



COVENANT
OF
LOVE

**MARRIAGE PREPARATION
POLICY**

**DIOCESE OF PHOENIX
MARRIAGE PREPARATION POLICY
POLICY AND GUIDELINES 2009**



The Roman Catholic
Diocese of Phoenix

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July 26, 2009

Feast of Ss. Anne and Joachim, parents of Our Lady

Dear Father, Deacon, Lay Marriage Leader,

As members of the Church at the beginning of the 21st Century, we face no more critical matter than the renewal of marriage and family life. This is a time to trust the truth God has revealed and a time to teach it with patience, persuasion and hope. We need not fear—indeed, *human hearts are made for the Lord's message*. It is my prayer that this marriage preparation policy, *Covenant of Love*, will serve to assist all who have the sacred duty of preparing couples for marriage.

This policy owes much to the Archdioceses of Denver and Washington and the Dioceses of Peoria and Colorado Springs. We are grateful for the permission to make use of the fruits of their labor.

Having been reviewed by many of you during the past twelve months, and improved by your pastoral insights, this policy is hereby promulgated by me on this date. It may be put into effect as early as October 1st, 2009, if it seems helpful and reasonable to do so. It becomes mandatory for the preparation of couples for marriage beginning January 1, 2010.

My deepest thanks to one and all for your vital pastoral service to those preparing for marriage in the Church.

May Christ, the Bridegroom, bless you with peace, wisdom and love.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+Thomas J. Olmsted
Bishop of Phoenix

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Document Abbreviations

CA	John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, <i>The Church in America</i> (January 22, 1999).
CC	Pius XI. Encyclical Letter, <i>Casti Connubii</i> (December 31, 1930), Daughters of St. Paul.
CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> (1994), United States Catholic Conference.
CIC	<i>Codex Iuris Canonici</i> (January 25, 1983), Canon Law Society of America.
CT	John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation <i>Catechesi Tradendae</i> (October 16, 1979), Daughters of St. Paul
DRP	John Paul II, <i>Discourse to Participants in a Course on Responsible Procreation</i> (March 1, 1984) Daughters of St. Paul.
FC	John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, <i>Familiaris Consortio</i> (November 22, 1981), Daughters of St. Paul.
GDC	Congregation for the Clergy, <i>General Directory for Catechesis</i> (August 11, 1997), United States Catholic Conference.
GS	Second Vatican Council, <i>Gaudium et Spes</i> (December 7, 1965), Daughters of St. Paul.
LF	John Paul II, <i>Letter to Families</i> (February 2, 1994), Daughters of St. Paul.
MM	Paul VI, Apostolic Letter, <i>On Mixed Marriages</i> (October 1, 1970), Daughters of St. Paul.
MPC	National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Marriage & Family, <i>Marriage Preparation and Cohabiting Couples: An Information Report on New Realities and Pastoral Practices</i> August, 1999).
PSM	Pontifical Council for the Family, <i>Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage</i> (May 13, 1996), Daughters of St. Paul.
SGL	Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted, <i>Self-Giving Love: Humanae Vitae's Paradoxical Wisdom</i> (2006), One More Soul.
SMM	National Conference of Catholic Bishops, <i>Statement on the Implementation of the Apostolic Letter on Mixed Marriages</i> (November 16, 1970), Daughters of St. Paul.
TB	John Paul II, <i>The Theology of the Body</i> (General Audiences delivered between September 1979 and November 1984), Daughters of St. Paul.
WMI	Arizona Catholic Conference of Bishops, <i>Why is Marriage Important in the Catholic Church: A Statement of the Arizona Catholic Conference Bishops</i> (March 1, 2006), The Catholic Sun.

Introduction

“Our marriage preparation programs of the past have accomplished much good. But at this time in our nation, even greater efforts are needed to hand on the full truth of Church teaching on the sacred, sacramental nature of marriage and family life.”¹ In order to assist our local Church in this great effort, the Office of Marriage and Respect Life (OMRL) and the Tribunal, with the help of priests, deacons and pastoral workers throughout the diocese, have revised the Policy for Marriage Preparation, hereafter referred to as **Covenant of Love**.

The goal is to establish a consistent and updated marriage preparation policy for our local church that more adequately addresses the needs of today’s engaged couples. **Covenant of Love** is inspired by and based on the 1996 document by the Pontifical Council for the Family, *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*. In conjunction with this policy, it is required that everyone involved in marriage preparation in the diocese familiarize him or herself with this document.

Marriage preparation programs have taken various forms over the years in the diocese. These include individual formation guided by the parish priest or deacon, classes or couple-to couple formation provided at the parish level and programs provided by the OMRL. After careful review of the particular needs of the diocese and the pastoral approaches of other dioceses across the country,² our new policy seeks to adapt a complementary approach between parish and diocesan programs and resources. This will allow continued flexibility at the parish level, while at the same time ensuring some measure of consistency and security of content for all engaged couples in the diocese.

The process by which a couple enters marriage is closely regulated by canon law, by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and by particular policies of the local Church, which are herein revised. All of these have one goal: to prepare couples adequately to live their call to holiness through the Sacrament of Marriage. Every effort has been made to outline the new policies as clearly as possible. In specific cases not foreseen by this policy, or in complicated situations, priests and deacons should contact the OMRL for further clarification.

This revised policy is not intended to complicate the marriage preparation process for the engaged, nor for the pastoral ministers and others who prepare them. While it is in some ways more demanding than the previous policy, so are the pastoral needs of today’s couples more demanding than in the past. With God’s grace, the leadership of pastors, and the united effort of all priests, deacons, and other pastoral workers in implementing **Covenant of Love**, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Phoenix will rise to the challenge of addressing these needs more adequately.

¹ Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted, Pastoral Letter “Covenant of Love,” July 26, 2009.

² Special credit is due to the Archdiocese of Denver, the Diocese of Colorado Springs, the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. and the Diocese of Peoria for assistance in development of this policy.

Part I of ***Covenant of Love*** details Church teaching on the stages of marriage preparation and gives the practical steps and policies which will govern this process in the Diocese of Phoenix.

Part II of ***Covenant of Love*** contains sections on Catholic teaching on marriage, marriage preparation ministers and marriage preparation lay leaders,³ special circumstances encountered in marriage preparation, pastoral care after marriage, and two appendices: the first devoted to the pastoral care of sexually active/cohabiting couples and the second to the question of prenuptial agreements.

³ For clarity, the term *marriage preparation minister* refers to the ordained ministry of priest or deacon. The priest or deacon must be understood as the primary marriage preparation minister. Lay Catholics who assist the priest or deacon in Marriage Preparation Ministry are referred to as *marriage preparation lay leaders (MPL)*, a term which more accurately reflects their role.

Covenant of Love Part I: Preparing for Marriage

Stages of Marriage Preparation

POLICY 4.4.1

The Covenant of Love, Marriage Preparation Policy defines the process by which couples prepare for the sacrament of matrimony in the Diocese of Phoenix.

The various periods of marriage preparation cannot be rigidly defined. However, it is useful as a working model to divide marriage preparation into *remote*, *proximate*, and *immediate* stages. Those couples who discern a call to marriage through these stages of preparation then proceed, of course, to the *celebration of marriage* itself. The Pontifical Council for the Family, in *Preparation for the Sacrament of Matrimony (PSM)*, offers the following breakdown of the periods of preparation:

- I. Remote Preparation – a lifelong process
- II. Proximate Preparation – the nine months before the wedding
- III. Immediate Preparation – two months before the wedding
- IV. Celebration of marriage

I. Remote Preparation

The remote preparation for a life of marriage that models Christ's love for the Church begins in the womb in the atmosphere wherein the new life is awaited and welcomed. This preparation continues while children mature and grow in their understanding of the mystery of salvation.

The goal of remote preparation is an encounter with the living Christ for the young Christian, a conversion into true discipleship, a maturing in faith through the sacraments and thorough catechesis in the faith of the Church, and a growth in virtue. This process is challenging, particularly in our time. As the Pontifical Council for the Family explained, "The journey of conversion from a rather external and vague level of faith, typical of many young people, to a discovery of the 'Christian mystery' is both essential and decisive: a faith that involves the communion of grace and love with the Risen Christ."

The Council goes on to explain how a catechesis in the nature of love is necessary for the young Christian, "Through the grace of God, love is also cherished, strengthened and intensified through the necessary values connected with giving, sacrifice, renunciation and self-denial." (PSM 23) In this stage of formation, pastoral help must be directed toward moral behavior that is supported by faith. A faithful and courageous education in chastity and love as self-giving must not be lacking. It is to be kept in mind that chastity is not a mortification of love but rather a condition for real love.

The Family: Foundation for Marriage Preparation

Central to remote preparation is what occurs in the family, the domestic church. Christian parents are the first and most important witnesses and educators of their children in the growth of faith, hope and charity. “There is a need to encourage shared spiritual moments such as participating in the Eucharist on Sundays and Holy Days, receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, daily prayer in the family and practical signs of charity. This will strengthen fidelity in marriage and unity in families. In such a family setting it will not be difficult for children to discover a vocation of service in the community and the Church, and to learn, especially by seeing the example of their parents, that family life is a way to realize the universal call to holiness” (CA 46).

Fostered in the context of the family, as John Paul II describes, is “esteem for all authentic human values...both in interpersonal and in social relationships, with all that this signifies for the formation of character, for the control and right use of one's inclinations, for the manner of regarding and meeting people of the opposite sex...” (FC 66).

It should also be noted that a Christian lifestyle lived in the family is itself a form of evangelization. In fact, it is “the very foundation of remote preparation.” Another goal of this stage is the presentation of the parents' educational mission. Remote preparation instills the view that “as a vocation and mission, human life is called to the love that has its source and end in God, ‘without excluding the possibility of the total gift of self to God in the vocation to the priestly or religious life’” (FC 66).

In summary, it is impossible to overstate the importance of the family, based itself on marriage, in the foundational preparation for marriage for every Catholic young person.

Catholic Schools and Other Catechetical Efforts

In assisting the Christian family to hand down the faith, Catholic schools and all religious education programs have a serious responsibility to be faithful to the teachings of the Church. Today, in a world that increasingly presents a view of love and human sexuality that lacks the fullness of God's plan, it is of greater importance to carry out this liberating work with joy and zeal, proudly proclaiming the Good News.

Our Catholic classrooms are to support the mission of the domestic church by offering a “broad catechetical effort regarding the Christian ideal of conjugal communion and family life, including a spirituality of fatherhood and motherhood” and responsible parenthood. Catholic education will allow students to have a beautiful and inspiring understanding of marriage and the love of Jesus Christ when it clearly and unambiguously presents Catholic teaching on the sacrament at the theological, anthropological and spiritual levels (CA 46).

