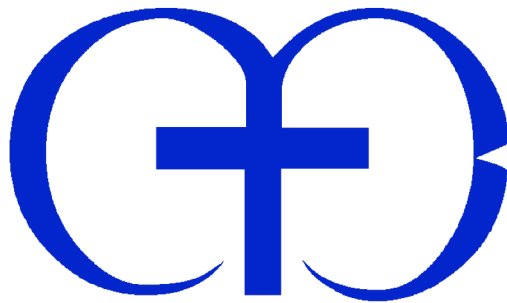


*Joined
in
Christ*



*A Couple's Guide To
Preparing For Marriage*

***DIOCESE OF
ST. PETERSBURG***

JOINED IN CHRIST

Christian marriage is a serious and sacred commitment that calls a man and a woman to each other in a most profound and permanent way. Christian marriage calls a couple to become a visible sign of Christ's unconditional and faithful love. It demands a living faith on the part of the couple and the awareness that they are entering into a covenant not only with each other, but with God.

The intimate community of life and love which constitutes the married state has been established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws...God himself is the author of marriage. The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator. Marriage is not a purely human institution despite the many variations it may have undergone through the centuries in different cultures, social structures, and spiritual attitudes.
Catechism of the Catholic Church 1603

Joined in Christ through the Sacrament of Matrimony, Christian spouses are called to see Christ in each other and to be Christ for each other. They are called to be living symbols of God's tender love and mercy.

On the threshold of his public life Jesus performs his first sign—at his mother's request—during a wedding feast. The Church attaches great importance to Jesus' presence at the wedding at Cana. She sees in it the confirmation of the goodness of marriage and the proclamation that thenceforth marriage will be an efficacious sign of Christ's presence.
Catechism of the Catholic Church 1613

Joined in Christ, the human love of Christian spouses participates in divine love. They are incorporated into the very heart of Christ – their love now consecrated and purified in Him who supports, nourishes, and sustains them in unity and peace.

Joined in Christ, Christian spouses are most intimately associated with God in His work of creation. Through the generation of children, whom God gives them as a blessing, spouses perpetuate the original blessing of the Creator by transmitting the divine image from person to person.

Joined in Christ, Christian spouses are called to be the Church in "miniature" – that is, they are called to form their family into a praying and believing community. They are called to manifest the love and mercy of God to a world in serious need of both. They are called to be the light in the darkness and the fire against the cold.

Christian marriage is not something to be undertaken lightly or hurriedly. To love like God loves, namely, to love unconditionally, to forgive without counting the cost, to persevere despite difficulties, to be patient and kind, to excuse, to trust, to hope, to believe, and to endure whatever hardships come one's way (cf. 1 Cor. 13-4-7) – all this requires virtue beyond the merely human.

You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own. So then, you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you. And to all these qualities add love which binds all things together in perfect unity. Colossians 3:12-14

Therefore, the Church invites engaged couples to prepare themselves spiritually for marriage by daily prayer, regular attendance at Mass, and frequent reception of the Sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation.

Joined in Christ, which outlines the basic policies for marriage preparation in the Diocese of St. Petersburg, is the Church's gift to engaged couples to assist them in their spiritual and human preparation for the Sacrament of Matrimony. The Church rejoices with engaged couples and prays that their love will grow deeper and more beautiful as they commit themselves to each other in the Lord.

STEPS TO THE ALTAR

The Preliminary Interview

Your first step in planning your wedding is to meet with your parish priest or deacon. During this first get-together, you will receive an explanation of the Church's guidelines for marriage preparation and an understanding of their purpose. The common policy for marriage preparation in the Diocese of St. Petersburg calls for a minimum six month preparation period to enable the couple, with the Church's help, to prepare spiritually for their wedding and more importantly for their married life together. The diocesan marriage preparation program has three phases: an assessment process, an enrichment process and planning the wedding liturgy.

So that the "I do" of the spouses may be a free and responsible act and so that the marriage covenant may have solid and lasting human and Christian foundations, preparation for marriage is of prime importance. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1632

Determining Your Readiness for Marriage

The assessment process begins with your initial interview with the priest or deacon. During this time, diocesan papers are filled out to obtain basic information regarding your freedom to marry in the Church. You will be asked to complete a premarital inventory. This will be administered by a priest, deacon, or lay person and serves as a tool to determine your strengths and weaknesses as a couple so that an enrichment program can be recommended to meet your specific needs. Under special circumstances, the priest or deacon may consult your parents or professional counselor to complete the assessment. The priest or deacon may not give you a firm wedding date until the assessment process is complete and a decision to proceed has been made.

