

## **Marriage Preparation Programs: Are They Working?**

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Any polling of pastors and parochial ministers about important pastoral needs is likely to reveal that marriage preparation is extremely important. The pastor and parish staff commonly give considerable attention to couples preparing for Christian marriage. New programs claiming to be the best way to assist couples appear with some regularity. As we evaluate the various programs and approaches to marriage preparation now available, the rather brief history of this ministry is worth recalling.

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Pastoral ministers have sought ways to help couples preparing for marriage to become aware of the inadequacy of their relationship skills. They found that adequate relationship skills include the psychological realities of effective communication and the willingness to listen and share. These skills also include faith realities, such as prayer, forgiveness, trust, and the ability to make and keep commitments. It is clear that many (most) couples who hope to be successful in Christian marriage need to learn more effective relationship skills. This effort to design better marriage preparation programs resulted in three distinct kinds of programs:

1. FOCCUS (and similar programs). FOCCUS (Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding, and Study) is a series of questions to which each person answers "agree," "disagree," or "unsure." The results of the survey are shared with the couple under the guidance of a facilitator. The goal is to highlight potential areas of weakness and encourage the couple to develop more effective ways of relating.
2. "Engaged Encounter" (and similar programs). Engaged Encounter is a weekend retreat led by married couples who share their own stories and struggles of learning how to live in a Christian marriage. The goal is to provide real-life examples of how marriage can be done, as well as time for the engaged couple to do private sharing and planning free of the normal distractions of daily life.
3. "Sponsor Couple Program" (and similar programs). The Sponsor Couple Program is a mentor process. The couple preparing for marriage first does their homework. They study the meaning of Christian marriage and the skills such a marriage will require. Then they meet with their "sponsors" in the home of the sponsor couple. This provides an opportunity for the sponsor couple to use their own experiences to affirm, coach, and even challenge the engaged couple to learn and practice more effective marriage skills.

In recent years, dioceses of the United States and Canada have established a pastoral process for assisting couples preparing for marriage. Typically, this includes an assessment process involving two or three meetings with the priest or deacon to verify the couple's "freedom to marry" in the Church and their psychological and spiritual readiness for Christian marriage.<sup>2</sup> The hope is to establish enough of a relationship with the couple so that they will listen to the concerns of the Church about the need to assess their skills for building a sacramental marriage.

After the assessment, the couple participates in one or more preparation programs, such as Pre-Cana, Engaged Encounter, or Sponsor Couple Program. The goal of each of these programs, as outlined above, is to help the couple examine the content of what they have received from their family of origin and to determine whether they need to learn new, and perhaps radically different, skills for establishing and maintaining a sacramental marriage. Taking a course in Natural Family Planning is also highly recommended. Finally, the couple returns to the priest or deacon to plan the wedding ceremony. Many dioceses have made this kind of process a requirement for marriage in the Church.

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In trying to assess current needs, pastors struggle with three key pastoral problems.

Pastoral Problem #1: Lack of adequate and appropriate discernment. Diocesan policies direct couples to contact the parish six to twelve months prior to their desired wedding date so that marriage preparation programs can begin. The problem is that even if the couple contacts the pastor a year or more before they plan to marry, they have already made their decision to marry. Traditional marriage preparation programs are thus too late to help with this critical decision. Pastoral Problem #2: Lack of canon law information about "freedom to marry" and "mixed religion." The number of marriages in which at least one of the parties has been married before and/or is not Catholic is increasing. Many Catholics unwittingly plan to marry a previously married non-Catholic with the mistaken notion that because the previous marriage was not in the Catholic Church it was "not valid." Even if the couple approaches the pastor a year or more prior to their intended wedding, it is likely to be too late if either of them needs to go through the annulment process. In addition, mixed-religion couples need to know all the options and regulations of canon law (and local diocesan policies) before making decisions about the place of the wedding and the wedding ritual. Pastoral Problem #3: Lack of adequate time for the "conversion" that Christian marriage requires of the couple. Most couples in the United States are products of a culture that is highly materialistic, individualistic, and even anti-marriage. The desire to live Christian marriage requires radical lifestyle changes—that is, conversion of lifelong habits that are destructive of relationships and marriage.

The final hectic months before the wedding is not the best time for the kind of reflection and dialogue that could lead to radical personal change. The emotional high of a weekend retreat for engaged couples is not a bad thing, but it is rarely a reliable indication that radically new skills (e.g., forgiveness, marital dialogue, and prayer as a couple) have taken lasting root. The parish can be more effective by following a few simple principles of adult education and by offering resources designed to assist couples with the discernment process.

Effective marriage preparation starts by remembering that those preparing for marriage are adults, not children. While this may seem an obvious point, there is a reason to give this careful thought. Since so many of the educational efforts of the Catholic Church have been designed for children, parishes are still learning to incorporate the unique elements of adult education into the design of marriage preparation programs. When educating children, it is appropriate to determine for them what they must learn, and when and how they will learn it. Once a person becomes an adult, however, he or she is capable of directing his or her own ongoing

formation and education, and he or she bears personal responsibility for all decisions made. Effective adult education incorporates this principle of personal responsibility.

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Strange as it may seem, we have not designed formal marriage preparation products for use when they are most needed—namely, while the couple is making their decision about getting married. Typically, the couple has gone through their own process of deciding to marry. Then they have informed their families, "hired the band," and called the parish to sign up the church. The parish has responded to this request by trying to get the couple to slow the planning process, to re-think their decisions about marriage, and perhaps to decide not to marry (or at least postpone the wedding). Needless to say, this is not an effective way to minister to adults.

The following parish efforts will encourage couples to make better, more informed decisions about marriage:

1. Periodic pulpit announcements and weekly bulletin notices. Information from the pulpit by the pastor is a proven method of announcing and establishing new policies. In addition, the information can be printed in the bulletin as a weekly reminder: "Anyone who is even remotely thinking about marriage is encouraged to contact the parish office for a special packet of information. Please obtain this packet before you decide to get engaged!"<sup>4</sup> Couples needing this information may not be regular churchgoers, so the goal is to inform family and friends, who can pass it on to couples they know. Parish secretaries can refer incoming calls about marriage to the pastor (or another person trained for this responsibility).
2. Information Session: Preparing for Marriage. Parishes can provide evening sessions as often as needed. Single persons, dating couples, and engaged couples can be invited to a presentation of information about preparing for marriage in the Catholic Church, and such presentations present an opportunity for them to ask any questions.
3. Publish helpful websites in the parish bulletin. This is a strategy for encouraging personal initiative and responsibility. One site that such a list could include is [www.marriagepreparation.com](http://www.marriagepreparation.com), which offers information about marriage preparation and one's freedom to marry in the Catholic Church, and provides e-mail access to a pastoral minister who will answer personal questions about marriage preparation. §

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1. Cf. Center for Marriage and Family, *Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church: Getting it Right* (Omaha, Neb.: Creighton University, 1995).
2. The FOCCUS (or similar) instrument is typically used to help with this assessment process.
3. There is a general impression that couples marrying in the Church today are doing better than the national average of 50 percent divorce rate. However, too many variables make it difficult to conclude that it is the programs themselves that are making this positive difference.

4. A packet designed by this author, For Better and For Ever, can be mailed to the person or couple who needs it (or perhaps a parent or friend of the prospective bride and groom) by contacting Rev. Robert A. Ruhnke, CSSR, Marriage Preparation Resources, 1617 Iowa Street, San Antonio, TX 78203; phone (210) 534-1129; or on the web at [www.marriagepreparation.com](http://www.marriagepreparation.com).
5. Ibid.