It is especially important that teachers and catechists are given a clear formation in this Good News before instructing the faithful. Part II of this policy and the *God's Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage* course can provide a basic theological framework that is foundational for the Church's understanding of marriage. Additionally, the formation of educators in the faith is aided by the training for all catechists and Catholic school educators in the diocese. Catechetical courses offered here in the Diocese of Phoenix by the Office of Family Catechesis, Kino Institute, and

John Paul II Resource Center target this fundamental formational need. They include not only an adequate formation in sacramental and moral theology, but an introduction to Christian anthropology, particularly the theology of the body.⁴

Ib. Proximate Preparation

Proximate preparation begins during the earliest days of a couple's engagement period and continues until the final weeks just prior to the marriage celebration. It involves a process of evangelization and a journey of faith similar to the catechumenate, providing an opportunity for the engaged to rediscover and deepen the faith they received in Baptism.

The engaged must encounter the "profound mystery" of Christian Marriage through an explicit catechesis so that they will sense a need to prepare for it by embracing God's plan. Yet, in marriage preparation, as elsewhere, "frequently many who present themselves for catechesis truly require genuine conversion....Only by starting with conversion...can catechesis, strictly speaking, fulfill its proper task of education in the faith." (PSM 25) Thus the document PSM points us in the direction of making proximate marriage preparation a powerful opportunity for encountering Christ, something like the catechumenate.

Therefore, preparation during this stage is to be directed toward a pre-evangelization, evangelization, and catechesis that enables a couple to embrace consciously and freely what the Church intends by the Sacrament of Marriage. It is difficult to overemphasize as well that the way in which the engagement period is lived by the preparing couple is certain to have an influence on the couple's ability or inability to do so. The nine month period ensures that preparing couples have adequate preparation time and that this stage is truly proximate and not immediate.

POLICY 4.4.2:
The Proximate Preparation stage must begin at least nine months in advance of the couple's anticipated wedding date, and conclude no closer than two months prior to that date.^{4a}

Key Points of Proximate Preparation (from PSM, sections 32-49)

- a. The foundation of this preparation must be a reflection in faith on the Sacrament of Marriage through the Word of God and the guidance of the Church's teaching. To become "one Flesh" in Christ means that the couple's love will become a concrete expression of Christ's love for his Church.
- b. "It is essential that the time and care necessary should be devoted to doctrinal preparation. The security of the content must be the center and essential goal of the courses in a perspective which makes spouses more aware of the celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage and everything that flows from it regarding the responsibility of the family." (John Paul II)

⁴ For more information on these formation courses and requirements for catechists, contact the Office of Family Catechesis at 602-354-2323 or see www.catecheticalleadershipphx.org.

^{4a} Pastors may dispense couples from the minimum nine month period when circumstances dictate a legitimate need. Otherwise, the minimum nine month period (this includes proximate and immediate preparation) is to be required of all engaged couples and replaces the six month period previously required.

- c. Instruction in the natural requirements of marriage includes: freedom of consent; unity and indissolubility of marriage; the correct concept of responsible parenthood; the human aspects of conjugal sexuality; the conjugal act with its requirements and ends, and the proper education of children.
- d. Especially with regard to total self-giving and responsible procreation, the theological and moral formation will have to be given special attention according to the clear teaching of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.
- e. Adequate instruction in a USCCB approved method of Natural Family Planning (NFP) is given to all.⁵ These methods must not be presented merely as a behavioral technique for regulating fertility, but must be presented in the full context of a lifestyle that fosters authentic conjugal love.
- f. The engaged are helped to become aware of psychological and/or emotional shortcomings they may have that can take away from their total commitment to one another.
- g. This time is not only for theoretical study but for formation of the engaged that prepares them to give themselves as a couple to Christ. Here, premarital chastity takes on its full meaning. Any practices that violate this chastity must be abandoned with recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
- h. Formation for the family's role in the Church and society is included.
- i. Reflections on the themes of pertinent Church documents such as *Familiaris Consortio*, *Letter to Families*, *Evangelium Vitae*, *Humanae Vitae*, etc. are included, with the goal of helping couples understand their rich content.
- j. It should help the engaged to regain the dynamism of the sacraments remembering that by celebrating Christ's sacrificial love for the Church, the Eucharist develops the love proper to marriage.
- k. The engaged are taught how to preserve and cultivate married love through communication and how to overcome the inevitable challenges of married life.
- l. The engaged must be given formation and strengthened in the values concerning the defense of human life in view of the fact that they will become "the domestic church" and "sanctuary of life."
- m. The final result of proximate preparation should be a clear awareness of the essential characteristics of Christian Marriage: unity, fidelity, indissolubility, fruitfulness. The couple will have a clear understanding of sacramental grace, which conforms them to

⁵ For clarification of approved methods of NFP instruction, go to www.phxnfp.org

the love of Christ the Bridegroom for His Church. This grace will strengthen them to carry out the mission proper to the family.

The Proximate Preparation Process

Five steps, or components, will generally make up the process of proximate preparation. Additional steps may be required for couples in certain circumstances.⁶ Certain steps, on the other hand, could be combined if the parish desires. (For example steps 1 and 2 or steps 3 and 4)

A complementary approach between parish and diocesan programs and resources offers continued flexibility in format at the parish level, while seeking to ensure a measure of consistency for all preparing couples throughout the diocese.

The sequence of *proximate marriage preparation steps* is as follows:

- Step 1: Initial Interview (parish)
- Step 2: Pre-nuptial Inquiry & Inventory, Review of Inventory (parish)
- Step 3: Preparation Workshop I: Married Life Skills (parish or diocesan)
- Step 4: Preparation Workshop II: God's Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage (parish or diocesan)
- Step 5: Preparation Workshop III: Natural Family Planning Instruction (parish or diocesan)

Step I: Initial Interview

Couples approaching the Church for marriage are often enthusiastic but understandably unaware of most diocesan and parish policies for marriage preparation. Experience has shown that the initial interview is a crucial moment in couples' relationship with Christ and his Church. The initial interview should be given by the parish priest or deacon.⁷ It is critical that the first person the couple encounters be positive and welcoming as well as knowledgeable ambassadors for the Church and for marriage. The goals of this interview are:

- To begin developing a warm, welcoming relationship with the couple;

⁶ These additional sessions might consist of counseling, retreats, or other provisions. Reference *Covenant of Love: Part II Theological Foundations and Pastoral Application* for circumstances which require professional counseling.

⁷ While in some circumstances this may not be possible, the pastor should take it upon himself to ensure that the couple is met by a well-prepared, knowledgeable MPM or MPL who can charitably and enthusiastically share the good news of what the Church offers in the marriage preparation process. *This interview, in any case, should not be delegated lightly.*

- To begin to ascertain the couple's attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about themselves and their desire for marriage in the Church;
- To begin the process of assessing the couple's readiness for the sacrament. (Is the couple living an active Christian life?) Some may wish to conduct the required pre-nuptial inquiry at this time (if so, refer to Session 2);
- Explain to the couple what is involved in their proximate and immediate preparation for the sacrament⁸ and assist them in planning accordingly (scheduling of the inventory, presenting potential dates for the instructional sessions, parish/diocesan programs, etc.);

Step 2: Pre-nuptial Inquiry & Inventory, Review of Marriage Preparation Inventory

The pre-nuptial inquiry should be led by the parish priest or deacon. If necessary, the marriage preparation inventory can be administered by a properly trained lay person. The goals of this session are to:

- Conduct the required pre-nuptial inquiry. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has decreed that the following must be observed:
 - Parties must be questioned as to their freedom to marry;⁹
 - Catholics must present an annotated baptismal certificate issued within nine months of the proposed wedding date;
 - Affidavits of free status from parents or other life witnesses attesting to all parties' (Catholic or non-Catholic) freedom to marry must be presented;
 - Baptized non-Catholics must present satisfactory proof of baptism.
- Any necessary dispensations must be obtained as soon as possible;
- Administer the marriage preparation inventory.

If a Catholic has not yet received the Sacrament of Confirmation, he or she should receive it, if it can be accomplished without grave inconvenience (Canon 1065).

Direct and specific instruction must be given on the meaning and implications of the canonical promises of indissolubility, fidelity, and openness to children to ensure that couples intend what the Church intends by marriage.

Pastoral workers who administer the FOCCUS Inventory are to be very familiar with the means of doing so as explained in the facilitator's guide. The instrument is to be scored prior to the Review; scoring can be provided by the OMRL for a fee within two weeks of submission.

Review of Marriage Preparation Inventory: This review, which can be led by a priest, deacon or lay leader, is an excellent opportunity to enlist the help of properly trained and

⁸ This explanation of the process of preparation conducted is to convey that it is a positive aid, indeed a gift of the Church, to the couple and should be explained as such. A mere checklist of tasks handed to the couple will not convey the great importance of the preparation for marriage that the couple has begun. Explaining the benefits of each of the sessions of marriage preparation as well as helping the couple to plan and schedule is a necessary act of charity at this stage and can build positive momentum in the couple's preparation.

⁹ The prospective bride and groom must be interviewed individually so as to allow complete freedom in each of their responses.

predisposed “mentor couples” in preparing the engaged for marriage. The goals of this inventory review are to:

- Review with the couple the results of their FOCCUS inventory;
- Affirm the unique gifts each brings to the relationship and help the couple address any areas of concern. If the issue of cohabitation or premarital sex has not yet surfaced, it is to be discussed (see Appendix “Pastoral Care of Sexually Active/Cohabiting Engaged Couples” in *Covenant of Love Part II: Theological Foundations and Pastoral Application*);
- Assess the general readiness of the couple to proceed with the normal process of marriage preparation. If this session is carried out by an MPL couple or other qualified lay person, close collaboration with the priest or deacon is necessary;
- In most instances, it may not be possible to review the inventory adequately in one session. Additional sessions are scheduled as needed. A very successful approach is to have properly trained MPL couples facilitate the review over the course of two to three meetings, as needed. The experience of established married couples who are actively living their faith provides an invaluable witness for the engaged.

POLICY 4.4.3
Three courses are required in order to more adequately prepare couples for holy matrimony: an approved Married Life Skills course, God’s Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage and a full course in an approved Natural Family Planning method.

Step 3: Preparation Workshop I: Married Life Skills

Prayer, self-knowledge, knowledge of one’s future spouse, handling conflict, decision-making, communication, career and marital expectations, finances, family of origin, parenting: all of these issues demand certain “life skills” for a successful marriage.

Parishes are encouraged to establish a team of exemplary Catholic couples, who either in a class setting, or through the “couple-to-couple” approach, can help couples evaluate and develop their skills for married life. Pastors interested in developing such a team and program may contact the OMRL for startup information.

