

Directory for the Preparation for Marriage

Diocese of Stockton

CONTENTS

DECREE OF PROMULGATION.....	5
I. INTRODUCTION	7
A. SPIRITUAL VISION OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE	7
B. THE IMPORTANCE OF MARRIAGE PREPARATION	9
II. THE GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR MARRIAGE PREPARATION.....	11
A. Hospitality.....	11
B. Marriage Preparation Period.....	12
C. Responsibility for Immediate Preparation for Marriage.....	12
D. Responsibility in the Case of a Visiting Cleric	13
E. Setting of a Tentative Wedding Date	13
F. Place of Wedding and Proper Liturgical Order.....	13
III. ASSESSMENT OF READINESS FOR MARRIAGE	15
IV. MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROCESS STEPS	15
A. Engaged Couple Interview.....	16
B. Accompaniment of Engaged Couples – Engaged Couple Sponsors.....	17
C. Premarital Assessment or Inventory.....	17

D.	Formal Marriage Preparation Programs	18
1)	Parish-based marriage preparation class.....	18
2)	Engaged Encounter Weekend and Online Preparation.....	19
3)	Online Marriage Preparation.....	19
E.	Natural Family Planning.....	19
F.	Preparing the Wedding Liturgy.....	20
V.	CANONICAL PREPARATION FOR MARRIAGE:.....	21
A.	Prenuptial Inquiry.....	21
B.	Baptismal Certificate	21
C.	Confirmation Certificate.....	22
D.	Prenuptial Witness Form (Letters of Freedom)	22
E.	Petition for Dispensation from the Impediment of Disparity of Cult (Worship).....	22
F.	Permission for Mixed Marriage	23
G.	Petition for Dispensation from Canonical Form	23
H.	Status of Documents (<i>Nihil Obstat</i>)	24
VI.	STATE OF CALIFORNIA MARRIAGE LICENSE REQUIREMENTS.....	24
VII.	SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES.....	25
A.	Marriage of non-practicing Catholics.....	25

B.	Pregnancy.....	25
C.	Marriage after the Death of a Previous Spouse.....	26
D.	Marriage after a Previous Union	26
E.	Regularization of a Civil Marriage Celebrated by a Catholic.....	27
F.	Cohabiting or Otherwise Sexually Active Engaged Couples	27
G.	Marriage of those with Disabilities	30
H.	Marriage of Minors.....	30
I.	Marriage of Couples Over the Age of 35	31
J.	Causes for Denial or Delay of Marriage.....	31
VIII.	PASTORAL CARE AFTER THE WEDDING	32
	Appendix I	35
	ACCOMPANYING COUPLES PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE	35
	INITIAL INTERVIEW AND FOLLOW-UP SESSIONS GUIDE	35
	Appendix II.....	39
	SAMPLE GRANT OF DELEGATION TO ASSIST AT MARRIAGE.....	39
	Appendix III.....	40
	SUGGESTED READINGS	40

This page intentionally left blank.



**DIOCESE OF
STOCKTON**

www.stocktondiocese.org

212 N. San Joaquin Street, Stockton, CA 95202-2409

Ph.: 209-466-0636 • Fax: 209-941-9722

Myron J. Cotta
by the Grace of God and the Favor of the Apostolic See
Bishop of Stockton

DECREE OF PROMULGATION

I am pleased to promulgate for the Diocese of Stockton this *Directory for the Preparation for Marriage*, which is intended to assist parishes in forming and preparing engaged couples to embrace better the vocation of marriage and build up the domestic church. The Church needs evangelized and catechized married couples. For this reason, we must better utilize the months of immediate preparation in anticipation of the wedding ceremony and present to them a good formation for marriage.

Pope Saint John Paul II taught that marriage preparation is properly understood as a gradual and prolonged process. That process includes three main stages: remote, proximate, and immediate, together with continuing accompaniment to sustain and nurture the marital relationship (*Familiaris consortio*, 66). As Pope Francis has succinctly said, “For every couple, marriage preparation begins at birth” (*Amoris laetitia*, 208).

The remote, proximate, and immediate stages of marriage preparation are described in Section II of the Directory. However, the focus of these norms is on the immediate stage that takes place in the weeks and months prior to the wedding.

This immediate preparation stage is an ideal time for the Church to accompany the engaged parties on their journey toward the vocation of marriage. As the engaged couple anticipates life together as a married couple, there is likely an openness to evangelization, catechesis, and sacramental preparation, which is offered in a spirit of generosity. This evangelization, catechesis, and sacramental preparation are facilitated through the initial meeting and follow up sessions with the priest or deacon, Pre-Marital Assessment, catechetical formation for marriage, Natural Family Planning instruction, and a new element of marriage preparation, which we have named, *Engaged Couple Sponsors*.

