

MARRIAGE PREPARATION POLICY

1. MARRIAGE

"In this entire world there is not a more perfect, more complete image of God, Unity and Community than marriage."¹ The process of preparation for marriage in the Catholic Church is a unique opportunity for a man and woman to learn the importance of beginning their life together rooted in authentic love for God and one another. It is a chance for the couple to come to understand the mission of the family life which they seek, "to become more and more what it is, that is to say, a community of life and love, in an effort that will find fulfillment, as will everything created and redeemed, in the Kingdom of God."²

The Catholic Church has long had a tradition of pre-marriage preparation. Recognizing the immense challenges facing couples in the modern world, great care for preparing couples for the sacrament of matrimony is particularly important.

Marriage preparation in the Catholic Church is an invitation to view the marriage union as the formation of a "free, total, faithful, and fruitful community of persons."³ The marriage vows between husband and wife are lived through day-to-day free and total mutual self-giving, faithful in life long commitment to one another and God, and fruitful in its openness to new life in the form of the children God may entrust to their care.

Prior to undertaking any marriage preparation, it is hoped that couples (if Catholic) are already practicing in their faith, as the grace of the marriage sacrament will build upon the grace of a life of faith. Within the vocation to the priesthood or religious life, years of preparation and education are vital before the vows are taken. Just the same, in the vocation to marriage between man and woman, the time of courtship and in particular the time of marriage preparation is vital for life within the sacrament.

In faithfulness to Christ's teaching the Church has always held that marriage is a sacred and indissoluble institution. In the sacrament of matrimony, through grace, a married couple's love will be a sign and a symbol of God's love. Properly understood, the marriage commitment is a promise that must be regarded with the highest degree of seriousness and reflection.

Marriage and family life are not always supported by modern social conditions. This necessitates an even greater diligence on behalf of the couple and the clergy responsible for their marriage preparation. It is important for the couple to know exactly what the nature of the commitment before them is and how it is the foundation of their future happiness. In recognizing the importance and beauty of the commitment to one another in the sacrament of matrimony the couple is prepared to willingly accept the call to the vocation of marriage.

This document is a statement of policy on marriages for the Archdiocese of Mobile. The guidelines are directed to couples who are planning to marry in order to assist them in knowing what they can and should expect to receive from the Church and, in return, what we, the Church, should expect of them.

¹ Blessed John Paul II, Homily on the Feast of the Holy Family, December 30, 1988

² *Familiaris Consortio*, apostolic exhortation of John Paul II, 1981.

³ *Humanae Vitae*, paragraph 9

2. PRIOR NOTICE POLICY

In order to ensure that sufficient time is available for appropriate marriage preparation and pastoral counseling, couples must contact their parish priest or deacon at least six months in advance of their anticipated wedding date. The proposed date for the wedding will be considered conditional and dependent upon completion of marriage preparation.

3. MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROGRAMS

A marriage preparation program led by the priest/deacon with the help of married couples will be the norm for all couples seeking marriage in the archdiocese. The priest/deacon who will witness the marriage will be responsible for ensuring the completion of this preparation. To assist the priest/deacon in this task each couple will complete the FOCCUS Inventory and attend an Engaged Encounter weekend or an equivalent program approved by the Family Life Office. Topics for the program include finances, communication, relationships and the sacramentality of marriage, parenting, and other important areas.

Children are regarded as among the greatest blessings of married life. Each engaged couple is required to complete the “Marital Sexuality & Responsible Parenthood” NFP introduction program and a full NFP instruction course approved by the Family Life Office. The full NFP course can be completed through online training or certified teaching couple approved by the Family Life Office. The purpose of this requirement is to cooperate fully with the request of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops that “in each formal pre-marriage program, a presentation on Natural Family Planning and fertility appreciation be included as an integral, not an optional, part of the schedule.”⁴ This is also in accord with the words of Pope John Paul II, who said, “Marriage preparation programs should include an honest and complete presentation of the Church’s teaching on responsible procreation, and should explain the natural methods of regulating fertility.”⁵

In a proposed marriage of a Catholic and a non-Catholic, the Catholic’s future spouse is to receive a thorough explanation of the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. As part of the explanation the future spouse and the Catholic party must be made aware of the declaration and promise the Catholic party must make concerning the faith and the raising of children. The Catholic party should also make every effort to become acquainted with the beliefs and practices of the other faith community. The priest/deacon should make a sincere effort to cooperate with the clergyman of the party who is not a Catholic. This preparation will be given in every case including the exceptional case where permission can be given for the marriage in the church of the non-Catholic.

⁴ Bishops’ Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices, *Faithful to Each Other Forever: A Catholic Handbook of Pastoral Help for Marriage Preparation*: NCCB, 1988.

