

SETTING UP THE SPONSOR COUPLE PROGRAM IN YOUR PARISH

I. Step One: Dealing with Engaged Couples when they contact the church.

When the engaged couple contacts the church ~usually by phone ~ the role of the church secretary is to record information for Pastor or Staff Person. If the person/couple is making the "first contact" with the church and has not yet met with the pastor or someone on the church staff, the secretary should be *welcoming* and *answer questions*, but it is *not* the role of the secretary to make decisions about who is to be married in the Church. The secretary should record information from the caller and assure him/her that the Pastor or someone on the church staff will return the call as soon as possible. Why? A request for marriage requires a conversation with someone responsible for making pastoral judgments about the couple's "freedom/readiness for Christian marriage" (different Christian churches have different criteria), and such judgments must be made *before* it is appropriate to reserve the church for a wedding.

The secretary could ask the couple if they have gotten the parish *packet of information about preparing for Christian marriage and planning your wedding*. If they have not obtained this packet, they can be invited to come and get these materials. Note: Your parish hopefully has materials that are given to engaged couples once they contact you for preparation. There are information packets available through Catholic Charities – all of the information is also on this website (Our Catholic Marriage) and you can direct couples here.

In the above paragraphs, there is no option for the couple to "reserve the church" for their wedding before they meet with the Pastor or Staff Person. However, the Pastor may decide to allow for the parish secretary to check the church calendar to see what dates are available when a couple calls to see what dates it is possible to celebrate their marriage at the parish. This is a practical way to be more "user friendly" to engaged couples within the pastoral strategy of the parish to provide quality marriage preparation. Assuming the church is available, the parish secretary can "pencil in" the wedding for a specific date and explain to the couple that: *no other couple can reserve the church on that date/time; however, the fact that it is written in "pencil" means that we only hold this date till you can meet with the Pastor or Staff Person and get official confirmation from the Pastor or Staff Person that the church can be reserved for your wedding, i.e. when the reservation is "written in ink."* So be sure you don't print your wedding invitations until you have this date confirmed by the Pastor.

This process also works well for the situation in which the couple is trying to reserve the church for the wedding and also get permission to have a priest/deacon from outside the parish officiate at the wedding. In this situation, it is necessary to talk with the Pastor or Staff Person (this could be done by phone and not necessarily require a face to face meeting) about who will *officiate at the wedding* and who will *take responsibility for the marriage preparation of the couple*.

II. Assessment Phase. (By Pastor/Deacon/Trained Lay Person)

1. The first contact between the Pastor and the engaged couple is likely to be on the phone. This provides the Pastor an opportunity to clarify a number of issues (e.g., whether either of them has been married before, their age, their faith tradition, etc). If there is a major issue, such as, the

need for an annulment, the pastor may decide to meet with the couple to address such an issue face to face. If there are no major issues, the pastor sets up an initial meeting.

2. The first face to face meeting. The pastor spends some time getting to know the couple and may conduct an inventory, such as, **FOCCUS**, *at the end of this meeting*. [NOTE, *If the pastor is going to use the FOCCUS (or any other such inventory), this is the recommended time to use it along with the For Better and For Ever program.*]

At this time the pastor explains they will be matched up with a mentor couple who will contact them. The engaged couples will be given their individual copies of *For Better and For Ever* from the pastor who will explain how **page 7** directs them to cover certain chapters in "preparation for their first meeting with the pastor." The pastor says something like: "*Be sure to follow the directions on page 7, that is, write your answers to all the questions (actually WRITE in the book!), then ~ after you have both done the writing ~ share your answers with one another in dialogue, and then call me to set an appointment for our first meeting." This is a simple but effective way to make it clear that they are to do the "homework" before they set an appointment to meet with the pastor. This avoids the excuse that they "forgot" or "did not have time" for the homework!*

3. The pastor will more than likely need to schedule a second meeting to review the results of *FOCCUS* and the beginning chapters of *For Better and For Ever* with the couple.

III. Sponsor/Mentor Couple Phase. After the assessment by the Pastor (or someone delegated by the pastor to do this). The couple will be assigned a Sponsor Couple and they usually meet with the Sponsor Couple 5 or more times.

See *For Better and For Ever* (page 7) for suggested sequence of meetings. The Sponsor Couple will adapt this recommended format to the needs/interests of the engaged couple.

IV. Final Session(s) with Pastor.

The pastor goes over the final chapters of *For Better and For Ever* (see page 7), completes any paper work that needs to be done, and plans the wedding (with input from the engaged couple).

V. Rehearsal and Wedding.

VI. Follow up by Sponsor/Mentor Couple. Using the questions in *For Better and For Ever*. Often the newly married couple will not be living in the city of the sponsor couple. However, the sponsor couple can keep in touch by phone and email, and this may be just as effective as trying to have a face-to-face meeting (if that is not easy to do).