

Clergy Notes

As a priest or deacon, you play a profound role in the formation and integration of an engaged/newly married couple into the life of the parish. Below are some suggestions for working with these couples as they prepare for the Sacrament of Matrimony. These points were compiled from real-life experience by priests and deacons who have worked with hundreds of couples through the Witness to Love program.

These notes are intended for **Witness to Love** parishes. This handout is a short summary of the basic details that pertain to clergy in the *Witness to Love Renewal Plan*.

#1. Structure of the First Meeting with Clergy:

- The engaged couple is welcomed by Father or Deacon.
- This meeting is an orientation of sorts and it is informal with a focus on listening.
- Gauge where they are in their walk with Christ.
- Ask them about their first date, their engagement, their jobs, schooling or family life.
- Let them know a little bit about the marriage prep process but not in an overwhelming way. Let them know that while it is work, it is also fun.
- Let them know that you use a marriage mentor or sponsor in your marriage prep process and that they will be allowed to choose this couple using the tips below.

Tips for Helping Engaged Couples Discern a Mentor Couple

It is very important to coach the engaged couple properly so that they can choose the right mentor couple. Ask them to **prayerfully** consider their choice of a couple whom:

- They both admire
- They both are comfortable with
- Practices and is active in their Catholic Faith
- Attends church regularly
- Have been married in the church for five years or more (if the engaged couple is immature or had a rough outcome on their inventory then you may want to make that ten years or more for a specific couple)
- Are in good standing with the Church
- They can look at and say "I would be happy to have a marriage like that," or "I love the way they talk to each other and to their kids."
- Attends your church parish or the parish where they will be attending church after the wedding. They do not have to know the couple well.

- Is someone whom they feel will hold them accountable, inspire them and challenge them.
- Is preferably not an immediate relative unless the couple that they both are most comfortable with and admire happens to be a relative
- The mentor should be someone who will take their role seriously and should not be a peer or a “buddy”.

The Dynamic of the Initial Meeting Between Clergy and Engaged Couple

Be informal and welcoming. Be a good listener and make them feel encouraged. Meet them where they are and reinforce their interest to marry in the Church. At this meeting you create the foundation for a relationship between you and the couple, and the couple and the parish, so that you **and** the parish can walk with the couple on their journey into the ecclesial community.

- Let them know that they need to find this couple prior to meeting with the Marriage Prep Coordinator.
- Briefly let them know about the Prepare, FOCCUS, or Fully Engaged and where they will go to take it, why it is important, and how it will be used.
- Gauge where they are with regards to Natural Family Planning and let them know that they will be taking a class in that as well. This class can be in person or online.
- Let them know that everything we are asking them to do is for the health of their future marriage and their relationship.
- Briefly discuss the Theology retreat or conference they will be going to and begin the Pre-nuptial Inquiry with them but do not make it the focus of that first meeting.
- The only paperwork the priest fills out with them is the Pre-Nuptial Interrogation. Any anxiety caused by filling that form out is offset by the focus of their meeting with the priest being one of simply getting to know the parish and each other.
- Any need for followup with respect to canonical permissions and dispensations is determined as well.
- Let them know that once they complete their Prepare/FOCCUS/Fully Engaged that someone will contact them and set up a time to meet with them and the sponsors/mentors that they choose so that they can begin the process together.
- Let them know the Mass and Confession times and any other upcoming parish events.
- Introduce them to the Parish Secretary or others in the office that they might need to call someday.
- Immediately after they leave, fill-out the Witness to Love Intake Form, reread the PNI for any corrections and then add their info to the Google Spreadsheet (or simply give the WTL Intake form to a parish staff person to enter into the Google Doc). If you wait to do this it may never be completed or the information might not be as helpful.

Note: When an engaged couple approaches the church to request the sacrament of marriage they have either been recently engaged or already civilly married. In both cases they are excited, nervous, and even possibly have conflicted or varying desires for the sacrament. Foundationally there is always something good motivating them or attracting them to receiving the sacrament. Our focus at this first meeting is on that something good, that something that is drawing them to the church, drawing them to Christ. While it is not always immediately identifiable there is always a good that can be identified as the reason that they are seeking the sacrament.

We use this first meeting to welcome engaged couple to the parish, to establish a relationship with them, and to help them get to know the life of the parish. The focus for the priest or deacon during this is to meet them where they are and to begin the process of discipling and walking with them. This attitude will change your heart and your approach will change with it. When they see this approach in you, their attitude, and their heart, will change as well. Be personal, honest, and real. They should leave this first meeting with the desire to know more about their fiance, your parish community, and you, their priest or deacon.

Goals – To invite them into the life of the parish; To let them know the Mass times, parish events, adult education series; To allow both your enthusiasm for parish life and the Church and your relationship with Christ to draw them in. Your enthusiasm is vital and their connection to you is what they will associate with the church. Let them leave with a desire to know more about the sacrament and an excitement to receive it.

