

Dear Friends:

Congratulations on your coming celebration of Matrimony. A wedding is a particular moment of grace in the life of an individual and in the life of a couple. You can be sure that the prayers and good wishes of all in the Diocese of Lincoln are an accompaniment to your marriage preparation work.

Because marriage is a life-long commitment which involves self-giving love and which places in your life solemn and sacred obligations along with great joy and happiness, the marriage policy of the Diocese of Lincoln, contained in this booklet, is given to you as a help on your journey toward that fulfillment of your dreams and desires.

Please study this booklet carefully, and discuss with the priest who is assisting you in preparing for your wedding any questions or difficulties that you may see in what is contained herein. The marriage policy of the Diocese of Lincoln is the fruit of long and profound experience, and, as such, deserves your respectful consideration and observance.

May God enrich you on your wedding day and all through your married life together.

# MARRIAGE PREPARATION POLICY

## DIocese OF LINCOLN

### INTRODUCTION

The marriage covenant, in which God joins a man and woman in a permanent, faithful, life-giving bond of love, gives a husband and wife an intimate experience of God's unconditional love. The man and woman who promise to love each other unconditionally reveal God's love to one another. In this union of life and love, the couple begins their family – the basic foundation for society and the Church. The health and stability of society rests upon the health and stability of families. The Christian vision of marriage is developed through good marriage preparation, which presents to the couple the beauty of the sacred marriage covenant.

In his letter on the Christian Family, *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II outlines three stages of marriage preparation: the remote, the proximate, and the immediate. The *remote* preparation starts at the beginning of one's life, extends through childhood, and consists of all that one learns from parents and others about relationships, values, and faith, and how they influence marriage. In the *proximate* stage individuals come into contact with the Church's teachings concerning marriage when families, schools, and parishes form our ideas about marriage. Marriage preparation is completed in the *immediate* preparation stage during which a man and woman proceed prayerfully through a structured process that enables them to gain knowledge of themselves, of one another, and of the marriage covenant. This preparation enhances the couple's ability to make the free and mature exchange of vows required for Christian marriage. Immediate marriage preparation emphasizes that the couple's relationship is a journey of faith that continues after the wedding and throughout family life.

This marriage preparation policy applies to the immediate preparation stage. Each section begins with a list of basic topics followed by paragraphs of explanation.

### Overview of the Process

The ordinary steps of the marriage preparation process include the following:

- The couple's discernment and decision to marry
- The notification of a parish priest
- The readiness assessment (Section I)
- The formal instruction on marriage (Section II)
- The liturgical celebration of marriage (Section III)

Couples must not underestimate the value of the first step in the process, namely their *discernment and decision to marry*. All too often, couples regard getting married as a simple decision that they make by themselves. The Christian notion of marriage, however, takes for granted that the couple does not make this decision alone. Rather, they listen to God in order to discern the call to the married vocation and God's choice of their lifelong partner. Throughout the dating period, Christian couples should reflect seriously on the will of God for them, and they should be fervent in prayer before making the decision to marry.

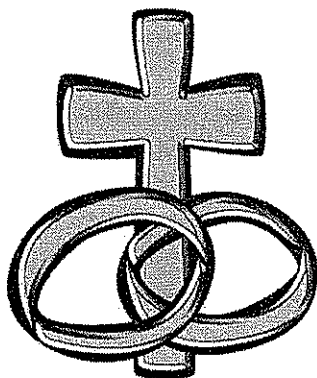
*Notification of a parish priest* is important because it formally begins the immediate marriage preparation process. When the couple informs the priest of their discernment and decision to marry early in the engagement period, the preparation process enjoys the advantage of providing ample time for the couple to grow in their relationship with one another and with God. Sufficient time must be allowed to complete a readiness assessment (see Section I) before a wedding date may be set. At a minimum, the couple must notify the priest *four months* prior to the date proposed for the marriage, and no firm date can be established until the assessment is complete. Optimally, the couple should contact the priest *six to twelve months* prior to the proposed wedding date.

During the third step, *the readiness assessment*, the man and woman have the opportunity for a greater realization of the

strengths and weaknesses affecting their ability to enter into and grow in married love. The essential parts of the readiness assessment are: an explanation of impediments (things that prevent marriage), completing all necessary forms, discussing the pre-marital inventory, and formalizing the decision to marry by setting the wedding date.