In lieu of a parish-based *Married Life Skills Course*, attendance at a *Love for Life Engaged Weekend* or *Remarriage Seminar*, depending on circumstances, will fulfill the requirement of Preparation Workshop I. Any other “magnet” weekend programs which have been pre-approved by the OMRL for this session are listed at www.ourcovenantoflovephx.org.

A certificate or other record of completion of the “Married Life Skills” step of proximate preparation *must* be placed in the couple’s file.

POLICY 4.4.4
All paid and volunteer staff who currently assist with the work of preparing couples for marriage at the parish or diocesan level must attend a God’s Plan for a Joy Filled Marriage session or God’s Plan diocesan training.

Guideline 1 – The expectation is that all paid and volunteer staff currently working in this ministry will complete the training identified above within one year of the promulgation of this policy.

Guideline 2 - A certificate will be issued upon completion of this training.

Step 4: Preparation Workshop II—God’s Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage

Couples fulfill this component of proximate marriage prep by attending a workshop entitled *God’s Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage*.¹⁰ Hosted by the OMRL, this course seeks to provide couples with the context to encounter fully and in a positive, contemporary way, the Church’s teaching on the sacramentality of Christian marriage and its implications for life, particularly the implications for the couple’s sexual relationship. Evangelistic in nature, it seeks to reawaken faith, stressing the importance of making Christ the foundation of marriage. Honest, positive discussion throughout the course aims to demonstrate that embracing God’s plan for marital love is not a burden, but a joy and an adventure. The goal is to explain the “why’s” behind the “what’s” of Catholic teaching in a way that makes sense to men and women today. Particular attention will be given to the important moral distinction between contraception and natural family planning.

This workshop is not intended to replace the indispensable efforts of the parish to evangelize and catechize the engaged. It is designed to reinforce those efforts and provide a measure of consistency for engaged couples throughout the diocese. Pastors who wish to host this workshop at their own parish are encouraged to contact the OMRL.

These workshops will be held on a regular basis during the year in various locations throughout the diocese. The delivery goal (as resources permit) is to offer all engaged couples an opportunity to attend a class in their own area (dates and locations are made available through brochures given to each parish as well as online). At the completion of the course, couples will be given a certificate of attendance to be placed in their preuptial file.

Step 5: Preparation Workshop III-Natural Family Planning Instruction

Instruction in Natural Family Planning (NFP) is one of the most practical and effective ways that the Church can help couples conform to the will of God in their lives. In his booklet, *Self-Giving Love*, Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted indicated that the time is upon us to provide all engaged couples with full instruction in NFP as part of all marriage preparation programs. (SGL, p. 11)

Every parish should have its own certified parish NFP instructors. With a united effort on the part of pastors and the lay faithful to promote NFP at the parish level, this is an achievable goal.

Until this goal is realized, the Office of NFP will organize courses in various locations throughout the diocese for this instruction. Contact the Office of NFP for scheduling.

¹⁰ For couples who are separated by state, country, and military service or find travel extraordinarily difficult because of a lack of means or belonging to one of our remote parishes, the OMRL has found that the online program provided by *Catholic Marriage Prep Online* can be an adequate substitute for Preparation Workshop II. For information, contact the program’s operators available at www.catholicmarriagepreponline.com. A certificate is issued to the couple for this course. Completion of this online course fulfills Preparation Workshop II requirements.

Ic. Immediate Preparation

Immediate preparation consists of the final meetings in the last two months prior to the celebration of the sacrament. Its aim is to solidify the formation received in prior preparation, prepare the wedding liturgy, and make final preparations for the couple's worthy celebration of their sacrament.

Key Points of Immediate Preparation (from PSM, nos. 50-59)

- n. Should provide a review of previous preparation, especially its doctrinal, moral, and spiritual content according to the couple's needs;
- o. Should include experiences of prayer;
- p. Must introduce the couple to the Rite of Marriage, helping them to understand the meaning of liturgical actions and texts;
- q. Should include a suitable liturgical preparation instructing and encouraging the active and informed participation of the engaged;
- r. Must include a special invitation to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation to all Catholics as a means of encouraging the worthy celebration of marriage;
- s. Ought to include special emphasis given to the importance of family prayer and creating an atmosphere of faith within the home. The engaged are to be reminded that as parents they will carry out their mission of proclaiming the Gospel of Life through educating their children in the ways of faith.

POLICY 4.4.5

The pastor implements the immediate preparation requirements regarding:
Review of Previous Preparation
Time of Prayer
Opportunity for Reconciliation
Planning of the Liturgy

Review of Previous Preparation

It is recommended that the priest or deacon witnessing the marriage meet with the couple at least once in the immediate stage of preparation to review and synthesize the previous preparation (as the couple's needs dictate) and answer any remaining questions the couple may have about the Church's vision of marriage and their final preparations for the sacrament. The wisdom and experience of an MPL couple can also be of great service at this stage of preparation.

Time of Prayer/Sacrament of Reconciliation

In light of the rates of cohabitation and premarital sexual activity as well as the often lengthy time which has elapsed since the couple may have been truly engaged in their faith, it is particularly important for couples to be reconciled to Christ, the Church, and one another before celebrating the Sacrament of Marriage. Pastoral sensitivity will recognize the appropriate ways of encouraging the couple to set aside extra time for prayer and reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The interrelation of the Sacraments of Marriage, Reconciliation, and the Eucharist should be stressed. The experience of a mentor MPL couple can also help preparing couples learn how to pray together and establish a marital spirituality.

Preparation for the Liturgy

Pastors and/or other pertinent pastoral workers should devote appropriate time with the engaged couple to ensure their active and informed participation in the liturgy. Care and sensitivity should be taken in explaining what is and what is not appropriate in the context of the wedding liturgy.

Id. The Celebration of Marriage

The journey of preparation leads the couple to the celebration of marriage. “To indicate a clearer relationship between the nuptial sacrament and the paschal mystery, the celebration of marriage is normally set within the celebration of the Eucharist.” (PSM 53)

While it is understandable that the beauty of Arizona leads some couples to desire outdoor weddings, canon law requires that a marriage between Catholics, or a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic, be celebrated in the parish church (Canon 1118). Only with serious reason and by permission of the local Ordinary may it be celebrated outside of a Catholic church. Patient care must be demonstrated in explaining the sound pastoral reasons for this. Such patience most often enables couples to see that the parish church is the worthy place for the celebration of their sacrament.

Key Points of the Celebration of Marriage (from PSM, nos. 60-72)

- t. Pastoral workers take care to follow and make comprehensible what is already set down and established by the liturgical rite;
- u. Praiseworthy customs that belong to various peoples or ethnic groups can be brought into the celebration provided they are appropriate signs of faith;
- v. The active participation of those present is to be favored in every way. Suitable materials should be provided to help them comprehend the richness of the rite;
- w. The celebrant should help those present to understand the structure of the rite;
- x. The homily (which is obligatory) should have as its center the presentation of the *great mystery* of marriage (as spoken of by St. Paul in Eph. 5);
- y. Care should be taken that the details of the marriage celebration are characterized by a restrained, simple, and authentic style.

Marriage Preparation Process at a Glance:

Remote	Proximate	Immediate	Celebration
When?			
Begins in the womb and continues throughout childhood, adolescence and up to the period of the engagement.	9 months before the wedding, beginning with the contact to the parish regarding desire for marriage in the Church. Concludes 2 months before the wedding.	In the 2 months before the wedding.	Rehearsal before the wedding Celebration of the Sacrament of Matrimony
How?			
In the family which is the Domestic Church with the assistance of the parish and the schools.	Initial meeting with the priest or deacon at least nine months before the planned date of the wedding. Pre-nuptial Inquiry and FOCCUS Inventory, Review of FOCCUS Preparation Workshop I <i>Marriage Life Skills</i> Preparation Workshop II <i>God's Plan For A Joy-filled Marriage</i> Preparation Workshop III <i>Natural Family Planning training</i>	Final meeting with the priest or deacon Review and solidify previous preparation Time of prayer/ Sacrament of Reconciliation Planning of the wedding liturgy	Celebrated in the parish church Characteristic of a celebration of faith, usually within the context of the Eucharist

(I) Assessment of the Situation

The American cultural landscape provides both bright spots and shadows for today's couples preparing for marriage. On the one hand, couples coming to the Church today for marriage have been raised in a culture that instills in them greater attention to the quality of their interpersonal relationship, and a keen awareness of their equal dignity as men and women. They also usually exhibit a noble desire to live a life-long marriage, which retains its promise of beauty and joy despite its difficulty.

On the other hand, many couples have grown up without the stable witness of their own parents' married love. Furthermore, American culture incessantly promotes a vision of human life that is not only unsupportive of marriage and family life, but quite often antithetical to them. The Church must therefore promote better and more intensive programs of marriage preparation in order to counter the pervasive influence of secular culture and even more in order to favor positively the establishing and maturing of successful marriages (FC 66).

The greater the difficulties caused by one's surroundings for knowing the truth of the Christian sacrament and of the institution of marriage, all the greater must be our efforts to prepare spouses adequately for their responsibilities.
Pope John Paul II

While some might be led to despair in the face of current trends, as followers of Christ, we are people of hope. We are convinced that we have *good news* to proclaim to the couples who come to us for help in preparing for marriage. By proclaiming the full truth of conjugal love to engaged couples in the context of an encounter with Christ, and by directing them to full participation in the sacramental life of the Church, we lay the building blocks of a "culture of life."

(Ia) Profile of Couples Seeking Marriage in the Church

While it is important to avoid unfounded prejudices with regard to specific couples, it is just as important to have a realistic understanding of the general circumstances in which many couples today are approaching the Church to receive the Sacrament of Marriage.

Some of the common issues/circumstances with which couples are dealing and which call for specific pastoral concern include the following:

- lack of initial conversion to Christ and his Church
- weak or non-existent faith
- un-catechized Catholics
- inactive Catholics
- mixed faith
- new-age spirituality
- individualism and materialism
- cohabitation/current sexual activity
- previous sexual relationships
- couples generally older than in the past
- dual careers
- children of divorced parents
- divorce mentality

- contraceptive mentality/anti-child mentality
- second union
- seeking validation of civil union
- abusive backgrounds (child abuse, molestation, abusive dating relationships, rape)
- abusive relationship (verbal, emotional, and physical abuse)
- personal or parental alcohol or drug abuse or addiction
- previous abortion
- sexual addiction (extended involvement with pornography and masturbation), repeated sexual encounters, anonymous sexual encounters, repeated infidelity in mind and/or action

(1b) The Primary Task of Marriage Preparation

Those who marry in the Catholic Church have not been immune from the dramatic rise in divorce in our society. This is connected to the fact that Catholics are entering marriage with many of the same detrimental patterns of thinking and behaving as the general population, such as those characteristic of the issues and circumstances listed above.