The role of Engaged Couple Sponsors is like that of the sponsors in the Christian initiation of adults: to form a parish-based relationship with the engaged couple that bears witness to the Sacrament of Matrimony in its lived reality. Through loving, encouraging, and listening to the engaged couple, the sponsors welcome the parties anew into a living relationship with Jesus. The marriage preparation process is intended to form couples to live a Christ-centered vocation as husband and wife. This formation/accompaniment is experienced through the relationships developed with Engaged Couple Sponsors. Ideally, these relationships will continue after the wedding as couple sponsors nurture the friendships formed during marriage preparation. As mentors to the newlyweds, this will further encourage accompaniment.

May the Holy Spirit guide us as we offer our engaged couples a more extended marriage preparation process to live fully and joyfully their vocation of marriage and build up the domestic church.

This *Directory for the Preparation for Marriage* shall take effect in the Diocese of Stockton for couples making their initial contact with the parish on April 1, 2023.

Given this 1st day of March, two thousand twenty-three in the Diocese of Stockton.

+The Most Reverend Myron J. Cotta
Bishop of Stockton

Dyan Hollenhorst
Chancellor

I. INTRODUCTION

“The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring, has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between the baptized.”¹

“Preparation for marriage, for married and family life, is of great importance for the good of the Church. In fact, the Sacrament of Marriage has great value for the whole Christian community and, in the first place, for the spouses whose decision is such that it cannot be improvised or made hastily.”²

“What is called ‘preparation’ . . . includes a broad and thorough process of *education* for married life which must be considered in the totality of its values The very reality of marriage is so rich that it first requires a process of sensitization so that the engaged will feel the need to prepare themselves for it.”³ Engaged couples “should be helped to perceive the attraction of a complete union that elevates and perfects the social dimension of existence, gives sexuality its deepest meaning, and benefits children by offering them the best context for their growth and development.”⁴

These norms are intended, therefore, to ensure proper discernment by engaged couples and accompaniment of them by marriage ministries and other pastoral ministers, along with sufficient formation for undertaking and living Christian marriage. They are also intended to help them prepare well for Matrimony and to understand fully their commitment to living out their vocation in and for the community of the Church. As St. John Paul II has stated, “The New Evangelization must be a nuptial movement.”

Specific canons are cited where appropriate so that the origin of each section will be clear.

A. SPIRITUAL VISION OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

The mutual self-giving love of husband and wife signifies the love of Christ for his Bride, the Church, and the love of the Church for her Bridegroom, Christ.

¹ 1983 Code of Canon Law (CIC), c. 1055 §1.

² Pontifical Council for the Family, *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage* (1996), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (On Love in the Family, March 19, 2016), 205.

The plan of God for Christian marriage begins with the creation of humanity as a communion of persons made in the image of God. As Genesis states, “God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them.”⁵

God is love and, in himself, he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. *Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.*⁶

Entering into marriage is a response to God’s call for the man and woman to become “one flesh” in mutual self-giving.⁷ The couple then becomes the symbol of the covenant that binds God and humankind together in a permanent and faithful bond. In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI states that one meaning of love “stands out” among all others, namely, the “love between man and woman, where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness.”⁸

God’s covenant with his people is expressed as a marriage (see Hosea, Song of Songs). St. Paul takes the teaching of the one-flesh union and applies it to the plan of God, calling it a “mystery”, a sacrament, of the union of Christ and the Church. In the final book of the New Testament, the joy of heaven is repeatedly compared to a wedding feast, that of the Lamb, Christ, and the Bride, the Church. (see Rev 19:7-9; 21:2; 22:17). God has made marriage a sacred sign of the consummation of his entire saving plan.

Marriage is thus not a peripheral issue in the Christian life. It finds itself at the heart of the Christian mystery and serves to illuminate it. Indeed, we cannot understand the Church herself, said Pope John Paul II, “unless we keep in mind the ‘great mystery’ involved in the creation of man as male and female and the vocation of both to conjugal love”⁹

Through Christian revelation, we recognize two ways of realizing that personal and fundamental vocation to love: marriage and virginity/celebracy.

The Second Vatican Council states that “husbands and wives find their proper vocation in being witnesses of the faith and love of Christ to one another and to their children. The Christian

⁵ Gn 1:27.

⁶ John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, November 22, 1981), 11.

⁷ Gn 2:24.

⁸ Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est* (God Is Love, December 25, 2005), 2.

⁹ John Paul II, Letter *Gratissimam Sane* (Letter to Families, February 2, 1994), 19.

family proclaims aloud both the present power of the kingdom of God and the hope of the blessed life to come.”¹⁰

By virtue of their baptism, the marriage of two Christians is a sacrament, a *living sign* that the couple truly communicates and participates in the love of Christ and the Church. Hence, baptism is described as a “nuptial bath,”¹¹ and the Eucharist is understood as the sacramental consummation of the marriage between Christ and the Church. The same Holy Spirit that unites us with Christ as the Church forms the bond that unites spouses in the sacrament of marriage. This is the “profound mystery” in which marriage participates.

The Eucharist, then, is the very source of Christian marriage. “In the Eucharistic gift of charity the Christian family finds the foundation and soul of its ‘communion’ and its ‘mission,’”¹² that is, to love as God loves. We see this in the Church’s preference that marriages between Catholics be celebrated during the Eucharist itself.

