



# Marriage Catechumenate

Recommended Guidelines & Policy

EFFECTIVE

**JANUARY 1, 2026**

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*“God has revealed his innermost secret:  
God himself is an eternal exchange of love,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he has  
destined us to share in that exchange”  
(CCC, n. 221).*



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## **Acknowledgements**

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*Dedicated to St. Joseph:*  
Protector of the Holy Family & Holy Church  
**Diocese of Lincoln**  
**Office of Family Life & Discipleship**

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# DIOCESE OF LINCOLN

## OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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February 14, 2025  
*Feast of St. Valentine*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

One of the most beautiful truths about the Sacrament of Marriage is that it is the one blessing from the beginning, "not forfeited by original sin nor washed away by the flood." (*The Order of Celebrating Matrimony, 2nd Edition, 2016, #74*). In this sacred bond, God has "foreshadowed the Sacrament of Christ and his Church."

While marriage has always been both a demanding and beautiful vocation, it has become even more so in recent years. The present culture, within which marriage finds itself, is evermore hostile to the virtues marriage strives to instill and the truth for which it stands. Therefore, we must do even more to prepare Catholics for this Sacrament, responding to the needs and challenges that affect those today seeking to enter this Holy Covenant. Further, in the scriptures we see that Jesus accompanied people and taught them through his words and actions, not sending them into the unknown until they were sufficiently prepared for the challenges ahead.

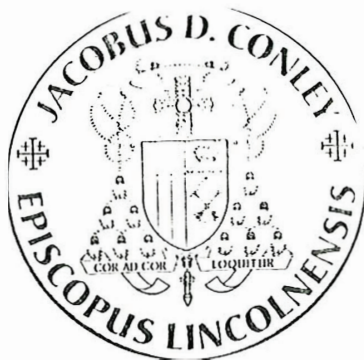
In his masterpiece on marriage and family *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope Saint John Paul II was the forerunner for the Marriage Catechumenate. In this document, he introduced the concept of the three stages of marriage preparation (remote, proximate, and immediate), in which he proactively invited the whole of the ecclesial community into this great work of evangelization. *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*, the 2022 Vatican document promulgated by the Dicastery for Laity, Family, & Life, is a systematic response to Pope Francis' desire to offer pastors, spouses, and family ministry workers a refreshed approach to marriage preparation. These pastoral guidelines echo Pope St. John Paul II's original appeal for a renewal in marriage formation.

For this reason, in response to this genuine need and request of the Holy Father, I am pleased to promulgate for the Diocese of Lincoln: "The Marriage Catechumenate: Recommended Guidelines & Policy." The hallmark of this new model of marriage preparation is mentorship and accompaniment. One particular model I strongly endorse is "Witness to Love: A Catechumenal Model for Marriage Formation." This model calls into service married couples who genuinely desire (1) the holiness of newly wedded couples; (2) to share with them the knowledge that they have learned through their "good times and bad times;" (3) to walk with them in their time of preparation and beyond. Through this process, the Church emphasizes the *kerygmatic* model established in the Order of Christian Initiation.

The encouraging thing is that the research surrounding “Witness to Love” demonstrates an increase in church attendance and a lower divorce rate among newlyweds who use this model. There's a 77% decrease in the divorce rate– from 23% on average for Catholic marriages to less than 6% among Witness to Love Couples. Church engagement has also been statistically shown to rise, with an 80% increase in attendance among “Witness to Love” newlyweds. The reason: personal relationship. Newlyweds with a secure, chosen mentor couple, who acts as a lifeline to their parish, are much more likely to be engaged in their parish and stay married.

If Jesus and his love for his Church is the model of Christian Marriage, then couple mentorship and accompaniment becomes the model for us to help others live their vocation to the best of their abilities.

With my prayers for you, I remain



Sincerely yours in Christ,

The Most Reverend James U. Conley  
Bishop of Lincoln

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# **GUIDELINES FOR THE MARRIAGE CATECHUMENATE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Marriage preparation offers a unique opportunity to form and accompany couples in the process of evangelization and discipleship. The Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life proposed pastoral guidelines in their new document, *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*. (CPML) This document was created as a pastoral tool in response to the last two Synods on the Family and Pope John Paul II's request in *Familiaris Consortio* to re-establish marriage preparation into a "catechumenate" involving mentor couples and the entire parish community. Like OCIA, it mainly consists of four distinct stages: reception, proximate preparation, final preparation, and accompaniment in the first years of marriage. It emphasizes formation over several years, an approach in which sacramentally married mentor couples accompany engaged and newly married couples in the journey toward missionary discipleship. The required minimum is now six months; anything less than this amount requires a dispensation. The ideal length for the Marriage Catechumenate is 8-12 months, but our current diocesan minimum is six months.

## **THREEFOLD PURPOSE:**

Pope Francis has asked every diocese in the world to implement "a true catechumenate for future spouses including all the steps of the sacramental path: time of preparation for marriage, its celebration, and the years immediately thereafter..." (CPML, Preface). Its purpose is threefold:

- 1) to prepare all the Christian faithful for the reality of marriage (remote preparation)
- 2) to assist couples in discerning and preparing for the Sacrament of Matrimony so they may celebrate validly and fruitfully (proximate and immediate preparation)
- 3) to accompany them in the early years of marriage (mystagogy, or ongoing formation)

## **THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE TASK:**

Priests

Deacon(s) and their wives

Parish Marriage Formation Coordinator\*

Mentor Couples and/or Facilitator Couples

Parish Wedding Coordinator

Fertility Instructors

Retreat Coordinators/Presenter Couples

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## GENERAL GUIDELINES OF THE MARRIAGE CATECHUMENATE

The **General Guidelines for the Marriage Catechumenate** are adaptable recommendations from the Vatican document, *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*. The pastor can adjust these three guidelines in a flexible, customizable mode based on pastoral, geographical, cultural, and pastoral situations. It is up to the due discretion of the pastor to implement these guidelines based on the local parish's needs. See **Marriage Catechumenate FAQ** in *Appendix 3* for more information on recommendations vs requirements.

1. **Mentorship/Accompaniment:** (relational witness of spouses and pastoral leaders that offers integration into the local parish community; through friendship, reflection, discussion, and small groups)
2. **Gradual:** (a comprehensive period of time sufficient to allow couples to truly reflect and experience conversion, marked by rites of entry – where possible and appropriate); approximately 6 - 12 months
3. **Kerygmatic:** (faith and personal encounter with Christ are central to the marriage prep process; presentation of the Gospel and the teaching of praying together as a couple is key)

### STAGE 1 - RECEPTION

This stage may last from a few weeks to 60 days. It includes five components and a closing rite of entry:

1. **Kerygmatic Welcome to the Parish** - Offer a tour, sign up for Flocknote, and assess walk with Christ.
2. **Determination of Freedom & Readiness to Marry** - i.e., canonical investigation, Marriage Preparation Record
3. **Overview of Necessary Brochures and Forms** - Offer *10 Steps to Get Married* and *Fertility Awareness* Brochures, overview of documentation to be collected, i.e., affidavits for freedom to marry, baptism certificates, dispensation or permission forms
4. **Register in the first 60 days for Necessary Programs, Courses, and Retreat** - Offer the couple the FOCCUS QR code (if desired) to self-register. An additional QR code has been added to the brochures for easy access to registration links for Engaged Encounter, FOCCUS, & the Fertility Awareness Intro Course
5. **Rite of Entry: Public Presentation of Couple to the Parish** and prayer/offering of Bible; or private prayer

### STAGE 2 - CATECHUMENATE: PROXIMATE FORMATION

This stage is ideally one year before the wedding. It includes 4 components and a closing rite of entry:

1. **Engaged Encounter (or alternative for exceptions.)** This discernment retreat is recommended as the preferred first step of the Catechumenate Stage. For alternative retreat options for exceptions and convalidations, *see complete list on p. 23, or Clergy Resources.*
2. **Post-Retreat Pastoral Followup.** This conversation occurs between the priest preparing the couple for marriage and the engaged couple after the Engaged Encounter or equivalent.
3. **Parish-based Lay Accompaniment (Two Options to Choose From, But May Use Both):**
  - 1) **Witness to Love** is friendship-based accompaniment through chosen mentors that connects couples to parish life
  - 2) **FOCCUS** is trained facilitated sessions for navigating difficult conversations and spotting red-flags
4. **Fertility Awareness Introductory Course.** The full followup course should be encouraged by the presiding priest.
5. **Concluding Rite:** The Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple

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## STAGE 3 - CATECHUMENATE - FINAL PREPARATION

During this stage, the couple meets with the priest or deacon at their parish to ensure knowledge of the spiritual, doctrinal, and moral aspects of marriage and plan the logistics of their wedding liturgy. This stage includes four components, including the Rite of Matrimony, an entrance into a new state of life.

Optional: A parish-based opportunity for reflection for the engaged couple prior to the wedding day. *See Appendix 3 for sample outline.*

1. **Teaching a form of Couple's Prayer (Spousal Prayer)** is a requirement, and should be modeled by a lay couple. Ask your mentor or facilitator couples in your parish to model this for them. One handout of Couple Prayer is included in Appendix 3 to disseminate to your FOCCUS or WTL mentors. A secondary Ignatian Examen for Couples is on the diocesan marriage prep web-page.
2. **Reconfirm true intent** to marry on *Premarital Questionnaire pp. 3-4.*
3. **Liturgy Planning & the Sacrament of Reconciliation**
4. **Concluding Rite:** The Sacrament of Matrimony

## STAGE 4 - ACCOMPANIMENT DURING THE FIRST 5 YEARS

During this stage, the newlywed is accompanied by their mentor couple and/or a group of other couples similar in age. Newlyweds in their first five years of married life are invited to attend local apostolate gatherings, monthly date nights at the parish level, or milestone masses at the parish.