The Catholic Church has a “blueprint” for successful marriages. She teaches that if marriages are to succeed two things are necessary: first, couples must meditate on God's plan for marriage; and second, they must seek to shape all their ways of thinking and acting according to it (CC 2). *Helping the engaged to do these two essential things in the context of an encounter with Christ is the primary task of Catholic marriage preparation.* The high rates of divorce among those who marry in the Church indicate that this task has not always been carried out successfully. Loss of faith in the Church's role as the authentic interpreter of God's plan for marriage is partly to blame for this. Furthermore, many couples come to the Church for marriage without any explicit personal attachment to Jesus Christ (CT 19).

“Therefore, ‘the Church in America must speak increasingly of Jesus Christ, the human face of God and the divine face of man. It is this proclamation that truly makes an impact on people, awakens and transforms hearts, and in a word, converts. Christ must be proclaimed with joy and conviction, but above all by the witness of each one's life’” (CA 67).

What is required according to John Paul II, “is a serious preparation of young people for marriage, one which clearly presents Catholic teaching on this sacrament at the theological, anthropological, and spiritual levels.” (CA 46) Such preparation is an integral part of the “new evangelization.” This new evangelization is a “more decisive personal conversion” and “an ever more generous fidelity to the Gospel.” (CA 26) “At a time when in the sphere of morality there is a disturbing spread of relativism and subjectivism, the Church in America is called to proclaim with renewed vigor that conversion consists in commitment to the person of Jesus Christ, with all the theological and moral implications taught by the Magisterium of the Church.” (CA 26)

Pastoral experience attests that those who are properly evangelized and catechized, that is, those who have encountered Christ personally¹¹ and who understand, embrace, and strive to

¹¹ By this we mean knowing Jesus Christ truly present to us in the sacraments, prayer and in the events of our daily lives.

live the Church's teaching on marriage, very rarely, divorce.¹² Experience also attests that we cannot instill in others' hearts what is not instilled in our own: faith in the *Good News* of all that the Catholic Church teaches about marriage.

Thus, if we, as the witnesses to and proclaimers of the Gospel, are to do our part to turn the tide of marital breakdown, it will first require a more thorough understanding of, a deeper faith in, and a more profound conversion to all that the Church teaches about marriage: its sacramentality, its permanence, its God-given orientation towards children, and the proper regulation of births.

(2) What is Marriage in the Eyes of the Church?

(2a) A Basic Definition of Marriage by the Church

Marriage is the intimate, exclusive, indissoluble communion of life and love entered by man and woman at the design of the Creator for the purpose of their own good and the procreation and education of children; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament (GS 48 and Canon 1055).

Intimate communion of life and love: Marriage is the closest and most intimate of human friendships. It involves the sharing of the whole of a person's life with his/her spouse. Marriage calls for a mutual self-surrender so intimate and complete that the two become "one," not only in body, but in soul. Far from clouding their uniqueness as persons, true marital love leads to each spouse's deeper discovery of his/her personhood.

Exclusive communion of life and love: As a total gift of two persons to each other (physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually) this intimate union and the good of the children excludes such union with anyone else. It demands *total fidelity*.

Indissoluble communion of life and love: Husband and wife are not joined by passing emotion or mere erotic inclination, which, selfishly pursued, fades quickly away. (GS 49) They are called by God to a vocation of holiness, and joined by him in conjugal love through the firm and irrevocable act of their own consent. For the baptized, this bond is sealed by the Holy Spirit and, once consummated, is absolutely indissoluble. Thus, the Church does not so much teach that divorce is wrong, but that divorce (in the sense of dissolving a valid marriage) is *impossible*, regardless of its civil implications.

Entered by man and woman: The complementarity of the sexes is essential to marriage. There is such widespread confusion today about the nature of marriage that some would wish to extend a legal "right" to two persons of the same sex. The very nature of marriage makes such a proposition *impossible*.

¹² Cf. Janet Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later*, p. 127; and "NFP Update....," Diocese of Charleston's Office of Natural Family Planning Office, 1999.

At the design of the Creator: God is the author of marriage. He inscribed the call to marriage in our very being by creating us as male and female (Gen 1:27). Marriage is governed by His laws, faithfully transmitted by His Bride, the Church. For marriage to be what it is, it must conform to these laws. Man, therefore, is not free to change the meaning and purposes of marriage.

For the purpose of their own good: "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen 2: 18). Conversely, it is for their own good, for their benefit, enrichment, and ultimately, their salvation, that a man and woman join their lives in the Covenant of Marriage. Marriage is the most basic (but not the only) expression of the vocation to love that all men and women have as persons made in God's image and likeness.

And the procreation and education of children: "By their very nature, the institution of marriage itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children and find in them their ultimate crown." (GS 48) Children are not added on to marriage and conjugal love, but naturally spring from the very heart of the spouses' mutual self-giving as its fruit and fulfillment. Marriage retains its goodness even when couples are physically unable to have children, but intentional exclusion of children contradicts the very nature and purpose of marriage.

Covenant: Marriage is not only a contract between a man and a woman, but a sacred covenant. God created marriage to image and participate in his own covenant with His people. Thus, the marital covenant calls couples to share in the very love of God.

The dignity of a sacrament: Marriage between baptized persons is an efficacious sign of the union between Christ and the Church, and, as such, is a means of grace (see below for a more thorough discussion). The marriage of two non-baptized persons, or of one baptized person and one non-baptized person, while not a sacrament, is considered by the Church a "good and natural" marriage.

(2b) Theology of Marriage and its Development

The importance that our Lord Jesus Christ placed on marriage can be seen in numerous places in the Gospel. It is no coincidence that the first of his miraculous signs takes place at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11). This changing of the water to wine has often been depicted as symbolizing the transformation of man and wife who become one flesh. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his disciples on the indissolubility of the marriage (Matthew 5:31-32) and repeats this ground-breaking teaching in his challenging exchange with the Pharisees (Matthew 19:3-9). Also, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:27-30), our Lord not only emphasizes the importance of fidelity in marriage but sets a new standard for spouses that calls them to chastity and purity of heart.

St. Paul, who continues to break ground in man's understanding of marriage, takes us deeper into the meaning of a man and woman becoming one flesh (Ephesians 5:31-33). This union, which is God's gift to humanity, is an earthly sign of the union that our Lord promises to enjoy

with all who belong to him in eternity. In Heaven, we will all be joined to Jesus Christ as his bride. And to the degree that men and women live their married love according to God's plan, their earthly union is a proclamation, a sacred prefigurement of the eschatological or heavenly union.

The twentieth century witnessed significant developments in the Church's theology of marriage, beginning with Pope Pius XI's 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii*, passing through the Second Vatican Council and Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, and culminating in the manifold writings and original insights of Pope John Paul II.¹³

The Second Vatican Council marked a further development in the theology of marriage. While not ignoring or lessening Sacred Tradition's emphasis on the "duties," "rights," and "ends" of marriage, the Council Fathers with the input of Karol Wojtyla (later John Paul II), emphasized how these same duties, rights, and ends are informed by the intimate, interpersonal love of the spouses. Therefore, the inclusion of a deeply "personalist" explanation of marriage was added to the rich tradition of the Church's thought.¹⁴

Explaining how conjugal love is a "merging of the human and the divine" is the task of a theology of marriage.

The Centrality of Marriage in God's Plan

"Sacred Scripture begins with the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God and concludes with a vision of the 'wedding feast of the lamb.' Scripture speaks throughout of marriage and its 'mystery,' its institution and the meaning God has given it, its origin and its end, ...the difficulties arising from sin, and its renewal 'in the Lord'..." (CCC, 1602) Throughout the Old Testament, God's love for his people is described as the love of a husband for his bride. In the New Testament, Christ *embodies* this love. He comes as the Heavenly Bridegroom to unite himself indissolubly to his Bride, the Church.

Marriage, then, is not a peripheral issue in the Christian life. It finds itself *right at the heart* of the Christian mystery and serves to illuminate it. We cannot understand the Christian mystery unless we keep in mind the "great mystery" involved in the creation of man as male and female and the vocation of both to conjugal love (LF 19).

Male & Female: Image of the Trinity

Having created man in his image and likeness specifically as *male and female*, God called them to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:27. 28). God is in himself a life-giving, divine *Communion of*

¹³ Such important works include *Love and Responsibility*, *Familiaris Consortio* and the *Theology of the Body*.

¹⁴ The inclusion of personalist language in the way the Church now explains marriage—"gift of self," "communion of persons," etc. is no move toward subjectivism or mere emotionalism in the Catholic understanding of love. Indeed, the duties, rights and ends of marriage remain as objective norms requiring adherence by married persons. The two nouns in the title of John Paul II's master philosophical work on the subject, *Love and Responsibility*, signify this combination of personalism together with objective norms.

Persons. We are called to image God's faithful, everlasting, life-giving love by living in a similar communion of persons.

“Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. ...Christian revelation recognizes two specific ways of realizing the vocation of the human person, in its entirety, to love: marriage, and virginity or celibacy. Either one is in its own proper form an actuation of the most profound truth of man, of his being ‘created in the image of God’” (FC, 11) and both are rightly called sacraments of service. Marriage and celibacy are not in conflict, but stem from the very same call to the sincere gift of self in “spousal” love.

Marriage: Sacrament of Christ & the Church

By virtue of their baptisms, the marriage of Christians is a *sacrament*. It is a *living sign* that truly communicates and participates in the love of Christ and the Church. The spouses' vows lived out in their daily commitment, and most specifically in their “one flesh” union, constitute this living sign. As St. Paul says, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother, cling to his bride, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a profound mystery, and it refers to Christ and the Church” (Eph 5: 31, 32).

The Eucharist, then, is the very source of Christian Marriage. “In the Eucharistic gift of charity the Christian family finds the foundation and soul of its ‘communion’ and its ‘mission,’” (FC, 57)—that is, to love as God loves.

The Marital Embrace

The free exchange of consent properly witnessed by the Church establishes the marriage bond. Sexual union consummates it - seals it, completes it, perfects it. *Sexual union is where the words of the wedding vows become flesh.* The very “language” that God has inscribed in sexual intercourse is the language of the marriage covenant: the free commitment to a union of love that is indissoluble, faithful, and open to children. If spouses willfully contradict any of these goods of marriage in their sexual expressions, marital intimacy becomes less than God intended it to be.

The often disputed sexual moral teachings of the Church¹⁵ become lucid when seen through this lens. Like all sacramental signs, sexual intercourse (as the visible sign of marriage) is truly to communicate God's life and love. Sexual union that is total, faithful, and open to new life actually participates in the communion of Christ and the Church. Masturbation, fornication, adultery, intentionally sterilized sex, homosexual acts, etc.- none of these accurately symbolize, and thus never bring about the love of Christ for the Church.

