

**Pastoral Policies &
Guidelines for Marriage Preparation
for
The Catholic Church of New Jersey**

Couples' Guide

Bishop's Letter

Dear Engaged Couple,

Over a quarter century ago, the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey offered a Common Policy for Marriage Preparation. One of its primary purposes was to ensure that engaged couples were given an improved pastoral preparation for marriage.

These revised Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation build on the strengths of the original policy and takes into consideration additional issues that could pose challenges for a lasting, stable and happy marriage. The policies and guidelines draw from the Church's spiritual wisdom and an appreciation of Christian marriage gained in part from the practical insights of pastoral ministers and married couples who over the years have been involved in marriage preparation.

In an age when the prevailing culture and contemporary legal systems allowed that a marriage could be dissolved "for any reason whatever," Jesus Christ lifted up a more authentic biblical vision of marriage. Jesus declared that from the beginning God's will was that a man and woman live out marriage in a faithful commitment and in an indissoluble unity as long as both live (Matt. 19:3-9).

Jesus' vision of what married love can be has its foundation in the very work of creation and in God's revelation to His chosen people. His insistence on marital permanence and monogamous fidelity exceeded the tolerance of divorce and polygamy that the interpretations of the ancient covenant had come to tolerate. Jesus raised the covenant of marriage to a higher level, leading spouses to a unique mutuality, empowering them to behold each other as beloved in the Lord, offering selfless care for one another and loving each other as the Lord loves them.

A Christian marriage can reflect God's love alive in the world. A Christian family becomes a living cell in the Body of Christ. The faithful relationship of husband and wife sacramentally manifests Christ's presence. The community of the Christian home that emerges from that relationship becomes what our Catholic tradition has called the "domestic Church."

Throughout the past two thousand years, countless Christian men and women have succeeded in living out Jesus' vision of married life, guided by His gospel values, supported by divine grace, and encouraged by others witnesses of Christian love. Catholic married couples today are the beneficiaries of this great heritage. Couples already committed to living their marriage vows each day are, in a special way, witnesses to those who are preparing for marriage. They are able to share a genuine faith-based wisdom about married life garnered over the years.

American society stands at a crossroads in respect to marriage. Many couples today find that their own experience of marriage is better than they would ever have dreamed possible. Happily, many couples have discovered in their own Christian marriages a depth of spirituality and personal love beyond what was common in the past. Yet at the same time far too many marriages end in divorce, and too many husbands and wives do not seem to grasp what makes marriage work. In popular culture, too, there are movements questioning the institution of marriage itself. Some declare marriage outdated. There is a trend in civil society to place "de facto" unions (those unions without any publicly recognized institutional bond) on a par with marriage. Many couples approach marriage with doubt or anxiety about whether a lasting commitment is really possible or that they are capable of living up to the expectations and responsibilities of marriage. Many postpone a decision to marry for years; many live together without marriage for a variety of reasons.

By promulgating these Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation, we wish to offer to you who are preparing for marriage, as well as to our priests, deacons, religious and lay people ministering to you, sound pastoral guidelines and directions. It is our fervent wish that the Church be of practical assistance in helping you to discern your own readiness for marriage. The process should afford you time to deal honestly and confidently with issues that call for deeper conversion and personal growth and to face any difficulties which may arise. Most of all we see these Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation as an affirmation of engaged couples and our gift to you. Our Church communities will be ready to help you with a supportive experience as you prepare to enter into the covenant of marriage.

It is our fervent hope that you will be aware that our Savior Jesus Christ, who graced the wedding feast of Cana and blessed the couple with His miraculous transformation of water into wine, wishes to be with you in this time of preparation, on the joyful day of your wedding, and throughout your married and family life, we pray that you will open your hearts to him.

Sincerely yours in the Lord,

Most Reverend John J. Myers, Archbishop, Archdiocese of Newark

Most Reverend Nicholas A. DiMarzio, Bishop of Camden

Most Reverend Paul G. Bootkoski, Bishop of Metuchen

Most Reverend Frank J. Rodimer, Bishop of Paterson

Most Reverend John M. Smith, Bishop of Trenton

Most Reverend Andrew Pataki, Bishop of the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy Of Passaic

Most Reverend Joseph Younan, Bishop of Our Lady of Deliverance Syriac

Most Reverend David Arias, Auxiliary Bishop of Newark

Most Reverend Dominic A. Marconi, Auxiliary Bishop of Newark

Most Reverend Charles J. McDonnell, Auxiliary Bishop of Newark

Most Rev. Arthur J. Serratelli, Auxiliary Bishop of Newark

Prayer of Blessing for Engaged Couple
We praise you Lord, for your gentle plan draws together with your children, and in love for one another, Strengthen their hearts, so that they will keep faith with each other, please you in all things, and so come to the happiness of celebrating the sacrament of their marriage. We ask this through Christ our Lord. (Book of Blessing, Art. #211)

Congratulations on Your Engagement

You are engaged to be married and, desiring the blessing of God on your union, have approached the Church to witness and seal your vows to each other. Marriage is a divine vocation involving an enduring sacred relationship lived in the community of the Church and the wider human family. For baptized Christians, it is a sacrament of Christ's love expressed in a couple's living their marriage vows day to day in the grace of God.

