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“I Promise To Be True To You . . . All The Days Of My Life”

PASTORAL POLICIES AND GUIDELINES

FOR

*Marriage Preparation*

FOR

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN NEW JERSEY

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Newark      Camden      The Bishops of the Dioceses of New Jersey      Metuchen      Paterson      Trenton      Passaic      Syriac

# *Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation*

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# Overview

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This revised handbook\* of *Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation* focuses on a three-stage marriage preparation process. The goal of these policies and guidelines is to provide assistance and support to engaged couples as well as to pastoral ministers\*\* and married couples working with them. Different authoritative levels of directions are found in this handbook: canonical norms, statements of policy, and guidelines for dealing with special circumstances.

Regarding canonical issues, everyone is to observe procedures that are established by the *Code of Canon Law* (1983) as well as by the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*\*\*\*. Establishing a couple's eligibility to marry is most critical, especially in cases of prior marriages, whether the ceremony was religious or civil. If one or the other party was married before, a wedding may not be scheduled until the freedom of each person to marry is established. This is to be done through a death certificate, or if the former spouse is still alive, through a legitimate determination that a prior marriage was invalid.

The Bishop's message addressed to engaged couples conveys the pastoral spirit of the policies and guidelines for marriage preparation.

The **Introduction** relates the revised *Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation* to the broader context of the Church's teaching about marriage and contemporary attitudes that may undermine the Christian vision of marriage. It considers the canonical norms for remote, proximate and immediate preparation as well as follow-up which will be supportive to newly married couples. Lastly, it stresses the Church's concern for ministerial sensitivity and prudence toward engaged couples in special circumstances.

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\* A Couple's edition of the Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation is available.

\*\* In this document the term "pastoral minister" generally refers to a priest or deacon but may also include a lay person with theological and canonical competence and pastoral experience, who is responsible for the direction of the marriage preparation process.

\*\*\* **CIC** is often used for the 1983 Code of Canon Law. It stands for Codex Iuris Canonici. **CCEO** is often used for the 1990 Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches. It stands for Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium.

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## ***SECTION I: The Marriage Preparation Process (Three Stages)***

### **Stage One: Introduction and Orientation**

Couples approach the Church desiring to make a commitment to one another before God and to have their union blessed. It is of paramount importance that from the outset they have a warm and welcoming experience regardless of the couple's active or inactive affiliation with the Church. The pastoral minister should assure the couple of the Church's desire to help them prepare for a lasting, life-giving and happy marriage. In this first stage the pastoral minister will address any special circumstances, inform the couple about the preparation process, encourage them to understand the value of their commitment to this preparation process and determine with them a course for activities and meetings beyond their wedding. The use of a pre-marital communications inventory such as F.O.C.C.U.S. (**F**acilitating, **O**pen, **C**ouple, **C**ommunication, **U**nderstanding and **S**tudy) may be helpful at this stage. A wedding date may be scheduled only after establishing the couple's freedom to marry. The "Engagement Blessing" is optional.

### **Stage Two: Marriage Catechesis and Formation**

A couple will participate in an approved marriage preparation program conducted either in an individual parish or at a diocesan level. Whatever the choice of program, *Engaged Encounter Weekend*, *Pre-Cana Sessions* or *Sponsor Couple formation*, the interaction of engaged couples with married couples during the marriage preparation is an invaluable dimension of the Church's preparation ministry. If personal circumstances make these options unfeasible, this "instructional" stage may be conducted by the pastoral minister, but it would be advisable to introduce the engaged couple to a sponsor couple (a married couple), trained in marriage preparation, who is able to share their own convictions and personal experiences about God and love, commitment and sacrifice, forgiveness and spiritual growth in marriage.

### **Stage Three: Pastoral Sessions, Wedding Liturgy and Beyond**

This stage allows time for a couple to reflect further with the pastoral minister on their experience in the preparation

process and to address their plans for their wedding liturgy. It also provides the opportunity for the pastoral minister to encourage the engaged couple to appreciate the value of their continuing, active involvement in worship and parish life. The hope is that in establishing their home they will also seek a spiritual home in a parish community. It is important that parish communities reach out to newly married couples with a warm welcome.

## ***SECTION II: Particular Ecclesial Situations in Marriage Preparation***

Particular ecclesial situations may include: Catholics of different Churches *Sui Iuris*, a Catholic and a baptized Christian; a Catholic and a non-baptized person, and two Catholics of the same Church of whom one or both are no longer practicing the faith. For marriages between Latin rite Catholics and Catholics of other Churches *Sui Iuris*, the canonical preference in preparing for and celebrating the marriage is that the marriage will take place in the rite of the groom and be witnessed by his proper pastor. Deacons are able to witness marriages only for Latin Rite Catholics. In some circumstances a dispensation from the canonical form of marriage may be petitioned; or permission and/or delegation may be given to celebrate the Catholic Rite of Marriage outside of a Church.

