japan, what a marvelous grace for us to meet and marry a Catholic, and moreover to have had the opportunity to experience ME. We may be weak, but with the help of the Holy Spirit we intend to aim at unity in our daily lives, and to be a light to others. And from the bottom of our hearts we wish to thank Fr. Calvo, Fr. Donnon, and all those who have prayed for us. Shalom!!!

The following are “Weekends” included under the umbrella of FIRES:

- Original Marriage Encounter (ME) –
For couples to encounter themselves individually and as a couple
- Marriage Re-Encounter (RE) –
For reconciliation with children while deepening the M.E. experience
- Engaged Encounter (EE)-
For an efficacious marriage preparation course
- Sons and Daughters Encounter (SADE) –
For an encounter with self regarding important aspects of one’s life
- Sons and Daughters Retorno (SADR)-
For an Encounter with the Lord, especially through Sacred Scripture
- Family Encounter (FE)-
For encountering one another as a family
- Self-Encounter (SE)-
For individuals in all walks of life
- Self Retorno (SR)
For an Encounter with the Lord, especially through Sacred Scripture
- Priest Encounter (PE)-
For re-evaluating one’s vacation; evangelizing through families; etc.
- Sisters Encounter (Sr. E)-
For re-evaluating one’s vacation; evangelizing through families; etc.
- Pre-Conjugal Encounter (PCE)
For those living together without the benefit of a church wedding

<Additional Experiences>

- * Marriage Retorno (MR)-
For an Encounter with the Lord as a couple
(This weekend is not presented as a “FIRES” program)
- * Family Communication Workshop FCW□-

For deepening communication among family members (a six hour experience)

- * Marriage Encounter at home (MEH)-
For a Marriage Encounter experience by mail.
- * Around the Table (AT)-
For family sharing over a protracted period of time.
- * Family Encounter at home (FEH)-
For a Family Encounter experience by mail.
- * Fraternal Encounter (Frat.E)-
For aiding animators of family ministry to collaborate.