In ministering to engaged couples local parishes and campus ministries are guided by the Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation, issued by the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey. These Policies and Guidelines are also an expression of the Church's wish to be of practical assistance to you as you embark upon what perhaps is the most important decision and commitment of your life.

The marriage covenant is by divine law indissoluble. It is a covenant promising enduring love between the parties and an openness to children who will be born from their loving union. The Church community stands ready to be of continuing support to couples who are preparing for and who are living out their marriage covenant in the Lord.

The pastoral assistance of the Church will involve meeting with the Church's pastoral minister. The process will help you to discern your readiness for marriage, to be affirmed by your strengths and to deal objectively, honestly and confidently with issues that call for further communication, conversion, and deeper growth. More than ever, this is a time for you to seek God's assistance, to forge a bonded spirituality, to worship together, and to participate in the sacramental life of the Church.

The Marriage Preparation Process

A Commitment Of Time

The preparation process for your wedding should begin as soon as you become engaged even if that is more than a year before the proposed wedding date. Normally the preparation process should begin not less than one year before the desired date of your wedding. This will give you adequate and less stressful time to prepare for the details of the wedding celebration and to reflect more deeply and prayerfully upon your upcoming marriage.

Contacting the Parish

The marriage preparation process is initiated with your first call to the parish inquiring about being married in the Church. A member of the parish staff will facilitate arrangements for you to meet with the pastoral minister (usually a priest or deacon of the

parish) as soon as possible. A date for your wedding may not be entered into the parish calendar until such a meeting takes place.

The Initial Meeting

At the time of your first meeting, the pastoral minister will explain the marriage preparation process and provide information about the available marriage preparation programs you are required to attend. You have the option of selecting a program best suited to your needs (see section on “Marriage Formation Sessions” for details).

The pastoral minister will begin to fill out the necessary canonical forms and advise you as to what Church and civil documents are needed. The pastoral minister will also make certain that there are no canonical or civil impediments to your marriage. Once it is established that there are no impediments or other serious obstacles evident the wedding date may be set.

In order to obtain a deeper understanding and appreciation of your individual and shared experiences, the pastoral minister may have you complete a premarital inventory, i.e. F.O.C.C.U.S. (Facilitating, Open, Couple, Communication, Understanding and Study), to assist you in identifying strengths and areas for growth in your relationship, areas of agreement or disagreement you may have with each other or with Church teachings, that is, areas that need more of your reflection and discussion.

At this time in your preparation process, the parish may provide an opportunity for family and parish members to support and affirm your decision to marry through an Engagement Blessing.

Marriage Formation Sessions

Participating In A Shared Process

At your initial meeting with the pastoral minister the various marriage preparation programs will be explained and made available to you. These would include Engaged Encounter Weekends ,Pre-Cana Sessions and other appropriate parish-based programs approved by the diocese and best suited to your needs. These sessions strive to provide quality time for you to reflect and discuss the important aspects of marriage with committed married couples. They seek to share with you the wisdom gained from their experiences as they live out their own vocation to married life.

Pastoral Sessions, Wedding Liturgy and Beyond

Meetings With The Pastoral Minister

Following participation in a marriage preparation program you will once again arrange to meet with the pastoral minister. This will be an opportunity to share your experiences about the session you attended and to discuss any serious issues or concerns that may need to be addressed. It will also be the time to collect any outstanding documents and complete any remaining paperwork. Once your readiness for marriage is affirmed, the planning for the wedding liturgy may begin.

Issues That May Require Consultation

During the course of your preparation, the pastoral minister may find that you may be experiencing a significant difficulty or perceive that there is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. Such a situation may involve theological, medical or psychological consultation. When this occurs the pastoral minister is required to refer such concerns to be reviewed through a process that has been established in the diocese where your preparation is taking place. In such circumstances the pastoral minister will inform you that the marriage preparation process will have to be extended. It is your right to appeal directly to the Bishop or his representative if you wish. The pastoral minister will assist you in making such an appeal.

Immediate Plans For The Wedding Liturgy

The pastoral minister will assist in planning the wedding liturgy by providing information and resources that may be helpful in making the appropriate choices for this celebration. The Rite of Marriage contains various options for prayers, Scripture readings, blessings, and wedding ceremonies. Parish guidelines and local policies may also be available. Other parish ministries might also provide guidance in various areas (music, environment, etc.). A date and time for the rehearsal is confirmed. Prior to the rehearsal all details regarding the wedding liturgy should be reviewed and approved by the officiant.

Parish Life After The Wedding

The pastoral minister will be happy to provide information and resources that may be helpful to you when contacting the parish you will be joining as a married couple.

“For as God of all 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, Vatican II Council)