Examples of our diocesan mystagogical marriage enrichment programs are listed below:

1. **Be Light Marriage Enrichment Small Groups**
2. **Love & Life Programs**
3. **Missionaries of the Holy Spirit & the Family**
4. **The Rule of JP II Married Small Groups**
5. **Marriage Encounter**
6. **Missionary Families of Christ - Nebraska**
7. **Retrouvaille**
8. **Parish Marriage Enrichment Groups, e.g., Marriage on Mission at St. Teresa's, Lincoln**

Chart of Stages for Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life

Stage	Remote Prep	Reception	Proximate	Final Prep	Mystagogy	Enrichment/ Crisis
<b>Duration</b>	0yrs. – Young Adulthood	<b>First 60 days after 1<sup>st</sup> parish visit</b>	<b>Varies in duration: 4-12 months</b>	<b>2 months before the wedding</b>	First 5 yrs.	Ongoing
<b>Similar OCIA Stages</b>	Period of Evangelization & Pre-catechuminate	Rite of Entrance	Catechuminate/ "Rite of Election"	Purification & Synthesis / Rite of Initiation	Mystagogy	
<b>Closing Rites</b>	+Sacraments of Initiation	<b>+Public Prayer for Couple; or Private Prayer; Offering of Gift</b>	<b>+ The Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple</b>	<b>+ Rite of Matrimony</b>	+Milestone Blessing	+ Anniversary Mass/Certificate
<b>Content of each stage</b>	-Gift of self -Dignity/modesty -Male/Female Complementarity -Virtues -TOB (love vs lust) -3 vocations -Chastity ed -Gender issues -Dangers of pornography -Kerygmatic retreat for youth -Accompaniment & mentorship of youth	<b>-Proclamation of the Kerygma*</b> <b>- Overview of brochure*</b> <b>- Dialogue (for inactive or interfaith) *</b> <b>- Canonical interview to discern eligibility*</b> <b>-Assess and nurture couple's walk with Christ*</b>	- Fertility Awareness Intro Course* - Mentor Accompaniment* - Premarital Inventory Facilitation* - Premarital retreat (catechesis + life skills)* - Post-retreat pastoral followup to confirm intent to marry* - Journey of deeper Conversion for couple	-Deeper synthesis of moral & spiritual dimensions of Marriage* -Form the couple to pray together* -Liturgy prep* -Confession*	-Marriage mystagogy -Conjugal spirituality -Parenting -Discipleship in Marriage -Invitation to mission -Forgiveness/ Reconciliation -Infertility and Miscarriage	-Empty-nesting -Crisis or separation -Death of family member or spouse -Loss of employment -Mental/physical illness or disability -Support for family members re: child with gender confusion, same-sex attraction, or pornography use
<b>List of Suggested Programs</b>	-Steubenville -Totus Tuus -Encounter Groups -TOBcurriculum (K-12) -Godteens -RuahWoods TOB education for Parents/ Homeschool -Damascus Youth Camp or Diocesan -Father/Son and Mother/Daughter	<b>-Alpha</b> <b>-Young Adult small groups</b> <b>-Complete FOCCUS Inventory</b>	<b>-Marquette, Creighton, or Couple to Couple</b> <b>-Engaged Encounter</b> <b>-Lay Accompaniment</b>  ▪ <b>Witness to Love</b> ▪ <b>FOCCUS</b>  <b>-Civil Marriage Initiative/Convalidation Inventory</b> <b>-Joy-Filled Marriage (an alternative to EE)</b>	- "Spousal Prayer" by Deacon James Keating - <b>Couples Prayer</b> - <b>ARRR Prayer or Lectio Divina with wedding readings</b>	-Be Light Married Small Groups (continuation of Witness to Love) -MHSF -Love & Life -The Rule of St JP II Married Groups -Missionary Families of Christ	-Jubilee Wedding Anniversary Mass -Retrouvaille -Safe Haven Sunday -Love & Life -Marriage Encounter -The Rule of St JP II Married Groups -Missionary Families of Christ

- (\*) are recommended guidelines; may use suggested programs to fulfill requirements
- (+) are a Rite of Entry or Liturgy
- **Bolded** and grayed boxes correspond to Immediate Marriage Preparation (with a six month minimum requirement)
- *Italicized* are customizable/plug-and-play options

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# Recommended Summary & Timeline

## STAGE 1: RECEPTION OF COUPLES

Varies in length; a few weeks to 60 days

### FIRST MEETING

- Complete pp. 1-2 of the Marriage Preparation Record to determine eligibility. You may leave the rest of the Prenuptial Questionnaire until after the retreat.
- Be Christ to the couple, walking with them in the way of the Church. Ask the couple where they are in their walk with Christ. Based on the openness of the couple's reception to all of what has been shared, set a date to meet again in a few weeks.
- Proclaim the *Kerygma*. (See *Optional Handout: Theology of the Body: The Gospel of Love*, see Appendix 3)
- Focus on getting to know the couple. If time permits, offer a parish tour and a handout of parish resources (Flocknote, small groups, or social media) and offer QR code to self-register for FOCCUS (if applicable)
- Offer two brochures and give an overview: **10 Steps to Get Married** and **Fertility Awareness Methods. Remind them to register for the Engaged Encounter and Fertility Awareness Course with the QR Code on the Brochure.**
- Discuss with them how your parish handles **Lay Accompaniment**. There are **two options, or you may use both**:
  - **Witness to Love** is focused on long-term accompaniment that will continue even after the wedding day. If your parish uses only Witness to Love for lay accompaniment, let the couple know that the Parish Marriage Formation Coordinator (MFC) will contact them to schedule a coaching meeting with themselves and a chosen mentor couple. **Tell the couple to choose a mentor couple who fits the criteria (5 years married or more, active and in good standing, and someone they admire).** If the couple knows no one in the parish or is relocating, you can suggest a hybrid model by allowing them to choose from a pool of showcase couples in the parish or to be mentored by a couple they will belong after the wedding (which, is the ideal). If the parish they will join is long-distance, virtual mentoring via Zoom is an acceptable option.
  - **FOCCUS** is a well-established global Catholic marriage inventory created in 1985 in the Archdiocese of Omaha. Its main goal is to facilitate strong, intimate communication through trained facilitators. It allows for difficult discussions on 12 topics of disagreement covering life skills. If your parish uses FOCCUS for lay accompaniment, you will recruit married couples to be trained facilitators. If clergy wish to continue facilitating FOCCUS, they must do lay accompaniment in another form (i.e., WTL) If your parish uses both WTL & FOCCUS, please refer to the **WTL/FOCCUS Cheat Sheet**. (See *marriage prep web-page* or *Clergy Resources*)

### RITE OF ENTRY: PRESENTATION/PRAYER FOR THE COUPLE

A simple public introduction of the couple after Sunday mass with a blessing allows for connection to the broader parish community. Another option for non-parishioners would be a private gesture of offering a Bible or rosary, and praying a blessing for the couple marking the end of the Reception Phase.

## STAGE 2: CATECHUMENATE: PROXIMATE PHASE

4 - 12 months; the ideal length is approximately one year

### ENTRY RETREAT

The couple attends Engaged Encounter (or a hybrid or virtual option, for exceptions *see p. 25*) to begin the Catechumenate Stage. This step is crucial as it is the discernment retreat for the couple to start their journey.

### POST RETREAT FOLLOW-UP MEETING

- The priest should offer this follow-up after the Engaged Encounter. This conversational check-in is simply an informal way of reviewing the theological content. Through reviewing feedback and dialogue the couple had on the retreat, it replaces the former requirement of "Private Instruction on the Theology of Marriage."
- Ask about any highlights, hot-button issues, or points of confusion regarding Church teaching. If the couple needs a refresher on the basics, offer them the "Basic Teachings of Church Teaching" handout.
- To piggyback on the post-retreat follow-up, it is recommended that the first FOCCUS facilitation session (if the clergy is facilitating) be begun at that time. If a volunteer couple is helping with facilitation, the presiding clergy may review the initial FOCCUS session as a pre-cursory review; otherwise, this step can be delegated.

### WITNESS TO LOVE COACHING SESSION

- Ensure the engaged couple has set up a series of dates/times to meet with their mentor couple. (e.g., send a Calendly link via the MFC.) The WTL Marriage Formation Coordinator should keep track of the engaged couple's progress by checking the WTL App to ensure they meet with their mentor couple six times before the wedding.
- *If the parish is using Witness to Love (WTL)*, the second meeting will be a **Witness to Love Coaching Session (1 HR)**, which serves as an orientation with the Marriage Formation Coordinator (MFC), engaged couple, and mentor couple. This session may happen at the tail end of the FOCCUS session or scheduled separately after.
- If a parish does not have a Marriage Formation Coordinator, WTL offers the "Hybrid Experience" for an additional fee to parishes that are not certified or do not have a parish marriage formation coordinator. *See Marriage Catechumenate FAQ* in Appendix 3.

### WITNESS TO LOVE MENTORING (6 MONTHLY SESSIONS)

- Witness to Love is unique in setting the stage for ongoing mystagogy after the wedding. The WTL mentors and engaged couple meet for six meetings for 1.5 hours. For the civilly married, it is four meetings. The best setting for these meetings would be the mentor couple's home to offer a glimpse into their family life.
- The couple should choose a couple who will remain in their lives after the wedding day. If they plan to move or will not settle in the parish they marry in, they may choose to be mentored virtually by a mentor couple.
- The *Theology of Marriage Discussion Night* (Session 5) should happen after the Engaged Encounter retreat. Still, it may be moved around to fit the schedule of the clergy, mentor couples, and engaged couple.

