Introduction:

This form has been developed as a tool for pastoral ministers to prepare couples for Catholic marriage in accordance with "The Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation for the Catholic Church in New Jersey" (PP&G). It can be used as a checklist in preparing for meetings with the engaged couple, and is recommended as a summary form for the couple’s marriage file.

According to the PP&G: “It is important to note that much more is involved in the marriage preparation process than simply meeting minimal canonical requirements. Pastoral ministers who work with engaged couples exercise a major influence in the lives of these men and women. Their interest in them and willingness to give of themselves are crucial in carrying out their pastoral role in marriage preparation.”

Bride’s Name: _______________________________________________________________________

Groom’s Name: _______________________________________________________________________

Pastoral Minister’s Name: _______________________________________________________________________

Wedding Date: _______________________________________________________________________

The Marriage Preparation Process (Three Stages)

Stage One: Introduction and Orientation

The first contact with the couple should be a warm and welcoming experience whereby the pastoral minister assures the couple of the Church’s desire for a lasting, life-giving, happy marriage. The initial meetings offer teachable moments for evangelization (a reawakening of a dormant faith).

Goals of the initial meetings:

- Get to know couple and their hopes and dreams about marriage
- Explain the essentials of Catholic marriage – permanent, exclusive, faithful
- Inform couple of marriage prep process
- Encourage them to understand value of commitment to prep process
- Address any special circumstances (PP&G, pgs. 5; 32-55)
- Complete Part I of Pre-Nuptial Investigation form
- Complete the FOCCUS pre-marital inventory process
Summary of First Meeting with the Engaged Couple:

Questions for the Pastoral Minister (before completion of the FOCCUS Pre-Marital Inventory) – Use the space after the questions to describe and summarize your impressions and observations about the couple for each topic area:

1. In an effort to get to know this couple, you might ask the couple how they met and when they knew this relationship would lead to marriage. You might also ask: What unique, special qualities have they found in their future spouse? What qualities do they like best about themselves? What qualities might they want to change about themselves or their future spouse?
2. Based on your initial contact and first meeting with the couple, describe your initial assessment of the couple’s attitude toward each other and the Church, their level of maturity, their level of faith, and their understanding of the basics of Catholic marriage.
3. List any special circumstances or challenges that may need to be addressed.
Summary of FOCCUS Pre-Marital Inventory:

The following topic areas are covered in the FOCCUS pre-marital inventory. To ensure that each of these essential topic areas are discussed with the pastoral minister, please use this form to record your observations and notes from your discussions. Even if FOCCUS is not used, this form can be used to assist you in preparing for and summarizing your formational sessions with your couple.

• Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills
  - Couples need to know their own communication style and that of their future spouse, and how well each partner is able to share and to listen.
  - Couples need to explore any blocks to on-going communication, including an inability to heal and be reconciled, a fear of being vulnerable to the other, a need to avoid conflict and an inability to adjust to differing needs and styles. The pastoral minister should encourage and model good listening and responding skills when working with couples.

Questions for the Pastoral Minister:

1. What is the style of communication that you observe about this couple? Who spoke first? What is their attitude toward each other? Body language?
2. How would you assess their ability to cope with disagreements? You might ask them, point blank, “how have you dealt with disagreements?”
3. How would you assess their ability to share genuine feelings about themselves with the other?
• Religion, Spirituality and Values
  - Couples who choose to make religion/spirituality/values a strength in their relationship have more stable and satisfying marriages. Each needs to know how significant these areas are for the other. Together they need to choose the priority they will give to this in their lives.
  - Can be a positive source of shared hope or a negative source of significant conflict.
  - Research suggests couples do not have to believe the same things to have common strength in this area. They do need to find some joint religious/spiritual activities and develop good problem solving skills around their differences.
  - When there are religious differences, identifying and discussing the issues before marriage can give couples a chance to know each other and make honest decisions about how they will problem solve with mutual respect.
  - Discussions about decisions regarding children and faith need to take place before marriage. The marriage and future children will benefit if each knows what the other values and expects before marriage and they can plan and decide together.

Questions for Pastoral Minister:

1. Are there any particular challenges this couples faces in terms of religious differences, even if both are Catholic? Has the couple adequately discussed their expectations on living their respective faiths, attending church, involvement in religious activities and how they will raise the kids?
Parenting Issues:

- Children create a bond in marriage that is life giving and a source of great responsibility. Couples should discuss the fears, hopes and expectations each has for himself/herself and for the other in parenting. Background influences should be discussed and the couples should look for realistic approaches to the situation of two parents working outside the home.

- Family backgrounds and differences in personality and style can create conflict over the role of mother and father. Two career families need to agree on acceptable models of parenting. The fear or danger that the couple relationship could be abandoned for the parenting role needs exploration. The role of parents should not become more important than the marital relationship.

