

# Telling Anew the Story of Marriage

## Marriage Preparation Guidelines Diocese of Portland, ME

### 1. Welcome to a Special Time of Preparation for your Marriage!

The Catholic Church rejoices with you in this exciting time as you prepare together for your marriage! Your Faith Community looks forward to sharing in your journey of preparation for a lifetime together. We believe the resources we will share with you, especially the rich and beautiful teachings of our Catholic Church on marriage, will deepen your relationship, and help prepare you for the challenges of marriage and family life.

In our efforts to support you on this most important journey of your lives, the Catholic Church in the diocese of Portland offers you supportive guidelines for your marriage preparation. Throughout this process you will be invited to discuss the meaning of marriage and how you want to deepen your married love. You will learn about the Catholic Church's understanding of the sacred vocation you have chosen, and how your marriage can strengthen the life of the Catholic Church, and vice versa. We hope you will be open in discussions and will ask questions freely.

### 2. Why Do We Have a Marriage Preparation Process?

First of all, it is because the Catholic Church really cares about married couples and wants marriages to be happy and life-giving.

Secondly, research in social studies find that close to 50% of marriages end in divorce, and the greatest number of divorces happen in the first five years of marriage.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the Catholic Church wants to do what it can to enrich the readiness of couples with life-skills education on things like communication, parenting, the influence of your families on your marriage relationship, money matters, and how your faith and spirituality will be part of your marriage.

We hope this time of preparation will begin, or continue, your dialogue about your ideas, feelings, plans, dreams, hopes and fears about marriage. Because the Catholic Church believes this kind of dialogue is so important, discussion of the following matters is part of all marriage preparation programs in this diocese:

- ♥ What marriage in the Catholic Church means
- ♥ Your faith and relationship with God
- ♥ Understanding influences from your families about life and love
- ♥ Your gift of sexuality, information on Natural Family Planning, and what you expect and hope from your married sexual love
- ♥ Having children: how you would handle an unexpected or difficult pregnancy; or how you would manage discovering that you are not able to have biological children
- ♥ Your values and habits about money, debt, possessions, and career
- ♥ How to make decisions and problem-solve together with love, common sense, good communication, and humor
- ♥ "Red flags" indicating possible problem areas – like substance abuse, domestic violence, rape, abortion, or sexual abuse, or pornography
- ♥ Special situations (when applicable) like re-marriage, step-parenting, and cultural differences
- ♥ Marriage enrichment opportunities and resources like the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Conference web-site at <http://www.foryourmarriage.org>

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<sup>1</sup> Current national divorce statistics indicate that most divorces occur for couples married less than five years and that the proportion of divorces is highest for couples married three years (National Center for Health Statistics, 1995). Dan Hurley in *The New York Times*, 4/19/05, wrote that the rate for how many people have ever married and subsequently divorced "has never exceeded about 41%".

No preparation program can cover every possible situation. So, if you find that something important to you is not discussed, please bring it up with your marriage preparation team.

### 3. What the Catholic Church Believes about Marriage

The Catholic Church believes marriage, as seen in God's plan for creation, is both a natural institution and a sacred union between a man and a woman. It is the basic pattern for male-female relationships where the natural makeup of male and female bodies complement each other for expressing married love and transmitting human life. It believes marriage is much more than a civil contract between two people in love. It is an outward sign to everyone of the love God has for all people. Marriage joins your individual gifts and talents into a new partnership blessed by God's special graces for your relationship.

The Catholic Church trusts that when you stand before the community to marry each other, you will make a **free** commitment to join your lives **fully** and completely in a life-long **faithful** covenant that is **fruitful** (the 4 F's) in deepening your relationship and in accepting children. Through these holy vows, God will promise to be with you, to sustain you on your journey together, and to help you love each other with God's very own love.

A **free** commitment means there is nothing in the way, personally or legally, of you marrying each other. It also means you choose this marriage without pressure from anyone, including yourselves, your families, or any personal situations.

A **full** commitment means you both intend your vows "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part". It means you intend, with God's grace, to love your spouse and to forgive your spouse when needed, so that each of you becomes the best person God created you to be. In that way, you will be your best helpers to gain the rewards of heaven some day.

A **faithful** commitment means you "forsake all others" when you marry, so your spouse will be your "one true love" and your most intimate companion for the rest of your life. Your promise to be faithful both sexually and emotionally includes striving to be loving, encouraging, thoughtful, and generous with each other.

A **fruitful** marriage means you are open to new life, that is, to having children if God sends them to you. Sometimes, couples discover they cannot give birth to biological children, but choose to give life through adoption, foster parenting, or generous works of charity. Whatever the situation, your married love is meant to give life to your relationship and to help you love others, including the children who may come into your lives.

In your marriage preparation, you will hear about **Natural Family Planning (NFP)**, a healthy, all-natural, safe, responsible and effective way to plan or space children without artificial contraception. NFP helps couples communicate better about their sexuality and focuses on their total relationship. The Catholic Church approves this method because it is the only one that does not affect or change the natural cycles of fertility and infertility God placed in our bodies. It is our hope that you will seriously consider learning and using this method of family planning.

