

# Preparing for Marriage in the Church

## Archdiocese of Baltimore



### MARRIAGE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Marriage is a commitment between a man and a woman to share their entire lives in an intimate way. It is a commitment by each to join their lives together forever to encourage the other to grow in holiness, to remain completely faithful to one another, to receive God's gift of children and raise them lovingly in faith.

Therefore, our Lord raised marriage to the dignity of a sacrament, a sign of Christ's love. In marriage, Catholics encounter not only our Creator but also Christ, the Redeemer of all, and his Spirit, the Sanctifier.

A Christian marriage, then, is:

**Sacramental**, because a couple consents to mutually give and accept each other in a covenant relationship. This conjugal covenant is a sacrament for it is rooted in baptism, developed in faith, nourished by the sacramental activity of the Church, and transformed by the redemptive love of Christ and the Church.

**Permanent and life long**, because marital love is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Married spouses are called each day to realize this covenant through mutual fidelity and conjugal love. Thus, couples signify and participate in the covenant of lasting unity and fruitful love that exists between Christ and the Church, so as to build up the Church and share in the salvific love of God.

**Open to growth** in love and understanding, and to life in harmony and fidelity within the community of the People of God, as well as total life long fidelity to one another.

**Committed** to generous and responsible parenthood, working together in partnership with God to raise loving, responsible children.

Your relationship in marriage is not static; it takes your gifts and talents as individuals and develops them in a new partnership blessed by God. This partnership offers you the strength to face the day-to-day realities of married life, and provides a vision of what love can be.

To live this type of life requires special help and strength. Your marriage should be celebrated, after careful preparation, with the greatest joy, and with much prayer. The following is an attempt to assist you in your preparation for your Marriage in the Lord.

Couples preparing for marriage should contact their parish at least six months prior to the desired date of the wedding.

## PREPARATION FOR MARRIAGE

Although the idea of a wedding may seem quite simple, the reality can be complex. Concerns for the sanctity of marriage and the profound effect that marriage will have on your life are the compelling reasons for the Church's stress on careful, even meticulous, preparation.

Marriage preparation has two sides: a personal one in which you share more fully with each other your beliefs, values, goals, and feelings, and prepare for the commitment you are about to make; and a formal preparation that involves not only you but also your families, the Church, and society. Both of these began shortly after you started to explore a possible commitment to each other in matrimony. This time of preparation is a time of growth and should be filled with joy.

### PERSONAL PREPARATION

Your personal preparation begins a sharing with each other that should continue and develop throughout your married life. It is important for you to learn to communicate your ideas and your emotions, your plans and your dreams, your hopes and whatever fears you may have. You may want to focus on:

1. Considering your rights and responsibilities as a married couple to each other, to society, and before God and the Church.
2. Knowing each other's relationship with God and reflecting on the role that God will play in your life together.
3. Adequate formation in and an appreciation of human sexuality, and of the enriching role that it will play in your marriage.
4. Sharing ideas and attitudes about responsible parenthood.
5. Comparing the values that each of you hold on material and financial matters, and adapting them to your new status.
6. Setting some goals for yourselves, including only immediate plans, but also long-range goals that will give direction to your life as husband and wife.
7. Developing a style of joint decision-making and problem solving which will aid you in facing the future with love, common sense, and good humor.
8. Establishing new relationships with your own and each other's families and friends.

### FORMAL PREPARATION

Your personal preparation is crucial for the success of your marriage. Your family and friends, the priest, and the Church as a whole have a responsibility to support you in these preparations. Realizing that you will have already begun to think about things mentioned above, the Church has developed a formal preparation required of every couple seeking to be married, that will assist you in exploring those issues in even greater depth.

The priest or deacon you have selected to witness your wedding will be your principle advisor in the formal marriage preparation process. Therefore, you should contact this priest or deacon at least six months before your proposed wedding date. If you plan to be married in a church other than your own parish, or if the priest or deacon whom you have asked to officiate is not a member of your parish staff, you should also contact one of your own parish priests.

The priest or deacon who is to assist you in preparing for marriage will give a general overview of the entire preparation period and settles on a schedule of the steps to be taken that is convenient for all concerned. Five elements in this preparation process can be enumerated:

1. **The Sacramental Preparation** – This should be the subject of your personal and mutual prayer and reflection as a couple. It will also be a part of the second step.

