

# Love is a Decision

**Frank Johnson** recently attended a weekend organised by Retrouvaille, an organisation dedicated to helping couples repair their marriage relationships.

**H**arry and Jane\* had been coming to see me to help resolve the difficulties in their marriage. They had come to me because I am a Catholic priest. I told them I was happy to see them, but that I was not a marriage counsellor and didn't have any expertise in that area. I said I thought it would be better for them to go to a specialised counsellor or agency, but I didn't know to whom I could refer them. When I was away in Rome I received a phone call from Jane who asked if they could come and see me. I told them that if they were happy to come to Rome then I could see them. Otherwise they would have to wait until my return.

## **Something remarkable**

A month later, I saw Harry and Jane again – but it wasn't the same couple that I had spoken to just four weeks before. There was a clear difference in their relationship; obviously, something remarkable had happened to them – but what? They told me that friends of theirs had recommended them to do the Retrouvaille programme. These

friends had done it themselves, and it had saved their failing marriage. In fact, Harry and Jane were so happy with Retrouvaille, that they were very keen that I should also attend one of their weekend programmes. I didn't see the point of a celibate priest attending a weekend for married couples, but I was impressed with the effect the programme had had on them and decided to give it a go.

As I parked the car outside the Hertfordshire hotel where the programme was taking place, I wondered if I really had made the right decision to come. When I went into the meeting room on the Friday evening, I was given a warm welcome by the couples who were to 'lead' the programme. I was also introduced to Fr Anthony, a priest from Leeds Diocese who was also part of the team. At this point I



should explain that the basis of Retrouvaille has Roman Catholic roots, and mass is celebrated each day for those who wish to attend. However, the programme is open to anyone, including those with no particular religious faith. In fact, not all those present that weekend were Roman Catholic, though the majority were.

## **A moving experience**

After the evening meal, everyone came together in the meeting room and were introduced to the programme. Looking round the room I could see some very apprehensive-looking faces and quite a lot of negative body lan-

Do you feel lost, alone or bored in your marriage?

Are you hurt, frustrated or angry with your spouse?

Have you thought about separation or divorce?

Are you constantly fighting or do you simply shut down?

Does talking about it only make it worse?

Have you stopped sharing how you feel?

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guage. One of the lead couples congratulated the participants for having the courage to admit to their difficulties and coming along to the weekend. It soon became clear that the four presenting couples had all themselves got into severe difficulties in their marriages and had all followed the Retrouvaille programme. As the weekend progressed, each of the lead couples shared the different stages of their marriage relationship. The circumstances of each couple were quite different, but the pattern of their relationships were very similar: romance, disillusion, misery.

I found listening to their stories very moving. Each couple spoke with great frankness and honesty about the difficulties they had experienced in their relationship, but also with great delicacy and respect for their partner. The love that was now between them, having followed the Retrouvaille programme was obvious and

spoke as loudly as the experiences themselves. The lead couples were different ages and backgrounds, the youngest being in their early thirties, the oldest in their late fifties early sixties.

### **No group therapy**

I went without any expectations and wondering what I could contribute to the weekend. In fact, when the couples entered into their dialogue sessions, I too exchanged experiences with Fr Anthony. I realised that I too had much to learn about communicating my feelings on a range of topics, and I learnt from the techniques suggested by the programme. It was made clear at the outset that Retrouvaille is not group therapy so, there was no public baring of souls and no public revelation of difficulties. The lead couples were there to talk to, whenever necessary, and Fr Anthony was available for confession. But the lead couples emphasised that they were not counsellors and could only shed light on situations by sharing their own experiences.

At various stages phrases were unveiled to affirm some of the important points of the programme, such as: 'God doesn't make junk'; 'Feelings are neither good nor bad', or 'Love is a decision'. At certain stages short Bible passages were read to reinforce a point, about forgiveness, for example. The touch was light but none the less effective, and every point was illustrated from experience. One of the lead cou-

ples told of how they had failed completely to identify the needs of the other. When they understood what those needs were through respectful dialogue, their relationship took a qualitative leap.

### **Improved body language**

Over the two days of the programme I observed a change in the body language of most of the couples there. Serious faces turned into smiles and even the physical distance between them seemed to diminish. All of those I spoke too left the weekend with renewed hope and real belief that they could repair their relationships. One husband said that he and his wife were no longer living together, but that he now felt it would be possible for them to live together again. Not everyone was resolved, but even the couple who seemed most in crisis were prepared to give it a go and were going to travel the long distance from their home to attend the follow-up sessions.

I can honestly say, on the evidence of the weekend, that the Retrouvaille programme offers a real opportunity for couples to rebuild their relationship, no matter how badly things have gone wrong or for how long. One of the lead couples told me that one husband and wife who had lived apart for thirty-five years and who had followed the programme were reunited! At a time when so many marriages seem to end on the scrapheap, Retrouvaille is like a beacon in the darkness. ■

*\*not their real names*

*For more information:  
www.retrouvaille.org.uk*