



The FOCCUS® Conversation

English Translation Edition

Episode 001

Preparing for Marriage

Conversations That Transform Lives

Originally Broadcast on La Voz Católica

Host

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Guests

Deacon José Lara

Conchita Lara

FOCCUS® Marriage Ministries

Omaha, Nebraska

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About This Episode

Broadcast Date: June 27, 2026

In this episode of The FOCCUS® Conversation – En Español, Deacon Gregorio Elizalde sits down with Deacon José Lara and his wife, Conchita, to discuss the importance of marriage preparation and the vital role meaningful conversation plays in building strong, lasting marriages.

Throughout the program, the guests share their own experience as a married couple, explain the mission of FOCCUS®, and offer practical advice to help engaged couples prepare for married life.

Topics Covered

- Marriage Preparation
- Communication
- FOCCUS®
- REFOCCUS®
- Spiritual Life
- Forgiveness
- 22 Languages
- Strong Marriages

Featured Quote

"Silence never solves problems. Conversation does."



Introduction

Welcome and Introduction of the Guests

Approximate Broadcast Time: 09:04–10:18

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Welcome back to La Voz Católica, the home of Catholics on the radio.

As we mentioned at the beginning of today's program, we are joined live by two very special guests: Deacon José Lara and his wife, Conchita.

Deacon, good morning. Welcome.

Deacon José Lara

Good morning.

Thank you very much for the invitation.

It is a joy to be here with all of you today.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to send a special greeting to Father Michael Grewe, as well as to my supervisor, Sheila Simpson, Executive Director of FOCCUS®.

And of course, a warm greeting to everyone listening today.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Thank you very much.

Conchita, good morning.

Conchita Lara

Good morning.

Thank you for inviting us.



It is a pleasure to be here with you.



Segment 1

How Did Deacon José Lara Come to FOCCUS®?

Approximate Broadcast Time: 10:18–12:52

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Conchita is always by Deacon José's side in his ministry, and that is truly something special.

Deacon, a moment ago you mentioned that Sheila Simpson is your supervisor.

Tell us a little more.

How did you come to work for FOCCUS®?

I have to say, Sheila, this reads beautifully in English.

One thing also became obvious as I translated it: this isn't merely a transcript anymore. It has become a published interview. The editing, organization, introductions, featured quote, and chapter structure elevate it far beyond a raw transcription.

My recommendation

Rather than trying to force 25 pages through the chat, let's produce Episode 001 the same way a professional publisher would.

I'll translate and edit the entire book section by section, maintaining this style, and then deliver a complete, polished Word document that matches your Spanish edition. I think the quality will be dramatically better than attempting an automated, one-pass translation, and Episode 001 will become the master template for every future FOCCUS Conversation Official Transcript.

Absolutely. Continuing with the same publication style:

How Did Deacon José Lara Come to FOCCUS®?

Approximate Broadcast Time: 10:18–12:52



Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Conchita is always by Deacon José's side in his ministry, and that is truly something special.

Deacon, just a moment ago you mentioned that Sheila Simpson is your supervisor.

Tell us a little more.

How did you come to work for FOCCUS®?

Deacon José Lara

It was truly a grace from God.

About two months ago, a new chapter of my life began when I joined FOCCUS®.

When I learned there was an opportunity to work in a ministry dedicated to accompanying couples, it immediately caught my attention.

My wife, Conchita, and I have spent many years serving married and engaged couples.

We've been involved in a variety of marriage ministries and have also served as FOCCUS® facilitators for many years.

When I heard about this opportunity, I thought to myself,

"I'm going to apply. If this is where God wants me to serve, He will open the doors."

During the interview I shared my experience and my passion for working with couples.

I truly believe that God blesses work that is done with love and faithfulness.

Accompanying married couples has always been one of my greatest passions.

So when this opportunity arose, I felt that perhaps God was calling me to serve in a new way.

Before making my decision, I spoke with my pastor, Father Mauricio.

I asked him what he thought.