2. **The Personal Preparation** – To assist your personal preparation, you need to select a marriage preparation program from among those certified by the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Marriage and Family Enrichment Office, such as Pre-Cana, parish-based Sponsor Couple Program, Engaged Encounter Weekends, and Remarriage Preparation. Your clergyman will discuss these alternatives with you and help you select the one best suited for your needs. If you need additional information about any of these programs, please contact the Marriage and Family Enrichment Office, 410-547-5417.
3. **The Legal Preparation** – Civil law requires that the parties present a license valid for the city or county where the marriage is to take place to the clergyman who officiates. There is a waiting period of three (3) working days between time of application for and receipt of the license. The universal law of the Church requires that parties respond to a premarriage questionnaire and furnish certain documents mentioned, including, for Catholic parties, a baptismal certificate of recent date (i.e., within six months of the proposed marriage). The priest or deacon assisting you will present the questionnaire and guide you in obtaining the documents that may be needed.
4. **The Liturgical Preparation** – The priest, deacon, or pastoral minister will explain the requirements, suggest many options for you to consider, and will work with you in planning a wedding that will reflect both the rich traditions of the Church as well as your own personal taste. For marriages between Catholics and persons of other religious denominations, please consult the priest or deacon officiating for information on the appropriate guidelines.
5. **The Practical Preparation** – You will need to reserve a time at the church and make arrangements regarding music for your wedding. Music for weddings must always be of a liturgical/classical nature and must be approved by the priest, deacon, or pastoral minister. National, local, and familial customs for the marriage ceremony may also need to be considered. In these matters, your families and friends can be of great assistance.

As you can see from the above, you have a great deal of work to do in preparation for your wedding and your marriage. While special arrangements can be made because of particular problems, this entire process usually requires about six months to complete and usually involves at least three meetings between you and the priest or deacon you have chosen. At least one meeting should take place after the formal marriage preparation program and should include discussion of any questions that arose during that program.

## **YOUR WEDDING**

Since the Eucharist is the perfect sign of the union of Christ and his Church and the Sacrament to which all others are in some sense ordered, Sacramental Marriage between two Catholics normally is to be celebrated with Mass. However, where special circumstances suggest that a Nuptial Mass might not be appropriate, you may select a ceremony from several other options.

The Wedding may take place in the parish of either the bride or groom. Although in the United States, it is usual to select the bride's parish. With permission of the pastor of either the bride or the groom, the wedding may be held in another church or chapel. Permission for a marriage in a place other than a parish church or chapel is granted in extraordinary circumstances and may be obtained only from the Chancery.

Your wedding may be held on any day of the week throughout the year except Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday and November 2, All Souls Day. Weddings are not celebrated at a scheduled weekend or holyday parish Mass. They may, however, be held any time of day or evening depending on the availability of the church.

## **GUIDELINES FOR YOUR PRIEST OR DEACON OF WHICH YOU SHOULD BE AWARE**

The jurisdiction for officiating at a wedding usually rests with the pastor or clergy staff of the bride's parish. No priest or deacon may officiate at the wedding of parishioners of another parish without receiving written permission from the proper pastor or his associate. In an interfaith marriage, the jurisdiction rests with the pastor or clergy of the Catholic

party. The pastor of the non-Catholic party should be contacted to determine the parishioner's eligibility to marry. If yours is an interfaith marriage, you may wish to receive a dispensation to marry in the church of the non-Catholic party. However, two separate ceremonies are not permitted. Without proper dispensation, no priest or deacon may officiate at a wedding in a parish to which he is not assigned. This delegation, which is usually granted, is a rule of Canon Law for validity, and the responsibility for obtaining delegation rests upon the priest or deacon who is to witness the marriage.

The priest or deacon has a serious moral responsibility to provide personal pastoral care by meeting with both of you as often as necessary to assist in your immediate preparation for marriage as well as the wedding. He should be particularly concerned that you both understand and appreciate the sacramental, liturgical, and spiritual aspects of a Christian marriage, as well as the practical consequences involved. The priest or deacon will take special care to help a young couple determine their readiness for Christian marriage because marriage failure among young people has become a subject of increasing concern to the Church.

The pastor or the clergy staff of the parish, where the wedding takes place, has the responsibility to see that the policies stated herein are carried out. The officiating clergyman will see to the details of the formal process. When the officiating clergyman is from another parish within the Archdiocese, he is responsible for guiding both of you through the process and will be asked to do so by your parish priest or deacon. When the officiating clergyman is from outside the Archdiocese, the clergy of the parish, where the wedding will take place, will be responsible for guiding you through the process.

