

## **MARRIAGE PREPARATION POLICY ARCHDIOCESE OF MOBILE**

The Catholic Church follows very seriously the command of the Lord: "What God has joined together, no human being must separate." (Matthew 19:6) The process of preparation for marriage in the Catholic Church is a unique opportunity for a man and woman to learn the importance of beginning their life together rooted in authentic love for God and one another. It is a chance for the couple to come to understand the mission of the family life which they seek, "to become more and more what it is, that is to say, a community of life and love, in an effort that will find fulfillment, as will everything created and redeemed, in the Kingdom of God"<sup>1</sup>

A couple seeking marriage should come to see marriage preparation in the Catholic Church as an invitation to view their union as the formation of a "community of persons." The first communion, between husband and wife, is lived "through day-to-day fidelity to their marriage promise of total mutual self-giving."<sup>2</sup> This gift of self is then extended by the couple to new life in the form of the children God may entrust to their care.

Pastoral guidelines for preparing couples for the sacrament of matrimony are particularly important in a time when couples attempting to commit themselves to a life of faith and family receive little support from the world at large. The Catholic Church has long had a tradition of pre-marriage preparation, but the high rate of divorce necessitates more thorough guidelines.

Of course, prior to undertaking any marriage preparation, it is expected that couples (if Catholic) are already practicing their faith, as the grace of the sacrament should build upon the grace of a life of faith. If this is not the case, greater pastoral sensitivity should be exercised and every effort made to encourage a return to an active practice of the faith.

The Church, following in every age the teaching of Christ that marriage is a sacred institution, offers the sacrament of matrimony so that, through grace, love may be lived fully in family. In speaking their vows, a man and woman pledge themselves to one another and to God, promising faithfulness to one another and a willingness to cooperate with God in the sacred work of the creation of new life. Properly understood, the marriage commitment is a promise that must be regarded with the highest degree of seriousness and reflection. This, combined with the fact that modern social conditions do not always support his understanding of marriage and family life, necessitates that the clergy exercise great diligence in seeing to it that couples are properly prepared for marriage. In other words, that he couple knows exactly what the nature of the

<sup>1</sup>*Familiaris Consortio*, apostolic exhortation of John Paul II, 1981.

<sup>2</sup>F. C.

commitment before them is and how it is the foundation of their future happiness, and are willing to accept this call from God.

The policy attempts to answer the some basic questions that require specific guidelines for all involved in arranging a Roman Catholic ceremony. What should be the content of pre-marital instructions? What programs are available or provide such instruction? How are problem areas met and solved: cohabitation, teenage marriages, non-practicing Catholics immaturity, pregnancy?

This document is a statement of policy on marriages for the Archdiocese of Mobile. The guidelines are directed to couples who are planning to marry in order to assist them in knowing what they can and should expect to receive from the Church and, in return, what we, the Church, should expect of them.

### **Prior Notice Policy**

In order to ensure that sufficient time is available for adequate marriage preparation and pastoral counseling, couples must contact their parish priest or deacon at least six months in advance of their anticipated wedding date. The proposed date for the wedding will be considered conditional and dependent upon completion of marriage preparation.

### **Marriage Preparation Programs**

A marriage preparation program led by the priest/deacon with the help of married couples will be the norm for all couples seeking marriage in the archdiocese. To assist the priest/deacon in this task, programs such as Engaged Encounter and Evenings for the Engaged, involving the assistance of married couples, are available in the archdiocese. Engaged Encounter provides a weekend format and Evenings for the Engaged consists of several sessions conducted on week nights. Topics include finances, communication, relationships and the sacramentality of marriage, parenting, and other important areas. Couples are strongly urged to participate in one or the other of these programs whenever possible.

Children should be regarded as among the greatest blessings of married life. Regardless of whatever marriage preparation program the couple is participating in, each engaged couple is required to attend either a natural family planning series taught by a certified teaching couple, or a "Marital Sexuality & Responsible Parenthood" session. The purpose of this requirement is to cooperate fully with the request of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops that "in each formal premarriage program, a presentation on Natural Family Planning and fertility appreciation be included as an integral, not an

optional, part of the schedule."<sup>3</sup> This is also in accord with the words of Pope John Paul II, who said that "marriage preparation programs should include an honest and complete presentation of the Church's teaching on responsible procreation, and should explain the natural methods of regulating fertility."<sup>4</sup> (It is important to note that while the single session introduces the couple to the Church's teaching on natural family planning as one of its topics, the detailed instruction on how to use NFP is covered only in the four part NFP class series taught by a certified teaching couple.)

