

## ***A Celebration of Marriage Retreat, By Tom & Joan Bartololmei***

The Marianist Family Retreat Center really is a very special place; the presence of the Holy Spirit pervades the place; the sense of community is palpable! God knows that it cannot happen by accident; only people answering the call to ministry can make that happen, not just through word or deed but just by their very witness. In other words, even a week after we attended the Celebration of Marriage Retreat it's hard to articulate just how you all manage to do what you do...and do it so very well! You ask if we can share our thoughts with you about what we experienced and felt during the weekend, to have been a part of it all. We'll try.

What was the experience like? Well, when a man stands up and tells you that his wife just got out of the hospital, after a serious bout of pneumonia, and is still too weak and unwell to withstand the rigors of a retreat weekend, and yet he and she both feel a strong need to bear witness to the call of the Spirit and be present, even if it means only one of them can be present physically while the other is truly present in spirit, how can you possibly put that into words?

How do you explain the feeling that you get when, before you even have time to get your bags out of the car, people are making you feel genuinely welcome, like they have truly been waiting for years for you to visit! All through the weekend, in small groups sharing experiences, in the couple talks, in the dining room sharing a meal, washing dishes after the meal, even cleaning the house at the end of the stay, it was always like being part of a family we didn't know we had. That can't be contrived; it can't be programmed; it can't really even be planned. It can really only happen spontaneously when people pray about it, embrace it, bear witness to it and do all in their power to be guided by the Spirit to take on Christ and make it happen.

The call to love one another is a call to intimacy, a call to be vulnerable, a call to let down the barriers that keep us apart. Mary's House became for us a safe haven, a place to be protected, a sanctuary where you can truly share experiences with one another, openly and without fear. These were people who, for the most part, we had never met before. And yet throughout the weekend, being oneself, sharing one's desires, fears, and longings, like falling backwards with your eyes shut, it always felt like someone was there to catch you and keep you safe and sound.

Clearly though wonderful things happen when people answer the call of the Spirit. When you put them together under the same roof...look out! We have been on Married Couple retreats before and, for the most part, they have been good experiences. But... nothing like this past weekend has ever happened to us as a couple. The longing to take that sense of love, of family, of community away with us from Cape May Point and to embrace it, and nurture it in our own lives every day... is that the Marianist charism that you all were talking about?

No wonder so many people cry, including us, when they think about leaving Mary's House at the end of a retreat. No wonder so many people, including us, can't wait to come back. When God works through people like He did last weekend with such subtlety, so unexpectedly, is it any wonder that people feel like they've been part of something miraculous! Believe us when we say it, there is something very powerful going on down at the Point!