



ENDURE

LEADER GUIDE



Faith and Family Life
Catholic Ministries

An Invitation

We would like to take a moment to thank you and your parish team for dedicating your time to this important ministry. As St. John Paul II asserted, “the future of humanity passes by the way of the family.” Now more than ever, humanity needs vibrant local parish communities that are open to accompanying and practically supporting those living out their family life. We truly believe that the quickest way to revitalize the Church is for local parishes to establish a lifelong model of accompaniment. This resource is meant to be a tool to help you move in this direction.

The model of accompaniment outlined in the Road to Emmaus found in the Gospel of St. Luke should become our model for ministry. Like the two distraught disciples walking away from Jerusalem, many couples married in the Church may be blind from seeing Jesus in their life or relationship. Like Christ, the parish is called to walk with these couples listening to their joys and fears, and assisting them along this journey. As couples encounter Christ within the community, it will become easier to see Christ within their relationship and families. Our number one priority must be regaining trust and revealing to these couples their parish is here to support them.

The title “*Endure*” derives from the map of intimacy that St. Paul sets forth in 1 Corinthians 13. Paul’s message to the Corinthians provides a timeless path for spouses and families of how to experience true love. Paul models the love that a couple should strive for and depicts a disordered love a couple should avoid. For any couple, this short passage provides the path to deeply rooted intimacy, which can endure all things and will not fail. Pope Francis reflectively unpacks this passage beautifully in *Amoris Laetitia*. He opens his reflection by recalling a passage from St. Paul:

All that has been said so far would be insufficient to express the Gospel of marriage and the family, were we not also to speak of love. For we cannot encourage a path of fidelity and mutual self-giving without encouraging the growth, strengthening, and deepening of conjugal and family love. Indeed, the grace of the sacrament of marriage is intended before all else ‘to perfect the couple’s love.’ (AL, 89)

In this passage, Paul and Francis accentuate the importance of love and show that love is experienced and nurtured in the day-to-day life of the family. They identify the great need for couples to set aside time to support one another, reminding them that their love can endure all things when it is centered on Christ and directed towards each other. Unfortunately, many couples struggle to set this intentional time to grow their

relationship, which becomes even more complicated once their families grow. Couples need to be invited into these intentional moments of accompaniment and provided training that gives them the skills necessary to build this intimacy.

It is often said within faith formation that “we must meet people where they are at,” unfortunately, most of the time, parishes simply plug families and individuals into a mass formative process disregarding the individual’s present needs. Much of that formation is directed toward sacramental and liturgical engagement, with little focus given to the practical life experiences of the individual or family. *Endure* flips this mentality and tries to meet couples in the messiness and the joys of figuring out marital life. It draws them in through the couple’s desire for a strong and fruitful marriage. It will also create avenues for easy engagement for couples at different stages of life searching for community and becomes an entry point into the parish community for those who have fallen away.

This resource grew out of one couple’s decision to give intentional time to their own marriage. They have been at the heart of the development of this entire process and have piloted the process at their own parish. The fruit from these encounters led them to partner with Faith and Family Life Catholic Ministries to create something beautiful and useful that could be shared with couples on a larger scale. You are being invited into this crucial opportunity to meet couples where they are and lead them closer to Christ and each other. As you will see, *Endure* is meant to not only affect those who participate but transform the entire culture of the parish. For marital and family accompaniment to be successful, it takes the entire community. We hope this tool ignites your parish and transforms your families. May the presence of the Holy Spirit be felt in all your efforts.

Sessions

Endure looks to accompany newly married couples toward marital perfection by first, demonstrating to the married couple that the local parish exists to accompany them throughout their marriage; second, fostering practical skills that strengthen the couple’s relationship and connect those skills to the kerygma; third, connect each couple to an intentional faith community; and finally, lead couples to an understanding of how their marriage perfects their love over time. *Endure* will guide your parish through an experience that will reignite each couple’s marital commitment and establish a support system within your parish for ongoing accompaniment of these newly formed intentional marriage communities. *Endure* includes 5 Sessions and 1 Mini-Retreat that can be done in person, virtual, or hybrid. The process begins with a Visit with each

couple. The Sessions can be done weekly, every two weeks, or according to whatever schedule you find best. You will need a facilitator couple to lead the Session from the front. Be sure to read the Content in full before beginning to familiarize yourself with the flow, particulars, and supplies needed for each Session/Part.

