Pastoral Policies and Guidelines

For

Marriage Preparation

For

The Catholic Church in New Jersey

The Bishops of the Dioceses of New Jersey

Newark    Camden    Metuchen    Paterson    Trenton    Passaic    Syracuse
Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation

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Overview

This revised handbook* of Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation focuses on a three-stage marriage preparation process. The goal of these policies and guidelines is to provide assistance and support to engaged couples as well as to pastoral ministers** and married couples working with them. Different authoritative levels of directions are found in this handbook: canonical norms, statements of policy, and guidelines for dealing with special circumstances.

Regarding canonical issues, everyone is to observe procedures that are established by the Code of Canon Law (1983) as well as by the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches.*** Establishing a couple’s eligibility to marry is most critical, especially in cases of prior marriages, whether the ceremony was religious or civil. If one or the other party was married before, a wedding may not be scheduled until the freedom of each person to marry is established. This is to be done through a death certificate, or if the former spouse is still alive, through a legitimate determination that a prior marriage was invalid.

The Bishop’s message addressed to engaged couples conveys the pastoral spirit of the policies and guidelines for marriage preparation.

The Introduction relates the revised Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation to the broader context of the Church’s teaching about marriage and contemporary attitudes that may undermine the Christian vision of marriage. It considers the canonical norms for remote, proximate and immediate preparation as well as follow-up which will be supportive to newly married couples. Lastly, it stresses the Church’s concern for ministerial sensitivity and prudence toward engaged couples in special circumstances.

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* A Couple’s edition of the Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation is available.

** In this document the term “pastoral minister” generally refers to a priest or deacon but may also include a lay person with theological and canonical competence and pastoral experience. who is responsible for the direction of the marriage preparation process.

*** CIC is often used for the 1983 Code of Canon Law. It stands for Codex Juris Canonici. CCEO is often used for the 1990 Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches. It stands for Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium.
SECTION I: The Marriage Preparation Process (Three Stages)

Stage One: Introduction and Orientation

Couples approach the Church desiring to make a commitment to one another before God and to have their union blessed. It is of paramount importance that from the outset they have a warm and welcoming experience regardless of the couple's active or inactive affiliation with the Church. The pastoral minister should assure the couple of the Church's desire to help them prepare for a lasting, life-giving and happy marriage. In this first stage the pastoral minister will address any special circumstances, inform the couple about the preparation process, encourage them to understand the value of their commitment to this preparation process and determine with them a course for activities and meetings beyond their wedding. The use of a pre-marital communications inventory such as F.O.C.C.U.S. (Facilitating, Open, Couple, Communication, Understanding and Study) may be helpful at this stage. A wedding date may be scheduled only after establishing the couple's freedom to marry. The “Engagement Blessing” is optional.

Stage Two: Marriage Catechesis and Formation

A couple will participate in an approved marriage preparation program conducted either in an individual parish or at a diocesan level. Whatever the choice of program, Engaged Encounter Weekend, Pre-Cana Sessions or Sponsor Couple formation, the interaction of engaged couples with married couples during the preparation process is an invaluable dimension of the Church's preparation ministry. If personal circumstances make these options unfeasible, this “instructional” stage may be conducted by the pastoral minister, but it would be advisable to introduce the engaged couple to a sponsor couple (a married couple), trained in marriage preparation, who is able to share their own convictions and personal experiences about God and love, commitment and sacrifice, forgiveness and spiritual growth in marriage.

Stage Three: Pastoral Sessions, Wedding Liturgy and Beyond

This stage allows time for a couple to reflect further with the pastoral minister on their experience in the preparation process and to address their plans for their wedding liturgy. It also provides the opportunity for the pastoral minister to encourage the engaged couple to appreciate the value of their continuing, active involvement in worship and parish life. The hope is that in establishing their home they will also seek a spiritual home in a parish community. It is important that parish communities reach out to newly married couples with a warm welcome.

SECTION II: Particular Ecclesial Situations in Marriage Preparation

Particular ecclesial situations may include: Catholics of different Churches Sui Iuris, a Catholic and a baptized Christian; a Catholic and a non-baptized person, and two Catholics of the same Church of whom one or both are no longer practicing the faith. For marriages between Latin rite Catholics and Catholics of other Churches Sui Iuris, the canonical preference in preparing for and celebrating the marriage is that the marriage will take place in the rite of the groom and be witnessed by his proper pastor. Deacons are able to witness marriages only for Latin Rite Catholics. In some circumstances a dispensation from the canonical form of marriage may be petitioned; or permission and/or delegation may be given to celebrate the Catholic Rite of Marriage outside of a Church.

