

TEAMS OF OUR LADY – CANADA

NATIONAL GATHERING 2026

“RETURNING TO THE SOURCE”

PRESENTATION: TESTIMONY

SPEAKER(S): FATHER GILLES A. SURPRENANT

DATE / SESSION: SUNDAY, AUGUST 23 – 10:15–10:45 AM

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

An inspiring testimony for both couples and spiritual counsellors

1. Spiritual fruits I have witnessed within our team

Spiritual fruits are not always obvious. During our piloting year, 2014-15, we greatly **benefitted** from the piloting we received from Suzana and Oscar. Their young family was a few years ahead of our families with two children a little older. Husband and wife were very different in temperament and personality, which inspired our couples to be themselves.

We quickly learned for ourselves the truth that Teams is not a therapeutic instrument, but rather a movement for mutual support, help, and growth through fraternity and spiritual sharing of faith in the many challenges to faith we experience in life in this modern world. In the second year, one of the men left his wife and child to return to his mother in his country of origin. The poor woman felt she could no longer continue the journey with our Team, and we mourned their loss. We tried to continue supporting her, but she soon fell out of contact; needing to rebuild her life.

This was a hard lesson, but one of the fruits was increased compassion in us and an increased desire to make room for new couples and families. In our fourth year, we welcomed a new couple with their three boys, and two years later, in our sixth year, we welcomed yet another couple with their young child. More children were added over the years, and it was a great blessing to share in the joy of these young families.

During this same period, in our fifth year, one couple discerned their need to seek graduate studies, both of them, which required them to refocus their time and energy. They withdrew from our monthly Team meetings for a time, remaining friends and in contact with us. In the sixth year, another of the original couples discerned a call to return to Europe in order to be closer to their parents, in two neighbouring countries. They have remained friends and in contact with all of us. One spiritual fruit has been ongoing fraternity among us.

Our Team has known different couples with their families, and it enriches all of us to grow with these couples and their children actively participating in our Team. These changes, while dramatic, are a fairly accurate reflection of the nature of our society, with its challenges from the workplace and the pace of life.

What stands out as abundantly clear, is the way in which Our Lady, in calling each of us to be members of her Team, brings us ever closer to her Son, our Lord Jesus; even when our personal journey seems to keep us more at a distance from God or from each other. Our faith must necessarily negotiate the transition from a childish faith – believing in the way we received from our parents alone – into a more adult faith.

In facing the challenges of life, and especially the challenge of discovering our own fragility and sinfulness, we must all learn to take responsibility for ourselves, but putting our trust in God; rather than in our own efforts alone. We learn from one another's testimonies – particularly during the difficult times – to acquire attitudes of humility and

gratitude; admitting our shortcomings, seeking the support and help of others, and most especially, of God, and giving thanks to God day by day for everything.

Perhaps it is difficult for most people today to pray, to want to enter intentionally and frequently into the Presence of God: within us, before the Blessed Sacrament, during the Sacred Liturgy, in our couple, in our family, in our Team. There are obstacles to overcome: unhealthy fear of God as a punishing authority, pride, self-reliance, reluctance to appear imperfect, and so many others. We have experienced in our Team many spiritual fruits of encouragement in hearing the testimonies of others; receiving through them the graces we need to renew our efforts to pray as a Team, alone, with our spouse, with each child, and as a family.

A particularly daunting challenge has been the sit-down for our couples, and for myself as a priest, devoting time to adoration and silent meditation. Many misconceptions persist in us about what these endeavours are all about. Not really understanding the simple honesty and trust offered to us by God as graces through the sit-down; we tend to put it off. However, whenever we finally put the well-being of the other first, and propose it or accept to do it; it is always a profound blessing, which enhances our intimacy with each other, and therefore, also with God. We have seen this in ourselves and in each other.

Our efforts to open the Bible and to feed on the Word of God remain a challenge for most of us, but we understand how essential it is for growth to feed on the Word of God. The better we come to understand who God really is, what the divine Persons are like, the more we want to put our trust in God. Jesus is the Light of the world, and we very much need his light to dispel the darkness and shadows in our lives and families.

We have learned to taste spiritual fruit by making good use of the rule of life endeavour: defining for ourselves specific goals for personal growth, to uproot a bad habit or to develop a good habit. We could reap much more spiritual fruit here by sharing more regularly with each other any changes in our rule of life and both setbacks and progress along the way: both struggles and breakthroughs.

As a Team, we have at times struggled to observe an annual Team retreat; although some of us have been able to participate personally in retreats or days of recollection or pilgrimages. Still, our Spiritual Counsellor, a priest, has tried to put together at least a half day retreat during the summer. We don't always succeed, but whenever we have done it, we have all tasted how good are the spiritual fruit: being renewed in the love of God, the grace of Reconciliation, the Light shining in the Word of God, the beauty and power of silence, and of personal sharing, and of course, the power and encouragement of praying together.