Marriage and the Rupture Caused by Sin

¹⁵ The Encyclicals *Casti Connubii* (1930) and *Humanae Vitae* (1968) are strong, persuasive, and prophetic articulations of the Church's perennial teaching.

Marriage is indeed a “profound mystery,” as St Paul described it (Eph 5:31). But this lofty vision of marriage that Christ sets forth for his Church often meets with much cynicism and resistance. When Jesus proclaimed the permanent nature of marriage, even his disciples said to him, “If this is the situation for a husband and a wife, it is better not to marry” (Mt 19: 10).

Universal experience reveals that marriage is wrought with difficulties. “According to faith, the discord we notice so painfully does not stem from the *nature* of man and woman, nor from the nature of their relations, but from *sin*. As a break with God, the first sin had for its first consequence the rupture of the original communion between man and woman” (CCC 1606, 1607).

History affirms the poignant story in the book of Genesis by attesting to the havoc wrought in the relationship of man and woman as a result of human disobedience to God. Because of sin, male and female differences, rather than complementing one another and bringing about communion, are often a cause of great tension and division. Sexual attraction given by God to be the power to love as He loves, can be, because of sin, a desire for self-gratification at the expense of others: husbands, wives, and their children.

A Call to Conversion

While an “echo” of God's original intention for marriage remains in the human heart, this distorted way of relating has become man's lot. The capacity for genuine marital love has not been entirely lost, but men and women must consciously renounce all that is contrary to God's plan and continually surrender themselves to the grace of Christ's redemption if they are to experience marriage as God intended it “in the beginning.”

Since it was man and woman's turning away from God that distorted their relationship, restoring marriage requires a radical return to God. Thus, the task of authentic marriage preparation is not only *informational* but, above all, *transformational*. It must call couples to a life of ongoing personal conversion to Jesus Christ. Only as spouses renounce themselves and take up their crosses to follow Christ can they experience the true joys of marriage that God ardently wishes to shower upon them.

Marriage and family life find themselves, as Pope John Paul II explains, “at the center of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love” (LF 23). Living the truth about marriage, then, is a very difficult struggle, even for those with solid moral formation. This struggle brings spouses to the heart of the “spiritual battle” (Eph 6: 12) that they must fight if they are to resist evil (in the world and in themselves) and love each other as Christ loves his Bride, the Church.

But spouses must never become discouraged. For Christ has won the victory over sin. As they surrender their lives to the grace of redemption, it is truly possible for spouses to know the joy and freedom that come from living and loving according to their true dignity as men and women made in the image and likeness of God. It is truly possible for men and women,

husbands and wives, to experience healing, restoration of proper balance and mutual self-giving in their relationship.

This is the *Good News* of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit has been poured into our hearts (Rom 5:5). The Spirit of love makes the Cross of Christ fruitful in our lives enabling us to live the full truth about marriage. The Church never ceases to proclaim this *Good News* for the salvation of every man and woman.

A Question of Faith

Since her earliest days, the Church has been compelled to proclaim faithfully the goodness of marriage. In doing so, she is at the same time proclaiming the nature of God's love.

When Jesus restored God's original plan for marriage, He said that it was because of the hardness of their hearts that Moses allowed divorce, that is, because of sin. Then He added, "But in the beginning it was not so" (Mt 19:8). Christ is able to restore God's original plan because He is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29).

Confronting the Church's teaching on marriage, then, brings us face to face with the message of the Gospel and questions of faith: *Do we believe that Christ came to save the world from sin and restore Gods original plan of love? Do we believe that it is possible for husbands and wives (and everyone else) to love one another as God loves?* The Church invites men and women called to marriage to see that the answer is "yes." This is the faith to which all engaged couples and all husbands and wives must be called. Central to Catholic marriage preparation is the proclamation of the Gospel as it pertains to marriage and family life.

(3) Marriage Preparation Ministers and Marriage Preparation Lay Leaders

The policies set forth in the norms recognize that not all couples who volunteer to help prepare the engaged for marriage are trained catechists, nor are they expected to be. While properly trained and certified catechists are essential to the marriage preparation process (particularly for Session 4 of proximate preparation), the lived experience of couples who give authentic witness to the practical realities of sacramental married life is no less important. Their generous and invaluable service should be recognized with gratitude.

A particular problem arises, however, when those couples involved in forming the engaged are living in direct conflict with Catholic teaching on marriage and conjugal morality. Rather than presenting an authentic witness to the lived experience of the Church's teaching, their attitudes and behavior, at least in the conflicting area, present a *counter-witness*. This is not only a cause of scandal, but a source of great confusion for the engaged.

Before couples are given an opportunity to help form the engaged, they must first be called to embrace the truth in their own marriages, specifically *Humanae Vitae* and *Familiaris Consortio*. Establishing a marriage preparation team to assist the pastor is itself, then, an opportunity for

evangelization and catechesis. This implies the need for an adequate formation program for the couples who give of their time to serve the engaged.

Because of the many special circumstances with which engaged couples come to marriage preparation, extraordinary discretion, prudence and sensitivity are required of all those who serve the engaged in preparation for their sacrament. In cases where the engaged couple may be unchurched or uncertain regarding Church teaching and practice, the welcome and understanding which sensitive marriage preparation ministers and lay leaders offer on behalf of the entire parish community is particularly important.

This policy presupposes that leadership development in marriage preparation ministry be a high priority at the parish level. If they have not already done so, pastors are strongly encouraged to establish a parish marriage preparation team consisting of couples who are able to give lively witness to the practical realities of living a sacramental marriage. Such a team can be of particular service in the successful implementation of Sessions 3 and 5 of proximate preparation and Sessions 1 and 2 of immediate preparation.

Pastors are responsible for ensuring that all those involved in this sensitive ministry have appropriate dispositions and sufficient understanding of Church teaching on marriage and conjugal love. *Above all, pastors must be certain that the couples they hold out as an example to the engaged are not living in conflict with the teachings of the Church particularly in matters of conjugal morality.* Such an assessment must be undertaken with care and sensitivity, not with the aim of excluding couples outright from ministry, but with the aim of inviting them to enrich their own marriage by embracing the full truth of God's plan for them. If in the end, however, and in spite of all efforts, a couple remains in conflict with the Church's teaching, it would be inappropriate to hold them out as an example to the engaged.

(4) Special Circumstances

Couples requesting marriage come to the Church today with a wide diversity of backgrounds and family experiences. Consequently, clergy and staff often encounter circumstances which justify special concern and attention. In the following section, diocesan policies governing these special circumstances are discussed (see Appendix for a discussion of cohabiting and sexually active couples).

(4a) Marriage of Non-practicing Catholics

In the case of non-practicing Catholics who request to be married in the Church, the MPM should ask the couple to articulate clearly the reasons for their request. While the Church does admit to the sacrament those who are imperfectly disposed, mere social convention, parental pressure, or preference for setting provide no justification for marriage in the Catholic Church.

The celebration of a Catholic Marriage, like all the sacraments, is indicative of faith in Christ and his Church. The Sacrament of Matrimony expresses very concretely the manner of living the couple is going to pursue. Therefore, it is proper to expect that couples attend Mass regularly

and are in the state of grace, particularly at the time of the celebration of marriage. If they are not attending Mass regularly they should be invited to do so. They should also be offered further instruction in the life of faith beyond what is required by the policies set forth in the norms. Whether and how couples are approached in this regard can mean the difference between continued alienation from the Church or renewed involvement.

Commentary: Recent Church documents provide pastoral ministers with fundamental insights into the prudent pastoral judgment such cases require. It is recommended that the full text of the section from which the following excerpts have been taken be consulted by all who have responsibility for marriage preparation.

“(T)he faith of the person asking the Church for marriage can exist in different degrees, and it is the primary duty of pastors to bring about a rediscovery of this faith and to nourish it and bring it to maturity. But pastors must also understand the reasons that lead the Church also to admit to the celebration of marriage those who are imperfectly disposed.

“The Sacrament of Matrimony has this specific element that distinguishes it from all the other sacraments: it is the sacrament of something that was part of the very economy of creation; it is the very conjugal covenant instituted by the Creator “in the beginning.” Therefore, the decision of a man and a woman to marry in accordance with this divine plan, that is to say, the decision to commit by their irrevocable conjugal consent their whole lives in indissoluble love and an unconditional fidelity really involves, even if not in a fully conscious way, an attitude of profound obedience to the will of God, an attitude which cannot exist without God's grace. They have thus already begun what is in a true and proper sense a journey towards salvation, a journey which the celebration of the sacrament and the immediate preparation for it can complement and bring to completion, given the uprightness of their intention.

“...It must not be forgotten that those engaged couples, by virtue of their Baptism, are already sharers in Christ's marriage Covenant with the Church, and that, by their right intention, they have accepted God's plan regarding marriage and therefore at least implicitly consent to what the Church intends to do when she celebrates marriage. Thus, the fact that motives of a social nature also enter into the request is not enough to justify refusal on the part of pastors.

“...However, when in spite of all efforts, engaged couples show that they reject explicitly and formally what the Church intends to do when the marriage of baptized persons is celebrated, the pastor of souls cannot admit them to the celebration of marriage.” (FC 68) (See causes for denial or delay of marriage below.)

(4b) Marriage of Minors

The *Code of Canon Law* states that without special permission of the local ordinary, no one is to assist at a marriage of a minor (a person under the age of 18) when the parents are unaware of the marriage or are opposed to it for reasonable cause (canon 1071, §6).

Commentary: Because sacramental marriage is a lifelong commitment, the Catholic Church has a responsibility to ensure that engaged couples understand its sacred nature. Although the strength of the conclusions drawn from statistical evidence differs, it cannot be disputed that a direct correlation exists between younger age and high incidence of divorce. Many teenagers are not sufficiently mature to bear successfully the obligations and responsibilities of marriage in contemporary American society. Age clearly does not guarantee maturity, but time is required for a person to achieve the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual development and balance necessary to make the commitment to married life. Clear evidence of immaturity, particularly when reinforced by parental opposition, demands that the parish minister counsel the couple to delay their marriage. In the difficult process of discussing the reasons for this decision with them, the pastoral minister is challenged to demonstrate utmost respect and sensitivity.

(4c) Pregnancy

In the case of pregnancy, a request for marriage in the Church will only be considered following completion of recommended counseling, and (if either person is under 18 years of age) consultation with the parents/guardians of both parties. In any case, the couple should be strongly advised to delay the wedding until *after* the birth of the child.

