

—PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE—
Policies of the Roman Catholic Church in the Province of St. Louis:
St. Louis, Jefferson City, Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Kansas City-St. Joseph

Introduction

The bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and lay faithful of the Province of St. Louis, to assist engaged couples preparing for marriage in the Catholic Church, have developed the policies and pastoral guidelines that follow. These policies and pastoral guidelines are designed to help couples appreciate the seriousness and sacredness of marriage. The whole process of marriage preparation – the sessions, the assessment of readiness for marriage and the program of instruction – supports couples to deepen their relationships, as well as discern their readiness for the life-long commitment of Christian marriage.

God is the Author of marriage. He establishes the marriage covenant between a man and a woman who are no longer two but one flesh. The marital covenant is an intimate partnership of life and love.

Christ elevated marriage to the dignity of a sacrament that symbolizes His own total self-giving and reflects the intimate union of the Bridegroom and His Bride, the Church. The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony consecrates spouses to each other and strengthens them in the life they will share. With faith and humility, spouses must trust and rely upon the grace of God to live the essential obligations of marital and familial life.

All these considerations impose upon the Church the grave responsibility of assisting persons to enter a marriage that gives promise of being grace-filled, happy, and successful. The right to marry is a God-given right that arises from the very nature of the human person. The exercise of this right, however, demands the capacity to have a mature appreciation of marriage and to live out its obligations.

Given a person's right to marry, and the fact that this right is not without restrictions, the Church has a serious responsibility to provide adequate preparation for couples who wish to marry, and sometimes to postpone a marriage or, in an extreme case, to refuse to witness a marriage based on objective factors.

The Church believes that every person entering marriage has a desire to be happy. However, happiness, or better yet, joy, is the fruit of true love, and true love is only realized through the free, total, faithful mutual giving of oneself to another which is at the heart of Christian married love. To assist couples in bearing the fruit of true happiness, and prompted by an acute awareness of the many social, emotional, and financial pressures exerted on marriage today, the Church holds up to all men and women the narrow way of love which is learned and grows through the daily giving of self which is at the center of the vocation of Christian marriage.

The vocation of marriage does not begin or end on the day of the wedding. There is an ever increasing need for remote marriage preparation programs for persons in high school and college, as well as for various kinds of marriage enrichment programs. The marriage relationship needs constant nurturing if couples are to make it what Christ intended it to be, a love that will go beyond themselves and gives witness to Christ's love within our faith community and society as a whole.

I. Assessing a Couple's Readiness for Marriage

The Church has a pastoral duty to assist those who desire to marry in making a prayerful and mature judgment concerning their readiness for so solemn a commitment. In particular, those who prepare couples for marriage and the one who will witness the marriage are responsible for helping the couple determine their readiness for marriage. It is the pastor of the parish of one of the Catholic parties who is responsible for the preparation and witness of the marriage, but it is understood that others may often be delegated to this task. The pastor is that of the place where the Catholic party has residence (even if temporarily relocated due to school or work) or where the person is an accepted registered parishioner.

As we assist couples discerning their marital readiness, we must consider the spiritual, psychological, financial, and familial factors of their lives. Assessment may sometimes include professional counseling or more in-depth catechesis. If either party is under the age of twenty-one, the parents or guardians of that person must be consulted.

After an initial interview with the engaged couple, each party completes a pre-marital inventory. The data compiled individually is then reviewed with the couple. This provides the minimal basis for assessing the capacity of the couple for marriage. Hence, a tentative date can be set for the wedding ceremony if assured there are no prior bonds or impediments that would prohibit the couple from marrying.

If it is determined that there is a sufficient pastoral reason not to establish a date for the wedding, the couple should be informed immediately of a decision to delay, the reasons for the decision, and counseled as to a means of recourse.

