



**DIOCESE OF
SAN DIEGO** | OFFICE FOR
FAMILY LIFE &
SPIRITUALITY



Marriage Preparation Guidelines

“Let us put our minds and hearts at the service of future families. I assure you that the Lord will sustain us, give us wisdom and strength, make our enthusiasm grow, and above all, allow us to experience the ‘delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing’, as we proclaim the Gospel of the family to new generations.”

-Pope Francis, Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life

Congratulations on your engagement!

We’re so glad that you’ve chosen to marry in the Catholic Church. It is a cause for great joy! We are privileged to accompany you on this “journey of your love”, and honored that you have entrusted us with equipping you to traverse both the joys and the inevitable challenges that married life brings. As you encounter Christ’s love in your relationship with each other, your marriage will be nourished and transformed by His grace.

May God continue blessing you in this process of growing in closer and deeper relationship with God through Christ and with each other. With families and friends around you, may they be your source of support and encouragement for you. And may our Blessed Mother Mary be part of your journey in your life of marriage and family.

Bishop Michael Pham

Marriage Prep vis-à-vis Wedding Prep

These guidelines pertain to the preparation process for the Sacrament of Marriage, not preparation for the wedding. While marriage prep and wedding prep are certainly related, they are two separate processes that frequently take place at different locations altogether, perhaps even in different states or countries. It is common for couples to celebrate their wedding at the parish where they were raised or more likely a parish close to their wedding reception. Furthermore, preparation for the wedding itself (choosing the music, readings, etc.) may not take place until a few months before the wedding, whereas the marriage preparation process typically begins much earlier than that.

Where should couples prepare for marriage?

The **marriage preparation process should take place at the engaged couple's home parish**, since the norm is for sacramental preparation to be rooted in one's own parish community. By "home parish", we mean the place where one or both parties actually attend Mass, as well as living close enough to be part of the community. Traditionally, general custom calls for Catholics to "register" at their home parish, but this doesn't actually always happen in practice. There are many Catholics who feel at home and become quite involved in a particular parish without ever actually registering. It is recommended that couples register (if they're not already) when they begin the marriage prep process.

If the bride and groom are members of different parishes, then couples should choose the parish where they will (or where they are most likely to) attend after the wedding. Marriage preparation thus becomes an opportunity to help couples connect with their parish and better appreciate the gift of parish life.

What if we don't have a home parish?

In many cases, couples may not be actively attending Mass and/or may not have a home parish. We recommend that couples take this opportunity to start attending Mass together as a couple and **find a parish that feels like "home"** to them. While couples don't necessarily need to choose the parish that's geographically closest to them, they should be realistic about finding a parish that is at least in their general neighborhood.¹ That way, they will be much more likely to remain connected after the wedding.

How soon should we begin the marriage preparation process?

This process of marriage prep is a wonderful time to intentionally focus on your relationship with God, with each other, and with the Church, recognizing that marriage isn't just about the two of you but about how you have been called in your own unique way to become a missionary outpost of the Gospel through the witness of covenantal love. Marriage prep is a time to be truly honest with each other about your strengths and growth areas as a couple. Finally, it is a time to ensure that you have a strong community around you that will be there for you during the good times and the bad. Couples make a vow to each other to do these things, but as a Church we also make a vow to be there for you.

All this is to say that couples are called to embark on the "journey of your love", or the **Marriage Catechumenate**, which doesn't, in fact, end with the wedding. One could argue that the wedding is just the beginning. But for the purposes of helping couples engage with the catechumenal journey in a meaningful way, we recommend starting the marriage prep process **at least 9-12 months before their proposed wedding date**. With that being said, there's no reason couples can't start the marriage prep process before they've even set their wedding date.

While exceptions to the 9-12-month rule can be made, they should be done so with great reservation on the part of both parish leaders and the couples themselves. Couples that rush their marriage prep process may be doing themselves a grave injustice. We can't emphasize enough how important it is to take this process of preparing for marriage seriously, giving themselves completely and intentionally to the process rather than just seeing it as a series of hoops to jump through in order to arrive at a

¹ A good rule of thumb is that if the parish is more than a 20-minute car ride away on a Sunday, it's probably too far away.

particular destination (in this case the wedding). In fact, the catechumenal journey itself allows for a **Rite of Entry into the marriage catechumenate** in the same way that an individual becomes a catechumen after the Rite of Acceptance during the process of preparing for Baptism. Before getting married, our engaged couples are to become “marriage catechumens”!

Who is in charge of the marriage prep process for each couple?

