

New diocesan initiative designed to encourage Catholic marriage

MARY CLIFFORD MORRELL ■
Contributing Editor

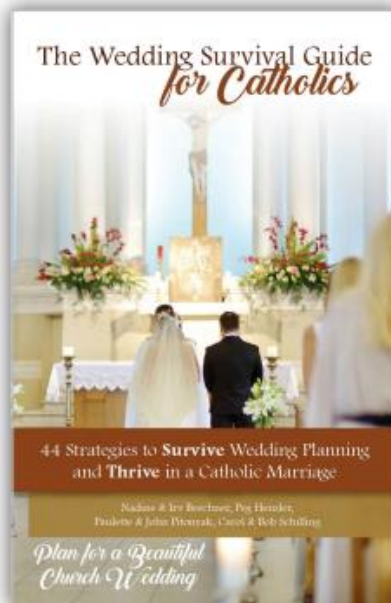
In his 2016 apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, *The Joy of Love*, Pope Francis calls for “a broader vision and a renewed awareness of the importance of marriage and the family.”

Embracing the Holy Father’s call, and in an effort to address the significant problem of Catholics choosing to marry outside the Church, the Diocese of Trenton has launched a new multi-pronged initiative to support and encourage Catholic marriage.

“Encouraging Catholic Weddings,” an initiative of the diocesan Department of Evangelization and Family Life, is “a campaign to build awareness of the benefits of Catholic marriage that includes a program specifically for parishes,” explained Peg Hensler, associate director, Marriage Ministries and Natural Family Planning.

At the core of the ECW initiative is a new book, “The Wedding Survival Guide for Catholics – 44 Strategies to Survive Wedding Planning and Thrive in a Catholic Marriage.” The book, which is a collaboration between the Diocese of Trenton and Stress Gone Publishing LLC, provides “a fresh perspective to young adult Catholics who are engaged or discerning marriage with a vision for a beautiful Church wedding,” said Hensler, who is co-author.

The ECW program for Trenton diocesan parishes includes free books and



14 free mini-guides and other materials in pdf format along with a diocesan web page (DioceseofTrenton.org/ecw) devoted to the “Encouraging Catholic Weddings” initiative. The unique mini-guides are created for distribution to parish staff, parents/grandparents, and engaged couples, including Hispanic brides and grooms.

The book carries the Imprimatur of Bishop David M. O’Connell, C. M., and a Nihil Obstat, assuring doctrinal accuracy, from Father Scott Shaffer, pastor, St. Joseph Parish, Toms River, who was appointed Censor Librorum for the book

“Achieving ‘extraordinary’ takes hard work, but it is the best work you could ever encounter, because you encounter life – and God – uniquely as a couple, as something new, created by God so that with your spouse you reflect the joy which God shares with you. The Wedding Feast of Cana is not over, it is not history: It is beginning again, with you and your spouse, called by God to become One.”

~ Father Jim Grogan, contributor, and pastor, Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish, Moorestown

by Bishop O’Connell.

Encouraged by the book’s potential, Bishop O’Connell said, “I’m sure couples will find it helpful, insightful and the fruit of lots of experience.”

Much of that experience comes from the additional co-authors, Nadine and Irv Brechner, Paulette and John Pitonyak, and Carol and Bob Schilling, three couples who planned weddings with their adult children over the course of two COVID-impacted years and who share their experiences in the book. The sole focus of the secular portion of the book is to minimize wedding planning stress and anxiety.

As part of this new ECW initiative, the book is in line with the Diocese’s Plan for Strengthening Marriage, the result of the 2014-2019 pastoral priorities of Bishop O’Connell, particularly Objective #3: To influence the decision of Catholics to marry in the Church through the development and widespread dissemination of a compelling message about Catholic marriage, with a goal to create a



Peg Hensler



Irv & Nadine Brechner



John & Paulette Pitonyak



Bob & Carol Schilling



Marriage

The Wedding Survival Guide for Catholics

OBJECTIVES:

- ▶ To show Catholic couples the importance of embracing the beauty of Catholic marriage, and how to navigate the complexities of planning a Church wedding.
- ▶ To help couples minimize wedding/reception planning stress and conflict so they may experience family harmony and a wedding day that is both meaningful and memorable.
- ▶ To help couples practice communication, collaboration and compromise throughout wedding planning; skills that will serve them well each day of their Catholic marriage.
- ▶ To demonstrate how the comprehensive marriage preparation process for Catholic couples, such as Pre-Cana, couples mentoring, and private preparation with a priest or deacon, can dramatically increase marital success and decrease the chance of divorce.

multi-media awareness campaign about Catholic marriage using both Catholic and secular outlets.

