



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops' Committee for the Family and for Life

A Policy on Marriage Preparation for the Catholic Church in Australia

Introduction

The fostering of the nobility of marriage and the family is one of the major pastoral concerns of the Church. The Second Vatican Council in the *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World* provided a contemporary teaching on married life and love based on God's plan and purposes for man and woman found in the Scriptures and Catholic Tradition.ⁱ

Addressing marriage and family life, Pope John Paul II, in *Familiaris Consortio*, (Vatican 1981) observed that preparing of young people for this is "more than ever necessary in our times." He continued: "not only the family but also society and the church should be involved in the effort of properly preparing young people for their future responsibilities." And "The church must therefore promote better and more extensive programs of marriage preparation in order to eliminate as far as possible the difficulties that many married couples find themselves in, and even more in order to favour positively the establishing and maturing of successful marriages."

The Pontifical Council for the Family in its document: *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage* (Vatican 1996): also affirms "For Christians, marriage, which has its origin in God the Creator, also implies a real vocation to a particular state of life and grace. In order to be fully realised, this vocation requires adequate, particular preparation and a specific path of love within the Church and society." The values and benefits of married life are intimately personal and openly social. Therefore, the divine, personal and social dimensions of marriage provide a curriculum and a process for marriage preparation and ongoing marriage education.

Pastoral concern and teaching are also supported in church law: Pastors are charged with the task of seeing to it that their own church community provides couples with assistance in preparing well for and living out a Christian marriage; the overseeing of marriage preparation by the local Bishop, and the delivery of programs by men and women of proven experience and skill; and the issuing of norms by the conferences of bishops.ⁱⁱ

Stages of Marriage Education

To ensure appropriate, timely and comprehensive marriage education, the human sciences recognise and the church proclaims three stages of preparation for marriage: the remote, the proximate, and the immediate and a fourth or ongoing stage, which continues for couples after the wedding.

Remote preparation begins in the womb and continues through early childhood and adolescence in wise family training and witnessing of Christian values where they experience healthy family relationships. The witness of the parents' own married love is the very foundation of remote marriage preparation.

While parents remain the primary educators of their children throughout childhood and adolescence, they need suitable assistance in fulfilling their responsibilities. The Church, schools and the wider society all play increasing roles in preparing young men and women for marriage.

The **proximate preparation** involves the preparation for the sacraments, and the social, moral, religious and personal formation of young people where they acquire greater interpersonal skills and continue to experience family relationships and broaden their social relationships. Deeper reflection on earlier experiences of family values provides young people with the appreciation of the call to live in truth and that real love finds its fulfilment in the gift of self for others.

In this stage, greater importance is placed on personal and interpersonal formation through religious education by qualified teachers skilled in proven educational principles, curricula and processes. Diocesan educational bodies and youth and vocational ministries are entrusted to assist schools, parishes and families in relationship education and guidance.

Remote and Proximate Preparation may be impaired by children experiencing negative family structures, domestic violence, inadequately educational opportunities or personal tragedies. Opportunities for intervention or healing of those negative factors may only arise when couples approach the Church at the time of marriage. On a different plane many engaged couples planning a Catholic wedding may know very little about the rich teaching of the Church on marriage, sexuality and family life.

In both cases, priests, marriage educators and counsellors need to be sensitive to the individual and particular needs of these people who often are incapable of articulating their real needs.

Thirdly, **immediate preparation** for the celebration of the sacrament of Matrimony “should take place in the last months and weeks immediately preceding the wedding. The engaged have an opportunity rediscover and deepen the faith they received in Baptism by a process of evangelisation and a journey of faith similar to the catechumenate.

The engaged, through this formation and conversion process may discover the “profound mystery” of Christian marriage and God’s plan for their lives. Hence, preparation in this stage is directed toward evangelisation and catechesis that enables a couple to embrace consciously and freely what the Church intends for the Sacrament of Marriage.

The *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage* (Vatican 1996) enumerated key topics in this stage of preparation: The engaged should be aware of the interpersonal relationship between a man and a woman in God’s plan for marriage and family; and aware of the freedom of consent as the foundation of that union, the unity and indissolubility of marriage, the correct concept of responsible parenthood, the human aspects of conjugal sexuality, awareness that conjugal love is total, exclusive, faithful and fruitful, knowledge about the scientific basis and moral principles of natural family planning. (n35).

This preparation is not only a time for theoretical study but also a time of reflection in faith through the Word of God and Christ’s love and a time for pastoral guidance. Couples should be helped to become aware of social and/or emotional shortcomings, risk factors associated with difficult family backgrounds, cohabitation and second marriages and attain the skills and understanding to deal with them.

In the final weeks before the wedding is the opportunity for the couple, together with their priest and/or pastoral worker to solidify the formation received, prepare the wedding liturgy,

and with prayer, the celebration of reconciliation and the Eucharist prepare for the fruitful celebration of their marriage.

Formation and education are life-long. After the wedding, couples value time for reflection and seek enrichment in their marriages through further formation, dialogue and participation in formal programs, activities and movements that support marriage and families.

Marriage, Family and Marriage Education in today's culture

The central goal of the Church in this activity is to prepare couples adequately to live their call to holiness through the sacrament of Marriage in the world and their specific culture. Therefore contemporary marriage education must account for diverse features of our modern culture, many which have adverse affects on healthy relationships: longer period between adolescence and marriage, premarital cohabitation, separation, divorce and family breakdown, poverty, domestic violence, excessive alcohol and drug consumption, absenteeism, suicide and youth homelessness, consumerism and intense individualism but strong desire for acceptance and belonging.

