



Media Release

21 March 2018

## Radical Demands, Extravagant Mercy: Answering Pope Francis' call to accompaniment

The Renaissance of Marriage Conference brings together new and innovative ideas of accompanying all people who are called to the sacrament of marriage to make it a place of mercy, healing, joy and flourishing.

One hundred and eighty delegates attended the fourth national Renaissance of Marriage conference on the 17-18th of February 2018 at the University of Notre Dame's Broadway campus. The conference brought together clergy, theologians, psychologists and lay leaders from Australia and USA to share their experiences of working in marriage formation. The clarion call of the conference was to take seriously Pope Francis' call to accompaniment and to explore what that looks like for marriage formation and education.

The Marriage Resource Centre (MRC) directors Byron and Francine Pirola convened the first Renaissance of Marriage in 2008 as a forum for marriage educators to share their experiences, gain new insights and form international networks that are vital to the spiritual and professional sustenance of those toiling in the vineyard. "It has never been more urgent for us as people of God and leaders of His Church to come together to discuss the challenges of marriage education and formation, and to collectively discern responses to these challenges," Byron said.

Speakers at the Conference represented a diverse body of experience from Bishops to theologians to professional psychologists, educators, experienced lay men and women, all working directly and indirectly in forming Catholics in the pews (and out of the pews) for the rigours and joys of a sacramental marriage.

Visiting clinical psychologist Dr Gregory Bottaro from the CatholicPsych Institute in Connecticut delivered a number of scientifically-based insights integrated into the Catholic moral and spiritual framework in his keynote. On the purpose of marriage preparation, Dr Bottaro minced no words on the enormity of the challenge we are facing; "the entirety of marriage preparation should be about getting to the psycho-spiritual and sexual development stage where you can say I am ready to die to myself forever."

The challenge is enormous but we do have some direction in Pope Francis' call to accompaniment, "especially of our brothers and sisters who feel distanced from the Church. In a world that is

fractured by broken relationships and widespread disillusionment, the healing mercy of God is desperately needed if we are going to get anywhere," said Francine Pirola.

Other aspects of marriage formation such as parenting and Catholic education were addressed by MenALIVE founder Robert Falzon; the author of parenting manual *As I Have Love You*, Dr Gerard O'Shea; director of Catholic Education Tasmania, Martin Tobin and international teacher formation speaker and writer, Jonathan Doyle. Daily mass was celebrated by Archbishop Anthony Fisher OP of Sydney, and Bishop Eugene Hurley of Darwin punctuated the program.

Bishop Mark Edwards was one of the hundred and eighty delegates at ROM. "The conference has helped to form me to be a better leader in the area of supporting people in marriage. It's given me some words and some vision that I can share with people that hopefully will help them to be better husbands and better wives. And in the end, better Christians, better followers of Jesus Christ."

The conversation around marriage formation and education is one that the Marriage Resource Centre is keen to foster and continue into the future. "This work is difficult enough without having to reinvent the wheel. Opportunities like this one to learn from both the successes and failures of our co-workers in faith are an important part of the MRC's work, " said Byron Pirola.

The next conference is planned for July 2019.

To find out more about marriage formation and education, or the next Renaissance of Marriage, contact the Marriage Resource Centre team at 02 9319 6280, or visit their website at

[www.marriageresourcecentre.org](http://www.marriageresourcecentre.org)