Diocese of San Diego

GUIDELINES FOR MARRIAGE PREPARATION

The very preparation for Christian marriage is itself a journey of faith. It is a special opportunity for the engaged to rediscover and deepen the faith received in baptism and nourished by their Christian upbringing. In this way they come to recognize and freely accept their vocation to follow Christ and to serve the kingdom of God in the married state.


PERIOD OF PREPARATION

Length of Preparation Period

Engaged couples who will be married within the Diocese of San Diego, or who wish to complete their preparation for marriage in the diocese, should contact their local priest or deacon approximately nine months before their intended wedding date. Exceptions may be granted only for a serious reason. It is recommended that couples should be encouraged to start their marriage preparation even before setting a wedding date.

The formal preparation should be completed two months before the marriage ceremony.

Collaborative Effort

The couples’ complete experience of preparation for marriage is a collaborative effort by the pastor, and/or those he designates to help couples prepare, as well as by participation in the marriage preparation programs offered under the auspices of the diocesan Office for Marriage and Family Life, or their equivalent.

The pastoral usefulness and positive experience of marriage preparation courses show that they can be dispensed with only for proportionally serious reasons. Therefore, if couples present themselves with the urgency of celebrating their marriage soon and without proximate preparation, the parish priest and his co-workers will have the responsibility of offering them some occasions to make up an adequate knowledge of doctrinal, moral and sacramental aspects set out in the proximate preparation for marriage and finally include them in the phase of immediate preparation.


PREPARATION PROCESS

1. Completion of diocesan prenuptial forms.
2. Completion of diocesan approved marriage preparation programs, including a premarital inventory, or an equivalent program offered within the parish. The **Diocesan Pre-Cana Program** (English or Spanish), or an equivalent program offered within the parish, is recommended as the first part of the immediate marriage preparation for engaged couples. It is an informational/instructional session in a one-day format. There is an emphasis on communicating the nature of marriage as the sacrament of Holy Matrimony based on Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body. The Church’s teaching on conjugal love and responsible parenthood is explained, and the engaged couple is provided with basic information on Natural Family Planning. A very important component is the completion of a premarital inventory entitled FOCCUS.

It is essential that the time and care necessary for marriage preparation should be devoted to doctrinal preparation….Questions concerning the unity and indissolubility of marriage, and all that regards the meaning of the union and of procreation in married life and its specific act, must be treated faithfully and accurately, according to the clear teaching of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (cf. nn. 11-12). This is equally true for everything that pertains to the gift of life which parents must accept responsibly and joyfully as the Lord’s collaborators.


It is recommended that following their participation in the **Diocesan Pre-Cana Program** the couple should be urged to participate in one of three other formation programs:

1. **Evenings for the Engaged** (English or Spanish) involves a six weeks series (one evening per week) with a trained facilitating couple to address topics related to family of origin, communication, obstacles, spirituality, intimacy and sacrament.

2. **Catholic Engaged Encounter Weekend** (English or Spanish) is presented in a weekend retreat format by trained facilitating couples and a priest.

3. **Awareness and Preparation for Remarriage** is a program offered for those who are entering marriage wherein one or both parties have been married before. It is offered in English only. The format is a one-day conference held on a Saturday and addresses step-parenting among other issues pertaining to marriage preparation. If the individual(s) were married previously for only a short time, and if they do not have children, the couple might be better served by attending the **Diocesan Pre-Cana Program**, followed by **Evenings for the Engaged** or a **Catholic Engaged Encounter Weekend**.

In this country, about half of those who remarry do so within three years after the divorce. While that is understandable, such a rapid remarriage raises concerns. As we observed, divorce is something of a death experience. It takes time to sift through and properly accept all the thoughts and feelings that accompany such a dying event. Too swift an entrance into a new relationship can cause another future disaster.

We encourage those groups, movements, and agencies that offer unique assistance to the divorced, to widows and to widowers, helping them to understand their grief and to prepare them better for possible future remariages.

It is necessary to establish that both partners are free to marry by procuring either a declaration of nullity or a death certificate, whichever is appropriate to the couple’s situation.

**Natural Family Planning (NFP) classes** are available to enable engaged couples to practice responsible parenthood in accordance with Church teaching. Classes are presented by certified NFP teachers.

**SPECIAL AREAS OF CONCERN**

**Interreligious Marriages**

This term is used to identify a marriage that involves a Catholic and a partner who is not Catholic. An *ecumenical marriage* is a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized Christian of another denomination. Permission from the competent authority is required for such a union which, in a valid marriage, is considered a sacrament. An *interfaith marriage* is a marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person of another faith (such as Judaism or Islam). For validity a dispensation from the impediment of disparity of worship (canon 1086) is necessary for any marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person.

The Church requires that: 1° the Catholic party is to declare that he or she is prepared to remove dangers of defecting from the faith and is to make a sincere promise to do all in his or her power so that all offspring are baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church; 2° the other party is to be informed at an appropriate time about the promises which the Catholic party is to make, in such a way that it is certain that he or she is truly aware of the promise and obligation of the Catholic party.