SECTION III: Special Circumstances in Marriage Preparation

Guidelines are offered for various circumstances, including: abusive relationships, addictions, people choosing not to have children, cohabitation, communicable diseases, convalidations, unmarried couples who have had children together, couples with children from other relationships, instances of cultural, ethnic or racial diversity, HIV/AIDS and marriage, immaturity, infertility, long distance relationships in marriage preparation, marriages of minors, marriages of older persons, marriages of persons with disabilities, instances of pregnancy, pre-nuptial agreements, previous marriages and questions of sexual identity. These guidelines may assist a couple and the pastoral minister working with them to evaluate their situation in a realistic and responsible way.
I. Marriage is a profoundly personal, deeply spiritual relationship affecting not only a couple but their children. "The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring, has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between the baptized" (c. 1055, §1).

Marriage is, for Christians, a mystery and a mission.

Marriage is a mystery because a husband and a wife engage the depths of their personalities to work out their destiny together but also because their relationship is lived out in the presence of God and in response to the initiative of Christ’s grace in them.

Marriage is a mission insofar as they assume responsibility for each other and for the children who may be born to them and also insofar as they help sanctify one another by manifesting faith to each other, their children and the community in which they live.

Marriage is God’s creation and the work of husbands and wives.

II. A marriage is created through a mutual, personal commitment. "Matrimonial consent is an act of the will by which a man and a woman mutually give and accept each other through an irrevocable covenant in order to establish marriage" (c. 1057, §2).

Marital love is rooted in the complete and total self-gift of a man and woman to each other. By their consent to marriage, the spouses betroth and accept each other in such a way that a new relationship begins for them in the sight of God and in the eyes of society as well. Their relationship is an intimate union calling for total fidelity and permanent unity so long as they each shall live. Once a couple creates a marital relationship, the bond that they have forged no longer depends solely on their own will but has a social and ecclesial reality which endures.

"For as God of old made Himself present to His people through a covenant of love and fidelity, so now the Savior of men and the Spouse of the Church comes into the lives of married Christians through the Sacrament of Matrimony. He abides with them thereafter so that, just as He loved the Church and handed himself over on her behalf, the spouses may love each other with perpetual fidelity through mutual self-gestowal" (Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 48, Second Vatican Council, 1965).

III. Attitudes a man or woman has about marriage may jeopardize their very ability to marry. Such an incapacity for marriage exists for “those who suffer a grave defect of discretion of judgment concerning the essence matrimonial rights and duties mutually to be handed over and accepted” (c. 1095, 2°).

Much of contemporary society does not share Christ’s ideal for marriage. At a time when His own culture and the contemporary legal systems agreed that marriage was a relationship that could be dissolved at least at the initiative of a husband, Jesus Christ introduced a different vision for marriage. Jesus declared that God’s will is for a marriage relationship to be lived out in faithful commitment by a man and a woman as long as both live.

The pervasive experience of divorce, the prevalence of prenuptial agreements and experiments with live-in relationships as preparatory for marriage, affect the readiness of couples who approach the Church for marriage to grasp the practical implications of Jesus’ vision for them and to accept Jesus’ norm as their practical duty toward each other. Catholic couples preparing for marriage today will find themselves in what may be described as a counter-cultural experience. If a couple holds intentions about marriage contrary to the Church’s standards, they jeopardize their own ability to marry validly as well as their ability for a happy life together.*

IV. REMOTE PREPARATION. The Church has a duty to declare Christ’s vision for marriage to the whole community, young and old, and to assist couples to fulfill this vocation. "Pastors...are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful the assistance by which the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection. This assistance must be offered especially by: pre...
catechisis adapted to minors, youth, and adults ...by which the Christian faithful are instructed about the meaning of Christian marriage ...”(c. 1063, §1).

Communicating the truth and the beauty of Christian marriage to all, young and old, is crucial. Informing people about the sacrament is a duty of the whole Christian community. The seeds of this message are planted in the deeds of daily life as boys and girls, young men and women, witness how their parents work to live out their commitment of married love. In Catholic schools and religious education programs, instruction appropriate to various grade levels should gradually introduce youngsters to a formal appreciation of the sacrament of marriage. In marriage preparation programs married couples proclaim the joys and loving struggles of faithfully lived married life and share their own Christian wisdom about marriage with those who are preparing to begin their own lives together.

At Sunday worship, periodic explanations about what marriage entails should highlight why the Church treasures the marriage preparation process as an opportunity to work with couples. Beyond the home, the classroom and pre-marital instructions, Catholic people need to hear about marriage from the pulpit. Priests and deacons should call to their congregations’ attention Christian marriage successes, for instance, in celebrations for significant marriage anniversaries. At times the Scriptures lend themselves to the themes of married life. Priests and deacons should take such opportunities to affirm the Christian vision of married life. When the Scriptures speak of brokenness, the plight of widows or the uncertainties of the dispossessed, preachers may be able to uplift hearts bruised in families separated by failed marriages, by the tensions of living with spouses or parents who are no longer lovers and by the isolation of outliving a beloved spouse. In all situations, faith in the Good News about marriage needs to be announced with conviction.

Today’s mass media exerts a strong influence on young people. Much of what is broadcast runs counter to time-honored and sound values. The Church must speak out and highlight the ideals and qualities of Christian marriage. The young especially need to hear the voices of those who know all that marriage can be.