#2. The Theology of Marriage Discussion Night

This section focuses on the flow of the evening and on tips for a successful conversation. This portion is not a “crash course” in the Theology of Marriage. It is an invitation into deliberate and meaningful conversations about marriage, love, and family. This section is the key portion of the clergy training, so we will go in depth regarding the structure, dynamics and goals of this meeting. We include tips from Fr. Michael Delcambre on his experience of **Witness to Love**. Father Michael Delcambre is the priest who initially helped to pilot and develop **Witness to Love**.

The Structure and the Participants - The “Theology of Marriage Discussion Night” takes place in the Mentor Couple’s home with the Clergy, Engaged Couple and Sponsor/Mentor Couple. The Marriage Prep Coordinator is not present at this meeting. At this meeting, the Engaged Couple shares with their Sponsor/Mentor and with Father/Deacon what they learned and questions they have following their retreat; Father/Deacon listens, answers their questions, explains and helps to clarify any information that they heard at the Diocesan Marriage Prep Conference/Retreat. All

participants also share the reflection questions that they did in advance for Chapter 5 in their Witness to Love workbook.

Leading up to the meeting the following should have taken place:

- Both couples will have met with the Marriage Prep Coordinator, gone on a double date, begun their “Scavenger Hunt,” had four formal meetings to cover Chapters 1-4 in their workbook, watched the accompanying video content, completed and discussed their homework assignments, answered a survey on their marriage prep process, done an Examination of Conscience and attended a Parish or Diocesan Marriage Prep Retreat together.
- They will be about halfway through their NFP Class.
- They will have prepared five comments and five questions with regards to their Retreat.
- The Theology of the Marriage Discussion Night should have been scheduled to take place at the Sponsor/Mentor Couple’s home soon after the couple’s Parish or Diocesan Marriage Prep Conference. Once a date is determined, the date should have been coordinated and scheduled with your parish calendar immediately.
- The Engaged Couple and the Mentor Couple will have read and responded to the discussion questions offered in Chapter Five in the **Witness to Love** Couple Workbook (directions are in the workbook). You should refer to the copy of the workbook that came with your certification and use the items in Chapter 5 to prepare for the conversation.

Now let’s look at what happens **during the meeting:**

- The evening usually includes dinner or at least dessert at the Mentor’s home.
- Initially, the focus is on relationship building, moving into the reason for having the meeting.
- Be confident and focused on the beauty of the Church’s teaching on sexuality and marriage. Make it very informal.
- Allow the couple to follow this with their five comments and questions about their Theology Day. Let them shine.
- Observe and listen to what they heard. Be prepared to fill in the gaps and ask them to flesh out their questions.
- Move into the reflection questions that the Mentor Couple answered in the workbook. Remember that for the Mentor couple this is Marriage Enrichment for them as well. Realize that the Mentor Couple may be discussing some of this for the first time and they will have experiences to share. Their own living out the Sacrament of Marriage will allow them to speak to things that they have experienced, supporting what you are trying to explain.
- Let the Engaged Couple share their workbook discussion question answers.

- The workbook contains possible topics for Father or Deacon to cover. Some topics include:
 - How the Sacrament (a covenant) is different from a civil ceremony (a contract).
 - Give context to the language of love, mutuality and complementarity. Make sure you know what was covered at whatever conference option you sent them to.
 - Fill in the gaps regarding their understanding of the Church's teaching on Natural Family Planning. Ask them what they plan to do with it.
 - Relate Marriage to the image of the Trinity, the image of God and the life of the Holy Spirit between the Father and the Son.
 - Talk about the difference between love(giving) and lust (taking).
 - There are discussion questions in our WTL workbook that will help the couples prepare for the Theology Discussion Night and there is a section for you to cover as well. Please read Chapter 5 in our workbook ahead of time.
 - There is a Homily Helps section for you to work with them to find out what their family needs to hear.
 - They will have had an Examination of Conscience in their workbook before this meeting. Let them know that Confession is always available.

Remember:

- This is an opportunity for the Theology of Marriage/NFP to be personalized, internalized, shared and owned.
- Let the Holy Spirit dictate what is covered and how long you stay.
- Make sure that both couples know that this is an ongoing conversation and an invitation to learn more. Let them know that they can always revisit with you in the future.
- Begin and end with prayer.
- You may want to have a third meeting with both couples closer to the wedding but if you are not able to then ask the Marriage Prep Coordinator to receive their "Scavenger Hunt" paperwork and review their final survey about the process with both couples. This final meeting is called "Welcome to Parish Life" because it is just the beginning and not the end.
- Never tell the couples "congratulations you are done"!
- They will both meet one more time to cover Chapter 6 and complete their final survey and the survey will be sent to the Marriage Prep Coordinator's email address as soon as both couples complete it. That survey will serve as their certificate of completion.

