

# **MARRIAGE PREPARATION POLICY**

## **Diocese of Sacramento**

(Revised September 26, 2014)

**The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring, has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between the baptized. 1983 Code of Canon Law, Canon 1055**

In support of its ministry to marriage, the Diocese of Sacramento promulgated the first “Marriage Preparation Policy” in 1978. On the feast of the Holy Family, December 30, 1994, Bishop William K. Weigand approved and promulgated the second “Marriage Preparation Policy.” In the fall of 2004, following the Diocesan Synod, Bishop Weigand formed an *ad hoc* Marriage Preparation Committee to update the 1994 policy. That update:

- Provides and fosters sacramental catechesis at all pastoral levels, helping the people of God be increasingly aware that, in and through the sacraments, “they worship God, are sanctified, built up as the Body of Christ, and sent forth to proclaim and live the Good News of salvation” (cf. Synod Pastoral Initiative, 4).
- Adopts general guidelines for marriage preparation articulated in *Faithful to Each Other Forever*, promulgated by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) in 1989.

This 2014 update reflects Bishop Jaime Soto’s plan to place a renewed emphasis on parish involvement in marriage preparation in the hope of making this critical moment in the lives of the engaged couples more effective in both catechesis and evangelization. As a consequence of making the parish the primary place for marriage preparation, the English and Spanish diocesan Pre Cana classes were eliminated effective January 2013.

These guidelines help engaged couples make the best possible decisions regarding marriage. They also help them prepare well for the Sacrament of Matrimony and fully understand their commitment to living out their vocation in and for the community of the Church. Specific canons are cited where appropriate so that the origin of each section will be clear. Those canons are guiding principles of the Catholic Church.

### **I. SPIRITUAL VISION OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE**

Noting Canon 1055 above, the self-giving love of husband and wife represents the mutual love of Christ for his bride, the Church, and the love of the Church for her bridegroom, Christ.

The plan of God for Christian marriage begins with a vision of the wholeness of the human person. As Genesis states, “God created man in his own image...male and female he created them” (1:27). With all the dignity and sacredness of life and sexuality, man and woman witness to the wonder and graciousness of God. Entering into marriage is a response to God’s call for

the man and woman to become “one flesh” in mutual self-giving (Gen 2:24). The couple then becomes the symbol of the covenant that binds God and humankind together in a permanent and faithful covenant. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, states that one meaning of love “stands out” among all others, namely, the “love between man and woman, where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness.”<sup>1</sup>

Marriage is not a peripheral issue in the Christian life. It finds itself at the heart of the Christian mystery and serves to illuminate it. Indeed, we cannot understand the Church, herself, says Pope John Paul II, “unless we keep in mind the ‘great mystery’ involved in the creation of man and female and the vocation of both to conjugal love....”<sup>2</sup>

“God is love and, in himself, he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. *Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.*”<sup>3</sup>

Through Christian revelation, we recognize two ways of realizing that personal and fundamental vocation to love: marriage and virginity/celebracy. Either way actuates the most profound truth in us, that of being created in the image of God.<sup>4</sup>

Vatican Council II states that “married partners have their own proper vocation; they must be witnesses of faith and the love of Christ to one another and their children. The Christian family proclaims aloud both the present power of the kingdom of God and the hope of the blessed life.”<sup>5</sup>

By virtue of baptism, the marriage of Christians is a sacrament, a *living sign* that the couple truly communicates and participates in the love of Christ and the Church. Hence, Baptism is described as a “nuptial bath,”<sup>6</sup> and the Eucharist is understood as the sacramental consummation of the marriage between Christ and the Church. When we receive the body of Christ, just like a bride we conceive new life in us—life in the Holy Spirit. It is the same Holy Spirit that forms the bond that unites spouses in the Sacrament of Marriage. This is the “profound mystery” in which marriage participates.

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,’”<sup>7</sup> that is, to love as God loves.

---

<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est* (God Is Love, December 25, 2005), 2.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, Letter, *Gratissimam Sane* (Letter to Families, February 2, 1994), 19.

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, November 22, 1981), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Vatican II, Constitution, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), 35.

<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Latin Typical Edition, August 15, 1997), 1617.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 57.

## II. THE IMPORTANCE OF MARRIAGE PREPARATION

Although these marriage preparation guidelines address the time immediately preceding a couple's marriage, it is important to realize that the Church can and should play a central role in all the stages of marriage preparation. Pope John Paul II expanded our vision by teaching that marriage preparation is a gradual and prolonged process. That process includes three main stages: **remote**, **proximate**, and **immediate**, together with aftercare efforts to sustain and nurture the marital bond (*Familiaris Consortio*, 65-69; cf. 1983 *CIC*<sup>8</sup> c. 1063).

Remote preparation begins in early childhood and includes all family and environmental factors that influence the person in positive and negative ways regarding marriage. It is through the "family of origin" that role models, values, traditions, attitudes, communication styles, etc., play a major part in a person's formation. The Church's support of family life during the formative years is critical in building strong families through which children can grow and learn (USCCB, *Faithful to Each Other Forever* [1989], pp. 10-20).

Proximate preparation begins at a suitable age, usually around the time of puberty. It involves, through age-appropriate catechesis, a more specific preparation for and rediscovery of the sacraments. It is the responsibility of parents and guardians, along with pastoral ministers, to provide integration of the religious formation of young people with their preparation for life as possible future spouses.

It is in the bosom of the family that parents are "by word and example...the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each child..." (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). It is also critical to address the role of media and the importance of media education during this stage of young people's development (USCCB, *Faithful to Each Other Forever* [1989], pp. 23-54).

Immediate preparation for the celebration of the sacrament of matrimony takes place in the weeks and months immediately prior to the wedding, with the hope that it will give new meaning, context, and form to the prenuptial investigation required by canon law (c.1063). Immediate marriage preparation should be a special experience for those engaged couples who choose to be married in the Catholic Church. It is a time when engaged couples can be helped to:

- Experience a sense of welcome and involvement with the pastoral Church.
- Evaluate their readiness to live married life.
- Gain insights of themselves individually and as a couple.
- Obtain a deeper understanding of the sacrament of Matrimony.
- Understand the mission of a married couple both in the Church and in society
- Develop a greater appreciation of their faith.

---

<sup>8</sup> CIC = Codex Iuris Canonici (Code of Canon Law)

For those involved in ministry to the engaged, it is an important pastoral opportunity for evangelization (cf. Pastoral Initiatives 1 and 4, 3<sup>rd</sup> Diocesan Synod, Sacramento Diocese, 2004). Today's engaged couples present both a challenge and an opportunity for those involved in immediate marriage preparation.

The Diocese strongly recommends an ecclesial team approach to sacramental preparation. Today, priests and deacons are working side by side with married couples and individuals from the parish faith community to provide engaged couples with a rich variety of experiences and exposure. Team members share their special gifts in a variety of ways, such as teaching marriage preparation classes, being sponsor couples, assisting in administration, facilitating the premarital inventory, coordinating the rehearsal, etc.

In this team model of collaborative ministry and shared responsibility (Synod Pastoral Initiative 3), the active involvement of the priest or deacon is central to the process. He is the person responsible for the initial interview, completing the Prenuptial Inquiry, deciding whether to postpone or proceed, witnessing the marriage, etc.

### **III. THE MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROCESS**

#### **A. Hospitality**

The couple's first contact with the parish is crucial, setting the tone of and stage for sacramental preparation. They have made a decision to come forward and ask to be married in the Church. Preparation for one's wedding is a significant event in a person's life. Many of these couples have not been active in Church for some time, and even regular churchgoers have many questions about their upcoming wedding and marriage. Teachable moments during the marriage preparation process are excellent opportunities for evangelization; how we handle them will say much to the couples about who we are as a Church. The pastor and his delegates must welcome the couple as Christ would, that is, with "a warm and caring, positive and joyful attitude of hospitality" (USCCB, *Faithful to Each Other Forever* [1989], p. 59). John Paul II says that while "the faith of person(s) seeking marriage can exist in varying degrees, it is the primary duty of pastors to facilitate a rediscovery of this faith, nourishing it and bringing it to maturity" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 68).

#### **B. Six-Month Marriage Preparation Period**

To ensure that the engaged couple have adequate time to prepare in a serious way, this contact must be made at least six months in advance of the couple's wedding date, and conclude no closer than eight weeks prior to the date. *Nine months to one year is ideal*. This preparation time is not just a "waiting period" for the ceremony, but rather an important, teachable moment in preparation for the lifetime journey on which the couple is about to embark. Each faith community is advised to publish this requirement in their bulletin on a regular basis.

