



GENERAL GUIDELINES

REASONS FOR A CATECHUMENATE

- 4 The idea of creating *catechumenal pathways for married life* is not new in ecclesial reflection.⁵ Following the two Synods on the Family in 2014 and 2015, Pope Francis called for such a proposal several times in his ordinary magisterium, and it has gradually taken shape in his pastoral reflection, offering outlines for a renewed journey of accompaniment on the path toward marriage.⁶

- 5 In the early Church—according to the shared conviction of the Church Fathers—a clear Christian orientation in life must precede the celebration of the sacrament. “One must first become a disciple of the Lord, and then be admitted to holy Baptism,” stated St. Basil.⁷ Faith and conversion were two unequivocal signs of such a new orientation of life. In fact, the ancient catechumenate was a time to form candidates for Baptism by nurturing their faith and encouraging them to conversion. Faith opened the heart and mind to God and Jesus Christ’s work of salvation; conversion sought to correct behaviors, habits, and life practices that were incompatible with the new Christian existence which the catechumens were about to embrace.

In a similar way to that which occurred before Baptism in the early Church, a path of faith formation and accompaniment toward

5 The expression appears in various studies on the subject, including F. Coudreau, in *Verkündigung und Glaube. Festgabe für F. X. Arnold*, Freiburg 1958, and B. Häring, *Sociology of the Family*, Rome 1962. Since the 1960s, some bishops’ conferences also mentioned it in several national and regional documents. In addition, the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* already marked the stages of the itinerary for marriage preparation, starting from the analogy with the baptismal catechumenate: remote, proximate, final, and subsequent accompaniment of the spouses (see no. 66).

6 “I wish to recommend the commitment of a *marriage catechumenate*, intended as an indispensable itinerary for young people and couples aimed at reviving their Christian conscience, sustained by the grace of the two sacraments, Baptism and Marriage. As I have explained on other occasions, the catechumenate is unique in itself, since it is baptismal—that is, rooted in baptism—and at the same time, in life it must assume a permanent character—as the *grace* of the Sacrament of Marriage is permanent” (Francis, Address on the Occasion of the Inauguration of the Judicial Year of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota, January 29, 2018).

7 Basil of Caesarea, *De baptism* I, 1.

the acquisition of a Christian lifestyle—a path specifically intended for couples—would offer great assistance today in relation to the celebration of marriage.⁸ Indeed, the catechumenate can inspire new methods for faith renewal in every age, because it proposes a type of accompaniment for people—pedagogical, gradual, and ritualized—which always retains its effectiveness. Specifically, the marriage catechumenate does not aim to be a simple catechesis, nor to transmit a doctrine. It aims to let the mystery of sacramental grace resonate among the spouses, since it belongs to them by virtue of the sacrament: it seeks to bring to life the presence of Christ in them and among them.⁹ For this reason, the Church must go beyond a type of formation which is solely intellectual, theoretical, and general (i.e., religious literacy) when engaging with those who intend to marry. We need to walk with them along a path that leads to an encounter with Christ, or to deepen this relationship, and assist them in making an authentic discernment of their own vocation to marriage, both on a personal and interpersonal level.¹⁰

THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS TASK

- 6 It is the duty of the entire ecclesial community to elaborate a catechumenal pathway for marriage preparation and to offer concrete

8 “It is necessary . . . to make preparatory programs for the Sacrament of Marriage ever more effective, not only for human growth, but above all for the faith of the engaged couples. The fundamental objective of the encounters is to help engaged couples realize a progressive integration into the mystery of Christ, in the Church and with the Church. This carries a progressive maturation in the faith, through the proclamation of the Word of God, adhesion to and generously following Christ” (Francis, Address on the Occasion of the Inauguration of the Judicial Year of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota, January 21, 2017).

9 “God, who called the couple *to* Marriage, continues to call them *in* Marriage” (Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, no. 51, emphases added).

10 “They do not need to be taught the entire Catechism or overwhelmed with too much information. Here, too, ‘it is not great knowledge but rather the ability to feel and relish things interiorly that contents and satisfies the soul.’ Quality is more important than quantity, and priority should be given—along with a renewed proclamation of the kerygma—to an attractive and helpful presentation of information that helps couples live the rest of their lives together with ‘great courage and generosity’” (*Amoris laetitia*, no. 207).

accompaniment to couples along this path. The journey should be shared among priests, Christian spouses, religious men and women, and pastoral workers, who must collaborate among themselves and in agreement with their bishop. Marriage is not only a social act; for Christians, it is an “ecclesial” act. Therefore, the whole Church, as the body of Christ, takes charge of it, and feels the need to be of service to future families.¹¹