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## FOCCUS SESSIONS / FERTILITY AWARENESS COURSE

- The engaged couple continues to meet with FOCCUS Facilitator(s) to review their inventory report. According to FOCCUS, the recommended minimum is 2-3 sessions and a maximum of no more than six sessions. Any couple that needs more than six sessions should be referred to premarital counseling.
- The couple participates in an introductory fertility course. It takes about 10 weeks to learn how to observe fertility signs and to chart accurately. Five methods to fulfill the NFP Requirement in the Diocese are *Marquette, Creighton, Couple to Couple., SymptoPro, and FEMM*. Special attention should be made to parishes and deaneries to promote local fertility instructors. A list of practitioners/doctors who practice charting is also advisable to have on hand to give to couples found on our diocesan NFP page. Emphasis on the impediment of lack of openness to life is critical.
- Only **5% of couples** are taking the full NFP course. Witness to Love has created a **Fertility Awareness for Leaders** Course on their website to assist clergy and parish leaders to teach them how to navigate challenging couples.

## RITE OF ENTRY: ORDER OF BLESSING AN ENGAGED COUPLE

This rite is a closing of formal discernment and poses no canonical obligation to marry. It is a solemn moment to pray for graces for the wedding day. For couples who are long-distance or preparing with an outside priest, requesting their presider for this rite is requested.

## STAGE 3: FINAL PREPARATION

### 60 days before the wedding

- The mentor couple should model for the engaged couple how to pray together as a couple. Handouts are provided in *Appendix 3* to offer to your mentor couples and engaged couples so they can pray together in a mentoring session. A video is provided on the Diocesan website to model this method of prayer for beginners.
- Meet with the priest who will celebrate the wedding liturgy to discuss reading choices, and other logistics for the wedding liturgy
- The priest should recap the goods of marriage and ensure the couple is fully catechized and able to intend what the Church intends to receive the Sacrament of Marriage
- Once the priest is certain of this, he should complete the “Premarital Questionnaire” if this has not happened yet. (*See pp. 3- 4 of Marriage Prep Record*)

Optional: The engaged couple may attend a spiritual enrichment day before their wedding day; it could take place the same day as their wedding rehearsal or the week prior. This may take place at the parish where they will marry and focus on offering the couple the chance to go to Confession and review the meaning of the Sacrament of Marriage. It is also an opportunity for the couple to pray together, and may include adoration. *See Appendix 3 for a sample outline.*

## CLOSING RITE: RITE OF MATRIMONY

## **STAGE 4: MYSTAGOGY**

**2- 3 years after the wedding; 5 years of accompaniment as the ideal length**

The Diocese of Lincoln is blessed to have numerous local and national marriage enrichment apostolates to offer to our many families looking to grow their Domestic Church. For parishes, Witness to Love has developed a five-year marriage enrichment small group curriculum that is peer-to-peer led and requires no oversight or clergy facilitator. Mentor couples and newlyweds can continue where they left off with this group format. A secondary book option is "*The Rule: St. John Paul II's Rule for a Joy-filled Marriage of Divine Love*" by Theresa & Peter Martin, which also incorporates a small group format.

For parishes using **Witness to Love's Be Light Marriage Enrichment Small Groups**, an intentional pathway that draws couples in their first five years of marriage (and beyond) into transformation into family missionary disciples. It is a monthly followup after the wedding for the mentor couple and newlyweds to continue meeting as a small group.

### **MARRIED YEAR 1**

- **Belong:** The newly married couple feels welcomed at the parish and invited into a small group of other married couples; focus on human formation

### **MARRIED YEAR 2**

- **Believe:** *Kerygma* and basic catechesis on the Sacrament of Marriage

### **MARRIED YEAR 3**

- **Becoming:** Conversion, prayer, healing, and forgiveness

### **MARRIED YEAR 4**

- **Beatitude:** Life in Christ; living the moral teachings of the Church

### **MARRIED YEAR 5**

- **Be Light:** To become evangelizing spouses, sharing the gift of the Sacrament of Marriage with others

**For more information, check out [www.witnesstolove.org/belight](http://www.witnesstolove.org/belight)**

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## **STAGE 1: RECEPTION**

It is important that candidates manifest an inner readiness to embark upon a journey of faith conversion as part of the marriage catechumenate. Only when couples have allowed their decision to mature shall they move on to the next stage. (CPML, 40)

### **Five main tasks that ought to be accomplished during the Reception Stage:**

- 1) *Kerygmatic* Welcome to the Parish
- 2) Determination of freedom and readiness to marry
- 3) Overview of Brochures and Forms
- 4) Registration for Necessary Programs, Courses, and Retreats
- 5) Rite of Entry: Public Announcement (i.e., present couples to the parish community at Sunday celebration, simple blessing) or private prayer (presentation of symbol, e.g., bible)

### **KERYGMATIC WELCOME TO THE PARISH**

Non-practicing to disengaged persons with little or no experience of faith must necessarily receive an explicit invitation to embark upon the catechumenate journey. The aim is for the couple to receive the *Kerygma*, forming their mind and heart according to the teachings of Jesus and inserting them into the life of the Church. Assess the couple's background and knowledge of the Church by filling out an Intake Form (see *Clergy Resources: WTL Intake Form*; parishes may use this even if they don't use Witness to Love.

*Below is a script of questions that can be used as a Gospel Invitation to accept Jesus into their heart:*

- What is your image of God? Where did that image of God come from?
- "Can I quickly share a story (3-5 min) about my own encounter with God/His plan for my life?"
- "Sin separates us from God. But Jesus died on the cross to atone sin and to open heaven for you."
- "Jesus invites you to accept His gift and make Him the center of your lives."
- Afterward, introduce them to the community. Introduce to parish staff, offer a tour, or a handout of parish/diocesan young adult and marriage ministries. (e.g., Young Married's Small Groups, Alpha, etc.)

### **DETERMINATION OF FREEDOM & READINESS TO MARRY**

The priest's primary role is to ensure the couple is free to marry in the Church and understands the true nature of marriage as revealed by God. They must be mature enough to fulfill the responsibilities of Christian marriage, including being open to children and raising and educating them in the Catholic faith. The presence of a living and explicit faith in couples is the ideal situation to achieve the goal of arriving at the wedding with a clear and conscious intention. Components of a true marriage are: one which is indissoluble and exclusive, directed toward the good of the spouses, and open to children. Nonetheless, there remains a necessary condition for access to the Sacrament of Marriage and its validity: the condition is not a certain *a priori* "minimum level of faith" on the part of the betrothed but rather consists in their intention to do what the Church intends to accomplish in the celebration of marriage. (CMPL, 44)

The *ius connubii* (right to marry) is not a “*subjective claim that pastors must fulfill through a merely formal recognition independent of the effective content of the union. The right to contract marriage presupposes that the person can and intends to celebrate it truly, that is, in the truth of its essence as the Church teaches it. No one can claim the right to a nuptial ceremony. Indeed, the ius connubii refers to the right to celebrate an authentic marriage. The ius connubii would not, therefore, be denied where it was evident that nothing contrary to its exercise exists.*”... (Benedict XVI, Address at the Inauguration of the Judicial Year of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota, 22 January 2011).

The priest will review impediments, ensuring both individuals are free from previous bonds. Any counseling concerning a previously annulled marriage must be completed before a wedding can be pursued. While the priest may advise against the marriage, his reasons must be explained clearly. The decision to marry belongs to the couple and the right to marry must be maintained. If the couple wishes to proceed, they can request a review of their case. If so, the priest will make arrangements with the chancery for another priest to review their case. In cases where both the couple and priest agree about the couple's readiness for marriage, a wedding date may be finalized, and they may continue with the Catechumenal Stage.

## **OVERVIEW OF BROCHURES AND FORMS**

The documentation necessary for marriage ordinarily includes the Marriage Preparation Record, baptismal certificates for Catholics, written proof of baptism for non-Catholic Christians, a copy of the Engaged Encounter certificate, two affidavits of freedom to marry for each party, and if a former spouse has died, a copy of the death certificate is required. Two brochures are also distributed: *10 Steps to Get Married* and *Fertility Awareness Methods* (for couples of child-bearing years).

## **REGISTER FOR NECESSARY PROGRAMS, COURSES, & RETREATS**

To save many headaches, couples should register for the retreat, fertility introductory course, the pre-marital inventory, and mentoring programs in the first 60 days. For example, if the parish uses FOCCUS, encourage the couple to self-register for the FOCCUS using the QR code cards. The priest should encourage the couple to administer the inventory separately. As a best practice, they should not go over their results with their facilitator until after they have gone on the Engaged Encounter retreat, but that is not a hard-line requirement. The reason for delay is two-fold: 1) It encourages the couples to treat Engaged Encounter as the first step of their catechumenal journey and a discernment retreat to discern moving forward in the catechumenate. 2) Much of the content spent in reflection/dialogue at Engaged Encounter is repeated during the FOCCUS inventory. To reduce redundancies and to make time spent together more effective, the couple should discuss the topics in-depth during the allotted periods on the retreat weekend. It saves critical time and energy both for the couples and the priest or facilitator. That way, other topics may be explored that were not covered on Engaged Encounter, or couples may go deeper on a particularly complicated issue in the presence of a facilitator if needed.

## **RITE OF ENTRY: PUBLIC OR PRIVATE BLESSING OF THE COUPLE**

To close the Reception Phase, it is encouraged to offer a simple blessing at the end of Sunday Mass with a public introduction to the parish community. Or, a private prayer of blessing with the optional offering of a small gift (rosary, Bible, book, etc.) would suffice for couples who don't attend your parish.