Questions for the Pastoral Minister:

1. Has this couple discussed their expectations for parenting? Are they both open to life and do they believe that children are a gift from God (not a right)? Does this couple understand the notion of responsible parenthood – that children are the supreme gift of marriage and that the family is an image of the Trinity and a domestic church? Have they discussed what might happen if they can’t have children?
• **Extended Family Issues:**
  - No matter what age, couples bring to marriage not only themselves but their families of origin. Couples need to view the diversity in their families as neither good nor bad, but as the foundation from which the couple will form a new family. Couples need to strike a healthy balance in making their relationship primary while staying bonded with family in ways that support their relationship.
  - Couples need to recognize the effects that lack of family acceptance, family interference or the rejection/criticism of the other person’s family can have on their relationship.

Questions for the Pastoral Minister:

1. Are there significant religious or socio-economic differences between the two families? Are both families fully supportive of the couple’s relationship and future marriage? Has the couple discussed how to deal with a lack of boundaries or too much interference from one or both families? Does the couple understand that their marriage will always take precedent over other extended family relationships?
• Financial Issues:
  - Shared financial planning and related day to day decisions can be a key marital bonder of trust. Financial issues can, on the other hand, cause more problems for couples than any other area of the marital relationship. The problem is usually not so much the actual finances as it is the underlying value orientation to money held by each person.
  - Couples must ask realistically if they have the financial means to support a marriage. If not, can they accept the great stresses that financial concerns can place on a marriage? Couples need to consider, examine and develop models for handling and sharing in financial decision making that strengthens bonds in the relationship.
  - Lack of respect or trust for the other’s style of money management or earning ability can bring about a major power struggle in the marriage. The couple needs a clear understanding and agreement in this area before marriage. Unspoken expectations about changing the other need to be challenged.

Questions for the Pastoral Minister:

1. Has this couple indicated that they trust each other and have an open, healthy dialog when it comes to day to day financial decisions as well as large purchases? Is this couple willing to use a monthly budget? Have they discussed what might happen if one is unable to work or if one will stay home with the children? Are they completely aware of each other’s existing college debt or other debts?
• **Readiness Issues (Note):** you may wish to re-visit this section after your final sessions with the couple to ensure that nothing has surfaced during the course of the marriage prep process or the Instructional session (Pre-Cana), that demonstrates a lack of either party’s readiness for marriage

  ▪ Even after the couple has examined their compatibility, communication and problem-solving skills, and have discussed all issues that affect their daily lives in marriage, they still need to focus on their readiness for marriage to this person at this time. Couples must answer the question about how free and realistic is the couple’s decision to marry, how aware and open they are to what marriage entails and how they are approaching planning for their wedding.

  ▪ The readiness to marry presupposes realistic knowledge of both self and other, a decision to committed love for each other, a sense of acceptance and being able to live one’s life in full union with the other. Are there any non-negotiables –things that are so important that they can’t be compromised?

  ▪ An awareness of the changes and adjustments that marriage will require and a realistic view of the ongoing process involved in marriage is necessary so that couples will not be disillusioned by the realities of each new stage of marriage (e.g. adjusting to children, parenting of teens, loss of income, empty nest, retirement, illness)

Questions for the Pastoral Minister:

1. Do both parties have realistic expectations about marriage? Does this couple fully understand the demands of sacrificial love? Does this couple understand the unconditional nature of marital love – the notions of permanence, exclusivity and fidelity?
2. Is this couple fully ready to give themselves to the other freely, totally, faithfully and fruitfully, just as Christ gives himself to us?

3. Are there any concerns regarding either party’s ability to give consent completely and capably (with full knowledge, free will, and ability)? [We refer here to Canon Law, Canons 1095-1103, more specifically to defects of knowledge (canons 1096-1100), defects in the will (canons 1101-1103), and an incapacity for consenting (canon 1095)]¹

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• Covenant/Commitment:
  - Couples are given an opportunity to see their commitment as sacred, not just as a civil contract but a never-ending covenant. A marriage covenant involves a pledge to seek a life-long, faithful love for each other and with God. This promise pledges forgiveness and commitment even and especially in the face of difficulty and hardship. It is a promise to choose to love the same person day in and day out and enter each stage of marriage with renewed zest and deeper commitment.
  - Marriage as a covenant does not mean acceptance of destructive behavior nor simply enduring “down times.” This commitment involves a willingness to struggle and grow, to forgive and be forgiven, and recognize and address challenges together.

- Couples need to understand they make a commitment to seek the ideal with no absolute guarantee that they will in every instance be able to live it out completely. Fortunately couples are never meant to “go it alone.” They always have recourse to the sacraments, and should rely on their parish as a community of support in “good times and bad, sickness and health.”

