
Pastoral Issues of Marrying & Tips for Pastoral Ministers

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2010

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Part I – Some history

We have heard it said that *those who do not pay attention to history are doomed to repeat it*. If we know the history of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church we may learn to be more effective in ministering to couples preparing for sacramental marriage or validation of a civil marriage.

1 – Prior to the 20th century, no need for marriage preparation.

For more than 1900 years, formal marriage preparation programs were *not* part of the Church's ordinary pastoral ministry because prior to World War I divorce was so rare that it was not a significant pastoral issue.

- Social and economic factors supported marriage by making divorce illegal or available only to the very wealthy.
- Most women could never hope to survive without the economic support of a husband.
- After the First World War, however, the combination of the industrial revolution, the high mobility rate, the development of the nuclear family, and the rising status of women resulted in radical social changes.
- Couples began to expect *more of marriage* and more women became *less dependent* on the income of husbands. ***The divorce rate began to climb.***

2 – In 1930, the Church begins to deal with the pastoral challenge of divorce.

In 1930, the Church began to respond to the problem of divorce by recommending adequate *preparation* for Christian marriage. Pope Pius XI, in *Casti Connubii*, para. 112, called for "*suitable preparation both remote and proximate, of the parties for marriage...The seeds of a happy or unhappy marriage are planted in childhood and youth. Consequently remote preparation must begin in the home where basic Christian values are inculcated and fostered.*"

What Pius XI wrote in 1930 was exactly in line with modern psychology, educational theories and social studies, namely, the critical role of the *family of origin* in the education and formation of children for successful marriage. Unfortunately, the importance of his words was not adequately understood at the time and nothing was done to put them into practice.

In the United States, the Catholic Church put almost all of its effort into the Catholic school system which tended to focus on the *child* rather than the *family*. Educational theory at the time was "*Teacher teaches & Student learns.*" Most educated Catholics never learned anything more about Matrimony other than it is a "sacrament" and "gives sanctifying grace." (This is not to blame Catholic schools...public schools were not any more effective in educating children for marriage.)

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3 - 1940's – 1960s. The First Efforts at Marriage Preparation Programs.

In 1943, "Family Renewal Days" were begun in New York to help families cope with changing times. Similar efforts took place in Britain, Ireland, and France. The focus of these "Family Renewal Days" was on *parents who would, in turn, influence their own children*. [Note: this because it "fits" with modern *family system theory*!] However, these efforts to assist parents quickly shifted to *marriage preparation for engaged couples*. Thus began Pre Cana.¹

The Pre Cana movement was primarily an educational effort to provide engaged couples with the *information* that would equip them to live Christian marriage within a social environment that was less and less supportive of Christian marriage. The theory was that most couples were *lacking information* which the Pre Cana programs could provide.

In the 1960s, pastors begin to incorporate new insights from fields of education and psychology into Pre Cana. Beginning awareness of dynamics of adult education leads to the realization that giving information is not effective, unless the couples are personally motivated to learn. Efforts to "involve" the couples as searchers for information in the process are begun ("question box", "fish bowl", etc.), but how best to do this is unclear. "Compatibility" and "psychological readiness for marriage" were not well understood and sometimes poorly used to deny the Sacrament of Matrimony to some couples.

1965. Vatican Council II said: "The matrimonial covenant...is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring..." rather than a contract explained in terms of primary and secondary ends. This radically impacted the Catholic understanding of sacramental marriage (making annulments nearly as common as divorce!); however it was not until the mid 1970s that new programs were designed to teach the intimacy skills needed for establishing & sustaining a lifelong community of life and love.

4 – 1970's – 2005. Development of modern Marriage Preparation Programs.

1974. Pre marital inventories begin in 1974. These are developed when it was thought that the pastor could objectively determine the engaged couple's readiness for marriage. Since these inventories only raise questions (they do not teach content), they depend on the teaching skills of the pastor.

1975. Engaged Encounter begins as result of the dramatic impact of Marriage Encounter which began in the USA in the early 1970s. Major contributions are:

1. Radical shift of educational technique from "teaching of experts and authority figures" to the "sharing of personal experience." This is not a peer-to-peer process because the leaders do not set up a level ground dialogue process with the engaged couples.
2. The concept of dialogue is taught to couples.
3. Smaller group dynamic (usual maximum of about 15 engaged couples per weekend).

¹ For more about this history, see *Marriage Preparation in Contemporary Theology and Canon Law*, Thomas J. Groarke C.S.S.R., 1991, Rome.

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1975. *For Better and For Ever* begins in an effort to address the individual needs of each engaged couple. Couples meet with a "sponsor couple" usually in the home of the sponsor couple. This format intentionally sets up a level ground teacher/student dialogue process by which the sponsor couple deals with the engaged couple in a forum of "equals."

1989. Family system theory from psychology begins to be incorporated into marriage preparation (as in *For Better and For Ever*). Engaged couples learn importance of Family of Origin and the role of the unconscious in mate selection and relationship dynamics (Imago Theory).

1998. *For Better and For Ever* is redesigned to address a variety of pastoral challenges:

1. Provide a text which dating/engaged couples can use for personal reflection and dialogue.
2. Additional content, such as, couple prayer, finances, intimacy, marital spirituality, and more are added to the program.
3. Follow-up by sponsor couple through the first year(s) of marriage is added to the program.