## **STAGE II: CATECHUMENAL STAGE**

### **PROXIMATE FORMATION**

The specific goal of this stage is to finalize each couple's discernment about their vocation to marriage. This may lead to the free, responsible, and deliberated decision to enter into marriage, or it may lead to the equally free and deliberated decision to end the relationship and not to marry. (CMPL, 55)

**The proximate phase of formation of marriage includes four components and a rite of entry:**

- 1) Participation in an Engaged Encounter weekend or an equivalent approved retreat
  - a) Instruction on the theology of marriage as a sacrament is included in the Engaged Encounter retreat
- 2) Post-Retreat Followup to Confirm Intent to Marry
  - a) Marriage Preparation Record (pp. 3-4)
  - b) A review of the basic teachings of the Catholic Church for inactive Catholics
- 3) Lay Couple Accompaniment - Witness to Love/FOCCUS
- 4) Fertility Awareness/NFP Introductory Course
- 5) Rite of Entry: Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple

#### **1) PARTICIPATION IN AN ENGAGED ENCOUNTER OR EQUIVALENT**

Every couple is required to attend an Engaged Encounter (EE). Early registration in the first 60 days is necessary to reserve a place on the weekend of preference. It is advised that EE is the first step of the Catechumenal Stage as a discernment retreat, although priests may use flexibility and leave it up to their discernment whether to delay it or not. Attending a weekend early in the engagement allows couples to discuss and work through important issues that may surface during the course of the engagement. It is recommended but not required to have EE done before the FOCCUS and/or Witness to Love sessions. Some of the discussion topics on the retreat are redundant in relation to FOCCUS and/or Witness to Love. Couples doing the work 1:1 on the retreat by having difficult conversations prior is ideal over extended meetings with the priest/facilitator reiterating the same topics. Full participation is expected, meaning that attendance for both parties must span the entire weekend (Friday evening until Sunday mid-afternoon). Presentations on various topics are given by two married couples and a priest who volunteer their time to share important knowledge and insights about marriage gained from their education and life experiences. Ample time for private couple dialogue is provided.

#### **2) POST-RETREAT FOLLOWUP TO CONFIRM INTENT TO MARRY**

- a) Complete the Marriage Preparation Record (pp. 3-4)
- b) Offer a basic review of the basic teachings of the Catholic Church if the couple is inactive or poorly formed in Church teaching; *see Clergy & Parish Forms on the diocesan marriage preparation web-page*

### **3) LAY COUPLE ACCOMPANIMENT**

Lay accompaniment is the missing piece in successful marriage preparation pathways. According to recent statistics, the key to success is to allow the couple to *choose* their mentor couple (mirroring OCIA's sponsorship component). The preferred program is Witness to Love. (WTL) Witness to Love is not catechetical; but provides the missing piece of ongoing friendship and accompaniment (*mystagogy*) after the wedding day. An engaged couple who does not know a mentor couple who meets the criteria may choose from a pool of vetted couples chosen by the Pastor. The best practice is for the couple to ask someone they already know who will stay in their life long-term, preferably who will be in the parish they hope to belong to. Criteria to choose a mentor couple include:

- 1) **Married for five years or more**
- 2) **In good standing and active in the Church**
- 3) **Someone whom the engaged couple admires\*** (*They do not need to be experts or well-formed to be mentor couples. WTL is a two-for-one evangelization that forms both couples simultaneously.*)

Another form of lay accompaniment is to train married couples in your parish to facilitate the FOCCUS Inventory. The key difference is that FOCCUS trained couples are assigned facilitator couples. They will likely not provide ongoing friendship and accompaniment after the wedding day. A pastor may do either FOCCUS or Witness to Love, or ideally both as they offer different purposes.

### **4) FERTILITY AWARENESS INTRODUCTORY COURSE**

The USCCB now recommends that Natural Family Planning (NFP) be re-branded to "Fertility Awareness Methods" (FAM) as it more familiar terminology with younger women. A Fertility Awareness Intro Session is required (it is not comprehensively covered on EE), and full follow-up sessions are very recommended. Topics regarding the meaning of responsible parenthood, the scientific monitoring and the benefits of Fertility Awareness are discussed in follow-up sessions. However, Church teaching on conjugal chastity still needs to be followed up with after the retreat. It is recommended to go over the impediment of lack of openness to life, and the nature of the marital act be examined as a pastoral follow-up.

### **5) RITE OF ENTRY: ORDER OF BLESSING AN ENGAGED COUPLE**

The Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple is a public blessing of the rings and engagement. By ritualizing this moment, couples grow aware of an inner certainty regarding the decision to marry. This rite of entry offers a solemn moment for the couple to ask the Lord for the graces needed to prepare worthily for the Sacrament of Marriage. This moment is intended to end the Catechumenal Stage and signifies the finalization of formal discernment. To utilize its purpose as a rite of entry into the final stage of preparation (60 days before the wedding), you may do this liturgical ceremony at your parish after Sunday Mass. Using *The Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple* is recommended, and not the *Rite of Betrothal*, as prudence should be extended in its widespread use. The *Rite of Betrothal* is a public, contractual promise to be married. Although, the *Rite of Betrothal* is not canonically binding – according to the 1917 Codex, using such a liturgical ceremony could add extra weight to a marriage case if a couple applied for annulment. If in the case that the betrothal were to be called off, it could only be dissolved by a priest, as it is more serious than calling off an engagement.

## **STAGE III: FINAL PREPARATION**

Spiritual experiences shall be offered which are specifically designed for couples (listening to the Word, celebration of the Sacraments, moments of personal and community prayer), in order to constantly return to the encounter with the Lord as the source and center of all Christian life. (CPML, 66)

**The final preparation stage is composed of three different components:**

1. To recall the doctrinal, moral, and spiritual aspects of marriage
2. To have spiritual experiences of encounter with the Lord
  - a. Sacrament of Reconciliation & Rediscovery of Faith
  - b. Reformulation of the *Kerygma* and how sin is the true enemy of love
  - c. Couple's Prayer
3. To prepare for a conscious and fruitful participation in the liturgy of matrimony

### **DOCTRINAL, MORAL, & SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF MARRIAGE**

The main content of the journey of preparation undertaken thus far should be recalled. Emphasis needs to be placed on the indispensable conditions of freedom (within the couple and as a couple) and full awareness regarding the commitments assumed in the choice to marry. Those commitments are linked to the essential characteristics of marriage (indissolubility, unity, fidelity, fruitfulness) and will form the specific content of the interviews with the pastor required by canon law.

### **THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION & REDISCOVERY OF THE GOSPEL**

Sacred Scripture and Catholic Tradition teach that sexual activity outside of marriage is a mortal sin. Couples desperately need to hear the Gospel through the lens of the Theology of the Body. (See "*Theology of the Body: The Gospel of Love*" handout in Appendix 3 to offer a script to present to couples) One script to use is: "God made us for communion; to be in relationship with Him and others. We're made for spousal love. But sin is the greatest barrier to spousal love. It literally disintegrates communion. Jesus, the Eternal Bridegroom, offered up His body and shed his blood on the cross to remove that barrier. Like Christ, our bodies are made to be a spousal gift to each other, which can only be offered in self-giving, vowed love."

*"In fact, the faith of the person asking the Church for marriage can exist in different degrees, and it is the primary duty of pastors to bring about a rediscovery of this faith and to nourish it and bring it to maturity. But pastors must also understand the reasons that lead the Church also to admit to the celebration of marriage those who are imperfectly disposed." (Familiaris Consortio, 68)*

The timing of returning to the Sacrament of Reconciliation is vital. Often, couples need a proper preparation after years of avoidance and "baggage." Great care should be given to understand that the graces from the wedding can only be fully received if they are predisposed. Reconciliation before or after the Rehearsal is also an invitation to be offered for the wedding party and their families as an extension of God's mercy to all.

## **COUPLE'S PRAYER**

Couples that pray together daily have a less than 1% chance of divorce. Many couples do not know how to pray by themselves, let alone with each other. Deacon James Keating calls it "the deepest form of intimacy a couple can share with one another" as it is "innermost intimacy." If you have parish funds, buying the couple a copy of "Spousal Prayer" by Deacon Keating is impactful.

Couple's Prayer is now a recommended guideline under our new policy. Provided in Appendix 3 is a Couple Prayer handout, which involves heartfelt sharing/listening, intercession, and forgiveness. The best way to use this resource and fulfill this requirement is to share the resource with either your FOCCUS facilitator couple and/or Witness to Love mentor couples. To learn this valuable skill, engaged couples need to be modeled it by a married couple, then to practice with each other directly after. You may express to the couples that you know it may feel awkward at first, but to try, as it is one of the most rewarding ways to build intimacy as a couple. Another version of this prayer, an *Ignatian Examen for Couples*, can be found on the diocesan marriage prep page.

## **PREPARATION FOR A FRUITFUL & CONSCIOUS LITURGY**

*"As they approach the wedding, couples should become aware that they are not spectators but rather, in the name of Christ, ministers of the celebration of their marriage." (CMPL, 68)*

Many couples do not realize that they are administering the Sacrament to one another. It is important to teach the couple that Marriage is the only Sacrament that the priest does not administer. For example, it is a mistake to say "Louis and Zelig were married by the priest." It is more accurate to say: "Louis and Zelig married each other in the presence of the priest." The priest's role is to act as an official witness, representing Christ and His church, and this presence is necessary for the Sacrament to be valid. However, it is the couple who confer the Sacrament, and not the priest.