**C. Responsibility of the Priest/Deacon Performing the Ceremony  
(1983 *CIC* cc. 1063, §2 and 1066)**

Immediate marriage preparation begins when the engaged couple contact the parish. This is a time for the couple and pastor (or his delegate) to engage in assessment and education for a lifetime commitment to family living within the Church. The priest or deacon, after being contacted by either party residing in the parish to which he is assigned, is the one responsible to see that:

- (1) The couple has personal preparation for entering marriage so that, through such preparation, the parties may be predisposed toward the holiness and duties of their new state (c. 1063, §2).
- (2) Before marriage is celebrated, it is evident that nothing stands in the way of its valid and licit celebration (c. 1066).

**D. Responsibility in the Case of a Visiting Cleric (1983 *CIC* c. 1111)**

Whenever a priest or deacon is invited from outside the parish or to witness the wedding ceremony, the pastor of the parish or a local ordinary must delegate the visiting cleric. The celebrant must be in good standing in accordance with diocesan statutes. This delegation is more than giving permission; it is the granting of authority (faculty) to witness the exchange of vows in the name of the Church. The delegation is required for validity. **Note 1:** A record of that delegation is to be included in the Prenuptial Documents and entered in the marriage registry. **Note 2:** It is permissible for the visiting cleric to handle the marriage preparation, but the pastor retains the responsibility to see that this is completed appropriately.

**E. Setting of a Tentative Wedding Date (1983 *CIC* c. 1066)**

Discussion of a tentative wedding date may take place during the initial contact with the priest or deacon. **Note:** This date is not to be finalized until the assessment process has been completed. Under no circumstances is the date to be scheduled by anyone other than the priest or deacon who has accepted the responsibility of the assessment process.

**F. Place of Wedding**

**1983 Code of Canon Law (cc. 1115, 1118, §1 and 1127) and 1990 Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches (cc. 831, §2, 835, 838)**

The Catholic tradition recognizes and cherishes an incarnational spirituality, one that appreciates the importance of symbol, gesture, sacred space, and ritual. Within the Diocese of Sacramento, a number of values are at issue and must be reflected in our policy regarding the place of the celebration of weddings involving Catholics. Among those values is the need to:

- Witness to the sacred nature of marriage in a secular society.
- Witness to the communal and ecclesial dimension of marriage. The Christian community has a stake in the marriage of its members, and the couple has a vocational responsibility to the community.

- Respect the conscience and religious practices of people from other faith traditions who are entering marriage with a Catholic.
- Welcome people with genuine hospitality, understanding, and appropriate flexibility.

### **(1) Marriage between Two Catholics of the Latin Church**

The marriage between two Catholics of the Latin Church is to take place in the parish of either the bride or the groom (c. 1118, §1). The pastor may permit the wedding to be held in another Catholic Church or oratory (e.g., a mission church or convent chapel) within the parish boundaries (c. 1118, §1).

### **(2) Marriage between a Latin Catholic and an Eastern Catholic**

The marriage between two Catholics, one of whom is a member of one of the Eastern Catholic Churches, is to take place in the parish of the groom (*CCEO*<sup>9</sup>, c. 831 §2). Permission may be sought by a delegate of the bishop for this ceremony to take place in the parish and ritual tradition of the bride.

### **(3) Marriage between a Catholic and a Baptized Christian**

The marriage of a Catholic with a baptized Christian who is not Catholic is to take place in the parish church of the Catholic party (c. 1118, §1). The pastor may permit the wedding to be held in another Catholic Church or oratory (e.g., a mission church or convent chapel) within the parish boundaries (c. 1118, §1). **Note 1:** The minister of the non-Catholic party may be invited to attend and participate in the ceremony. However, the Catholic priest or deacon must be the one who asks for and receives the exchange of consent (*Rite of Marriage*, 14, 17; c. 1105). **Note 2:** When serious ecumenical or family reasons exist, the priest or deacon assisting the couple to prepare for marriage may petition from the local ordinary a dispensation from the canonical form of marriage in accord with canon 1127, §§2-3. Such a dispensation may be granted only for serious reason and when the Catholic party has a genuine commitment to continue active practice of Catholicism.

### **(4) Marriage between a Catholic and a Person Who Is Not Baptized**

The marriage of a Catholic with a person who is not baptized is to take place in the parish of the Catholic party (c. 1118, §1). The pastor may permit the wedding to be held in another Catholic Church or oratory (e.g., a mission church or convent chapel) within the parish boundaries (c. 1118, §1). **Note 1:** If the religious convictions of the non-baptized person or members of his or her family create difficulties for celebrating the wedding in the parish church or oratory, the priest or deacon preparing the couple may consult the Diocesan Bishop only to discuss the possibility of another “suitable place” (e.g., a parish hall) in accord with the provisions of canon 1118, §3. **Note 2:** The rabbi, clergy person, or other recognized official of the non-Catholic party may be invited to attend and

---

<sup>9</sup> CCEO = Corpus Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium (Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches)

participate in the ceremony. The “Rite for Celebrating Marriage between a Catholic and an Unbaptized Person” is to be used, and the Catholic priest or deacon must be the one who asks for and receives the exchange of consent (*Rite of Marriage*, 14, 17, 55-66; c. 1108). **Note 3:** When serious interreligious or family reasons exist, the priest or deacon assisting the couple to prepare for marriage may petition from the local ordinary for a dispensation from, the canonical form of marriage in accord with canon 1127, §§2-3. Such a dispensation may be granted only for serious reason and when the Catholic party has a genuine commitment to continue active practice of Catholicism.

#### **(5) Members of the College Community**

The priest or deacon should refer members of college communities to their appropriate parish, especially if the couple is not registered, does not attend the local church, or is inactive in the practice of the faith. *Faithful to Each Other Forever* (54) stresses the importance of close communication between parish and campus ministers and encourages efforts to preserve and support the couple’s links with the parish back home.

#### **(6) Outdoor Weddings**

The Diocese of Sacramento does not approve of outdoor weddings. Rare exceptions are made, for ecumenical or interreligious reasons, for a ceremony conducted in an appropriate neutral **indoor setting**, but written permission must be granted by the Diocesan Bishop. The marriage ritual presumes that the parish church is the setting for the celebration of marriage, although it makes provision for a ceremony in “another appropriate place” when a Catholic marries a non-baptized person (*Rite of Marriage*, 55).

### **IV. MARRIAGE PREPARATION DOCUMENTS:**

#### **Commonly Used Documents, and Additional Permissions and Dispensations**

##### **Documents, Permissions, Dispensations:**

Prenuptial Inquiry Forms  
 Prenuptial Witness Forms  
 Baptismal Certificate  
 Confirmation Certificate  
 Petition for Dispensation from Disparity of Cult  
 Permission for Marriage of Mixed Religion  
 Petition for Dispensation from Canonical Form  
 Request for Testimonial Letters (*Nihil Obstat*)

#### **A. Prenuptial Inquiry**

The completion of the Prenuptial Inquiry (Form A) is required to establish freedom to marry and identify any impediments to the proposed marriage (cc. 1066-1067), as well as to assure the

Church that the bride and groom freely wish to marry one another at this time. It also explores the engaged couple's understanding of the Catholic teaching on marriage.

The bride and groom must be interviewed separately by the priest or deacon. This is a confidential church document and should be kept in a secured file with the documents noted below, as well as the results of the pre-marital assessment, the certificate of completion of a marriage preparation program and the certificate of attendance at a one-hour NFP introductory class.

### **B. Baptismal Certificate**

A Catholic Baptismal Certificate is needed to verify the fact of baptism and to facilitate the post-marital registration and notifications required by canon law (cc. 1121-1122). This certificate is to be obtained from the parish of Baptism. A recent certificate (i.e., one issued in the last six months) with complete marginal notations is required. The reason the certificate must be current is that the marginal notations may reveal an impediment due to a prior valid bond, sacred orders, or religious profession (cc. 1085, 1087, and 1088).

### **C. Confirmation Certificate**

Catholics who have not yet received the Sacrament of Confirmation are to receive it before they are admitted to marriage if it can be done without grave inconvenience (c. 1065). The parish issuing the current Baptismal Certificate should include the notations for First Eucharist and Confirmation. If this is done, there is no need to secure a separate copy of the Certificate of Confirmation. If the certificate of Confirmation is needed, it can be obtained from the parish of Confirmation.

