



Evangelization as the Heart of Marriage Preparation

It would be great if most of the engaged couples who reached out to the parish office began with a deep understanding of and assent to the Church's teachings on sex and marriage. We'd still have lots of work to do, because living out these teachings in real life takes great virtue, but it would be a nice place to start. The reality, though, is that many, if not most, couples seeking Catholic marriage do not have a clear understanding of sacramental marriage or the Church's rather countercultural teachings about cohabitation, sex before marriage, contraception, or natural family planning because they lack the vision that is behind these teachings.

Effective marriage preparation has to cover several topics, some of which are quite practical, like finances and communication. It must also prepare couples to live the Church's teaching on contraception, natural family planning, and IVF. Before all of that, though, marriage prep must help couples understand the reality of sex and marriage. In 2017, Pope Francis said that we ought to approach marriage preparation as a "new catechumenate" (Address, the Inauguration of the Judicial Year of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota). This implies a process that begins with evangelization—a proclamation of good news and an encounter with Christ. It's from here that we can move on to solid teachings that flow from the Gospel and into practical, lived experience. This way of thinking also implies that beyond the sacrament there is mystagogy—ongoing formation and mentoring after the wedding day.

This doesn't mean that we have to burden couples with extra hours of classes; it means that we should order and plan our process with a clear goal in mind. Some parishes (or marriage prep leaders) may be tempted to skip ahead to communications and finance, compatibility tests, etc. Others may immediately focus on the wedding logistics to avoid tougher conversations. Still others, understanding that couples are quite likely imbued with a secular mindset, might launch right into the Church's tougher teachings on subjects like contraception.

The key, though, is to make the process complete, meaningful, and impactful. The ministry of the parish can help couples avoid becoming a statistic. Couples who pray together and live the Church's teaching on marriage have an exponentially lower divorce rate than others. To continue preparing couples for faithful and lasting marriages, we have to start with the proclamation of the good news, which always centers on Christ's love for the Church, and then build from there. We want to ensure that couples who contact the parish office with the exciting news of their engagement learn to connect their love to its ultimate source—God himself.

Here are five steps to keep in mind as we minister to these couples:

1. Best Foot Forward

The first point of contact—the person in the office who picks up the phone or answers the email—will undoubtedly be charged with logistical matters, but first and foremost, they are “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:20). They should share in the couple’s joy and offer support and service.

2. Truth in Advertising

The next conversation should continue in this spirit of joyful service and invite couples into a process that is directed toward their good and the strength of their future marriage. Let them know that Matrimony is a sacrament and that the parish is committed to preparing them for a deep encounter with God’s love through their love for one another.

3. Witnesses, Not Teachers

St. Paul VI famously said that “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 41). Find couples who live the good news of marriage and make them part of your team. They can make a long-term commitment as mentors or help in smaller ways throughout the process.

4. Free, Total, Faithful, and Fruitful

In explaining the Church’s teaching on contraception, St. Paul VI laid out a vision of marriage—flowing from the vows—that reflects Christ’s love for the Church (see Ephesians 5:25). This love is free, total, faithful, and fruitful. Center formation—from start to finish—on this portrait of love. How couples treat each other should reflect their belief in the sacredness of the sacrament. Emphasize *lex orandi, lex credendi*: the law of praying is the law of believing. Use this summary of the vows as the focus for the whole process.

5. Answer Questions

If we do the first four steps, we will be well on our way to establishing the kind of trust and closeness that will lead to true encounter and dialogue. Be sure that your team is well-positioned to answer the real questions and objections that couples have. Mentor couples may or may not feel comfortable with this responsibility. Schedule time with priests, deacons, and seasoned catechists who are.

If we bring couples into the vision of what their love is really about and what it witnesses to, we do a great service to them, to their future children, and to the whole Church, for whom their love is a hopeful and beautiful sign.

[Learn more about Joy-Filled Marriage.](#)

Do you have questions about implementation?

You may contact Helene Hallowell at hhallowell@acensionpress.com or 610-873-2017 if you’d like to chat one on one.

