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Stage One: Introduction And Orientation

Marriage Preparation: A Commitment Of Time

Goals: To give couples adequate time to prepare for marriage and the wedding celebration.

To provide the pastoral minister and the engaged couple an opportunity to develop a relationship with one another.

Policy: *Ideally the marriage preparation process should begin when the engagement is announced even if that is more than a year before the proposed wedding date. Normally the preparation process begins not less than one year before the desired wedding date.*

Discussion:

- Couples should be encouraged to contact the parish as soon as they become engaged. Many couples initiate wedding plans almost a year and a half to two years in advance. The earlier the couples contact the parish to arrange for a wedding the more beneficial the marriage preparation process may be for them.
- Beginning the marriage preparation process early provides additional opportunities for the couple to assess their individual readiness to marry and sufficient time to go through the three stages of the preparation process.
- If either of the two parties has been previously married, or if there are particular circumstances that require further attention (cf. Section III), additional time may be needed to determine the party's freedom to marry in the Church and/or to address their particular circumstances.
- If the couple should approach the Church for marriage less than a year before the wedding, the process for preparation needs to be honored in a responsible and realistic way. It is expected that the pastoral minister will exercise appropriate pastoral discretion.
- It is strongly recommended that the preparation process be completed at least six weeks prior to the wedding date. This allows the couple those final weeks to focus on personal reflection and their last minute preparations for the wedding.

A Couple's First Contact With The Parish

Goals: To reflect Christ's love and the Church's concern for engaged couples by providing a warm and congratulatory welcome.

To recognize that regardless of a couple's active or inactive affiliation with the Church, many are apprehensive about the initial contact and may need encouragement and support.

Policy: *The parish staff should facilitate arrangements for the couple to meet with the pastoral minister as soon as possible. A wedding date is not to be entered, even tentatively, into the parish calendar until such a meeting takes place.*

Discussion:

- The engaged couple initiates the marriage preparation process when they call the parish to inquire about being married in the Church. It is important that the first persons contacted by the couple seeking a Church wedding have the information and skills to assist them in a pastoral manner.
- Experience has shown that some couples have been discouraged, even alienated, by parish personnel merely stating the requirements necessary to celebrate marriage. This can undermine the intent of these guidelines. It is essential therefore to provide training for secretaries and receptionists in terms of attitude, tone of voice and the type of information they give the couple.
- This is a special moment in the lives of the couple and a time when they should be assured of the Church's readiness to be of assistance to them.

Initial Meeting(s) With The Couple

Goals: To establish a rapport with the couple by communicating an attitude of openness, support and hospitality.

To explain the marriage preparation process.

To provide information about available marriage preparation programs.

To ascertain the couple's canonical and civil eligibility for marriage.

To determine the date for the wedding, if possible.

To nurture the couple's faith by encouraging their spiritual preparation.

Policy: *Soon after a couple makes an initial contact with the parish, a meeting should take place with the pastoral minister before they participate in any formal marriage preparation program. There is a real value at this stage of the process for the couple to confer with the pastoral minister who will officiate at the wedding.*

Discussion:

- The marriage preparation process can provide teachable moments for evangelization, particularly for those couples who do not have a strong faith commitment. Therefore, a caring response from the pastoral minister may be an invitation for the couple to take a deeper look at their faith.

- Review and explain the pastoral concerns and commitment of the Church as expressed in the **Pastoral Polices and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation**. The couple's edition of this handbook should be given to the engaged couple to facilitate their understanding of the requirements of the marriage preparation process.

- Explore the motives for marriage and any special circumstances that may affect their marriage, for example: age, cultural background, pregnancy, military service, physical or mental disability, levels of faith development and religious issues. If any impediment or special circumstance

seems to be present, refer to the special circumstances section of these guidelines.

- It is recommended that in the initial session the bride and groom assisted by the pastoral minister complete the biographical portion of the required canonical forms. This may reveal any canonical impediment that would prevent setting a wedding date.

- Instruct the couple in regard to Church and civil documents that will be required.

- ♦ Baptismal Certificates (issued within six months)
- ♦ Affidavits of Freedom to Marry

In the event of a second marriage:

- ♦ A Civil Decree of Divorce
- ♦ An Ecclesiastical Decree of Annulment, or
- ♦ A Death Certificate

- Couples have many questions about the celebration of their wedding. A well-prepared parish fact sheet/booklet can obviate the necessity of repeating the most basic answers about such things as the documents that they will need to obtain, how to make contact with an approved diocesan or parish marriage preparation program, wedding or rehearsal times, parish musicians, fees, and the like.