## ***SECTION III: Special Circumstances in Marriage Preparation***

Guidelines are offered for various circumstances, including: abusive relationships, addictions, people choosing not to have children, cohabitation, communicable diseases, convalidations, unmarried couples who have had children together, couples with children from other relationships, instances of cultural, ethnic or racial diversity, HIV/AIDS and marriage, immaturity, infertility, long distance relationships in marriage preparation, marriages of minors, marriages of older persons, marriages of persons with disabilities, instances of pregnancy, pre-nuptial agreements, previous marriages and questions of sexual identity. These guidelines may assist a couple and the pastoral minister working with them to evaluate their situation in a realistic and responsible way.

# Introduction For Pastoral Ministers

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**I. Marriage is a profoundly personal, deeply spiritual relationship affecting not only a couple but their children. “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”** (c. 1055, §1).

Marriage is, for Christians, a mystery and a mission.

*Marriage is a mystery* because a husband and a wife engage the depths of their personalities to work out their destiny together but also because their relationship is lived out in the presence of God and in response to the initiative of Christ’s grace in them.

*Marriage is a mission* insofar as they assume responsibility for each other and for the children who may be born to them and also insofar as they help sanctify one another by manifesting faith to each other, their children and the community in which they live.

Marriage is God’s creation and the work of husbands and wives.

**II. A marriage is created through a mutual, personal commitment. “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”** (c. 1057, §2).

Marital love is rooted in the complete and total self-gift of a man and woman to each other. By their consent to marriage, the spouses betroth and accept each other in such a way that a new relationship begins for them in the sight of God and in the eyes of society as well. Their relationship is an intimate union calling for total fidelity and permanent unity so long as they each shall live. Once a couple creates a marital relationship, the bond that they have forged no longer depends solely on their own will but has a social and ecclesial reality which endures.

“For as God of old made Himself present to His people through a covenant of love and fidelity, so now the Savior

of men and the Spouse of the Church comes into the lives of married Christians through the Sacrament of Matrimony. He abides with them thereafter so that, just as He loved the Church and handed himself over on her behalf, the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-bestowal” (*Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 48, Second Vatican Council, 1965*).

**III. Attitudes a man or woman has about marriage may jeopardize their very ability to marry. Such an incapacity for marriage exists for “those who suffer a grave defect of discretion of judgment concerning the essential matrimonial rights and duties mutually to be handed over and accepted”** (c. 1095, 2°).

Much of contemporary society does not share Christ’s ideal for marriage. At a time when His own culture and the contemporary legal systems agreed that marriage was a relationship that could be dissolved at least at the initiative of a husband, Jesus Christ introduced a different vision for marriage. Jesus declared that God’s will is for a marriage relationship to be lived out in faithful commitment by a man and a woman as long as both live.

The pervasive experience of divorce, the prevalence of pre-nuptial agreements and experiments with live-in relationship as preparatory for marriage, affect the readiness of couples who approach the Church for marriage to grasp the practical implications of Jesus’ vision for them and to accept Jesus’ norm as their practical duty toward each other. Catholic couples preparing for marriage today will find themselves in what may be described as a counter-cultural experience. If a couple holds intentions about marriage contrary to the Church’s standards, they jeopardize their own ability to marry validly as well as their ability for a happy life together.\*

**IV. REMOTE PREPARATION. The Church has a duty to declare Christ’s vision for marriage to the whole community, young and old, and to assist couples to fulfill this vocation. “Pastors...are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful the assistance by which the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection. This assistance must be offered especially by: preaching,**

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\* Invalidity can arise from a number of defects of consent in addition to canon 1095.2. These defects are discussed in canons 1095-1107.

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catechesis adapted to minors, youth, and adults ...by which the Christian faithful are instructed about the meaning of Christian marriage ...”(c. 1063, §1).

Communicating the truth and the beauty of Christian marriage to all, young and old, is crucial. Informing people about the sacrament is a duty of the whole Christian community. The seeds of this message are planted in the deeds of daily life as boys and girls, young men and women, witness how their parents work to live out their commitment of married love. In Catholic schools and religious education programs, instruction appropriate to various grade levels should gradually introduce youngsters to a formal appreciation of the sacrament of marriage. In marriage preparation programs married couples proclaim the joys and loving struggles of faithfully lived married life and share their own Christian wisdom about marriage with those who are preparing to begin their own lives together.