B. THE IMPORTANCE OF MARRIAGE PREPARATION

Although these marriage preparation norms are meant to address the time immediately preceding a couple’s marriage, it is important to realize that marriage preparation is truly something that occurs in various ways throughout a person’s upbringing. Pope John Paul II taught that marriage preparation is properly understood as a gradual and prolonged process. That process includes three main stages: **remote**, **proximate**, and **immediate**, together with continuing accompaniment afterwards to sustain and nurture the marital relationship.¹³ As Pope Francis has succinctly said, “For every couple, marriage preparation begins at birth.”¹⁴

1. Remote preparation begins in early childhood and includes all family and environmental factors that influence the person in positive and negative ways regarding marriage. It is through the “family of origin” that role models, values, traditions, attitudes, communication styles, etc. play a major part in a person’s formation. The Church’s support of family life during the formative years is critical in building strong families through which children can grow and learn.¹⁵

It is in the family that parents are “by word and example . . . the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each

¹⁰ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral constitution *Lumen gentium*, 35.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1617.

¹² *Familiaris Consortio*, 57.

¹³ *Familiaris consortio*, 65-69; cf. 1983 CIC c. 1063.

¹⁴ *Amoris laetitia*, 208.

¹⁵ USCCB, *Faithful to Each Other Forever* (1988), 10–20.

child”¹⁶ It is also critical to address the role of media and the importance of media education during this stage of young people’s development.¹⁷

2. **Proximate preparation** begins at a suitable age, usually around the time of puberty. It is the responsibility of parents and guardians, along with pastoral ministers, to provide integration of the religious formation of young people with their preparation for life as possible future spouses.
3. **Immediate preparation** for the celebration of matrimony takes place in the weeks and months immediately prior to the wedding. Two major aspects of immediate preparation are assessment of the couple’s readiness to marry and formation in the vocation of marriage.

3.1 Assessment of the couple’s readiness to marry includes ensuring that the parties are sufficiently knowledgeable about themselves and their intended spouse, the consent they will give, as well as the prenuptial investigation required by canon law (c. 1067), which ascertains that the parties are, in fact, free to marry each other. “The timely preparation of engaged couples by the parish community should also assist them to recognize eventual problems and risks. In this way, they can come to realize the wisdom of breaking off a relationship whose failure and painful aftermath can be foreseen. In their initial enchantment with one another, couples can attempt to conceal or relativize certain things and to avoid disagreements; only later do problems surface. For this reason, they should be strongly encouraged to discuss what each expects from marriage, what they understand by love and commitment, what each wants from the other and what kind of life they would like to build together. Such discussions would help them to see if they in fact have little in common and to realize that mutual attraction alone will not suffice to keep them together. Nothing is more volatile, precarious, and unpredictable than desire. The decision to marry should never be encouraged unless the couple has discerned deeper reasons that will ensure a genuine and stable commitment.”¹⁸

3.2 Formation in the vocation of marriage should be a special experience for those engaged couples who choose to be married in the Catholic Church. It is a time when engaged couples can be helped to

- Experience a sense of welcome and involvement with the pastoral Church.
- Evaluate their readiness to live married life and confront any obstacles.
- Gain insights of themselves individually and as a couple.
- Obtain a deeper understanding of Christian marriage.

¹⁶ *Lumen gentium*, 11.

¹⁷ *Faithful to Each Other Forever*, 23–54.

¹⁸ *Amoris laetitia*, 209.

- Understand the mission of a married couple both in the Church and in society.
- Develop a greater appreciation and living out of their faith.

This special experience is best facilitated through personal accompaniment of engaged couples by those involved in their preparation, especially clergy and Engaged Couple Sponsors. The role of Engaged Couple Sponsors is described in Section III B.

It must also be recognized that many who come for immediate preparation for marriage may in some ways be ignorant of the demands of Christian life and the Church's vision of marriage. For those involved in ministry to the engaged, particularly Engaged Couple Sponsors, formal marriage prep program presenters, and clergy, this time is an important pastoral opportunity for *evangelization*. Those coming for marriage may have little practice or knowledge of the faith or may manifest other shortcomings or difficulties with Christian doctrine and practice. Preparation for marriage is an opportunity to invite them to a deeper relationship with Christ and his Church.

The complexity of today's society and the challenges faced by the family require a greater effort on the part of the whole Christian community in preparing those who are about to be married. The importance of the virtues needs to be included. Among these, chastity proves invaluable for the genuine growth of love between persons.¹⁹

Immediate preparation for marriage includes not only catechesis and formation for married life but also experiences of prayer and "a suitable liturgical preparation which also envisages the active participation of the engaged, with special attention to the Sacrament of Reconciliation."²⁰

II. THE GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR MARRIAGE PREPARATION

A. Hospitality

The couple's first contact with the parish is crucial, setting the stage for the rest of the preparation process. The parties have made a decision to come forward and ask to be married in the Church. They may not have been active in Church for some time, and even regular churchgoers have many questions about their upcoming wedding and marriage; some may not have completed their sacraments of initiation. Teachable moments during the marriage preparation process are excellent opportunities for evangelization; how pastoral ministers handle them will say much to the couples about who we are as a Church. The pastor and his

¹⁹ *Amoris laetitia*, 206.