The fourth step, *the formal instruction on marriage*, is an opportunity to study and understand the teachings of the Catholic Church regarding marriage. This includes attendance at an Engaged Encounter weekend, a thorough instruction on the meaning of the Sacrament of Marriage and marital sexuality, and a review of the basic tenets of the Catholic Faith.

The final step in the marriage preparation process is to prepare for an appropriate *liturgical celebration of marriage*. During this step the priest will review the liturgical laws of the Church and help the couple to plan the wedding ceremony.



## SECTION I THE READINESS ASSESSMENT

In order to give the couple and the priest sufficient time to investigate the couple's readiness for marriage, the assessment requires several sessions in addition to the initial meeting. There are four main tasks that need to be accomplished during the assessment process:

- The determination of freedom to marry
- The collection of necessary documents and forms
- The completion and discussion of the pre-marital inventory
- The determination of readiness for marriage

### The Determination of Freedom to Marry

The first task of the priest is to help the couple to determine whether or not they are both free to marry in the Church. The priest must make sure that the couple understands the true nature of marriage as revealed by God and has the maturity to fulfill family responsibilities. The priest will review with the couple the impediments and prohibitions that affect marriage. Both the man and the woman must be free from the bonds of any previous marriage. Any counseling required because of a Tribunal decision concerning a previous marriage must be completed before a wedding in the Catholic Church can be pursued.

The couple must intend a faithful, unbreakable relationship that expresses marital love through sexual cooperation and which is open to the possibility of children. Catholics entering marriage must intend to raise and educate their children in the Catholic Faith.

### The Collection of Necessary Documents and Forms

The documentation necessary for marriage ordinarily includes: the Marriage Preparation Record, baptismal certificates for Catholics, written proof of baptism for non-Catholic Christians, a copy of the

Engaged Encounter certificate, and two affidavits of freedom to marry for each party. Also, when an individual is free to marry because a former spouse has died, a copy of the death certificate is required.

### **The Completion and Discussion of the Pre-marital Inventory**

The couple is to complete and discuss their pre-marital inventory (FOCCUS) with the priest or others approved by the pastor who are trained in marriage preparation. Optimal marriage preparation requires a thorough treatment of the many issues surrounding marriage. While the amount of time needed to discuss the results of the inventory will vary from couple to couple, a minimum of three one-hour sessions (or its equivalent) is required.

### **The Determination of Readiness for Marriage**

The decision to marry belongs to the couple and respect for the couple who intends to give marital consent must be maintained. Thus, if a couple is told by the priest that their proposed marriage appears to be inadvisable, he must carefully explain his reasons. The couple should then take some time to consider prayerfully the reasons provided by the priest. If the couple wishes to proceed with their intention to marry, they are to request that their case be reviewed. In such cases, the priest will make arrangements with the chancery for another priest of the diocese to review their case.

In cases where both the couple and priest are in agreement about the couple's readiness for marriage, a wedding date may be finalized and they may continue with the formal marriage instruction.

## **SECTION II FORMAL INSTRUCTION ON MARRIAGE**

The formal instruction on marriage must include:

- Participation in an Engaged Encounter weekend
- Instruction on marriage as a sacrament and a vocation
- Instruction on marital sexuality and family life
- A review of the basic teachings of the Catholic Church

### **Participation in an Engaged Encounter Weekend**

Every couple is required to attend an Engaged Encounter because of its proven ability to help couples to grow significantly in knowledge of one another and of God. There they will deepen their intimacy with one another and with the Lord, who is the "third partner" in Christian marriage. Early registration is necessary to reserve a place on the weekend of preference. Attending a weekend early in the engagement provides couples with the opportunity to discuss and work through important issues that may surface during the weekend. Full participation is expected, meaning that attendance for both parties must span the entire weekend (Friday evening until Sunday mid-afternoon). Presentations on various topics are given by two married couples and a priest who volunteer their time to share important knowledge and insights about marriage gained from their education and life experiences. Ample time for private couple dialogue is also provided.

### **Instruction on Marriage as a Sacrament and a Vocation**

When two baptized Christians legally enter into a permanent union of life and love through mutual and free consent, their marriage is sacramental in nature. The bond in these marriages is strengthened and protected by sacramental graces. When a baptized Christian and a non-baptized person unite in marriage, God provides the actual graces needed to sustain a healthy and holy marital union, even though a sacramental bond is not formed in such marriages.