Some research has shown the decline in Catholic weddings may be attributed to several reasons, including the reality that younger Catholics are less involved in their Catholic faith and attend Mass less often, are cohabitating and hesitant to approach the Church for marriage, and are pressured less by family to have a traditional church wedding.

CARA, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, observed that "no Sacrament is in a steeper decline

in the U. S. than marriage," noting also "Catholics are more often choosing civil ceremonies at country clubs, the beach, or other sites. The practice of marriage as a Sacrament is becoming less common."

Father Shaffer spoke from his own experience as a parish priest, noting that a lack of knowledge about the teachings of the Church and about the value of Catholic marriage was a stumbling block for many young couples, an observation made also by the U.S. Catholic bishops in a 2014 report.

"I hope this book helps this generation to understand the Sacrament of Marriage," Father Shaffer said.

Irv Brechner, who is also publisher for the book, considered it "a labor of love ... with great feedback and input from clergy, couples, parents and experts," and highlighted the unique coupling of secular and Catholic ideas that help make it appealing to couples and their families.

"The Catholic content takes a sometimes confusing and complicated process of planning a true Catholic wedding and presents it in an easy-to-understand manner, giving couples the confidence to embrace a Church wedding.

"The secular content, 44 'Stress Reducers,' are 1-2-page guides for specific situations as they arise during the long wedding planning process. It's not a wedding planner and should not be read cover to cover. It's an essential guide that both couples and parents should use to address specific situations," said Brechner.

For example, when the couple discusses an often contentious subject like whom to invite, that section in the book helps couples and parents communicate, collaborate and compromise to resolve

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EXCERPTS

THE BEAUTY OF A TRUE CATHOLIC WEDDING

When you combine the rich tradition of a Catholic wedding with all the meaning behind the ceremony, you have something really beautiful and special. The ultimate Catholic wedding takes place in the church and is truly a sacred covenant. However, the Church realizes that times have changed, and as a result, some policies have been loosened at the local level, giving you greater flexibility.

EMBRACE PRAYER TO REDUCE STRESS

What we are suggesting and asking is that you turn your worries, concerns and joys over to God by embracing prayer during this time. Why? Prayer gives hope, the ultimate stress reducer. We know that more than half of Americans pray each day as do 20% of people not even affiliated with a particular religion. Many doctors actually admit that it's the best thing you can do for your mind and body.

A WEDDING REHEARSAL WITH MEANING AND BASED IN FAITH

The old rhyme, "Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue a sixpence in your shoe." This adage creates a connection to the past, a symbol of the future, a connection to the wider community, blue as an invocation of the Blessed Mother who requested her Son Jesus to help the wedding couple at Cana and sensibly saving for the future.

SOME THOUGHTS ON MARRIAGE AND THE EUCHARIST

By deciding to get married, you are taking a leap of faith that you will love and honor each other forever, but because we are human, we all have times when loving and honoring can be really difficult. That's when we say that love is a decision, an act of the will, not just a feeling. That's what we call sacrificial, self-giving love, and sometimes that requires superhuman ability.

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publication of "The Wedding Survival Guide for Catholics" received a great deal of support from numerous people and organizations from throughout the Diocese.

Peg Hensler, diocesan associate director of marriage ministries and NFP, expressed appreciation for the various groups who assisted with funding for the project.

The groups included: the Diocese's Annual Catholic Appeal; the State Council of the New Jersey Knights of Columbus, and several local Knights of Columbus councils including Allentown, Hightstown, Lawrence Township and Little Egg Harbor. Hensler also acknowledged James Stoeber, State Deputy of the New Jersey State Council Knights of Columbus, and District Deputy Louis Monteforte Sr.