- The wedding date may be set provided there are no canonical impediments or other special circumstances that might delay the marriage. Pastoral ministers should familiarize themselves with all the special circumstances in Section III and be especially aware of those that may call for a delay in the wedding date.

- The couple should be reminded of the importance of personal prayer and participation in the sacramental life of the Church as they prepare for their marriage. If one of the Catholic parties has not been confirmed he or she should be encouraged to begin preparation for the sacrament although the reception of Confirmation itself is not required prior to marriage. (c. 1065 §1 states, "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".)

- The pastoral minister may discuss the value of a special blessing for the engaged couple (*Cf. Book of Blessings, pp. 96-101 Art. #195*).

Addressing A Couple's Experience And Needs

Goals: To assist a couple in assessing their own insights, understanding and mutual communication as part of preparation for Christian marriage.

To address the particular needs of each individual couple by recommending appropriate preparation opportunities and, if necessary, further counseling for special concerns.

Policy: *During the initial meeting, or in a subsequent meeting with the couple, the administration of a communications assessment instrument, a premarital inventory, is strongly recommended as an effective way to bring clarity to a couple's individual and shared experience as well as their own hopes for and expectations about marriage.*

When special circumstances warrant, refer to Section III.

Discussion:

- Just as every person is unique, so is each couple unique. Working with people preparing for marriage may offer many insights. But no one couple is an exact copy of another. Each time a couple approaches them, pastoral ministers are invited to become acquainted anew with the mystery of how human love and divine love are working themselves out in a particular way.

- Couples need to understand that they will come to know themselves in new ways. Through one another and in their mutual relationship, they can experience together the joys and sorrows of human love, the destructive influence of selfishness and sin and the uplifting power of genuine self-giving and sharing God's grace.

- The Church encourages the use of premarital communication instruments that can help couples to understand better where they are in their own relationship as they begin their marriage preparations. Results of taking such instruments can also help couples to review the implications for marriage preparation or any special circumstances in which they find themselves.

- The Pontifical Council for the Family, in its document, *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, recommends the use of sound pedagogical aids for marriage preparation. Couples might use premarital inventories such as F.O.C.C.U.S. (Facilitating, Open, Couple, Communication, Understanding and Study), the PMI (Premarital Inventory) or PREPARE (Premarital Personal and Relationship Enrichment). Such instruments, interpreted by those trained to do so, can help an engaged couple to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their own relationship and to identify areas of agreement and disagreements both with each other or with Church teachings. Such realizations can lead to further consideration and reflection with one another, with the pastoral minister, and with the committed married couples who will work with them in their preparation experience.

- Premarital Inventories are not psychological tests. "Good results" do not guarantee a successful marriage. "Difficulties uncovered" are not absolute obstacles to continuing marriage preparation. Pastoral ministers should be careful not to "psychologize" or to draw unfounded conclusions. In cases of apparent serious difficulty, the couple and the pastoral minister will wish to consult with experts. The pastoral minister might refer couples to counselors recommended by the Diocese or to others known to be competent in providing counseling about the results of the communication instrument. If it would become necessary for the results of a premarital inventory to be reviewed by someone other than the pastoral minister working with the couple, the couple will be asked to complete a Counselor Release Form, both to provide for the review of the data by an appropriate counselor and to give that counselor permission to share information gleaned during the review process with the pastoral minister.

- Normally, F.O.C.C.U.S., PREPARE or another type of premarital inventory will be taken prior to participation in a diocesan approved program for preparation. In some circumstances, this order may be reversed at the discretion of the pastoral minister and with the couple's agreement. Couples should complete this entire process not less than 6 months before their marriage date.

The Engagement Blessing

Goals: To emphasize the importance of this time of discernment and preparation for marriage by invoking God's blessing on the couple.

To provide a ritual through which family and/or the parish community can bless and become involved in the couple's journey of faith in marriage.