- 7 The conviction from which to begin—for engaged couples preparing for marriage and for pastoral workers accompanying them—is that marriage is not a point of arrival: it is a vocation, a path to holiness that embraces a person’s entire life.¹² Moreover, by virtue of their participation in the prophetic and royal priesthood of Christ, the lay faithful also receive a specific ecclesial mission in the sacrament of Marriage for which they need to be prepared and accompanied.¹³ Therefore, just as the Church takes care to prepare priests and religious to live out their vocation and mission by devoting long years of formation to them, in the same way the Church has a duty to adequately prepare those lay faithful who feel called to accept the vocation of marriage and to persevere in it throughout their lives by carrying out the mission with which they have been invested.¹⁴ The sacrament of Holy Orders, religious consecration, and the sacrament

11 The Christian community itself is called to become involved in the preparation of engaged couples for marriage, which is an ecclesial mission. Indeed, those couples “can help renew the fabric of the whole ecclesial body” (*Amoris laetitia*, no. 207).

12 “Both short-term and long-term marriage preparation should ensure that the couple do not view the wedding ceremony as the end of the road, but instead embark upon marriage as a lifelong calling based on a firm and realistic decision to face all trials and difficult moments together” (*Amoris laetitia*, no. 211).

13 “In virtue of the Sacrament, [spouses] are invested with a true and proper mission, so that, starting with the simple ordinary things of life they can make visible the love with which Christ loves his Church and continues to give his life for her” (*Amoris laetitia*, no. 121).

14 “Three or four meetings in the parish church cannot be defined as ‘marriage preparation.’ . . . The preparation must be mature and it takes time. It is not a formality: it is a sacrament. But it must be prepared with a true catechumenate” (Francis, Catechesis on the Commandments, 11/A: Do not commit adultery, October 24, 2018).

of Matrimony all deserve the same care, since the Lord calls men and women with the same intensity and love to one vocation or the other.

- 8 In order to effectively implement a renewed pastoral care of married life, it has now become indispensable that couples offering accompaniment, in parishes and family movements, as well as priests, already from the time of their seminary formation, and religious and consecrated men and women, be adequately formed and prepared in mutual complementarity and ecclesial co-responsibility.¹⁵ This natural communion in the apostolate between spouses and consecrated celibates has been part of the Church's life since its very beginnings, as shown by the example of Paul, who was assisted in his evangelizing activities by Aquila and Priscilla.¹⁶ However, that communion needs to be rediscovered and lived out fully today in parishes and at the diocesan level, because the diversity of approach and language, the diversity of life experiences, and the diversity of charisms and spiritual gifts proper to each vocation and state of life offer great enrichment in the transmission of the faith to young couples and in their initiation into married life.
- 9 Those entrusted with pastoral ministry—parish priests, religious men and women, bishops—perform an important task of oversight and coordination.¹⁷ In particular, priests and parish priests—usually the first to receive young people's request to marry in the Church—have a great responsibility to welcome, encourage, and deftly guide engaged couples, as well as to immediately impress upon them the

15 See *Amoris laetitia*, no. 203; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1632.

16 See Acts 18:1–3, 18:18–19, 18:26; Rom 16:3–5; 1 Cor 16:19.

17 “This catechumenate is principally entrusted to you, parish priests, indispensable collaborators of the Bishops. I encourage you to implement it despite the difficulties you may encounter” (Francis, Address to Participants in the Course on the Marriage Process, February 25, 2017).

profound religious dimension involved in Christian marriage, which is far superior to a simple “civil ceremony” or “matter of custom.”¹⁸

- 10** Married couples must also play a primary role alongside priests and religious. The preparation of couples for marriage is a true work of evangelization,¹⁹ and the lay faithful, especially married couples, receive an equally important call as religious and ordained ministers to participate in the Church’s evangelizing mission: they are pastoral workers.²⁰ Because of their unique experience, they can offer concrete support along the journey of accompaniment by intervening as witnesses and companions of couples, both before and during marriage, regarding many aspects of married life (emotional, sexual, communicational, and spiritual) and family life (duties of care and nurturing, openness to life, reciprocal self-offering, raising children, and mutual support in daily labors, difficulties, and illness). Spouses who make themselves available for this valuable service of accompaniment receive great benefit themselves. Indeed, carrying out a pastoral commitment together and proclaiming the “Gospel

18 “Priests, especially parish priests, are the first interlocutors of young people who wish to form a new family and wed in the Sacrament of Matrimony. The support of the ordained minister will help the future spouses to understand that marriage between a man and a woman is a sign of the spousal union between Christ and the Church, helping them to become aware of the profound meaning of the step they are about to take” (Francis, Address to Participants in the Diocesan Formation Course on Marriage and Family promoted by the Tribunal of the Roman Rota, September 27, 2018).