V. PROXIMATE PREPARATION. The opportunity for individual, personal marriage preparation is a responsibility not only of priests and deacons but also of a parish community. “Pastors...are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful...personal preparation to enter marriage, which disposes the spouses to the holiness and duties of their new state...”

Marriage is an intimate partnership. Every marriage is the union of two unique persons. Every family is composed of never-to-be-duplicated individual personalities. Each marriage and each family is a creative effort on God’s part as well as for a husband and wife. To prepare adequately for such an undertaking, engaged partners must come to know one another realistically. The conjugal covenant involves two imperfect individuals making a genuine commitment to give themselves to and to accept one another. Premarital communication inventories such as F.O.C.C.U.S. may help to achieve better mutual self-understanding. In every case the Church’s ministers work with each couple individually.

Every couple must challenge any secular ideologies or personal misconceptions that undermine their appreciation of Christian marital commitment. The pastoral ministers and various marriage preparation programs will provide opportunities for engaged partners to explore their own assumptions, share their expectations and claim for one another a truly Christian view of what marriage is.

Key to the marriage preparation process is a couple’s willingness to take the time and to do the work that will enrich them spiritually and humanly. Marriage is a life-long process of growth and commitment to a continuing and a supportive relationship in which the partners help each other to develop themselves as fully as possible. “Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. By virtue of this sacrament, as spouses fulfill conjugal and family obligations, they are penetrated with the Spirit of Christ...Thus they increasingly advance their own perfection, as well as their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God.” (Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 48, Second Vatican Council, 1965).

It is for this very reason that the Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation mandates that engaged couples receive a preparation which both instructs them regarding marriage and their role as ministers of marriage, and also contributes to their human and spiritual for-
mation as marriage partners. To adequately fulfill these
goals, a year's preparation is directed by the Pastoral Policies
and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation. This re-
represents a significant commitment to be made by the couple,
the pastoral minister who will be working with them and
the married couples in marriage preparation programs.

"Before a marriage is celebrated, it must be evident that
nothing stands in the way of its valid and licit celebration"
(c. 1066). Pastoral ministers must see that the spirit of this
canon is observed. It is important to note that much more is
involved in the marriage preparation process itself than sim-
ply meeting minimal canonical requirements.

Pastoral ministers who work with the engaged couples ex-
ercise 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. Pastoral ministers should never underestimate
the skills and knowledge that they have acquired through
their own experiences in human relationships as well as
their personal spiritual formation. The authenticity of their
faith can shine out in their efforts to share prayer and ideals
with couples whom they prepare for marriage.

VI. Procedures are established to assure the couples' read-
iness to exercise their right to marry and to assist
everyone in a particular case when the right to marry is ques-
tioned. "All persons who are not prohibited by law can
contract marriage" (c. 1058). But the right to marry is not
absolute and must be weighed against any factors which
mitigate that right by challenging readiness of a couple or
an individual. ..."In a special case, the local ordinary
can prohibit marriage for his own subject...but only for a
time, for a grave cause, and for as long as the cause con-
tinues" (c. 1077, §1).

During the course of preparation, the pastoral minister may
find that a particular couple is experiencing a significant
difficulty or perceive that there is a serious issue that needs
to be addressed. Such a situation would require further ex-
amination and may involve theological, medical, or psycho-
logical consultation. In that case, the pastoral minister will
seek advice through whatever process has been established
in each diocese. Such a referral might take place after profes-
sional counseling or may itself be a prelude to the recom-
mandation of such counseling. Occasionally a suspected dif-
ficulty may be easily verifiable; for example, one or both of
the parties may be under age 18 or there may be a pregnancy
that occurred prior to marriage. But in other cases the prob-
lem may be more difficult to pinpoint; for instance, immatu-
rety, marrying to escape an unhappy home situation, excess-
ive parental pressure, undue haste in planning a marriage,
lack of commitment to the marriage preparation process or a
truly insufficient commitment to the Church's teaching about
marriage. In all such situations, it is mandatory that the pas-
toral minister who is working with a couple to refer the issues
for review through the process that is in place in the particu-
lar diocese where the marriage takes place.

In such circumstances, the pastoral minister will inform the
couple that their marriage preparation process may have to
be extended. In a gentle and pastoral way, he should try to
enable the couple to appreciate the reasons why he is mak-
ing a referral and urge openness to a more extended prepara-
tion if it is the eventual recommendation for them. The
pastoral minister should request the consent of the couple
to release any information in the referral that may have
been obtained from some professional agency.

The process seeks to guarantee adequate consultation with
experienced persons of good judgment so that a negative
evaluation of the couple's readiness for marriage is objec-
tive and not based on the whim or prejudice of a control-
ing individual. It provides opportunity for a couple to avail
themselves of counselors who may help them to appreciate
aspects of a lifelong commitment they may have overlooked.