God calls individuals to the vocation of marriage and provides couples with the tools to make their marriage successful. In both sacramental and non-sacramental marriages, the call to the vocation of marriage has implications with regard to education of children in the Catholic Faith, commitment to and support of Christ's Church, and other family issues. These important themes, along with the scriptural foundations for marriage, are to be discussed with the preparing priest.

### **Instruction on Marital Sexuality and Family Life**

Couples preparing for marriage must have a healthy knowledge of and respect for the nature and purpose of marital sexuality, as well as for the duties of married persons to God, to one another, to their children and to society. The Church's teachings regarding the meaning of responsible parenthood, the nature of the marital act, the intrinsic evil of contraception, and the benefits of Natural Family Planning are to be discussed. An introductory session on the basics of the practice of Natural Family Planning is required.

### **Review of the Basic Teachings of the Catholic Church**

The purpose of reviewing Catholic teachings before marriage is twofold: 1) to help Catholics to know their Catholic beliefs better and 2) to help non-Catholics to understand Catholic teachings and thus to know their spouses better.

The quantity and quality of religious instruction received by Catholics varies greatly among those preparing for marriage. A review of the basic teachings of the Catholic Church helps Catholics to know and understand their beliefs at an adult level. Additionally, these instructions benefit non-Catholics because understanding Catholic beliefs is helpful for understanding Catholics themselves. A review of Catholic doctrine is a valuable means for helping Catholics as well as non-Catholics to understand the value systems and convictions of their future spouses.

## **SECTION III THE LITURGICAL CELEBRATION OF MARRIAGE**

Christian marriage normally involves a liturgical celebration that expresses the essential sacramental nature of the marriage covenant. In order to prepare for a wedding that reflects the Catholic Church's understanding about marriage, certain guidelines are to be followed. Liturgical issues fall into four general categories:

- Appropriate setting for the wedding
- Sacramental preparation for the wedding
- Involvement of people in the wedding
- Liturgical celebration of the wedding

### **Appropriate Setting for the Wedding**

*The wedding is to be celebrated in a Catholic church* where the bride or groom is a member, or in another Catholic church with the permission of the pastor of that church and the priest preparing the couple. Wedding ceremonies outside of a Catholic church building are rarely permitted by the bishop, and only for serious reasons.

*Weddings are celebrated either within or outside the context of Mass.* Ordinarily, the marriage of two Catholics takes place within the context of Mass. The marriage of a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic can also be celebrated during Mass whenever permission for a mixed-religion marriage has been obtained from the bishop. Marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person can be celebrated only outside the context of Mass.

### **Sacramental Preparation for the Wedding**

*Catholics should receive the Sacrament of Confirmation before marriage.* The mature public acceptance of the teachings of the Church is an important prelude to passing on the Catholic Faith to children. Furthermore, the graces of the Sacrament strengthen not only a person's own commitment to God and his Church, but also his or her commitment to a lifelong partner in marriage.

*Catholics should receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) regularly before marriage.* Reception of this Sacrament immediately before the wedding day is especially beneficial. Non-Catholics should repent of their sins according to the practice of their own faith traditions. Then, with purity of heart, the couple may approach Christ for the graces of the Sacrament of Marriage. Proper spiritual purification before the wedding significantly enhances a couple's readiness for a lifelong commitment of themselves to one another and to God.

*Catholics should receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist regularly in preparation for marriage.* Catholics are expected to attend Sunday Mass faithfully in order to develop and maintain a healthy relationship with God and his Church and to acquire the graces necessary to live chastely during the engagement period. When received worthily, the Eucharist helps individuals to fulfill the demanding responsibilities that Christ places on those who wish to enter into Christian marriage. The eucharistic mystery is the most profound expression of the love of Christ for his Church, which marriage is meant to symbolize.

#### **Involvement of People in the Wedding**

*The wedding attendants* should not be so numerous that they distract from the celebration of the marriage itself. Parish policies may limit the number of people allowed in the wedding party.

*The liturgical ministers* selected to serve as Acolytes, Readers or Altar Servers must be chosen in accord with diocesan regulations.

*A Catholic priest or deacon* receives the vows at weddings celebrated in a Catholic church. The marriage vows can only be taken from the options found in approved Catholic liturgical books because they reflect the Church's understanding of the marriage covenant. If a priest or deacon not involved in the preparation process is to receive the vows, arrangements must be made with the preparing priest and the pastor where the wedding will take place at least one month before the ceremony. The parish may have a policy regarding how closely the priest or deacon must be related to the couple in order to perform the ceremony.