At Sunday worship, periodic explanations about what marriage entails should highlight why the Church treasures the marriage preparation process as an opportunity to work with couples. Beyond the home, the classroom and pre-marital instructions, Catholic people need to hear about marriage from the pulpit. Priests and deacons should call to their congregations' attention Christian marriage successes, for instance, in celebrations for significant marriage anniversaries. At times the Scriptures lend themselves to the themes of married life. Priests and deacons should take such opportunities to affirm the Christian vision of married life. When the Scriptures speak of brokenness, the plight of widows or the uncertainties of the dispossessed, preachers may be able to uplift hearts bruised in families separated by failed marriages, by the tensions of living with spouses or parents who are no longer lovers and by the isolation of outliving a beloved spouse. In all situations, faith in the Good News about marriage needs to be announced with conviction.

Today's mass media exerts a strong influence on young people. Much of what is broadcast runs counter to time-honored and sound values. The Church must speak out and highlight the ideals and qualities of Christian marriage. The young especially need to hear the voices of those who know all that marriage can be.

**V. PROXIMATE PREPARATION.** *The opportunity for individual, personal marriage preparation is a responsibility not only of priests and deacons but also of a*

*parish community.* “Pastors...are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful...personal preparation to enter marriage, which disposes the spouses to the holiness and duties of their new state...”

Marriage is an intimate partnership. Every marriage is the union of two unique persons. Every family is composed of never-to-be-duplicated individual personalities. Each marriage and each family is a creative effort on God's part as well as for a husband and wife. To prepare adequately for such an undertaking, engaged partners must come to know one another realistically. The conjugal covenant involves two imperfect individuals making a genuine commitment to give themselves to and to accept one another. Premarital communication inventories such as F.O.C.C.U.S. may help to achieve better mutual self-understanding. In every case the Church's ministers work with each couple individually.

Every couple must challenge any secular ideologies or personal misconceptions that undermine their appreciation of Christian marital commitment. The pastoral ministers and various marriage preparation programs will provide opportunities for engaged partners to explore their own assumptions, share their expectations and claim for one another a truly Christian view of what marriage is.

Key to the marriage preparation process is a couple's willingness to take the time and to do the work that will enrich them spiritually and humanly. Marriage is a life-long process of growth and commitment to a continuing and a supportive relationship in which the partners help each other to develop themselves as fully as possible. “Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. By virtue of this sacrament, as spouses fulfill conjugal and family obligations, they are penetrated with the Spirit of Christ...Thus they increasingly advance their own perfection, as well as their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God.” (*Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 48, Second Vatican Council, 1965).

It is for this very reason that the **Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation** mandates that engaged couples receive a preparation which both instructs them regarding marriage and their role as ministers of marriage, and also contributes to their human and spiritual for-

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mation as marriage partners. To adequately fulfill these goals, a year's preparation is directed by the **Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation**. This represents a significant commitment to be made by the couple, the pastoral minister who will be working with them and the married couples in marriage preparation programs.

"Before a marriage is celebrated, it must be evident that nothing stands in the way of its valid and licit celebration" (c. 1066). Pastoral ministers must see that the spirit of this canon is observed. It is important to note that much more is involved in the marriage preparation process itself than simply meeting minimal canonical requirements.

Pastoral ministers who work with the engaged couples exercise a major influence in the lives of these men and women. Their interest in them and willingness to give of themselves are crucial in carrying out their pastoral role in marriage preparation. Pastoral ministers should never underestimate the skills and knowledge that they have acquired through their own experiences in human relationships as well as their personal spiritual formation. The authenticity of their faith can shine out in their efforts to share prayer and ideals with couples whom they prepare for marriage.

**VI. Procedures are established to assure the couples' readiness to exercise their right to marry and to assist everyone in a particular case when the right to marry is questioned. "All persons who are not prohibited by law can contract marriage" (c. 1058). But the right to marry is not absolute and must be weighed against any factors which mitigate that right by challenging readiness of a couple or an individual. ... "In a special case, the local ordinary can prohibit marriage for his own subject...but only for a time, for a grave cause, and for as long as the cause continues" (c. 1077, §1).**

During the course of preparation, the pastoral minister may find that a particular couple is experiencing a significant difficulty or perceive that there is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. Such a situation would require further examination and may involve theological, medical, or psychological consultation. In that case, the pastoral minister will seek advice through whatever *process* has been established in each diocese. Such a referral might take place after professional counseling or may itself be a prelude to the recommendation of such counseling. Occasionally a suspected difficulty may be easily verifiable; for example, one or both of

the parties may be under age 18 or there may be a pregnancy that occurred prior to marriage. But in other cases the problem may be more difficult to pinpoint; for instance, immaturity, marrying to escape an unhappy home situation, excessive parental pressure, undue haste in planning a marriage, lack of commitment to the marriage preparation process or a truly insufficient commitment to the Church's teaching about marriage. In all such situations, it is mandatory that the pastoral minister who is working with a couple to refer the issues for review through the *process* that is in place in the particular diocese where the marriage takes place.

