

**PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE:
Policies of the Roman Catholic Church in the Province of Oklahoma City:
Oklahoma City, Little Rock, Tulsa**

Introduction

The bishops, priests and laity of the Province of Oklahoma City, to help engaged couples prepare for marriage in the Catholic Church, have developed the policies that follow. They are designed to help couples appreciate the seriousness and the sacred nature of the Sacrament of Matrimony. The whole process of marriage preparation – the sessions, the assessment of readiness for marriage, and the program of instruction – is designed to support and assist engaged couples as they strive to deepen their relationship and ready themselves for the lifelong commitment of Christian marriage.

God, Himself, established marriage as the beginning and basis of human society. Through the marriage covenant, man and woman are – no longer two but one flesh. The meaning of their oneness is experience in the intimate union of their persons and their actions. This union of marriage demands of the spouses their mutual and complete giving of selves, imposes total fidelity and expects an unbreakable oneness between them.

Christ raised this human mystery to the dignity of a sacrament that symbolizes His own total self-giving and reflects the union of Himself and His Church. Authentic married love is caught up in the redeeming love of Christ. The sacrament of marriage consecrates spouses to each other and strengthens them for the life they will share.

Marriage is among the most serious and sacred of human commitments. In marriage, spouses are called to draw closer to God and to each other in life-giving community of love.

The Church continues to stress the dignity of marriage through the emphasis she places upon the sacrament and vocation of marriage love. Pope Paul VI, in his Encyclical on Human Life, urged bishops, priests, and the whole people of God to make a concerted effort to meet the contemporary needs of this human and Christian union between husband and wife.

*Work ardently and incessantly for the safeguarding and the holiness of marriage,
so that it may always be lived in its entire human and Christian fullness. Consider
this mission as one of your most urgent responsibilities at the present time.*
(Paragraph 3)

Pope John Paul II wrote eloquently in his apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, in which he emphasizes the values of family life and those who aspire to the married state. The views of some Catholics on marriage are influenced by many commonly accepted attitudes in modern secular society which are proving to be destructive to the Christian dignity of marriage. The sacrament of marriage, though it guarantees to a couple Christ's presence in their marriage and the power of God's grace, does not compel their cooperation with that grace; nor does it remove them from the negative influences at work in our culture.

All these considerations impose upon the Church the grave responsibility of assisting persons to enter a marriage that gives promise of being grace-filled, happy, and successful. The right to marry is a God-given right that arises from the very nature of the human person. The exercise of this right, however, demands the capacity to have a mature appreciation of marriage and to live out its obligations.

Given a person's right to marry, and the fact that this right is not without restrictions, the Church has a serious responsibility to provide adequate preparation for couples who wish to marry, and sometimes to postpone a marriage or, in an extreme case, to refuse to witness a marriage based on objective factors.

The Church believes that every person entering marriage has a right to the pursuit of happiness. To assist in securing that happiness, and prompted by an acute awareness of the many social, emotional, and financial pressures exerted on marriage today, the Church holds up all men and women the ideal of Christian marriage.

The vocation of marriage does not begin or end on the day of the wedding. There is an ever-increasing need for marriage preparation programs for persons in high school and college, as well as for various kinds of marriage enrichment programs. The marriage relationship needs constant nurturing if couples are to make it what Christ intended it to be, a love that will go beyond themselves and influence the large community.

I. Assessing a Couple's Readiness for Marriage

The Church has a pastoral duty to assist those who desire to marry in making a prayerful and mature judgment concerning their readiness for so solemn a commitment. In particular, those who prepare couples for marriage and the one who will witness the marriage are responsible for helping the couple determine their readiness for marriage.

Not only should the personal attitude of the couple be taken into consideration, but also the various spiritual, psychological, financial, and familial factors. Assessment will sometimes include consultation with the parents of the couple. If either party is under twenty-one, the parents or guardians of that person must be consulted.