²⁰ *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, 50.

delegates, including the parish receptionist and other office staff members, must welcome the couple as Christ would, that is, with “a warm and caring, positive and joyful attitude of hospitality.”²¹ John Paul II said that, while “the faith of person(s) seeking marriage can exist in varying degrees, it is the primary duty of pastors to facilitate a rediscovery of this faith, nourishing it and bringing it to maturity.”²²

B. Marriage Preparation Period

To ensure that the engaged couple has adequate time to prepare in a serious way, the initial contact with the Church must be made at least nine months in advance of the couple’s proposed wedding date. *One year is ideal*. Concluding no closer than eight weeks prior to the wedding date, this preparation time is not just a “waiting period” for the ceremony but rather an important, teachable moment in preparation for the lifetime journey on which the couple is about to embark. “Both short-term and long-term marriage preparation should ensure that the couple do not view the wedding ceremony as the end of the road, but instead embark upon marriage as a life-long calling based on a firm and realistic decision to face all trials and difficult moments together.”²³ Each faith community is advised to publish this requirement in its bulletin and website on a regular basis. The seriousness with which this responsibility of preparation is undertaken shows the seriousness with which the Church sees the responsibility and weight of the marriage decision.

Quality is more important than quantity, and priority should be given—along with a renewed proclamation of the kerygma—to an attractive and helpful presentation of information that can help couples to live the rest of their lives together “with great courage and generosity”. Marriage preparation should be a kind of “initiation” to the sacrament of matrimony, providing couples with the help they need to receive the sacrament worthily and to make a solid beginning of life as a family.²⁴

In a particular case and for a just and reasonable cause, pastors are granted the faculty to dispense from the nine-month preparation period for marriage taking place in their parish (see c. 89).

C. Responsibility for Immediate Preparation for Marriage (1983 CIC cc. 1066–1070)

²¹ *Faithful to Each Other Forever*, 59.

²² *Familiaris consortio*, 68.

²³ *Amoris laetitia*, 211.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

Immediate preparation for marriage begins when the engaged couple contacts the parish. This is a time for the couple and pastor (or his delegate) to engage in assessment and education for a lifetime commitment to family living within the Church. The pastor or his delegate (ideally the priest or deacon who will preside or witness the marriage), after being contacted by either party residing in the parish to which he is assigned, is the one responsible to see that:

1. The parties participate in an assessment of their readiness to marry each other.
2. The couple has personal preparation for entering marriage so that, through such preparation, the parties may be predisposed toward the holiness and duties of their new state (c. 1063, 2°).
3. The premarital investigation is conducted so that it is evident that nothing stands in the way of the valid and licit celebration of the marriage (c. 1066).

D. Responsibility in the Case of a Visiting Cleric

(1983 CIC c. 1111)

Whenever a priest or deacon is invited from outside the parish to assist (preside or witness) a marriage, the pastor of the parish or the local ordinary must delegate the visiting cleric. This delegation is more than giving permission; it is the granting of authority (faculty) to witness the exchange of consent in the name of the Church. The delegation is required for validity.

- **Note 1:** A record of delegation granted is to be included in the Prenuptial Documents and entered in the marriage register. See Appendix II for sample delegation.
- **Note 2:** It is permissible for the visiting cleric to handle the marriage preparation, but the pastor of one of the parties retains the responsibility to see that this is completed appropriately.

The visiting cleric must be in good standing in accordance with diocesan policy. An Affidavit of Suitability for the cleric from his diocese or religious community is to be sent to the Office for Priests at least two weeks before the wedding.

E. Setting of a Tentative Wedding Date

Discussion of a tentative wedding date may take place during the initial contact with the priest or deacon. **Note:** This date is not to be finalized until the assessment process has been completed.

F. Place of Wedding and Proper Liturgical Order

The proper place for the wedding in the Latin Church is the parish of the Catholic party, or, if both parties are Catholic, either of their parishes (c. 1115). If an Eastern Catholic is a party to the marriage, the proper parish is that of the groom (Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches [CCEO] c. 831 §2).

Within the parish, “a marriage between Catholics or between a Catholic party and a non-Catholic baptized party is to be celebrated in a parish church. It can be celebrated in another church or oratory with the permission of the local ordinary or pastor” (c. 1118). A Catholic marrying a non-baptized person can also celebrate marriage in a suitable place (c. 1118 §3).

Permission to celebrate marriage outside a church or oratory can be requested from the Bishop of Stockton. Catholics interested in requesting this permission are directed to the diocesan “Policy on the Place of Marriage”, which can be found at [Policy-on-the-Place-of-Marriage-1.pdf \(stocktondiocese.org\)](https://www.stocktondiocese.org/PDF/Policy-on-the-Place-of-Marriage-1.pdf).