Ultimately, each marriage catechumen is under the direction of the pastor of the parish where the marriage preparation process takes place, along with those he designates to assist with marriage preparation, regardless of where the wedding is taking place. The pastor may not necessarily be involved in the marriage preparation of each and every couple, but he will have a marriage prep team that he works closely with, which may include priests, deacons, and lay staff/volunteers. The role of the diocese, through the Office for Family Life & Spirituality, is to provide support and guidelines for parishes when it comes to marriage prep. Each couple’s 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.

What do couples need to do before they can set their wedding date?

Before setting a wedding date, it is crucial that couples meet with a priest, deacon, or other qualified parish leader to ensure that they are free to marry in the Catholic Church. Unpacking the full meaning of validity through a deepened understanding of the Sacrament of Marriage is itself part of the marriage prep process, but a priest or deacon at least needs to meet with the couple in order to establish this baseline before moving forward with the formal marriage preparation process. In this initial meeting with a marriage prep minister, typically a priest or deacon, the couple needs to show that they understand, at least at a basic level, what we mean by marriage in the Catholic Church, that is, a commitment rooted in God that is free, total (lifelong), faithful, and fruitful. Before setting their wedding date, we also recommend that couples take the pre-marriage inventory and choose their Marriage Godparents (more on this below). Couples that are waiting on confirmation of the status of a previous marriage may need to wait until any previous marriages have been declared null before they can enter into the marriage catechumenate.

If the couple is planning a “destination wedding”, then general custom calls for the preparing parish to prepare a letter to the wedding parish indicating that the couple has started the marriage prep process and is free to marry. **Couples should not schedule their wedding anywhere (especially in another country) without first starting the marriage prep process in their home parish and diocese.**

Taking the Pre-Marriage Inventory

One of the first things that couples should do during marriage prep is take a pre-marriage inventory (PMI), which will help them to make an honest assessment of their strengths and growth areas as a couple. In our diocese, most parishes use the FOCCUS pre-marriage inventory. The FOCCUS can bring the couple to an awareness of important issues that they perhaps haven’t even talked about yet. The preparing parish can set up the couple to take the FOCCUS by creating a session for them at www.foccusinc.com, and sending the couple an email (FOCCUS does this automatically when you create the session) with instructions on how to login and take it online.

Once the engaged couple takes the FOCCUS, they should meet with a facilitator, often the priest or deacon who initially met with them or perhaps a supporting 'coach couple', at least once or twice. The purpose of these meetings is to help the couple find clarity in terms of how they are called to strengthen their relationship and grow as a couple. In addition, the FOCCUS inventory will help the couple assess their own understanding of the marital covenant and confirm whether they are actually called to marriage. The FOCCUS facilitator can help the couple better understanding the meaning of marriage as a commitment that is free, total, faithful, and fruitful, and as such confirm for themselves that the couple's marriage will be valid.

During these meetings, the marriage prep minister can also assist the couple in discerning their choice of a mentor couple, or Marriage Godparents, if they haven't already chosen one.

Choosing Marriage Godparents, or a mentor couple

One of the most important factors in a healthy marriage is developing a strong community of other faithful couples who are walking this journey with you. As such, we ask each and every engaged couple to **choose "Marriage Godparents"**, in the same way that they would choose godparents or sponsors for Baptism or Confirmation. Many couples already do this in a traditional or cultural sense (ie. "padrinos"/best man & maiden of honor), but we encourage couples to choose Marriage Godparents based on the following guidelines:

- 1) They are married in the Church and have been for at least a few years.
- 2) They are practicing Catholics (if they are an interfaith/ecumenical couple, this would just apply to the Catholic party).
- 3) They have a marriage you admire and can relate to/aspire to.
- 4) They are parishioners at the parish where you are preparing for marriage, or at least a parish that is nearby (near enough that you could easily get together with them in-person and on a regular basis).

Entering into the Marriage Catechumenate

Once engaged couples have met with their priest or deacon and confirmed that they are free to marry, reviewed the pre-marriage inventory, and chosen their Marriage Godparents, they are ready to enter into the Marriage Catechumenate. Many parishes have a **Rite of Entry into the Marriage Catechumenate** which marks the beginning of this new stage. It allows engaged couples to publicly declare their intention to commit themselves to this journey of marriage formation. The Rite of Entry is also an opportunity for the parish to commit to praying for you and with you on this journey.