### **D. Prenuptial Witness Form (Letters of Freedom) "Form B: Witness"**

Each party must provide two witnesses to attest to their freedom to marry. The Prenuptial Witness Form is to be used to: (1) verify freedom to marry; (2) investigate the attitude of both parents when a party is under twenty-one [21] years of age; (3) investigate stability of the proposed marriage when either party is under eighteen [18] years of age; and (4) assist in proving baptism when a certificate is unavailable. Parental testimony is preferred for Form B and should only be omitted for grave reasons.

### **E. Petition for Dispensation from Disparity of Cult (Worship)**

- (1) Marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person is invalid without dispensation (c. 1086).
- (2) A petition for Dispensation from Disparity of Cult is used to request authorization for a Catholic to marry a non-baptized person. It is also used when a Catholic marries a doubtfully baptized person, either because the fact of the baptism is doubtful or the validity of the baptism is in doubt. This form contains a statement by the Catholic party that he/she understands the expectations of the Church regarding continued practice of the faith and handing on the faith to the children of the marriage. The form also contains a statement by

the other party that he/she is aware of the Catholic's obligations. Failure to obtain a dispensation from disparity of cult renders a marriage invalid.

#### **F. Permission for Marriage of Mixed Religion**

- (1) Marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic requires permission of the local ordinary or his delegate.
- (2) A petition for Permission for a Marriage of Mixed Religion is used when permission is needed for a baptized Catholic to marry a person baptized in another Christian faith. This form contains a statement by the Catholic party that he/she understands the expectations of the Church regarding continued practice of the faith and handing on the faith to the children of the marriage. The form also contains a statement by the other party that he/she is aware of the Catholic's obligations. Failure to obtain the permission renders the marriage illicit.

#### **G. Petition for Dispensation from Canonical Form**

A petition for Dispensation from Canonical Form is used when a Catholic wishes to marry someone of another religious tradition in their place of worship and before the authorized minister of that religion (e.g., Catholic to Jew). A rescript for Dispensation from Disparity of Cult or the granted Permission for Marriage of Mixed Religion is to be attached.

#### **H. Request for Testimonial Letters (*Nihil Obstat*)**

A Request for Testimonial Letters is used when the priest or deacon prepares premarital documents for another diocese where the wedding will take place. The documents are reviewed and sealed by the delegate of the Diocesan Bishop (the Tribunal), forwarded to the chancery of the other diocese, and then delivered to the parish where the marriage will take place. This procedure, with all pre-marital documents and permission of the pastor, assures the authenticity of the documents from diocese to diocese and their acceptance at the parish.

**Note:** For the engaged couple, the above documents (A, D–H) are available at the parish office. The pastor, parochial vicar, or deacon responsible for the Prenuptial Inquiry will send any completed forms to the Diocesan Tribunal for processing.

### **V. STATE OF CALIFORNIA MARRIAGE LICENSE REQUIREMENTS**

A valid marriage license from the State of California is necessary and can be obtained at a county clerk's office.

### **VI. ASSESSMENT/ASPECTS OF READINESS FOR MARRIAGE AND MARRIAGE PREPARATION**

Canon law states that ordained ministers may not refuse the Sacraments to those who ask for them under suitable circumstances, are properly disposed, and are not prohibited by law from

receiving them (c. 843, §1). At the same time, ministers have the duty to see to it that those who seek the Sacraments are prepared to receive them (c. 843, §2). The canons on marriage further state that all persons are able to contract marriage unless they are prohibited by law (c. 1058). Before a marriage is celebrated, it must be evident that nothing prevents its valid or licit celebration (c. 1066).

The purpose of the marriage assessment process is to (1) discern if any impediment or obstacle exists that would prevent a valid or licit celebration; (2) assist in overcoming, to the extent possible, any such impediment or obstacle; and (3) begin the process of preparing the couple for the Sacrament of Matrimony.

The pastor or his delegate is encouraged to facilitate and complete the assessment process within the first month after his initial contact with the engaged couple. One of the first facts to ascertain is whether there have been any previous marriages. That fact must be addressed before proceeding. A decision to proceed with or delay the wedding is made by the priest or deacon with the couple, following the assessment process. The wedding date is finalized only after the decision to proceed has been made.

If a couple is asked to delay their wedding, whether it be for one or more of the special circumstances outlined in these guidelines or for any other serious reason(s), it is the responsibility of the pastor or his delegate working with them to help find a way to overcome the impediments or other obstacles if at all possible.

There are five steps to the **diocesan marriage preparation** process: (1) the initial interview between the engaged couple and the priest, deacon, or pastoral minister; (2) meetings with an assigned sponsor couple; (3) the use of an approved premarital assessment or inventory to facilitate dialogue between the couple and the priest, deacon, or pastoral minister; (4) the formal marriage preparation program; and (5) the participation of the couple in the Natural Family Planning (NFP) overview session.

### **A. Engaged Couple Interview**

When a request is made to schedule a wedding, the pastor or his delegate first arranges an appointment to meet with the engaged couple. The assessment process begins with the initial contact between the priest or deacon and the engaged couple. To evaluate the readiness of the couple to be married in the Catholic Church, the priest or deacon will interview the couple sufficiently so that he becomes acquainted with them.

Sponsor couples or other team members can also assist with any additional preparation, such as facilitating the approved assessment/inventory instrument (Prepare/Enrich, PMI, Fully Engaged or FOCCUS), teaching NFP classes, etc.

Discussion points may include: previous marriages, individual maturity, faith experience, suitability as a couple, current religious practices, and views on Christian marriage. The goals are to:

- Establish a good rapport with the couple, facilitating the rest of the preparation process.
- Reinforce the sacred nature of marriage for the couple.
- Emphasize the focus of preparation process on the whole of married life, not just the ceremony.
- Identify any special circumstances that need to be addressed during the preparation process.

## B. Meetings with a Sponsor Couple

In addition to ensuring that engaged couples attend at least one formal marriage preparation program, every parish should also provide each engaged couple with a married sponsor couple. The goal of this one-on-one contact is much like it is in RCIA: to form a parish-based friendship with the engaged couple that bears witness to the Sacrament of Matrimony in its lived reality. Through loving, encouraging and listening to the engaged couple, the sponsor couple also welcomes them anew into a living relationship with Jesus. The sponsor couple should meet with the engaged couple several times in a more relaxed and social setting, e.g., in their homes, and should also, as appropriate, follow up with them after the wedding.

## C. Premarital Assessment or Inventory

An approved premarital assessment or inventory is required because it facilitates the crucial dialogue through which the couple explore the significant issues that affect marriage. Further, it allows the priest, deacon, or pastoral minister to tailor marriage preparation to the couple's specific strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the use of the instrument can support the effectiveness of the couple's experience in one of the formal educational programs required by the Diocese. Because such an instrument supports the overall purpose of marriage preparation, it should be administered as early as possible in the couple's interaction with the priest, deacon, or pastoral minister. The instruments approved for use in the Diocese of Sacramento are: FOCCUS, Prepare/Enrich, PMI and Fully Engaged.

<b>FOCCUS</b> <a href="http://www.foccusinc.com">www.foccusinc.com</a> <a href="mailto:focus@foccusinc.com">focus@foccusinc.com</a> 877-883-5422	<b>Prepare/Enrich</b> <a href="http://www.prepare-enrich.com">www.prepare-enrich.com</a> <a href="mailto:cs@lifeinnovations.com">cs@lifeinnovations.com</a> 800-331-1661	<b>PMI</b> <a href="http://www.intercompub.com">www.intercompub.com</a> <a href="mailto:sales@intercompub.com">sales@intercompub.com</a> <b>800-999-0689</b>	<b>Fully Engaged</b> <a href="http://www.Getfullyengaged.com">www.Getfullyengaged.com</a> 320-253-3540
---	---	---	--

## D. Formal Marriage Preparation Programs

### Formal Marriage Preparation Programs include:

Parish-based Marriage Preparation class  
 Engaged Encounter Weekends  
 Online Marriage Preparation

All couples wishing to be married in the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Sacramento must participate in a formal diocesan-approved marriage preparation program. This is to be completed during the first four months of the preparation. Since the last months prior to the date of the wedding are filled with so many practical details, it is important that the engaged couple spend quality time early on to prepare themselves for the Sacrament of Matrimony.

No couple should be turned away from a marriage preparation program because of the inability to pay, and care must be taken not to discourage couples who may be in special circumstances.

