



July 6th, 2020

Dear Clergy and Parish Communities,

As an introduction, we are David and Kathleen Lavallee, and we are the Local Coordinators for Catholic Engaged Encounter (CEE) for the Birmingham, AL community. We have been involved in the ministry since 2014, and we were discerned in as the Local Coordinators for our group this past January. We are members of St. John the Baptist in Madison.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all of us in so many ways, including how couples in our diocese are planning and preparing for strong, life-giving marriages. In the late spring, the National CEE Board released guidelines for presenting CEE Retreat Weekends virtually in emergency situations. Moreover, the retreat center at the Sacred Heart Monastery in Cullman — where we normally hold our in-person retreats — wisely closed their doors to protect their community and all those who would visit them. We then consulted with other CEE communities as well as Msgr. Michael Deering on the practicality and feasibility of presenting a virtual retreat.

As a result, the Birmingham CEE community decided to host our first ever virtual retreat on May 16 and 17, 2020. The presenting team consisted of Kathleen and me, Deacon David Hicks and his wife Ann of St. Thomas the Apostle church, and Fr. Josh Altonji of St. Stephen the Martyr church. We virtually hosted nine engaged couples from across the diocese, some of whom were adversely affected by ongoing government travel restrictions. The weekend did very well, and we received wonderful feedback from the retreat couples as well as from Fr. Altonji.

With the continued pandemic crisis and closing of the Sacred Heart retreat center, **our CEE community has decided to continue presenting virtual weekends throughout the rest of 2020**. We do not make this decision lightly; we all pray for the day that it is safe to host our retreat in person in Cullman. However, we feel strongly about providing this ministry to the engaged couples of our diocese in the best way we can while remaining safe during this time.

We want to inform you that we will host virtual CEE retreat weekends over Zoom on the following dates:

- July 17-19, 2020 (with very few spots remaining)
- August 7-9, 2020
- September 11-13, 2020
- October 16-18, 2020

Due to additional hurdles of ensuring that retreaters fully and actively participate in the virtual format, we have reduced the number of spots on our weekends down to 15 couples. However, if there is large demand for this virtual marriage preparation retreat, we will consider adding additional weekends, as our community availability allows.

We are still in the process of updating our website, birminghamcee.org, with information regarding our virtual weekends, including expectations and guidelines for making the virtual retreat a meaningful event. Please continue monitor the website for updates, and please feel free to reach out to us if you have any additional questions or concerns.

Please pray for our community as we continue to navigate this unprecedented time in our ministry and our world. We will continue to pray for you all.

Peace and blessings,

David and Kathleen Lavallee

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