A excellent way to re-invite couples into a more profound preparation for a fruitful and conscious liturgy is a half-day or one-day spiritual retreat at the parish, or a simple morning or evening of reflection a few weeks before the wedding. Oftentimes, much time has passed from the initial discernment retreat (e.g., Engaged Encounter) which happens at the start of the Catechumenal Stage, and it is efficacious for a quick refresher of what they will be saying "Yes" to, and the Sacrament which they will be administering to one another.

*Appendix 3* provides a sample outline as an optional half-day or day of reflection for parishes to offer couples in the Final Preparation Stage.

## STAGE IV: MYSTAGOGY

"The catechumenal pathway does not conclude with the celebration of marriage. In fact, the entire process should not be understood as an isolated act, but rather as the entry into a 'permanent state', which therefore requires a unique 'ongoing formation' involving reflection, dialogue, and help from the Church. For this reason, the first years of married life need to be accompanied and newlyweds should not be left in solitude. Newlyweds should be made aware the celebration of marriage is the beginning of a journey, and that the couple still constitutes an 'open project,' not a 'completed work.'" (CPML, 71-75)

Mystagogy means "*introduction into the mystery.*" The grace offered in the sacrament is not automatically activated; it requires the spouses to actively cooperate with it by responsibly embracing the tasks and responsibilities of the Christian married state. It truly is a stage of accompaniment, and more or less, "an apprenticeship" where experienced married couples can walk along the way with newlyweds. The ideal length of this stage is five years, but realistically, parishes may only focus on the first two to three years.

The main components of mystagogy are:

1. Periodic followup meetings after the wedding (with mentor couples or couples within the parish community)
2. Being built up by parish or diocesan ministries
3. Transition to Mission (invitation to be mentor couples, lead small groups/date nights)
4. Milestone Anniversary Blessings: Order for Blessing a Married Couple (vow renewal within Mass on anniversary) or Order for Blessing a Married Couple Outside of Mass (no vow renewal, general blessing)

Mystagogy may continue after the initial first years of marriage, and may evolve into ongoing marriage enrichment. In order to eliminate confusion, listed below is the various marriage enrichment apostolates in the Diocese:

1. *Witness to Love - Be Light*: for the first 5 years of marriage and beyond; a continuation and intentional pathway to become Evangelizing Spouses
2. *Missionaries of the Holy Spirit & the Family*: for the growing and mature disciple, a "seminary-like" two-year formation for married couples done at the parish level and in the home
3. *Love & Life Programs*: for ongoing marriage enrichment; nine programs focusing on tools, workshops, and small group followup
4. *The Rule of St. John Paul II Married Small Groups* - for conjugal spirituality recommended for the early years, written by St. John Paul II, a rule of life for married couples
5. *Worldwide Marriage Encounter* - for ongoing marriage enrichment to those in crisis; offers tools, dialogue, and workshops over a retreat weekend
6. *Retrouvaille* - for couples in crisis or renewal; 3 phases of support via retreat & small groups
7. *Missionary Families of Christ Nebraska* - for all stages of family life; seminars and small groups

# **APPENDIX 1: LITURGICAL PLANNING OF MARRIAGE**

Christian marriage involves a liturgical celebration that expresses the essential sacramental nature of the marriage covenant. To prepare for a wedding that reflect the Catholic Church's understanding of marriage, specific guidelines are to be followed. Liturgy planning covers six areas:

- 1) Appropriate setting for the wedding
- 2) Customary Fees, Donations, and Stipends
- 3) Sacramental preparation for the wedding
- 4) Involvement of people in the wedding
- 5) Liturgical planning of the Rite
- 6) Traditions, Music, Decorations

Updating your parish marriage preparation policy is highly recommended at the parish level to be distributed to couples. Please consider the following suggestions taken from the USCCB Guidelines:

## **1) APPROPRIATE SETTING OF WEDDING**

The wedding is to be celebrated in a Catholic church where the bride or groom is a member or in another Catholic church with the permission of the pastor of that church and the priest preparing the couple. The bishop rarely permits wedding ceremonies outside of a Catholic church building, and only for serious reasons. Weddings are celebrated either within or outside the context of Mass. Ordinarily, the marriage of two Catholics takes place within the context of Mass. The marriage of a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic can also be celebrated during Mass whenever permission for a mixed-religion marriage has been obtained from the bishop. Marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person can be celebrated only outside the context of Mass.

## **2) CUSTOMARY FEES, DONATIONS, & STIPENDS**

Asking for a wedding stipend is customary. Depending on the parish, this might include the deposit, musicians' fees, compensation for the wedding coordinator, or parish-based marriage preparation materials (e.g., the Witness to Love workbook). In a situation of actual financial difficulty, couples can agree with their pastors so that genuine financial hardship will never prevent a Catholic marriage from taking place.

Celebrants are not expected to collect the stipends, which is best done by the parish staff or designated wedding coordinator. Donations and stipends should be placed in clearly marked envelopes and given to the intended recipient. Some parishes require that specific fees be paid in advance, such as a deposit to confirm the date or the musician's fee. Any remaining donations and stipends should be paid prior to the wedding day.

- **Traditionally, couples donate to the wedding parish. Sometimes, an amount or range is suggested, but often, it's left to the couple's discretion.** Wedding donations can be an essential source of support for older buildings. If the bride or groom or both are registered parishioners, the recommended amount may be minimal or none. The assumption is that they already support the parish with regular financial contributions. If the celebration includes a Mass, altar servers should be given a small offering.
- **Celebrant's stipend:** The services of the priest or deacon are free, but **it is customary to receive a stipend.** Usually, no specific amount is suggested, but you may include this as a suggested donation in your parish's wedding fees. Couples may consider the time devoted to the rehearsal and wedding and the effort put into the marriage preparation process.
- **Musicians' fees** are often explained in the parish's marriage prep policy or can be discussed when the couple meets with the music director.

### **3) SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION FOR THE WEDDING**

- **Catholics should receive the Sacrament of Confirmation before marriage.** The mature public acceptance of the Church's teachings is an important prelude to passing on the Catholic Faith to children.
- **Catholics should receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) regularly before marriage.** Reception of this Sacrament immediately before the wedding day is especially beneficial. Non-Catholics should repent of their sins according to the practice of their own faith traditions.
- **Catholics should receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist regularly in preparation for marriage.** They also are expected to attend Sunday Mass faithfully to develop to acquire the graces necessary to live chastely during the engagement period.

### **4) INVOLVEMENT OF PEOPLE IN THE WEDDING**

- **The liturgical ministers** selected to serve as Acolytes, Readers or Altar Servers must be chosen according to diocesan regulations.
- **A Catholic priest or deacon** receives the vows at weddings celebrated in a Catholic church. The marriage vows can only be taken from the options found in approved Catholic liturgical books because they reflect the Church's understanding of the marriage covenant. If a priest or deacon not involved in the preparation process is to receive the vows, arrangements must be made with the preparing priest and the pastor where the wedding will take place at least one month before the ceremony. The parish may have a policy regarding how closely the priest or deacon must be related to the couple to perform the ceremony.
- **A non-Catholic minister** may offer a prayer or benediction after a wedding Mass or during the marriage rite itself when it is celebrated outside the context of Mass.

## 5)

## LITURGICAL PLANNING OF THE RITE

There are *three different forms* to celebrate the Rite of Matrimony. You should choose one of these forms:

1. [Option #1] **Wedding within a Mass is often used when two Catholics are getting married.**
2. [Option #2] **Wedding with Liturgy of the Word is often used when a Catholic marries another baptized Christian.**
3. [Option #3] **Wedding with Liturgy of the Word and specific prayers used when a Catholic marries someone who is not baptized.**

While offering liturgy planning, creating an evangelizing and teaching moment that explains the Rite of Matrimony is powerful. Teaching points include:

- **The active role is taken by the couple who, in the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, are the "ministers" of the Sacrament;**
- **The wedding takes place in a church,** signifying it is a sacred covenant
- **The scriptural readings speak of God's plan for marriage** and his presence to the couple
- **The music lifts our thoughts and feelings** in a prayerful, joyful way
- **The homily given by the priest/deacon addresses the couple and their guests** about the meaning of marriage as well as its joys and challenges
- **The vows and exchange of rings** in which the couple express their freely given consent, promises to create a loving and lifelong union of permanence, fidelity, and openness to children
- **The various prayers and blessings** solemnize and support the journey of the couple

## 6) TRADITIONS, MUSIC, & DECORATIONS

- **The couple should focus on the Sacrament.** They should not have to postpone the celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage because they cannot afford decorations, flowers, and accompaniments.
- **Music selected for a wedding** should be an appropriate expression of faith and worship. Secular music cannot be used at the wedding. The words and style of the music chosen must be reverent.
- **Liturgical celebrations during Advent and Lent** must reflect the unique character of the season. Parish policies regulate music, decorations, and other such liturgical matters, which are more restricted when a wedding is scheduled during Advent or Lent.
- **Lighting a Unity Candle** is a non-liturgical ceremony not prescribed in the Rite of Matrimony. A better alternative would be to light a candle in front of the Blessed Mother to ask her intercession.
- **The Blessing and Giving of the Arras** is a Latin-American tradition. If the occasion so suggests, the rite of blessing and giving of the arras (coins) may occur following the blessing/giving of the rings.
- **The Lazo** is another custom that can be chosen. Then, the whole community may sing a hymn or canticle of praise. **The presentation of flowers** to honor St. Joseph is also recommended.