II. The Required Process for Marriage Preparation

1. An initial interview is required with the couple at least six months prior to the tentative date of the wedding. The pastor can make an exception to this norm. for extenuating pastoral circumstances (i.e. military deployment, imminent death of a parent, etc.).
2. The Pre-Marital Inventory (FOCCUS, Prepare, Fully Engaged, etc.) and subsequent objective review of the inventory with the couple are required. Resources to help the couple prepare for marriage are varied, and may well include professional counseling, in addition to the help provided by the local diocesan Family Life Office.
3. It is a requirement that all couples preparing for marriage will attend a Marriage Preparation Program or other diocesan sponsored preparation program(s). A certificate of completion of an approved program is required before a wedding may take place. Obvious exceptions to this requirement should be based on special circumstances that would prevent the couple from such participation.
4. All couples of child-bearing years are required to attend a Natural Family Planning (NFP) program on modern fertility awareness methods offered by the local Church. Exceptions to this requirement may also be made when the requirement may not be appropriate or due to the present local availability of such programs.
5. The planning of the liturgy of marriage can begin at any time after a date has been set for the wedding.
6. The completion of the prenuptial investigation, along with proof of the couple's freedom to marry, the completion of the marriage preparation program, and the request for permission/dispensations should be made **no later than one month prior to the wedding date.**

7. According to the need of the couple, additional resources, including professional counseling, may be suggested.

Because each Diocesan church of the Province of St. Louis has within it particular pastoral needs and challenges, it is recognized that the Diocesan bishop may issue specific norms for adaptations of these policies for their local church consistent with the principles reflected above.

III. Date and Place of Wedding

Once a couple has made the decision to marry, they should notify the Church as soon as possible, making contact with a priest or deacon. However, a couple should make no arrangements regarding the wedding ceremony, the reception, or related matters until the couple's readiness for marriage has been established.

1. The normal place in which all Catholic weddings are celebrated is in the parish church of the Catholic party, or if both parties are Catholic, then in the parish church of one of the parties.

In addition to one's own parish church, another approved Catholic church, chapel, shrine, or oratory may be chosen for the site of a couple's wedding ceremony.

2. For a just cause, Church Law permits dispensation from the observance of canonical form. A request for such dispensation should be made only if it is determined that it would be an undue hardship to observe canonical form and it should be recognized that this is a dispensation only extended for a just cause and is not to be presumed automatic.
3. Catholic marriages are normally celebrated within Mass. In a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic, the couple may choose to celebrate their marriage within or outside of Mass, recognizing a possible desire to avoid the lack of unity otherwise demonstrated during the reception of the Eucharist. However, a wedding ceremony between a Catholic and a non-baptized person is only to be celebrated outside of Mass.

IV. Preparation for Marriage

A couple who desires to be married in the Church is ordinarily required to notify the Church at least six months prior to the date on which they plan to marry. This period of time is essential so that the couple may have several pastoral sessions with a priest or deacon, complete one of the approved marriage preparation programs, take part in pre-marital counseling and evaluation (if this should be necessary), participate in the Natural Family Planning program, and plan the marriage liturgy.

Interfaith couples are encouraged to arrange a meeting with a minister or rabbi of the non-Catholic's choice. Such a meeting may be a great benefit to both parties, and actually complement what the Catholic Church is already offering them.

If circumstances such as military service, employment, or other similar circumstance prohibit both parties from participating together in a marriage preparation program, the absent party must obtain the requisite

preparation and assessment of readiness for marriage in that party's own locale. The absent party is then to provide the parish priest/deacon with verification of attendance in such a program.

When a couple is going to be married in a diocese but is not resident there during the period in which they may be prepared, they may be prepared outside of the diocese. It is the pastor's responsibility of the place of marriage to confirm that the couple has been properly assessed and adequately prepared for the sacrament of marriage before the wedding occurs.

When the prenuptial investigation forms are filled out in another diocese, they should be sent to the local Chancery to be forwarded to the diocesan Chancery within which the marriage is to take place. This is a standard procedure between dioceses to assure that the proper documents are coming from their respective diocese, and that when dispensations are required, the appropriate and competent authority is the one granting the dispensation. This practice should be done whether the preparation is being conducted here for the celebration of the wedding elsewhere or vice-versa.

V. Delegation

For validity of a Catholic marriage, delegation is required in order to officiate at a wedding. All pastors and associate pastors possess delegation only in their parish or place of assignment, and must receive delegation to officiate at a wedding elsewhere. In order for priests who are not canonically assigned to the parish, or for deacons to officiate at weddings, the pastor must grant such delegation to them. The prenuptial investigation form provides a place to indicate that delegation has been granted.

The priest or deacon in charge of preparing a couple for marriage has a serious moral responsibility to provide personal pastoral care by meeting with the couple and assisting them in understanding and appreciating the many aspects of marriage: psychological, social, liturgical, sacramental, and spiritual. He should strive always to share with them a Christian vision of marriage.