5 – 2006 +. Development of New Strategies.

2008. San Bernardino CA. Bishop Gerald Barnes of the Diocese of San Bernardino through his Office of Catechetical Ministry launched a Diocesan Marriage Initiative that will include a comprehensive approach to total marriage education consisting of proximate preparation, immediate preparation and "follow-up" after the celebration of the sacrament.

2009. US Bishops' Pastoral on marriage ~ *Marriage, Love and Life in the Divine Plan* ~ was formally approved by the US Bishops in November 2009. This document calls for marriage preparation programs to include relevant theology and doctrine; and affirms the value of using mentors (sponsor couples) during the time of immediate preparation for marriage.

Part II – The factors influencing engaged couples which marriage preparation must address to be effective.

Vatican Council II reminded us that the Church “has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel.”² To effectively “preach” the good news of sacramental marriage, we need a good understanding of “where the engaged couples are coming from” so as to better address their needs. For example:

- the *conscious* needs of the couples, *i.e.*, what they think they want, such as, “How to have a good marriage.”
- the *unconscious* needs of the couples, *i.e.*, what they are not aware of that is influencing them, such as, “How to heal the unmet needs of family of origin”).
- the *unknown* needs of the couples, such as, a need for catechesis/evangelization & intimacy skills.

The following is a listing of topics/issues ~ characteristic of North America ~ that couples seeking to marry in the Church will “bring” with them as part of the reality of their lives. Not every couple will be influenced by every topic/issue listed, but most couples will be affected by more than one of the following:

1 - Unrealistic Expectations.

Couples are entering marriage with *increasingly high expectations* of marriage and think that their romantic love is a “proof” they are prepared to make a commitment to life long marriage. While it is good to have high expectations, most couples are unaware that constructing a lasting and satisfying marriage will *require skills and a life style they have never developed*. This is a simple explanation for why the divorce rate is so high *even among couples who are determined to do well in marriage!*

2 - Unmet Intimacy Needs.

Unmet needs, such as the caring/nurture that they did not adequately receive from their ***family of origin***³. Couples today assume that marriage will satisfy their *emotional and psychological needs*. However, they are using relational skills ~ learned growing up in their family ~ which were developed for ensuring the *physical and economic survival of the family, rather than the intimacy needs of the individual*. *Moreover*, some parents and grandparents did not learn and practice intimacy skills, so they could not teach them to their children. Thus, couples today are looking for something in marriage that was not necessarily sought or taught in the past, *i.e. intimacy*.

² Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 4, 1965.

³ See *Keeping the Love You Find* by Harville Hendrix.

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3 - Anti-Marriage “skills.”

Some propose that “dysfunctional families” are a growing phenomenon. Others say that families are becoming healthier, or at least more aware of behaviors they need to change. These claims propose that advances in the field of psychology are helping us recognize the unhealthiness of many cultural and family traditions which were once accepted as “*normal*” (e.g., verbal and physical abuse of children and one’s spouse), or buried in silence (e.g., alcoholism and sexual abuse). Whichever side of the debate one prefers, the reality is that a significant percentage of children are products of marriages which *lack healthy intimacy*. Children of such marriages survive by using the anti-marriage behaviors they learned in their *family of origin* and in the society in which they live. Some examples of these behaviors are:

- ◆ They manipulate others with power and seduction.
- ◆ They hide their real selves and promote “secrets.”
- ◆ They “listen” only to what they want to hear.
- ◆ They tend of view \$\$\$ and career as “mine” rather than “ours.”
- ◆ They think that marriage will make their lives “better” or “easier” and are rarely prepared for the “relationship work” necessary in marriage.
- ◆ They think that their experience of sexual activity prior to marriage and living together prior to marriage has better prepared them for the reality of married love. (Sociologists have plenty of evidence to show that sex before marriage and living together prior to marriage are too often symptomatic of couples who later have trouble with intimacy and commitment in marriage.)
- ◆ They rarely have adequate intimacy and dialogue skills or the ability of use them when they need to communicate about important matters. They are more likely to try to solve intimacy and communication problems by trying to change their spouse’s behavior (rather than focus on change of one’s self), keep their deepest thoughts and fears to themselves (rather than appear “weak” to their spouse), and assume that their spouse should be able to “read my mind” (“*If you really loved me, you would know.....*”).

4 - Equal Status of Women.

While it is good that laws now require that women are to be accorded the same rights as men, one of the consequences is that women can survive in society without needing a husband’s financial support and they are less likely to remain in a marriage that does not meet their emotional needs. *Both men and women* are less likely to remain married to a spouse who fails to tend to their emotional needs.

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5 - Inadequate Catechesis⁴.

This is not to blame anyone involved in catechesis, but only admit the obvious: It is simply not possible to provide adequate formation in the Catholic tradition when most Catholics *end* their formal education as Catholics before they finish high school. As adults, they have no idea of how little they know about what the Catholic Church actually teaches. As such, it should not be shocking to know how little Catholics know about Church teaching concerning Marriage and Family Life as a **vocational path of sanctity**.

6 - Media that promotes materialism, ego-ism and winning at any price.

