

Marriage Is Forever

MARRIAGE PREPARATION POLICY AND PROCEDURES FOR THE DIOCESE OF LITTLE ROCK A SUMMARY FOR COUPLES

THE NEED FOR PREPARATION

Preparation for marriage is not just preparation for the wedding day when family and friends gather to witness and celebrate the commitment the bride and groom make to each other. It is preparation for the day-to-day relationship you will live throughout your married life. Your lives, through the Sacrament you receive, will become a witness to others of Christ's love for His Church.

The Church takes seriously the need for marriage preparation, and through the programs available, couples seeking to marry have the opportunity to learn, develop, and strengthen their relationship. When couples commit to being open to this preparation, they can anticipate and find a firm foundation on which to build their future. As with any program, its success depends on the individuals' participation and commitment. Successful marriage preparation depends most strongly on the couple's commitment to live out the values and concepts they learn in conjunction with an openness to work with the gifts God gives them in the Sacrament. The marital relationship needs constant nurturing if the couple is to make it what Christ intended it to be, a love that will go beyond the couple themselves and influence the faith community in which they are members.

MARRIAGE IS A SACRAMENT

Because marriage for a Catholic is understood as something that is beyond the human reality, the Church has established norms, guidelines, and procedures to help the engaged couple see their marriage as a part of God's plan for them.

MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROCEDURES

1. Initial Interview

Your first step in preparation for marriage is to notify the parish priest or deacon as soon as possible and set up a meeting with him for an initial interview. This meeting should take place at least six months before your proposed wedding date. It should certainly take place before any social arrangements for the wedding are planned.

2. Assessment Process

The parish priest or deacon, who will prepare you for your marriage, has the responsibility of helping you assess your readiness for marriage. Besides the information from the initial interview, he will use other tools for assessment such as diocesan forms, a pre-marriage evaluation, consultation with parents/relatives and, if needed pre-marriage counseling and evaluation. These will all be reviewed with you, and a mutual decision will be reached regarding your proposed marriage.

In view of the many factors in present-day society that work against marriage under the age of 21, special care and concern is focused on any couple when one of the parties (or both) under the age of 21. Studies

have shown that, in this country, such marriages have the least likelihood of lasting. Extra preparation may be required for couples seeking to marry when one or both parties are under the age of 21. If one of the parties (or both) is younger than 18, special permission for the marriage must be received from the bishop.

3. Decision

For most couples, the assessment with the priest or deacon will lead to a mutual decision to proceed with the marriage. In those cases in which a delay is indicated, special procedures will be worked out with you.

4. Establishing a Wedding Date

Up to this point in your preparation for marriage, your wedding date has not been finalized. It was probably penciled in the calendar as a tentative date. Now this date can be made definite. Early contact with the priest or deacon will ensure there is plenty of time to make arrangements for the wedding day. It is important that you begin this process as early as possible. Six months before the proposed date is only the minimum amount of time for contacting the priest or deacon. Notification more than six months beforehand will provide even more time for meeting church requisites and making the arrangements for the wedding day.

5. Instructional Program

After you have finalized the actual date of your wedding, the priest or deacon will outline the program that will be used to help you prepare not only for your wedding, but more importantly, for the life of the marriage that begins that day. This program will often include a few meetings with the priest or deacon and participation in at least one of the marriage preparation programs used by the diocese. Marriage preparation programs available in the diocese include: Pre-Cana and Sponsor Couple Program.

If circumstances such as military service, employment, or other similar circumstances prohibit you from participating together in a marriage preparation program, the absent party must obtain the requisite preparation and assessment of readiness for marriage in that party's own locale. The absent party is then to provide the priest or deacon with verification of attendance in that program and/or assessment.

6. Natural Family Planning Course

Couples of child-bearing years are required to complete a certified Natural Family Planning (NFP) course approved by the diocese. Instructors and class schedules are available through the Family Life Office, the diocesan web site and NFP providers. The instructor of the selected program will provide written verification of course completion of the NFP program of instruction to the minister preparing the couple. Financial assistance may be applied for through the NFP provider.

7. Marriage Ceremony

Because your wedding will be a public ceremony in the Church, there are several things to keep in mind. A wedding is a religious event, an act in which a man and a woman pledge themselves to each other before God.

The appropriate place for the wedding is in the Church. As a matter of policy, the Church will not give permission for weddings to take place in non-denominational chapels, parks, yards, private homes or other such places.

If both parties to the marriage are Catholic, the wedding usually takes place in the bride's parish church.

If you are of different faiths, the wedding usually takes place in the church of the Catholic. In some serious circumstances, a wedding may take place in the church of the non-Catholic and before a minister of the

non-Catholic's faith. You must seek permission of the Catholic Church for this dispensation (the priest or deacon preparing you will assist with this). Dispensation may be granted if the Catholic priest or deacon is satisfied that you are ready for marriage by following the policies and procedures for marriage established by the Church.

