**Marriage Preparation Guidelines (Template for parishes to use and adapt)**

Dear friends,

Congratulations on your engagement!

We’re so pleased you’ve decided to marry in the Catholic Church. Just as you’re about to commit your lives to each other forever, the Church is committed to your lifelong marriage. Our task is to prepare you for the journey of your love—the journey of a lifetime!—to accompany you through all the joys and the inevitable struggles of daily married life, and to show you what’s so unique and wonderful about Catholic Marriage.

As you think about marriage, you are undoubtedly experiencing a whirlwind of dreams, hopes, and aspirations. It is our prayer that you will be among the couples who—among the trials of daily living—have experienced a lifetime of delight and fulfillment as married couples. You deserve an extraordinary marriage—and that’s what Catholic marriage is all about!

As Roman Catholics, we are the beneficiaries of a wonderful spiritual inheritance. This inheritance comes to us from teachings of our Lord in the Scriptures and from the two-thousand year guidance of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Please review carefully the contents of *Journey of Your Love*. It encompasses the liturgical/sacramental policies of the universal Church, including those of our local bishop.

Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage is a step-by-step process. May our Lord, in his faithful love for you, bless *your* every step. Please know that we are here to assist you in this preparation process—one that will lead, we pray, to a lifetime of blessings and content.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

*Pastor and signature*

*“God who created man out of love also calls him to love—the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God, who is himself love. Since God created him man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man. It is good, very good, in the creator’s eyes. And this love which God blesses is intended to be fruitful and to be realized in the common work of watching over creation.”*

*-Catechism of the Catholic Church #1612*

**Spiritual Preparation for Marriage**

Engaged couples should prepare for marriage at their “home” parish or at least the parish of either the bride or groom, regardless of where the wedding is taking place.

The Church’s preparation process for marriage is not just for a single day, but for a lifetime of love and commitment. Our hope is that each couple is able to recognize the importance of their preparation for marriage by building upon their own personal spirituality. As they prepare for the Sacrament of Marriage, couples should show signs of growth in their commitment to Christ by participating in parish life, especially the Sunday Eucharist.

The model of Christian marriage is Christ’s relationship of love and fidelity to his people, the Church. Couples should dedicate themselves to developing an understanding of Jesus’ love for the Church, and what marriage means within that context. Specifically, they should understand that marriage is permanent, that it means being faithful to one’s spouse, and indicates a willingness to lay down one’s life for the other. You will be provided with a marriage preparation minister—who may be a priest, deacon, or other designated person—who can accompany and assist you in this journey of preparation.

*“Greater love has no man than this, that a man may lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)*

When two baptized persons exchange wedding vows, they share the life of Christ that they have received in baptism. The ministers of marriage extend the Lord’s presence to each other and become a sign of the Lord’s presence to others. The minister of the Rite of Marriage is the priest or deacon who assists, witnesses, and authorizes the right.

In order to have a true exchange of promises, both the bride and groom must be responsible adults, capable of forming a community of life and love. The couple must honestly and, without reservation, declare to each other their willingness to assume the duties of marriage according to the teachings of Christ and the Church.

*“By coming to restore the original order of creation disturbed by sin, Jesus himself gives us the strength and grace to live marriage in the new dimension of the Kingdom/Reign of God.”*

*-Catechism of the Catholic Church #1615*

*“Sacred Scripture begins with the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God and concludes with a vision of the “wedding feast of the Lamb.” (cf. Rev. 19:7,9; Gen. 1:26-27) Scripture speaks throughout of marriage and its ‘mystery,’ its institution and the meaning God has given it…”*

*-Catechism of the Catholic Church #1602*

**Marriage Preparation Guidelines**

What we indicate in these guidelines reflects the policies of the universal Church and the Diocese of San Diego. Each one is an extension of the other. The marriage preparation process itself is a multi-phased effort under the direction of the Diocesan Office for Family Life and Spirituality, in collaboration with local parishes. The process typically involves the following:

1. Initial meeting with Marriage Formation Director (typically priest, deacon, or other designated minister): The purpose of this initial meeting is to provide the engaged couple with an orientation of the process as well as to confirm that they are free to marry. The Marriage Formation Director can offer some insight into the theology of marriage to ensure that the couple has a basic understanding of what they are seeking. The marriage preparation process only deepens this understanding, which will unfold fully as the couple matures into their married relationship.
2. Taking and reviewing the FOCCUS pre-marriage inventory: Following the initial meeting, engaged couples will take the FOCCUS pre-marriage inventory. The purpose of the FOCCUS is to help couples make an honest assessment of their strengths and growth areas as a couple, including areas that they perhaps haven’t discussed yet. The parish will set up a FOCCUS session for you and your fiancé(e) to complete and you will receive an email with instructions on how to do so. In our parish, you will either meet either with you Marriage Formation Director or with another trained FOCCUS facilitator. Please make sure both have completed it before your next meeting. Engaged couples will typically meet with their FOCCUS facilitator at least twice to review the results.
3. Choose Marriage Godparents: 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, or a mentor couple. 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:
4. They are married in the Church and have been for at least a few years.
5. They are practicing Catholics (if they are an interfaith/ecumenical couple, this would just apply to the Catholic party).
6. They have a marriage you admire and can relate to/aspire to.
7. They are parishioners at our parish, 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).
8. Register for one or more marriage prep retreats.
   1. The Diocesan **Celebrating Your Love Day** is held monthly on Saturdays at different locations throughout the diocese. Visit sdcatholic.org/cyl for dates and registration. Please sign up as early as possible in order to secure your preferred date/location!
   2. The **Engaged Encounter Weekend** (Friday evening-Sunday morning) also takes place monthly at either Mission San Luis Rey in Oceanside or St. Charles Retreat Center in Imperial Beach. Register at sandiego.engagedencounter.com.
9. Rite of Entry into the Marriage Catechumenate: Once engaged couples have taken the FOCCUS and chosen their mentor couple, they are ready to enter into the Marriage Catechumenate. Please discuss with your Marriage Formation Director about the possibility of a simple Rite of Entry at Mass to mark the beginning of this important stage.
10. The Marriage Catechumenate: The marriage catechumenate will primarily be spent with your Marriage Godparents, attending Mass together, and meeting monthly at their home for prayerful reflection and dialogue. Currently, **Witness to Love** (WTL) is our recommended format for facilitating the encounter between the engaged couple and their mentors. WTL provides various materials from guidebooks and videos to supplemental online course content with the aim of creating a context for growth among the couples. Either a WTL “coach” here in our parish will help you get started, or you can begin on your own at <https://witnesstolove.org/begin-hybrid-experience>.