Whenever a referral to this process is made, the pastoral
minister will be clear with a couple that what is occurring is
a consultation and not necessarily a conclusion as yet. The
Church is not saying to a couple, "You cannot marry!", just
because some serious question is under investigation. But,
if after the consultation, the decision of the local Ordinary
is to prohibit the marriage at least temporarily (c. 1077, §1),
the couple should be urged to accept that advice and coop-
erate with whatever recommendations are offered for fur-
ther preparation.

If a couple can not be persuaded to postpone their wedding
and indicate that they will marry outside of the Church, the
minister should not look upon such an attempted marriage
as simply the lesser of two evils. If a couple is judged not
ready for marriage, the pastoral minister should do all that
he can to persuade the couple not to enter any kind of
union at that time.
The right of any couple or individual to appeal directly to the Bishop as the head of the Catholic community is always guaranteed. The pastoral minister should assist a couple or the individual in making such an appeal.

The Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation assists engaged couples to “let the spouses themselves...be joined to one another in equal affection, harmony of mind and the work of mutual sanctification” and helps pastoral ministers and all who work in marriage preparation programs in assisting engaged couples to undertake “the joys and sacrifices of their vocation” so they may “become witnesses of the mystery of that love which the Lord revealed to the world by His dying and His rising to life again.” (Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 52, Second Vatican Council, 1965).

VII. IMMEDIATE PREPARATION. Marriage preparation includes the active participation by the couple in the wedding ceremony. “Pastors...are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful...a fruitful liturgical celebration of marriage which is to show that the spouses signify and share in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church...”(c. 1063, §3).

The Rite of Marriage provides various options for the prayers, the readings and the ceremonies of a wedding liturgy. While marriage preparation is focused more to the lifetime experiences of a couple than to the single event of a wedding, the preparation of a wedding liturgy itself is also an important part of the process. Therefore a parish preparation program for marriage should support the active participation of the couple and their guests in the wedding ritual. The availability of musicians, assisting ministers and a welcoming church environment can only be achieved at the local level and with its own resources.

The pastoral ministers who work with engaged couples need to familiarize them with the Rite of Marriage and how they consider the various options for participating. In doing so everyone should keep in mind the perspective of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal and its directives for all Masses (352). The pastoral effectiveness of a celebration will be heightened if the texts of readings, prayers, and songs correspond as closely as possible to the needs, religious preparation, and aptitude of the participants, however secular music is not permitted. Secular readings may not replace scripture and the official texts may not be altered without approval. Choices are to be made in consultation with the pastoral minister.

VIII. BEYOND THE WEDDING. The Church’s interest in married couples does not end with the wedding ceremony. “Pastors...are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful...help to those who are married, so that faithfully preserving and protecting the conjugal covenant, they daily come to lead holier and fuller lives in their families” (c. 1063, §4).

Programs supportive to married couples have developed in the Church. The Christian Family Movement, Marriage Encounter, Retrouvaille, and parish-based support groups work in various ways to enhance the quality of married couples’ relationships or help couples that have experienced major tensions to rediscover the foundations of their love and commitment. Such efforts are to be commended and supported.

A somewhat newer recognition, however, is the importance of Church support for young couples in the first years of their marriage experience. Progressively, the anonymity of contemporary society often isolates many people from their neighbors and from the communities in which they live. People are highly mobile. Many work in one city, live in a suburb, recreate in other areas and are in touch with family more by telecommunications than by face-to-face contact. Young married couples sometimes have little connection with their parish church even if they regularly practice their religion.

The Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation offer suggestions to capitalize on the positive experience of marriage preparation by making contact with a newly married couple in the parish in which they reside. Many blessings can be gained by both the couples themselves and by the parish communities in which they may become actively involved.
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Marriage Preparation: A Commitment Of Time

Goals: To give couples adequate time to prepare for marriage and the wedding celebration.

To provide the pastoral minister and the engaged couple an opportunity to develop a relationship with one another.

Policy: Ideally the marriage preparation process should begin when the engagement is announced even if that is more than a year before the proposed wedding date. Normally the preparation process begins not less than one year before the desired wedding date.

Discussion:

- Couples should be encouraged to contact the parish as soon as they become engaged. Many couples initiate wedding plans almost a year and a half to two years in advance. The earlier the couples contact the parish to arrange for a wedding the more beneficial the marriage preparation process may be for them.

- Beginning the marriage preparation process early provides additional opportunities for the couple to assess their individual readiness to marry and sufficient time to go through the three stages of the preparation process.

- If either of the two parties has been previously married, or if there are particular circumstances that require further attention (cf. Section III), additional time may be needed to determine the party’s freedom to marry in the Church and/or to address their particular circumstances.

- If the couple should approach the Church for marriage less than a year before the wedding, the process for preparation needs to be honored in a responsible and realistic way. It is expected that the pastoral minister will exercise appropriate pastoral discretion.

- It is strongly recommended that the preparation process be completed at least six weeks prior to the wedding date. This allows the couple those final weeks to focus on personal reflection and their last minute preparations for the wedding.
A Couple's First Contact With The Parish

Goals: To reflect Christ's love and the Church’s concern for engaged couples by providing a warm and congratulatory welcome.

