



# Marriage Preparation in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux

## 4 Steps to a Rewarding Marriage Preparation Experience.

The following information outline the steps to be taken to prepare yourself not just for the wedding day, but for the rest of your lives....Living out the divine plan for married love.

### *Congratulations on your Engagement!*

Marriage as a sacrament is a serious and sacred commitment that calls a couple to each other in the most profound and permanent way. Their mutual love is a reminder of the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. By the grace of their sacrament, they become able to love one another as Christ has loved them. As a married couple, they become a visible sign and reminder of Christ's sacrificial love for all people.

A couple desiring to be married is encouraged to contact their priest/deacon at least six (6) months (or more) prior to the proposed date of their wedding. This interval allows time to prepare well for such a sacred commitment. The engaged couple must take an active part in all the steps of these guidelines which apply to them. With the assistance of their priest/deacon, they are to:



- identify and cultivate their strengths
- deal with the areas of difficulty in their relationship;
- participate in assessment and preparation;
- recognize that marriage is essentially characterized by unity, fidelity, permanence and an openness to children;
- attend a formal marriage preparation program;
- participate in premarital evaluation and counseling when recommended.

A tentative wedding date may be set at the time of this initial contact with the priest/deacon. When the couple has completed steps one and two of the Marriage Preparation Process, the tentative wedding date will be confirmed or changed.

#### **Responsibilities (Priest/Deacon, Community and Parents)**

The church has the pastoral obligation to assist those desiring to marry to make a prayerful and mature judgment concerning their marriage. In particular, the priest/deacon, who plans to witness a marriage, is personally responsible for the complete marriage preparation process. He has the serious moral and ministerial responsibility to assist the engaged couple in understanding the meaning of Christian marriage in its human, spiritual, canonical and sacramental aspects, and to provide a liturgical experience that truly celebrates and manifests the momentous step that the couple is taking.

The faithful in each parish share in the pastoral responsibility to help engaged couples prepare for their life together. Married couples have a particular responsibility to witness the holiness of their sacramental life of intimacy, unity, self-sacrificing love and commitment. They may therefore be invited to participate actively in the marriage preparation of engaged couples in their parish.

The church recognizes the unique and vital role of parents in the psychological, social, moral, and spiritual development of their children. Renewal in the church has included attempts to make sacramental preparation more family centered. Parents are therefore encouraged to respond to the invitation of the priest/deacon to participate actively in the assessment and preparation of their children for marriage in the church whenever possible.

### *Marriage Preparation Process*

1. Meet with your Pastor
2. FOCCUS Marriage Inventory
3. Marriage Preparation Day or Retreat
4. Meet to Discuss Wedding Liturgy

## 1. Meet With Your Pastor

All engaged couples are required to receive a sacramental preparation and must meet with their priest/deacon at least six months (or more) prior to the desired wedding date. This marriage preparation process consists of Four Phases.

Initial Contact with Priest/Deacon will:

- ◆ Establish rapport with you in order to support and counsel you at this most important time in your life.
- ◆ Examine your motives for marriage.
- ◆ Explore any special circumstances that may affect marriage, e.g., age, cultural background, pregnancy, military service, physical or emotional problems, levels of faith and religious issues.
- ◆ Explain the Marriage Preparation process.
- ◆ Obtain personal information, explain what other documentation is needed, and determine whether any dispensations or permissions will be necessary.

## 2. FOCCUS Marriage Inventory

Assessment Process with Priest/Deacon will:

- ◆ Administer a PREMARITAL INSTRUMENT\* to assist in beginning the assessment of your readiness to marry.
- ◆ Discuss the results of the FOCCUS instrument.
- ◆ Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of your communication process.
- ◆ Examine the sacramental aspects of your human covenant.
- ◆ Assess your readiness for marriage and complete the Prenuptial Questionnaire.
- ◆ Begin the liturgical wedding plans and present to you the parish guidelines. Inform you of the cost and suggested offering.

\*A premarital instrument is a tool designed to help you assess your readiness for marriage. It is not a pass/fail indicator. Instead it is meant to help you discover more about yourselves and each other in a non-threatening and objective way. Our diocese utilizes the FOCCUS (Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study) instrument to help you identify issues that need to be discussed, reflected on, understood, studied for problem-solving, skill-building and decision-making. Your priest/deacon will give you more information at your initial meeting.

During step 2, the priest/deacon will make the decision to PROCEED or DELAY the marriage. If he proceeds, the wedding date will be confirmed and the process continues. If his decision is to delay the marriage, he will follow the procedure found in Delay of Marriage.

## 3. Marriage Preparation Day or Retreat

Marriage Preparation day presents the essential human and Christian aspects of marriage so that the couple becomes aware of the total dimensions of the marriage covenant. The day includes reflection on the nature and sacramentality of marriage, married love and family life, couple prayer, marital responsibilities, communication within marriage, personal expectations, natural family planning and other practical considerations.

There are two approved options in our diocese. If you are unable to attend you must discuss this with your priest/deacon immediately.