**Date for Weddings**

Couples are strongly encouraged to contact the parish to begin marriage preparation at least nine months—preferably one year—before their proposed wedding date. In the case of a previous marriage, couples are advised to refrain from scheduling their weddings until the annulment process has been completed, a decree of nullity has been granted, and no restrictions apply.

The purpose of this 9-12 month policy is:

1. To provide the priest, deacon or other marriage preparation minister time to assess with the couple their spiritual, personal and canonical readiness to marry.
2. To allow for adequate marriage instruction and preparation.
3. To allow the couple time to pray deeply and to reflect seriously upon their decision to enter into Christian marriage.

**Required Documents**

It is the responsibility of the couple to obtain the following documentation as needed:

* Sacramental Records: Baptized parties are to obtain a baptismal certificate. These certificates may be obtained from the church of baptism and should be dated within the last six months.
* Previous Marriage Records: If a person has been married before, it is necessary to provide the following:
  + The death certificate of former spouse or
  + A declaration of nullity
* Civil Marriage License: This license is to be obtained within sixty days of the celebration of the wedding.
  + If the couple is already married civilly, then a copy of the marriage record is required.

**Marriage within a church**

Because marriage is a Sacrament, the normal place for a Catholic wedding celebration is in a Catholic church, since the church more fully represents the ongoing sacramental life of the individual and the Catholic community. If both the bride and groom are Catholics, the wedding can be held at the parish church of either party. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the "Foundation and confirmation of all Christian Practice" (CCC, 2181).

*“In the Latin Rite the celebration of marriage between two Catholic faithful normally takes place during Holy Mass, because of the connection of all the sacraments with the Paschal Mystery of Christ. In the Eucharist the memorial of the New Covenant is realized, the New Covenant in which Christ has united himself forever to the Church, his beloved bride for whom he gave himself up.*

*It is therefore fitting that the spouses should seal their consent to give themselves to each other through the offering of their own lives by uniting it to the offering of Christ for his Church made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice, and by receiving the Eucharist, so that, communicating in the same Body and Blood of Christ, they may form but “one body” in Christ.*

*-Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1621

(please review the intervening paragraphs—for more theology, and especially paragraphs #1625-1666—which contain more specific applications)

If only one member of the couple is Catholic, the marriage is usually at the parish of the Catholic party. A couple can, for good reason, request that their wedding be at another Catholic parish. For pastoral reasons, couple can also request that their wedding be held at a non-Catholic church if, for example, one the individuals is not Roman Catholic but is actively engaged in the life of their own particular Christian faith community.

**Musical Arrangements**

Because you have chosen to respond to Christ’s invitation to celebrate the Sacrament of Marriage, all hymns should reflect the full reality of the wedding. The lyrics of songs chosen for the wedding liturgy should express the Christian concept of life, rather than one which is purely secular. The liturgy of marriage celebrates not only the human love between two persons but also their relation to God who is love. The texts *must always be in conformity with Catholic doctrine, indeed they should be drawn chiefly from Holy Scripture, and from liturgical sources.* Constitution on Sacred Liturgy, Vatican Council II, #121

**Dress Code**

On the day of your wedding you are encouraged to wear the color white, which is symbolic of baptism. It also represents holiness and purity of love. All wedding attire should be modest in nature. Per Psalm 96:9, “Worship the Lord in holy attire.”

**Marriage Preparation for Weddings in a different Catholic Parish**

When a couple lives outside of the parish where they wish the wedding to occur, the preparation process should be initiated in the parish where the Catholic party or one of the Catholic parties resides. All the requirements of the parish where the preparation is taking place should be followed. The couple must leave time so that the marriage file can be prepared in time for the church where the wedding will take place to receive and review it. If you are being prepared somewhere else to be married at our parish, your marriage preparation minister should contact our parish to inform us that you are free to marry and have begun the marriage preparation process in your home parish. Once that has taken place, the couple can reserve their wedding date.

**Conclusions**

Although these guidelines may seem extensive, their intent is to answer many of the questions that brides and grooms have. Please be honest and open about ANY other concerns or problems that you might have; we are here to support you. May God continue to bless you as you and your future spouse prepare for the reception of this wonderful Sacrament.

*“Married life is a process of growth in which each spouse is God’s means of helping the other to mature. Change, improvement, the flowering of the good qualities present in each person—all these are possible. Each marriage is a kind of ‘salvation history,’ which from fragile beginnings—thanks to God’s gift and a creative and generous response on our part—grows over time into something precious and enduring.”*

*-Pope Francis, Amoris Laetitia 221*