How to “teach” folks who spend too much time shopping, texting, hooked to I-pods and watching “reality shows!” The skills of **healthy intimacy** and **dialogue** ~ *so critical for success in marriage* ~ are rarely found in TV programming, youth culture, popular music or TV News. Whether TV is the cause of poor skills ~ or simply shows us poor skills ~ the bottom line is that popular media rarely provide access to effective dialogue/intimacy skills.

7 – Aging clergy and clergy scandals.

Most young Catholics do not know or have a relationship with a priest who is “*relatable*” to *them*! This is not said to undervalue the wonderful efforts of clergy, but it is important to acknowledge the reality that most couples preparing for marriage see priests as “old” or from a radically different culture. As a result, the clergy are not likely to be seen as experts on love relationships and marital intimacy. The fact that some clergy have been abusive has also had a negative effect on reputation of clergy. In dealing with these realities it is all the more important to incorporate married couples as key ministers in marriage preparation.

8 - Divorce.

Divorce is promoted as a socially acceptable **solution** to marriage problems. Divorce is now so common that children are not aware of how much they are impacted by divorce. *Teachers have stories of children who feel deprived because they have only one house to live in...whereas their school mates get to travel across the county to different houses for Christmas and get more gifts!*

9 - Additional Factors...

- ◆ Couples are likely to be living outside of the parish (even if one of them grew up in the parish). It is also likely they will not be living in the parish after they are married. Thus no “belonging” to the life of the parish.
- ◆ Couples are likely to be involved in a life situation not in accord with Catholic tradition (e.g. living together, pre marital sex, not registered a parish, etc.)

⁴ “Catechesis is that particular form of the ministry of the word which matures initial conversation to make it into a living, explicit and fruitful confession of faith.” *National Directory for Catechesis*, USCCB, 2003.

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- ◆ They are likely to be at a phase of life when they are least likely to be "church-goers". Couples planning to marry are typically at a time of life where they are estranged from the Church.
- ◆ It is very possible that one or both of the engaged couple is divorced, or came from a family in which their parents are now divorced. They may also be parents.
- ◆ It is very possible that one or both of the engaged couple was raised in a family that would be accurately called "dysfunctional".
- ◆ It is possible that one of them is not Catholic or both of them are "non-practicing Catholics."

All of these factors contribute to the pastoral *challenges* of marriage preparation.

In Part III we will consider developments in theology, psychology, catechesis/evangelization and biology which can help us deal with these challenges in the context of marriage preparation.

Part III – Theological, psychological, catechetical/evangelical, and biological developments.

Theological, psychological, catechetical/evangelical, and biological developments of the past 50 years can serve as key resources that pastoral ministers (clergy and laity) can use to better address the needs of those seeking marriage in the Church.

See Appendix #1
20th century
development of
Matrimony

1 - The Theology of the Sacrament of Matrimony.

Adults who lived through the experience of Vatican Council II (1962-1965) tend to remember most the reforms of the Catholic Mass because those changes ~ such as the introduction of “vernacular” languages (rather than only Latin) ~ directly impacted every Catholic. What the Council said about marriage, however, did not get much attention because the statements about marriage were so positive and easy to understand they were not considered “radical.” However, in hindsight, the Church added elements that profoundly changed the very definition of Matrimony.

The easiest way to see that something changed is to remember that prior to Vatican Council II it was almost impossible to obtain a declaration of nullity when a marriage was valid according to the standards of Catholic Canon Law. Today, 40+ years later, most Catholics know someone who married in the Catholic Church, later divorced, then petitioned for a declaration of nullity, and eventually was able to marry “again” in the Catholic Church. This is not said to encourage more divorces and annulments, but to make it clear that the Church now teaches a definition of Matrimony that is so counter-cultural that too many Catholics are failing to establish and sustain the Sacrament of Matrimony. In most cases, when the Office of the Tribunal examines carefully the formal testimonies of the petitioner and the respondent, the conclusion is that the marriage failed because one or both of the persons *lacked the skills necessary for maintaining the kind of love that is the essence of lifelong marriage* once they grew beyond romantic love.

Marriage preparation is a unique opportunity to help couples become appropriately informed as adults about the Sacrament of Matrimony (*i.e.*, what they are expected to “vow”) and a better understanding of skills they will need for sustaining the vows of Christian marriage.

Key Teachings: The following are key elements of Matrimony as described by Vatican Council II and later written in Canon Law and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. *The teaching is written in non-technical language in the text of For Better and For Ever / En las buenas y para siempre to make it easier for couples who may have limited formal education to understand:*⁵

- The Church teaches husbands and wives to give equal importance⁶ to the continuing development and deepening of their *love for each other*, and to their role as *parents*.

⁵ See *For Better and For Ever / En las buenas y para siempre*, Chapter 7.

⁶ “The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring...” Canon 1055.

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Catholic teaching about the meaning of sexual intercourse links together these two elements of Christian marriage, i.e. the commitment to be faithful and intimate lovers, and the commitment to establish a lasting relationship to provide an adequate “home” for the generation, education and formation of children. (This is radically different from the pre-Vatican Council II teaching: Children are the primary purpose of marriage.)