While it is possible that couples who are financially insecure may not be ready to take on the responsibilities that marriage requires, the priest, deacon, or pastoral coordinator can use this opportunity to bring financial priorities, including considerations about the wedding budget, to the attention of the couple.

There are three different types of approved marriage preparation programs available to engaged couples in the Diocese of Sacramento. The pastor or his delegate is responsible for discussing with the engaged couple the program that best meets the couple's criteria. Regardless of which marriage preparation program the couple attends, they must obtain from the instructor(s) a certificate of completion (See Appendix IV) that they are to submit to the pastor or his delegate. Listed below are descriptions of these programs:

### **(1) Parish-based marriage preparation class**

These classes consist of four to six short sessions (one to two hours) usually spaced a week apart, held in small group settings (not more than fifteen engaged couples) at a host parish. They should be taught only by persons – ideally married couples – with “solid doctrinal preparation and unquestionable fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church.” *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, (PSM, Pontifical Council for the Family). Though due attention in these classes should be given to the life skills that are critical to marriage, “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 course...” (PSM). Though a parish will offer these classes mainly for the sake of its own engaged couples, it may also serve as a “magnet parish” and welcome couples from other parishes, especially those that have not yet developed such a class. A variety of published materials can be used in these classes. Contact the Diocese's Family Life office for a current list of approved resources.

### **(2) Engaged Encounter Weekend**

This is a weekend retreat experience presented by two married Catholic couples and a priest. It is designed to help engaged couples self-reflect, communicate, understand their sexuality, etc. The main thrust of the weekend is personal reflection and dialogue. In this Diocese, the weekend takes place at a retreat center. For more information and to register go to (<http://SacEE.org> or [www.engagedencounter.org](http://www.engagedencounter.org)).

### **(3) Online Marriage Preparation**

For engaged couples unable to attend either a parish-based marriage preparation class or the Engaged Encounter weekend, an online course is available. This interactive course is rooted in John Paul II's Theology of the Body and focuses on the building of strong, Christ-centered marriages. The course lasts from one week (minimum) to three months (maximum) depending upon the couple's pace. Each couple is assigned a personal instructor who follows them throughout the course. There are eight worksheets that cover all aspects of marriage preparation, from God's plan for marriage and family to practical tools that help develop a successful relationship. For more information or to register go to the Online Marriage Preparation tab at [www.ourmarriageprep.com](http://www.ourmarriageprep.com).

### **E. Natural Family Planning**

In Natural Family Planning, the couple understands, accepts, and uses their God-given phases of fertility and infertility for the purpose of achieving or avoiding pregnancy. In this way, the unitive and procreative, the love-giving and life-giving meanings of sexual intercourse are maintained together in a responsible way (*Familiaris Consortio*, 11, 32).

The Natural Family Planning component for marriage preparation is to be a minimum of one full hour of information and discussion provided by an individual or couple with specific training and expertise in NFP. A certificate of completion must be submitted to the pastor or his delegate (see Appendix III). It is strongly recommended that the pastor or his delegate encourage the couples to pursue further training in a particular method of NFP.

Ideally, every parish (or cluster) should have its own certified NFP instructor or teaching couple. In the event that there is not such an instructor available, the engaged couple may receive this introductory class from any certified NFP instructor or teaching couple, whether from within the Diocese of Sacramento or elsewhere. In the event that the couple cannot attend this introduction to NFP in a live setting, they may receive it remotely, e.g., through an on-line resource. However, regardless of the location of the instructor, the couple must obtain from her (or them) a certificate of attendance.

For a complete list of NFP instructors in the Sacramento area or to discuss on-line instruction options, contact the Diocesan NFP Coordinator (916/733-0133) or go to [www.scd.org/nfp](http://www.scd.org/nfp).

For additional resource information, contact:

Mercy Women's Center, Sacramento (Creighton Model; 916-733-6300).  
 California Association of Natural Family Planning (NFP providers; [www.canfp.org](http://www.canfp.org)).  
 Couple to Couple League (Sympto-Thermal Method; 800-745-8252, [www.ccli.org](http://www.ccli.org)).  
 Northwest Family Services (Sympto-Thermal Method; 503-215-6377,  
[www.nwfs.org](http://www.nwfs.org)).

Family of the Americas Foundation (Billings Ovulation Method in Spanish; 800-443-2279, [www.familyplanning.net](http://www.familyplanning.net)).

Billings Ovulation Method ([www.woomb.org](http://www.woomb.org)).

Pope Paul VI Institute, Omaha, NE (Creighton Model Training; Infertility; 402-390-9168, [www.popepaulvi.com](http://www.popepaulvi.com)).

For further information and extensive bibliographical resources, see the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website ([www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org)).

## VII. WEDDING LITURGY

### A. Introduction

The Liturgy, the public prayer of the Church, is, by its very nature, communal. Therefore, Catholic weddings are celebrations of the whole Church, as well as of individual couples, and are thus governed by the liturgical principles and directives of the Church.

A parish's celebration of the Eucharist is the model for celebrating a wedding or, indeed, any sacrament. Since the parish church is the spiritual home of the family of God and the heart of sacramental life and ministry, Catholics ordinarily are expected to marry in the parish church of either the bride or the groom. Marriages are not to be celebrated outside a church or oratory in the Diocese of Sacramento except in exceptional circumstances and with the permission of the Diocesan Bishop (cf. Diocese of Sacramento, Diocesan Statutes, no. 114).

It is important that the parish and the couple recognize the relationship that they share. The couple preparing for marriage should be given thorough catechesis on the rite, prayers, and scripture readings on matrimony, in order that they might receive the greatest possible benefit from the celebration of the sacrament (cf. *Rite of Marriage*, 5).

It is important for the couple to understand that the Wedding Liturgy is the celebration of a sacrament and is, above all else, an encounter with Jesus Christ, in the presence of his Body, the Church. Therefore, it is most appropriate to focus on the true nature of the experience, and reserve more personal and individual expressions for the wedding reception or other celebrations with friends and family. The goals are:

- To encourage the participation of the assembly in the Wedding Liturgy.
- To express the faith commitment of the couple and of the assembly.
- To pray as a faith community for the couple, thereby offering them promise of support in their married life.

### B. Ministries of the Liturgy

Within each liturgical celebration there are a variety of ministries (servers, reader, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, etc). Some roles can only be filled by a Roman Catholic minister (e.g., ordinary or extraordinary minister of Holy Communion), while other ministries (e.g., reader) can be fulfilled by qualified persons of other faith traditions. Sometimes there is a desire

to include the participation of a clergy person from another faith tradition in a wedding celebration. It is possible to do this in certain limited ways, but it must always be clear that the reception of the consent and the exchange of vows are heard by the presiding Catholic clergy member.

For all present, the Wedding Liturgy is an opportunity to encounter God in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. The signs, symbols, words, and actions of the liturgy are the means by which this encounter is brought about. Therefore, any person selected to perform a role in the wedding must have the experience, skills, and spiritual gifts necessary to fulfill the ministry in a way that will facilitate a truly spiritual experience for all. The desire to honor a friend of family member by giving them a “part” in the liturgy is insufficient cause to assign them a liturgical role, unless they possess the appropriate qualifications.

The couple should not feel any pressure to provide individuals to fulfill liturgical roles, if such persons are not readily available. The parish should be prepared to provide ministers from among those who regularly serve that community. Likewise, all ministries in the Wedding Liturgy should never be assumed by any one person, such as the priest or deacon.

The assembly too has a ministerial role to perform at the Wedding Liturgy, and every attempt should be made to encourage their participation to the fullest extent possible.

### **C. The Rite:**

The Church provides three different rites for marriage:

- A sacramental rite during the Eucharist, which is the normative form when both parties are Catholic (1969 Rite of Marriage, #6);;
- A sacramental rite outside the Eucharist, which is the normative form when one party is baptized but not Roman Catholic (1969 Rite of Marriage, #8); and
- A non-sacramental rite between a Catholic and an non-baptized person.

There are certain days in the year when the Nuptial Mass is not permitted. On some of these days, the Marriage Rite may be celebrated within a Mass of the Day or outside of Mass. In those circumstances, the selection of available readings is affected as well. The priest or deacon officiating at the wedding should help the couple be aware of such considerations.