To recognize that regardless of a couple’s active or inactive affiliation with the Church, many are apprehensive about the initial contact and may need encouragement and support.

Policy: The parish staff should facilitate arrangements for the couple to meet with the pastoral minister as soon as possible. A wedding date is not to be entered, even tentatively, into the parish calendar until such a meeting takes place.

Discussion:

• The engaged couple initiates the marriage preparation process when they call the parish to inquire about being married in the Church. It is important that the first persons contacted by the couple seeking a Church wedding have the information and skills to assist them in a pastoral manner.

• Experience has shown that some couples have been discouraged, even alienated, by parish personnel merely stating the requirements necessary to celebrate marriage. This can undermine the intent of these guidelines. It is essential therefore to provide training for secretaries and receptionists in terms of attitude, tone of voice and the type of information they give the couple.

• This is a special moment in the lives of the couple and a time when they should be assured of the Church’s readiness to be of assistance to them.
Initial Meeting(s) With The Couple

Goals: To establish a rapport with the couple by communicating an attitude of openness, support and hospitality.

To explain the marriage preparation process.

To provide information about available marriage preparation programs.

To ascertain the couple's canonical and civil eligibility for marriage.

To determine the date for the wedding, if possible.

To nurture the couple's faith by encouraging their spiritual preparation.

Policy: Soon after a couple makes an initial contact with the parish, a meeting should take place with the pastoral minister before they participate in any formal marriage preparation program. There is a real value at this stage of the process for the couple to confer with the pastoral minister who will officiate at the wedding.

Discussion:

- The marriage preparation process can provide teachable moments for evangelization, particularly for those couples who do not have a strong faith commitment. Therefore, a caring response from the pastoral minister may be an invitation for the couple to take a deeper look at their faith.

- Review and explain the pastoral concerns and commitment of the Church as expressed in the Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation. The couple's edition of this handbook should be given to the engaged couple to facilitate their understanding of the requirements of the marriage preparation process.

- Explore the motives for marriage and any special circumstances that may affect their marriage, for example: age, cultural background, pregnancy, military service, physical or mental disability, levels of faith development and religious issues. If any impediment or special circumstance seems to be present, refer to the special circumstances section of these guidelines.

- It is recommended that in the initial session the bride and groom assisted by the pastoral minister complete the biographical portion of the required canonical forms. This may reveal any canonical impediment that would prevent setting a wedding date.

- Instruct the couple in regard to Church and civil documents that will be required.
  - Baptismal Certificates (issued within six months)
  - Affidavits of Freedom to Marry

In the event of a second marriage:
  - A Civil Decree of Divorce
  - An Ecclesiastical Decree of Annulment, or
  - A Death Certificate

- Couples have many questions about the celebration of their wedding. A well-prepared parish fact sheet/booklet can obviate the necessity of repeating the most basic answers about such things as the documents that they will need to obtain, how to make contact with approved diocesan or parish marriage preparation program, wedding or rehearsal times, parish musicians, fees and the like.

- The wedding date may be set provided there are no canonical impediments or other special circumstances that might delay the marriage. Pastoral ministers should familiarize themselves with all the special circumstances in Section III and be especially aware of those that may call for a delay in the wedding date.

- The couple should be reminded of the importance of personal prayer and participation in the sacramental life of the Church as they prepare for their marriage. If one of the Catholic parties has not been confirmed he or she should be encouraged to begin preparation for the sacrament although the reception of Confirmation itself is not required prior to marriage. (c. 1065 §1 states, "Catholics who have not yet received the sacrament of Confirmation are to receive it before they are admitted to marriage if it can be done without grave inconvenience").

- The pastoral minister may discuss the value of a special blessing for the engaged couple (Cf. Book of Blessings, pp. 96-101 Art. #195).
Addressing A Couple's Experience And Needs

Goals: To assist a couple in assessing their own insights, understanding and mutual communication as part of preparation for Christian marriage.

To address the particular needs of each individual couple by recommending appropriate preparation opportunities and, if necessary, further counseling for special concerns.

Policy: During the initial meeting, or in a subsequent meeting with the couple, the administration of a communications assessment instrument, a premarital inventory, is strongly recommended as an effective way to bring clarity to a couple's individual and shared experience as well as their own hopes for and expectations about marriage.

When special circumstances warrant, refer to Section III.

Discussion:

* Just as every person is unique, so is each couple unique. Working with people preparing for marriage may offer many insights. But no one couple is an exact copy of another. Each time a couple approaches them, pastoral ministers are invited to become acquainted anew with the mystery of how human love and divine love are working themselves out in a particular way.

* Couples need to understand that they will come to know themselves in new ways. Through one another and in their mutual relationship, they can experience together the joys and sorrows of human love, the destructive influence of selfishness and sin and the uplifting power of genuine self-giving and sharing God's grace.