III. ASSESSMENT OF READINESS FOR MARRIAGE

“Sacred ministers cannot deny the sacraments to those who seek them at appropriate times, are properly disposed, and are not prohibited by law from receiving them” (c. 843 §1). At the same time, ministers have the duty to see to it that those who seek the sacraments are prepared to receive them (c. 843 §2). The canons on marriage further state that all persons are able to contract marriage unless they are prohibited by law (c. 1058). Before a marriage is celebrated, it must be evident that nothing prevents its valid or licit celebration (c. 1066).

The pastor or his delegate is encouraged to facilitate and complete the assessment process within the first month after his initial contact with the engaged couple.

The purpose of the premarital assessment process is to assist the engaged couple evaluate their readiness to enter the vocation of marriage with each other. It includes (1) completion of a premarital inventory, (2) a facilitated discussion of the inventory, and (3) dialogue on issues of potentially significant impact on the proposed marriage.

One of the first facts to ascertain is whether either or both parties have any previous marriage (s) or other impediments or obstacles that would prevent a valid or licit celebration. These facts must be addressed before proceeding with other aspects of the assessment process.

A decision to proceed with or delay the wedding is made by the priest or deacon with the couple, following the assessment process. The wedding date is finalized only after the decision to proceed has been made.

If the couple is asked to delay the wedding, whether it be for one or more of the special circumstances outlined in these norms or for any other serious reason(s), it is the responsibility of the pastor or his delegate working with the parties to help find a way to overcome the impediments or other obstacles, if possible.

IV. MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROCESS STEPS

Four aspects mark the process of immediate preparation for marriage: assessment of the parties for marriage; catechetical and spiritual formation for marriage; canonical preparation for marriage; and liturgical preparation for the wedding. These four are intended to be accomplished in the Diocese of Stockton through the six steps of the Diocesan Marriage Preparation Process:

- A. The initial interview between the engaged couple and the pastor or his delegate.
- B. Regular or occasional meetings with the person(s) tasked with accompanying the couple preparing for marriage, Engaged Couple Sponsors.
- C. The use of an approved premarital assessment or inventory to facilitate dialogue between the couple and the priest, deacon, or pastoral minister.
- D. Participation of the couple in a formal marriage preparation program.
- E. Participation of the couple in a Natural Family Planning (NFP) class in the method preferred by the couple.
- F. Planning the Wedding Liturgy.

The *Guide to Planning Your Catholic Wedding* is a one-page document intended to be given to engaged couples to assist them in making the most of the immediate preparation process.

A. Engaged Couple Interview

When a request is made to schedule a wedding, the pastor or his delegate first arranges an appointment to meet with the engaged couple. The assessment process begins with this initial contact with the engaged couple. To evaluate the readiness of the couple to be married in the Catholic Church, the pastor or his delegate will interview the couple sufficiently so that he becomes acquainted with them.

Those responsible for accompanying the couple—priests, deacons, Engaged Couple Sponsors, and other pastoral ministers—may assist with any additional preparation, such as facilitating the approved assessment/inventory instrument (Prepare/Enrich, PMI, Fully Engaged, or FOCCUS), teaching NFP classes, etc.

Discussion points may include individual maturity, practice and experience of the faith, suitability as a couple, current religious practices, previous marriages, and views on Christian marriage. The goals are to

- Establish a good rapport with the couple, facilitating the rest of the preparation process.
- Reinforce the sacred nature of marriage for the couple.
- Help the couple embrace a preparation process for the whole of married life, not just for the ceremony.
- Identify any special circumstances that need to be addressed during the preparation process.

B. Accompaniment of Engaged Couples – Engaged Couple Sponsors

In addition to ensuring that engaged couples attend at least one formal marriage preparation program, every parish should also provide each engaged couple with persons to accompany them. We refer to these persons as Engaged Couple Sponsors. They may serve as an individual or a married couple. The goal of this one-on-one contact is much like the role of the sponsor in the Christian initiation process: to form a parish-based friendship with the engaged couple that bears witness to Matrimony in its lived reality. Through loving, encouraging, and listening to the engaged couple, the sponsors also welcome them anew into a living relationship with Jesus. They should meet with the engaged couple several times in a more relaxed and social setting, e.g., in their homes, and should also, as appropriate, follow up with them after the wedding.

C. Premarital Assessment or Inventory

An approved premarital assessment or inventory is required because it facilitates the crucial dialogue through which the parties explore the significant issues that affect marriage. Further, it allows the priest, deacon, Engaged Couple Sponsors, and other pastoral ministers to tailor marriage preparation to the couple's specific strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the use of the instrument can support the effectiveness of the couple's experience in one of the formal educational programs required by the Diocese. Because such an instrument supports the overall purpose of marriage preparation, it should be administered as early as possible in the preparation period. The instruments approved for use in the Diocese of Stockton are the following:

FOCCUS	www.foccusinc.com	focus@foccusinc.com 877-883-5422
Prepare/Enrich	www.prepare-enrich.com	cs@lifeinnovations.com 800-331-1661
PMI	https://www.premaritalinventory.net/	Jd8657@gmail.com 800-999-0680
Fully Engaged	www.Getfullyengaged.com	320-253-3540

NOTE: After the priest or deacon meets with the parties to discuss the facilitated conversations about their premarital inventory, a date for the wedding can be set (see Appendix I).

