

What is Witness to Love?

Witness to Love is not just another marriage prep program. It is a renewal movement and an ethos centered around fostering community involvement in the marriage formation process that bears fruit for the entire parish community. It is a unique virtue and mentorship-based system of marriage renewal and formation that:

1. Prepares couples for a sacramental marriage, AND...
2. Fosters their transition into a welcoming community of faith before and after they are married.

We integrate evidence-based principles of psychology to help couples facilitate an authentic dialogue about their relationship, and provide a connection to their local parish through mentors that lasts well beyond their time of sacramental marriage formation.

What is Witness to Love: Civil Marriage Initiative?

Witness to Love: Civil Marriage Initiative is sacramental marriage formation for couples in civil unions. Approximately 20% of all sacramental marriages are convalidations. Hence, there is an urgent evangelization need in our Church today to invite civilly married Catholics to receive formation for sacramental marriage leading up to the ceremony. *Witness to Love: Civil Marriage* is a comprehensive, revolutionary, nationally-researched and collaborative effort to reach and inspire couples in civil unions to pursue transformative sacramental marriage formation.

What makes Witness to Love different?

The *Witness to Love* approach focuses on developing key relationships in order to fully integrate engaged and newly married couples into their own parish. The Priest/Deacon, the Marriage Prep Coordinator/Coaches, and a Mentor/Sponsor Couple act together as a team, fully utilizing their specific gifts and roles to prepare the couple for marriage and welcome them into the parish family. Our workbook, mentor's hand-book, video series, and trainings are powerful tools deliberately designed to help facilitate this renewal. *Witness to Love* is now available in Spanish. View all available resources and training options at witnessstolove.org.

Why is the Witness to Love Mentor Model so Effective?

A unique differentiator of *Witness to Love* is that couples are invited to discern qualified mentors that they usually already know and trust (and which meet basic requirements). Deep conversions, encounter with Christ, and renewal happen consistently for both couples. This is a two-for-one evangelization model.

By allowing the engaged or civilly married couple to choose their own mentor couple, a concrete connection and integration into the Church parish is developed. Through the sharing of the mentor couples' own marriage journey, the couple inherits a "lifeline" of support in their commitment to Christ and the Church. The mentors are not tasked with teaching moral or sacramental theology, but serve as powerful witnesses and guides, all the while growing in their own marriage through the development of virtue. *Witness to Love* enables the parish to build on this relationship to help rebuild trust between the engaged or civilly married couple and the Church.

Why does the Church today need a Civil Marriage Initiative?

Approximately 20% of all sacramental marriages are convalidations. The Civil Marriage Initiative by *Witness to Love* is a national grassroots movement to change opinions and attitudes of baptized Catholics who choose to be civilly married rather than sacramentally married. We are drawing civilly married couples to understand the need for a sacramental marriage and to give them a path forward to receive the sacrament of marriage.

Over time we noticed that many of our mentor couples had experienced convalidations and reported never receiving any marriage preparation until mentoring an engaged couple through *Witness to Love*. The feedback from these couples, regarding the impact this ministry had on their marriages, was profound and pivotal. We soon realized the need for the development of a new program—*Witness to Love: Civil Marriage Initiative*.

Many dioceses around the nation also noticed a need. We heard from *Witness to Love* parishes and we heard the conversion stories from *Witness to Love* couples. We responded to the need.

The fact is, the number of sacramental marriages among Baptized Catholics in the United States over the past fifteen years has plummeted due to many factors such as secularization, the breakdown of the family, and a lack of trust in the Catholic Church. The number of sacramental marriages dropped from 294,000 in 1995 to 144,000 in 2017, a decrease of 50%, even though the number of Catholics in the U.S. has almost *doubled* in that same time period.

Witness to Love: Civil Marriage Initiative responds to the urgent need to reach those Baptized Catholics who have chosen to be civilly

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married rather than sacramentally married. The Church, until now, has not responded to the needs of this vast demographic who are the missing young families, the future families of the Church.