When the engaged couple has completed the initial interview, the administration of a premarital inventory providing objective data with subsequent review of the inventory with the couple, the minimal basis for assessing the capacity of the couple for marriage will be established and hence a date set for the wedding ceremony. If it is determined that there is a sufficient pastoral reason not to establish a date for the wedding, the couple should be informed of the delay immediately.

II. The Required Process for Marriage Preparation

1. An initial interview is required with the couple at least **six months** prior to the tentative date of the wedding. In rare cases, the pastor can make an exception to this norm.
2. The Pre-Marital Inventory (FOCCUS, Prepare) and subsequent objective review of the inventory with the couple are required. Resources to help the couple prepare for marriage are varied, and may well include professional counseling, in addition to the help provided by the Family Life Office of the Diocese.
3. It is a requirement that all couples preparing for marriage will attend a "Pre-Cana", or "Engaged Encounter", or other diocesan sponsored preparation program(s). A couple may complete this preparation phase by participating in a "couple-to-couple" marriage program. Obvious exceptions to this requirement should be based on special circumstances that would prevent the couple from such participation.
4. All couples of child-bearing years are required to complete a "Natural Family Planning" (NFP) program offered by the local Church.
5. The planning of the liturgy of marriage can begin at any time after a date has been set for the wedding.
6. The completion of the prenuptial investigation, along with proof of the couple's freedom to marry, the completion of the marriage preparation program, and the request for permission/dispensations should be made **no later than one month prior to the wedding date.**

7. According to the need of the couple, additional resources, including professional counseling, may be suggested.

III. Date and Place of Wedding

Once a couple has made the decision to marry, they should notify the Church as soon as possible, making contact with the pastor (or pastoral administrator). However, a couple (and their parents) should make no arrangements regarding the wedding ceremony, the reception, or related matters until the couple's readiness for marriage has been established.

1. If both parties are Catholic, the wedding ceremony is normally celebrated in the parish where one is a member.
2. Catholic marriages are normally celebrated within Mass. Interfaith couples should be encouraged to have their wedding during Mass, while at the same time respecting the Church's guidelines on Inter-Communion.
3. Church Law permits that for a just cause (relationship with non-Catholic minister or faith community, achieving family harmony, etc.) a dispensation from canonical form may be requested for those marriages to be celebrated by a minister of another faith tradition. A request for dispensation should be made only if it is determined that it would be an undue hardship to observe canonical form. When a dispensation from canonical form is determined to be justified and a Catholic minister will no longer be officiating, the Diocese of Little Rock imposes no further restriction on where the wedding is to take place, other than that the location must be a suitable place.
4. The normal place in which all weddings are celebrated is the parish church. Wedding ceremonies may not be celebrated in parks, gardens, homes, secular places, or so-called "wedding chapels," except as stated above in #3. Only the bishop for extraordinary circumstances gives permission for a wedding without a dispensation from canonical form to be celebrated in a non-denominational chapel or secular setting.

IV. Preparation for Marriage

A couple who desires to be married in the Church is ordinarily required to notify the Church at least six months prior to the date on which they plan to marry. This period of time is necessary so that the couple may have one or more interviews, complete one of the approved marriage preparation programs, take part in premarital counseling and evaluation (if this should be necessary), participate in the NFP program, and plan the liturgy and other details of the wedding ceremony.

Interfaith couples are encouraged to arrange a meeting with a minister or rabbi of the non-Catholic's choice; such a meeting may be a great benefit to both parties, and actually complement what the Catholic Church is already offering them.

If circumstances such as military service, employment, or other similar circumstance prohibit both parties from participating together in a marriage preparation program, the absent party must obtain the requisite preparation and assessment of readiness for marriage in that party's own locale. The absent party is then to provide the parish priest/deacon with verification of attendance in such a program.

V. Delegation

For validity of a Catholic marriage, delegation is required in order to officiate at a wedding. All priests within the Province of Oklahoma City possess general delegation within their respective dioceses. Deacons possess delegation only in their parish or place of assignment, and must receive delegation to officiate at a wedding elsewhere. In order for priests who are not canonically assigned to the (arch)diocese to officiate at weddings, the pastor must grant such delegation to them. The prenuptial investigation provides a place to indicate when delegation has been granted.