1. Diocesan Marriage Preparation Program
2. Engaged Encounter Weekend in surrounding dioceses

## 4. Continue Meeting to Finalize Requirements and Discuss Wedding Liturgy

Completion of Marriage Prep Process with Priest/Deacon will:

- ◆ Discuss what you have learned and experienced at your formal marriage preparation program.
- ◆ Discuss your understanding of sacrament in light of your formal marriage preparation.
- ◆ Discuss your responsibilities as members of God's people, as spouses and future parents.
- ◆ Complete all documentary requirements. As appropriate, grant permission for mixed marriage and/or apply for appropriate permissions or dispensations.
- ◆ Discuss the reception of Penance and Holy Eucharist as a fitting preparation for the sacrament of Matrimony.
- ◆ Finalize the wedding liturgy and discuss the wedding rehearsal.

# *Additional Marriage Preparation Guidelines for the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux*

## **Delay of Marriage**

A priest/deacon may not lightly delay the marriage of a parishioner who is free to marry in the Church. For a just cause, a priest/deacon may recommend that the marriage be delayed. A just cause would include any one of the following reasons for delay:

- ◆ Non-practice of the Catholic faith by either party with no evidence of an intention of practicing the faith.
- ◆ Lack of freedom, maturity, or readiness for marriage.
- ◆ Substantial lack of appreciation for the spiritual and sacramental aspects of marriage.
- ◆ An expressed intention by either of the parties to deny the other's right to a permanent and exclusive union.
- ◆ An expressed intention by either of the parties to refuse to have children.
- ◆ Apparent indifference by the Catholic party, or disdain for Catholic formation of children.
- ◆ Refusal to cooperate with the marriage preparation guidelines.

In those cases where the priest/deacon has decided that the celebration of Matrimony should be delayed, the priest/deacon will inform the couple and offer to help them overcome the obstacles to their readiness of marriage (See Appeal and Exceptions). The priest/deacon must record the reason for delay in the prenuptial questionnaire and notify, in writing, the pastor of both parties of the reason(s) for the delay.

## **Additional Pastoral Discussions**

Due to the varying backgrounds of couples requesting marriage today, circumstances are often present that warrant additional pastoral concern:

**The Marriage of Minors:** It is important that the couple understand the degree of maturity necessary for a serious, permanent commitment. When either of the parties is a minor (prior to his/her 18th birthday) at the time they make their intention to marry known to the priest/deacon, the decision to proceed may be given by the priest/deacon **ONLY AFTER** the parents or guardians of both parties have been consulted and a diocesan evaluation process is completed as prescribed in the respective diocese.

**Pregnancy:** Pregnancy must be considered equally as grave a reason for not contracting marriage as for contracting marriage. A couple needs the time and opportunity to assess their reasons and readiness for marriage exclusive of the pregnancy. Therefore, pregnancy of itself shall constitute no exception to the prescribed statewide regulations concerning the setting of the date of the wedding. In particular, the following norms are to be followed.

*Eighteen Years of Age and Older: If the couple made the decision to marry and were engaged prior to the pregnancy, the decision to proceed with the marriage preparation process may be given by the priest/deacon if he assesses the couple to be sufficiently prepared for marriage. If the couple had not made the decision to marry before the pregnancy, they must enter into a diocesan evaluation process before they proceed to PHASE THREE and PHASE FOUR of the marriage preparation process.*

*Either Party is Under 18 Years of Age: If the couple made the decision to marry and were engaged prior to the pregnancy, they must enter into a diocesan evaluation process. The priest/deacon, in consultation with the parents of both parties, will assess the couple's readiness for marriage before they proceed to PHASE THREE and PHASE FOUR of the marriage preparation process.*

If the couple did not make the decision to marry prior to the pregnancy, the priest/deacon, besides adhering to the above, must seek additional input from an approved diocesan consultant. In this case, the priest/deacon should strongly encourage the consideration of delaying the wedding until after the birth of the child.

**Different Faiths:** Since the unity of the couple is a primary goal in marriage, couples of different faiths will be offered special consideration. The couple will be helped to identify potential problems and work out shared plans to address special needs; clarify or update the couple's understanding of Catholic beliefs and practices; discuss the practical implications regarding faith practice, formation of children and dealing with the feelings of family members.

**Validation:** If a couple has attempted marriage contrary to the laws of the Church or is seeking validation of an otherwise invalid marriage, they must follow the marriage preparation process described herein. However, the priest/deacon preparing the couple may adjust these guidelines appropriately according to the special circumstances of the couple.

**Remarriage:** Couples who are entering a subsequent marriage are provided special consideration owing to their differing circumstances and past experiences with marriage. Those who have been married before may not be immediately free to enter a subsequent marriage in the Church. The priest/deacon will address the circumstances of each particular situation and assist the couple accordingly.

**Living Together:** If either from public knowledge or by frank admission of the couple, a priest/deacon knows that the couple is living together before their upcoming marriage, he must approach the premarital process with extreme pastoral care and delicacy. In teaching the couple about the sacrament of matrimony and Christian teachings on the meaning of sexual intimacy, the priest/deacon should exhort them to live separately and refrain from sexual relations until after their marriage.

**Appeal and Exceptions:** If the marriage is delayed, the couple may appeal to the diocesan bishop but only through the channels established at the diocesan level. Final determination rests with the diocesan bishop. The approval of the diocesan bishop is required for a priest/deacon to proceed with a marriage after the marriage has been delayed by another priest/deacon.

The length of the preparation period is at the discretion of the diocesan bishop and is normally at least six (6) months.

Other exceptions to these guidelines and their procedures are solely at the discretion of the diocesan bishop.