Policy: *The parish may provide an opportunity for the couple's family and members of the parish community to affirm the couple's decision through an engagement blessing.*

Discussion:

- The engaged couple can benefit from the prayers and support of their family, friends and parish community during this time of discernment and preparation. It is a special occasion for the family and an opportunity for the parish to provide on-going support while asking God's blessings on the couple's time of preparation.
- The Engagement Blessing presents an opportunity for the couple to hear the Church's prayer . . . "that as they await the day of their wedding, God will help them grow in mutual respect and love for one another . . ." (*Cf. Book of Blessings, Art. #202*). It is not a public commitment to marriage nor a celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage itself.
- The blessing may be offered by the parents, pastoral minister or a lay minister. If this is not offered by the pastoral minister, the parents of the couple may offer this blessing at a family gathering (*Cf. Book of Blessings, Art. #197*).
- The special blessing of an engaged couple is never to be combined with the celebration of Mass (*Cf. Book of Blessings, Art. #198*).
- A copy of the Engagement Blessing is in the Couple's Guide. Eastern Catholics have their own engagement ceremony.

Stage Two: Marriage Catechesis and Formation

Participation In A Shared Preparation Process

Goal: To facilitate the engaged couple's participation in a formational process of marriage preparation offered by the Church community.

Policy: *A variety of diocesan or parish sponsored preparation programs are to be available for couples.*

Discussion:

- All couples are to be prepared by the Church for marriage.
- The occupational demands made on their time and their residential geographical locations require that they be offered reasonable options when informed of their required participation in a marriage preparation program.
- Although convenient for most, couples are not to be restricted to programs offered in their parish or diocese.
- The type of marriage preparation programs currently available within the Province are:
 - ◆ Engaged Encounter Weekends
 - ◆ Marriage Preparation/Pre-Cana Sessions
 - ◆ Other appropriate parish-based marriage preparation programs approved by the diocese.
- Ecumenical, Interreligious and Second Marriage Programs
Ecumenical, Interreligious and Second Marriage preparation programs should be available to meet the special needs of these couples.

Marriage Preparation Programs

Goal: To provide trained married couples for service in marriage preparation ministry (i.e. Engaged Encounter, Pre-Cana).

Policy: *Pastors are to recruit and, with the assistance of diocesan family life offices, train validly married couples competent and willing to help engaged couples prepare for Christian marriage. The selection of married team couples should reflect the diversity of engaged couples in terms of age, cultural heritage and faith tradition.*

Discussion:

- By Baptism all members of the Church are called to build up the Body of Christ.

- If marriage preparation in all its phases should be the concern of the entire Christian community (*Cf. Familiaris Consortio* and *Faithful to Each Other*) certainly married couples should have an important role in the immediate preparation of the engaged.

- In recruiting and training married couples for marriage preparation ministry, it is important that they be properly trained with due regard for the teachings of the Church on Christian marriage (*Cf. #43 Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage, Pontifical Council on the Family.*)

- Experience has proven the value of the witness of married couples, who live their vocation in light of the Gospel, in preparing couples for marriage. When married couples speak out of their own conviction and from personal experiences about God, Church, love, commitment, sacrifice, forgiveness, prayer, stewardship and service, they offer a powerful witness.

- Married couples who serve in this capacity find that their encounter with the engaged enriches and strengthens their own marriages. Pastoral wisdom warrants that these successfully married couples should form the core of a marriage preparation team.

- Toward this end marriage preparation programs will strive to make ample time and space for the engaged couple's reflection and discussion, and for dialogue with those serving on marriage preparation teams. It is important to encourage the couple's on-going dialogue throughout the marriage preparation process.

Stage Three: Pastoral Sessions, Wedding Liturgy & Beyond

Affirmation Of The Couple's Readiness For Marriage

Goal: To affirm the readiness of the couple for Christian marriage.

Policy: *Following their participation in a marriage preparation program, the couple will meet with the pastoral minister as soon as it is convenient. Once sufficient readiness for marriage is affirmed the liturgical planning may take place.*

Discussion:

- Since there are a variety of pre-marital programs available it is essential that the pastoral minister is assured that the couple understands the sacramental dimension of marriage.

- Discuss the engaged couple's response to the interest, care, and the time given by the married couples helping them.

- The married couple's evident happiness, example of faith in God, commitment to one another and loyalty to the Church may tremendously influence the engaged couple. How was this expressed in the engaged couple's experience? Did it give them strong hope for their own future? Did it inspire them now to become reconciled with the Church or to participate more in its life?