- Married love is *holy*⁷. It is a reflection of God's own love for us. (Vs. the pre-Vatican II teaching that sexual intercourse is permitted *only* if/when the intent is to be open to the conception of new life.)
- Husband and wife *equal in dignity*⁸ and are to *serve one another*⁹.
- Married love is *truly intimate*¹⁰. The gift of spouses to each other in sexual intercourse is for deepening their knowledge of and love for each other. This intimacy includes *much more than sexual lovemaking*. It includes the full sharing of one's self as gift (intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and physically) and the acceptance of the full sharing of one's spouse¹¹. (Intimacy is no longer “optional” because “lack of true intimacy” can now be a valid reason to grant a declaration of nullity!)
- Parents collaborate with God in the generation and education of new lives¹². Parenting begins with conception and continues until the child reaches adulthood.
- Proper care for and education of children calls for *responsible parenthood*¹³. A decision to bring a child into the world *must also include the ability to properly raise the child*.
- Respect for life and openness to life. Decisions about whether to be open to the conception of a (or another) child, or selecting how to avoid conception at this time, are to be made in a way that acknowledges God as the ultimate Giver of Life¹⁴.

See Appendix #2
Sacramentality,
Spirituality,
Intimacy

Additional values¹⁵:

- Vatican Council II and the Catechism of the Catholic Church specifically used the word “covenant¹⁶” to communicate that marriage is *more than a mere contract*¹⁷. *For Better*

⁷ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 48, 1965.

⁸ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 49, 1965.

⁹ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 48, 1965.

¹⁰ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 48, 1965.

¹¹ *Love and Responsibility*, John Paul II, 1960. English trans. 1981, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, pages 272-273.

¹² Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 50, 1965.

¹³ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 50, 1965.

¹⁴ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 51, 1965.

¹⁵ See *For Better and For Ever / En las buenas y para siempre* Chapters 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18.

¹⁶ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 48, 1965.

¹⁷ “...marriage is a personal union of hearts within a covenant, and not a contract explained in terms of primary and secondary ends.” *Bernhard Haring, A Happy Redemptorist*, Raphael Gallagher, 2008, p. 90.

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and For Ever uses the phrase “a permanent and unconditional commitment” to convey the meaning of “covenant” to those preparing for marriage.

- Intimacy with one’s spouse is interrelated with intimacy with God. Healthy marriage will include a style of spirituality that will include couple prayer and family prayer¹⁸.
- Appropriate family planning¹⁹ will include a working knowledge of natural family planning.
- Appropriate education/formation so the couple can continue conscience formation²⁰ and learn the skills for making “marriage friendly” decisions throughout their lives.
- An understanding of marriage as their “**vocation**”²¹, i.e. learning how to make the marital relationship the **priority** upon which all the other elements of their lives depend.

2 - Mixed Religion Marriage (interfaith/interchurch²²).

We are fortunate that Vatican II effectively addressed the issues of religious toleration and freedom of conscience and these teachings are seen in Canon Law²³ and Liturgical Rites.

- Dispensation for mixed religion marriage does NOT require the non-Catholic to become Catholic or take an active role in raising the children Catholic.
- The wedding ceremony can take place in the church of the non-Catholic.
- There are 3 Rites for Matrimony so that the wedding ceremony can focus on what the couple shares in common and avoids things that would cause division.

3 – The Role of Family of Origin in the process of mate selection and living married life.

In spite of the proclamation of "freedom" in our society - "I can be anybody I wanna be, and I can marry the person of my own choosing" the truth is that the so-called "free choice of one's mate" and "being whomever I choose to be" is an illusion. It is an even more dangerous illusion when it is sincerely believed because it leads predictably to tragic dead ends in failed marriages, violence and frustrated lives. While psychological and spiritual information can offer a more balanced and sensible view of our freedoms within certain limitations, it is not likely that most people will ever take the time to study this information and apply it to their personal relationships (unless they experience so much pain and frustration that they decide they must change their personal ideas). Both religion and psychology have much to say about the fact that we "inherit" the "sins of our ancestors" in ways that radically affect our vision of life and our approach to relationships with other people. No two people have the same heritage, so each

¹⁸ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 49, 1965.

¹⁹ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 50&51, 1965.

²⁰ Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 50, 1965.

²¹ “By virtue of this sacrament...spouses...are penetrated with the spirit of Christ...thus they increasingly advance their own holiness as well as their mutual holiness...” Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, para. 48, 1965.

²² For more about Interfaith/Interchurch marriage > www.marriagepreparation.com/InterChurchANDInterFaith.htm.

²³ Code of Canon Law, Canons 1124-1129.

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engaged couple will discover - usually painfully - the limitations of the other person and continue the traditional mistake of trying to change the other person (rather than him/her self).

Family System Theory (Bowen & Friedman²⁴) and Imago Theory (Hendrix²⁵) are two of the best resources for learning how and why the **family of origin** of each individual will likely be the source of the most significant challenges to the success of marriage. In hindsight, most marriages fail because the couple did not learn the necessary skills for dealing with the unmet needs experienced in their family of origin. On the other hand, when couples take the time to share about their families and learn the skills they will need to deal with their differences they can construct a healthy marriage which can help “heal” the “wounds” of the past.

4 - Dialogue

The particular value of **dialogue**²⁶ as taught by Harville Hendrix and many others, such as, Marriage Encounter is hard to ignore. Effective dialogue is likely to be a familiar and well-used tool in effective/satisfactory marriages and friendships; it is likely to be absent in troubled marriages and poor relationships in every part of society.