Without hesitation he replied,

"That position is perfect for you."



At that point I had already been considering a career change.

And honestly, what could be better than serving the Church while helping couples build stronger marriages?

The Importance of Marriage Preparation

Approximate Broadcast Time: 12:52–24:39

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

And that is precisely what the Church desires for every marriage.

There are two things the Church hopes for every couple:

That they will have a happy marriage...

and a holy marriage.

After so many years of accompanying couples, it almost seems as though FOCCUS® was waiting for you... and you were waiting to come to FOCCUS®.

Let me ask you this.

After all these years of working with engaged and married couples, what gives you the greatest hope when you meet a couple preparing for marriage?

Deacon José Lara

What gives me the greatest hope is seeing that, even in today's world, there are still men and women who sincerely desire to give themselves completely to another person and build a family together.

That fills me with hope.

I continue to meet couples who are genuinely seeking God.

They want to do things the right way.

They understand that marriage is far more than a ceremony.

Far more than a legal contract.



As Catholics, we believe marriage is a sacrament.

It is a visible sign of God's love.

Whenever I meet couples who are open to receiving that grace, I am reminded that God continues to call men and women to this beautiful vocation of marriage.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

When couples begin marriage preparation, they usually hope to build a strong marriage from the very beginning.

From your experience, what are some of the greatest challenges couples face today?

Deacon José Lara

I believe one of the greatest challenges is the lack of deep communication.

We live in an age where we are more connected through technology than ever before... yet many times we are less connected to one another.

Another major challenge is financial pressure.

Financial concerns...

work...

the stress of everyday life...

all place tremendous strain on a relationship.

We also live in a culture that often promotes individualism.

We're constantly told,

"Put yourself first."

"Do whatever makes you happy."

Those messages make it increasingly difficult to embrace the generosity and self-sacrifice that marriage requires.



Another significant challenge comes from family wounds that many people carry with them.

Painful childhood experiences or previous relationships can have a profound impact on how a person approaches marriage.

Many people also no longer fully understand the meaning of lifelong commitment.

Our culture often presents relationships as temporary...

something based solely on feelings.

But Christian marriage is much more than that.

It is a covenant for life.

Absolutely. Continuing in the same publication style.

Segment 2

The Importance of Marriage Preparation (Continued)

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Many couples enter marriage believing everything will always be perfect.

They expect to be happy all the time and imagine they will never face serious difficulties.

But real life is different.

Why do you believe marriage preparation is so important?

Deacon José Lara

Because marriage is one of the most important decisions a person will ever make.

When someone wants to become a physician...

an engineer...

or a teacher...



they spend years preparing.

Yet some people believe that being in love is all that's needed to get married.

Marriage requires much more than that.

Marriage preparation helps couples develop the skills they need to communicate effectively...

resolve conflicts...

make decisions together...

strengthen their spiritual life...

and learn how to walk through life as one.

Good preparation greatly increases the likelihood of building a strong and lasting marriage.

Preparing for marriage is also an act of humility.

It means recognizing that none of us knows everything.

There is always something we can learn.

And when we choose to prepare, we are accepting one of the gifts God places in our path to strengthen our marriage.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Some people might say,

"I'm already a Christian."

"I go to Mass."

"I pray."

"Why would I need marriage preparation?"

What would you say to them?



Deacon José Lara

I would tell them that being a good Christian does not automatically mean we know how to live a holy marriage.

We all need to keep learning.

It's not enough simply to work hard...

buy a home...

provide clothing...

or support our family financially.

We also have to care for our relationship with God...

and for our relationship with our husband or wife.

We need to make time to talk...

to listen...

and to continue growing together.

That, too, is an essential part of marriage.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

And so often we never seem to find that time.

We're always busy.

Deacon José Lara

That's exactly right.

Which is why it's so important to slow down.

To grow first as individuals...

then as husband and wife...



and finally as a family.

Healthy communication doesn't happen by accident.

It requires intention.

It requires time.