* The Church encourages the use of premarital communication instruments that can help couples to understand better where they are in their own relationship as they begin their marriage preparations. Results of taking such instruments can also help couples to review the implications for marriage preparation or any special circumstances in which they find themselves.

* The Pontifical Council for the Family, in its document, Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage, recommends the use of sound pedagogical aids for marriage preparation. Couples might use premarital inventories such as F.O.C.C.U.S. (Facilitating, Open, Couple, Communication, Understanding and Study), the PMI (Premarital Inventory) or PREPARE (Premarital Personal and Relationship Enrichment). Such instruments, interpreted by those trained to do so, can help an engaged couple to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their own relationship and to identify areas of agreement and disagreements both with each other or with Church teachings. Such realizations can lead to further consideration and reflection with one another, with the pastoral minister, and with the committed married couples who will work with them in their preparation experience.

* Premarital Inventories are not psychological tests. “Good results” do not guarantee a successful marriage. “Difficulties uncovered” are not absolute obstacles to continuing marriage preparation. Pastoral ministers should be careful not to “psychologize” or to draw unfounded conclusions. In cases of apparent serious difficulty, the couple and the pastoral minister will wish to consult with experts. The pastoral minister might refer couples to counselors recommended by the Diocese or to others known to be competent in providing counseling about the results of the communication instrument. If it would become necessary for the results of a premarital inventory to be reviewed by someone other than the pastoral minister working with the couple, the couple will be asked to complete a Counselor Release Form, both to provide for the review of the data by an appropriate counselor and to give that counselor permission to share information gleaned during the review process with the pastoral minister.

* Normally, F.O.C.C.U.S., PREPARE or another type of premarital inventory will be taken prior to participation in a diocesan approved program for preparation. In some circumstances, this order may be reversed at the discretion of the pastoral minister and with the couple's agreement. Couples should complete this entire process not less than 6 months before their marriage date.
The Engagement Blessing

Goals: To emphasize the importance of this time of discernment and preparation for marriage by invoking God's blessing on the couple.

To provide a ritual through which family and/or the parish community can bless and become involved in the couple's journey of faith in marriage.

Policy: The parish may provide an opportunity for the couple's family and members of the parish community to affirm the couple's decision through an engagement blessing.

Discussion:

- The engaged couple can benefit from the prayers and support of their family, friends and parish community during this time of discernment and preparation. It is a special occasion for the family and an opportunity for the parish to provide on-going support while asking God's blessings on the couple's time of preparation.

- The Engagement Blessing presents an opportunity for the couple to hear the Church's prayer ...“that as they await the day of their wedding, God will help them grow in mutual respect and love for one another...” (Cf. Book of Blessings, Art. #202). It is not a public commitment to marriage nor a celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage itself.

- The blessing may be offered by the parents, pastoral minister or a lay minister. If this is not offered by the pastoral minister, the parents of the couple may offer this blessing at a family gathering. (Cf. Book of Blessings, Art. #197).

- The special blessing of an engaged couple is never to be combined with the celebration of Mass (Cf. Book of Blessings, Art. #198).

- A copy of the Engagement Blessing is in the Couple’s Guide. Eastern Catholics have their own engagement ceremony.
**Stage Two: Marriage Catechesis and Formation**

**Participation In A Shared Preparation Process**

**Goal:** To facilitate the engaged couple’s participation in a formational process of marriage preparation offered by the Church community.

**Policy:** A variety of diocesan or parish sponsored preparation programs are to be available for couples.

**Discussion:**

- All couples are to be prepared by the Church for marriage.

- The occupational demands made on their time and their residential geographical locations require that they be offered reasonable options when informed of their required participation in a marriage preparation program.

- Although convenient for most, couples are not to be restricted to programs offered in their parish or diocese.

- The type of marriage preparation programs currently available within the Province are:
  - Engaged Encounter Weekends
  - Marriage Preparation/Pre-Cana Sessions
  - Other appropriate parish-based marriage preparation programs approved by the diocese.

- Ecumenical, Interreligious and Second Marriage Programs
  Ecumenical, Interreligious and Second Marriage preparation programs should be available to meet the special needs of these couples.
**Marriage Preparation Programs**

**Goal:** To provide trained married couples for service in marriage preparation ministry (i.e. Engaged Encounter, Pre-Cana).

**Policy:** Pastors are to recruit and, with the assistance of diocesan family life offices, train validly married couples competent and willing to help engaged couples prepare for Christian marriage. The selection of married team couples should reflect the diversity of engaged couples in terms of age, cultural heritage and faith tradition.

**Discussion:**

- By Baptism all members of the Church are called to build up the Body of Christ.

- If marriage preparation in all its phases should be the concern of the entire Christian community (Cf. Familiaris Consortio and Faithful to Each Other) certainly married couples should have an important role in the immediate preparation of the engaged.

- In recruiting and training married couples for marriage preparation ministry, it is important that they be properly trained with due regard for the teachings of the Church on Christian marriage (Cf. #45 Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage, Pontifical Council on the Family.)