⁵ Address of Pope John Paul II to the bishops of California, Nevada, and Hawaii, 1998

4. COHABITATION

Cohabitation has become all too common among Catholics. Studies indicate that couples who live together before marriage have a fifty percent higher chance of divorce, as well as higher rates of domestic violence, and have a poorer quality of communication than those who do not. Studies show only negative results from living together before marriage.⁶ These sociological reasons, considered along with the destructive nature of sexual intimacy prior to marriage, lead to the conclusion that priests/deacons urge the cohabiting couple to live separately during the engagement period. This will enhance the couple's opportunity to prepare for the life-long commitment, as well as respecting the sacredness of marital sexuality. If the priest/deacon finds that a couple is unable or unwilling to accept or work toward this expectation he may delay the wedding while continuing to minister to the couple in the hope of fostering their spiritual and emotional growth. Or, in order to avoid scandal, he may require that the wedding ceremony be small; for example, the couple, two witnesses and the immediate families.⁷

5. MARRIAGE OF MINORS

Special care and concern will be given to very young couples because of the difficulty experienced in early marriages. Therefore, if either party is not yet 19 years old, consideration for marriage in the Church will be given after the priest/deacon has completed adequate pastoral preparation, which will include some form of evaluation of maturity. Consultation with the parents and an archdiocesan approved counselor will normally be necessary.

6. PREGNANCY

The fact of pregnancy does not diminish the need for the preparation provided in this policy. Indeed, it is even more vital in cases of pregnancy that the usual help be given. Special counseling will also be needed when there was no engagement to marry prior to the pregnancy.

7. REASONS FOR DELAY OF MARRIAGE

A priest/deacon may not refuse to witness the marriage of a parishioner who is free to marry and who has completed the program of preparation. A priest/deacon may delay, for a just cause, the witnessing of a marriage as long as such cause continues and the priest/deacon offers counseling. Just cause would include, but is not limited to, the following: a) Non-practice of the Catholic Faith by Catholic party or parties with no intention of returning to the practice of the faith. b) Lack of readiness for marriage as assessed by the priest/deacon, who consults with parents and professional counselors where needed. c) Refusal of the parties to participate in the preparation that applies to them.

8. APPEAL

If the marriage is delayed, the couple may appeal to the Moderator of the Curia.

⁶ *The Rise of Divorce and Cohabitation in the United States: Duke University Study*

⁷ *Before You say 'I Do': Pastoral Considerations for Christian Marriage Today*, Diocese of Fort Wayne–South Bend, 1998.

9. PLACE OF THE WEDDING CELEBRATION

Marriages between two Catholics are to be celebrated in the parish church of either the bride or groom. Marriages between a Catholic and a non-Catholic are to be celebrated in the parish church of the Catholic. The pastor of the Catholic party may grant permission for the marriage to be celebrated in another Catholic church.

For exceptional reasons, the Moderator of the Curia may give permission to celebrate the marriage in the church of the non-Catholic party.

For very serious reasons, a marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized party may be allowed in another appropriate building. The Moderator of the Curia may grant this permission.

No outdoor weddings are allowed in the Archdiocese of Mobile.

10. POSED PHOTOGRAPHS AT WEDDINGS

With the consent of the officiating priest pictures may be taken during the ceremony in a discreet manner that does not clash with the sacred character of the occasion. A single posed picture may be taken of the couple and the wedding party after the final blessing just before processing out. No other posed pictures are to be taken in the church before, during or after the ceremony.

11. MARRIAGE FILE NIHIL OBSTAT

When a couple is prepared for marriage outside the Archdiocese of Mobile but will be married within the boundaries of the Archdiocese, the pastor of the parish where the marriage is scheduled to take place will inform the couple that the priest or deacon preparing the couple must send the prenuptial investigation file to his Chancery office for granting of a *nihil obstat*. The official in that diocese who reviews marriage policy will then forward the file to the Archdiocese of Mobile, Office of the Vicar General, 400 Government Street, Mobile, Alabama for the granting of a *nihil obstat*. The file will then be sent to the pastor of the parish where the marriage is scheduled to take place. This should be done at least one month before the date of the wedding to ensure that the file is received on time.

If a priest or deacon of the Archdiocese of Mobile is preparing a couple for marriage, but the marriage is to take place outside of the Archdiocese of Mobile, the completed prenuptial investigation file must be sent to the Office of the Vicar General, 400 Government Street, Mobile, Alabama for the granting of a *nihil obstat*. The file will then be forward to the Chancery Office of the diocese where the marriage is scheduled to take place. That diocesan official will review the file and grant *nihil obstat*. The file will then be forwarded to the pastor of the parish where the marriage is scheduled to take place. This should be done a month before the date of the wedding to ensure that the file is forwarded on time.

12. VALIDATION OF MARRIAGE

If a couple enters into a marriage in a manner contrary to the laws of the Church, and later seeks to have the marriage validated by the Church, validation is permitted only after the couple has completed adequate preparation and evaluation in the judgment of the pastor.

13. EXCEPTIONS

When pastoral considerations require it, request for exceptions to this policy may be referred to the Moderator of the Curia.

Bibliographical Resources

¹ Blessed John Paul II, Homily on the Feast of the Holy Family, December 30, 1988

² *Familiaris Consortio*, apostolic exhortation of John Paul II, 1981.

³ *Humanae Vitae*, paragraph 9

⁴ Bishops' Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices, *Faithful to Each Other Forever: A Catholic Handbook of Pastoral Help for Marriage Preparation*: NCCB, 1988.

⁵ Address of Pope John Paul II to the bishops of California, Nevada, and Hawaii, 1998

⁶ *The Rise of Divorce and Cohabitation in the United States*: Duke University Study

⁷ *Before You say 'I Do': Pastoral Considerations for Christian Marriage Today*, Diocese of Fort Wayne–South Bend, 1998.

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