2. How spiritual counsellors can guide and support couples in their faith journey

When I was asked and accepted in 2014 to join a new team, the first English speaking Team of Our Lady in Montreal, I accepted without knowing too much about the expectations or duties. I received no mentoring from other spiritual counsellors, and since I was still in recovery from depression which lasted from 2006 to 2017; I did not go looking for mentoring either. It is only after this that I went looking for instructions from the website and related documents. Our Sector also had a formation. It was a joy to realize I could and should share thoughts at the monthly meetings in reflecting on the Word of God and on the study materials; as well as whatever may be pertinent and potentially helpful, based on the reflections of Team members

Naturally, even at the beginning, having three decades of experience as a pastor; I did try to share my faith journey in ways that seemed pertinent to what the other Team members shared. It was also a blessing for me and other members when they asked to celebrate Reconciliation or simply asked for guidance. It is a profound privilege and blessing for priests to receive from the Holy Spirit insights into souls and to see the hand of God working in the lives of others, in couples, in children and youth, and in families.

It is delightful for me to be able to share that on many occasions throughout these past twelve years, that the candid sharing, the personal faith, both the struggles and the joys of our Team members, provoked in me renewed desires to apply my own will to my rule of life; not to give up but to keep trying to respond to the Lord's call in my life. Their heroic efforts to be faithful as spouses and parents and to sacrifice of themselves for their spouses and children have been profoundly inspiring for me, and continue to be so.

I have learned as Spiritual Counsellor to leave responsibility for our Team to the Team members and their rotation of the responsible couple's role of service. We can and certainly should support the Responsible Couple and offer to do what we can to make the planning and meeting go as smoothly as possible; while doing all we can to help remove obstacles to our personal and collective growth and development.

In addition, as priests or religious, we have been blessed with a depth of formation in many disciplines: Sacred Scripture, Liturgy, prayer, faith, Church history, spirituality and spiritual direction; such that we have many of the riches in our Church Tradition at our finger tips. These treasures are intended by the Church to be available to all, and we spiritual counsellors are ideally situated to share with the Team these abundant riches.

3. Stories of growth, perseverance, or transformation within Teams that have inspired me

One Team member at first was not so comfortable with the domain of the interior life, or the mystery of God, or such dimensions of faith. Encouraged by the sharing of others, he began to do research, read books, and share with the Team the riches which he found. In this way, he felt able to contribute to the work of our Team and to their own couple and family.

Another Team member felt held back by elements of family history; that the busyness of married life and parenting had caused an impoverishment of her personal life and anything she might have to offer her spouse and children, or even our Team. The testimonies and encouragement of other Team members, and also some guidance from the Spiritual Counsellor, encouraged her to change her way of looking at her life. She adapted her outlook to be more realistic to her changing circumstances, and discovered a new and perhaps more intimate connection with the Most Holy Trinity; which in turn enriched her couple and family and us.

Whenever there was a new pregnancy and, in time, a new birth in our Team, it generated profound feelings of sympathy, empathy, solidarity, and shared joy; which in turn helped renew the faith, love, gratitude, and generosity of all our Team members, including the priest. Similarly, times of illness, wounds, loss of employment, gain of new employment, illness and death in the families of origin and extended families – all the events of life – enriched the living, faith, love, and hope of all of us. Our families have each brought into the world, until now, between two and four children each, and each one is unique and a great blessing.

The courage and faith of those members who left their countries of origin, leaving behind parents and siblings and extended families, became demonstrations of living faith and trust in God, of generous self-sacrificing love; which in ongoing ways have continued to lift us all up to higher levels of commitment and dedication. Similarly, sharing the intense challenge of maintaining a livable balance between family and work, marriage and career; this has also provided opportunities for solidarity, encouragement, and mutual help.

When one couple with their family missed some monthly Team meetings in order to take an important step of higher education for the sake of their careers and family; it was a loss and challenge for our Team, but when the friendships and fraternity continued, we learned that we have come to our Team of Our Lady in response to her call. We learned that our lives and vocations are all about freedom and generosity. The ways of the Lord are mysterious, but following his will is good, and we are called to give Him the glory.

4. Insights on living out the mission and values of the Movement in daily life, both for couples and spiritual counsellors

At first, for our original founding couples, and for myself as a priest, we found the endeavours variously challenging and difficult; that is, some more than others. Exposure to the Teams movement puts on display for us couples and spiritual counsellors who have achieved an extraordinary degree of holiness, discipline, generosity, courage, and dedication to their vocation; as well as to the movement itself. It can be very daunting, perhaps a risk even of discouragement, to compare ourselves to others.

By the grace of God, we are learning that each person, each couple, and each family is unique. The lesson is that the only person to whom I may compare myself is myself. Tomorrow, I can be better than I have been today. Of course, we can learn and be encouraged by the progress and growth and testimonies of others, but the rule of thumb is to “weep with those who weep, laugh with those who laugh, rejoice with those who rejoice”, and allow the flame of divine Love to fan the flame of Love in our own heart and soul and enlighten our mind. In this way, we can better perceive the promptings of the Holy Spirit attracting us to what seems to us to be desirable, and to know when it is the Holy Spirit giving us a gentle nudge from behind when we are too hesitant or afraid. To this end, some Team members have at times sought out spiritual direction.

Time permitting, a sharing in English and French of our recent experience of the Annual Retreat.

THANK YOU, MERCI.

Fr. Gilles A. Surprenant
Priest & Poustinik