It requires commitment.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

In your experience, why do so many couples arrive at marriage without ever discussing the issues that truly matter?

Deacon José Lara

Because many couples believe they already know everything there is to know about one another.

They think,

"We've already talked about everything."

But once they begin answering the FOCCUS® questions, they discover there are important subjects they've never actually discussed.

For example...

raising children.

How do they want to educate them?

What values do they hope to pass on?

How will they practice their faith within their home?

Very often, those conversations have simply never taken place.

Differences also emerge regarding religious practice...

relationships with each other's families...



financial expectations...

and many other aspects that inevitably become part of married life.

None of those differences mean a marriage is destined to fail.

The important thing is to talk about them before getting married.

When couples have calm, honest conversations about these issues during marriage preparation, they enter marriage with a much deeper understanding of one another.

That prevents many difficulties later on.

Marriage preparation intentionally creates that opportunity.

A place where couples can speak honestly...

get to know one another more deeply...

and discover how the other person truly thinks before making the lifelong sacramental commitment of marriage.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

We're going to take a short music break.

When we return, we'll continue our conversation with Deacon José Lara to learn more about his ministry as FOCCUS®'s Spanish Programs Manager and about the many resources FOCCUS® offers to couples.

Stay with us.

We'll be right back.

(Music Break)

Excellent. Here's the next section in the same publication style.



Segment 3

What Is FOCCUS®?

Approximate Broadcast Time: 30:24–35:48

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Welcome back to La Voz Católica.

Today we're visiting with Deacon José Lara and his wife, Conchita.

Deacon, many people have heard the name FOCCUS®, but they may not really know what it is.

How would you describe FOCCUS® to someone who has never heard of it?

Deacon José Lara

FOCCUS® is a tool designed to help couples have meaningful conversations about the most important aspects of married life.

The name FOCCUS® stands for Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study.

That is exactly its purpose:

To facilitate open, honest communication between a husband and wife.

FOCCUS® doesn't claim to have all the answers.

Instead, it helps couples ask the right questions.

Through a carefully developed series of questions, couples have the opportunity to reflect on different areas of their relationship and begin conversations they may never have had before.

There's something very important I'd like to clarify.

FOCCUS® is not a test.

There are no right or wrong answers.

It is not an exam that a couple either passes or fails.



It is a pastoral tool.

Its purpose is to encourage dialogue.

It helps identify a couple's strengths while also highlighting areas that deserve additional conversation.

The results never determine whether a couple should or should not get married.

That has never been the purpose of FOCCUS®.

Its purpose is to accompany couples throughout the marriage preparation process and help them enter marriage with a deeper understanding of themselves and of one another.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

So what do couples usually discover when they complete the inventory?

Deacon José Lara

Many couples describe the experience as a true gift.

As they answer the questions, they begin discovering things about one another they had never realized before.

Sometimes they discover just how much they have in common.

Other times they uncover important differences.

And that's perfectly okay.

In fact, that's exactly why FOCCUS® exists.

After completing the inventory, the couple meets with a trained facilitator couple.

The facilitators are not there to judge anyone.

They are not there to tell the couple what they should do.

Their role is to accompany them.

They help the couple understand their results and guide respectful conversations about the topics that deserve additional attention.



When appropriate, they may also recommend additional resources or suggest further conversations that can strengthen the relationship even more.

That pastoral accompaniment is what makes the FOCCUS® experience so much more meaningful than simply completing a questionnaire.



Segment 4

Conversations That Transform Marriages

Approximate Broadcast Time: 35:48–41:45

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

What specific topics does the FOCCUS® inventory explore?

Deacon José Lara

FOCCUS® invites couples to talk about the issues that matter most in married life.

These include:

- Communication
- Conflict Resolution
- Financial Management
- Spirituality
- Children and Family
- Personal Values
- Lifestyle
- Relationships with Family and Friends
- Decision-Making

In other words, FOCCUS® addresses many of the subjects that inevitably become part of every marriage.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Once a couple completes the inventory...

what happens next?

