

Why does the Catholic Church require a marriage preparation program?

The Catholic Church views marriage as a “vocation” or calling from God. In His goodness, God brings two people together and unites them through the Sacrament of Marriage. God’s plan for marriage is a life-long union between a man and a woman. Forming a lasting and healthy marriage takes time and dedicated effort. The Catholic Church wants to give couples the best possible foundation for their marriage. The required meetings and classes help to ensure that couples are adequately prepared for the journey of marriage.

What is Natural Family Planning?

Natural Family Planning (NFP) is the general title for the scientific methods of family planning that can help married couples either achieve or postpone pregnancies. NFP methods are based on the observation of the naturally occurring signs and symptoms of the fertile and infertile phases of a woman's menstrual cycle. No drugs, devices, or surgical procedures are used. Since the methods of NFP respect the unitive (love-giving) and procreative (life-giving) nature of the conjugal act, they support God's design for married love.

What if one of us is not Catholic?

In addressing this topic the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “Difference of confession between the spouses does not constitute an insurmountable obstacle for marriage, when they succeed in placing in common what they have received from their respective communities, and learn from each other the way in which each lives in fidelity to Christ. But the difficulties of mixed marriages must not be underestimated” (No. 1634). Couples need to give careful consideration to challenges posed by such unions, and are required to receive permission from the Church. Furthermore, both parties must fully participate in the preparation process.

Can our wedding be held in a non-Catholic Church?

“Because entry into the married state is part of the sacramental reality of the Church, the proper place to enter into marriage is within the sacred setting of the church – either the parish of the bride or the parish of the groom, or another church” (*Diocese of Steubenville Marriage Formation Policy*). In the case of couples where one is Catholic and one is non-Catholic, weddings may be held in the place of worship of the non-Catholic partner, but this requires special permission.

One of us has been married before. How will this affect our preparation?

It is important to discuss any previous marriages with the priest or deacon who is preparing you for marriage. The Catholic Church takes the commitment of marriage very seriously. The Church believes that the marriage between a baptized man and a baptized woman is a sacrament. As such, it is more than merely a legal contract; it is a covenant whereby God establishes a spiritual bond between the spouses that cannot be broken by human means. However, sometimes the Church examines a marriage and determines that something prevented the sacrament (and the spiritual bond) from being established between the couple. In those cases the Church can declare the marriage to be null and thus free the parties to marry. Documentation of a declaration of nullity must be provided before preparation can begin. “If one or both of the parties is not free to marry by reason of a prior marital bond, a date cannot be set (not even a tentative one) until the prior marriage is declared null and the party (parties) declared free to marry” (*Diocese of Steubenville Marriage Formation Policy*).

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DIOCESE OF STEUBENVILLE
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The Marriage Preparation Process

A Guide for Engaged Couples



Congratulations on your engagement!

Sacramental Marriage is both a gift and a true calling. In His goodness, God brings a man and a woman together to form a life-long union – a union that enriches the lives of the couple and the world around them. As the foundation of the family, marriage plays a vital role in the life of both the Church and Society itself, above all through the procreation and education of children (the greatest gift and blessing of marriage).

Brought together by mutual love, a man and a woman united in the Sacrament of Matrimony receive the outpouring of God's grace inviting and enabling them to share in and manifest the Mystery of Love which is always free, total, faithful and fruitful by its very nature.

In order to offer couples the very best possible foundation for their marriage, the Diocese of Steubenville requires the following five steps for marriage preparation.

FIVE STEP PROCESS

Marriage preparation in the Diocese of Steubenville consists of the following five steps.

STEP 1

Meetings with Priest or Deacon

Six to twelve months prior to the anticipated wedding date, you will need to meet with the priest or deacon who will be preparing you for marriage. He will walk you through the preparation process, help you to evaluate your readiness for marriage, and offer you some tools for preparing to make this life-long commitment.

STEP 2

Comprehensive Introduction to the Theology of the Body

We live in a culture that often upholds and promotes messages in conflict with the Gospel. This has obscured the Catholic understanding of marriage and sexuality. The *Theology of the Body*, created by St. John Paul II, offers a fresh and modern perspective on human sexuality, the dignity of man and woman and the sacred calling of marriage. Couples are often surprised by the very positive approach to sex offered by the *Theology of the Body*. For different options for completing this requirement, ask the priest or deacon preparing you for marriage or visit www.diosteub.org/family/marriage-preparation.

STEP 3

Marriage Life-Skills Workshop or Retreat

The workshop or retreat will help you to dive deeper into your marriage preparation and offer you concrete tools to build your married-life together. For different options for completing this requirement, ask the priest or deacon preparing you for marriage or visit www.diosteub.org/family/marriage-preparation.

STEP 4

Course in Natural Family Planning

Catholic teaching on sex and responsible parenthood is often greatly misunderstood. Although all couples entering into marriage need to be open to the gift of children, the Catholic Church specifically encourages couples to discern for themselves the timing and number of their children. This must always be done through morally acceptable means and with an openness to God's calling.

As part of your preparation for marriage, you are required to attend a diocesan-approved course in Natural Family Planning. These courses offer scientifically-based methods of fertility awareness that are proven to be effective in postponing pregnancy. Natural Family Planning also respects God's design for human sexuality.

Various methods of training are available in the diocese, although not all are available in each region. (Online courses are available as well.) Most courses require at least three classes over a period of three months. The cost of instruction is determined by each provider and varies considerably. For different options for completing this requirement, ask the priest or deacon preparing you or visit www.diosteub.org/family/nfp.

STEP 5

Finalize Preparations

One to two months prior to the wedding date, you will meet with the priest or deacon who will be officiating at the wedding to finalize all preparations. You will have the opportunity to review your marriage preparation with him and to make final plans for the Wedding Liturgy. (You are strongly encouraged to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation before the celebration of Matrimony.)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Does the order of the steps matter?

It is not essential to follow the exact order of these steps, however couples should begin by meeting with the priest or deacon. It is advisable to make arrangements for the course in Natural Family Planning early in the process since it typically requires three months to complete.