What's the story behind Witness to Love: Civil Marriage Initiative?

It all began when we noticed that couples in civil unions were reaching out to us at *Witness to Love* at a point when they were trying to “save” or strengthen their marriage. We started using the *Witness to Love* process with those couples. We saw the fruit it was bearing in their conversion, involvement in the parish, and in their marriage. We realized these couples were a hidden gem in the Church that were being overlooked. These couples could articulate in a special way the radical difference between living without the grace of the sacrament versus living with the grace of the sacrament. They became key evangelists in the church community. Because we saw this fruit, when we would do a *Witness to Love* training, we told parishes to also invite couples in civil unions to go through *Witness to Love* when they wanted to get their marriage blessed. We did that for six years. Over the past two years, we've received consistent and direct requests from parishes saying, “We see the fruit *Witness to Love* is having in our civilly married couples. Is there anyway you can customize the *Witness to Love* process and materials specifically for the civilly married couples? We need something just for them.”

We began a process of interviewing civilly married couples who went through the traditional *Witness to Love* process in order to have their marriage blessed and got their feedback. We spoke with clergy and marriage prep coordinators at our *Witness to Love* parishes, and they all agreed that a program for couples in civil unions was a priority and an urgent need for marriage formation and for evangelization in the Church today.

In January 2018, we were independently contacted by diocesan leaders from around the country, each of whom had been tasked by their bishop with finding ways to reach and form civilly married couples for sacramental marriage. Each leader was trying to tackle this need in their own diocese and wanted to collaborate. Ultimately, we decided to work with nine dioceses who were leaders in evangelization and had a desire to reach civilly married couples.

Throughout 2018, we had regular, lengthy meetings with diocesan leaders, canon lawyers, civilly married couples, and clergy, to address a targeted outreach to civilly married couples and develop a unique formation process for them. From these conversations flowed everything we are now doing as part of this *Witness to Love: Civil Marriage Initiative*. From these months of research, dialogue, and collaboration a unique process has been created which includes resources, training, materials, and powerful videos specific to couples in civil unions who are seeking sacramental marriage. We interviewed and filmed couples who were civilly married and who went through the *Witness to Love* process to tell their story and give their witness about how sacramental grace has operated in their lives.

Our Sunday Visitor got wind of the initiative we were undertaking, stepped in, and invited us to apply for a grant to reach unaffiliated millennials. We described to them what we were trying to do, the scope of the project, and the intended impact. They immediately saw this was one of the most urgent needs of the Church today and supported our efforts with a generous grant of \$50,000 so that every Church parish in the United States could have the best possible resources for reaching and forming these civilly married couples.

Based on our experience, we saw very early on that couples who were civilly married who came to the Church to have their marriage blessed, needed more than a few conversations and a blessing— they need what all the others needed: formation in virtue, accompaniment by a married couple they trusted and admired, and an invitation to a faith community. Those couples responded. Once we began inviting these couples to go through the *Witness to Love* process we found them even more responsive than the average engaged couple. They were seeking a *sacrament*, not just a *venue*.

Does Witness to Love marriage preparation work?

Yes! *Witness to Love* has been proven to be very effective in preparing couples for marriage and successfully integrating them into their parish. A recent case study at one Church parish (averaging 17 marriages/year) found that the full implementation of *Witness to Love* in 2012 took their divorce rate from 23% to 0% each year over the last four years. Further, all parishes implementing *Witness to Love* report a divorce rate of less than 5.8% at the five-year mark. Even more, reports show that newly married couples still attend Mass and are active in their parish years after their wedding day; parishes report a 70-90% increase in Church attendance and involvement.

Is it an “approved” program?

Yes. *Witness to Love* is listed on the USCCB's site “For your Marriage” as a complete marriage preparation resource. In addition, Archbishop Gregory Aymond, Secretary of USCCB, serves as the ecclesial advisor for our non-profit renewal ministry. We are currently working with over 75 Dioceses in various capacities.