Even though priests and deacons are licensed by the State to officiate at weddings, they are delegated by the Church to officiate only at weddings that involve at least one member of the Catholic faith. Permission to officiate at a wedding of two non-Catholics is granted only by the bishop.

Civil requirements: each officiant of weddings is to be registered by the State to do so. Furthermore, upon completion of the wedding, the civil marriage license must be signed by the officiant and returned to the appropriate County Court House. Pastors should be aware that visiting clergy from outside the States of Oklahoma and Arkansas must comply with these civil laws as well, and should provide such information to the visiting clergy in ample time to obtain such credentials.

The priest or deacon in charge of preparing a couple for marriage has a serious moral responsibility to provide personal pastoral care by meeting with the couple and assisting them in understanding and appreciating the many aspects of marriage: psychological, social, liturgical, sacramental, and spiritual. He should strive always to share with them a Christian vision of marriage.

In those parishes that are administered by lay ministers, delegation for visiting clergy should be obtained by contacting the Chancery Office.

VI. Interfaith Marriage

The term "interfaith" is used here to include all marriages in which the parties hold different religious persuasions and affiliations. It includes those couples whose non-Catholic parties hold no religious affiliation at all. Neither partner should enter into marriage with the expectation of drawing the other away from his or her religious convictions. Such an attitude can easily result in the unhappiness and alienation of either or both partners.

The priest/deacon who is preparing an interfaith couple for marriage should include the following:

- 1) Deepening both parties' awareness of the influence of religious convictions and values in their lives;
- 2) Helping the couple to see that their coming from different faith traditions will have a significant impact on their relationship;
- 3) Exploring the areas of agreement and disagreement between the couple's faith traditions;
- 4) Appreciating the practical problems that could arise because of the couple's coming from different faiths.

Sufficient instruction must be given in order that the couple understands the Catholic party's obligations to continue the practice of the Faith and to do everything possible to share that faith with the couple's children by having them baptized and reared as Catholics. It should be made clear that these obligations flow from the nature of the Church itself and are not simply obligations of law.

It is the will of the bishops of the Province that, due to the nature of the sacraments of initiation, the wedding ceremony is not deemed the appropriate time for reception into full communion of one of the parties.

VII. Marriage of those under 21

In view of the many conditions in present day society which militate against marriages of those under the age of twenty-one, special care and concern must be given a couple requesting marriage when one or both of the parties have not yet celebrated his or her twenty-first birthday. Studies have documented the fact that, in this country, such marriages have the least likelihood of lasting since many Americans at this age are not sufficiently mature to form the community of life and love that is marriage.

Approval for a Church wedding in the Province of Oklahoma City ordinarily will not be granted for anyone who has not yet celebrated his or her eighteenth birthday, and only then by the bishop.

The required program for the marriage of those under 21 is as follows:

- 1) Notification by the couple of their intention to marry as soon as possible, but at least six months prior to a proposed date for the wedding;
- 2) One or two interviews with the couple to assess maturity. It may be helpful in some cases for a professional counselor to assist in determining the maturity level of the individuals;

- 3) The administration of a premarital inventory and subsequent objective review with the couple;
- 4) Interview with parents or guardians of the couple;
- 5) When all of the above steps are completed and the recommendation from the premarriage counselor is reviewed, a decision is made to: a) proceed with the marriage preparation by setting a wedding date or, b) delay further the witnessing of the ceremony.

NOTE: While permission of the pastor is necessary for couples to marry, one of whom is between the ages of 18-21, permission of the bishop is required for marriages between couples, one of whom is younger than 18 years of age.

VIII. Pregnancy

When a couple becomes pregnant outside of marriage, both partners, and frequently the families of both endure a time of extraordinary pain and stress. The Church always views such situations with special compassion and care. At the same time, to rush a couple into marriage because of a pregnancy is by no means the course that “solves a problem” particularly when there is no engagement prior to the pregnancy.