19 “Today more than ever, this preparation is presented as a true and proper occasion for the evangelization of adults and, often, of the so-called distant ones. There are, indeed, numerous young people for whom the approach of the wedding is an opportunity to encounter once again the faith which has long been relegated to the margins of their lives; moreover, they experience a unique moment, often characterized by a readiness to re-examine and change the direction of their life. . . . It can be, therefore, an advantageous time for renewing their encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, with the message of the Gospel and with the teaching of the Church” (Francis, Address on the Inauguration of the Judicial Year of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota, January 21, 2017).

20 “Holy Christian couples . . . are the work of the Holy Spirit, who is always the protagonist of the mission, and they are already present in our territorial communities. . . . Let us think about pastoral care as a catechumenate before and after marriage. These are the couples that should do it and move forward” (Francis, Address to the Tribunal of the Roman Rota for the Inauguration of the Judicial Year, January 25, 2020).

of marriage” to others helps deepen a couple’s spiritual union, and enriches spouses both individually and as a couple. Nevertheless, lay people, particularly spouses as they live out this prominent ecclesial task, shall not replace the priest by taking on roles and tasks which are not proper to them. For their part, priests and religious shall take care not to limit the laity’s contribution to that of mere bystanders, since lay faithful are entitled to effective co-responsibility. Priests and religious, therefore, shall seek to embrace an attitude of constant listening and verification of their journey together with the married couples who work with them and who live the familial dimension firsthand, while avoiding the risk of being the sole agents or, on the other hand, of making excessive requests or delegating unduly, thereby running the risk of “exhausting families.”

RENEWING PASTORAL CARE OF MARRIED LIFE

- 11 Therefore, the pastoral renewal requested by Pope Francis since the beginning of his pontificate²¹ must also embrace the pastoral care of married life. In this field, the path of renewal can be traced out on the basis of three specific “principles”: interconnectedness, synodality, and continuity.
- 12 “Interconnectedness” means that the pastoral care of married life is not confined to the narrow arena of “meetings for engaged couples,” but “crosses” into other pastoral areas, which always seek to include it. Such an approach can avoid an inflexible division of pastoral care into “watertight compartments,” which diminish its effectiveness.

21 “Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way.’ I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and method of evangelization in their respective communities. A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving will inevitably prove illusory” (Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 33).

Rather, pastoral care of children, young people, and families should all advance in tandem by working in synergy. Each field needs to be aware of the others' pastoral journey and goals in order to engender a linear growth process and a gradual deepening of faith. The pastor should play an important role by coordinating along with the pastoral team. Additionally, it would be of great benefit to always include in each of these three fields a *vocational perspective*, which unifies and gives consistency to people's faith and life journey. Even *social pastoral care* should be integrated with pastoral care of the family, since social pastoral care cannot be properly understood without "listening" to the family, just as the family cannot be understood without taking into account how they are affected by their contemporary social reality.

- 13 "Synodality" defines the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church. The Church is communion, and concretely fulfills its essence of communion by walking together, coordinating among all pastoral fields, and encouraging the active participation of all her members in the mission of evangelization.²² The pastoral care of married life must also be carried out according to this synodal key. It must be "taken on" by all within the Church in a co-responsible manner, must span all pastoral spheres, and must go hand in hand with the shared journey of the Church in every historical epoch, growing with her and being updated and renewed within her.
- 14 "Continuity" refers to the nature of pastoral care of married life, which is not "episodic" but "prolonged in time"—one might even say "permanent." Such an approach makes it possible to set up pedagogical pathways to accompany children and young people throughout their various stages of growth—on both human and faith levels—toward

22 See International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, March 2, 2018, no. 6.

the gradual discovery of their vocation, whether it be to marriage, priesthood, or religious life. The marital vocation should therefore be rooted in the journey of Christian initiation into the faith even from childhood.²³

- 15 In light of these considerations, the Church needs to seriously rethink how she accompanies the human and spiritual growth of the faithful. Indeed, in many countries, the ordinary activity of parishes displays long periods of “pastoral abandonment” during certain moments in the lives of individuals and families, which unfortunately cause estrangement from the community and often also from the faith. Think, for example, of the experience of parents after receiving catechesis before the Baptism of their children, or of children after receiving their First Communion. In order to fill these “pastoral gaps,” specific vocational programs should be considered as a way to continue offering basic catechetical formation and other forms of accompaniment, so that parents can assist their children’s spiritual growth during childhood and adolescence, and feel supported in this aim by a community with which they can share their reflections and experiences.²⁴

23 *Amoris laetitia*, no. 206.

24 “Family and young people cannot be two parallel sectors of the pastoral care of our communities, but they must walk closely together, because very often young people are that which a family has given them in their period of growth. This perspective recomposes in a unitary fashion a vocational ministry attentive to expressing the face of Jesus in its many aspects” (Francis, Address at the Meeting with the Faithful During the Visit to Loreto, March 25, 2019).