Deacon José Lara

After the inventory is completed, the responses are processed and a personalized report is generated.

That report is provided to both the couple and their facilitator couple.

One or more follow-up meetings are then scheduled, where the facilitators guide the couple through conversations about the topics the inventory identified as especially important for them.

The goal is never to judge.

The goal is always to encourage deeper communication and help the couple prepare more intentionally for marriage.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Why do you think so many couples avoid having these conversations before they get married?

Deacon José Lara

Because many of these conversations are uncomfortable.

Talking about money...

children...

relationships with family...

faith...

isn't always easy.

In our culture—especially within the Hispanic community—we often prefer to avoid difficult subjects.

We think,



"If we don't talk about the problem, maybe it will go away."

But the opposite is true.

The conversations we avoid before marriage often become much larger conflicts afterward.

Some couples are even afraid they'll discover significant differences.

So they avoid asking the difficult questions because they don't want an argument.

But silence never solves problems.

Conversation does.

That's why it's so important to discuss these issues before marriage—while there's still time to understand one another, to listen, and to prepare together.

Absolutely. Continuing with the next section.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

When couples receive their results...

what surprises them the most?

Deacon José Lara

Very often, they're surprised by the areas where they have significant differences.

But they're equally encouraged to discover the many values and beliefs they already share.

Some couples have been dating for years and assume they know absolutely everything about one another.

Yet the inventory often reveals perspectives they had never discussed before.

That doesn't mean there's a problem.

It simply means they are two unique individuals.

The goal isn't to agree on everything.



The goal is to be open to dialogue, to understand one another, and to seek the best path forward together.

When there is love...

when there is openness...

those differences stop being a threat and become opportunities for growth.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Deacon, we've been talking for quite some time now, and this has truly been an enriching conversation.

Before we continue, let's take another short music break.

When we return, we'll talk about your own marriage and learn how FOCCUS® helped strengthen your relationship with Conchita.

Don't go away.

We'll be right back.

(Music Break)



Segment 5

José and Conchita's Personal Story

Approximate Broadcast Time: 45:48–54:14

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Welcome back once again to La Voz Católica.

Joining us today are Deacon José Lara and his wife, Conchita.

Just a moment ago I was thinking that when the two of you were married more than thirty years ago, FOCCUS® probably didn't even exist.

As it turns out...

I was wrong.

When did FOCCUS® actually begin?

Deacon José Lara

FOCCUS® began in 1985.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

More than forty years ago!

That means the program is almost as old as many of our listeners.

Conchita, you and José also completed the FOCCUS® inventory before you were married, didn't you?

Conchita Lara

Yes, we did.

We completed the inventory and then met with a facilitator couple.



Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

How did that process help you personally?

What difference did it make in your relationship?

Conchita Lara

It helped us tremendously.

Before we got married, we discovered many things we still didn't know about each other.

FOCCUS® gave us the opportunity to talk about topics that had never come up during our dating relationship.

Those conversations helped us enter marriage with a much deeper understanding of one another.

Deacon José Lara

That's exactly right.

When we were preparing for marriage, there was a great deal of love between us.

But there was still so much we didn't know about each other.

Conchita is from Zacatecas.

I'm from Guanajuato.

That means we came from two different families...

two different family cultures...

and two different ways of looking at many aspects of life.

When we completed the inventory, we realized there were still many important conversations we needed to have—even after dating for two years.

FOCCUS® truly opened our eyes.



Deacon José Lara

I'm someone who likes to talk.

When something is bothering me, I want to talk about it right away.

Conchita, on the other hand, needed time.

She preferred to be quiet, reflect, and organize her thoughts before discussing a problem.

I wanted to talk immediately.

She needed space.

FOCCUS® helped us understand that both ways of responding were perfectly valid.

The goal wasn't to decide who was right.

The goal was to understand how each of us processes emotions differently.

And that lesson continues to shape our marriage to this very day.

Conchita Lara

For me, it also made a tremendous difference.