### **D. Entrance Rite**

The procession may include the liturgical ministers and the presider, as well as the bride and groom, family members, and attendants. There are many ways to plan the entrance rite (e.g., a procession of the ministers followed by the procession of the wedding party; the wedding party included in the liturgical procession; attendants entering as couples rather than bridesmaids alone; incorporation of parents and grandparents with the bride and groom; and even the bride and groom entering as a couple with the rest of the wedding party). Each couple should discuss with their officiant the practices of that parish and what would be most expressive of their own understanding of the liturgy they are about to celebrate.

The couple should be able to participate fully along with the entire assembly in the complete Wedding Liturgy, and therefore should be able to adopt the same postures as the assembly (e.g., sitting during the Liturgy of the Word, kneeling during the Eucharistic prayer, etc.). The custom of the couple either kneeling or standing throughout the entire liturgy is not appropriate.

### **E. Liturgy of the Word**

Readings may be selected from the many options given in the Revised Lectionary for Mass for the Ritual Mass of Marriage or from other appropriate Scripture passages. Non-scriptural readings absolutely are not permitted as part of the Wedding Liturgy. Care is to be taken that the readings selected follow precisely the same form as that found in the Revised Lectionary; no other translation is allowed for use at liturgies in the United States.

The Psalm is normally to be sung, following the familiar format of refrain and verses found in the Lectionary, and allowing for the participation of the assembly in the singing of the refrain. Likewise the Alleluia (or in Lent one of the alternative acclamations) with an appropriate Gospel verse is to be sung by all.

The General Intercessions are to include prayers for the Church, civil society, those in special need, the sick and the dying, as well as prayers more specific to the individual couple, their family, and friends.

### **F. The Rite of Marriage**

The Ritual for Marriage includes alternate forms for the giving of consent, the exchange of vows, and the blessing and exchange of rings. While it is ultimately up to the presiding minister to determine which form will be employed, he may wish to discuss with the couple which form speaks most clearly and richly to them.

Often cultural expressions are included in the Rite of Marriage, such as the lasso, coins, or other symbols. The use of these items is welcomed if they truly hold meaning for the couple being married and are not contrary to church teaching or practice. Their use, if included, should be carefully planned for, and if they may not be familiar to all present, it might be appropriate for the officiant to offer some words of explanation with regard to the meanings they symbolize.

### **G. Liturgy of the Eucharist**

As at any other time, the priest or deacon is the Ordinary Minister of Holy Communion at the Wedding Mass. He may be assisted if necessary by trained and approved Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion. In some parishes, it might be a good idea if the Wedding Coordinator is trained as an Extraordinary Minister to assist when needed. The couple should not serve as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion at their Wedding Mass.

The reception of Holy Communion at the Wedding Mass is limited to those Catholics who are prepared to receive. It is not possible for non-Catholics to participate in the reception of Holy Communion. It is recommended that the statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on reception of the Holy Eucharist be printed in the worship program (a condensed

version may be used). Alternatively, if there is any concern that there may be some confusion among those present for the wedding, the presiding priest should kindly and respectfully give a brief explanation of who may receive the Eucharist.

## **H. Music**

The parish, through its music ministry, is to be prepared to offer assistance with the preparation and presentation of music for the Wedding Liturgy. All music associated with any liturgy of the Church is to be appropriate, sacred, and of a liturgical nature. Secular or popular music is not to be admitted during the celebration. Those parts of the liturgy which are sung should provide the opportunity for participation by the entire assembly. Couples are to be aware that all music for the wedding is subject to approval by the pastor or those to whom he has entrusted this responsibility.

## **I. Music Ministers**

It is the responsibility of parish music ministers to assist couples in the planning and preparation of the music for their wedding. In most places, it will be the policy of the parish that the music for the wedding be provided by their own musicians or musicians with whom they have made arrangements. Policies will vary from place to place, and the couple should ascertain, at an early stage, what the parish's expectations are and abide by the policies with which they are presented.

The participation of a qualified cantor/song leader from the parish can do a great deal to foster the musical participation of the assembly and is encouraged.

## **J. Worship Aids**

In order to encourage the participation of the assembly in the Wedding Liturgy, it is helpful to provide a worship aid of some kind. It may be possible to use whichever hymnal or resource is already in the pews of the parish church, or the couple may wish to arrange to have a special worship program produced, including music that will be sung and other prayers and responses. When such a booklet is produced, it is necessary to obtain copyright permissions for musical selections and include proper copyright notices. The parish music minister should be prepared to advise the couple on this issue.

## **K. Environment**

Concerning the environment for the wedding, the couple should consider the particular liturgical season in which the wedding will occur, as well as cultural considerations. For example, while the Church permits marriages during Lent, the Wedding Liturgy is to reflect the unique nature of this time of the Liturgical Year.

Quality and appropriateness should always be the primary consideration when planning the liturgical environment. The arrangement of flowers, kneelers, candelabra, and other decorations must neither obscure the view of the assembly nor inhibit their participation, nor should it restrict movement within the sanctuary.

No item is ever placed upon the altar of the church except that which is specifically needed for the celebration of the Eucharist.

The policies of each individual church are to be respected by all preparing the Wedding Liturgy, including florists and photographers/videographers, and any outside wedding coordinator that may be involved. The parish, in turn, is expected to articulate clearly such policies and to enforce them in a uniform manner.

It is always a good idea for the couple to discuss with the parish what the specific environment will be in the church at the time of their wedding. For example, during Advent, will there be an Advent wreath? If so, where will it be located? Will there be Christmas trees or a crèche during the Christmas Season? Where will the Paschal Candle be during Easter? Will there be a large amount of red decoration for Pentecost? Generally, these items cannot and may not be moved to accommodate the wedding decorations, so it is best to know ahead of time what to expect.

#### **L. Parish Policies**

Parish policies for wedding liturgies are helpful to all and are strongly encouraged. They are always to be presented in a positive, welcoming, and hospitable tone. Written policies or guidelines which state clearly what is allowed or not allowed in the celebration can assist the couple in making initial preparations; such policies typically cover the areas of music, environment, and photography.

Marriage policies of the parish should be made readily available to all interested parties, perhaps by posting on the parish or community website. A clear understanding at the beginning can help avoid disappointment, frustration, and sometimes even expense down the road. Written policies or guidelines also maintain consistency as the couple consults with various parish representatives (clergy, musicians, wedding coordinator, environment ministers, etc.).

**Note:** While policies or guidelines may be particular for each parish, they cannot impose restrictions or requirements contrary to those found in the general law of the Church or Diocesan policies.

### **VIII. SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES**

#### **A. Marriage of non-practicing Catholics**

In the case of non-practicing Catholics who request to be married in the Diocese of Sacramento, the pastor or his delegate needs to 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. Thus, the pastor has an obligation to officiate only at those weddings where faith has been personally appropriated by the couple, even if that faith is imperfect.

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 warmly 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.

### **B. Marriage of Minors (1983 *CIC* c. 1071, §6)**

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 eighteen [18]) when the parents or guardians are unaware of the marriage or are opposed to it for reasonable cause.

Because sacramental marriage is a lifelong commitment, the Diocese of Sacramento has a responsibility to ensure that engaged couples understand its sacred nature. Many teenagers are not sufficiently mature to bear successfully the obligations and responsibilities of marriage in our society today (c. 1072). 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 coordinator counsel the couple to delay their marriage. In such a case, the pastor and his delegates should demonstrate utmost respect and sensitivity.

### **C. Pregnancy**

In the case of pregnancy, a request for marriage in the Diocese of Sacramento will only be considered following completion of recommended counseling, and, if either person is under eighteen 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.

Premarital pregnancy, although it understandably creates a sense of urgency in the minds of the couples and their parents, does not, of itself, constitute adequate justification for marriage or for the abbreviation of the marriage preparation process. Statistics indicate that the majority of marriages involving a premarital pregnancy end in divorce.

Factors that need to be considered include the couple's maturity and readiness for marriage, their freedom from parental and social pressure, their capacity to manage the financial responsibilities of a family, and the possibility of adoption. A premarital inventory is valuable in assessing the maturity of young couples in these difficult circumstances. In many cases, pastors and their delegates find it appropriate to recommend counseling. Parents and guardians should be invited to participate in the discernment process in order to assist the couple evaluate their motivation and readiness for marriage. Regardless of the ultimate decision, both parents must be strongly advised of their continued moral responsibility to each other and their child.

#### **D. Marriage after a Previous Union**

Particular pastoral concern is required to meet the special needs of couples requesting sacramental marriage in the Diocese of Sacramento following a previous union. Before proceeding with marriage preparation, the pastor must be careful to ascertain that both parties are canonically free to marry and that all responsibilities towards children of the previous union have been satisfied (c. 1071, §§1,3). Marriage preparation may not begin nor a wedding date be set until *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.