The Dynamic - There will be initial tension because the couples are thinking, “We have to talk about sex with Father/Deacon!” There will be excitement because they do want to know more, as do the Mentors. The Mentors are usually very aware that they have a priest/deacon in their house and it may be a first for them so make sure to put them at ease. Again, this is also a time to get to know Mentors. They can be a great source of renewal and wisdom in your parish that you may not have known you had. Often, they will ask you about getting more involved. Keep the focus on tonight’s meeting, but follow up later. If you are nervous, they will be nervous; make sure to prepare and then say a prayer to the Holy Spirit. With every priest or deacon, this meeting will have a different dynamic, but always make sure that the Holy Spirit is free to work. Conversions happen at this meeting! Pray with the couples, and pray for them. Based on your initial conversations with them, pray for the areas in which you know they need prayers. This meeting may go long, so do not schedule something at 8pm if this meeting starts at 6pm.

The Goal - The end goal of the “Theology of Marriage Discussion Night” is for the Engaged Couple AND the Mentor Couple to be aware of the beauty within the Theology of Marriage, what it is and just how relevant it is to their marriage. We want to give them a language of love, mutuality, the language of complementarity. We want them to use a different lense to look at their marriage from that which the culture has given them. We want them to connect God’s love, which is free, total, faithful, and fruitful with marital love. Marriage on earth is meant to be an image of the Trinity. It is the difference between love and lust. Love is always open to life. **They should know the plan that God has for them, and that it is possible.**

The couples leave with a new way to look at things through the lense of Theology of Marriage as opposed to what the culture presents. It opens them up to and gives them courage to seek and to live a sacramental marriage. Don’t forget to thank the Mentors for opening up their domestic church to you and to this engaged couple!

Difficult questions or comments you might hear based on what your diocesan marriage preparation conference may cover:

- “My body is a different” or “I have an irregular cycle”: Know NFP Teachers or “NFP Only” doctors that you can send them to. Remove that as an excuse for them.
- “Father/Deacon, We are living together and financially we can’t separate”: Let them know that what they are preparing to say with their lips, they must say with their heart. Make them see that the power of their yes is more what it says by learning to abstain and say no. Help them learn there are ways to love that go

beyond sex. Help them strive for appreciating communication, just being together, spiritual intimacy and emotional intimacy.

- Also with regards to pornography or any other kind of addiction make sure you are familiar with good counselors in the various areas of addiction.

Tips From Fr. Michael Delcambre for Changing the Culture of Marriage Prep in Your Parish:

- Expose yourself to what they are learning at your diocesan or parish marriage preparation retreat. Do not expect them to learn and do what you have not.
- Ask questions of them and respond to their questions.
- If you do not know the answer to a question let them know you will get back to them.
- The Mentor can share in all of this. These discussions introduce them to beauty in a new way.
- Establish relationships with couples.
- Have the small group leader or a volunteer invite newly married couples and their mentors to small groups or parish events.
- Don't see them as something to get over, check off the list, or just more work.
- There is power of meeting them where they are, discipling them and walking with them.
- When this attitude changes in your heart, your approach changes and then the attitude in their heart changes.
- Pope Francis advises us to go to the fringes. We have this amazing opportunity where the fringes are coming right to us.
- Just be personal, honest and real.
- Do not be confrontational - have conversations in love, attract them to the beauty of the sacrament. Do not be focused on what is missing or where they are not. Meet them where they are and journey with them.
- For the civilly married, make them very comfortable. Be approachable.
- Cultivate a culture of approachability. They have a broad spectrum of things that need to be addressed. They need to see you as someone they can be comfortable with through this.

What do clergy need to understand about attachment theory with regards to their role in the Witness to Love Marriage Prep process?

Clergy play a particularly important role in the Witness to Love marriage preparation process. They are irreplaceable instruments of God's love and sources of His soothing and security for the mentors and the engaged couples. If the mentor or engaged couples experience the priest/deacon as too distant or unsafe, this will likely compromise the couple's efforts at securely growing in virtue and deepening their relationship with God and each other. Since clergy act as Christ's instruments they can greatly influence how couples perceive who Christ is. Their words and witness can also strongly influence whether the couple will want to make the consistent effort to vulnerably grow in virtue, and in their relationship with Christ. Moreover, the clergy's influence will shape whether the couple will mutually choose to allow Christ to guide them in their marriage.

As Pope Paul VI astutely put it: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (see *Evangelii Nuntiandi* #41). The person of the priest/deacon and how he represents Christ and His Church to the mentors and engaged couples make a great difference to the level of openness by which they receive the priest's/deacon's instruction. The priest/deacon best represents Christ when he is pastorally sensitive to the couple's need for security, and firm in teaching Catholic doctrine; two essential features of priestly witness in marriage preparation. Attachment theory, adapted for this purpose, indicates that if a couple is to genuinely hear and embrace a priest's/deacon's teaching, rather than reject him and his words, the couple must experience him as a safe haven to return to for counsel and consolation, and a secure base from which they can take his message out into their daily lives. Pastoral sensitivity alone--like doctrinal firmness by itself--is insufficient to effectively communicate Christ's message of agapic love.

In a word, just as healthy concern for the couple's emotional security does not preclude communicating correct theological teaching, doctrinal firmness is no substitute for pastoral sensitivity toward the couple's need for security. Pastoral sensitivity and doctrinal firmness are a "package deal."