*A non-Catholic minister* may offer a prayer or benediction at the conclusion of a wedding Mass, or during the marriage rite itself when it is celebrated outside the context of Mass.

#### **Liturgical Celebration of the Wedding**

*Music* selected for a wedding must reflect the sacred and noble character of Christian marriage and must be an appropriate expression of faith and worship. Popular or secular music, even when it contains references to religious ideas, cannot be used at the wedding. Such music may be utilized appropriately at a wedding reception or dance. The words and style of the music chosen for the wedding liturgy must be consistent with the sacred and solemn nature of the celebration of a Sacrament of the Church. The pastor, or a parish musician approved by him, may provide a selection of appropriate music, and the pastor can require that parish musicians be used for the celebration.

*Liturgical celebrations during Advent and Lent* must reflect the special character of the season. Parish policies regulate music, decorations, and other such liturgical matters. These things are commonly more restricted when a wedding is scheduled during Advent or Lent.

*Photographs and audio or video recording* must not cause distractions or delays during the wedding ceremony. A parish policy may prohibit or restrict the taking of photographs in the sanctuary of the church or during the ceremony.

*The lighting of a Unity Candle* is a non-liturgical ceremony. Thus, it is carried out most appropriately during the wedding reception, but it may be done after the post-Communion prayer at Mass or at the end of a wedding liturgy celebrated outside of Mass. Also, all candles in the sanctuary are to be lit before the wedding without ceremony by the Altar Servers.

*The presentation of flowers* to honor Mary may be allowed for those who have a genuine devotion to the Blessed Mother. This non-liturgical action most appropriately takes place after the post-Communion prayer or at the end of the wedding liturgy when celebrated outside of Mass.

## SECTION IV PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCES

Due to the variety and background of couples requesting marriage, circumstances are sometimes present that warrant additional concern and attention. This section establishes the policy of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Lincoln for the following circumstances:

- Cohabitation (living together)
- Inter-faith Marriages
- Marriage of Minors
- Pregnancy
- Second Marriages
- Validation of a Civil Marriage in the Catholic Church

### Cohabitation (living together)

*Couples are expected to refrain from sexual relations before marriage and to commit themselves to remaining chaste and pure throughout the remainder of their engagement.* Despite the “conventional wisdom” of the culture, the Christian Scriptures teach that sexual intercourse is a gift from God that has its rightful place only in the covenantal relationship of marriage. The giving of one’s body in intercourse is a profound symbol of the giving of one’s whole self to another person, which can only happen in the context of marriage.

The nature and sacredness of the bond of marriage is such that the decision to establish this bond must be free and well informed—that is, the product of prayerful discernment. Pre-marital sexual activity adversely affects the freedom of those considering the married state. Both men and women typically feel emotionally bonded to those with whom they share intimate relations. This emotional bond creates an internal pressure to remain with the person, even as other aspects of the couple’s relationship may be wanting.

*The priest who is preparing a cohabiting couple should not be expected to witness a marriage that he suspects will fail.* While pre-marital sexual activity does not prevent a couple from getting married, it does indicate that the couple may have neither an adequate understanding of marriage and sexuality nor a proper respect for themselves and for one another. Because a mature understanding in these areas is essential to the couple’s future happiness, the cohabiting couple will be asked to spend more time than usual preparing for marriage for the purpose of interiorizing the Gospel message concerning the sacredness of human sexuality.

Sacred Scripture and Catholic Tradition teach that sexual activity outside of marriage is a mortal sin. Consequently, couples who have engaged in premarital sexual activity should seek forgiveness from God the Father and recommit themselves to following his commands. For Catholics, this means the worthy reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

*Cohabiting couples cause scandal, create an inauthentic picture of married life, and place themselves in a situation of serious temptation to commit mortal sin. Contrary to the common perception, scandal is not shock or shame about someone’s behavior. In its scriptural sense, scandal means leading another person into sin by one’s behavior. The sexual activity that may be reasonably presumed in cases of cohabitation violates God’s teaching about sexuality, which causes scandal to other believers, but most especially to fellow Christians.*

The decision to marry must be well informed. In other words, the couple must have a clear understanding of one another and the meaning of married life. The cohabiting couple creates a complex set of false expectations and unreal conditions that harm their future married life. Individuals in this circumstance tend to be on their best behavior and unwittingly give a false impression of who they really are. Consequently, cohabitation undermines honest communication and distorts the authentic meaning of marriage.