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, clergy 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.”<sup>10</sup>

#### **E. Marriage of the Disabled**

Catholics with disabilities have the right to participate in the sacraments as full functioning members of the local ecclesial community. “Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities” (NCCB) stresses the importance of all the sacraments and provides general catechetical guidelines for celebrating the sacraments with persons with a variety of disabilities.<sup>11</sup>

All forms of the liturgy should be completely accessible to persons with disabilities, since these forms are the essence of the spiritual tie that binds the Christian community together.<sup>12</sup>

The pastor and his delegates must demonstrate particular care and sensitivity when a disabled person requests marriage in the Diocese of Sacramento. 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.

*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 (c. 1095). It is also necessary that the parties understand that marriage is a permanent union and is ordered to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children (c. 1096).*

---

<sup>10</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1651.

<sup>11</sup> NCCB, “Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities” (June 16, 1995), 367.

<sup>12</sup> USCCB, *National Directory for Catechesis* (December 16, 2004), 3b-3, p. 130.

## **F. Marriage of the Deaf**

Catholics who are deaf are to be offered the opportunity to express their matrimonial consent in sign language, if sign language is their primary means of communication (c. 1104, §52). Marriage may also be contracted through a sign-language interpreter who is known to the pastor or diocesan office (c. 1106).

## **G. Marriage of Older Couples**

During the process of marriage preparation, special consideration should be given to engaged couples over the age of thirty five (35) when both persons are requesting marriage for the first time. The pastor or his delegate is to invite them to proceed with the normal marriage preparation process, but offer whatever modifications may be appropriate to address their specific needs. 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 pastor or his delegate should evaluate their emotional stability, capacity to enter a permanent and exclusive relationship, and ability to relinquish their prior financial and social independence. It must never be assumed that a couple is ready for marriage in the Church simply because they are older.

## **H. Convalidation**

When Catholic parties have already exchanged vows in a civil ceremony outside the Catholic Church and seek to regularize their union within the Church, the priest or deacon needs to make an assessment of what is motivating the request. In the case of a couple who marries contrary to the laws of the Church, convalidation is permitted after the couple has completed the preparation steps of this Marriage Preparation Policy. A convalidation is not simply the renewal of the consent previously exchanged in another setting, but the exchange of genuine consent and the creation of a true marriage. It is important to note that a convalidation is not simply a “blessing” of an invalid union. It is a commitment and an exchange of vows in the sight of the Christian community. It calls for a full and complete preparation and one that takes into consideration the different needs for a couple in this circumstance.

If the invalid marriage has taken place recently, the priest or deacon will want to determine the motivation of the couple to get married in the Church at this time. Possible concerns to address are whether the couple married “out of the Church” because another priest wanted to delay their marriage or if there is pressure from the family to get married in the Church now. The marital relationship will need to be assessed and determined by the couple’s needs and experience, and determination made about the reasons why they desire to have their union validated. The priest or deacon needs to discover whether a good appreciation of the sacramental dimensions of Christian marriage is present. If the marriage is already of long duration and seems to be stable, it is unlikely that detailed personal instruction or counseling will be needed. What is needed is a proper understanding of the new sacramental dimension of the union. However, in addition to personal meetings with the priest or deacon, formal preparation is still expected. Here are some common questions and answers:

- Q.** What is the procedure if the previous marriage was a Catholic wedding, a non-Catholic wedding with special dispensation to be married before someone other than an ordained Catholic clergyman, or a marriage between two non-Catholics?
- A.** The Tribunal process in these circumstances is termed a “formal case.” The procedure takes approximately eighteen months. In this type of case, the Church researches the relationship between spouses before and during the marriage. **In the United States, a person may start this process only after obtaining a divorce under civil law.** The petitioning individual then works through an extensive, inquiry that explores the childhood of both persons, their courtship, the early years of marriage and what the petitioner considers the major cause of the marital breakup. The petitioner will need to secure official documents: proof of Baptism (if pertinent), a marriage record, and the final divorce decree. In addition, names and addresses must be provided of the former spouse, as well as witnesses who can share their observations and experiences of the courtship and marriage. The petitioner’s ex-spouse is known as “the respondent” and has the right to give and review testimony. Once all the materials have been assembled, the diocesan tribunal examines the case.

Usually, the petitioner is interviewed, and the counsel of a psychologist or therapist can be requested. The initial judgment is then sent to a second tribunal for confirmation. If both tribunals agree that there are sufficient grounds for nullity, the diocesan tribunal communicates a declaration of nullity to the petitioner. Respondents who are interested and who have cooperated in the process are also notified about the declaration of nullity.

- Q.** Does a declaration of nullity make the children illegitimate?
- A.** No. The parents, now divorced, presumably once obtained a civil license and entered upon a legal marriage. Children from that union are, therefore, their legitimate offspring. Legitimate, in this sense, means “legal.” The civil divorce and the Church process do not alter this situation; they do not change the parents’ responsibility toward the children. In fact, during tribunal procedures, the Church reminds petitioners of their moral obligation to provide for the proper upbringing of their children.
- Q.** Are there particular grounds for nullity in failed marriages?
- A.** Reasons include a grave lack of due discretion, because of some factor such as young age or pressure to marry in haste; psychological incapacity; and the absence of a proper intention to have children, be faithful, or remain together until death.<sup>13</sup>

## **I. 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. As Pope John Paul II wrote, “...when in spite of all efforts engaged couples show that they reject explicitly and

---

<sup>13</sup>Joseph M. Champlin, “Bringing Your Marriage into the Church: Convalidation of Civil Marriages” (St. Anthony Messenger Press, June 2004).

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.”<sup>14</sup>

This decision is not to be arrived at lightly but must come after prayer and through 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. As a minister, 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 for delaying or refusing a marriage. This list is not exhaustive:<sup>15</sup>

- Refusal to cooperate with the preparation process or participate in good faith. In this case, marriage must be delayed.
- A radical lack of physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychological maturity required for marriage. In this case, marriage must be refused.
- 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. 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.”<sup>16</sup> If the questions on the Pre-Nuptial Investigation Form concerning children are answered negatively by one or both of the parties, the marriage is to 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, due to parental pressure, or simply for appearance’s sake. In such a case, 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 this attitude has been corrected.

## **J. Cohabiting Engaged Couples**

Canon Law does not cite cohabitation as a formal impediment to the sacrament of Matrimony. However, this does not negate the priest or deacon’s responsibility to assist the couple through

---

<sup>14</sup>John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981), 68.

<sup>15</sup> Marriage Policy, Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., from which the list was adapted.

<sup>16</sup> Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), 50.

“personal preparation for entering marriage, so that through such preparation the parties may be predisposed toward the holiness and duties of their new state” (c. 1063).

Cohabitation is of great concern to pastoral leaders throughout the United States. This is particularly true in the framework of marriage preparation, as an ever-increasing number of cohabiting couples come to the Church to be married. These couples need to be affirmed for their willingness to take this step.

However, the priest or deacon is cautioned to assess carefully the motives of both persons, their readiness for marriage, especially its call to fidelity, and their intent on making this a lifelong commitment.

It has been the constant teaching of Christ and the Catholic Church that sexual intimacy belongs exclusively in marriage. In his Apostolic Exhortation on the Family (*Familiaris Consortio*), Pope John Paul II states that “The gift of the body in the sexual relationship is a real symbol of the giving of the whole person.” For the couple to engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage without making a formal, public, and permanent commitment of their whole lives to each other is to trivialize its sacredness. The Church, therefore, rejects cohabitation and calls on couples to follow Christ’s teaching.

Canon 1057, §2 states: “Matrimonial consent is an act of the will by which a man and a woman mutually give and accept each other through an irrevocable covenant in order to establish marriage.” That kind of consent is not found in a cohabiting relationship. Despite negative statistics about cohabitation, most of the engaged couples coming to the Church to be married have grown up in a culture that accepts and even condones that life-style. The fact that many of them are also “unchurched” makes their preparation for the Sacrament of Matrimony even more problematic: When they come to the Catholic Church asking to be married, they see no reason why they should be treated differently than any other engaged couple.