5 - Witness

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), Marriage Encounter, Engaged Encounter, Beginning Experience, Sponsor Couples for engaged couples have been working examples of an intentional strategy to incorporate personal experience into the process of catechesis/evangelization. Christianity and especially Christian marriage involves Truths that are more easily “taught” than “lived”, e.g., “forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance,²⁷” treat all people as “brothers and sisters²⁸,” “serve your spouse²⁹.” Experts and clergy and teachers can preach the correct truths *without necessarily living those truths in their personal lives* (“*The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice.*”³⁰) and this is a particular challenge for the project of teaching engaged couples how to live Christian marriage. **We are still learning more about how to select and train and support witness teachers/ministers, but experience seems to prove there is unique value in this method that is worth encouraging and promoting.**

²⁴ *Generation to Generation*, Edwin Friedman, 1985.

²⁵ *Keeping the Love You Find*, Harville Hendrix, 1992

²⁶ *Keeping the Love You Find*, Harville Hendrix, 1992 (Chap. 11 & 15); *For Better and For Ever*, (Chap. 9 & 10).

²⁷ See Mark 11:25.

²⁸ See Matthew 23:8.

²⁹ See Ephesians 5:21.

³⁰ See Matthew 23:1-4.

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6 – Adult Education³¹ & Peer-To-Peer Ministry.

Educational assumptions and strategies suitable in the education of **children** can be counter-productive in the education/formation of **adults**. Children, for example, can be presumed to be ignorant of important things which they must be taught, and it is the responsibility of parents and teachers to teach them whether or not the children "want" to learn.

Adults, however, have been involved in relationships all their lives and ~ *though this experience may be wrong or inadequate* ~ their experiences serve as their "personal belief system" by which they judge and tend to reject new/different information. The biggest challenge of marriage preparation is dealing with the reality that it is "normal" for engaged couples to believe they **already know all about how to love one another and therefore how to be successful in marriage** (even though what they know is too often misinformation). Couples do not come to marriage preparation with the assumption they need to learn and put into practice concepts that will require them to *radically change what they have been doing all their lives!*

Human beings are designed (by God!) to resist change. Adults change only when they are willing to risk setting aside what they have thought to be "true" and decide to allow another to "coach" them through the difficult experience of learning new behaviors. If they sense the teacher is assuming a position of "superiority" and judging them to be wrong/less informed, they tend to defend what they are *familiar with* and deny/reject the *new information*.

An effective educational strategy is **peer-to-peer ministry** in which the "teacher" and the "student" establish a level ground of trust whereby both the "teacher" and the "student" are willing to risk sharing personal questions and personal experience/information (the "teacher" does not assume superiority over the student). Examples of Jesus using *peer-to-peer ministry* can be seen his efforts to teach the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32) and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:6-43). In each situation, the people interact with him as co-equals. The disciples are so distressed that Jesus seems to be out of touch they say "*...are you the only resident of Jerusalem who does not know what has been happening there...?*" The Samaritan woman does not hesitate to inform Jesus that he is not likely to reach down to the living water at the bottom of the well because he does not even have a bucket!

The use of Sponsor Couples who are willing to be both "teachers" and "students" is an effective way to establish this kind of learning process.

7 - Natural Family Planning.

It is important for Church ministers to acknowledge that the poor track record of the "the rhythm method" of the last century continues to be associated with modern methods of natural family so that many couples assume that "natural family planning" is simply the "rhythm method" by a new name! Modern advances in biology have made natural family

³¹ "To be effective ministers of adult faith formation we will first, like Jesus, join people in their daily concerns and walk side by side with them on the pathway of life. We will ask them questions and listen attentively as they speak of their joys, hopes, griefs, and anxieties." From *Our Hearts were burning within us*, Page 2, USCCB.

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planning a viable option for family planning that is beneficial to couples ~ no chemicals or artificial barriers needed ~ and is in accord with Church teaching. Modern methods of natural family planning teach couples methods of observing the current cycle of fertility in the woman so that she and her spouse can know when it is possible for her to become pregnant. The couple can use this information to make love during the time when the woman is likely to become pregnant if they are trying to conceive a child, or they can abstain from sexual intercourse during this time (usually a few days) if they are convinced it is important for them to avoid the conception of a (another) child at this time.

Parishes/dioceses need to effectively “market” modern methods of natural family planning so that couples will *want to learn about them*. Ideally, couples will take a natural family planning course far enough in advance of the wedding so they will have a number of months to learn to use natural family planning with appropriate confidence.

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Making all of this practical. What parishes/clergy can do to:

- 1 – Welcome couples and deal with them “where they are as individuals”
- 2 – Put the developments ~ in theology, psychology, catechesis/evangelization and biology ~ into an effective parish marriage preparation program

Part IV – Effective pastoral strategies.

In spite of the challenges of dealing with couples who seek to marry in the Church, there is also some important GOOD NEWS about these couples.