### **SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES**

***INTERFAITH MARRIAGES:*** You and your priest or deacon should seek the cooperation and counsel of the minister or rabbi of the non-Catholic party. The minister or rabbi should be made welcome to participate in the wedding ceremony when it is held in the Catholic Church and the priest or deacon will normally accept the invitation to participate in the wedding when it is held in the church of the other party. Even where permission has been granted for you to be married in the church of the non-Catholic party, all of the steps in this policy must be observed. The celebration of marriage between Catholics and non-Catholics should be celebrated outside Mass. The ceremony can be planned to emphasize especially the Word of God where all Christians find a source of unity and strength. Marriage between Catholics and non-Christians will require special planning to ensure sensitivity to the traditions represented.

Since there is such divergence among interfaith couples—from non-religious to active—the priest or deacon assisting you will make every effort to understand your faith commitment as an individual couple. He will make you aware of the opportunities to find common ground to grow together in faith in the special situations you may face coming from different religious traditions.

***VALIDATIONS:*** If you have married outside the Church, you should approach the decision to enter the Sacrament of Matrimony through a process similar to that outlined above, provided you are free to marry in the Church. The nature and extent of the consultation process should be dependent on the reasons for originally marrying outside the Church and the duration and stability of your present marriage, as well as the factors listed in "Delays."

***PREVIOUS MARRIAGES:*** Since the ordinary premarital consultation processes are designed for couples entering marriage for the first time, they may be inappropriate for you if either of you has been widowed or has had a previous marriage annulled by the Church. In this case, your priest or deacon will provide consultation designed to meet your particular needs as a couple. The Remarriage Program has been especially designed for couples when one or both of you have been married previously. Ask your priest or deacon if this program is offered in your parish or contact the Marriage and Family Enrichment Office at 410-547-5417.

## DELAYS

**REASONS FOR DELAYS:** Circumstances may arise which would necessitate more extended consultation and evaluation to assist you in determining your readiness for marriage. In such cases, the priest or deacon is obliged to ask you to delay your marriage pending the outcome of such consultation and evaluation. These circumstances exist where:

1. The clergyman is convinced that one or both of you lack understanding of, or a commitment to, sacramental marriage (e.g., if you refuse to practice your faith or have no intention of returning to it), or if you have come to the Church merely to satisfy your parents or to seek the atmosphere of a church wedding.
2. You refuse to take part in good faith in the formal marriage preparations outlined above.
3. One or both of you is below the age of 21, or shows the lack of maturity demanded by a Christian marriage.
4. You are under substantial and undue pressure to marry from external sources (e.g., social, religious, parental pressure, or premarital pregnancy).
5. A parent or guardian has made written a strong objection to your marriage.

**THE PROCESS IN CASE OF DELAY:** If one of these special cases exist, you will be asked to seek further consultation and can be required to be evaluated by a certified counselor as to your readiness for marriage. The counselor will not be deciding if you can marry. He or she will assist you to evaluate your readiness to understand and to meet the responsibilities of marriage in the Catholic Church in the light of your special circumstances. The final decision will rest with you and the clergyman assisting you. If the clergyman is unable in good conscience to witness your marriage in the name of the Catholic Church, he is obligated to notify you and the Chancery in writing, of this fact and of the reasons for the delay. You may appeal directly to the Office of the Chancery as described in "Appeal Process." If you choose to consult another Catholic clergyman, he is bound to the same process and must consult with the Chancery before proceeding with your marriage plans. Only when an evaluation has been made, the concerns discussed, and a positive decision to marry has been reached, you may proceed with plans for the wedding.

## APPEAL PROCESS

If you believe there is a need to appeal any part of the process, either as described in this document or as interpreted by your clergyman, you have recourse to the Archbishop through his appointed delegate who will review your case and recommend or arbitrate a solution. Address your letter to the Archbishop of Baltimore, Catholic Center, 320 Cathedral Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21201. Indicate both of your names, your parish, the name of the priest or deacon, and your complaint. The Archbishop's delegate will contact you and the clergyman to arbitrate the problem. Final determination rests with the Archbishop. No priest or deacon may proceed with a marriage after denial by another priest or deacon without the approval from the Archbishop or his delegate.

## EXCEPTIONS

No policy can provide for every contingency. Should you believe a need for exception to this policy exists, it should be brought to the attention of the Archbishop or his delegate. Such requests will be considered according to the merits of each case and in the best interests of the couple and the Church Community.

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To request a copy of Marriage in the Lord: Preparing for Marriage in the Church, Archdiocese of Baltimore, contact the Marriage Preparation and Enrichment Office, 320 Cathedral Street, Baltimore, MD 21201, or call (410) 547-4517.

The above information was taken from the Booklet "Marriage in the Lord, Preparing for Marriage in the Church, Archdiocese of Baltimore."