Meeting and growing with your Marriage Godparents

The majority of the Marriage Catechumenate will be spent with your Marriage Godparents, attending Mass together, and meeting monthly at the mentors' home for prayerful reflection and dialogue. Currently, **Witness to Love** is the recommended format for facilitating the encounter between the engaged couple and their mentors. Witness to Love provides various materials from guidebooks and videos to supplemental online course content with the aim of creating a context for growth among the couples. If the parish is not equipped to help you get started with Witness to Love, engaged couples can get started by filling out the form at <https://witnessstolove.org/begin-hybrid-experience>.

Marriage Preparation Retreats

Engaged couples should plan on attending one or more marriage prep retreats as part of the marriage prep process. The vast majority of engaged couples preparing for marriage in the Diocese of San Diego will attend either one or both of the following: the Diocesan **Celebrating Your Love (CYL) Day** (colloquially known as the “Pre-Cana”) and the **Engaged Encounter Weekend**. We encourage couples to attend both if they can at least a month or two apart. Engaged couples should register for the retreats as soon as possible.

The CYL is held once a month on Saturdays at different locations throughout the diocese. Couples can register and view all available dates at sdcatholic.org/cyl. Once a particular retreat is filled, it will be removed as an option from the website. Retreats usually fill up at least a few months in advance. The Engaged Encounter is held over a weekend from Friday night to Sunday afternoon, typically once a month either at the Mission San Luis Rey Retreat Center in Oceanside or at the St. Charles Retreat Center in South Bay. Just as with the CYL, couples are encouraged to reserve their Engaged Encounter weekend as soon as possible by visiting sandiego.engagedencounter.com.

Marriage prep ministers should be aware of a few other in-person retreat options applicable to some couples, but not all. For example, the **Marriage Encounter Weekend** is a marriage enrichment retreat formatted similarly to Engaged Encounter that may be more applicable for couples that have been civilly married for more than five years. The Diocesan ***A New Beginning Retreat*** is typically held twice a year for couples who have been married before but are free to marry again in the Church.

What if there aren't any retreat dates that work for us? Are there any online options?

Couples should take a look at their calendars and book their marriage prep retreats as soon as possible so they can make suitable arrangements. Between the CYL and Engaged Encounter, there will typically be at least a couple of retreat options every month. The longer a couple waits to register, however, the fewer options there will be since retreats tend to fill up a few months beforehand. Couples whose marriage prep processes are being rushed will also, naturally, have fewer options to choose from.

Online marriage prep courses should be seen as supplemental to in-person retreats. Online marriage prep courses are an option for couples for whom it is impossible to attend in-person events due to military deployment or immigration reasons.

Canonical Q&A's

Do both the bride and the groom need to be Catholic in order to be married in the Catholic Church?

No. As long as at least either the bride or the groom is a baptized Catholic, then the couple is free to marry in the Church.

What about Confirmation? Do Catholics need to be confirmed to be married in the Church?

No. While strongly encouraged, it is not technically a requirement. As long as both parties are validly baptized, then they are free to enter into a sacramental marriage. With that being said, it's fair to ask a bride or groom that wants to be married in the Church and takes their faith seriously: “*Why wouldn't*

you want to be confirmed?” For some couples, the catechumenal journey might involve preparation for both marriage and confirmation.

We’re civilly married and would like to be married in the Church. My spouse would like to be confirmed and is in the OCIA. Our priest says that we need to schedule our wedding before he can get confirmed, but another priest said he needs to be confirmed first before we can get married. Who is right?

See previous question. First of all, someone shouldn’t be pressured into OCIA because they want to get married in the Church; likewise, they shouldn’t be pressured into marriage because they want to be confirmed. On the other hand, it’s fair to ask: “Why *wouldn’t* you want to be confirmed?” Or vice versa, if you want to get confirmed and you are married civilly, “why *wouldn’t* you want to celebrate your marriage in the Church?” Both of those questions should be raised with a trusted priest or spiritual advisor. But at the end of the day, our recommendation is to give both preparations the time and space they deserve and not try to schedule one around the other.

What makes a Catholic marriage sacramental as opposed to just valid?

If both parties are baptized (at least one of them Catholic), then the marriage is a sacrament. If a Catholic marries someone who’s not baptized, it can still be valid, it just wouldn’t be a sacrament.

What is the purpose of all the paperwork?

Ultimately, the purpose of the paperwork is to confirm that you are free to marry in the Church. It is important to remember that in marriage, it is the couple themselves who are ministers of the Rite, not the presider. As such, if both groom and bride are baptized, then the marriage is a sacrament. The Church asks for a recent copy of your baptism certificate because, in theory, it should be up to date and include notations of any other sacraments you have received, saving you from having to retrieve additional sacramental documentation. If either groom or bride was previously married, then additional documentation is required to confirm that you are free to marry again.