

Retrouvaille deepens faith, heals marriage of St. John Westminster parishioner

If you Google “save my Catholic marriage,” one of the top search results is for the Retrouvaille Marriage Help Program for Struggling Couples.

Michael Lagonigro can attest to the program’s strength. Lagonigro and his wife, Theresa, attended a weekend-long Retrouvaille session in 2005 after hitting a bump in their marriage.

“By Sunday morning, I knew we were going to be OK,” said Lagonigro, a parishioner of St. John in Westminster.

Retrouvaille helps couples polish their communication skills, recognizing that feelings are not right or wrong, Lagonigro said. He also likes the sense of community the program fosters.

“Everyone knows we’ve all had troubles,” Lagonigro said. “It’s a no-judgement zone.”

“It (Retrouvaille) works,” Lagonigro said. “A lot of the couples that go through this program are greatly transformed.”

The program was so transformative for the Lagonigros that they became active in its leadership, today serving as coordinators for Retrouvaille’ of Maryland and Washington, D.C.

“It’s an amazing experience for a lot of couples,” Lagonigro said. “It’s also an amazing experience as a servant leader. It’s something that you continue to understand, the power of the Holy Spirit, if you give the Holy Spirit a chance.”

Lagonigro described the initial weekend experience as intense as drinking from a fire hose.

"It's overwhelming," he said. "You're absorbing a ton of information, which is coming at you fast and furious."

GET TO KNOW

Michael Lagonigro

.....

What is your home parish?

St. John, Westminster

Who had the most influence on the development of your faith?

"It's hard to say one. My mother was steadfast in her faith and focused, as was her mother (my grandmother), who lived with us when I was a kid. My wife's mother and father had a really deep faith. We were always around people who had good faith."

Who is your favorite saint and why?

"St. Joseph is a quiet saint who doesn't necessarily have a lot of fanfare. He did what he needed to do, when it needed to get done."

What makes you proud to be Catholic?

"The faith doesn't just exist. It's alive. Having the type of faith that I can participate in and wrap my arms around, it means a lot to me. It's not just something I do; it's who I am."

Retrouvaille began in 1977 as a French language weekend in Quebec and was later adapted to English and modified. In 1982 the program expanded into the United States and in 1991 it expanded internationally.

Retrouvaille is for couples that need more than a tuneup; they need intensive help, Lagonigro said.

"It can be a sensitive topic for a lot of people," Lagonigro said.

Following the initial weekend experience, couples engage in post-weekend sessions and monthly small group support sessions. There are also social gatherings such as monthly dinners.

"It keeps people grounded in the program," Lagonigro said. "It is highly encouraged that they stay involved."

In addition to helping his marriage, Lagonigro credits the ministry with deepening his faith. He described Retrouvaille as a "shot of adrenaline" for his faith.

"You know that the Holy Spirit is there, you know that God is there but you don't completely have an understanding until you go through a moment of crisis," Lagonigro said. "That moment of crisis almost cost us our marriage. In two-and-a-half days we were pushed together pretty darn fast."

Today, the Lagonigros, who met as students at Providence College in Rhode Island, have celebrated 30 years of marriage. They are parents of two grown children; a daughter, 27, and a son, 23.

Lagonigro leaned heavily on his family, as well as his faith, about a decade ago when he was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

"You don't battle that on your own," said Lagonigro, 54. "You have to battle that with you faith and your family."

During his cancer treatment Lagonigro was unable to attend Retrouvaille monthly meetings because of his compromised immune system. And so, the Lagonigro's involvement in Retrouvaille was tempered.

“We weren’t active in leadership at that point in time,” Lagonigro said. “We had to postpone everything. I was back after nine months or so and it was like seeing long-lost friends all over again.”

While Lagonigro devotes a considerable amount of time to Retrouvaille, it is a volunteer position. His livelihood is at UTZ Quality Foods where he serves as a senior category director.

“The people that I work with jokingly call me Father Mike,” Lagonigro said. “They know I’m Catholic, there is no hiding it. This is not the first place that I’ve worked where that’s happened.”

To learn more, visit www.helpourmarriage.org.

*Read more Faces of Faith profiles **here**.*