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. 1 John 4:12

The Enrichment Process

The enrichment process will present you with the essential human and Christian aspects of marriage and includes reflection on the nature and sacramentality of marriage, communication within marriage, married love and family life, the impact of family backgrounds, couple prayer, marital responsibilities, personal expectations, natural family planning, and other practical considerations. There is a variety of diocesan and parish based enrichment programs. Which program is best suited to your specific circumstances will be determined by the priest/deacon assisting you with the marriage preparation process.

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

If the following special circumstances pertain to your situation, they will need to be addressed by you and the priest or deacon during both the assessment and enrichment phases of marriage preparation.

Interfaith Marriages

If one of you is of a faith tradition that is not Catholic, you may be expected, as a couple, to participate in additional enrichment sessions. This will allow you the opportunity to discuss practical implications of your life together such as: (a) identifying with a faith community, (b) the religious formation of children, and (c) the feelings of family members.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. Matthew 7:24-25

Inactive Catholics

In the event that one or both of you are not active in the practice of your Catholic faith, you may be expected to attend additional enrichment sessions to help you to become active again as a practicing Catholic. If you have not yet received the Sacrament of Confirmation, the priest or deacon will encourage you to receive this sacrament before celebrating your marriage in the Church and will be happy to arrange instructions to prepare you.

Youthful Marriages

Youthful marriages are those where one or both of the parties are under the age of twenty-one. The Church's concern for those who wish to marry young rises out of her love for you and the Church's desire to protect you from making irreparable mistakes that couples in youthful marriages are frequently known to experience.

If one or both of you are under nineteen years of age, you can expect the Church to discourage you from getting married until you are at least nineteen. However, if a couple (whether one or both of the parties is under the age of nineteen) persists in their decision to marry, the special permission of the bishop or his delegate at the Marriage Tribunal is required before the marriage may be celebrated in the Church.

Premarital Pregnancy

If a pregnancy exists, you can expect the Church to express care for you and your child. Because of the alarmingly high failure rate of marriages which occur because of pregnancy, the Church will make every effort to discourage you from rushing into marriage. A premarital pregnancy is not considered reason enough to omit the normal six month preparation process.

The human pressures of a premarital pregnancy (need of basic support for self and child, desire "to do the right thing," fear of social stigma, etc.) can work havoc with a person's discretionary judgment and the necessary freedom to choose marriage. Therefore, in many cases it is advisable to delay the marriage until after the child is born.

The resources of Catholic Charities and the Diocesan Office of Life Ministries are available to help couples and families through this difficult time.

Family Background

Many people enter marriage with little or no realization of how their family background impacts their choice of a mate, patterns of communication, and expectations in a marriage relationship. If there has been alcoholism, divorce, death, abuse (sexual, physical, or emotional), or some other type of trauma in your family of origin, discovering how that has affected you will greatly enhance your chances for a healthy, happy marriage.

It is the goal of the Church to offer you information and assistance in this area to help insure the long term stability of your marriage.

Happy the husband of a good wife, twice-lengthened are his days; A worthy wife brings joy to her husband, peaceful and full is his life. A good wife is a generous gift bestowed upon him who fears the Lord; Be he rich or poor, his heart is content, and a smile is ever on his face. A gracious wife delights her husband, her thoughtfulness puts flesh on his bones; A gift from the Lord is her governed speech, and her firm virtue is of surpassing worth. Choicest of blessings is a modest wife, priceless her chaste person. Like the sun rising in the Lord's heavens, the beauty of a virtuous wife is the radiance of her home. Sirach 26:1-4, 13-16

Premarital Cohabitation

If you are living together before marriage without benefit of a civil union, you can expect the priest or deacon to encourage you in a gentle and loving way to live separately and to practice the virtue of chastity as the best way to prepare spiritually for your wedding day.

Convalidation of a Civil Marriage in the Church

If you are a Catholic married outside the Church and now wish to have your civil union convalidated or "blessed" in the Catholic Church, you will need to follow the steps outlined in this brochure. Depending upon the length of your civil union and other circumstances, your parish priest will adjust the assessment, enrichment, and liturgical planning processes so as to both respond to the needs of your particular situation and to help you grow closer to the Lord and each other as you prepare to renew your commitment in the Church.

For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate. Mark 10:7-9

Remarriage in the Church

Couples who are entering a subsequent marriage are provided special consideration according to their differing circumstances and past experiences with marriage. A remarriage can be celebrated in the Catholic community only after the death of a previous spouse or when a prior marriage has been declared null by the Church. Those who have been previously married may not be immediately free to enter a new marriage in the Church. Your parish priest or deacon will address the circumstances of your particular situation and assist you accordingly.