In such circumstances, the pastoral minister will inform the couple that their marriage preparation process may have to be extended. In a gentle and pastoral way, he should try to enable the couple to appreciate the reasons why he is making a referral and urge openness to a more extended preparation if it is the eventual recommendation for them. The pastoral minister should request the consent of the couple to release any information in the referral that may have been obtained from some professional agency.

The *process* seeks to guarantee adequate consultation with experienced persons of good judgment so that a negative evaluation of the couple's readiness for marriage is objective and not based on the whim or prejudice of a controlling individual. It provides opportunity for a couple to avail themselves of counselors who may help them to appreciate aspects of a lifelong commitment they may have overlooked.

Whenever a referral to this *process* is made, the pastoral minister will be clear with a couple that what is occurring is a consultation and not necessarily a conclusion as yet. The Church is not saying to a couple, "You cannot marry!", just because some serious question is under investigation. But, if after the consultation, the decision of the local Ordinary is to prohibit the marriage at least temporarily (c. 1077, §1), the couple should be urged to accept that advice and cooperate with whatever recommendations are offered for further preparation.

If a couple can not be persuaded to postpone their wedding and indicate that they will marry outside of the Church, the minister should not look upon such an attempted marriage as simply the lesser of two evils. If a couple is judged not ready for marriage, the pastoral minister should do all that he can to persuade the couple not to enter any kind of union at that time.

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The right of any couple or individual to appeal directly to the Bishop as the head of the Catholic community is always guaranteed. The pastoral minister should assist a couple or the individual in making such an appeal.

The **Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation** assists engaged couples to “let the spouses themselves...be joined to one another in equal affection, harmony of mind and the work of mutual sanctification” and helps pastoral ministers and all who work in marriage preparation programs in assisting engaged couples to undertake “the joys and sacrifices of their vocation” so they may “become witnesses of the mystery of that love which the Lord revealed to the world by His dying and His rising to life again.” (*Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 52, Second Vatican Council, 1965).

**VII. IMMEDIATE PREPARATION.** *Marriage preparation includes the active participation by the couple in the wedding ceremony. “Pastors...are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful...a fruitful liturgical celebration of marriage which is to show that the spouses signify and share in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church...”*(c. 1063, §3).

The *Rite of Marriage* provides various options for the prayers, the readings and the ceremonies of a wedding liturgy. While marriage preparation is focused more to the lifetime experiences of a couple than to the single event of a wedding, the preparation of a wedding liturgy itself is also an important part of the process. Therefore a parish preparation program for marriage should support the active participation of the couple and their guests in the wedding ritual. The availability of musicians, assisting ministers and a welcoming church environment can only be achieved at the local level and with its own resources.

The pastoral ministers who work with engaged couples need to familiarize them with the *Rite of Marriage* and how they consider the various options for participating. In doing so everyone should keep in mind the perspective of the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* and its directives for all Masses (352). The pastoral effectiveness of a celebration will be heightened if the texts of readings, prayers, and songs correspond as closely as possible to the needs, religious preparation, and aptitude of the participants, however secular music is not permitted. Secular readings may

not replace scripture and the official texts may not be altered without approval. Choices are to be made in consultation with the pastoral minister.

**VIII. BEYOND THE WEDDING.** *The Church’s interest in married couples does not end with the wedding ceremony. “Pastors...are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful...help to those who are married, so that faithfully preserving and protecting the conjugal covenant, they daily come to lead holier and fuller lives in their families”* (c. 1063, §4).

Programs supportive to married couples have developed in the Church. The Christian Family Movement, Marriage Encounter, Retrouvaille, and parish-based support groups work in various ways to enhance the quality of married couples’ relationships or help couples that have experienced major tensions to rediscover the foundations of their love and commitment. Such efforts are to be commended and supported.

A somewhat newer recognition, however, is the importance of Church support for young couples in the first years of their marriage experience. Progressively, the anonymity of contemporary society often isolates many people from their neighbors and from the communities in which they live. People are highly mobile. Many work in one city, live in a suburb, recreate in other areas and are in touch with family more by telecommunications than by face-to-face contact. Young married couples sometimes have little connection with their parish church even if they regularly practice their religion.

The **Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation** offer suggestions to capitalize on the positive experience of marriage preparation by making contact with a newly married couple in the parish in which they reside. Many blessings can be gained by both the couples themselves and by the parish communities in which they may become actively involved.