- **The couples come to us³²**...even when they have not been coming to our parish. We can view them as “using us” for selfish motives, or we can see this as an opportunity for assisting them toward an adult Christian lifestyle³³ that could include “connecting” with the Church even if they may be moving to a different city after they marry.
- **Couples want to be successful in marriage!** Most couples are saying they have seen too much of divorce and the problems of divorce. They are hoping to avoid divorce in their own marriage. If we engage them in adult dialogue and treat them with the respect due them as adults, they are likely to respond well to our invitation to take part in a quality marriage preparation program that promises them “divorce prevention skills.” When they become involved in a marriage preparation program that incorporates the use of sponsor couples of the parish, we have a unique opportunity to show them what Christian marriage is and also the skills necessary to establish and sustain this kind of lifelong marriage.

1 - Become a welcoming parish and always treat couples as *adults*, not children.

While this may seem a point that can be taken for granted, there is a reason to give this careful thought. Since so many of the educational efforts of the Catholic Church have been designed for *children*, parishes are still learning to incorporate the *unique elements of adult education* into the design of marriage preparation programs. When educating children, it is appropriate to determine for them what they must learn, and when and how they will learn specific information. Once a person becomes an adult, he/she has the freedom and the responsibility to direct his/her ongoing formation and education, and bears personal responsibility for all decisions made. Effective adult education programs incorporate this principle of personal responsibility. They wisely presume that, “You can lead the horse to the water, but you can’t make it drink!” Attempting to use elementary school tactics of grading and mandatory courses

³² What about the couples who are NOT coming for the Sacrament of Matrimony? This is another important pastoral challenge but I am not trying to address it in this presentation. R. Ruhnke.

³³ “The very preparation for Christian marriage is itself a journey of faith. It is a special opportunity for the engaged to rediscover and deepen the faith received in Baptism and nourished by their Christian upbringing. In this way they come to recognize and freely accept their vocation to follow Christ and to serve the Kingdom of God in the married state.” *Familiaris Consortio*, Para. 51, John Paul II, 1981.

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is likely to be less effective or even counter-productive with adults.

Rather than trying to *require* adults to learn, it is more effective to provide them with resources which will help them take responsibility for their own ongoing formation and education. True, it is likely that more mature persons will exercise more responsibility and prepare better for marriage, and those who are less mature may demonstrate less responsibility and prepare less well.

Rather than becoming over-anxious about “lack of maturity³⁴,” pastoral ministers can learn effective ways to “sell” folks on the idea of taking fuller responsibility for the success of their marriage. It is similar to the strategy of sales persons and coaches. People do not buy products because they “must,” nor do they invest in sports equipment because they will be “rejected if they don’t.” Rather they are offered products which claim to *satisfy their needs*. The truth is the vast majority of couples really want to have a good and healthy Christian marriage. Another truth is that most couples preparing for marriage in the Church today are frightened by the many divorces they have witnessed, often in their own family. They are “ripe” for the marketing of well designed marriage preparation programs.

2 - Provide services when they are needed.

Strange as it may seem, in the past we have **not** designed formal marriage preparation products for use **when they are most needed**, namely, while the couple is making their decision about getting married. Typically, the couple has gone through their own process of deciding to marry. Then they have informed their families, “hired the band” and, finally, called the parish to sign up the church. Too often the parish responds by trying to get the couple to slow down the planning process, re-think their decisions about marriage and perhaps decide not to marry (or at least postpone the wedding). This is *not* an effective way to minister to adults.

A better way to deal with the couples is to put in place services that are “couple friendly” by implementing **parish policies** based on principles of *adult education*, and by offering **resources** which are designed to *assist the couples with their own discernment process*.

³⁴ “...pastors must also understand the reasons that lead the Church also to admit to the celebration of marriage those who are imperfectly disposed...it is true that in some places engaged couples ask to be married in church for motives which are social rather than genuinely religious... [however this] is not enough to justify refusal on the part of pastors...as the Second Vatican Council teaches, ‘the sacraments by words and ritual elements nourish and strengthen faith’...As for wishing to lay down further criteria for admission to the ecclesial celebration of marriage, criteria that would concern the level of faith of those to be married, this would above all involve grave risks. In the first place, the risk of making unfounded and discriminatory judgments; secondly, the risk of causing doubts about the validity of marriages already celebrated...” *Familiaris Consortio*, Para. 68, John Paul II, 1981.

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3 – Parish Policies.

The following parish policies will encourage couples to make better ~ more informed ~ decisions about marriage:

See Appendix #3,
#4, #5, #6.
For more about
Parish policies and
role of clergy.

- ***Periodic pulpit announcements and weekly bulletin notices.***
Information from the pulpit by the pastor is a proven method of announcing and establishing new policies. In addition, this information can be printed in the bulletin as a weekly or monthly reminder: “Concerning the Sacrament of Matrimony. Contact the parish office for a *special packet of information* for marriage preparation and planning your wedding. Obtain this packet even ***before you get engaged.***”
- Couples needing this information may not be regular “church goers,” so the goal is to get this information to family and friends who can pass on the information to couples they know. The parish secretary refers incoming calls about marriage to the pastor (or another person trained for this responsibility) and the special packet, which includes *For Better and For Ever*, can be mailed to the person/couple who needs it (or perhaps a parent or friend of the prospective bride and groom).
- ***“Information Session: Preparing for Marriage.”*** Parishes can provide a one-evening session as often as needed (*e.g.*, every few months). Single persons, dating and engaged couples and parents who want to get information for their children are invited to a presentation of information about preparing for marriage in the Catholic Church and are given an opportunity to ask any questions they have. Those who have not already obtained their packet of information can get it at this time.
- ***Publish helpful web sites in the parish bulletin.*** This is another strategy for encouraging personal initiative and responsibility. A listing of recommended Catholic web sites would include the web site of the diocese and the parish and also ***www.marriagepreparation.com*** which offers information about marriage preparation, determining one’s freedom to marry in the Catholic Church, and provides email access to a priest who will answer personal questions about marriage preparation.
- ***Provide periodic “short courses” on marriage and family life.*** Lent and Advent can be ideal seasons to provide 3 – 4 sessions (once a week) about “Church teachings concerning Marriage and Family Life.” Make them open to anyone of the parish.