D. Formal Marriage Preparation Programs

Formal Marriage Preparation Programs include:

- Parish-based Marriage Preparation class
- Engaged Encounter Weekends
- Online Marriage Preparation

All couples wishing to be married in the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Stockton must participate in a formal diocesan-approved marriage preparation program. Ideally, this should be scheduled as soon as possible after completion of the Premarital Assessment or Inventory. Since the last months prior to the date of the wedding are filled with so many practical details, it is important that the engaged parties spend quality time early on to properly discern and prepare themselves for the marriage.

No couple should be turned away from a marriage preparation program because of the inability to pay, and care must be taken not to discourage couples who may be in special circumstances.

The pastor or his delegate is responsible for discussing with the engaged couple the program that best meets the couple's needs. Regardless of which marriage preparation program the parties attend, they must obtain from the instructor(s) a certificate of completion that they are to submit to the pastor or his delegate for inclusion in the marriage file. Listed below are descriptions of these programs:

1) Parish-based marriage preparation class

These classes consist of four to six short sessions (one to two hours) usually spaced a week apart, held in small group settings (not more than fifteen engaged couples) at a host parish. They should be taught only by persons—ideally married couples—with “solid doctrinal preparation and unquestionable fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church.”²⁵ Though due attention in these sessions should be given to the life skills that are critical to marriage, “it is essential that the time and care necessary should be devoted to doctrinal preparation. The security of the content must be the center and essential goal of the course”²⁶ Though a parish will offer these classes mainly for the sake of its own engaged couples, it may also serve as a “magnet parish” and welcome couples from other parishes, especially those that have not yet developed such a program. A variety of published materials can be used in these sessions.

²⁵ *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, 43.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48, quoting John Paul II, “Concluding Discourse to the General Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family” (1991).

2) Engaged Encounter Weekend and Online Preparation

Engaged Encounter offers both in-person weekends and online preparation. Both the weekend retreat and online preparation are presented by Catholic married couples and a priest. They are designed to help engaged couples self-reflect, communicate, and understand various aspects of the vocation of marriage. The main thrust of the process is personal reflection and dialogue. Engaged couples can find more information and registration options at the diocesan Engaged Encounter website (www.stocktonee.com) or the National Engaged Encounter website (www.engagedencounter.org). Couples may attend programs sponsored by Stockton Engaged Encounter or those sponsored by Engaged Encounter groups of other dioceses.

3) Online Marriage Preparation

An online course is also available through CatholicMarriagePrep.com. This interactive course is rooted in John Paul II's Theology of the Body and focuses on the building of strong, Christ-centered marriages. The course lasts from one week (minimum) to three months (maximum) depending upon the couple's pace. The parties are assigned a personal instructor who follows them throughout the course. There are worksheets that cover all aspects of marriage preparation, from God's plan for marriage and family to practical tools that help develop a successful relationship. Engaged couples can find more information or registration options at the Online Marriage Preparation tab at www.catholicmarriageprep.com.

E. Natural Family Planning

Natural Family Planning (NFP) uses fertility awareness—knowledge of a couple's fertility—in planning for children. In Natural Family Planning, the spouses learn to understand, accept, and use their God-given phases of fertility and infertility for the purpose of achieving or avoiding pregnancy. In this way, the unitive and procreative, the love-giving and life-giving meanings of sexual intercourse are maintained together in a morally responsible way.²⁷

In a society where many, even many Catholics, reject the Church's teaching on artificial contraception (often without fully understanding it), it is essential that couples be presented with the Church's teaching in a pastoral manner, together with the acceptable methods of responsible parenthood the Church commends.

The Natural Family Planning component of marriage preparation is to be sufficient instruction (as determined by the NFP instructor) to be able to practice the NFP method chosen by the couple. A certificate of completion issued by the instructor must be submitted to the pastor or his delegate for inclusion in the marriage file. The pastor may dispense from the Natural Family

²⁷ See *Familiaris consortio*, 11, 32.

Planning component of marriage preparation for couples who are beyond childbearing years. In such circumstances the pastor must include in the marriage file a letter dispensing the couple from this requirement, specifying the couple's age as the reason for doing so.

Engaged couples can find a list of available instructors and online options at the Natural Family Planning page of the Diocese of Stockton website (<https://stocktondiocese.org/natural-family-planning>).

F. Preparing the Wedding Liturgy

Couple will schedule meetings with the Priest, Deacon, or Marriage Coordinator to prepare the wedding liturgy, including the readings, prayer options, music, etc.

The first decision in preparing the wedding liturgy is to choose the appropriate rite from the three rites included in the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*:

1) Order of Celebrating Matrimony within Mass

The Church prefers that the marriage of two Catholics be celebrated with the celebration of the Eucharist. A priest must always preside at this celebration and assist at the marriage of the parties.

