

Building Life as a Couple on Solid Rock

Christophe and Oriane, from Belgium, were looking for a way to help young couples they knew to prepare for and strengthen their marriage.

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Young couples today face a great number of challenges and strains. And many of them have no one they can rely on to give them Christian guidance on ways to strengthen their relationship. Thinking about all this was what led Oriane and Christophe

to start the initiative “Batir ta maison sur le roc” (“Build your house on rock”).

What are you trying to achieve with this initiative?

Our goal is to help guide young couples, recently married or engaged, by preparing them to live their marriage in a Christian way. Stress is placed on the need to “communicate as a couple,” since we think this is the area where the greatest difficulties can arise and undermine the unity of a marriage. We organize seven sessions a year, basically one per month with a break for the summer. Before each session the participants receive material with the key ideas that are going to be raised, so they can begin to prepare for the discussion.

How did you get the idea to launch it?

As with almost all these kinds of initiatives, they develop little by little. Before getting into this project, we gave talks on communication and realized that many young couples were facing, even after years of marriage, serious problems communicating with one another. We knew we aren't experts in the psychology of marriage nor did we know anything about therapy, but we thought we could dedicate our efforts to trying to prevent problems from arising. We base our advice on the Church's teachings about marriage and the experience of our own lives.

How did it get underway?

When we started out, we invited a lot of people we knew and friends of our friends. Only a single couple came to the first session, but we began as we could and drew experience from it. For the next session, three couples came. And later, perhaps through the

success of the results, more people kept signing up. Quite a few people came through the scouting activities in which our children took part.

And how has it developed over the years?

Over the course of 15 years, we have helped guide more than 150 couples. The great majority of them are happily married, with a good number of children, and try to live in accord with the Church's teaching and provide an example for society.

One striking result is that quite a few of the engaged couples who were living together before getting married, after attending the course and learning, perhaps for the first time, of the richness of chastity before marriage, decided to separate for some weeks or even months before their wedding. They returned to their parents' homes and looked forward joyfully to celebrating the

day of their marriage. Almost all of them say that no one had ever advised them not to live together before getting married. But when we explain the reasons for this, they come to see it as a wonderful and worthwhile challenge. In many cases, they say it helped them to rediscover one another and grow in authentic love, which they are very grateful for.

I recall another story about the situation a couple had to face some days before their marriage. The groom's mother was opposed to the marriage. They didn't know what to do and felt discouraged. The couple came to see us and, after listening to their problem carefully, we advised them to remain firm in their decision to marry while redoubling their prayer and trust in God. We also advised them to show their parents a lot of love. Peace was restored and the marriage was celebrated as a

joyful family event, and they are very happy now.

Here is another striking story. A woman who attended the course and then lost contact with us, called my wife one day. Amid her tears, she said her husband had been diagnosed with brain cancer and had only a few months to live. They had two small children. She felt totally helpless and didn't know whom to turn to. We tried to help her as much as we could. Her husband lived for two years more, which gave them time to prepare for the definitive separation. Her husband's death brought great sorrow, but the family continued forward with faith.

One result of the course is a number of couples have decided to receive formation in natural family planning. This has brought them in many cases to a greater tenderness

in their marriage and being open to life.

And the pastors of nearby churches, have they sent any couples to you to help prepare them for marriage?

Over the years, quite a number of priests have come to know about our initiative through their parishioners or through our website. Many of them have seen the positive results and have advised young couples to attend the course. For years now, we have asked a priest to give one session about the Church's teaching on marriage and conjugal morality. This also makes it easier, for those couples who want to, to keep in contact with the priest.

Do you have any plans to expand your marriage preparation course?

Three years ago, another married couple began a similar course on the outskirts of Brussels. And this year another similar initiative has started near Paris. Other married couples are interested in launching this course in Grenoble and other cities in France.

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