- It is important to help the couple reflect on any serious or unresolved issues and concerns, any value and effect that the faith of the parish community had upon them during their preparation, and what they have learned about themselves, the parish, the Church, and Marriage. This is the time to ask, "What else needs to be covered/discussed?" before preparing for the wedding liturgy. This time should be used to encourage the reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

- Completion of pre-nuptial documentation should take place at this meeting.

- Review the substantive questions regarding marital commitment.

- Collect any outstanding documents and/or witness forms.

- Complete the pre-nuptial documentation with the couple.

- If the couple is unfamiliar with liturgical ritual this can be another occasion for uncertainty and anxiety. The couple can be reassured by the pastoral minister if the liturgical planning resources for their wedding liturgy are given and explained to them at this time. (*Cf. Immediate Plans for the Wedding Liturgy, p. 16 of this manual*).

Immediate Plans For the Wedding Liturgy

Goals: To assist couples in the planning of their wedding liturgy so that the celebration expresses and deepens their faith and experience of the mystery of God's love in their marriage.

To provide information and resources to an engaged couple in order to enhance their understanding of the rite of marriage and provide guidance as they begin the process of personally selecting those prayers and scripture readings which reflect their loving relationship and individuality as a couple.

Policy: *In liturgical preparation, the pastoral minister will assist the engaged couple in planning a celebration that is "simple and dignified", according to the norms of the competent authorities of the Church" (Familiaris Consortio, #67). Since Christian marriage is a sacramental action of the Church, "the liturgical celebration of marriage should involve the Christian community, with full, active and responsible participation of all those present, according to the place and task of each individual" (Familiaris Consortio, #67). The celebration of a Nuptial Mass is most appropriate for a couple who are both practicing Catholics.*

Planning a Nuptial Ceremony (outside of Mass) would be an appropriate choice for a couple who reflect differing faith traditions. Consult diocesan guidelines for the celebration of interchurch and interfaith marriages.

Discussion:

- In planning the wedding liturgy, the couple should be offered the assistance of a musician, pastoral minister, sponsor couple or a parish member who is trained in liturgical planning and familiar with the local church's interior appointments and design.

- Such help may be invaluable in a discussion of all aspects and choices for their wedding liturgy, with due consideration given to the rubrics contained within the Catholic Rite of Marriage, parish policies and local guidelines.

- The wedding ceremony should reflect the distinctive quality of Christian faith, with special attention given to the celebration of the Word, the exchange of vows by the couple promising to live together in loving trust and fidelity, and the nuptial blessing.

- It is also possible for the planners, in accordance with concrete circumstances of time and place, "to include in the liturgical celebration such elements proper to each culture which serve to express more clearly the profound human and religious significance of the marriage contract, provided that such elements are in harmony with Christian faith and morality" (*Familiaris Consortio*, #67). Care and prudent consideration will determine what can be fittingly introduced from the traditions and cultures of individual people, without conflicting with the theological meaning of the wedding ceremony.

- The preparation of a brochure highlighting local marriage guidelines, procedures for contacting parish music ministers and offering a rationale for selecting appropriate music for wedding liturgies would be most helpful and could be shared with the couple at this time. Books such as [Together for Life](#) and [Marriage is for Keeps](#) are examples of resources available for couples' use in selecting the scriptures and reviewing the elements of the marriage rite.

- If a visiting pastoral minister is to officiate the wedding, a copy of the parish marriage guidelines should be sent to him well in advance of the wedding date.

- Couples planning weddings during the seasons of Advent and Lent should be advised of the special nature of these liturgical seasons and plan accordingly (e.g. selections of appropriate music and antiphons; limitations on choice of text for readings at Nuptial Masses, decoration of the worship environment reflective of the season).

- Details of the completed wedding liturgy should be reviewed by the officiant prior to the rehearsal.

The Rehearsal

- Set a date and time for the rehearsal. It is further encouraged that the clergy (or designate) provide a prayerful introduction to the rehearsal, which often has a calming effect upon those present, and encourages their reflective participation and cooperation.

- This is often the first opportunity for some members of the family and bridal party to meet. The engaged couple is encouraged to make the appropriate introductions of parents and family members to the witnessing clergy or person(s) designated to conduct the rehearsal.

- It is recommended that the civil marriage license be presented at that time as well as the wedding program booklets (if applicable).