2) Order of Celebrating Matrimony without Mass

This rite is used when a Catholic marries a non-Catholic Christian, when a deacon assists at the marriage, or when a priest has already celebrated (or will celebrate) the Eucharist twice that day. Note that the permission of the local ordinary is required for the marriage of a Catholic and non-Catholic Christian to be celebrated during the Eucharist (OCM 36).

3) Order of Celebrating Matrimony between a Catholic and a Catechumen or a Non-Christian

A Catholic marrying a non-Christian must use this rite when marrying. A priest or deacon may assist at the marriage. This rite is also used when a catechumen wishes to marry a non-Catholic in the Catholic Church.

Those assisting couples in preparing the Wedding Liturgy should consider this an opportunity for catechesis and evangelization. May the preparation of the liturgy and the planning of the liturgy be an encounter with Christ.

V. CANONICAL PREPARATION FOR MARRIAGE:

The canonical preparation for marriage endeavors to ensure the parties are free to marry and free in marrying each other. This is accomplished through interviews with the parties and others who have known them, as well as the collection of documents attesting to their free status. The following commonly used documents and additional permissions and dispensations are described in this section:

- Prenuptial Inquiry Forms for the Bride and Groom
- Baptismal Certificate
- Confirmation Certificate
- Prenuptial Witness Forms
- Petition for Dispensation from the Impediment of Disparity of Cult
- Permission for Mixed Marriage
- Petition for Dispensation from Canonical Form
- Request for Testimonial Letters (*Nihil Obstat*)

A. Prenuptial Inquiry

The completion of the Prenuptial Inquiry (Form A: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE BRIDE OR GROOM) is required to establish the freedom of each party to marry the other, identifying any impediments to the proposed marriage (cc. 1066–1067 and 1083–1094), as well as to assure the Church that the bride and groom freely wish to marry one another at this time. It also explores the engaged couple's understanding of the Catholic teaching on marriage.

The bride and groom must be interviewed separately by the pastor or his delegate. This is a confidential church document and should be kept in a secured file with the documents noted below, as well as the results of the pre-marital assessment, the certificate of completion of a formal marriage preparation program, and the certificate of completion of a Natural Family Planning course in the method of the couple's choice.

B. Baptismal Certificate

A baptismal certificate is needed for Catholics and baptized non-Catholics to verify the fact of baptism and status as Christians. For Catholics, the certificate and its notations will facilitate the registration and notifications required by canon law after the celebration of the marriage (cc. 1121–1122). Catholics can obtain their baptismal certificate from the parish of their baptism. A recent, original certificate (i.e., one issued in the last six months) with complete marginal notations is required. The reason the certificate must be recent is that the marginal notations may

reveal an impediment due to a prior valid bond, sacred orders, or perpetual religious profession (cc. 1085, 1087, and 1088).

Catholics who were baptized in a non-Catholic Church or ecclesial community and later received into full communion of the Catholic Church can obtain a certificate of reception into full communion from the parish in which the reception was celebrated.

Non-Catholic Christians must also provide documentary proof of their baptism. Depending on the practice of the non-Catholic Church or ecclesial community, this proof may be a certificate, letter attesting to baptism, or even a copy of the pages from the baptism register.

Should difficulties develop in locating proof of baptism for either a Catholic or non-Catholic party, the Tribunal is to be contacted for other ways to supply the needed proof.

C. Confirmation Certificate

“Catholics who have not yet received the sacrament of confirmation are to receive it before they are admitted to marriage *if it can be done without grave inconvenience.*” (c. 1065). The parish issuing the current baptismal certificate is to include the notations for confirmation and First Communion, if known. A confirmation certificate can be obtained from the parish of confirmation.

D. Prenuptial Witness Form (Letters of Freedom)

Each party is to provide at least one witness to attest to his or her freedom to marry. The Prenuptial Witness Form (Form B: PRE-MARRIAGE WITNESS TESTIMONY) is to be used to (1) verify freedom to marry; (2) investigate the attitude of both parents when a party is under twenty-one [21] years of age; (3) investigate stability of the proposed marriage when either party is under eighteen [18] years of age; and (4) assist in proving baptism when a certificate is unavailable. Parental testimony is preferred for the Form B, but any person who has known the party for a long time can serve as this witness.

E. Petition for Dispensation from the Impediment of Disparity of Cult (Worship)

Marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person is invalid without a dispensation from the impediment of disparity of cult (c. 1086).

A petition for dispensation from the impediment of disparity of cult is used to request from the local ordinary authorization for a Catholic to marry a non-baptized person. It is also used when a Catholic marries a doubtfully baptized person, either because the fact of the baptism is doubtful, or the validity of the baptism is in doubt. In the petition, the Catholic party (1) declares “that he

or she is prepared to remove dangers of defecting from the faith” and (2) makes “a sincere promise to do all in his or her power so that all offspring are baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church” (c. 1125, 1°). The non-Catholic spouse is to be informed of the Catholic’s declaration and promise; and both parties are to be instructed in the ends of marriage (c. 1125, 2° and 3°). Failure to obtain a dispensation from the impediment of disparity of cult renders a marriage invalid.

