

# ARCHDIOCESE OF SAINT PAUL AND MINNEAPOLIS

## CLERGY BULLETIN

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### COMMON MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROCEDURE

Reverend and dear Fathers and Deacons,

In 1976, the bishops of the State of Minnesota agreed upon common guidelines to prepare couples for Christian marriage, emphasizing the qualities of permanence, stability and fidelity. Such qualities, which are at the heart of Christian marriage, certainly must continue to characterize this sacrament. In the last thirty years, however, we have experienced many other changes. Most importantly, our Church has come to a more profound human and theological understanding of the meaning of the sacrament of Matrimony.

Cognizant of this development, and desirous of revising marriage preparation procedures in a way which would reflect and promote these theological and cultural changes, the bishops of Minnesota agreed on March 7, 2006, to issue a new **Common Marriage Preparation Procedure** for the six Catholic dioceses in Minnesota. The following procedures will become effective in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis on October 15, 2006.

1. An engaged couple should begin formal preparation for marriage at least six months before their wedding date, and complete their preparation well in advance of (preferably three months before) their wedding.
2. Preparation of engaged couples for marriage is directed by arch/diocesan policy, implemented by duly appointed parish pastoral leaders and assisted by appropriately trained married couples (e.g., sponsor/mentor couples) and individuals on the parish and diocesan levels.
3. Preparation includes: pastoral discernment of the engaged couple's readiness and capacity for, understanding of, sacramental marriage; administering, evaluating, reporting and discussing the results of a diocesan approved premarital inventory (e.g., FOCCUS); pastoral preparation of the couple and catechesis about marriage and family life; participation in a diocesan approved marriage preparation program; liturgical preparation for the wedding; encouragement to receive the sacrament of reconciliation and the sacrament of confirmation if it has not been received.
4. A diocesan approved marriage preparation program should include catechesis and education about: the sacramental meaning and vocation of marriage and family life;

marriage as an exclusive, faithful and indissoluble union ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children, communication and conflict in marriage, intimacy, sexuality and chastity; natural family planning, fertility issues and parenting, work and leisure, stewardship of talent, time and finances, spirituality, faith, and interfaith issues.

5. When serious difficulties become evident during a couple's preparation for marriage, a pastoral decision may be made to delay marriage, keeping in mind the couple's canonical right to marry. If a couple rejects a pastoral decision to delay marriage, they may appeal to the bishop or his delegate. Without recourse to the diocesan bishop, a priest or deacon should not witness the marriage of a couple after another priest or deacon has decided not to witness the marriage.
6. Couples entering ecumenical, interfaith or interreligious marriages should be helped to grow in their knowledge of, sensitivity to, and respect for each other's faith tradition. Attention must be given to the responsibilities that faith requires of the Catholic party with regard to the free exercise of the faith (including the restriction against intercommunion) and the consequent responsibility to ensure, as far as possible, the baptism and upbringing of the children in the Catholic faith.
7. Preparation for remarriage in the Church presumes what is said in points 3 – 6, and: procuring a declaration of invalidity when there has been a civil divorce (this is to be done before the process of marriage preparation begins and a wedding date is set); providing a death certificate when a previous marriage has ended in death; addressing issues related to closure of, anger about, or grieving over a previous marriage; addressing any step-parenting and blended family issues; and carefully attending to any prohibition for remarriage specified in the declaration of invalidity (e.g., receiving any designated counseling).
8. Preparation for validation of marriage presumes what is said in points 3 – 6; however, depending on the length of the couple's civil marriage and their spiritual and psychological maturity, pastoral adaptations are permitted (e.g., the couple might be expected to visit with a counselor or attend a Marriage Encounter Weekend, in addition to or instead of, attending a regular diocesan approved marriage preparation program, and the couple might complete the REFOCCUS marriage inventory instead of the FOCCUS premarital inventory).
9. Appropriate pastoral attention and/or professional counseling should be provided to any couple whose ethnic, racial or cultural differences may pose challenges in their marriage and family life.
10. When persons with physical, mental, emotional or interpersonal disabilities request marriage, appropriate pastoral attention must be given to them (professional assessment and/or counseling may be needed). While their right to marry should be respected, their capacity to carry out the responsibilities of marriage must be discerned.

11. While couples beyond childbearing age require adequate preparation for marriage, regular diocesan approved preparation programs are sometimes not appropriate for such couples. Adequately addressing the needs of older couples requires additional pastoral attention at the parish or diocesan level.
12. Early in the marriage preparation process, in a manner that is not confrontational or condemnatory, cohabitating couples must be respectfully challenged with the gospel message of integrity, commitment, faithfulness and chastity. Cohabitating couples should be encouraged to reflect on their situation and to see it in light of the gospel message. Couples should reflect on why they have decided to cohabit and should be helped to consider the possible consequences, including harm to their spiritual well-being and harm to their ability to discern and ultimately to give valid sacramental consent. They should pay attention to factors that present special challenges to cohabitating couples and put them at risk for future marital disruption. In most cases, cohabitating couples should be asked to live apart until they are married. If a pastoral leader believes that a cohabitating couple is unable to give valid sacramental consent, the leader should postpone the wedding (not deny the marriage) until the situation is resolved.
13. If pregnancy (or a child already born) is a major factor in the decision to marry, caution is warranted. The couple should be encouraged to receive professional counseling before marriage (in the case of teenage pregnancy, professional counseling is mandatory), and serious consideration should be given to delaying marriage until after the birth of the expected child. The age and maturity of the couple needs to be considered, as well as the timing of the couple's decision to marry. Particular attention should also be given to parental and familial concerns.
14. No priest or deacon, without the required diocesan permission, should witness the marriage of a person who is less than eighteen years of age (Minnesota law allows a person of the full age of sixteen years to marry with the consent of the person's parents, guardian, or the court, and if the person's application for a license to marry is approved by the judge of the juvenile court of the county in which the person resides).
15. When there is reasonable evidence that a couple is affected by addictive behavior, such as alcohol or drug abuse, gambling, or pornography, marriage should not take place until a professional evaluation is obtained, confirming sufficient discretion and the capacity of assuming the essential obligations of marriage.
16. Where there is a history of medical, psychological, or emotional problems in one or both parties, marriage preparation should include professional evaluation regarding the ability to marry and the mutual understanding of the issues involved.
17. When there is reasonable evidence of physical, sexual, or psychological violence, marriage should not take place until a professional evaluation is obtained, confirming sufficient discretion and the capability of assuming the essential obligations of marriage.
18. Military couples, or those living or working a long distance away from each other, may need special pastoral attention and referral to pastoral support in another location. In

addition to attention and support that may be received in other dioceses, such couples are to have at least one meeting with the priest or deacon who will witness their marriage, and are to complete a marriage preparation program prior to their wedding.

19. Pastoral leaders or their delegates are to help couples understand the marriage ritual of the Catholic Church, including appropriate and approved options regarding wedding music and readings. The wedding liturgy should involve the whole assembly and reflect the liturgical practice of the Church.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

/S/

Most Reverend Harry J. Flynn, D.D.  
Archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis

/S/

Sister M. Dominica Brennan, OP  
Chancellor for Canonical Affairs