- Experience has proven the value of the witness of married couples, who live their vocation in light of the Gospel, in preparing couples for marriage. When married couples speak out of their own conviction and from personal experiences about God, Church, love, commitment, sacrifice, forgiveness, prayer, stewardship and service, they offer a powerful witness.

- Married couples who serve in this capacity find that their encounter with the engaged enriches and strengthens their own marriages. Pastoral wisdom warrants that these successfully married couples should form the core of a marriage preparation team.

- Toward this end marriage preparation programs will strive to make ample time and space for the engaged couple’s reflection and discussion, and for dialogue with those serving on marriage preparation teams. It is important to encourage the couple’s on-going dialogue throughout the marriage preparation process.
Affirmation Of The Couple’s Readiness For Marriage

Goal: To affirm the readiness of the couple for Christian marriage.

Policy: Following their participation in a marriage preparation program, the couple will meet with the pastoral minister as soon as it is convenient. Once sufficient readiness for marriage is affirmed the liturgical planning may take place.

Discussion:

• Since there are a variety of pre-marital programs available it is essential that the pastoral minister is assured that the couple understands the sacramental dimension of marriage.

• Discuss the engaged couple’s response to the interest, care, and the time given by the married couples helping them.

• The married couple’s evident happiness, example of faith in God, commitment to one another and loyalty to the Church may tremendously influence the engaged couple. How was this expressed in the engaged couple’s experience? Did it give them strong hope for their own future? Did it inspire them now to become reconciled with the Church or to participate more in its life?

• It is important to help the couple reflect on any serious or unresolved issues and concerns, any value and effect that the faith of the parish community had upon them during their preparation, and what they have learned about themselves, the parish, the Church, and Marriage. This is the time to ask, “What else needs to be covered/discussed?” before preparing for the wedding liturgy. This time should be used to encourage the reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

• Completion of pre-nuptial documentation should take place at this meeting.

• Review the substantive questions regarding marital commitment.

• Collect any outstanding documents and/or witness forms.

• Complete the pre-nuptial documentation with the couple.

• If the couple is unfamiliar with liturgical ritual this can be another occasion for uncertainty and anxiety. The couple can be reassured by the pastoral minister if the liturgical planning resources for their wedding liturgy are given and explained to them at this time. (Cf. Immediate Plans for the Wedding Liturgy, p. 16 of this manual).
Immediate Plans For the Wedding Liturgy

Goals: To assist couples in the planning of their wedding liturgy so that the celebration expresses and deepens their faith and experience of the mystery of God's love in their marriage.

To provide information and resources to engaged couples in order to enhance their understanding of the rite of marriage and provide guidance as they begin the process of personally selecting those prayers and scripture readings which reflect their loving relationship and individuality as a couple.

Policy: In liturgical preparation, the pastoral minister will assist the engaged couple in planning a celebration that is "simple and dignified", according to the norms of the competent authorities of the Church" (Familiaris Consortio, #67). Since Christian marriage is a sacramental action of the Church, "the liturgical celebration of marriage should involve the Christian community, with full, active and responsible participation of all those present, according to the place and task of each individual" (Familiaris Consortio, #67). The celebration of a Nuptial Mass is most appropriate for a couple who are both practicing Catholics.

Planning a Nuptial Ceremony (outside of Mass) would be an appropriate choice for a couple who reflect differing faith traditions. Consult diocesan guidelines for the celebration of interchurch and interfaith marriages.

Discussion:

- The wedding ceremony should reflect the distinctive quality of Christian faith, with special attention given to the celebration of the Word, the exchange of vows by the couple promising to live together in loving trust and fidelity, and the nuptial blessing.

- It is also possible for the planners, in accordance with concrete circumstances of time and place, "to include in the liturgical celebration such elements proper to each culture which serve to express more clearly the profound human and religious significance of the marriage contract, provided that such elements are in harmony with Christian faith and morality" (Familiaris Consortio, #67). Care and prudent consideration will determine what can be fittingly introduced from the traditions and cultures of individual people, without conflicting with the theological meaning of the wedding ceremony.

- The preparation of a brochure highlighting local marriage guidelines, procedures for contacting parish music ministers and offering a rationale for selecting appropriate music for wedding liturgies would be most helpful and could be shared with the couple at this time. Books such as Together for Life and Marriage is for Keeps are examples of resources available for couples' use in selecting the scriptures and reviewing the elements of the marriage rite.

- If a visiting pastoral minister is to officiate the wedding, a copy of the parish marriage guidelines should be sent to him well in advance of the wedding date.

- Couples planning weddings during the seasons of Advent and Lent should be advised of the special nature of these liturgical seasons and plan accordingly (e.g. selections of appropriate music and antiphons; limitations on choice of text for readings at Nuptial Masses, decoration of the worship environment reflective of the season).

- Details of the completed wedding liturgy should be reviewed by the officiant prior to the rehearsal.