## **APPENDIX 2: IRREGULAR SITUATIONS**

Due to the variety and background of couples requesting marriage, more and more now, irregular situations are now presenting themselves with great regularity. This section establishes the policy of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Lincoln for the following circumstances:

- 1) **Cohabitation**
- 2) **Inter-faith Marriages**
- 3) **Pregnancy**
- 4) **Second Marriages**
- 5) **Convalidations & Special Exceptions**
- 6) **Pre-Catechumens in OCIA/Annulments**
- 7) **Radical Sanation**

### **1. COHABITATION**

In his Apostolic Exhortation *On the Family (Familiaris Consortia, #81)*, Pope John Paul II strongly urges that young people be educated about chastity, fidelity, and the meaning of marriage as a sacrament. This remote preparation should happen well before the engagement period. This effort includes religious education, parish-based catechetical programs, and chastity curricula in elementary/middle and high schools. Cohabitation is intrinsically wrong, as it places the couple in a near occasion of mortal sin and scandal. However, compared to generations ago, it is sadly now the norm in our society, which poses a serious pastoral issue. The manner in which couples are welcomed can mean the difference between alienation from the Church or renewed involvement. Many clergy do not know how to have approachable conversations with couples who are cohabiting and avoid these conversations altogether. A helpful resource for parish leaders and clergy is *Witness to Love's Fertility Awareness Course* on their website. It is a tool to help leaders spread the Good News of God's plan for sex and marriage in these difficult conversations.

*Faithful to Each Other Forever* notes that two extremes are to be avoided in conversations with couples:

1. Immediately confronting the couple and condemning their behavior
2. Ignoring the cohabitation aspect of their relationship.

Our policy has built in a pastoral followup conversation following Engaged Encounter that can offer "general correction with understanding and compassion." (*Faithful to Each other Forever*) More often than not, marriage preparation is the first time young adults have re-initiated contact with the Church. Unfortunately, many young adult Catholics leave the Church due to distrust and misunderstanding. It is essential to treat the conversation of cohabitation with sensitivity but also to not skirt around the truth. Building rapport is the key to creating an atmosphere where truth can be shared and received. If the couple doesn't trust you, they will not receive what you're saying. The key part of evangelizing couples to God's plan for sex and marriage is building a trusting relationship with them.

Baptized couples, by their right intention, have already accepted God's plan regarding marriage and, at least implicitly, consent to what the church intends to do when it celebrates marriage. According to Canon Law, cohabiting couples cannot be denied the Sacrament of Marriage. Still, every effort should be made to assess true intent to marry, which is why various check-ins have been built into the diocesan policy. (i.e., pastoral followup after the retreat, and another check-in in the last 60 days of preparation)

## **2. INTERFAITH MARRIAGES**

When a Catholic marries a person of another religious affiliation, a special dispensation from the bishop is required. Before the priest requests this dispensation, the Catholic party must make the following profession of faith and promise regarding children:

*"I reaffirm my faith in Jesus Christ, and with God's help, I intend to continue living that faith in the Catholic Church. I promise to do all in my power to share my faith with our children by having them baptized and reared as Catholics."*

The non-Catholic spouse does not have to promise to have the children raised Catholic. The Catholic spouse must promise to do all they can to have their children baptized and raised in the Catholic faith.

## **3. PREGNANCY BEFORE MARRIAGE**

*Pre-marital pregnancy demands that special pastoral attention be given to the couple during their preparation for marriage.* It is important to evaluate the couple's freedom and readiness for marriage, exclusive of the pregnancy. The priest must always have moral certainty that the couple is sufficiently prepared for marriage. The wedding is sometimes delayed until after the birth to establish the couple's true freedom to marry. Cases of pregnancy before marriage are handled individually based on age, circumstances surrounding the discovery of the pregnancy, and when the decision to marry was made.

## **4. SECOND MARRIAGES**

Second marriages are distinct and new unions and should not be treated the same as the marriage preparation process. Preparation for a second marriage should mirror normal standard preparation, except for tailored differences such as the pre-marital inventory and the retreat format:

- 1) ***FOCCUS Pre-Marital Inventory: Midlife and Beyond*** - it may be advantageous to train a couple in your parish who is remarried or a later marriage to offer facilitation for these cases.
- 2) ***Instead of Engaged Encounter or equivalent***, they may participate in a virtual catechetical course tailored towards Second Marriages (*Agape Catholic*) or receive one-on-one parish-based instruction on the theology of marriage from the priest preparing them for marriage. Must comply with USCCB Standards for Catechesis of Sacramentality of Marriage. (*See page 23*)

## **5. CONVALIDATIONS & SPECIAL EXCEPTIONS**

- According to the USCCB, if a couple has been civilly married for two years or less, they should attend the diocesan marriage preparation program (Engaged Encounter).
- For couples who cannot attend in-person retreat due to constraints such as work, long distance, or lack of child-care options, we encourage the virtual self-paced alternatives listed below:
- If a couple has been civilly married for more than two years, they may choose a flexible on-line option instead of the full weekend Engaged Encounter.
- Fertility Awareness Intro Course is still required for convalidating couples of fertility age.

### **PRIVATE INSTRUCTION ON THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE/STANDARDS**

Private Instruction on the Theology of Marriage is no longer a requirement for clergy to fulfill. It is now a Pastoral Followup Check-in after the retreat that is more conversational in tone/manner to facilitate honesty and trust. Private instruction may still be done as an option for special cases, e.g., midlife to elderly couples, special needs, those without computer access, low income, or couples with a dispensation to marry who are well-formed and advanced in age. Listed below are the USCCB Standards for Theology of Marriage:

*The nature of marriage as instituted by God (Theology of the Body)*

*Sacrament of Matrimony (Christ Redeems Marriage)*

*The Vows and Conjugal Love (Free, Total, Faithful, Fruitful)*

*Intro teaching on NFP (Moral Aspects + Witness Couple/Benefits)*

### **APPROVED HYBRID OPTIONS FOR CONVALIDATIONS & EXCEPTIONS**

If the couple is in a second marriage, advanced in years, has young children, is seeking a convalidation, or lives more than 150 miles away from the in-person retreat, they may qualify for an online marriage preparation course. The pastor has the ultimate approval for the formation method. See the list of exceptions below:

1. **Witness to Love: Civil Marriage Initiative** *For Convalidations:* (4 Sessions; this option requires a mentor couple.) The Be More Retreat is required with this option.
2. **Be More Witness to Love Virtual Retreat:** *Free* pre-recorded video option, for those who cannot attend the live Engaged Encounter (in-person or virtual); pastor approval needed to use instead of Engaged Encounter. May be done with mentor couple. Any parish qualifies to use.
3. **Hybrid Virtual Engaged Encounter:** *Best live option for those who fall ill or have inconveniences attending in-person;* weekend long course (Fri night – Sunday afternoon) via Zoom offered quarterly, check website for dates;
4. **Catholic Marriage Fellowship:** *Best live option for Urgent Cases:* live Zoom session to use only in urgent cases; one-day course (9:00-2:30 pm), check the website for dates;
5. **Agape Catholic Marriage Prep:** *Best self-paced virtual option for Urgent Cases, Second Marriages, Military; i.e., anything specialized;* 20 hours total, instructor couple-led, focused on active work rather than content; \$40 military discount on website;
6. **Ascension Press Joy-Filled Marriage:** *Best flexible, self-paced virtual option for those with small children, work, and schedule constraints* (6 hours content + Active Work, instructor couple-led);

## **6. PRECATECHUMENS IN OCIA / ANNULMENTS**

The USCCB has released New Statutes for the Catechumenate *that recommend an extended process for precatechumens validating their irregular union*. Marriage preparation for those in OCIA is recommended to last at least six months to one year and should be an opportunity for an encounter with God and a deepening of the faith. OCIA candidates who are divorced or civilly married should begin the inquiry of freedom to marry in the first stage as early as possible (after the Initial Interview). While unbaptized persons in irregular marriages can enter the catechumenate, they are not to celebrate the Rite of Election until they are free to enter a canonical marriage. **(Norm 7, National Statutes for the Christian Initiation of Adults, 2023)**

When a Catholic attempts marriage outside the Church, the couple must complete the entire preparation process before validation of their marriage can be permitted. Just as there are specific requirements for civil marriage (e.g., a marriage license), the Catholic Church also has requirements before Catholics can be considered validly married in the eyes of the Church. A valid Catholic marriage results from four elements:

- (1) the spouses are free to marry
- (2) they freely exchange their consent
- (3) in consenting to marry, they have the intention to marry for life, to be faithful to one another, and to be open to children
- (4) their consent is given in the presence of two witnesses and before a properly authorized Church minister. Exceptions to the last requirement must be approved by church authority.

### **HANDLING ANNULMENTS & PRIOR UNIONS**

Pastors and OCIA coordinators should work closely together to ensure that the marriage situations arising in the catechumenate are addressed sensitively and promptly. Pastors should inform Religious Ed Directors/OCIA coordinators of the progress of annulment cases, and consult them *immediately in the Reception Phase* concerning the needs and progress of those in the pre-catechumenate. OCIA coordinators should see to it that the need for a Church annulment is identified, and the process of seeking it begins in the Inquiry Period before the Catechumenate Period (before the Rite of Acceptance and the Rite of Welcome is celebrated.) OCIA forms have been updated to rectify or spot irregular marital status. *(See Clergy Resources to access updated OCIA Forms for Initial Interview & Q and A for Pastoral Ministers)*

### **THE MARRIAGE OF CATECHUMENS**

Once a person has become a catechumen (the result of celebrating the Rite of Acceptance into the Order of Catechumens), that person is a member of the household of faith and has certain rights in the Church. Among them is the right to be married according to the Catholic Rite of Marriage. When a catechumen is married, the language of the rite is adapted to reflect the fact that the catechumen is unbaptized. The marriage should take place outside Mass, following the order described in Chapter III of the Rite of Marriage. When a catechumen marries an unbaptized person, no dispensation is needed. When a catechumen marries a baptized person, a dispensation is needed for disparity of cult.