Even couples with good intentions frequently give in to temptations of the flesh when they live together outside of

marriage. Christian individuals are expected to make choices that do not place themselves in situations where the human weaknesses of the flesh lie vulnerable to the forces of sinful temptation. Furthermore, control of one's own sexual impulses is a discipline necessary for natural and chaste intimacy in marriage.

*Couples preparing for marriage are expected to live separately and chastely.* This expectation flows from the truths revealed by God and taught by the Church. If the couple is unwilling to separate, the minimum time for the preparation process is extended to six months. In addition, the priest preparing the couple may require that the wedding ceremony be simplified. The simplifications required can include: limitations concerning processions, amount of music, number of attendants, extent of decorations, and other such matters connected with the ceremony.

### Inter-faith Marriages

*When a Catholic marries a person of another religious affiliation, a special dispensation from the bishop is required.* Before the priest requests this dispensation, the Catholic party must make the following profession of faith and promise regarding children:

"I reaffirm my faith in Jesus Christ and, with God's help, I intend to continue living that faith in the Catholic Church. I promise to do all in my power to share the faith I have with our children by having them baptized and reared as Catholics."

The couple must understand the meaning and reason for this solemn promise in order honestly and directly to face the challenges that having different faith backgrounds will present for their marital relationship and the religious education of their children.

### Marriage of Minors

Statistics confirm that minors who marry are likely to experience added difficulties in their marriage relationship.

*If either party is under the age of 19,* the decision to proceed with the immediate preparation may be given by the priest only after the parents or guardians are consulted. Also, specific discussions are required during the marriage preparation process to help the couple and their families realize more fully the serious and sacred nature of the Sacrament of Marriage.

*If either party is 17 years of age or younger,* preparation for marriage cannot begin without first consulting the bishop.

### Pregnancy before Marriage

*Pre-marital pregnancy demands that special pastoral attention be given to the couple during their preparation for marriage.* It is important to evaluate the couple's freedom and readiness for marriage exclusive of the pregnancy. The priest always must have moral certainty that the couple is sufficiently prepared for marriage. The wedding sometimes is delayed until after the birth in order to establish the couple's true freedom to marry. Cases of pregnancy before marriage are handled individually, based upon age, circumstances surrounding the discovery of the pregnancy, and when the decision to marry was made.

### Second Marriages

*The death of a spouse frees a person from the bond of that marriage.* A death certificate of the deceased spouse establishes freedom from that bond. In such cases, preparation for the new marriage proceeds in the normal fashion.

*Civil divorce does not free a person from the bond of a previous marriage.* When one or both parties intending to marry have been previously married, they are not free to marry or begin marriage preparation until freedom from any prior marriage bonds has been



established. If both parties of a previous civil or religious marriage are still living, the Marriage Tribunal of the Catholic Church must examine the previous marriage. After examination of the documentation concerning the marriage, the Tribunal will issue a decree stating whether or not the party is free to marry in the Church. Even when the Catholic Church grants a declaration of nullity for a prior marriage, a counseling requirement may be in place that must be fulfilled before marriage preparation may begin.

If children are being brought into this new relationship, care is to be given to cover topics that concern the combining of families and the fulfillment of obligations that already exist.

### Validation of a Civil Marriage in the Catholic Church

*When a Catholic attempts marriage outside the Church, the couple must complete the entire preparation process before a validation of their marriage can be permitted. In order to verify the stability of the relationship, preparation in the Church cannot begin until at least six months after the civil ceremony. A validation ceremony is not merely a blessing. It is a new exchange of consent that establishes a valid, binding and permanent bond between the man and woman that is recognized by God and his Church.*

### CONCLUSION

The Catholic Church in the Diocese of Lincoln wishes to assist engaged couples as they prepare to enter the lifelong commitment to marriage. This policy is intended to be one part of the Church's proclamation of the Good News. It is hoped that couples who are preparing for Christian marriage will be motivated to take the necessary steps to ensure a happy, healthy and holy marriage, one that makes visible the love that Christ has for his Church.

Promulgated on World Marriage Day, February 11, 2001

*Only the Catholic Bishop of Lincoln  
has the authority to make exceptions to this policy.*