While premarital pregnancy has often been presented as automatically necessitating marriage, contemporary evidence shows that instead it should be considered a reason to proceed with great caution toward marriage. It is now well established that couples who marry when there is a pregnancy have a much higher divorce rate than those who marry without this added pressure.

When both parties are at least twenty-one years old and when the decision to marry was made prior to the woman’s discovery of her pregnancy, plans may continue for the marriage if it is determined by the church that the couple is mature enough and otherwise sufficiently prepared to enter marriage. Although it is not mandatory to do so, the couple may benefit from additional premarital counseling and assessment. A couple in this situation is still required to participate in a Church-approved marriage preparation program.

The regulations about setting a date for the wedding are to be observed in these cases, and should not be relaxed except for a good reason. There are legitimate times when the requirement of six months notice (see II-#1 above) for a wedding to take place may be dispensed or shortened in length. Although the very presence of a pregnancy would not demand such a dispensation, each couple should be evaluated on their own merits in such cases.

IX. Cohabiting couples

Given the climate of society today, the Church is approached with greater frequency by couples who are already living a conjugal life without the benefit of civil or ecclesiastical recognition. Objectively, cohabitation is a lifestyle contrary to gospel values, is of serious matter in regard to their spiritual lives, and can be a cause for grave scandal. It is the Church’s responsibility to assist such couples by making every attempt to persuade them to separate prior to marrying in

the Church. There is significant data that supports the high rate of divorce among those who do live together before marriage. At the very least, those who prepare cohabitating couples for marriage should strongly encourage them to live a chaste life to the very same degree that non-cohabitating couples are expected to live. It is not the intention of these policies to refuse marriage to such couples based solely on their living arrangements. There may be other factors that might present reasons for postponing a wedding. Good and wise pastoral counsel should lead such couples through the marriage preparation months in such a way as to prepare them for a Christian life together. (The Bishops of this country issued a very helpful information report in 1999, which is recommended reading for those pastoral ministers who are assisting cohabitating couples. It is available through the Diocesan Family Life Offices and also through Origins Vol. 29: NO 14)

X. Convalidation of Civil Marriage

When a couple, having attempted marriage outside the Church, desires that their union be convalidated, the priest or deacon who arranges for the convalidation must provide the couple with adequate preparation for marriage. Among other concerns, the priest is to determine the motives, which bring the couple to the Church for convalidation. The priest should inquire whether the marriage is having any major problems. A convalidation is not an automatic cure for a troubled marriage, nor is it a simple “blessing” or a “mere continuation of a civil union already established.” In addition to these points, the priest/deacon should also strive to lead the couple to a proper appreciation of the theological and spiritual dimensions of Christian marriage and to an understanding of the implications of marriage as a covenant relationship.

Guidelines that apply to the convalidation of marriages are:

1. When the couple has been civilly married for only one or two years, they must participate in one of the approved marriage preparation programs;
2. When the couple has been civilly married for a greater length of time, they are to fulfill one or more of the following requirements after consultation with the priest/deacon:
 - a) Participation in one of the approved marriage preparation programs,
 - b) Participation in one of the approved marriage enrichment programs,
 - c) Participation in premarital counseling and evaluation;
3. When the couple has been married a number of years and the marriage has given evidence of being a true community of life and love, the priest/deacon may judge that none of the aforementioned programs meets the couple’s situation and may structure an alternative program which will achieve the objectives set forth in this policy.
4. The ceremony should be celebrated in a way that corresponds to the circumstances of the couple. Naturally every effort should be made to avoid scandal, but there is no a priori impediment to celebrating this wedding in a big way.

The priest/deacon should never be hasty in regard to convalidation. The standard six months period of preparation applies for all marriages, even when a couple enters into a civil marriage prior to completion of this six months period. It may be appropriate to wait a longer time if the couple does not give evidence of the requisite maturity and understanding of the marriage covenant. Similarly, it should be impressed upon the couple that convalidation is not a remedy for a troubled marriage.