THE DECISION TO DELAY MARRIAGE

A delay of marriage is sometimes indicated and is usually helpful to provide time for a couple to overcome the specific circumstances which make the delay advisable. Some reasons for delaying a marriage are the following:

- 1.) The non-practice of the faith by the Catholic party(ies) with no intention of returning to the practice of the faith.
- 2.) An expressed intention against or a substantial lack of appreciation for the spiritual and sacramental aspects of marriage, namely, that marriage is a partnership of the whole of life and by its nature is ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children, and that the essential properties of marriage are unity (fidelity) and indissolubility (permanence).
- 3.) A lack of readiness for marriage, by reason of immaturity, undue social pressure, family background etc.
- 4.) The likelihood that a separation of the couple for an extended period of time will occur after the wedding, e.g., military service, continued education, etc.
- 5.) The refusal of the parties to participate in any of the steps of marriage preparation that applies to them.

- 6.) The fact that one or both of the parties are under the age of nineteen.

With appropriate remedial programs, your parish priest, or deacon, will outline the reasons for the delay of marriage and will help you to overcome the circumstances that make the delay advisable. However, couples have the right to appeal if they disagree with a decision to delay their marriage. A couple who insists on proceeding with marriage should submit a written petition to the Diocese of St. Petersburg. Appeals can be sent to:

Office of Marriage & Family Ministries
Diocese of St. Petersburg
P.O. Box 40200
St. Petersburg, FL 33743-0200

The office will respond in writing to the couple and the priest regarding a determination of this matter.

I pray that your love will keep on growing more and more, together with true knowledge and perfect judgment, so that you will be able to choose what is best. Then you will be free from all impurity and blame on the day of Christ. Your lives will be filled with the truly good qualities which only Jesus Christ can produce, for the glory and praise of God.

Your life in Christ makes you strong, and his love comforts you. You have fellowship with the Spirit and you have kindness and compassion for one another. Philippians 1:9-11 - 2:1-5

Preparing the Wedding Liturgy

Both bride and groom should be actively involved in planning the wedding liturgy. Appropriate readings from Scripture, music and other options need to be selected in accord with the spirit of the liturgical season. Your parish priest, deacon, music director, parish wedding coordinator, or any combination thereof will guide you in planning all facets of the wedding ceremony. As you prepare for your special day, it is important for you to keep in mind that your wedding is only a day...but your marriage is for a lifetime!

The consent consists in a "human act by which the partners mutually give themselves to each other": "I take you to be my wife"—"I take you to be my husband." This consent that binds the spouses to each other finds its fulfillment in the two "becoming one flesh." Catechism of the Catholic Church

The Bride and Groom

By declaring their consent before the Church community, the bride and groom are the ministers of the sacrament of marriage. Through their mutual commitment, they become a visible sign (sacrament) of Christ's unconditional love for his Church and the Church's total commitment to the Lord. Therefore, care should be taken in planning and celebrating the marriage liturgy to ensure that the principal rites of the bride and groom are conducted within the sight and hearing of all who are present.

Witnesses (Attendants)

Church law (canon 1108) requires at least two witnesses to the marriage. While a minimum age is not mentioned in Church or Florida law, witnesses normally are to be above the presumed age of reason (age 7). Since their sole function is to attest to the fact that the marriage took place, witnesses may be of different or the same gender and need not be Catholic nor baptized.

Let marriage be honored among all and the marriage bed be kept undefiled, for God will judge the immoral and adulterers. Let your life be free from love of money but be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never forsake you or abandon you. Thus we may say with confidence: "The Lord is my helper and I will not be afraid." Hebrews 13:4-6

Liturgical Ministers

The wedding liturgy should include those needed to serve in the liturgical celebration. Care should be taken in selecting liturgical ministers for the marriage celebration and should include; competent readers, cantors, musicians, altar servers, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, greeters, ushers, etc. Well-intentioned family members and friends do not always meet the criteria for competence or experience. Friends, relatives, or parishioners who already serve in these ministries at their own parishes are perhaps better suited to serve in this capacity. Where needed, the parish should provide guidance and instruction to those serving in liturgical ministries.

The Priest/Deacon

The primary role of the priest or deacon is to preside, or officiate, at the wedding liturgy. In the Catholic wedding liturgy, the questions concerning the consent and exchange of

vows are reserved to the Catholic priest or deacon. A non-Catholic minister, if present, may not receive the consent; however, they may read a passage from scripture.

On their wedding night Tobiah arose from bed and said to his wife "My love, get up. Let us pray and beg our Lord to have mercy on us and to grant us deliverance." She got up, and they started to pray and beg that deliverance might be theirs. He began with these words: "Blessed are you, O God of our fathers; praised be your name forever and ever. Let the heavens and all your creation praise you forever. You made Adam and you gave him his wife Eve to be his help and support; and from these two the human race descended. You said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone; let us make him a partner like himself.' Now, Lord, you know that I take this wife of mine not because of lust, but for a noble purpose. Call down your mercy on me and on her, and allow us to live together to a happy old age." They said together, "Amen, amen," and went to bed for the night. Tobit 8:4-9