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4 – Resources.

For Better and For Ever /En las buenas y para siempre is not the **only** resource designed to address the needs of couples preparing for marriage. However, it does include these elements that may not be present in other resources:

See Appendix #7
For more
Resources.

- **A tool for discernment.** Couples can use *For Better and For Ever* for private study, dialogue and discernment **before** they set the wedding date, contact the parish or meet with the pastor.
- **More inclusive content.** The 21 chapters of *For Better and For Ever* touch on every topic and issue that couples should address **before they marry**. In addition, it includes references to additional resources on the web site [www.marriagepreparation.com] for couples who are open to further/deeper study.
- **Follow-up beyond the wedding day.** In the past, pastoral ministry to engaged couples has ~ unfortunately ~ ended with the wedding. We know today that couples will need more assistance once they begin to deal with the realities of marriage³⁵ (beyond their romantic ideas about marriage). *For Better and For Ever* includes questions for follow up during the first year(s) of marriage by the Sponsor Couple.

See Appendix #8
For more about
Content.

5 – Use Sponsor Couples³⁶ of the Parish.

By using “sponsor couples” of the parish, key theological, psychological, catechetical/evangelical elements and content can be dealt with more effectively.

- **The Value of Witnesses and Peer-to-Peer Ministers.** The difference between an "expert" and a "witness" is that the "expert" has valuable information, but has not necessarily lived this information by personal experience. The "witness" is one who can speak the valuable information from personal experience. It is not always possible for teachers to be "witnesses" (depending on the subject matter), but this has become a key factor in the design of marriage preparation programs. We live in a society which has produced a whole generation of children who are constantly reminded that 50% of marriages fail and that sexual intercourse is "normal activity" for single persons. If young

³⁵ “...young families, which, finding themselves in a context of new values and responsibilities, are more vulnerable, especially in the first years of marriage, to possible difficulties, such as those created by adaptation to life together or by the birth of children. Young married couples should learn to accept willingly, and make good use of, the discreet, tactful and generous help offered by other couples that already have more experience of married and family life.” *Familiaris Consortio*, Para. 69, John Paul II, 1981.

³⁶ ... “Christ the Lord, by virtue of the fact that marriage of baptized persons has been raised to a sacrament, confers upon Christian married couples a special mission as apostles, sending them as workers into His vineyard, and, in a very special way, into this field of the family.” *Familiaris Consortio*, Para. 71, John Paul II, 1981.

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people are to learn better ideas about Christian love and commitment, it is more likely that the words of a "witness" will have a better chance of making a positive impact.

The use of Sponsor Couples is an effective way to provide a marriage preparation program in which the teachers are "witnesses" rather than "experts," and even peer-to-peer ministers. The program is designed to move all questions and discussions to the level of personal experience on the part of both the Sponsor Couple and the engaged couple. The engaged couple can learn that the teachers themselves had to struggle with some of the very challenges that the engaged couple is going through. This can give a powerful message of hope to the engaged couple because they can see that an "ordinary couple" (the Sponsor Couple) is continuing their commitment to marriage in the midst of struggles similar to what the engaged couple is facing.

- **The Role of the Family of Origin.** The use of Sponsor Couples, who have learned from experience how family of origin issues "play out" in their marriage, can be especially helpful to engaged couples. The key message which the Sponsor Couple can "witness" is that they learned ~ often from painful experience ~ how different they were and how they tried to change the other person and how they eventually learned a different approach. "True Freedom" means I am "free to continue learning how to change my own self, with the grace of God and the support of my spouse". Resources for this training include Family System Theory (Friedman), Imago Theory (Harville Hendrix) and Alcoholics Anonymous.
- **The Theology of Matrimony.** In the days of Pre Cana, it was assumed that a priest would teach the engaged couples about the Sacrament of Matrimony because he was better qualified to do this. Today we can acknowledge that the priest may indeed know the theology of Matrimony, but the language of theology text books is unfamiliar to couples preparing for marriage. Merely to speak "theology" (in English or Spanish) to engaged couples.....using words, such as, "sacrament" and "sanctifying grace"is not likely to be effective.

Sponsor Couples can share with the engaged couple their experience of learning ~ often with great difficulty ~ the meaning of *lifelong commitment* (in the hard times of illness, loss of job, etc.) and *true love* (vs. romantic love) and marital *intimacy* (by practicing the discipline of dialogue) and *accepting God as a 3rd partner in our marriage* and *couple prayer* and *acceptance* and *forgiveness*. They are more effective teachers because they use language that comes from their *experience* in living the *vocation of Christian marriage*. Because it is their *personal experience*, they are better able to communicate it to those preparing for marriage.