PLANNING THE CEREMONY

The Catholic wedding liturgy is quite flexible and couples are encouraged to plan their wedding ceremonies with the priest or deacon who will officiate. He will be happy to discuss with you a choice of Scriptural readings, appropriate rituals, and music that is fitting for a religious service. Other secular arrangements surrounding the liturgy should be checked in order to comply with parish policies.

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Areas of special concern in the marriage preparation process are:

Interfaith Marriages

If one of you embraces a faith tradition that is not Catholic, serious dialogue and instruction will be offered by the priest or deacon. This dialogue will allow you an opportunity to discuss practical implications of your life together, such as 1) deepening both parties' awareness of the influence of religious convictions and values in your lives together; 2) helping you to see that coming from different faith traditions will have a significant impact on your relationship with each other; 3) exploring the areas of agreement and disagreement between the two faith traditions; and 4) appreciating the practical problems that could arise because you come from different faith traditions.

Youthful Marriages

If one or both of you are under 18 years of age, you can expect the Church to discourage you from getting married until you both are at least 21. The Church's concern rises out of her love for you and her desire to protect you from making irreparable mistakes frequently experienced by couples in youthful marriages. Permission of your pastor and consultation with your parents is required for marriage when one or both parties are younger than 21. Additionally, permission by the bishop is required if one or both parties are younger than 18.

Previous Marriages

If either party has been married before, the priest or deacon is to be informed immediately. Depending on the circumstances, the priest or deacon may determine that extra counseling and/or preparation is required. In some cases it is necessary to obtain a declaration of nullity concerning the previous marriage. In other situations, such as the death of a prior spouse, there must be sufficient time for the grief process following such a loss and the priest or deacon must assess whether the individual is emotionally prepared to enter into another marriage.

Pregnancy

If a pregnancy exists, you can expect the Church to express care and concern for you and your child. However, marriage should not be presumed to be the appropriate solution to the situation. Because of the alarmingly high failure rate of marriages that occur because of a pregnancy, the Church will make every effort to ensure that both of you are mature enough and sufficiently prepared to enter into marriage. Pregnancy, in and of itself, will not be considered reason enough to omit the normal waiting period and preparation process.

Cohabiting Couples

Some couples today are living a conjugal life without the benefit of civil or ecclesiastical recognition. Cohabitation is a lifestyle contrary to Gospel values, is a serious matter in regard to one's spiritual life, and can be a cause for grave scandal. The Church's perspective is to make every attempt to persuade couples to discontinue living together until they marry in the Church. There is significant evidence that couples that do co-

habitate have a much higher rate of divorce. At the very least, cohabitating couples will be strongly encouraged to live a chaste life to the same degree that non-cohabitating couples are expected to live. It is understood that there are often a number of factors as to why a couple chooses to live together and these will be taken into account on an individual basis. Cohabitating is a serious issue that must be examined during the preparation process.

CONVALIDATION OF CIVIL MARRIAGE

Frequently, couples are married outside of the Church and seek to have their marriage convalidated. A meeting with the priest or deacon is important to begin this process. There will be discussion of the reasons for being married outside of the Church, and the reasons for seeking convalidation. A couple must understand that convalidation is not a cure-all for problems within a marriage. Depending on the circumstances involved, the priest or deacon may require the couple to participate in an approved marriage preparation program, marriage enrichment program, premarital counseling and evaluation, and/or an alternative program. Typically, a couple must wait one year between a civil marriage and its convalidation. If there are problems within the marriage, issues with maturity, or determination of other problems, this one-year waiting period may be extended as long as the priest or deacon deems necessary.

SOME REASONS FOR DELAY

The Roman Catholic Church has always held the right to marry to be a natural right of high priority; therefore, any decision to delay a wedding is a serious matter. A priest or deacon may not refuse lightly the marriage of a Catholic who is free to marry. However, if your proposed marriage is seen to be in conflict with the sacramental practice of the Church, you can expect the priest or deacon to delay your marriage or, perhaps, even refuse to witness it.

Just reasons for delaying a marriage would include:

1. One or both of the parties are under the age of 18.
2. One or both of the parties refuse to participate in any of the steps of the marriage preparation process that apply to them.
3. A lack of readiness for marriage by reason of immaturity, undue social pressure, etc.
4. One or both of the parties exhibit a substantial lack of appreciation for the spiritual and sacramental aspects of marriage.
5. The Catholic party(ies) does not practice the Catholic faith and has no intention of returning to the practice of the faith.

The priest or deacon will discuss the reasons for delay and work to help you with appropriate programs to overcome the circumstances that made the decision to delay advisable.

APPEAL

If a decision is made to delay your marriage, you have the right to disagree with the decision. If you wish to appeal the decision, you should submit a written petition to:

Diocese of Little Rock
Attn: Chancellor for Canonical Affairs
2500 North Tyler Street
Little Rock, AR 72207