

Diocese of San Diego

GUIDELINES FOR MARRIAGE FORMATION

“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.” *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II, 1981, n. 51.

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 to twelve months before their intended wedding date. The pastor of the parish may grant exceptions to this, but only for a serious reason. We recommend that couples start their marriage preparation process *prior* to setting a wedding date.

Ideally, couples should complete the formal preparation process no less than two months before the wedding.

“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 for the Sacrament of Marriage*, n. 51.

Location of Marriage Preparation vis-à-vis the Wedding

It is a common practice for engaged couples to choose to get married outside of their home parish; for example at the parish they grew up attending, which may be in another state or country, or perhaps a particular destination that is popular with weddings. Regardless of where couples choose to get married, engaged couples should prepare for marriage at the parish where they actively attend and participate ¹and where they will likely continue to attend after the wedding. Many young couples today actively attend a particular parish but never think of registering. If couples do not have a home parish, they should prepare for marriage at the parish

¹ This may or may not be the parish in which they reside jurisdictionally. Many couples live in close proximity (within a 20-30 minute drive) to a handful of parishes, and they will select one based on a variety of factors, not simply where they reside jurisdictionally.

where they are most likely to attend after their wedding. Marriage preparation then becomes an opportunity to help couples connect with a local parish and better appreciate the gift of parish community.

Collaborative Effort

The couples' complete experience of preparation for marriage is a collaborative effort between the parish and the diocesan Office for Family Life & Spirituality, respecting the guidelines set forth by the diocese. Ultimately, each couple's marriage preparation is under the direction of the pastor of the parish and those he designates to assist with marriage preparation.

The Process

1. The engaged couple prepares for sacramental marriage under the guidance of a *marriage preparation minister* at the parish level. This individual is typically a priest or deacon, but can also be a designated and commissioned lay minister. The pastor is ultimately responsible for the preparation of couples in his parish.
2. Completion of all applicable diocesan forms, including the prenuptial questionnaire.
3. Completion and review of a pre-marriage inventory. The recommended inventory in the Diocese of San Diego is FOCCUS (www.foccusinc.com).
4. Participation in a marriage catechumenate at the parish level. The recommended catechumenal process in the Diocese of San Diego is *Witness to Love*. In *Witness to Love*, engaged couples choose a mentor couple who is active in a parish and has a marriage they admire, and then meets with them 4-6 times. For couples preparing for initiation, the RCIA process may be included as part of their marriage catechumenate.
5. Attendance at one or more formation retreats/events, such as the Diocesan *Celebrating Your Love Day*, an Engaged Encounter Weekend, a Marriage Encounter Weekend (for couples already civilly married at least 2-3 years), or an equivalent parish-based retreat. Non-diocesan online marriage preparation programs (i.e. catholicmarriageprepclass.com) should only be an option for couples for whom it impossible to attend a San Diego-based retreat, due to scheduling reasons or otherwise.

Pre-Marriage Curriculum

Celebrating Your Love (CYL) Diocesan Day (English or Spanish), or its equivalent, is recommended as part of the immediate marriage preparation for engaged couples. It is a daylong catechetical program of learning, prayer, dialogue, and reflection, with a particular emphasis on the meaning of marriage *as a sacrament*.

“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*

accept responsibly and joyfully as the Lord's collaborators." *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, Pontifical Council for the Family, 1996, n. 48.

Other recommended programs of marriage formation include:

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

Catholic Marriage Encounter Weekend (English or Spanish) is similar to Engaged Encounter, but for couples already married. Couples preparing for the Sacrament of Marriage should be civilly married for at least 2-3 years.

A New Beginning (English only) is a special marriage formation program designed for couples entering re-marriage after one or both partners has experienced loss through death or divorce. The format is a one-day conference held on a Saturday and addresses topics related to blended families.

"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 remarriages." *Faithful to Each Other Forever*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1989, p. 135.

Workshops and courses in **Fertility Awareness Based Methods (FABM) of family planning** are available throughout the diocese and online to assist engaged couples in the practice of responsible parenthood and ongoing discernment around family planning. You will find a list of recommended NFP providers and local instructors on our website at sdcatholic.org/fabm.

Special Areas of Concern

Interreligious Marriages

An *interreligious* marriage refers to a marriage in which one partner is Catholic and one is not. An *ecumenical marriage* refers to a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized person from another Christian tradition. An *interfaith marriage* is a marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person of another faith tradition (such as Judaism or Islam). For validity, a dispensation from the impediment of disparity of cult (canon 1086) is necessary for any marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person. Permission is also required for an ecumenical marriage.

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 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 begin a conversation about their future 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 and respect for their partner's faith tradition. Those involved in marriage preparation must ensure that each partner enjoys 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 what they hold in common.

"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.

From Civil to Sacramental

"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 receive the sacrament of marriage should meet with a marriage formation minister to begin their preparation process. There are ways to contextualize marriage preparation so that it better meets the needs of couples who have already been civilly married for more than a few years. For example, instead of taking the FOCCUS, couples might take the REFOCCUS marital inventory instead. A Marriage Encounter Weekend might be the most appropriate retreat option. The *Celebrating Your Love* Diocesan Day is structured to meet the needs of any couple preparing for the sacrament of marriage, regardless of whether or how long they have been civilly married. Some parishes may choose to provide a group-based catechumenate process specifically for those who are civilly married.

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. Moreover, 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.

Statistically, teenage marriages are twice as likely to end in divorce as marriages that occur in couples who are in their twenties.

Pastors and/or 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 these considerations:

“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.” *Ibid.*