### 4. Meetings with Marriage Preparation Team Members

Your formal preparation for marriage in the Catholic Church begins with your first meeting with a

member of the Marriage Preparation Team. It is important to have that first meeting **at least six months, preferably a year**, before your planned wedding date and before you book the hall and caterers, to see if the Catholic Church is available on that date.

#### **AT THESE MEETINGS, YOU CAN EXPECT TO:**

- ♥ Spend time getting to know the Team, and they will get to know you and your hopes and needs for your marriage
- ♥ Complete necessary paper work either with the Priest, Deacon, or a qualified team member
- ♥ Discuss if there are legal or personal reasons that could delay the wedding, such as:
  - ♥ Serious lack of emotional or psychological maturity. If this is the case, a consultation with a licensed professional may be necessary
  - ♥ Because of a previous marriage, at least one partner, legally or according to Catholic Church Law, is not free to marry
  - ♥ One or both partners refuse to participate in a reasonable marriage preparation process
  - ♥ There is pressure for the couple to marry, such as wanting to marry only because they are pregnant; or wanting to marry in the Catholic Church only to please family or friends
- ♥ Receive information on what marriage in the Catholic Church means
- ♥ Learn about your parish's marriage preparation program and receive information on dates and locations of programs offered in your area or the diocese
- ♥ Discuss when you will meet with Marriage Preparation Team members

At some point in the process, you will meet with the Priest or Deacon who will witness your marriage. In unusual and very rare circumstances, a Priest or Deacon finds he is not able in good conscience to witness a marriage in the name of the Catholic Church. If this should happen, he will notify the couple and the Bishop's Office, in writing, of his reasons and what could be done to remedy the situation. The couple may appeal his decision directly to the Bishop's Office.

## **5. Getting Ready for Your Marriage**

To deepen your relationship and support your preparation for marriage, the Catholic Church expects you to participate in a formal program of marriage education. You will receive information on the types of programs available and will be able to choose the one that best fits your situation and needs.

One of the most important parts of preparing for marriage is taking time to understand each other's faith, beliefs, and values. The marriage preparation process will provide you opportunities to talk about that. Marriage between a Catholic and someone of a different faith tradition is called an "interfaith" marriage. In that case, the Catholic party is expected to continue practicing the Catholic faith, have the children baptized, and to the best of his or her ability share that faith with future children. Marriages are stronger when interfaith spouses, or when one practices no faith, have an understanding of how that diversity can strengthen and challenge marriage and family life. <sup>2</sup>

An interfaith wedding can take place in a Catholic Church. If the couple wishes, a non-Catholic minister is welcomed to participate. With special permission and planning, a Catholic could be married in a non-Catholic Church.

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<sup>2</sup> More than 40 percent of couples married in the Catholic Church are of "mixed" religions, according to theologian Robert Hater, author of the 2006 book, "When a Catholic Marries a Non-Catholic."

Of all the challenges an interfaith couple will face, the most pressing one likely will be the question of how they raise their children.

"The Catholic Church makes clear ... that their marriages will be more challenging from the perspective of faith," Hater writes. " Special challenges exist as well when it comes to raising children in the Catholic faith."

## 6. If You Were Married in a Civil Ceremony

If you were married in a civil marriage and wish to be married in the Church, you must seek "convalidation". A convalidation is a valid marriage distinct from a civil marriage. It is not a "blessing" of the civil marriage but a new act of consent. For preparation on convalidation, please contact your pastor.

## 7. If You Are already Living Together

We are pleased you want to be married in the Catholic Church. That means you also want God to be a partner in your marriage.

A special belief the Catholic Church has about marriage is that every act of loving sexual intercourse within marriage renews the wedding vows and the commitment to love each other fully, freely, faithfully and fruitfully as described in #2 above. So, if there have been no public wedding vows, sexual intercourse loses the special meaning the Catholic Church believes God created it to have.

Though couples may choose to live together for various reasons, the Catholic Church does not believe living together is the best way to prepare for marriage. Also, studies from the social sciences find that couples who live together before marriage divorce at higher rates than those who do not.<sup>3</sup> So, the Catholic Church challenges couples to wait until after marriage to live together.

Couples already living together could find it helpful to discuss the following questions in preparation for their marriage:

1. Why did we choose to live together? (*Fear of permanent commitment, testing the relationship, convenience, need for companionship, financial reasons, escape from home, etc.*)
2. What have we learned from our experience of living together that will enrich our marriage?
3. Why do we want to commit ourselves in marriage at this time?
4. Before living together, was there a reluctance/hesitation to marry? If so, why? Does either one still have any reluctance/hesitation to marry?
5. Are we now at a new point of personal and couple development that makes us want to get married?
6. What is it that prompts us to marry in the Roman Catholic Church at this time?
7. What does marriage as a sacrament/sacred union/covenant mean to us?
8. How do we see our love and the continued growth of our love for one another being an important part of our marriage?
9. What changes in our relationship do we think will happen after we marry?
10. Can we consider living apart until we're married?