- It is important that anyone who is participating in a special way in the liturgy (e.g. gift bearers, altar servers or especially those proclaiming the scripture readings) be present at the rehearsal in order to familiarize themselves with the church's layout and to receive instructions appropriate to their role in the wedding liturgy.

- The engaged couple should be encouraged to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation in advance of the wedding day. Announcing the availability of the Sacrament of Reconciliation following the rehearsal often affords the bride, groom and others a privileged opportunity to receive the grace of the sacrament and to deepen their awareness of the sacred character of their soon to be created marriage covenant.

Continuing To Grow, Being Active In Parish Life

Goals: To develop a process for introducing newly-married couples in a personal way to the parish community in which they will be residing after their wedding.

To overcome the phenomenon of isolation from parish life which often marks the early years of marriage before the birth and schooling of children necessitate that a young couple reach out to their local parish.

To enhance the opportunity for young couples to become active with their local parish so that regular Church practice becomes a “natural part” of their own newly-developing relationship as husband and wife.

Policy: *It is recommended that the pastoral minister who has prepared the couple for marriage will send an introductory “referral card” to the parish where the couple expects to reside after their marriage. (Cf. Sample Card, p. 17)*

Discussion:

- During their period of preparation for marriage, couples often develop a positive relationship with the pastoral minister and the married couples or other ministers who work with them. Those previously estranged are encouraged to practice the Faith by prayer and regular attendance at Sunday Mass. Their Marriage Preparation experience established a living connection to the parish church.

- After their marriage many married couples establish their homes in other localities. In a sense they become strangers to the Church in their new parish. For young couples who continue to live in the parish where they were married, their own new way of life as married adults can make for a different relationship with the local parish even if it is the place where they grew up.

- Married parishioners can help young couples fit into their new role. By reaching out to them, engaging them in discussion, encouraging their active participation and showing them hospitality, married parishioners can help those

newly-married to feel at home in their “new status” and in the parish instead of being anonymous parishioners until they present their first baby for Baptism.

- A referral card can be used as a way of “introducing” the couple to their new parish if they are not residing in the parish in which they were married. The bride and groom should complete this card at their wedding rehearsal or shortly beforehand. It is recommended that the pastoral minister who has prepared the couple for marriage mail the card in an envelope addressed to the pastor of the parish where the couple will be moving. Without much additional effort, copies of the card could be sent to pastors of parishes known to be in the immediate area of where the couple plan to reside. It is hoped that this strategy may succeed in alerting vigilant pastors and pastoral ministers to make note of addresses which fall within their parish territorial lines. It is expected that every parish will be eager to welcome these recently married couples into their faith community.

- An important ingredient in this welcoming process is human contact with the Church during this important transition in the new couple’s life. Given this highly mobile society, couples may actually know no one when they first arrive in a new town. For their new parish community to reach out in welcome to them could be exactly what is needed to encourage their continuing close relationship with the Church that began with their marriage preparation.

- Parishes might provide an opportunity to welcome newly married couples.

- The important thing is to make the recently married couple feel welcome and to invite them to get involved. They could learn about parish activities and make known their own talents and interest to parish leadership. It would be a chance to explain how to get involved in sharing their time and talent in their new parish community.

Dear _____ and _____ ,

For many months you have worked with our parish in preparation for your upcoming wedding. You have experienced some of the blessings which the Catholic Church community has to offer. We hope that, after your marriage celebration, you will continue to nurture your faith with daily prayer, keep up your commitment to faithful attendance at Sunday Mass and become engaged in parish life where you will be living.

We will write the pastor of the parish in which you will be living to let him know of your conscientious preparation for Christian marriage and that you will be moving into town. We ask, therefore, that you please complete the following information to help us introduce you to your new parish.

Name _____
(Husband) (Wife) (Surname)

Future Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

New Telephone # __ (_____) _____ (if known)

The date that you expect to take up residence in your new home is:

_____, 20_____

Name of the local Catholic Church _____
(if known)

(The reverse side of the card reads:)

Dear Pastor,

I write to inform you that the couple whose names and address are on the reverse side were married at _____ Church in _____, New Jersey on _____, 20_____. From what we can determine, yours is the nearest Catholic parish for them.

Our parish has worked with them in preparation of the Sacrament of Marriage. We ask that you please take the opportunity to welcome them to your parish community, or, if necessary, refer them to another parish.

Thank you for your continuing involvement in their journey of faith.

Rev. _____
Pastor