Marriage Prep Goes High Tech

By Deborah Gyapong

OTTAWA (CCN)—Catholic marriage preparation has gone high tech transforming lives over the Internet.

The course's founder said couples who are often living together before marriage and already using artificial birth control take the course and then choose to refrain from sex until their wedding day and pledge to use natural family planning.

"We have incredible results," the co-creator of CatholicMarriagePrep.com Christian Meert told English speaking priests and pastoral workers in the Ottawa Archdiocese May 5.

This is not an ordinary course focusing only on equipping couples with the practical tools of finances, budgeting and effective communication. The divorce rate has kept rising despite such courses, Meert said.

CatholicMarriagePrep.com starts with a rich theological formation based on Catholic teaching, including Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body.

"We speak a lot about God because marriage is first of all a spiritual adventure," said Meert, who developed the course with his wife Christine.

"God invented marriage to help us go to heaven and bring our children to heaven."

On May 5 and 6, Meert explained his course to priests and pastoral workers in both the English and French sectors of the Ottawa Archdiocese at the invitation of Archbishop Terrence Prendergast, SJ, who said he encourages the use of the course as an option.

The Meerts are Christian missionaries from France who now work out of Colorado Springs, Colorado. They came to America 11 years ago when Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput invited them to devise a marriage preparation course.

The online courses have "live" instructors who read the material from the worksheets participants fill out in a profile accessed through a user name and password. The course can take anywhere from a week to three months for a couple to move through at their own pace.

It costs $150 U.S. per couple. Participants can choose to make their profile available to their priest. The Meerts also offer a course to teach married couples how to present the course "live" in a parish setting. It costs $400 U.S.

The online course allows couples who are in separate cities or rural areas to take the course, Meert said.

Though they run both live and online versions of Catholic Marriage Preparation, the online course often allows couples to be far more honest and deep in their answers, he said.

The theological discussions begin with Genesis and the vocation of humankind created in God's image, Meert said. The course covers the vocation of a man, the vocation of a woman, God as Trinity, the consequences of sin and the hope of salvation.

"We don't know the faith formation when they start the course," Meert said. "Most of the time it is very shallow."

The initial Bible study, that requires participants to think and dig for answers, makes them realize "Wow! there is something interesting for us" in the Bible texts written thousands of years ago, he said.

The theological foundation helps them to see that "the power to decide good and evil belongs to God alone," he said.

Couples are inviting Jesus to their wedding, just as Jesus was invited to the Wedding at Cana, he said. That special guest needs to be considered in the same way that we could never invite a Muslim to a feast where we were serving pork, he said.

The course does not skirt the contentious issues of cohabitation before marriage or contraception. About 90 per cent of couples today are having sexual relations before marriage, he said. "Today they don't even know that contraception is a sin."

If these issues were brought up first, without the theological foundations, the participants would vehemently object, he said. But after the teaching, most couples come around to accepting the moral teachings as well.

In 2009, 79 percent of couples signed a pledge card to refrain from sexual relations until marriage, 16 percent said they needed more time to discuss the matter further, and only five percent said, "No." On natural family planning, 61 percent pledged to use it, 33 percent said they needed more time, and only six percent refused, he said.

The course also teaches about annulment, because a priest had told them how tired he was of explaining it to couples when their marriage broke down. Instead couples entering marriage need to know the seriousness of entering freely into the Sacrament of Marriage, he said.

The practical issues are covered, including a section on pornography. "There is a huge problem in our society," he said. "Pornography is the silent killer of families."

Included in the section on finances, is teaching on the importance of tithing.

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— Christian Meert, CatholicMarriagePrep.com

Thumbs up for OLOS

The students at Our Lady of Schools (OLOS) in Halifax illustrate that it is never too early to start social action or community service with young children. Since Christmas, the students have set out to "make a difference."

Their charitable activities began with Christmas food and clothing hampers for the less fortunate. These acts of benevolence were followed by casual dress days for Haiti and most recently their "Shoes for Souls Drive."

After hearing Shoes for Souls founder Kyle Warkentin speak about his experiences in Zambia and why he founded the organization, the OLOS students went into action and started their shoe drive encouraging everyone who wanted to get involved.

The project was an ideal way to teach the students that they can make a difference in the life of one individual or for a whole community. The final count revealed 109 pairs of shoes were collected. The students said that they "really enjoyed helping those in need" and are looking forward to their next project.