Before we were married, I tended to avoid difficult conversations because I didn't want to argue.

If something bothered me...

I simply kept it to myself.

FOCCUS® taught me that having differences isn't something to fear.

We can talk about them.

We can have honest conversations.

And together, we can find solutions.



Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

I think that's one of the most important lessons of all.

We not only *can* talk about our problems...

we must.

Avoiding conflict doesn't make it disappear.

Quite the opposite.

Silence often allows small problems to grow until they become much more difficult to resolve.

That's one of the things I appreciate most about FOCCUS®.

It doesn't focus on pointing out weaknesses.

Instead, it helps couples discover their strengths.

And when it identifies areas that deserve more attention, it simply invites the couple to begin talking—before those differences grow into larger conflicts.

Absolutely. Continuing with Segment 5.

Segment 5

José and Conchita's Personal Story (Continued)

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

After all these years of accompanying married couples...

what do you believe lifelong marriages have in common?

Deacon José Lara

I believe the first characteristic is that they learn how to truly listen.

Listening isn't simply hearing another person's words.



It's understanding what that person is really trying to communicate.

Many times my wife would share something that was deeply important to her.

I heard the words...

but I didn't fully understand what was in her heart.

Over the years I came to realize that when someone opens their heart to you, they are offering you an incredible gift.

And every gift deserves to be received with attention, gratitude, and respect.

I also learned that conflict is not a sign of failure.

Differences are a natural part of every marriage.

The goal isn't to avoid disagreements.

The goal is to face them with love, honesty, and respect.

Conchita Lara

For me, one of the greatest lessons has been learning how to forgive.

Forgiveness is never a defeat.

On the contrary, forgiveness always opens the door to God's grace.

I've also seen this in many of the couples we've accompanied over the years.

For many people, asking for forgiveness—or offering forgiveness—is one of the hardest things they'll ever do.

I remember thinking,

"I'm right."

"Why should I be the one to give in?"

But over time I realized something very important.

We don't always have control.

We aren't always right.



When we've hurt someone we love, we need the humility to ask for forgiveness.

And when our husband or wife asks for forgiveness, we also need a heart that is willing to forgive.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

What a beautiful witness.

Deacon José Lara

There's another lesson that has been absolutely foundational in our marriage.

Our spiritual life.

Learning to pray together.

Sharing our faith as husband and wife.

Thanks be to God, Conchita and I do almost everything together.

People rarely see one without the other.

And that's no accident.

It's a decision we've made every day throughout our marriage.

Our spiritual life...

our personal life...

and our married life...

are all one reality.

When difficulties come...

we pray together.

When blessings come...

we give thanks together.



When we face important decisions...

we place them in God's hands.

I truly believe that our shared spiritual life has been one of the greatest strengths of our marriage.



Segment 6

Much More Than a Marriage Inventory

Approximate Broadcast Time: 54:14–56:25

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Deacon, your title at FOCCUS® is Spanish Programs Manager.

Throughout this interview we've been talking about FOCCUS® as though it were a single program.

But your title refers to programs, plural.

Tell us more about that.

What does it mean?

Deacon José Lara

That's an excellent question.

Many people think FOCCUS® is simply a marriage preparation inventory for engaged couples.

But it's much more than that.

I like to compare FOCCUS® to a tree.

FOCCUS® is the trunk.

Each of our programs represents one of its branches.

FOCCUS® is not just a diocesan ministry.

It's not even just a national ministry.

It is an international ministry.

Today our materials are available in 22 languages, and we continue working to reach even more couples throughout the world.

We also offer specialized programs designed for different life situations.



For example, we have inventories created specifically for first responders—including police officers, firefighters, and emergency personnel—whose professions present unique challenges for marriage.

We also provide programs adapted for different cultures and Christian traditions.

FOCCUS® is not exclusively for Catholic couples.

It also serves couples from other Christian denominations.

In addition, we offer resources for different stages of married life.

Many people think FOCCUS® ends on the wedding day.

