

PROVINCE of MIAMI POLICY FOR PASTORAL MARRIAGE PREPARATION
Approved by the Bishops, August 6, 2007

“More than ever necessary in our times is preparation of young people for marriage and family life. In some countries it is still the families themselves that, according to ancient customs, ensure the passing on to young people of the values concerning married and family life, and they do this through a gradual process of education or initiation. But the changes that have taken place within almost all modern societies demand that 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.” Familiaris Consortio 66

The Catholic Church in Florida warmly welcomes couples seeking marriage. Sharing their desire for enduring happiness in marriage, the Church wishes to assist them better as they prepare for this most important decision. It is in this spirit of loving service to these couples that the Bishops of Florida offer this Province Policy for Pastoral Marriage Preparation.

This Province Policy does not supersede the competence of each bishop to set policy for his diocese. Rather, this Policy organizes those principles and procedures that the Bishops of Florida commonly hold as essential to marriage preparation. With this Policy, each bishop will be better able to create policies that not only contemplate the resources and circumstances that are unique to his diocese, but which also better harmonize with the policies of the other dioceses of Florida.

The Province Policy is organized into the three phases common to marriage preparation.

PHASE I – INTRODUCTION AND ASSESSMENT

The couple and the priest or deacon each possesses a unique and irreplaceable competence in determining readiness for marriage. The prospective bride and groom, and each of them alone, have both the right and the ultimate responsibility to determine whether he or she is making the right choice of a partner. No one else should unduly influence them in this decision, most especially not the official representative of the Church. Indeed, in this regard the priest or deacon should be exemplary in his solicitousness of each party’s freedom, ensuring that each is free from any undue influence. A couple may be seeking a Sacramental union when both parties are baptized or a non-sacramental union when one of the two parties is unbaptized.

The priest or deacon is uniquely competent to determine the couple’s readiness for marriage *from the Church’s perspective*, that is, whether the couple is free not only from all the canonical impediments that might preclude marriage, but also from all those factors that might invalidate the marriage. To aid him in exercising this responsibility, the priest or deacon may consult with other persons assisting in the marriage preparation process.

To allow sufficient time to carry out the various steps of the marriage preparation program, a couple should contact their parish priest or deacon at least six months prior to their anticipated wedding date. Each diocese will adopt an assessment process. At the introductory session, a complete explanation of the program is given and the assessment may begin.

At the conclusion of the introductory session and assessment, the priest or deacon decides, with the couple, whether to proceed with or delay the wedding. If the decision is to proceed, the wedding date is established, and an instructional process is begun. However, the priest or deacon should explain to the couple that this decision to proceed is only preliminary, that is, it

does not preclude either the couple or the priest or deacon from subsequently deciding not to proceed further. Indeed, one of the central purposes of the instructional phase is to provide both the couple and the priest or deacon with more information to make the ultimate decision whether to proceed with the wedding itself.

If in the course of the assessment process the priest or deacon decides to delay the marriage, he must develop for the couple an appropriate remedial program that will help them overcome the circumstances that made the delay advisable.

When a delay is indicated, consultation with the parents/guardians of a party younger than 18 is recommended, and referral to a counselor and/or other appropriate persons may be necessary to resolve the cause of delay.

Impediments That May Preclude Marriage

Pastoral guidance and instruction should be provided a couple as they seek marriage in the Church. The following impediments are normally addressed in a pastoral manner during an initial assessment between the couple and clergy/marriage preparation team. *(Please note canonical citations for further reference.)*

Age: (CIC c. 1083); Physical Capacity for Consummation Lacking: (CIC c. 1084); Previous Marriage: (CIC c.1085); Disparity of Cult: (CIC c. 1085, CCEO c. 802); Sacred Orders: (CIC c. 1087, CCEO c. 804); Perpetual Vow of Chastity: (CIC c. 1088, CCEO c. 805); Abduction: (CIC c. 1089, CCEO c. 806); Crimes: (CIC c. 1090, CCEO c. 807); Consanguinity: (CIC c. 1091, CCEO c. 808); Affinity: (CIC c. 1092, CCEO c. 809); Public Propriety: (CIC c. 1093, CCEO c. 810); Adoptions: (CIC c. 1094, CCEO c. 812).

Factors That May Invalidate Marriage

Lack of Form: The couple would like the ceremony to take place in another Christian Church or with a minister of another Christian church.

Coercion: This exists if one of the parties is pressured by any circumstances to enter into marriage. (In order for the impediment to cease, the situation must change so that the party can marry freely.)

Psychological immaturity or mental incapacity: Both parties must understand and have the capacity to accept all that marriage or sacramental marriage entails.

Refusal to have children: A man or woman physically capable of fathering or, respectively conceiving a child but who intends never to have children are not properly disposed to being married in the Catholic Church.

Intention of Fidelity Lacking: Fidelity of each party to the other is an essential element and good of marriage. If either or both parties to the marriage do not intend to be faithful, then they are not *(properly disposed to being married in the Catholic Church)* ready to be married in the Catholic Church.

Civil Law: The Church recognizes the restriction of civil law on marriage. Except for Convalidation, a license must be obtained by the couple.

Pre-Nuptial Agreements: Assumes that the marriage is possibly not permanent. (A marriage subject to a condition about the future cannot be contracted validly.) However, a prior decision

or agreement by one or both parties to bequeath all or part of his or her property to someone other than his or her future spouse is not a pre-nuptial agreement as understood here. The operative issue is whether any such pre-nuptial decision or agreement contemplates and accepts divorce as a possible outcome.