The Rehearsal

- Set a date and time for the rehearsal. It is further encouraged that the clergy (or designate) provide a prayerful introduction to the rehearsal, which often has a calming effect upon those present, and encourages their reflective participation and cooperation.
• This is often the first opportunity for some members of the family and bridal party to meet. The engaged couple is encouraged to make the appropriate introductions of parents and family members to the witnessing clergy or person(s) designated to conduct the rehearsal.

• It is recommended that the civil marriage license be presented at that time as well as the wedding program booklets (if applicable).

• It is important that anyone who is participating in a special way in the liturgy (e.g., gift bearers, altar servers or especially those proclaiming the scripture readings) be present at the rehearsal in order to familiarize themselves with the church’s layout and to receive instructions appropriate to their role in the wedding liturgy.

• The engaged couple should be encouraged to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation in advance of the wedding day. Announcing the availability of the Sacrament of Reconciliation following the rehearsal often affords the bride, groom and others a privileged opportunity to receive the grace of the sacrament and to deepen their awareness of the sacred character of their soon to be created marriage covenant.
Continuing To Grow, Being Active In Parish Life

Goals: To develop a process for introducing newly-married couples in a personal way to the parish community in which they will be residing after their wedding.

To overcome the phenomenon of isolation from parish life which often marks the early years of marriage before the birth and schooling of children necessitate that a young couple reach out to their local parish.

To enhance the opportunity for young couples to become active with their local parish so that regular Church practice becomes a "natural part" of their own newly-developing relationship as husband and wife.

Policy: It is recommended that the pastoral minister who has prepared the couple for marriage will send an introductory "referral card" to the parish where the couple expects to reside after their marriage. (Cf. Sample Card, p. 17)

Discussion:

- During their period of preparation for marriage, couples often develop a positive relationship with the pastoral minister and the married couples or other ministers who work with them. Those previously estranged are encouraged to practice the Faith by prayer and regular attendance at Sunday Mass. Their Marriage Preparation experience established a living connection to the parish church.

- After their marriage many married couples establish their homes in other localities. In a sense they become strangers to the Church in their new parish. For young couples who continue to live in the parish where they were married, their own new way of life as married adults can make for a different relationship with the local parish even if it is the place where they grew up.

- Married parishioners can help young couples fit into their new role. By reaching out to them, engaging them in discussion, encouraging their active participation and showing them hospitality, married parishioners can help those newly-married to feel at home in their "new status" and in the parish instead of being anonymous parishioners until they present their first baby for Baptism.

- A referral card can be used as a way of "introducing" the couple to their new parish if they are not residing in the parish in which they were married. The bride and groom should complete this card at their wedding rehearsal or shortly beforehand. It is recommended that the pastoral minister who has prepared the couple for marriage mail the card in an envelope addressed to the pastor of the parish where the couple will be moving. Without much additional effort, copies of the card could be sent to pastors of parishes known to be in the immediate area of where the couple plan to reside. It is hoped that this strategy may succeed in alerting vigilant pastors and pastoral ministers to make note of addresses which fall within their parish territorial lines. It is expected that every parish will be eager to welcome these recently married couples into their faith community.

- An important ingredient in this welcoming process is human contact with the Church during this important transition in the new couple's life. Given this highly mobile society, couples may actually know no one when they first arrive in a new town. For their new parish community to reach out in welcome to them could be exactly what is needed to encourage their continuing close relationship with the Church that began with their marriage preparation.

- Parishes might provide an opportunity to welcome newly married couples.

- The important thing is to make the recently married couple feel welcome and to invite them to get involved. They could learn about parish activities and make known their own talents and interest to parish leadership. It would be a chance to explain how to get involved in sharing their time and talent in their new parish community.
Dear __________ and __________,

For many months you have worked with our parish in preparation for your upcoming wedding. You have experienced some of the blessings which the Catholic Church community has to offer. We hope that, after your marriage celebration, you will continue to nurture your faith with daily prayer, keep up your commitment to faithful attendance at Sunday Mass and become engaged in parish life where you will be living.

We will write the pastor of the parish in which you will be living to let him know of your conscientious preparation for Christian marriage and that you will be moving into town. We ask, therefore, that you please complete the following information to help us introduce you to your new parish.

Name__________________________________________________________
(Husband) (Wife) (Surname)

Future Address_________________________________________________

City_________________________ State__________________ Zip___________

New Telephone # (__________) ____________________________(if known)

The date that you expect to take up residence in your new home is:
________________________________________________________, 20_____

Name of the local Catholic Church ________________________________
(if known)

(Reverse side of the card reads:)

Dear Pastor,

I write to inform you that the couple whose names and address are on the reverse side were married at _________ Church in ____________, New Jersey on _________________, 20_____. From what we can determine, yours is the nearest Catholic parish for them.

Our parish has worked with them in preparation of the Sacrament of Marriage. We ask that you please take the opportunity to welcome them to your parish community, or, if necessary, refer them to another parish.

Thank you for your continuing involvement in their journey of faith.

Rev. ____________________________
Pastor