Good pastoral practice requires that the uniqueness of each individual be taken into consideration. Each cohabiting couple requires specialized care depending on their relationship to God and the teaching of the Church, as well as to each other, and this means increased attention during marriage preparation. Any pastoral approach is meant for the couple’s welfare and not just as a bureaucratic barrier that must be negotiated on the way to the altar. **The couple is not to cohabit during the time of preparation and is to refrain from having sex in order to focus on other aspects of their relationship.** It may also be advisable to temporarily postpone the marriage, if it is in the best interest of the couple.

Sincere hospitality, concern, and encouragement are key elements in assisting these couples to realize the Catholic Church cares about them. In general terms, there are four, main, pastoral goals:

- (1) Practice charity, patience, and understanding—not merely because of *what* the Church teaches about marriage and sexuality, but, more importantly, because of *why* she teaches it.

- (2) Challenge couples charitably, gently, yet directly to stop having sexual relations until those relations can be an honest expression of their marriage commitment.
- (3) Assist the couple to reflect on their situation and why they decided to cohabit and/or engage in sexual relations, and provide them with tools to address various practical factors that put them at risk for later marital difficulties.
- (4) Help the couple heal from the spiritual and emotional wounds they have inflicted upon themselves through their 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.

After the priest or deacon has asked the couple to consider chaste, separate living and given them sufficient time to reflect on their decision, a final course of action must be determined.<sup>17</sup>

- If the sexually active couple (whether cohabiting or not) strives to live a chaste life and return 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, practice a chaste relationship, and return 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 postpone the marriage in order to secure the time needed to assist the couple to sufficiently understand the meaning of marriage and the sacredness of sexuality. The priest or deacon will continue to minister to 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.
- 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, are still unable to acknowledge God's plan for marriage and sexuality and the need for sacramental reconciliation, then it may be advisable, in the judgment of the pastor, to hold the wedding outside of Mass in a ceremony that is reserved and simple.

It is the goal of the preparation process to bring the sexually active/cohabiting couple to realize the sin in 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, needs to realize that the course of action taken by the pastor is not a "punishment" for wrong

---

<sup>17</sup> Marriage Policy, Diocese of Peoria, from which these norms were adapted.

doing. Rather it is the consequence of their choices and the pastor's responsibility to maintain the integrity of the sacrament.

Suggested Readings:

- USCCB, *Faithful to Each Other Forever: A Catholic Handbook of Pastoral Help for Marriage Preparation*, 1989.
- Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, November 22, 1981.
- USCCB, *Sons and Daughters of the Light*, November 12, 1996.
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Latin Typical Edition, August 15, 1997.
- U.S. Bishops' Statement on Marriage: 1980-2005 ([www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/statements.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/statements.shtml)).
- USCCB, *Marriage Preparation and Cohabiting Couples* ([www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/cohabitating.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/cohabitating.shtml)).
- Barbara Markey, Ph.D., *Preparing Cohabiting Couples for Marriage*; available from FOCCUS, 3214 N. 60<sup>th</sup> St., Omaha, NE 68104 (Phone: 402-551-9003).

## IX. SACRAMENTAL AND LITURGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Catholic Church recognizes the importance of this occasion for the couple and emphasizes that the priest, deacon, or pastoral coordinator needs to convey to the couple the importance of careful planning of the liturgy. The journey of preparation leads the couple to the celebration of marriage, the source and origin of their conjugal life. If both are Catholic, "To indicate a clearer relationship between the nuptial sacrament and the paschal mystery, the celebration of marriage is normally set within the celebration of Eucharist."<sup>18</sup>

The celebration of marriage is fundamentally a liturgical act. It is grounded in Baptism. In Baptism we become members of the Body of Christ and, therefore, a part of the assembly of the people of God. Through Baptism we are no longer merely ourselves but ourselves in reference to others. What happens with our lives affects others. Whether we live a life of happiness and fulfillment or life of dysfunction affects the Body of Christ and the people of God.

**Celebrating the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist** (c. 1065, §2): The first liturgical consideration of a couple should be their relationship to the parish assembly. Are they truly part of it? Do they come regularly, and do they fully, consciously, and actively participate in the Liturgy? Are they known as members of this parish who regularly join the assembly at Mass? If they are not, there is an obvious need here that must be addressed.

Catholic engaged persons are encouraged to celebrate the Sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist as part of their preparation process. This sacramental preparation will deepen their

---

<sup>18</sup> Pontifical Council for the Family, "Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage," 53.

relationship with Jesus, prepare them for a more meaningful experience of their wedding liturgy, and become the foundation on which they build their married lives (c. 1065, §2).

This is a “teachable moment”! Couples entering marriage need not only be concerned with their maturity, psychological, physical health, and readiness for commitment. They also need to determine what they are truly asking of the Church. Are they asking for the support of the community in helping to build up the Body of Christ as a family unit within the Body?

The engaged couple need to realize that, among the many other aspects of their celebration, the actual liturgical celebration is primary. They will, by reason of their own full, conscious, and active participation in the Sunday assembly, begin to consider:

- The importance of the full assembly’s participation in the liturgy in which they are joined in marriage;
- What the significance is of the various readings that are offered, and which ones apply best to their experience;
- What proper, liturgical music can be used to enhance the liturgy;
- Who will serve as liturgical ministers and what roles will they take;
- The importance of planning and praying with the actual Rite of Marriage;
- The praiseworthy customs that belong to various people or ethnic groups and can be brought into the celebration, provided they are appropriate signs of faith;
- That care should be taken that the details of the marriage celebration are characterized by a restrained, simple, and authentic style.

## X. PASTORAL CARE AFTER MARRIAGE

“Once the wedding is over and the honeymoon a wonderful memory, the real work of marriage begins. The faith community must continue the hospitality and welcome offered during the marriage preparation period, so the couple remains part of the local church.”<sup>19</sup>

This paragraph from the United States Bishops is but one of many prompts toward ministry with couples in the early years of marriage. Pope John Paul II places the duty of aftercare help upon “all the members of the local ecclesial community” who are entrusted with the task of “helping the couple to discover and live their new vocation and mission.”<sup>20</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Diocesan Synod further challenges parishes, parish clusters, and deaneries to “provide training for those entrusted with the responsibility for sacramental formation, including . . . models for marriage preparation and support for newly married couples” (Pastoral Initiative 4 [Eucharist and Sacraments], p. 11).

---

<sup>19</sup> NCCB, *Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults* (USCC, Washington D.C., 1997), p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981), 69.

Care for “newly-married/early-weds” is also rooted in awareness that young adults distance themselves from institutions just when church affiliation could be mutually beneficial.

Ministers need to be aware that 50% of all divorces occur during the first five years, and 33% of all separations happen within two years.<sup>21</sup> Ministers also need to be aware of a report on a national study on the first five years of marriage conducted by the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University. It listed three problematic issues:

**Balancing Time and Relationship:** The most intense cluster of problematic issues included balancing job and family, balancing parent and couple time, and time spent with one’s spouse.

**Sexual Issues:** The second most intense cluster of problematic issues was frequency of sexual relations and unsatisfying sexual relations.

**Financial Issues:** The third most intense cluster of problematic issues included debt brought into the marriage, financial situations, financial decision-making, the employment of the husband, and the employment of the wife.<sup>22</sup>

Individuals in our diocesan parishes sought advice for these and other marital problems from friends (56.9%) and/or from parents (46.5%). They also indicated that they were unaware of current programs and resources and/or did not use them. There are non-profit organizations and religious movements within the Diocese of Sacramento and the United States that offer a wide variety of support for marriage. Some offer specific enrichment programs for married couples. Others are professional organizations or sources for those who minister to couples and families.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: *Committee on Marriage and Family*.  
(202/541-3040) ([www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org).)

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: *Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities*  
(202/541-3070) ([www.usccb.org/prolife/nfp](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/nfp))

Worldwide Marriage Encounter ([www.wmme.org](http://www.wmme.org))

Christian Family Movement ([www.cfm.org](http://www.cfm.org))

Marriage Retorno ([www.marriageretorno.org](http://www.marriageretorno.org))

National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers ([www.nacflm.org](http://www.nacflm.org))

Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment ([www.bettermarriages.org](http://www.bettermarriages.org))

Center for Marriage and Family ([www.creighton.edu/MarriageandFamily](http://www.creighton.edu/MarriageandFamily))

Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education ([www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com))

Retrouvaille ([www.retrouvaille.org](http://www.retrouvaille.org))

Beginning Experience of Sacramento ([www.sacramentobe.org](http://www.sacramentobe.org))

Catholic Alumni Club ([www.cacsacramento.org](http://www.cacsacramento.org))

Diocese of Sacramento Single Adult Ministry ([www.diocese-sacramento.org](http://www.diocese-sacramento.org))

Marriage Magazine ([www.marriagemagazine.org](http://www.marriagemagazine.org))

---

<sup>21</sup> USCCB, *Faithful to Each Other Forever* (June 2003), p. 128.