Commentary: Premarital pregnancy, although it understandably creates a sense of urgency in the minds of the couple and their parents, constitutes of itself adequate justification neither for marriage nor for abbreviation of the marriage preparation process. Statistics indicate that the majority of marriages involving a premarital pregnancy end in divorce. Even when the marriage does not fail, the pressures on the couple created by an unexpected pregnancy tend to inhibit their mutual growth. Factors that must be considered include the couple's maturity and readiness for marriage, their freedom from parental and social pressure, capacity to manage the financial responsibilities of a family and the possibility of adoption. Regardless of the age of the couple, marriage is never an acceptable option for a couple without the degree of personal maturity to accept freely and live the responsibilities of marriage.

A premarital inventory is particularly valuable in assessing the maturity of young couples in these difficult circumstances. In many cases, the parish MPM may find it appropriate to recommend professional counseling. Parents should be invited to participate in the discernment process in order to help the couple evaluate their motivation and readiness for marriage. Regardless of the ultimate decision,

the man must be strongly advised of his continued moral responsibility to the woman and their child.

(4d) Mixed Marriage

The relevant sections of the *Code of Canon Law* regarding mixed marriages should be carefully followed during marriage preparation, particularly Canons 1118, 1059, 1071, 1124-1129, and 1366. In addition to completing the preparation requirements detailed in the norms, the couple may require additional instruction sessions with the marriage preparation minister to deepen their understanding of the Catholic Church and its teaching on marriage, particularly in regard to morally responsible means of birth regulation.

While the Catholic party should become acquainted with the religious traditions of the future spouse, he or she "...has the duty of preserving his or her faith. Nor is it ever permitted to expose oneself to a proximate danger of losing it. Furthermore, the Catholic party in a mixed marriage is obliged ...as far as possible, to see that the children be baptized and brought up in the faith..." (MM, 12).

Commentary: Since "...'the perfect union of mind and the full communion of life' to which married couples aspire can be more readily achieved when both partners share the same Catholic belief and life..., the Church greatly desires that Catholics marry Catholics and generally discourages mixed marriages" (SMM, 5). The difficulties of the Catholic spouse in maintaining his or her faith should not be underestimated. Without the support of a Catholic spouse, simply getting to Mass on Sunday can become a chore, even a cross. Special care must be taken to help the Catholic spouse maintain his or her faith.

It must also be noted that the number of marriages between Catholics and unbaptized persons is growing. While these are not sacramental unions, they are to be respected as good and natural marriages. In some of these cases the unbaptized person practices another religion. In other cases the unbaptized person practices no religion at all. In both situations, particular pastoral safeguards must be in place to ensure the Catholic spouse's free and uninhibited practice of the faith, including the raising of children in the faith.

(4e) Marriage After a Previous Union

Particular pastoral concern is required to meet the special needs of couples requesting sacramental marriage in the Church following a previous union. Particular care is to be taken to ascertain that both parties are canonically free to marry *before* proceeding with the marriage preparation, and that all responsibilities towards children of the previous union have been satisfied (Canon 1071, § 1, 3 °). Both parties must be free of any canonical impediments or restrictions before a marriage celebration date can be set. A date may be set for the marriage *after* these obligations have been satisfactorily discharged. In the case of a proposed marriage following the death of a spouse, care should be taken that the person has recovered from the grief of separation.

Commentary: Everyone entering marriage begins a new and unique relationship. Although it is commonly believed that those involved in previous unions require little preparation because of their past experience, research concludes that marriages after previous unions fail at a higher rate than first marriages. Such persons are rarely required to examine their past experience and identify the factors which caused the failure of their first relationship. The parish MPM must therefore encourage such persons to analyze the reasons for the failure of their past relationship, and guide them in a realistic assessment of the challenges which they will face in their pending marriage.

The Church desires to strengthen the faith and devotion of divorced and remarried Catholics, particularly when they have endured painful personal experiences that increase their desire for unity with the Church community. “Towards Christians who live in this situation, and who often keep the faith and desire to bring up their children in a Christian manner, priests and the whole community must manifest an attentive solicitude, so that they do not consider themselves separated from the Church, in whose life they can and must participate as baptized persons.” (CCC 1651) On the parochial level, pastors should do all that is possible to assist persons in need in the preparation of the documentation necessary for canonical review of a previous bond by the Tribunal.

(4f) Convalidation

If a couple has not been married according to the laws of the Church (e.g., lack of canonical form), a validation (i.e., marriage in the Church) is permitted only after the couple has satisfactorily completed the marriage preparation process (note: pre-marital inventories that could be used in the convalidation process include REFOCCUS, ENRICH, or MATE if the couple is over 50).

Commentary: Pastoral prudence and discretion is essential in cases involving Church validation of a union lacking canonical form. First, marriage preparation ministers must be sensitive in communicating what a validation actually is. It is not, as commonly misunderstood, a “blessing from the Church” of an existing marriage. Without discounting the level of commitment that has existed between them, and endured in some cases for many years, the couple must acknowledge the fact that by offering their consent before the Church, they are marrying *for the first time*. Pastoral sensitivity is particularly important in this regard as couples must implicitly acknowledge the invalidity of their present union and be willing to make a *new* consent in order to ensure the “validity of the validation.”

The period of proximate and immediate preparation as discussed in the norms is required for any couple who has lived in an invalid union.

For various reasons, couples from certain ethnic cultures are sometimes less likely to understand the importance of following the canonical form of marriage and may more readily live in civil unions. Such couples are to be encouraged, with special attention, to seek marriage in the Church. Liturgical celebrations of these validations can include simple reception of vows within or outside the Mass as well as validations in a group (collective marriages).

(4g) Marriage of Persons with Disabilities

Particular care and sensitivity should be shown when a disabled person requests marriage in the Church. Each situation must be assessed individually and a determination made only after consultation with both family and professionals who can assess the person's level of independence and his or her ability to make a permanent commitment.

Commentary: Depending on the type of disability, the couple may need additional assistance in dealing with such issues as communications and capacity for sharing and for intimacy, both emotional and physical, prospects for parenthood and even the responsibilities for everyday living.

The pastor “should make the necessary provisions to ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities in marriage preparation programs. The inclusion of persons with disabilities in sponsoring couple programs is an especially effective way of supporting both the needs and the gifts of couples preparing for marriage.”¹⁶

“For matrimonial consent to be valid, it is necessary that the contracting parties possess a sufficient use of reason; that they be free of any grave lack of discretion affecting their judgment about the rights and duties to which they are committing themselves; and that they be capable of assuming the essential obligations of the married state. Pastors and other clergy are to decide cases on an individual basis and in light of pastoral judgments based upon consultation with diocesan personnel involved with disability issues, and canonical, medical, and other experts. Medical and canonical opinions should be sought in determining the presence of any impediments to marriage. It should be noted, however, that paraplegia in itself does not always imply impotence, nor the permanence of such a condition, and it is not in itself an impediment. In case of doubt with regard to impotence, marriage may not be impeded.”¹⁷

“Catholics who are deaf are to be offered the opportunity to express their matrimonial consent in sign language, if this is their primary means of communication. Marriage may also be contracted through a sign language interpreter whose trustworthiness has been certified by the pastor.”¹⁸

¹⁶ *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities*, USCCB Publishing, Washington, D.C, 2002, p 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 21-22.

When necessary, the Office of Evangelization of Persons with Disabilities may be contacted for assistance in discerning particular cases of persons with disabilities seeking marriage.

Also when necessary, the office of the Tribunal should be contacted regarding the canonical aspects of these situations, particularly when professional experts and civil authorities consider the parties incapable of assuming responsibility for their own lives.

(4h) Chemical Dependency/Alcoholism

Special care and concern must be taken to assess the effects of personal alcohol and/or chemical abuse on the capacity of persons to enter sacramental marriage. Likewise, the impact of parental alcoholism and chemical abuse on the emotional and psychological stability of engaged men and women must be carefully evaluated. In some circumstances a professional evaluation may be required. In the case of a chronically chemically-dependent person, the marriage cannot be permitted until a professional evaluation confirms that sufficient use of reason and discretion is present.

Commentary: Alcoholism and drug abuse affects not only the afflicted person but all the family members. These conditions often exhibit an identifiable pathology which requires professional intervention and treatment. Whether persons requesting marriage in the Church are themselves alcoholic and/or chemically dependent, or from a family whose other members have been afflicted with these illnesses, it is crucially important that they understand the devastating effects which they can bring to a marriage. Marriage in the Church is not permitted when a person is incapable of fulfilling the responsibilities of marriage due to the effects of alcohol and/or chemical dependency.

Great pastoral sensitivity is required in assisting the couple to confront the issue of chemical dependency before marriage. Because the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol typically follows a pattern of progressively greater dependence, challenging the couple to recognize the problem and obtain professional treatment benefits them, their family and the greater community even if the marriage cannot ultimately be celebrated in the Church. It is clearly important to be aware of available community counseling and rehabilitation resources when a situation of chemical dependency is encountered.

(4i) Marriage of Older Couples

Special consideration should be given during the process of marriage preparation to engaged older couples when both persons are requesting marriage for the first time. The pastoral minister should invite them to proceed with the normal marriage preparation process, but offer whatever modifications may be appropriate to address their specific needs.

Commentary: Older couples, by virtue of their longer and richer life experiences, have different needs than the majority of engaged couples who enter marriage at a younger age. During the preparation period, the parish MPM will evaluate their emotional stability and capacity to enter a permanent and exclusive relationship as well as their ability to relinquish their prior financial and social independence. Because each person brings to the marriage a life-style formed by habit over an extended period of time, the capacity to accept contrasting patterns of decision making and behavior is particularly important.

It must never be assumed that a couple is ready for marriage in the Church simply because one or both are older. Many marriages of older couples fail, primarily because of the inability to compromise individual independence for the mutual interdependence of the marriage relationship.

(4j) Marriage of Seniors

While all of the above considerations from Marriage of Older Couples apply to seniors—those over 55—a further consideration is necessary. The pastoral minister should advise couples seeking a second marriage and over 55 to *establish a will or revisit their wills* in light of this family change. For the sake of familial peace, inheritance and property matters should be clearly settled. See Appendix #2 for considerations of specialized prenuptial agreements for these circumstances.

(4k) Causes for Denial or Delay of Marriage

Although people have a natural right to marry, a priest or deacon is not to witness a marriage unless he is morally certain that nothing impedes its valid and licit celebration. (Canon 1066) As John Paul II wrote, “...when in spite of all efforts engaged couples show that they reject explicitly and formally what the Church intends to do when the marriage of baptized persons is celebrated, the pastor of souls cannot admit them to the celebration of marriage.” (FC 68)

Commentary: This decision is not to be arrived at lightly but must come after prayer and thorough consideration of the problems involved. The decision to delay should be a joint pastoral decision, made by the priest or deacon and the couple with the good of the couple in mind. The priest or deacon will do his best to indicate this and refrain from speaking of the delay in punitive terms. As a minister of the Church, a priest or deacon cannot recommend a civil union when the sacrament has been delayed or refused.