The theme of each Session unpacks one of the following practical skills: communication, intimacy, healing, forgiveness, dealing with anger, avoiding signs of divorce, creating shared meaning, forming a family plan, mapping your family of origin, managing expectation, and theological reflection. This is done through a series of reflection times between spouses. Couples are then invited into a time of small group sharing to reflect more deeply upon the particular skill with their peers. *Endure* looks to help couples connect the insights they take away from each Session back to the Christian story and vision through Scripture, church documents, and mystical reflection on the Rite of Marriage. Couples will be invited to reflectively integrate these aspects of faith into the proposed skill for each Session and pinpoint ways this new awareness would help strengthen their marriages.

Endure will also stimulate couples' imaginations around key skills that strengthen marriage and gradually lead them to a deeper understanding of the sacramentality of their Marriage. It assists the couple in unpacking their current image of marriage and guides them through meaning-making for their future. This is done through an engaging invitation that utilizes the couple's desire to have a successful marriage. The Sessions focus on a particular skill that allows the couples to articulate their current image of marriage pertaining to the highlighted skill. Couples are provided with an aspect of the Christian Story from Scripture or Tradition that provides a different perspective on the proposed skills. Finally, through a series of reflections with their spouse and other couples, they are invited to embrace a new way of looking at the present skill in each Session. In dialogue with their spouses and other couples, the participants expand their imaginations and will come to understand how sacramental Marriage leads to perfecting their relationship.

The formation of small groups is of special importance. The number of couples per small group will depend upon the number of participants and the difference in the demographics of the participants. The Visit will provide the facilitators with information to most effectively place couples with one another in small groups. We encourage groups to have 3 to 4 couples who are at similar points in life (e.g., age, years married, children, and marriage experience). Keeping couples with shared experiences in the same small group is pivotal in formulating intentional faith communities.

We also recommend placing a companion couple in each small group if possible. The companion couple is not meant to be a leader of the group, but instead, they help guide the conversation for the small group. Their primary role is to help develop a comfortable atmosphere that could foster fellowship, friendship, spiritual growth, and fruitful conversation. They help establish a setting of confidentiality and openness among their group. It is important that the companion couple understand the flow of each Session and have the small group questions ahead of time. Plan to order Guide Books for them as well. The companion couple can be either a couple with more marital experience than their small group and/or someone who is from a similar demographic as their small group. The two most important qualities of companion couples are that they are comfortable sharing about their marriage and that they are active in your parish community. If you are not able to find couples for this role as you begin, do not worry, these team members will be raised up naturally as you run *Endure* at your parish.

Time Frame

Endure Sessions are designed to last 1.5-2 hours with the upper limit to include time to gather, check-in, and enjoy fellowship. The Mini-Retreat lasts 4.5-5 hours, which includes Mass. You can also conclude with a celebration dinner afterward. Each part of the Sessions will also have an estimated time that should be allotted to keep the experience moving and on time. Try to start and stop on time to respect the couple's schedules. You know your community best, feel free to adjust and adapt the timelines given.

Gather

Each Session begins with the gather, in which a facilitator introduces the theme and helps frame the experience. Make sure the couple facilitating is well prepared and very familiar with the timing. This person will move the Session along and add any instructions or anecdotes. Their interaction with the couples should always be positive, authentic, encouraging, and supportive. It is crucial to choose the right person for this important role. Try to use someone the couples can easily relate to. In conjunction with introducing the theme they will present the opening quotes.

Opening Prayer

Each Session also begins with an opening prayer that includes Scripture reflections and other experiences. This will set the tone for the Session and invite the participants to encounter the Lord in his word.

Couples One-on-One Check-In/Discussion

Through the Sessions the couples will be given times to check-in/discuss with their spouses. We call these conversations a “Couple One-on-One.” The couples should be provided time to reflect by journaling and speak with each other on the specific questions provided. You can invite the couples to spread out in the room or walk down the hallways if they would like to have more privacy as certain check-in and discussion topics may be sensitive. They will be told which area they will be sharing with their small groups from their conversations.

Small Group Check-In/Discussion

Small group discussion time is an opportunity for couples to learn from one another. There is much wisdom around a table full of couples. Companion couples are key in getting that wisdom shared.