## 8. Your Formal Marriage Preparation Program

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<sup>3</sup>. The risk of divorce after living together is 40 to 85% higher than the risk of divorce after not living together. In other words, those who live together before marriage are almost twice as likely to divorce than those who did not live together (Bumpass & Sweet 1995; Hall & Zhao 1995; Bracher, Santow, Morgan & Russell 1993; DeMaris & Rao 1992 and Glen 1990).

Depending on the specific statistical methods used it was found that couples who marry after a period of cohabitation are at a 35% to 50% greater risk of separating and/or divorcing than marriages without prior cohabitation (Seltzer, 2000; Teachman, 2002; Teachman, 2003). *American Sociological Review* reported the findings of Yale University sociologist Neil Bennett that cohabiting women were 80% more likely to separate or divorce than were women who had not lived with their spouses before marriage (Bennett, et. al. 1988). Other studies show that those who have any type of pre-marital cohabiting experience have a 50 to 100 percent greater likelihood of divorce than those who do not cohabit premaritally (Axxinn and Thornton, 1992; Bumpass, Sweet and Cherlin, 1991; T. R. Balakrishnan, et al.1987).

Parishes provide marriage preparation in a variety of ways based on these guidelines. Some offer a parish or cluster-based program. Others offer options like the diocesan program through Catholic Charities Maine, couples meeting with other couples, or Engaged Encounter. Some request couples to take the Premarital Inventory called FOCCUS. There is also an on-line program available at <http://www.catholicmarriagepreonline.com/> for those who live far away and cannot physically attend a local program together, like some military couples. Speak with your Marriage Preparation Team about your options and what program best fits you. You can visit the diocesan web-site at <http://www.portlanddiocese.org> to see a listing of upcoming programs.

## **9. And Finally --**

We offer you our sincere congratulations on your upcoming marriage. The Diocese of Portland extends to you a warm and heartfelt welcome to the marriage preparation process. We sincerely believe this experience will be rewarding and enlightening for you. You are preparing for the most important relationship journey of your life – a journey that God and the Catholic Church want to support. We invite you to look at this preparation process as a solid investment in your marriage, one that will pay generously in benefits for the future.

If you have not already done so, we invite you to consider some form of active involvement or ministry in your parish. Please discuss this with your marriage preparation team. You are forming a “domestic Catholic Church” of the home. You hold the future of the Catholic Church in your hands and hearts. We believe you have much to offer, and we hope you will find a meaningful way to share your gifts and talents within the Catholic Church community.

**(The following section is for Marriage Preparation Teams)**  
**Formal Marriage Preparation Program**

**The**

The following are the topics that need to be addressed in any marriage preparation program offered in our diocese:

**1. What Sacramental Marriage in the Catholic Church means:**

- a. Full/permanent
- b. Free
- c. Faithful/exclusive
- d. Fruitful/Life-giving
- e. Covenant
- f. Married Couple as a sign of Christ's love

**2. Educational Components**

- a. Communication
  - i. Problem-solving
  - ii. Conflict resolution
- b. Family Background
  - i. Roles learned
  - ii. "Baggage" from the past
  - iii. Blending the two family backgrounds together
- c. Finances
  - i. Managing your money
  - ii. Lifestyle choices
  - iii. Career issues
- d. "Red flags" indicating possible problem areas:
  - i. Physical abuse to you or others - even if only a single incident
  - ii. Rape or sexual abuse
  - iii. Heavy drinking, or illegal use or abuse of other drugs or substances
  - iv. Control, i.e. constant need to know where you are and with whom; may insist that you distance yourself from family and friends
  - v. Unwillingness or inability to self-disclose, i.e., openly discuss family of origin, important past experiences, personal thoughts, feelings and values
  - vi. Money irresponsibility, i.e., high credit card balances, need to indulge in multiple expensive "toys", gambling
  - vii. Your gut tells you you're making a BIG mistake, i.e., you know there are already important unresolved problems, you feel serious worry and/or sadness, you are sleepless and/or near tears as the wedding approaches
  - viii. You find yourself thinking:
    1. At least I'll get away from my parents
    2. No one else would ever want me
    3. I can't call it off now, the wedding's all set and paid for, the invitations are sent, the guests are in the Catholic Church, what would people say?
    4. S/he will change after we get married. Or, worse, I will change him/her after we get married
  - ix. An abortion in either person's past
  - x. Pornography
  - xi. Cultural factors
  - xii. Others

**3. Sexuality**

- a. God made male and female bodies good – to complement each other (The "Language of the Body")
- b. Natural Family Planning (NFP) and the Catholic Church's teaching on Responsible Parenthood
- c. Sex as life-giving to the relationship and in bringing children into the world
- d. Genuine intimacy

**4. Spirituality**

- a. Faith issues
- b. Making God a partner in your marriage
- c. Moral decision-making
- d. Values
- e. Prayer

**5. Special Situations (if appropriate to discuss with the couple)**

- a. Raising children/step families**
- b. Parenting resources
- c. Catholic Remarriage and healing wounds from a previous marriage
- d. Cultural differences in a marriage

**6. After the Wedding**

- a. Expectations in the first years of marriage
- b. Marriage Enrichment opportunities and resources like the USCCB Conference's web-site at <http://www.foryourmarriage.org>.