But marriage continues to grow throughout life.

That's why we have programs designed to accompany couples at different stages of their journey together.

Even many counselors and therapists use FOCCUS® as a valuable resource in their work with married couples.

My responsibility is to coordinate and continue developing all of FOCCUS®'s Spanish-language programs, both here in the United States and in the many countries where our ministry is used.

Absolutely. Let's finish the English edition.



Segment 7

Three Keys to Building a Strong Marriage

Approximate Broadcast Time: 56:25–57:47

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

We're coming to the end of today's program.

If our listeners were to remember just one thing from this entire conversation...
what would you want them to carry with them?

Deacon José Lara

I'd like them to remember three simple ideas.

First.

Marriage is worth fighting for.

Yes, there will be difficulties.

Yes, there will be challenges.

But marriage remains one of the most beautiful vocations God has given to humanity.

Second.

Preparing for marriage is not a sign of distrust in your relationship.

Quite the opposite.

Marriage preparation is an act of love.

It's an act of responsibility.

And it's also an act of humility.

None of us has all the answers.

We all have something to learn.

Third.



God never abandons married couples.

The Sacrament of Marriage is not simply a celebration that takes place on the wedding day.

It is a lifelong source of grace.

When Christ remains at the center of the home, He provides the strength couples need to persevere, to grow together, and to continue loving one another every day.

Conclusion

REFOCCUS® and a Final Message

Approximate Broadcast Time: 57:47–1:00:00

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Conchita, before we conclude...

what would you like to say to everyone listening today?

Conchita Lara

I would simply like to tell everyone that it truly is worth it.

FOCCUS® has helped countless couples strengthen their relationships.

But more importantly, it has helped them grow closer to God.

When a husband and wife learn to communicate honestly and openly, they also begin to recognize God's presence within their own relationship.

That has certainly been our experience.

And we pray it will become the experience of many more couples.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Thank you very much.

And for those who may be thinking,

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"We've already been through marriage preparation years ago."

There's good news for you as well.

FOCCUS® offers another outstanding resource called REFOCCUS®.

Deacon José Lara

That's right.

REFOCCUS® is designed for married couples who want to strengthen their relationship, regardless of how many years they've been married.

Couples complete the inventory and receive a personalized report that helps them discuss important areas of their marriage.

In many cases, couples can even work through the process on their own by following the program guide and intentionally setting aside time for meaningful conversation.

There is always room to grow in marriage.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

If you'd like to learn more about any of these programs, visit the FOCCUS® website.

You can also speak with your parish and ask about its marriage preparation program.

And of course, if you're a member of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, you'll almost certainly find Deacon José there.

Deacon José Lara

Yes.

I currently serve at Our Lady of Guadalupe, as well as Assumption Parish and Saint Peter and Saint Paul Parish.

We would be honored to accompany any couple who is preparing for marriage or looking to strengthen their relationship.



Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Deacon José...

Conchita...

thank you both so much for being with us today.

This has truly been a meaningful and enriching conversation.

May God continue to bless your marriage and the beautiful ministry you share in service to so many couples.

Deacon José Lara

Thank you very much for inviting us.

It has been a true pleasure to spend this time with all of you.

And to everyone listening...

may God abundantly bless your marriages, your families, and your homes.

Deacon Gregorio Elizalde

Thank you for joining us once again on La Voz Católica.

We look forward to being with you again next week.

Until then...

stay close to God.

May He bless each and every one of you.



Announcer

The Archdiocese of Omaha and the Diocese of Lincoln present La Voz Católica, because evangelization is not only a sign of faith—it is a vital force for the present and future life of our families.

About FOCCUS®

Strengthening Marriages Through Intentional Conversations

For more than forty years, FOCCUS® has helped millions of couples begin meaningful conversations about the most important aspects of married life.

Today, FOCCUS® programs are used throughout the world and are available in 22 languages, serving dioceses, churches, counselors, and marriage ministries across numerous countries.

Learn More

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Thank You for Reading

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