Activity

Each Session has an experiential activity. This activity is another way to teach, and is meant to lead couples into reflection, connecting with their personal experience. Elements of the activities are located in their Guide Books. Some activities will need additional supplies. Supply lists can be found at the beginning of each Session, they will need to be purchased and gathered ahead of time.

Witnesses and Guest Speakers

Endure encourages parishes to coordinate witnesses/guest speakers from within the parish to assist with some of the Sessions. Some examples of witnesses/guest speakers would be the pastor, a psychologist/counselor, a financial advisor, and a couple.

We have set up *Endure* to have guest speakers attend the following Sessions:

- Session 1: Facilitator Couple to share personal story.
- Session 2: Marriage and Family Counselor to speak to the benefits of therapy with Q&A.
- Session 4: Couple to share a witness on how their faith has assisted their marriage and how they have integrated family of origin realities.
- Session 5: Has two guest speakers:
 - Financial Advisor/Planner to share about getting on the same page with financial planning.
 - Pastor or Parochial Vicar to share about forgiveness and what it is like to hear confessions.

You can find more information regarding each of the witness/guest speaker's talking points at the beginning of each Session. It would be helpful to set up a meeting to review the talking points with the witness/guest speaker and answer any outstanding questions. Each presentation is about 10-15 minutes long. These additional speakers provide more professional insight into the discussed skills of that Session.

Teaching

A teaching is provided for each Session that connects the activity, discussion, and witness/guest speaker to a skill or theological reflection that is intended to be delivered that day.

Closing Prayer

At the end of each Session the couples will be learning how to pray in different ways. Each prayer will follow one of the letters from the acronym P.R.A.I.S.E. It stands for praise and thanksgiving, reconciliation, asking for help or petition, intercessions, seeking his will or discernment, and expressing your desire to follow him. The full acronym will not be revealed until the Mini-Retreat, but will be helpful to keep in mind as each closing prayer builds on the previous one.

Set-Up and Environment

Set-up:

- Tables and chairs keeping in mind the small group format.
- You will need a projector or TV and a sound system for the videos/presentations. Utilize a good sound system. The content will not be able to touch the heart if it is not heard.
- Each participant will need a Guide Book, as well as supplies listed at the beginning of each Session/Mini-Retreat Part below, purchased separately. You will need to purchase these ahead of time.
- When meeting in person, we encourage the parish to provide refreshments and childcare if possible.
- Name tags are helpful, especially for the first few Sessions. You could invest in some that you keep throughout the process or use disposable ones. Either way people will appreciate the ease they provide.

Environment:

- The external space informs our internal space. When couples walk into a room and it is well put together and inviting, it says they matter, and someone prepared for them! If possible, gather a team of creatives to make simple centerpieces, welcome signs, and a prayer table.
- As couples arrive, consider playing some background music to set the tone. Walking into a room with light music playing sets a festive and reflective atmosphere. Be careful not to play the music too loud or it can easily become a distraction and make it hard to converse with others.

Accompaniment Team Needs

Facilitator Couple:

- Choosing a facilitator to lead your Sessions as an MC from the front is an important decision. There will be other voices: witnesses, guest speakers, etc. but it is necessary to have a central couple to be the stabilizing and guiding voice in the group. They will introduce and weave together the content for each Session. This couple should be warm, engaging, confident, and it helps if they have a good sense of humor. This couple needs to be open and non-judgmental. It will be their voices, and their connection to each other, that will help the group grow together. Having the entire group come together as a unit, as a family, will help couples continue to seek these experiences out with each other after the Sessions end.

Companion Couples:

We recommend placing a companion couple in each small group if possible. Make sure companion couples feel comfortable with the flow of each Session. It is very helpful to have them walk through a sample Session together prior to the start of *Endure*. Leave time at the end of each Session with the companion couples to evaluate the experience. To make this a great experience for all we must be checking in regularly, making any needed changes as soon as possible. Invest in time with your companion couples. Having a strong team of people committed to the same mission helps everyone. Offer time to get to know one another, provide skills training, and spend time in prayer together. We want our *Endure* couples to feel like they are being invited into a group that has been preparing for them and enjoys each other. Our Beside resources can be helpful in forming and growing your team. The companion couples should be made aware of the following:

- Make sure each group member has the chance to participate. Do not allow any group member to control the sharing. Do not make anyone feel forced to share. Adults can decide to “pass.”
- Make sure all participants feel respected and listened to. Having cell phones put away will help with this.
- Companions will set the tone for the sharing. If they want a deeper, more thoughtful response from couples, they will need to model that in their own sharing. The group will usually follow their lead.
- Make sure companions do not monopolize the sharing. It works well if companions begin the sharing and then pass it on to the other members.
- Companions should be listening to all the couple’s responses and be ready to ask follow up questions that help expand the couple’s answers. It is important that they remember information discussed and use it to check in with couples in future Sessions.
- Each group sharing time is preempted by a reflection time for processing. This should help the couples be prepared to share. No one likes to be put on the spot.
- If anything is ever discussed in small group time that is inappropriate or alarming it should be brought to the attention of the facilitating couple or pastor.