## **DIVORCED AND REMARRIED PERSONS**

A divorced but not remarried person may celebrate the Sacraments of Initiation. That person should clearly understand, however, that the Church considers them bound by the bond of the previous marriage and that a future marriage would not be possible unless the prior marriage was dissolved by death or annulment. The preparation for Initiation may be an appropriate time to present their case so they can know their freedom to enter into a future marriage within the Church. Anyone who was married and divorced and is now remarried must seek an annulment of the prior marriage. Anyone civilly married to someone previously married and divorced cannot be admitted to the sacraments unless the spouse obtains an annulment of the previous marriage.

It is possible to receive someone into the catechumenate while their marriage case is pending, but they will not be able to enter into the final period of purification and enlightenment, nor to receive the sacraments, or to celebrate the rite of reception until the marriage situation is resolved. Anyone with questions about the annulment process (or anyone needing to begin the process) should consult the clergy or the diocesan Marriage Tribunal office.

## **TYPES OF ANNULMENT CASES**

Keep this in mind preparing couples for marriage. Some possible reasons for an annulment are:

1. lack of ability or intention to enter into a lifelong commitment
2. lack of ability or intention to be faithful to one's spouse
3. lack of freedom in entering into the marriage
4. lack of openness to procreate
5. lack of ability or intention to will the "good of the spouses"
6. severe psychological, mental, or emotional illness or personality disorders

## **7. RADICAL SANATION ("HEALING AT THE ROOT")**

Radical sanation (Canons 1161-1165) is typically available to couples who were married civilly or in a way that did not meet the requirements for a valid marriage (such as lacking the proper form, witnesses, or consent), but may now be recognized retroactively. Radical sanation is done without renewal of consent or a ceremony and can be done secretly. It is most commonly seen in a Catholic who marries a non-Catholic, who refuses to convalidate. After obtaining a "radical sanation," the Catholic party may now receive the Sacraments of the Catholic Church.

For a marriage to qualify for radical sanation, the following conditions generally apply: 1) **invalid according to canonical form**, 2) **a desire on the part of Catholic party for validity, to live church teaching, and a contrite heart on the part of the Catholic party**, 3) **no impediments**, and 4) **a continued marital relationship**.

## **Appendix 3: Clergy & Parish Forms (Optional Handouts for Couples & Parish Leadership)**

Marriage Catechumenate FAQ - *For Clergy & Parish Leaders*

Parish "Cheat Sheet" - Timeline & Steps - *For Clergy & Parish Leaders*

Optional Half-Day or Day of Spiritual Reflection - *For Clergy & Parish Leaders*

Couple Prayer - Version 1 - *For Mentor & Engaged Couples*

Theology of the Body: The Gospel of Love- *For Clergy & Engaged Couples*

# Marriage Catechumenate FAQ

## 1. What is a recommendation versus a requirement under this new policy?

*According to Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life,* it is recommended to offer general guidelines that parishes may customize with flexibility. It is required for parishes to adopt the Vatican's recommended guidelines, but it is not requiring a hard-line, rigid way, program, or method to fulfill each recommendation. A "Cheat Sheet for Clergy" and 10 Steps to Get Married Brochure for couples have been provided to offer structure to the recommended guidelines, but you may use it as a flexible tool to learn the process rather than a checklist to be done perfectly. The following guidelines listed below are required, in the sense they should be customized and adapted to your parish as road-markers. The way you drive this road is up to you. We highly recommend you read the USCCB Pastoral Workbook for the Marriage Catechumenate as an additional guide.

## 2. What are the exact Guidelines for the Marriage Catechumenate?

The only requirement for the new policy is to implement the general guidelines (with a team of volunteers, i.e., marriage formation coordinator, mentor couples), under the pastor's guidance and discretion:

1. **Gradual:** an intentional pathway to build marriage missionary disciples (starts with remote marriage prep in childhood, to engagement, and continues throughout married life); length of preparation should follow maturity
2. **Kerygmatic:** proclaim the Gospel and invite couples into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ and His Church; welcoming couples intentionally through public blessings, personal invitations, couple's prayer
3. **Lay Accompaniment:** emphasis on mentoring/small groups before and after the wedding; a Marriage Formation Coordinator also may plan quarterly date nights or coordinate small groups for ongoing mystagogy

## 3. What if you are a rural parish with few resources/volunteers? How am I supposed to find a Marriage Formation Coordinator and mentor couples with so few people?

Witness to Love, the diocesan-preferred mentoring approach, works great for both larger, urban parishes and rural, spread-out parishes. Witness to Love's Parish support team ([support@witnessstolove.org](mailto:support@witnessstolove.org)) helps parishes fine-tune their unique needs and adjust to particular communities. For parishes with no marriage formation coordinator to do the coaching and oversee the ordering of materials/logistics, you may opt for Witness to Love "Hybrid Experience" which for a higher fee, the couple may get coached by a virtual Marriage Formation Coordinator who will oversee their progress. This allows all the administrative support to fall back on Witness to Love, and the engaged couple could cover the additional cost as part of their wedding fees. Much like the OCIA model of sponsor couples, the approach of Witness to Love is to rely on the Holy Spirit and allow the couple to choose a mentor couple based on the three criteria above. That way, you don't burn out a pool of "vetted expert couples" already over-extended.

#### **4. How often does the clergy meet with couples?**

If done according to the Guidelines, the clergy's role will focus on evangelization, pastoral care, and spiritual formation. In short, the clergy may do as little as 3 meetings. First, he provides "the welcome of the Face of the Father" to the couple in the first meeting. The canonical investigation will also be completed. Secondly, a followup meeting should be done after the marriage prep retreat in the Catechumenal Phase to check-in and offer gentle correction on Church teaching if needed. Lastly, a third meeting would be done in the Final Prep phase (60 days before the wedding): reviewing final details before the wedding, offering Reconciliation, and to reconfirm true intent to marry. A clergy may form couples to pray with their wedding readings using *Lectio Divina*, however, couple's prayer is best outsourced to mentor couples to model and to teach to engaged couples.

#### **5. Does the Diocese want me to use both FOCCUS and Witness to Love for lay accompaniment? Or can we just one?**

Again, as stated above, pastors have freedom to choose whether to use Witness to Love alone or to utilize both WTL/ FOCCUS together, as they provide different benefits. FOCCUS is a Catholic premarital inventory, and even WTL encourages a premarital inventory to be used alongside their product. For lay accompaniment, we highly recommend the program, "Witness to Love", as it offers mystagogy/accompaniment after the wedding. It focuses on relationships within your parish, increasing mass attendance by up to 80% and decreasing the risk of divorce down to 6%. To use both WTL and FOCCUS together, please see the handout on Clergy Resources or the diocesan web-page: [lincolndiocese.org/marriageprep](http://lincolndiocese.org/marriageprep)

#### **6. Can I train my mentors, so they can share Church Teaching?**

The mentors in our marriage preparation process should not be asked to share the fullness of the Church's teachings, because their role is to accompany the engaged couple, not catechize them. They do become "mentors", by sharing personal stories through the prompts in the materials, but truly it is 2-for-1 evangelization and marriage formation. Built into the method is a "Theology of Marriage Discussion Night" where as a replacement for "Private Instruction on Theology of Marriage" the clergy comes for dinner after the retreat to discuss Church teaching. You may opt to have your Marriage Formation Coordinator (MFC) "mentor the mentor couples," especially if you have a vetted group of showcase couples, just in case an engaged couple truly knows no one to ask. One suggestion is to read *Mentor's Journey: How Your Marriage Can Change the World* by Witness to Love. For a description of a Marriage Formation Coordinator role, see the diocesan marriage prep page.

#### **7. What if my engaged couple doesn't know anyone in the parish, doesn't plan on joining my parish, or will relocate after they marry?**

The ideal is for them to choose someone in the parish they will belong to or where they relocate to. (e.g., long distance couple can do virtual mentoring.) It is not recommended to choose an immediate family member. If they plan on staying in the parish they marry in but do not know anyone, they may choose from a list of volunteer "showcase couples". Pro tip: keep bio's of showcase couples on your website for the engaged couples to discern and select from.

#### **8. Help! This is a big culture change. Where do I start and what is my next steps?**

The first step is to recognize the problem, and acknowledge that despite our best efforts of marriage prep, our Church is wounded. Broken families = broken parishes. Our divorce rates are high (23% for Catholics by year 5). Survey the situation in your parish, and ask yourself what is working and what isn't. Next, form a parish team, and find a Marriage Formation Coordinator to champion this cause. Next, look at the gaps in your current approach. (remote preparation (i.e., family faith formation), immediate preparation, and mystagogy). Then, launch this at your parish and do a pulpit announcement inviting your whole parish to be apart of the renewal. Lastly, collaborate with other pastors in your local area and share ideas, resources, and goals.

**DIOCESE OF LINCOLN**  
**"Cheat Sheet "Recommended Timeline &  
Steps  
For Clergy & Parish Staff**

**Current Date - Projected Wedding Date (Timeline Estimate):**

**Name of Groom :** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Bride :** \_\_\_\_\_

**PREPARATION STEPS:**

**Reception/Inquiry Phase: Initial few weeks to 60 days**

**1. Initial Meeting:**

- Complete pp. 1-2 of the Marriage Preparation Record, offer Affidavits of Freedom to Marry
- Listen to the Couple's Story (Take notes on their background during intake; see **WTL Intake Form** as an optional sample - you may use your own format)
- Proclaim the *Kerygma*/Share Personal Testimony (3 – 5 min on how you encountered Jesus, allow them to ask questions, invite them into a deeper relationship with Christ)
- Overview of Brochures: (10 Steps to Get Married, Fertility Awareness Methods)
- If time permits, introduce newcomers to staff, take a tour, offer a bulletin. For larger parishes, it is recommended to pencil in wedding date and hold for 60 days until the initial inquiry is determined.