- **The critical role of Prayer in marriage.** Assessing the role of prayer in our contemporary society is a complex challenge. Many people quite simply do not believe that prayer ("keeping in touch with God") is real. Many who claim to be religious authorities have such distorted views of prayer that what they have to say is appropriately rejected by mature adults ("send money to our cause and God will grant you healing of your

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cancer"). Yet, it is also true to say that there can be no Christian marriage if the couple is not able to establish and sustain a meaningful life of prayer. Couples who cannot or will not pray are candidates for troubled marriages. If indeed Christian marriage means that God becomes a 3rd party to the marriage, the clearest sign that this is "real" is the prayer life of the couple. When such couples get into trouble, they can turn to God for help in prayer together because they have already established a habit of doing this. If they are having so much difficulty that they are unable to risk the vulnerability of praying together, they may at least be able to turn to God in prayer individually and pray for the grace to be able to pray together ~ as a couple ~ again. Without an effective habit of prayer together, when troubles come, each person is likely to turn to someone other than God, and this is likely to increase the problems in the marriage, because each will be looking for affirmation/support from someone who is willing to "take my side" against my spouse.

The use of Sponsor Couples has proven to be a highly effective forum for teaching engaged couples how to pray. In this exceedingly private and trusting forum, it becomes "permissible" to speak of anything and everything that the Sponsor Couple thinks is important for establishing and sustaining an effective Christian marriage. In this context the Sponsor Couple not only can speak about the importance of prayer, but show the engaged couple how they pray. This is an important element because the engaged couples learn that Joe, the auto mechanic, and his wife (who are ordinary folks like us!) actually *pray* (so it is not just priests and nuns who pray!).

- **Diversity among engaged couples.** We no longer live in isolated ethnic groups and pastoral ministry must constantly adapt to the differing cultures and socio/economic realities. Sending an engaged couple to an Engaged Encounter weekend where the other couples or the team couples are from a radically different culture or socio/economic level is NOT good pastoral ministry. The more "different" an engaged couple is, the more important it is for them to be tended to in a manner this is designed to deal with their "differentness"

The use of Sponsor Couples is a highly effective way to ensure that the particular needs and situations of each couple can be addressed. This does not mean that the pastor must recruit a Sponsor Couple which will "mirror" each engaged couple. But it does mean that the Sponsor Couple can become aware of particular needs and issues and make sure these are given special attention during the sessions.

- **Marriage Enrichment.** This item is last on this list, but it is actually the most important item of all. As much as we are concerned about preparing engaged couples for Christian marriage, the truth is that the vast majority of engaged couples will be changed VERY LITTLE by the process of marriage preparation. The real test of the effectiveness of marriage preparation programs is to examine those who are MARRIED and see how they are doing some years into their marriage. Marriages will fall on a continuum of very good to very bad. The best marriages will tend to have in common that they "work" at their marriages in ways that get them through the hard times; the worst marriages will

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tend to have in common that they ~ without understanding it ~ do all the wrong things to one another when they are having difficulties. [Family Systems Theory and Imago Theory provide a wealth of information/insight about why this is so sadly true.] The bottom line is that marriage enrichment is an on-going and never ending need if couples are going to continue living the commitment of Christian marriage. However, our Church has yet to establish a process of marriage enrichment that touches most marriages. The Marriage Encounter movement has been the single most effective aid, but tends to be a "one shot" experience and few couples continue the experience of "dialogue" for the rest of their lives.

The use of Sponsor Couples in marriage preparation is a way to motivate married couples to be willing to "minister" to engaged couples, and then discover that they (the married couple) benefits even more than the engaged couple from the process. The fact is that unless they were meeting with the engaged couples, the married couples themselves would not take the time to go through this deep level of sharing just between them. Being a Sponsor Couple is a way to "build in" a regular process of marriage enrichment for their own marriage. This will not, of course, include all the marriages of the parish, but when a pastor sees the beneficial effect in the Sponsor Couples themselves he may become more motivated to recruit more and more couples to become Sponsor Couples.

SUMMARY:

Pope Pius XI was right on target in 1930 when he called for "*suitable preparation both remote and proximate, of the parties for marriage...The seeds of a happy or unhappy marriage are planted in childhood and youth...*" (*Casti Connubii*, para 112.) Unfortunately, we have tended to ignore the time of *remote preparation*, when children and young adults are still learning critical relationship skills. We have been trying to help couples change life-long habits, learned in their families, during the final months prior to their marriage. While this is a laudable effort, it is too late to be as effective as it needs to be.

The *next step in marriage preparation* is to introduce policies and programs that can make the time of marriage preparation more effective. *For Better and For Ever* is designed to:

- 1 - Assist couples *discern* whether they are being called to the vocation of Christian marriage.
- 2 – Provide couples quality marriage preparation by the assistance of a sponsor couple.
- 3 – Help them with “follow-up” support after their wedding when they need to learn how to be married beyond the phase of romantic love.

While we are doing this, we will also begin the project of making marriage and family life a central focus and theme of **all** the educational and ministerial efforts of the parish so that every member of the parish ~ from youngest to oldest ~ knows the value of the vocation of Matrimony. This is a strategy for catechesis/evangelization of families who can teach these truths to their children.