

Marriage Preparation from the Priest's Perspective

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.

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!" 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, 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.

Robert A. Ruhnke, CSSR, D.Min., is the author of For Better and For Ever and is engaged in pastoral work and marriage preparation in San Antonio, Texas.