Hospitality:

- Hospitality is about much more than setting out cookies and water bottles. Great hospitality is the root for the growing that will take place. Having a team that interacts well together, and welcomes you into their community, will help the couples get comfortable almost immediately. This will produce greater engagement in the Sessions. This type of hospitality requires the facilitator and companion couples to become friendly with the couples before they ever begin. It includes being “real” through sharing, vulnerability, and laughter from the minute your guests enter.

- How the room “feels” is also an important part of the hospitality recipe. Covered tables, simple centerpieces, and the glow of a few candles will encourage the couples to lean into the conversation, like a great dinner party. Take the time to set the room in advance, so that couples walk into a space that feels prepared for them. A prayer table up front with changing images each Session can also be a small voice speaking into the room. Find creative people in your community who have a heart for couples and let them loose to work their magic.

Making Your First Invitation

Our experience and research has shown there are key moments along the life cycle that couples are longing for community and looking for marital support: the first five years, after the first child is born, when children move away for college, or when the couple becomes empty nesters. *Endure* was written with couples in their first 5 years of marriage in mind, but with some adaptation it can be used with a wider audience. We recommend the following approach when extending your first invitation.

To begin, parishes need to discover who fits into the above categories. Many times parish databases do not always have this data readily available, so it may take some searching. We would encourage a team of people to begin to identify emails and phone numbers for each of the groups listed above. Once the information is collected, the parish should send a personal invitation to these groups highlighting the parish’s desire to support their marriages and families.

Here is one example:

Subject: Join A Free Skills Building Experience for Married Couples

Dear (Husband & Wife),

We hope this email finds you well! My name is *(Intro)*. We are reaching out to you today to invite you to participate in an initiative that the parish will be implementing to help support your marriage and strengthen your family life.

(Personal Witness) My wife, Tricia, and I found that throughout our marriage, there were very few places we could turn to for support when misunderstandings and confrontations arose. At times we felt unprepared, unsupported, and alone in our struggles. In talking with friends, we realized we were not the only married couple wrestling with these obstacles.

To help other couples, we have decided to help facilitate a marriage enrichment experience for our parish called *Endure*. *Endure* will guide our parish through an experience with 5 Sessions and a Mini-Retreat that will help reignite our relationships and connect us to other couples. Each Session is founded on proven strategies and best practices developed by renowned marital counselors from around the country. These skills have tremendously strengthened our marriage, and we are excited to share them with you.

We are looking to hold the Sessions on *(Dates and Times)*

If you are interested in participating, have additional questions, or would like to participate but have a scheduling conflict, please let us know. We are praying for your marriage.

(Signature)

Visit

Following the couples' initial commitment, it would be helpful to schedule a Visit with the participating couples. The Visit will help establish a safe and confidential atmosphere where the couples are met in their current lived experience. These meetings can be held in person or virtually. The objective of the Visit is to facilitate an introduction between the facilitator or companion couple and each participating couple. The Visit allows the facilitator or small group leader to personally welcome each couple into the process, form a baseline of understanding of how the husband and wife currently perceive the content of *Endure*, and learn about their recent experience of married life. The information shared within each of these discussions will help provide areas that should be highlighted in each Session.

The Visit provides the facilitators a way to listen to the joys, hopes, moments of grief, and anxieties that have transpired over the couple's marriage. Depending on time constraints, the Visit can be 30 minutes to 1 hour and can be held in person or by video conference. After a brief welcome and introduction from the facilitating couple, the couples are led through the meeting following the Visit Guide found in the Content PDF, which includes opening prayer, questions, and closing prayer. Please also prepare (with dates and times) the double-sided summary of the schedule and welcome letter print to provide to each couple. This printable PDF can be found after the Visit Guide.