In circumstances where physical attendance would absolutely not be possible, the Family Life Office will make available an equivalent video presentation, as recommended by the NCCB.

The priest/deacon who will witness the marriage will be responsible for ensuring the completion of this preparation. In a proposed mixed marriage, the Catholic's future spouse is to receive a thorough explanation of the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic party should also make every effort to become acquainted with the beliefs and practices of the other faith community. The priest/deacon should make a sincere effort to cooperate with the clergyman of the party who is not a Catholic. This preparation will be given in every case of mixed marriage, including the exceptional case where permission can be given for the marriage in the church of the non-Catholic.

### **Cohabitation**

Sadly, cohabitation has become all too common among Catholics. Studies indicate that couples who live together before marriage have a fifty percent higher chance of divorce, as well as higher rates of domestic violence, and have a poorer quality of communication than those who do not. Studies show only negative results from living together before marriage. These sociological reasons, considered along with the immoral nature of sexual intimacy prior to marriage, lead to the conclusion that priests/deacons urge the cohabiting couple to live separately during the engagement period. This will enhance the couple's chances for success in marriage, as well as respecting the sacredness of marital sexuality. If the priest/deacon finds that a couple is unable or unwilling to accept or work toward this expectation he may delay the wedding while continuing to minister to the couple in the hope of fostering their spiritual and emotional growth. Or, in order to avoid scandal, he may require that the wedding ceremony be small; for example, the couple, two witnesses and the immediate families.<sup>5</sup>

*Faithful to Each Other Forever: A Catholic Handbook of Pastoral Help for Marriage Preparation*, Bishops' Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices, NCCB, 1988.

<sup>4</sup>Address of Pope John Paul II to the bishops of California, Nevada, and Hawaii, 1998

*Before You say 'I Do': Pastoral Considerations for Christian Marriage Today*, Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, 1998.

## **Marriage of Minors**

Special care and concern will be given to very young couples because of the difficulty experienced in early marriages. Therefore, if either party is not yet 19 years old, consideration for marriage in the Church will be given after the priest/deacon has completed adequate pastoral preparation, which will include some form of evaluation of maturity. Consultation with the parents and an archdiocesan approved counselor will normally be necessary.

## **Pregnancy**

The fact of pregnancy does not diminish the need for the preparation provided in this policy. Indeed, it is even more vital in cases of pregnancy that the usual help be given. Special counseling will also be needed when there was no engagement to marry prior to the pregnancy.

## **Reasons For Delay of Marriage**

A priest/deacon may not refuse to witness the marriage of a parishioner who is free to marry and who has completed the program of preparation.

A priest/deacon may delay, for a just cause, the witnessing of a marriage as long as such cause continues and the priest offers counseling. Just cause would include, but is not limited to, the following:

- a) Non-practice of the Catholic Faith by Catholic party or parties with no intention of returning to the practice of the faith.
- b) Lack of readiness for marriage as assessed by the priest/deacon, who consults with parents and professional counselors where needed.
- c) Refusal of the parties to participate in the preparation that applies to them.

## **Place of the Wedding Celebration**

Marriages between two Catholics are to be celebrated in the parish church of either the bride or groom. Marriages between a Catholic and a non-Catholic are to be celebrated in the parish church of the Catholic. The pastor of the Catholic party may grant permission for the marriage to be celebrated in another Catholic church.

For exceptional reasons, the Moderator of the Curia or the Chancellor may give permission to celebrate the marriage in the church of the non-Catholic party.

For very serious reasons, a marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized party may be allowed in another appropriate building. The Moderator of the Curia and the Chancellor may grant this permission.

No outdoor weddings are allowed in the Archdiocese of Mobile.

### **Appeal**

If the marriage is delayed, the couple may appeal to the Moderator of the Curia or the Chancellor.

### **Validation of Marriage**

If a couple attempts marriage contrary to the laws of the Church, a validation is permitted only after the couple has completed adequate preparation and evaluation.

### **Exceptions**

When pastoral considerations require it, request for exceptions to this policy may be referred to the Moderator of the Curia or to the Chancellor.