In those parishes that are administered by lay ministers, delegation for visiting clergy should be obtained by contacting the Chancery Office. For clergy visiting from another diocese, the standard procedure of obtaining a letter of good standing should be followed.

VI. Interfaith Marriage

Marriages between a Catholic and a non-Catholic are to be recognized as an exception to the norm and thus require special attention in their preparation and a permission/dispensation for the marriage. The diocesan application forms for the necessary permission/dispensation for such circumstances along with a pledge that the Catholic party must sign regarding their intention to raise any children in the Catholic faith are to be used. These forms along with current baptismal certificates or evidence of the baptismal status of the non-Catholic baptized party is to be sent to the Chancery for the appropriate permission/dispensation.

The term "interfaith" is used here to include all marriages in which the parties hold different religious persuasions and affiliations. It includes those couples whose non-Catholic parties hold no religious affiliation at all. Neither partner should enter into marriage with the expectation of drawing the other away from his or her religious convictions. Such an attitude can easily result in the unhappiness and alienation of either or both partners. However, as part of the marriage preparation process the non-Catholic partner should be made aware that they would be welcome should they have a desire to consider becoming Catholic.

The priest/deacon who is preparing an interfaith couple for marriage should include the following:

1. Deepening both parties' awareness of the influence of religious convictions and values in their lives;
2. Helping the couple to see that their coming from different faith traditions will have a significant impact on their relationship;
3. Exploring the areas of agreement and disagreement between the couple's faith traditions;
4. Appreciating the practical problems that could arise because of the couple's coming from different faiths.

Sufficient instruction must be given in order that the couple understand the Catholic party's obligations to continue the practice of the Faith and to do everything possible to share that faith with the couple's children by having them baptized and reared as Catholics. It should be made clear that these obligations flow from the nature of the Church itself and are not simply obligations of law.

It is the will of the bishops of the Province that, due to the nature of the Sacraments of Initiation, the wedding ceremony is not deemed the appropriate time for reception into full communion of one of the parties.

VII. Marriage of an Eastern Catholic

The valid marriage for an Eastern Catholic requires that a priest give a blessing of the couple, for this reason if a Roman Catholic is marrying an Eastern Catholic only a priest and not a deacon should be the party to assist at the marriage. If the marriage is between an Eastern Catholic and a non-Catholic care must be taken to assure that their proper pastor and authorities are involved so that the appropriate delegations are received to validly celebrate the marriage.

It should be noted that simply because a person was baptized at a Roman Catholic Church does not mean that they are not members of an Eastern Rite, depending upon their history and the Rite of their father.

For the above reasons, if there is any cause to believe that one of the parties involved in the marriage is an Eastern Catholic, the Chancellor of Canonical Affairs or the Tribunal should be contacted.

VIII. Marriage of those under 21 *(19)

In view of the many conditions in present day society which militate against marriages of those under the age of twenty-one *(nineteen), special care and concern must be given a couple requesting marriage when one or both of the parties have not yet celebrated his or her twenty-first birthday. Studies have documented the fact that, in this country, many at this age are not sufficiently mature to form the community of life and love that is marriage.

The required program for the marriage of those under 21*(19) is as follows:

1. Notification by the couple of their intention to marry as soon as possible, but at least six months prior to a proposed date for the wedding;
2. One or two interviews with the couple to assess maturity. It may be helpful in some cases for a professional counselor to assist in determining the maturity level of the individuals;

3. The administration of a premarital inventory and subsequent objective review with the couple;
4. Interview with parents or guardians of the couple;
5. When all of the above steps are completed and the recommendation from the pre-marriage counselor is reviewed, a decision is made to: a) proceed with the marriage preparation by setting a wedding date or, b) delay further the witnessing of the ceremony.

Approval for a Church wedding in the Province of St. Louis ordinarily will not be granted for anyone who has not yet celebrated his or her eighteenth birthday, and only then by the Ordinary.

*** For the Diocese of Jefferson City the age for which these special requirements apply is 19, not 21.**

IX. Pregnancy

When a couple becomes pregnant outside of marriage, both partners, and frequently the families of both endure a time of extraordinary pain and stress. The Church always views such situations with special compassion and care. At the same time, to rush a couple into marriage because of a pregnancy is by no means the course that "solves a problem" particularly when there is no engagement prior to the pregnancy.