*Code of Canon Law, canon 1125.*

The declaration and promise by the Catholic party, necessary for permission to enter any interreligious marriage, is to be made in the following or similar words:

> I reaffirm my faith in Jesus Christ and, with God’s help, intend to continue living that faith in the Catholic Church. I promise to do all in my power to share the faith I have received with our children by having them baptized and reared as Catholics.

*Faithful to Each Other Forever, p. 80.*

Therefore, the couple should be made aware of the reality of the generous efforts required for a successful interreligious marriage, to consider their differences and to decide about the children’s religious upbringing.

Interchurch couples…are most at risk for drifting from church belonging and practice.

*Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church: Getting It Right, Creighton University, 1995.*

At the same time there should be encouragement offered to couples entering into an interreligious marriage to grow in their knowledge of, sensitivity to and respect for their partner’s faith tradition. Ideally the couple would meet with representatives of both faith traditions. Those involved in marriage preparation must ensure that each enjoy total freedom with regard to their
own beliefs and practices. At the same time they need to be encouraged to develop a shared faith life and to appreciate the positive aspects of their marriage.

Marriages between Catholics and other baptized persons have their particular nature, but they contain numerous elements that could well be made good use of and developed, both for their intrinsic value and for the contribution that they can make to the ecumenical movement. This is particularly true when both parties are faithful to their religious duties. Their common baptism and the dynamism of grace provide the spouses in these marriages with the basis and motivation for expressing their unity in the sphere of moral and spiritual values.

*Familiaris Consortio*, n. 78.

An ideal is for the couple to participate in an optional, but carefully designed, mini-course in major Catholic teachings and practices.

**From Civil Marriage to Marriage in the Church**

There are increasing cases of Catholics who for ideological or practical reasons prefer to contract a merely civil marriage and who reject or at least defer religious marriage. The aim of pastoral action will be to make these people understand the need for consistency between their choice of life and the faith that they profess, and to try to do everything possible to induce them to regularize their situation in the light of Christian principles. While treating them with great charity and bringing them into the life of the respective communities, the pastors of the church will regrettably not be able to admit them to the sacraments.

*Familiaris Consortio*, n. 82.

Couples who have been civilly married and who wish to celebrate their marriage in the Church should meet with their local priest or deacon to begin their preparation. To meet the special needs of these couples, the diocese uses the REFOCCUS marital inventory which provides them with an instrument for marriage enrichment on an ongoing basis.

**Cohabitation of Engaged Couples**

*Faithful to Each Other Forever* cites Pope John Paul II’s recommendation that pastors and pastoral leaders should examine each situation case by case.

They ought to make tactful and respectful contact with the couples concerned and enlighten them patiently, correct them charitably and show them the witness of Christian family life in such a way as to smooth the path for them to regularize their situation.

*Familiaris Consortio*, nos. 80-81.

In the context of pastoral counseling the couples should be asked to consider seriously the following:

1. Factors which led to the decision to cohabit should be evaluated from the perspective of the Gospel.

2. Cohabitation is inconsistent with the moral teaching of the Church on sexuality and marriage, and is a source of scandal to the believing community.
3. It is a common misconception that cohabitation before marriage is good marriage preparation. It has been demonstrated that the intensity of genital sexual activity inhibits the development of communication skills such as listening and conflict resolution, as well as often precluding intimacy.

4. Living apart allows couples to be more objective about their relationship and to make a free and full commitment to Christian marriage.

**Teenage Marriages**

Pastors of souls are to take care to dissuade youth from the celebration of marriage before the age at which a person usually enters marriage according to the accepted practices of the region.

*Code of Canon Law*, canon 1072.

Marriages of couples in their teens have a high failure rate. Statistically, teenage marriages are twice as likely to end in divorce as marriages that occur in couples who are in their twenties.

Priests, deacons and parish ministers might consider the following observations:

They should exert great care in trying to gain the confidence of the couple and to look upon their love in a positive way....The young couple should understand that marriage is a lifelong relationship and that the Church and her ministers do not mean to create difficulties, but rather to assure that their nuptial union will be lasting or possibly to protect them from irreparable mistakes.

They should endeavor to establish a dialogue not only with the couple, but also with the parents in order to ascertain the strength of the commitment.

*Faithful to Each Other Forever*, p. 48.

When a teenager is pregnant and wants to get married, professional counseling is advised before the marriage can take place. County procedures for enforcing the state marriage laws often require it.

**Pregnancy**

With regard to pregnancy before marriage, pastors and/or parish ministers might reflect upon the following considerations from *Faithful to Each Other Forever*:

Marriage is not an appropriate solution to premarital pregnancy in cases of a totally immature couple with no prospect for success in entering the sacrament. Marriage is possibly an acceptable option for those who consider themselves engaged and for whom a proper marriage commitment may already have taken place.

Use of one of the instruments or inventories designed to facilitate dialogue between a couple intending to marry would be especially helpful in these delicate circumstances.

Since the cases involving pregnancies are especially difficult to handle, the couple should be advised to undertake professional counseling. The reasons for the pregnancy should be examined, as well as the seriousness of the commitment between the individuals.
The parents should be asked to assist in the discernment process as they will be of assistance in determining some of the background for the pregnancy, as well as the quality of the relationship between the couple.