Those who marry in the Catholic Church have not been immune from these factors; yet healthy marriages provide ways to build healthy families which make healthy societies.

These features of modern life, both positive and negative, reinforce the church's call to address seriously the preparation of those preparing for marriage. The Church teaches that if marriages are to succeed two things are necessary: first, couples must meditate on God's plan for marriage; and second, they must seek to shape all their ways of thinking and acting according to it.³¹ Helping the engaged to do these two essential things in the context of an encounter with Christ is the primary task of Catholic marriage preparation.

The Church's Role in Marriage Education

Education about family and begins with the childhood experiences of family life. During adolescence and early adulthood other sources - friends, school, church, social groups, workplace and the media help form values, ideas and behaviour patterns which will significantly affect future relationships. By the time a person begins to contemplate a spouse and a family and consider marriage these attitudes and behaviour patterns are often well established.

The Church not only needs to provide appropriate marriage education but needs to promote its value and necessity to a population which is often older, better educated and has wider experiences than former generations.

In recent times, marriage education providers have responded to these needs by re-evaluating the meaning, principles, content and methods of formal programs which are often conducted over weekends or evenings. While these courses and programs are important and valuable, we are reminded that the Church's concept of preparation is like a journey in which the couple are called to conversion of life as to live in holiness through the Sacrament of Marriage. What is required, according to John Paul II "is a serious preparation of young people for marriage, one which clearly presents Catholic teaching on this sacrament at the theological, anthropological and spiritual levels."

Pre-marriage education programs usually involve one or a combination of three approaches: 1) pre-marriage inventory, 2) information-awareness sessions, and 3) skills training programs.

1. Pre-marriage inventory approaches use sets of questions to gather and compare individual responses on a wide range of issues, attitudes and behaviours and to discuss differences and raise awareness for further development and understanding. The underlying belief is that the insights gained better help couples in their future relationship. The most well-known inventories are PREPARE and FOCCUS, the latter has sections on church, spirituality and moral values.
2. Information-awareness approaches usually involve taking groups of couples through a range of reflective exercises and information-sharing sessions over one or two days or several evenings aimed at increasing awareness, building skills, clarifying expectations and evaluating their decision to marry. Many of these programs grew out of the Pre-Cana conferences of four decades ago, but have been developed to reflect modern adult education principles.
3. Skills training approaches can involve elements of the other two approaches, or programs entirely devoted to developing the skills of participating couples. These programs usually require a much greater commitment of time, in the order of four to six weeks or more.

More recently, some agencies have developed programs combining the use of both an inventory and skills training, and integrated pre and post-wedding programs.

Finally priest-celebrants and/or parish pastoral workers meet with couples to welcome and affirm them in their preparation, explore the sacramental nature of marriage, meaning of commitment, assist them in planning the liturgy and complete the church and government declarations and other necessary papers.

Current Programs

In Australia contemporary marriage education involves the use of adult learning principles and couple interaction in the educative process and the opportunity for them to reflect on their attitudes and deepen their values and before the wedding and for enrichment and evaluation of relationships over the entire life cycle.

Typically, the sessions in a pre-marriage group program include:

- γ Expectations of marriage
- γ The influence of family background
- γ Communication skills
- γ Managing conflict
- γ Roles and gender differences
- γ Intimacy and Sexuality
- γ Family planning
- γ Finances, budgeting and home buying

- γ Church based programs may include commitment, spirituality and the marriage liturgy.

The pre-marriage inventories consist of a questionnaire to be completed by each person. A trained facilitator uses the collated answers in follow-up sessions to identify couple strengths and weaknesses in their relationship and to address matters which they are either concerned about or have not discussed.

Research has proven the effectiveness of both pre-marriage education programs and the PREPARE and FOCCUS inventories and that couples value them. An Australian Parliamentary report confirmed these findings and recommended greater support for all these programs.

Towards developing an Australian Policy

The pastoral concern of Church leaders, the recommendations of government and non-government agencies, the findings of researchers and the experience of celebrants and the couples themselves all agree that marriage education is highly important and effective.

Marriage education, in all its stages and approaches should be supported, coordinated, promoted and continually evaluated both locally and nationally so that more couples participate and benefit from them. To this end the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference adopts this common marriage education policy for use in Australia and recommends that each diocese implements the following:

1. Develop and provide proximate marriage, family and relationship education in the school curriculum.
2. Require couples to give early notification of weddings, ideally 12 months prior to marriage.
3. Require all couples to participate in an approved marriage education program at least six months prior to marriage.
4. Establish and support marriage education agencies in each diocese to approve, coordinate and promote marriage education.
5. Maintain professional standards and formation programs for marriage educators.
6. Promote healthier families through ongoing marriage education programs and networks of support for marriage and family.
7. Engage in and support research and development into marriage education programs.
8. Find ways to reach out to all couples, especially those who by circumstance, distance or disability are less likely to participate in marriage education.

Each diocese may prepare a guide for couples based on the principles and practices outlined in this policy document.

The adoption of a common policy by the Church in Australia is a practical response to the late Holy Father's exhortation in his Letter to Families and a reiteration of the centrality of the sacrament of marriage in building and maintaining lifelong unions.

ⁱ “Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World”, Vatican Council II: *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, art. 47-52, (Flannery). This teaching is expanded in the Rite of Marriage (nn1-7) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (nn1601-1666).

ⁱⁱ *The Code of Canon Law*, (Vatican, January 25, 1983) 1063ff