XI. Marriage Preparation for the Previously Married

With increasing frequency, couples are coming to the Church for marriage after one or both parties have been previously married. Even though a divorced person may have received a declaration from the Church that he or she is free to marry, the priest/deacon must still be satisfied that difficulties which appeared in a previous marriage will not exist in the proposed one.

Given that the Church has issued a Decree of Nullity, the following guidelines are set forth:

1. When the previously married party has not yet entered a second union, the preparations for marriage are to be conducted according to the policies already outlined herein;
2. When the couple has lived in a civil marriage which has contained over some years and shown signs of being in a stable relationship, the priest/deacon may use his pastoral judgment in providing the preparation for marriage which seems most suited to the needs of the couple, such as a marriage enrichment program, weekend encounter or retreat for married couples.
3. When the previously married person's union ended in the death of the other partner, care must be taken in preparing the widowed party for a second marriage, with consideration given to the ages of the couple, the length of the previous marriage, the grief process that must take place before the widowed person is emotionally prepared for a second marriage, and the effect of the second marriage on children of the first marriage.

XII. Exceptions to Policies and Decisions

Exceptions to the policies and procedures set forth in this statement must be referred to the Chancery Office. Exceptions will be considered according to the merits of each case.

XIII. Reasons for Delaying or Refusing to Witness a Marriage

The Church has always held that the right to marry is a natural right of high priority. This right, however, is not unrestricted. The Church has established legitimate restrictions based on serious reasons, especially when the proposed marriage is seen to be a conflict with the sacramental practice of the Church. On the other hand, priests and deacons may not lightly delay the marriage of a couple who are free to marry and who fulfill the requirements of marriage.

Some of the just reasons for delaying or refusing to witness a marriage include:

- 1) Refusal of the parties to take part in the marriage preparation program or to participate in pastoral counseling which is deemed necessary for proper reception of the sacrament;
- 2) If the Catholic party (or parties) have shown that they are not active in the life of the Church, in particular, to the life of worship, and furthermore, demonstrate that they have no intention of doing so;
- 3) Lack of readiness for marriage, as assessed by the priest/deacon through personal interview, consultation with the parents, and/or premarital counseling and evaluation.

When a priest/deacon finds that he cannot conscientiously witness the marriage, he must immediately inform the couple of this decision and the established means of recourse.

When the decision is made to delay a marriage the priest/deacon concerned is responsible for helping the couple overcome the circumstances that make the delay advisable. If the couple is open to such assistance, the priest/deacon should develop with them an appropriate remedial program, such as professional counseling. In no case should the priest/deacon merely inform a couple that he will not witness their marriage, but rather should explain the just cause behind his decision.

XIV. Appealing the Decision

If the priest/deacon refuses to witness a couple's marriage, he must inform the couple that they have a right to have recourse to the Chancery. The case will then be reviewed, including consultation with the priest/deacon, the instructors in the marriage preparation program, and those who have conducted the premarital counseling and evaluation. In every case, the questions shall be referred to the Bishop who will make the final decision.

No priest/deacon may knowingly witness the marriage of a couple after another has decided they should not marry, unless the Bishop or his official delegate has given the necessary approval.

XV. Effective Date

These policies and procedures will become effective in the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, the Diocese of Little Rock, and the Diocese of Tulsa on November 28, 2004, for marriages that take place after June 1, 2005. They shall be published in full in each of the diocesan newspapers and an explanation of them shall be fully given by all priests, deacons, and pastoral administrators throughout the Province. Notice of certain aspects of these policies should be published weekly in parish bulletins (e.g. six months preparation).

These policies will be reviewed every five years, and revisions made and implemented as the need arises. When such revisions are made, they will be given appropriate publicity. While these policies are in force, priests, deacons, and those who assist couples in marriage preparation are invited to submit proposed revisions to their diocesan Chancery for future reference.

NOTE: Because of delays in translating this document into Spanish the effective date for these policies and procedures in the Diocese of Little Rock is delayed until April 1, 2006. Beginning April 1, 2006, priest, deacons and others assisting them in preparing couples for marriage are to begin implementing these new policies and procedures so that they are fully implemented for all marriages scheduled to take place on or after October 1, 2006.