Marriage

Gift of marriage

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spouses," the Pope told the tribunal members Jan. 27. "Matrimony is always a gift! Conjugal fidelity rests on divine fidelity; conjugal fruitfulness is based on divine fruitfulness. Man and woman are called to accept this gift and freely correspond to it with the reciprocal gift of self."

As the members inaugurated the tribunal's judicial year, Pope Francis said he wanted to focus his talk on marriage "because there is a great need in the Church and in the world to rediscover the meaning and value of the conjugal union between a man and a woman on which the family is based."

In fact, part of the reason for the "crisis that is affecting so many families is the practical ignorance – personal and collective – regarding marriage," he said.

St. John Paul II described the celebration of the sacrament of matrimony as offering a "new heart" so that "the couples are not only able to overcome 'hardness of heart,' but also and above all they are able to share the full and definitive love of Christ, the new and eternal covenant made flesh," the Pope said, quoting from the 1981 document, "Familiaris Consortio."

► "As I have loved you, love one another."

"Marriage according to Christian revelation is not a ceremony or a social event, no," Pope Francis said. "It is neither a formality nor an abstract ideal: it is a reality with its own precise consistency, not a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will."

At the same time, the Pope said, "marriage should not be idealized, as if it existed only where there are no problems."

God's plan "is always fulfilled imperfectly" in human hands, he said, and yet the Lord is present in the family "with



all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes."

Life as a family makes it "difficult to pretend and lie; we cannot hide behind a mask," he said. "If that authenticity is inspired by love, then the Lord reigns there, with his joy and his peace."

For married couples in crisis, "the Church, both pastors and other faithful, accompanies them with love and hope, seeking to support them," he said. "A fundamental resource for facing and overcoming crises is to renew awareness of the gift received in the sacrament of marriage, an irrevocable gift, a source of grace on which we can always count."

Pope Francis said there is a need "to rediscover the permanent reality of marriage as a bond," especially since the "bond" is often thought of as an "imposition, a burden, a 'tether' in opposition to the authenticity and freedom of love."

"If, on the other hand, the bond is understood precisely as a bond of love, then it reveals itself as the core of marriage, as a divine gift that is the source of true freedom and that safeguards married life," he said.

The Church can assist engaged and married couples to deepen their love and overcome difficulties not just by helping them accept its doctrinal teachings and its valuable spiritual resources, he said. The Church can also help by offering "practical programs, sound advice, strategies based on experience and psychological guidance."

The indissolubility of marriage often

is considered to be only an "ideal," he said, while "the mindset that believes marriage lasts as long as there is love tends to prevail."

But true marital love cannot be reduced to just sentimental feelings or "selfish satisfactions," the Pope said. "Instead, matrimonial love is inseparable from marriage itself, in which human love, fragile and limited, meets divine love, always faithful and merciful."

God "supports spouses with his grace: 'As I have loved you, love one another,'" the Pope said, but it is also "a gift entrusted to their freedom, with its limits and its lapses, so that the love between husband and wife needs continual purification and maturation, mutual understanding and forgiveness," emphasizing that crises are not resolved by hiding them, but through mutual forgiveness.

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the issue quickly and harmoniously.

"Most young couples today are far more influenced by their peers and by the wedding industry's creative marketing approach that presents a vision for their dream wedding and all the magic that is provided by the plethora of wedding vendors. ... The Wedding Survival Guide for Catholics completely changes this narrative – showing couples the numerous benefits of good marriage preparation and what it means to celebrate the Sacrament of Marriage as something sacred," Hensler acknowledged.

The ECW program and book will be officially launched on Valentine's Day, Feb. 14. The book and file for the mini-guides will be sent to all parishes in the Diocese on or about Feb. 8.

Singles copies of the book are available for purchase at amazon.com/dp/B0BM99FV2R.

► To learn more, contact Peg Hensler at phensler@diocesoftrenton.org, or Irv Brechner at Irv@Stress-Gone.net.