**2. Direct the couple to [lincolndiocese.org/marriageprep](http://lincolndiocese.org/marriageprep) via the QR code on the 10 Steps to Get Married Brochure. Inform the couple to register online in the first 60 days for the following:**

- I. Engaged Encounter (In-Person)
- II. Online marriage prep course for exceptions and special cases (*see list on p. 24*)
- III. Fertility Awareness Intro Session

**3. If applicable, offer the couple a QR code card to self-register for one of three FOCCUS inventories:**

- **FOCCUS (regular), for Convalidations, or Mid-Life and Beyond**

*Rite of Entry:* Public or Private Prayer of Blessing - after a Sunday Mass, or privately with the offering of Bible, book, or rosary, and/or lighting a candle

## **CATECHUMENAL STAGE**

### **Proximate Formation: 4 -12 months before Wedding**

4. Entry Retreat: Engaged Encounter or equivalent (\*must complete three months before wedding)
  - Those who qualify for an exception may choose to do a self-paced hybrid virtual course or 1:1 formation at the parish level (*See Appendix 2: Irregular Situations, p.24*)
5. Post-Retreat Followup Conversation to address difficult topics such as cohabitation, contraception, and Church teaching, pp.3-4 of Premarital Questionnaire
6. Lay Couple Accompaniment (choose one of two or both)
  - *FOCCUS Facilitation w/ trained couples* (2 - 6 sessions) if combining WTL/FOCCUS, (1-2 sessions)
  - *Witness to Love Mentoring* (6 sessions including Theology of Marriage Discussion Night at mentor couple's home); allow couples to choose their own mentor couple. For Civil Marriage Initiative for Convalidations (4 mentoring sessions)
    - For an additional fee, WTL offers the "Hybrid Experience" to parishes that are not certified or do not have a parish marriage formation coordinator. *See Marriage Catechumenate FAQ in Appendix 3 and Clergy Resources.*
  - *Rite of Entry: Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple* - best to do at parish level

### **Final Preparation Stage: 2 months before the wedding**

5. Planning/Reflection on the Word, i.e., teach the couple to meditate with their wedding readings or Gospel of the week (i.e., *lectio divina*)
6. Offer a Couple's Prayer handout to mentor couples, and ask them to model it for the engaged couples during mentoring or FOCCUS sessions.
7. Re-confirm intention to marry in the Church (doctrinal, spiritual, and moral aspects of marriage), collect canonical forms; diocesan permissions/dispensations (if required)
8. Sacrament of Penance at Rehearsal (invitation into conscious participation in the liturgy)
9. **Celebration of the Rite of Matrimony**

### **MYSTAGOGY STAGE: 2-3 years after the wedding**

Invite couples into parish community events, small group invitations, and date nights for young marrieds (5 years or less) and mentor couples; *see list with descriptions on p.17*

# Couple's Prayer (Spontaneous) –

## For Mentor and Engaged Couples

*Taken from Ascension Press: Living a Joy-Filled Marriage*

Spontaneous prayer is simply having a conversation with Christ as you would with each other. It is a time to be completely at ease before God, using your own words and body language to express your authentic self. If you feel a little intimidated by the idea of praying together in this way, the following format can help you get started. You can use these steps in five minutes or an hour,

If you take the opportunity to pray for the needs of each other as a couple, you will typically experience a whole new level of intimacy. Consider following these steps:

**Step 1: One of you asks the other the following simple questions. The other person answers them.**

1. What are you thankful for right now?
2. Is there anything I have done that has hurt you? Is there anything I need to apologize for?
3. What concerns/worries do you have right now? How can I help?
4. How can I pray for you? Who else can we pray for?

**Step 2: The person who asked the questions begins by talking to God on behalf of the other person about what they just said.** (This is known as spontaneous prayer because it is not a set prayer but a prayer from the heart.) **Talk as if God were sitting right there with you.**

It might sound something like this:

*God, we trust that you are with us and hear our prayers. Thank you. You know Susan's heart better than anyone. Thank you for bringing her laughter at work this week. Lord, I am sorry that I have not been a good listener for her lately. Help me to improve that. Give her the answers she is looking for with regard to how to discuss difficult issues with her sister. Thank you for the gift that she is to me. Amen.*

**Step 3: Change places. The person who answered the questions will now ask the questions and then pray for the other's needs.**

Helpful Hint: To experience deeper intimacy during prayer, consider sitting close to one another and holding hands, or facing one another and looking into each other's eyes.

## **OPTIONAL: HALF-DAY OR DAY OF RECOLLECTION TEMPLATE**

### **FOR CLERGY & PARISH STAFF**

An optional spiritual half-day or day of recollection held at the parish is an excellent way to revisit the spiritual, moral, and doctrinal elements of marriage in the final 2 months of preparation. A bonus of incorporating this time of reflection is that you will be able to bring together other engaged couples in your parish for fellowship and introductions to each other. Having this time together will provide a natural on-ramp into the newlywed community with other couples in your parish. If your parish has a high volume of weddings, offering a half-day of reflection a few times/year en-masse would be helpful.

### **USCCB Standards for Catechesis of the Sacrament of Marriage**

The nature of marriage as instituted by God (Theology of the Body)

Sacrament of Matrimony (Christ Redeems Marriage)

The Vows and Conjugal Love (Free, Total, Faithful, Fruitful)

Intro teaching on NFP (Moral Aspects + Witness Couple/Benefits)

### **Hardcopy or Video Materials for Use: (choose one)**

Beloved (Episodes 3, 4, 5) – Formed / Augustine Institute

Marriage in the Lord Handbook (Sessions 1 – 2) - Liturgy Training Publications

### **Sample Themes for the Retreat**

- I. **Institution of Marriage/Theology of the Body**
  - a) Marriage in the Lord: Session 1 Meaning of Marriage pp. 7-8
  - b) Beloved: Episodes 3, 4, and 5
  
- II. **Sacrament of Marriage**
  - a) Marriage in the Lord: Session 8-9
  - b) Beloved: Episodes 3 and 5
  
- III. **The vows and conjugal love (Free, Total, Faithful, Fruitful)**
  - a) Marriage in the Lord: Session 2: The Gift of Intimacy and Its Responsibilities pp. 11-15
  - b) Beloved: Episodes 3 and 4
  
- IV. **Natural Family Planning**
  - a) Marriage in the Lord: Session 2: The Gift of Intimacy and Its Responsibilities p. 16
  
  - b) Additional Session: Special Considerations (for blended families, remarriages, interfaith, adult children of divorce) Beloved: Episode 4

# Theology of the Body: The Gospel of Love

Adapted from [\*Rescued: The Unexpected and Extraordinary News of the Gospel\*](#)  
*A Teaching Guide for Presenting the Gospel through the Lens of Theology of the Body*

There are three Great Questions in life:

- **Why am I here?** Because the Creator of this massive, incomprehensible universe, the God who simply breathed, spoke, and willed entire galaxies into existence, chose to create me. I don't just "happen" to be here, and neither do you. We're here because God created us, out of his love, in His image and Likeness. We are literally made for communion – with God, with each other. *Our greatest human need is relationship*, which is why the desire for marriage is literally written into our hearts.
- **Where am I going?** You, who were made in the image and likeness of God and are the highlight and pinnacle of everything He made, are meant to be *divinized*. (To become like God - glorified partakers in the divine nature) That's your destiny and the destiny of every human person. You're meant to share forever in God's own abundant life, joy, and happiness. That's where you're going.
- **How do I get there?** *We get there by love* — God's love for us. Marriage is a path to holiness, or a way to get to Heaven. You get there by *who* – through Jesus, the Eternal Bridegroom, who took on flesh and laid down his life for His Bride on the cross. This is the Great Mystery every marriage is invited into. That is why Christ must be at the center of your marriage, because Christ elevated marriage to be more than what it is. It is not just a natural institution, but a Sacrament, a sign of His own love. He died so that spouses could love one another as Christ loved the Church. How did Christ love the Church? (Look at the crucifix). Freely, totally, faithfully, and fruitfully. The deepest meaning of marriage is to give of oneself as Christ did on the cross, and to get the other back home to Heaven. And your "I do" in your vows should be given:

**Freely:** *With, no conditions, pressures, or reservations. Exhibiting mental and physical capacity. No substance, impulse, or desire is controlling you.*

**Totally:** *You hold nothing back. You disclose everything. You must choose to give all of yourself to your future spouse with no barriers (Many do not realize this, but contraception is a barrier. Hiding your history is a barrier.)*

**Faithfully:** *You are emotionally, spiritually, and physically committed to your spouse for the rest of your life. You reserve your deepest conversation, time, and resources for your spouse. The marriage bed and all sexual acts, both in thought and act, is only reserved for you both. (Note: Viewing pornography is an isolated, self-gratifying act, and does not honor the marriage vows nor the unitive, procreative nature of the sexual act.)*

**Fruitfully:** *Your love is life-giving, and you are open to the possibility of new life through the conception of a child. It calls for an openness to God's plan for life within the marriage each and every time a couple is sexually intimate. That doesn't mean we will conceive (or want to conceive) - it just means we need to be open. To avoid pregnancy in times of serious hardship or a lack of readiness is valid as long as the couple is using natural methods of avoiding pregnancy, (fertility awareness methods that still honor openness to life), which doesn't close off a couple's possibility to bear life completely. When an act, device, medication, or operation is used to remove fertility, a couple cannot give themselves totally, no matter how much they love each other.*