While premarital pregnancy has often been presented as automatically necessitating marriage, contemporary evidence shows that instead it should be considered a reason to proceed with great caution toward marriage. It is now well established that couples who marry when there is a pregnancy have a much higher divorce rate than those who marry without this added pressure.

When both parties are at least twenty-one years old and when the decision to marry was made prior to the woman's discovery of her pregnancy plans may continue for the wedding if it is determined by the Church that the couple is mature enough and otherwise sufficiently prepared to enter marriage. Although it is not mandatory to do so, the couple may benefit from additional premarital counseling and assessment. A couple in this situation is still required to participate in a Church-approved marriage preparation program.

The regulations about setting a date for the wedding are to be observed in these cases, and should not be relaxed except for a good reason. There are legitimate times when the requirement of six months notice (see II-#1 above) for a wedding to take place may be dispensed or shortened in length. Although the very presence of a pregnancy would not demand such a dispensation, each couple should be evaluated on their own merits in such cases.

X. Cohabiting couples

Given the climate of society today, the Church is approached with greater frequency by couples who are already living a conjugal life without the benefit of civil or ecclesiastical recognition. Objectively, cohabitation is a lifestyle contrary to gospel values, is of serious matter in regard to their spiritual lives, and can be a cause for grave scandal. There is significant data that supports the high rate of divorce among those who do live together before marriage. The priest or deacon should be pastorally sensitive and address the reasons for the couple's choice to cohabit. Those who prepare cohabitating couples for marriage should strongly encourage them to live a chaste life to the very same degree that non-cohabitating couples are expected to live. If it is possible, the couple should separate prior to marrying in the Church. It is not the

intention of these policies to refuse marriage to such couples based solely on their living arrangements. There may be other factors that might present reasons for postponing a wedding. Good and wise pastoral counsel should lead such couples through the marriage preparation months in such a way as to prepare them for a Christian life together. (The bishops of this country issued a very helpful information report in 1999, which is recommended reading for those pastoral ministers who are assisting cohabitating couples. It is available in *Origins* Vol. 29: No. 14).

XI. Pre-Nuptial Agreements

Due to the intrinsic nature of a pre-nuptial agreement to imply a lack of complete commitment to the unity of a marriage or to recognize its permanent nature, pre-nuptial agreements should be discouraged and thoroughly discussed if parties insist on their use. An exception to this practice is in the case of the marriage of an elderly couple who has children from previous marriages. In such cases, it is recognized that such agreements may have nothing to do with a lack of commitment to or the unity of a marriage, but rather are the fulfilling of a pre-existing obligation that one is bringing to a marriage regarding children and or inheritances.

XII. Convalidation of Civil Marriage

When a couple, having attempted marriage outside the Church, desires that their union be convalidated, the priest or deacon who arranges for the convalidation must provide the couple with adequate preparation for marriage. The priest should inquire whether the marriage is having any major problems. Among other concerns, the priest is to determine the motives, which bring the couple to the Church for convalidation. One such motive for convalidation is addressing the possible baptism of the couple's child. The convalidation should not be a prerequisite for the baptism to take place, but rather is an opportunity to discuss the Church's teachings and, if they desire to freely consent to marriage in the Catholic Church, only then to celebrate a convalidation. In all cases the priest/deacon should strive to lead the couple to a proper appreciation of the theological and spiritual dimensions of Christian marriage and to an understanding of the implications of marriage as a covenant relationship.

1. When the couple has been civilly married for only one or two years, they must participate in one of the approved marriage preparation programs;
2. When the couple has been civilly married for a greater number of years and the marriage has given evidence of being a true community of life and love, the priest/deacon may judge that none of the aforementioned programs meets the couple's situation and may structure an alternative program which will achieve the objectives set forth in this policy. An example of this would be to use a pre-marriage inventory tool that is specifically designed for couples who have been living together for a while as opposed to using the standard pre-marriage inventory questions which may not apply to their current situation.

The priest or deacon should act upon good pastoral judgment in his assessment of the couple. From assessing their pastoral need, he may determine the number of sessions for addressing their particular relational issues. The cleric may also discern that a couple may benefit from one of the approved marriage programs of the Archdiocese/Diocese or pre-marital counseling and evaluation. In assessing the appropriate preparation for each couple the cleric should do nothing to encourage or make it easier for a couple to simply

marry in a civil ceremony and then have a convalidation in the Church than it would be to originally have married in the Church, but at the same time no undue burdens should be imposed that would delay the convalidation of a civil marriage once the couple have shown themselves capable of a sacramental marriage.