Questions for the Pastoral Minister:

1. Is each party able to articulate what it means to have a permanent commitment of unconditional love and acceptance? Are they able to question, discuss and articulate their understanding of the kind of love they are pledging?

2. Is there any hesitation on either one’s part to lifelong, permanent, exclusive marriage? Will they place the marriage first above all other human relationships, and always rely on God for the supernatural, divine assistance that all couples need?
Stage Two: Marriage Catechesis and Formation

The goal of this stage is “to facilitate the engaged couple’s participation in a formational process of marriage preparation offered by the Church community.” *(PP&G, p. 13)*

- “If marriage preparation in all its phases should be the concern of the entire Christian community certainly married couples should have an important role in the immediate preparation of the engaged.” *(PP&G, p. 14)*
- “…it would be advisable to introduce the engaged couple to a sponsor couple (a married couple)...” *(PP&G, p. 2)*

The formational process consists of:

1. The instructional session (typically Pre-Cana, Engaged Encounter or the “Witness to Love” Mentoring program)
2. Accompaniment of the engaged by a sponsor couple (a requirement of the “Plan for Strengthening Marriage;” if using “Witness to Love,” the mentor couple serves the role of the sponsor couple.
3. Catechetical Session with Pastoral Minister (and sponsor couple) - Note: a full set of talking points and resources is being developed by the diocesan Marriage Ministry Team according to the Plan for Strengthening Marriage – will be available in early 2019.

**Key concepts to be covered in Catechetical Session:**

- The Trinity; the Incarnation; the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ; the “Good News” – the Gospel message.
- Marriage is exclusive, permanent and open to life.
- Marriage is a partnership of the whole of life – husband and wife give themselves to each other “totally, freely, faithfully and fruitfully,” just as Jesus gives himself to us.
- Marriage is a covenant of love made with God and each other - an unconditional promise of love and fidelity through good times and bad, sickness and health, until death.
- Marriage is a sacrament – a real and living sign of Christ’s love for his bride, the Church.
- Marriage is a sacrament of service and mission – a vocation that leads to the sanctification of the couple. Couples serve each other, their children, their families, their parish community, their town community and the world. By their baptism, all Catholics are called to be holy men and women of Christ (the universal call to holiness). The baptismal call is lived out in a unique way in the vocation of marriage.
- Marriage continues creation and forms a family. Husband and wife are called to responsible parenthood (includes use of natural methods of family planning only). The family is a church in miniature – a domestic church where we love and forgive one another, share meals and stories, praise and thank God for His blessings, celebrate family rituals, open our homes to others, and serve those in need.
- Marriage and all of the seven sacraments are a source of grace – the sharing in God’s divine life that gives couples the supernatural ability to love and serve each other every day of their marriage. The Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith. In Catholic marriage, couples belong to a Eucharistic
community (the Body of Christ) – the parish serves as their support system through every stage of marriage and family life.

Questions for the Pastoral Minister:

1. In discussing the couple’s experience of Pre-Cana, you might ask: What new insights did you gain about each other as a result of your Pre-Cana (marriage preparation) class? What new insights about the nature of Catholic marriage did you learn at Pre-Cana? Is there anything about Catholic marriage that was surprising to you? Is there anything that you found problematic about your new understanding of Catholic marriage?

2. After the completing the catechetical formation of the couple, do they fully understand the nature of marriage as permanent, exclusive, and open to life? Do they understand that marriage is an equal partnership wherein decisions are made together, and that marriage is a covenant of love made permanent by God’s action? Do they understand that marriage is a sacrament of service through which they live out their baptismal call in a unique way? Do they understand the notion of domestic church and how it connects to the Universal Church and to their parish community? Will the couple practice their faith, attend Mass weekly, and become actively involved in their parish community?
Stage Three: Pastoral Sessions, Wedding Liturgy and Beyond

Affirmation of the Couple's Readiness

1. Can you affirm the couple’s readiness for lifelong, indissoluble Catholic marriage? Do they fully understand what kind of sacrificial love (total self-giving) will be needed for lifelong sacramental marriage? Do they understand that their marital relationship will take precedence over all other human relationships, including their children? Have all pastoral challenges been addressed (Special Circumstances (PP&G, pgs. 32-55). Does the couple understand that the parish can provide all kinds of resources for the couple and their new family (pastoral care, counseling, mentoring, etc.)?

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Continuing to Grow; Being Active in Parish Life

It is recommended that the pastoral minister send an introductory referral card to the parish where the couple expects to reside after their marriage [see PP&G, p. 19; and Prenuptial Investigation Form C-1 (concerns the couple’s future residence), and Form C-2 (a letter to the couple’s future parish)].

Please use the additional space on this final page to list anything else that may be helpful for this couple’s marriage file:

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