<sup>22</sup> Center for Marriage and Family, *Time, Sex, and Money: The First Five Years of Marriage* (Creighton University, 2000), p. 1.

The aftercare of married couples is extensive in time and diverse in approach. Ministers are encouraged to become familiar with the NCCB Catholic Handbook of Pastoral Help for Marriage Preparation, *Faithful to Each Other Forever*, in which the following areas are discussed.<sup>23</sup>

- Early Years of Marriage
- Middle Years of Marriage
- No-Children Years
- Faithful Forever
- Some delicate Areas of Concern, such as:
  - Abortion
  - Sterilization
  - Pastoral Care of Infertile Couples
  - Divorce and Remarriage
  - Annulment Procedures

## **Acknowledgements**

The Catholic Diocese of Sacramento wishes to give appreciation and acknowledgment to the following:

The Diocese of Austin  
 The Archdiocese of Denver  
 The Diocese of Erie  
 The Archdiocese of Los Angeles  
 The Archdiocese of Omaha  
 The Diocese of Peoria  
 The Diocese of Phoenix  
 The Diocese of St. Cloud  
 The Archdiocese of Washington, D.C.  
 St. Anthony's Messenger Press  
 The Center for Marriage and Family, Creighton University

---

<sup>23</sup> USCCB, *Faithful to Each Other Forever* (June 2003), pp. 128-138.

## Appendix I

### Commonly-used Documents, Permissions, and Dispensations

Prenuptial Inquiry for Bride/Groom (Form A)  
Prenuptial Witness Testimony (Form B)  
Petition for Dispensation from Disparity of Cult  
Permission for Marriage of Mixed Religion  
Petition for Dispensation from Canonical Form  
Request for Testimonial Letters (*Nihil Obstat*)

The above forms (see pp. 8-10 for descriptions) are available through the parish pastor, associate pastor, or deacon responsible for the initial steps of marriage preparation. Completed forms are processed by the Diocesan Tribunal.

## Appendix II

### MODEL INTERVIEW FOR PREPARING COUPLES FOR MARRIAGE

The pastor or his delegate's involvement in the initial interview and follow-up meetings with the engaged couple is essential in preparing a couple for marriage. However, a marriage preparation ministry team or wedding coordinator in the parish could be utilized to assist the priest or deacon.

Sponsor Couples or other team members can also assist with any additional preparation, such as facilitating the premarital inventory, teaching NFP classes, etc. The team members could include: pastoral staff, a wedding coordinator, sponsor couples, NFP teachers, etc. As indicated in the Third Diocesan Synod, Initiatives # 3 (**Collaborative Ministry and Shared Responsibility**) and # 4 (**Eucharistic and Sacraments**), this team can provide valuable expertise and is an excellent means for the community to offer substantial support to the engaged couple on their journey to marriage in the Church.

The team should keep in mind a study on the value of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church for couples married from one to eight years, entitled, "Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church: Getting it Right" (Center for Marriage and Family, Creighton University, November 1995). Marriage Preparation is rated most helpful when it deals with the 5 Cs: Communication, Commitment, Conflict-Resolution, Children, and Church (p. 3). This report also indicates that the perceived value of marriage preparation is *lowest* for couples who had only one session. The value rises continuously for those who had up to eight or nine sessions and then diminishes for those who had more than nine sessions (p. 23).

### INITIAL INTERVIEW AND FOLLOW-UP SESSIONS

This interview takes place one year to six months before the proposed wedding date. The kind of welcome extended and the attitude of the priest or deacon toward the couple should be one of hospitality and understanding. While many practical things need to be addressed, the care which comes through the Church's minister will speak volumes to the couple about who we are as Church, provide a great opportunity for evangelization, and create a positive attitude toward the Sacrament.

- The interview should always be done in person, never by phone or through a secretary.
- Get to know the couple and a little about their background: e.g., where do you work? How did you meet? Why do you think you fell in love with each other? What is his/her most endearing quality for you, right now? Are there any serious obstacles standing in the way of your marriage in the Church, such as either one or both of you having been married before? Any other issues you think would be important for me to know? Would you tell me a little about your religious upbringing?
- Explain the goal of marriage preparation, what the steps toward marriage in the Church are, and how these are the Church's way to show concern and support for their marriage.

Explain the assessment process as a way to evaluate their readiness to make this important step in their lives.

- If there are any special circumstances in these guidelines (e.g., teenage marriage; pregnancy; non-practice of the faith; cohabitation; interreligious marriage; convalidation; remarriage), further discussion will be called for and a delay of the wedding may be appropriate. Share reasons for the delay with the couple and develop with them a way to remove the impediments or concerns. No wedding date can be set until the impediments have been removed and the concerns addressed.
- If there are no special circumstances, determine a tentative wedding date with the couple. Give them information regarding the three formal marriage preparation options (e.g., a parish based marriage preparation program, the Engaged Encounter weekend, or the on-line program) to be taken within the next three months. Explain the necessary documents and why they are required (e.g., recent baptismal certificates, two letters of freedom for each of them, any dispensations, etc.).
- Explain the purpose of a premarital inventory (e.g., FOCCUS, PMI, Fully Engaged or Prepare). If time permits, the inventory can be administered at this meeting, or a later date can be determined. This may take up to two or three sessions together.
- If possible, arrange for a sponsor couple from the parish who will journey with them toward their wedding date.
- Always set a date and time for their next appointment.

The follow-up to the initial interview takes place about three months before the wedding. The goal of this meeting is to provide ongoing support as the couple continues their preparation. This meeting focuses on the engaged couple and their relationship with each other, with God, with their families (including in-laws), and with friends.

- Inquire how things are going for the couple. In regard to their formal preparation, what was their experience? What are some of the topics that surfaced that needed further discussion? Where are they in regard to discussing these topics? Would they care to discuss any of them with you now?
- Discuss the results of their premarital inventory, even if it has been previously discussed by a qualified lay minister working in this ministry with you. Remember this is not a pass/fail test. It is a tool to help them to better understand themselves and the areas where some further growth might be helpful.
- The prenuptial inquiry can be administered at this time.
- Wedding ceremony options should be discussed. Explain that the care that goes into the planning of the celebration will speak about their faith and how they want to make it visible to others as they celebrate their commitment to each other and God.
- Follow up with documents and paperwork, and address any questions they might have.
- Set a date for their next appointment.

- Close with a prayer.

Another meeting takes place about one month before the wedding. While there are many practical things needing to be addressed at this time, hopefully, there would be some quality time to center again on their relationship as well as the place of God and faith in that relationship.

- Once again, inquire how things are going for them. Are there any issues that they want to discuss with you now? How is the pressure of their upcoming wedding affecting them and their family relationships?
- How is their faith in God making a difference in their lives during these days? Is prayer an important part of their relationship?
- Finalize plans for the wedding liturgy. Go through the wedding ceremony planning sheet.
- Verify the date and time of the rehearsal.
- Close with a prayer with/for the couple.

**Rehearsal:** The Rehearsal usually takes place the week before the wedding. Even though a wedding coordinator can handle the details of the rehearsal, it is suggested that the priest or deacon be available at some time to meet and welcome the family and wedding party. It does provide a teachable moment for evangelizing those who are involved in the wedding.

**Appendix III**  
**NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING CERTIFICATE**

**This is to certify that**

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

have attended a  
full one-hour information & discussion session  
as required by the Diocese of Sacramento  
in accordance with the marriage preparation guidelines  
on  
Natural Family Planning.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Natural Family Planning Instructor  
or Parish Representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

---

## Appendix IV

### MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROGRAM CERTIFICATE

**This is to certify that**

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

have completed a  
a marriage preparation program  
as required by the Diocese of Sacramento.

Regarding the Diocese's requirement that every couple also attend a full one hour introduction to Natural Family Planning, this marriage preparation program (check one):

Did not supply this additional required introduction to NFP. (If this is checked, the engaged couple must also obtain another certificate demonstrating their attendance at this one hour NFP introduction. (See Appendix III.))

Did supply this additional required introduction to NFP. (If this is checked, the instructor whose signature is below attests that at some time during the program a certified NFP instructor provided a one hour NFP introduction to the couple.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Marriage Preparation Program Instructor  
or Parish Representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date