XIII. Marriage Preparation for the Previously Married

With increasing frequency couples are coming to the Church for marriage after one or both parties have been previously married. Even though a divorced person may have received a declaration from the Church that he or she is free to marry, the priest/deacon is still to be satisfied that difficulties which appeared in a previous marriage are addressed thoroughly prior to any subsequent union. (Ref. Can. 1066)

Given that the Church has issued a Decree of Nullity, the following guidelines are set forth:

1. When the previously married party has not yet entered a second union, the preparations for marriage are to be conducted according to the policies already outlined herein;
2. When the couple has lived in a civil marriage which has continued over some years and shown signs of being in a stable relationship, the priest/deacon may use his pastoral judgment in providing the preparation for marriage which seems most suited to the needs of the couple, such as an approved remarriage program.
3. When the previously married person's union ended in the death of the other partner, care must be taken in preparing the widowed party for a second marriage, with consideration given to the ages of the couple, the length of the previous marriage, the grief process that must take place before the widowed person is emotionally prepared for a second marriage, and the effect of the second marriage on children of the first marriage.

It should be recognized that the diocesan programs exist for people in these situations which should strongly be considered.

XIV. Exceptions to Policies and Decisions

Exceptions to the policies and procedures set forth in this statement must be referred to the Chancery Office. Exceptions will be considered according to the merits of each case.

XV. Reasons for Delaying or Refusing to Witness a Marriage

The Church has always held that the right to marry is a natural right of high priority. This right, however, is not unrestricted. The Church has established legitimate restrictions based on serious reasons, especially when the proposed marriage is seen to be in conflict with the sacramental practice of the Church. On the other hand, priests and deacons may not lightly delay the marriage of a couple who are free to marry and who fulfill the requirements of marriage.

Some of the just reasons for delaying or refusing to witness a marriage include:

1. Refusal of the parties to take part in the marriage preparation program, to participate in pastoral counseling which is deemed necessary for proper reception of the sacrament;

2. If the Catholic party (or parties) have shown that they are not active in the life of the Church, in particular, to the life of worship, and furthermore, demonstrate that they have no intention of doing so;
3. Lack of readiness for marriage, as assessed by the priest/deacon through personal interview, consultation with parents or guardians, and/or premarital counseling and evaluation.

When the decision is made to delay a marriage, the priest/deacon concerned is responsible for helping the couple overcome the circumstances that make the delay advisable. If the couple is open to such assistance, the priest/deacon should develop with them an appropriate remedial program, such as professional counseling. In no case should the priest/deacon merely inform a couple that he will not witness their marriage, but rather should explain the just cause behind his decision.

XVI. Appealing the Decision

If the priest/deacon refuses to witness a couple's marriage, he must inform the couple that they may appeal the reasons for the decision to the Chancery. The case will then be reviewed, including consultation with the priest/deacon, the instructors in the marriage preparation program, and those who have conducted the premarital counseling and evaluation. In every case, the questions shall be referred to the bishop or his official delegate who will make the final decision.

No priest/deacon may knowingly witness the marriage of a couple after another has decided they should not marry, unless the bishop or his official delegate has given the necessary approval.

It Is Important to Note: This Common Marriage Policy does not treat every pastoral circumstance or exhaust pastoral issues presented. As you offer pastoral instruction to engaged couples, you may need further guidance or additional information. Please contact your Tribunal Office for their assistance.

XVII. Effective Date –

These policies and procedures will become effective in the Archdiocese of St. Louis, and the Dioceses of Jefferson City, Springfield-Cape Girardeau and Kansas City-St. Joseph on December 28th, 2014, the Feast of the Holy Family, for marriages that take place after June 28th, 2015. They shall be published to all priests, deacons, and pastoral administrators throughout the Province and made available through electronic and/or printed form. Notice of certain aspects of these policies should be published weekly in parish bulletins (e.g. six months preparation).

These policies will be reviewed every five years, and revisions made and implemented as the need arises. When such revisions are made, they will be given appropriate publicity. While these policies are in force, priests, deacons, and those who assist couples in marriage preparation are invited to submit proposed revisions to their diocesan Chancery for future reference.