Special Circumstances

Pregnancy: will not be considered a determining factor in proceeding with or delaying the marriage.

- If the decision to marry was made prior to the pregnancy, plans for the marriage may be made if the priest or deacon determines that the couple is otherwise sufficiently prepared for marriage. The couple is required to participate and complete instructional requirements and the normal marriage preparation process. Pregnancy will not be considered reason enough to omit the normal preparation process.
- If the decision to marry was made after discovery of the pregnancy, the priest or deacon should discourage the couple from marrying before the birth of the child, but should nevertheless leave that decision ultimately to the couple.

Abusive and/or Addictive Behaviors: Any evidence of substance abuse and/or addictive behaviors (pornography/gambling/internet) should be addressed and resolved before marriage. If such behaviors are present and, in the judgment of the priest or deacon, is not being dealt with adequately, the priest or deacon should consider it as cause for a delay in the marriage.

Convalidation: If a couple has attempted marriage contrary to the laws of the Church, a Convalidation (marriage in the Church) is permitted only after the couple has completed the steps of this policy.

Cohabitation: While cohabitation is not an impediment to marriage, it should be addressed by the priest, deacon and/or marriage preparation team. The couple should be encouraged to live chastely prior to marriage.

Undocumented Immigrants: In the case of those seeking marriage who cannot produce a valid passport or other form of government-issued identification, the priest or deacon should accept as valid any form of identification that would be accepted by the competent government agency issuing the marriage license. (*Section 741.04 Florida Statutes*)

Appeal

If the priest or deacon recommends that the marriage be delayed, the couple should be advised by the priest or deacon that they have a right to appeal this decision to the board of appeals or tribunal of their respective diocese. The matter, together with the recommendations of the board or tribunal, shall be referred to the Bishop with whom final determination rests. In special circumstances, this determination may also include consultation with the parents and/or other appropriate persons.

PHASE II – INSTRUCTIONAL

Participation in an instructional process is a requirement for all couples entering marriage. (Couples preparing for a subsequent marriage need assessments and a program addressing the unique needs of remarriage.)

Marriage preparation programs (such as Pre-Cana and Engaged Encounter) give primary attention to the religious and human dimensions of marriage, especially its sacramental character and qualities. While such programs should be respectful of other religious traditions, they should nonetheless present a thorough and accurate catechesis of Catholic teaching on marriage.

It is important that engaged couples receive appropriate and helpful information on responsible parenthood that reflects the longstanding teaching of the Catholic Church. This instruction should include pastoral and accurate instruction on contraception and Natural Family Planning. The historic teaching emphasizes responsible parenthood and recognizes nature, Scripture and apostolic tradition in its explanation.

Marriage preparation should provide instruction on the unitive and procreative aspects of a sexual relationship. These unitive and procreative elements are joined and meant to be realized in mutual cooperation. As Pope Paul VI stated in 1968, "The reason is that the marriage act, because of its fundamental structure, while it unites husband and wife in the closest intimacy, also brings into operation laws written into the actual nature of man and of woman for the generation of new life."

Marriage preparation should also present a wholesome and healthy explanation of Church Teaching on sexuality, i.e. "Sexuality is a source of joy and pleasure: 'The Creator himself...established that in the [generative] function, spouses should experience pleasure and enjoyment of body and spirit. Therefore, the spouses do nothing evil in seeking this pleasure and enjoyment. They accept what the Creator has intended for them. At the same time, spouses should know how to keep themselves within the limits of just moderation.' " (CCC 2362) "By safeguarding both these essential aspects, the unitive and procreative, the conjugal act preserves in its fullness the sense of true mutual love and its orientation toward man's exalted vocation to parenthood." (CCC 2369)

In those instances where the parties are of differing faith backgrounds, additional sessions may be added to the instructional process. Since the emphasis is on the mutual needs of the couple for openness and dialogue, the cooperative effort and involvement of the clergy of both faith communities is to be highly encouraged.

In the event that one of the parties entering the marriage is an unchurched Catholic, additional instructions for interfaith marriages in accordance with diocesan policy are required.

PHASE III – LITURGICAL PREPARATION

After completing the instructional sessions, the couple will meet again with the priest, deacon and or marriage preparation team to plan the wedding ceremony.

No member of the clergy is to perform any marriage that would not be recognized by the Church.

Because of the Liturgical practices of the Catholic Church and the Church's desire to be respectful of other faith traditions, when a Catholic is marrying a non-Catholic, the marriage rite takes place outside of Mass. The local bishop can permit the Eucharistic celebration when he determines there is a just cause. When a deacon is the official witness for the Church at a wedding celebrated outside the context of a Mass there should be no communion service.

SUMMARY

In summary, the pastoral marriage preparation process includes an initial interview followed by an assessment process, after which a decision whether to proceed with the marriage or delay the marriage is reached.

If the decision is to proceed, then a wedding date is established and the instructional program begins. After the instructional program is completed, the liturgical program is planned before the marriage takes place.

If the decision is to delay the marriage, a program is developed to address the specific circumstances that indicate the delay. As progress in this program is evaluated, a decision to proceed with or continue to delay the marriage is made.

Like every other living reality, the family too is called upon to develop and grow. After the preparation of engagement and the sacramental celebration of marriage, the couple begins their daily journey toward the progressive actuation of the value and duties of marriage itself.
Familiaris Consortio 65