The following is a list of situations which may call either for delaying or refusing a marriage. This list is not exhaustive:¹⁹

¹⁹ Special recognition is extended to the Archdiocese of Washington from whose norms this list was adapted.

- Non-practice of the faith by the Catholic party or parties, with no reasonable hope of resuming such practice. In such a case, the marriage is to be delayed until there is some indication of intent to practice the faith;
- Declaration of intention to deny the other party's right to a permanent union and to exclusiveness. Through proper and careful instruction about the nature of the marriage commitment, it may be possible to bring the person to an understanding and acceptance of the Church's teaching on the permanence and exclusiveness of marriage. Until such understanding and exclusiveness is attained, the marriage must be delayed. If, after all attempts to encourage the person to accept this teaching have failed, the priest or deacon must refuse the marriage, since such an intention constitutes a grave lack of proper matrimonial consent;
- Refusal to have children. By its very nature, marriage is "ordained towards the begetting and education of children." (GS 50) If the Question on the Pre-Nuptial Investigation Form concerning the children is answered negatively by one or both of the parties, the marriage should be delayed until the couple agrees to be open to the possibility of children;
- Existence of a canonical impediment (until dispensed). If no dispensation is possible, the marriage must be refused;
- Marriage in the Catholic faith only to satisfy parents or due to parental pressure or simply for appearance's sake. In such a case, the marriage is to be delayed until the couple demonstrates a more substantive motivation for marriage in the Church;
- Indifference or disdain for the Catholic instruction of their children. In such a case, marriage is to be delayed until the parties agree to accept the Church's teaching on this fundamental responsibility;
- Substantial lack of appreciation and awareness of the sacramental aspects of marriage and its spiritual dimensions. In such a case, the marriage should be delayed until the rudiments of such an understanding are present. If after serious marriage preparation, this lack persists with no hope of improvement, the marriage should be refused;
- A radical lack of emotional or psychological maturity required for marriage. If after serious attempts to address these problems, the issues persist with no hope of improvement, the marriage should be refused;
- Severe personality and/or emotional disorder. In this case, marriage should be delayed or even refused if the disorder is serious enough to invalidate consent;
- Refusal to cooperate with the preparation process or to participate in good faith. In this case, marriage should be delayed;

- A parent or guardian of a person under 18 has presented in writing a strong and reasonable objection. In this case, it is pastorally advisable to delay the marriage until the priest or deacon can assess the seriousness and veracity of the objection or until the cause for it has been remedied.

(4) Permission to Marry and the Right to Appeal

If on the basis of these policies a priest or deacon of the diocese reaches the pastoral judgment that he cannot witness the marriage of a particular couple in the Church, no other priest or deacon may witness the marriage without the permission of the local ordinary or his delegate, the Judicial Vicar.

A couple denied permission by a priest or deacon to marry in the Church on the basis of these policies may appeal the decision to the local ordinary through his delegate, the Judicial Vicar. Prior to consideration of the appeal, all possible efforts to resolve the issues involved on the parish level with the assistance of the OMRL must have been exhausted.

(5) Pastoral Care after Marriage

Parish-centered support and enrichment for couples once married is as important as the preparation they receive prior to the celebration of their marriage in the Church. “Hence there is urgent need of a broad catechetical effort regarding the Christian ideal of conjugal communion and family life, including a spirituality of fatherhood and motherhood. Greater pastoral attention must be given to the role of men as husbands and fathers, as well as the responsibility which they share with their wives for their marriage, the family, and the raising of their children.” (CA 11)

The primary responsibility for marriage enrichment lies within the local parish: “The pastoral care of the regularly established family signifies, in practice, the commitment of all the members of the local ecclesial community to helping the couple to discover and live their new vocation and mission... Young married couples should learn to accept willingly and make good use of the discreet, tactful, and generous help offered by other couples that already have more experience of marriage and family life. Thus within the ecclesial community... there will take place a mutual exchange of presence and help among all the families” (FC 70).

Enrichment programs for the newly married should combine elements of a practical nature to help couples adjust to married life with ongoing instruction in the Church's teaching on marriage and conjugal love. It should also include opportunities for socialization and emphasize the need for personal involvement in the parish community. Particular attention should be given in the instruction of newly married couples to the Church's teaching on responsible parenthood. Willingness to “receive children lovingly from God,” marks significant maturity in the move from “I” to “we” in a couple's relationship. “Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute substantially to the welfare of their parents” (GS 50).

Contrary to popular “wisdom,” delaying childbearing in order for the couple to have “time to themselves” or until all adjustments have been made and a certain stage of development has been accomplished is neither advisable nor in keeping with a faith perspective. While not making the other purposes of marriage of less account, the practice of true conjugal love has this aim: “that the couple be ready with stout hearts to cooperate with the Love of the Creator and Savior, who through them will enlarge and enrich his own family day by day” (GS 50).

Pastoral Care of Sexually Active/Cohabiting Engaged Couples

(6a) Assessment of the Situation

Many marriage preparation ministers identify premarital sexual activity/cohabitation as the most difficult issue they face in preparing engaged couples to embrace a sacramental vision of marriage. While premarital sexual activity and cohabitation cannot simply be identified (many engaged couples engage in sexual intercourse without living together, and it is possible to share the same residence without a sexually active relationship²⁰), they remain closely related pastoral problems. Sharing a common life in the same residence before marriage raises additional issues. However, this should not overshadow the fact that those who are sexually active without cohabiting are in no less need of specific pastoral assistance.

Cohabitation among the engaged and/or premarital sexual activity are commonplace. This presents the Church with an enormous pastoral task and demonstrates a crucial need for a “new catechesis” in human sexuality. The Church must be ready and willing to employ new methods and new approaches that convincingly demonstrate how her teaching on sexuality corresponds to the deepest desires of the human heart for love and intimate personal union. Special attention must be given to parents in this “new catechesis” as they play a critical role in preventing cohabitation and premarital sex in the lives of their children.

A growing body of research has firmly established that the prospect of divorce dramatically increases for those who cohabit before marriage. One study indicates that the risk of divorce for cohabitating couples is around 75%.²¹ Another study concludes that marriages that began with premarital sex are three times more likely to end in divorce than when sex was saved for marriage.²² Later comprehensive studies have confirmed that this phenomenon of greater risk of divorce continues.²³ In short, the phenomenon of cohabitation is altering the face of marriage and family life in first-world countries. This increasing choice of cohabitation among the young, as if it were a wise prelude to marriage, flies in the face of the fact that “no positive contribution of cohabitation to marriage has ever been found.”²⁴ This, of course, can only be explained within the broader context of the widespread abandonment of Christian teaching on the meaning of human sexuality.

Engaged couples today grow up in a society that has almost completely severed the inherent, God-given connection between sexual union and marriage. This severance has been largely afforded by the “contraceptive revolution.” By severing sex from its inherent connection with

²⁰ This latter case is extremely rare.

²¹ Larry Bumpass & James Sweet, *Cohabitation, Marriage, and Union Stability: Preliminary Findings*, Center for Demography and Ecology: University of Wisconsin, 1995

²² Teachman, Thomas, & Paasch, “Legal Status & the Stability of Coresidential Unions.” *Demography* (November 1991), 571-583

²³ Cohan & Kleinbaum, “Toward a Greater Understanding of the Cohabitation Effect: Premarital Cohabitation and Marital Communication,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64 (2002): 180-192

²⁴ Popenoe & Whitehead, “Should We Live Together?,” The National Marriage Project, Rutgers, 2002.

procreation (i.e. from the establishment of a family), contraception has logically led to the severance of sex from the commitment of marriage. We can see that the possibility of pregnancy serves as a “check” to keep sexual activity where it can alone be lived in truth - in a marriage which itself remains open to life. Once this lynch pin has been removed, society finds itself on a slippery slope: beginning with the severance of sex from procreation and marriage, and ending in the justification and even legalization of his most base perversions, not the least of which is the murder of “unwanted” children in the womb.

Thus, in today's “contraceptive culture,” sexual activity outside of marriage is seen as the norm. In faithfulness to the teachings of Christ, which are always meant for our good and the safeguarding of authentic love, the Church has consistently taught that non-marital sexual activity is always a grave objective evil. Sound reason rejects the notion that premarital sex and cohabitation are helpful in preparing for marriage. Such behavior is, in reality, more often preparation for divorce. The following points indicate some of the reasons for this:

- Indulging in a sexual relationship which is dissoluble, uncommitted to life-long fidelity, and closed to life²⁵ cannot prepare a couple to commit to a sexual relationship (marriage) which demands indissolubility, life-long fidelity, and openness to life. By consistently choosing such behavior, the couple is demonstrating that they are, in fact, *ill-prepared* for the commitment of marriage because they have been psychologically “trained” in its opposite.
- Authentic love is ready to sacrifice everything for the good of the beloved. Above all, it never entices another to do evil. To engage in gravely sinful kinds of behavior, and encourage one's beloved to do so as well, manifests an attitude *diametrically opposed* to authentic love. At the very least, it manifests an ignorance of the meaning and demands of that love which must be the foundation of the Sacrament of Marriage.
- Premarital sexual activity establishes a pattern of self-indulgence that fosters the very vices (lust, pride, selfishness, dishonesty, distrust, sloth, etc.) that serve to undermine - and if not addressed, unravel- the relationship of a husband and wife.
- The love required for the Sacrament of Marriage demands a profound purity, humility, selflessness, honesty, trust, and willingness to sacrifice that can *only* be established by embracing the virtue of chastity (i.e., lived respect for the truth and meaning of sexuality outside *and within* marriage).
- Sexual intimacy clouds a couple's judgment preventing them from reaching the objective assessment essential to discerning an authentic vocation to marriage.

²⁵ Premarital sex almost always involves the consistent use of contraception. However, even if a couple engaging in premarital sex were desirous of conceiving a child, they could not be considered “open to life” in the full sense of that expression. A proper “openness to life” is inherently marital. That is, it recognizes the right of the child to be conceived by parents who are already committed by marriage to his or her upbringing in a stable, loving environment.

- By their choice of lifestyle, cohabiting couples and those that are otherwise sexually active, deprive themselves of the fullness of Christ's grace in any sacramental encounter, save Reconciliation.

All of these factors contribute to the disintegration of men and women as individuals and to any relationship they share. If left unaddressed, establishing a marriage on such patterns of relating is akin to building a house on sand (cf. Mt 7:26). Thus, there is a serious need on the part of sexually active couples to be challenged to grow, and a serious obligation on the part of all marriage preparation ministers to challenge them out of love for all concerned - first the couple themselves, their future children, the Church, and society at large. Downplaying the damaging effects of premarital sex does a service to no one. What is needed is full appreciation for an appropriation of the merciful, healing love of Christ.

(6b) Goals in Working with Cohabiting Couples

When cohabiting/sexually active couples express a desire to marry in the Church, it is important for the marriage preparation minister to recognize this as a teachable moment in the life of the couple. Much of what was stated in the section on the pastoral treatment of the "Marriage of Non-Practicing Catholics" applies here as well. In dealing with the issue, two extremes are always to be avoided: (1) immediately confronting the couple and condemning them for their behavior, and (2) ignoring the topic altogether. *Neither one of these approaches demonstrates authentic Christian charity.*

Cohabitation/premarital sex should be discussed early in the marriage preparation process. In most cases, the topic should be broached within the second or third sessions of proximate preparation. Review of the FOCCUS Inventory offers an open door for the marriage preparation minister to address the issue in a non-prying, non-confrontational way.

In general terms, there are four main pastoral goals:

Goal #1. To impart with charity, patience, and understanding, not merely what the Church teaches about marriage and sexuality, but more importantly why she teaches it.

This responsibility lies not only with the priest or deacon, but with all the MPL's entrusted with the formation of the engaged. This implies the need for thoroughly knowledgeable and trained pastoral workers and catechists who not only accept the Church's teaching and live it, but know how to explain it thoroughly and convincingly.

Marriage preparation ministers should always stress that the Church's teaching is not a set of "arbitrary" or "repressive" rules. The demands of chastity perfectly correspond with the deepest desire of the human heart for unconditional love. Chastity then, is not first a "no" to illicit sexual behavior, but a positive "YES" to the truth and meaning of sexual love written in our very being. This is a demanding love, for it is modeled after Christ and, therefore, cannot be lived

without the help of his grace. Thus, education in chastity must always be placed in the context of our need for redemption in Christ.

Goal #2. To challenge couples charitably, gently, yet directly to stop having sexual relations until they can be an honest expression of their marriage commitment.

It is the experience of many marriage preparation ministers and lay leaders that a significant number of sexually active engaged couples seek to embrace the Church's teaching on sexuality once it is proclaimed in love and adequately explained, and, when they have been directly challenged to do so.

However, as common experience attests, a desire to stop a given behavior does not always result in its cessation. Breaking long established habits of sexual indulgence is difficult. To be sure, without the help of grace it is impossible. In calling couples to chastity, marriage preparation ministers are presented with a pointed opportunity to help couples encounter the person of Christ and the power of his redemption in a life-changing way, perhaps for the first time. "For this is the matter under consideration: the *reality* of the redemption of Christ. *Christ has redeemed us!* This means he has given us the *possibility* of realizing the *entire* truth of our being. He has liberated our liberty from the *domination* of concupiscence." (DRP)

This is the *Good News* we have to proclaim to engaged couples whose liberty seems dominated by the pull of sexual sin. Christ can redeem them! Encountering the power of Christ's redemption in this area of life is of crucial importance if a couple is to meet the challenge of their vocation. Merely "getting married" does not take away the subjective patterns of sin that have been established through on-going, non-marital sexual behavior and attitudes. A renewed mind and a converted heart are indispensable if their love for one another as husband and wife is to be truly *marital*.

Cohabitators, beyond being challenged to cease sexual relations, should also be challenged to establish separate living arrangements. When this poses a real practical difficulty for a couple, it presents the parish community with an opportunity to reach out in charity. In cases of real need, it is recommended that pastors appeal to their parishioners to consider opening their homes to engaged persons to facilitate their preparation for marriage. Living with a Catholic family from the parish could serve as an additional means of formation for the engaged and facilitate a sense of belonging to the parish community.

Goal #3. To help the couples reflect on their situation and why they decided to cohabit and/or engage in sexual relations, providing them with tools to address various practical factors that put them at risk for later marital difficulties.²⁶

The following statement from the USCCB's Committee on Marriage and Family helps to put this pastoral goal in context. The entire document from which this excerpt is taken is recommended to all marriage preparation ministers in helping address the issue of cohabitation.

“Individuals who chose to cohabit have certain attitudes, issues, and patterns that lead them to make the decision to cohabit. These same attitudes, issues and patterns often become the predisposing factors to put them at high risk for divorce when they do choose to move from cohabitation to marriage. The cohabitation experience itself also creates risk factors and bad habits that can sabotage the subsequent marriage. These attitudes and patterns can be identified and brought to the couple preparing for marriage for examination, decision-making, skill-building, change. Without creating “self-fulfilling prophecies,” those preparing cohabiting couples for marriage can help them identify and work with issues around commitment, fidelity, individualism, pressure, and appropriate expectations.” (MPC 5)

While all engaged couples should have adequate instruction in NFP as a normal part of marriage preparation, there are additional reasons for pastors to require a formal class of instruction in NFP to those who are sexually active before marriage. Learning about and eventually practicing NFP offers the couple a very practical tool for creating a new habit of life that respects the meaning of sexuality and serves to unravel the distorted pattern of relating that results from a non-marital sexual relationship.

Goal #4. To help couples heal from the spiritual and emotional wounds they have inflicted upon themselves through their disordered behavior, which, if not properly addressed, will inevitably have a deleterious effect on their marriage (This includes not only their present relationship, but also previous sexually active relationships).

Misuse of God's great gift of sexuality always inflicts deep personal wounds. Even more than the tools needed to address practical issues brought on by irregular relationships, engaged couples need tools to help them heal from the spiritual wounds caused by sin. This healing begins with repentance on the part of the couple and a return to the sacramental life of the Church as soon as possible, especially Reconciliation and the Eucharist. It also requires that the couple ask forgiveness of each other for compromising their relationship and

²⁶ A recommended resource that can help marriage preparation ministers address the necessary issues with cohabiting couples is the video and study guide entitled "Preparing Cohabiting Couples for Marriage," produced by FOCCUS, Inc.

encouraging the other in a life of sin. None of this is possible unless the couple experiences *a radical reorientation towards the person and message of Christ*.

In some instances, particularly in cases of long-term sexual activity, numerous sexual partners, sexual addiction, sexual abuse, long-term involvement with pornography, etc., counseling offered by competent professionals who understand and respect the Catholic vision of sexuality may be necessary.

(6c) Determining the Final Course of Action

After the priest or deacon has asked the couple to consider chaste, separate living and given the couple sufficient time to reflect on their decision, a final course of action must be determined.²⁷

- If the sexually active (non-cohabiting) couple strives to live a chaste life and returns to the sacraments, the usual preparation continues;
- If the cohabiting couple separates, strives to live a chaste life and returns to the sacraments, the usual preparation continues;
- If the cohabiting couple promises to establish separate sleeping quarters in the same residence, practices a chaste relationship, and returns to the sacraments, the usual preparation continues;
- If a couple refuses to attempt to live chastely or shows a lack of good will in the preparation process, then the priest or deacon in conscience may see the need to postpone the marriage in order to secure the time needed to help the couple sufficiently understand the meaning of marriage and the sacredness of sexuality. The priest or deacon continues to work with the couple, with the goal of their evangelization, always holding out to them the availability of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the grace of conversion it affords;²⁸
- If the couple refuses to cease sexual relations before marriage, and the *pastor* decides that the marriage can eventually take place, the priest or deacon should still encourage the Sacrament of Reconciliation;
- If a couple, after thorough preparation and having been given every *opportunity for conversion*, is still unable to acknowledge God's plan for marriage and sexuality and the

²⁷ Special recognition is extended to the Diocese of Peoria and the Archdiocese of Denver from whose norms this section was adapted.

²⁸ Pastoral consideration is to be given to couples who have been living in free unions or civil marriages spanning several years with children. These couples can be asked to remain chaste as part of their immediate preparation for marriage.

need for sacramental reconciliation, then it may be advisable, in the judgment of the *pastor*, to postpone the marriage.

Cohabitation/premarital sex is not in itself a canonical impediment to marriage. Therefore a couple may not be refused the sacrament *solely* on the basis of cohabitation or sexual activity prior to marriage. However, a priest or deacon has the right and obligation to follow his conscience if he is convinced that marriage ought to be delayed.

It is the goal of the preparation process to bring the sexually active / cohabiting couple to realize the serious contradiction between sexual activity outside of marriage and the very meaning of the “one flesh” union as a sacramental sign of Christ's love for the Church. A couple who, after having been given every opportunity for conversion, still refuses to acknowledge the contradiction of their behavior, must realize that the course of action taken by the pastor is not a “punishment” for wrong doing, but the natural consequence of their own choices necessary to maintain the integrity of the sacrament and the avoidance of scandal.

Appendix II

Pastoral Consideration of Prenuptial Agreements

When a man and women make their vows on their wedding day, they are establishing a life-long covenant that can only be dissolved by the death of either party. They also agree to enter into a community of persons, a life-in-common in which all that they possess and receive throughout their marriage belongs equally to both. It is in this light that we must consider the growing practice of limiting the totality of their covenant vows with a prenuptial agreement.

A prenuptial agreement is a written contract between two people who are about to marry, setting out the terms of possession of assets, treatment of future earnings, control of the property of each, and potential division if the marriage is later dissolved. If such an agreement is entered into by the couple, the marriage minister must ascertain their reasons for doing so. If it is the intention of one or both spouses to protect their current assets from going to the other in case of a divorce, such an agreement is a fundamental contradiction to the nature of a permanent commitment. In making provision for the possibility of a divorce, they are in essence saying that they lack the necessary trust in either themselves or the other person to sustain a life-long marriage. Such agreements should be considered an impediment to marriage and must be voided before the marriage can take place.

An exception would be in the case of older (usually elderly) couples wherein one party or both have children from previous marriages that are rightful heirs of assets accumulated in those previous marriages. If their intention is to ensure that the passing on of their property or business to their children at the time of their death, that should not be considered an impediment to their intention of permanence.

Any pre-nuptial agreements of couples preparing for marriage in the Catholic Church must submit these legal agreements for review by Tribunal personnel in order to safeguard against invalidating clauses or elements.

Conclusion

“The truth about marriage and the family, deeply rooted in the truth about the human being, has been actuated in the history of salvation, at whose heart lie the words: ‘God loves his people.’”²⁹ For this reason, “The Church manifests her particular spiritual closeness to all those who have built their family on the sacrament of Matrimony.”³⁰ As servants of God’s children during this age when the great mystery of marriage is at risk of being eroded by false and incomplete conceptions of authentic love, it is more than ever the work of the Church to

²⁹ Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the participants in the Ecclesial Diocesan Convention of Rome , Basilica of St John Lateran Monday, 6 June 2005 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/june/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050606_convegno-famiglia_en.html

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI – *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 27.

proclaim the good news. The call to marriage is truly a call to holiness. With the grace of God this policy will aid the continual renewal of marriage and family life.