The completed petition is sent to the Judicial Vicar at the Pastoral Center, where it will be signed, recorded, and returned to the pastoral minister for inclusion in the marriage file. The fact of dispensation is to be recorded in the Notations area in the Marriage Register.

F. Permission for Mixed Marriage

Marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic requires permission of the local ordinary or his delegate (cc. 1124–1125).

A petition for permission for a mixed marriage is used when permission is needed for a Catholic to marry a baptized non-Catholic. In the petition, the Catholic party (1) declares “that he or she is prepared to remove dangers of defecting from the faith” and (2) makes “a sincere promise to do all in his or her power so that all offspring are baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church” (c. 1125, 1°). The non-Catholic spouse is to be informed of the Catholic’s declaration and promise; and both parties are to be instructed in the ends of marriage (c. 1125, 2° and 3°). Failure to obtain the permission renders the marriage illicit.

The completed petition is sent to the Judicial Vicar at the Pastoral Center, where it will be signed, recorded, and returned to the pastoral minister for inclusion in the marriage file. The fact of permission is to be recorded in the Notations area in the Marriage Register.

G. Petition for Dispensation from Canonical Form

The canonical form of marriage in the Catholic Church consists of the presence of the bride and groom, the delegated assisting minister, and two witnesses, during which time the assisting minister asks for and receives the consent of the spouses (c. 1108). For the validity of their marriage, Catholics are obliged to exchange consent in canonical form. When serious difficulties are present, however, the requirement of canonical form can be dispensed (c. 1127).

A petition for dispensation from canonical form is used when a Catholic wishes to marry a non-Catholic outside canonical form but in a public celebration of marriage. Because two Catholics marrying cannot be dispensed from the observance of canonical form, the petition for a dispensation from canonical form will always include a petition for a dispensation from the impediment of disparity of cult or for permission for mixed marriage.

The completed petition is sent to the Judicial Vicar at the Pastoral Center, where it will be processed, recorded, and returned to the pastoral minister for inclusion in the marriage file. The fact of dispensation is to be recorded in the Notations area in the Marriage Register.

H. Status of Documents (*Nihil Obstat*)

A Request for Testimonial Letters is used when the priest or deacon prepares premarital documents for another diocese where the wedding will take place. The form is completed and sent to the Judicial Vicar at the Pastoral Center with all the original documents created during the marriage preparation process (i.e., prenuptial inquiry forms; prenuptial witness forms; baptismal and confirmation certificates; any completed petitions for a dispensation from the impediment of disparity of cult, mixed marriage, or dispensation from canonical form; and certificates for the completion of marriage catechesis and Natural Family Planning). After reviewing the complete marriage file, the Judicial Vicar will forward it to the diocesan chancery of the place of marriage, which, in turn, will send it to the parish where the marriage will take place. This procedure, with all premarital documents and permission of the pastor (c. 1115), assures the authenticity of the documents from diocese to diocese and their acceptance at the parish.

Note 1: Before sending the original documents to the Judicial Vicar at the Pastoral Center, the pastoral minister is prudent to make two copies of the complete file. One set should be kept in the parish until the celebration of the marriage. The other should be given to the parties to carry with them to the place of marriage in case the mailed originals get lost in the mail.

Note 2: The documents listed above (A, D–H) are available at the parish office or on the Tribunal’s page on the diocesan website.

Note 3: Status of Documents for marriages outside the diocese **MUST** be received by the Tribunal two (2) months in advance of the date of the wedding, otherwise, there is no guarantee of timely processing.

VI. STATE OF CALIFORNIA MARRIAGE LICENSE REQUIREMENTS

A valid marriage license from the State of California is **necessary** before a sacred minister can assist at the marriage of a Catholic. The marriage license can be obtained at a county clerk’s office. If the Catholic marriage is the regularization of a civil marriage, a copy of the civil marriage license is to be included in the marriage file.

VII. SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

A. Marriage of non-practicing Catholics

In the case of non-practicing Catholics who request to be married in the Diocese of Stockton, the pastor or his delegate needs to ask the couple to clearly articulate the reasons for their request. While the Church *does* admit to marriage those who are imperfectly disposed, mere social convention, parental pressure, or preference for setting provide no justification for marriage in the Catholic Church.

It is proper to expect that couples participate at Sunday Mass regularly and are in the state of grace, particularly at the time of the celebration of marriage. If they are not participating at Mass regularly, they should be warmly invited to do so. They should also be offered further instruction in the life of faith beyond what is required by the norms set forth in the policies. Whether and how couples are approached in this regard can mean the difference between continued alienation from the Church or renewed involvement. For those who are struggling in the practice of the faith, it may be prudent to celebrate the Order of Matrimony outside of Mass.

B. Pregnancy

Premarital pregnancy, although it understandably creates a sense of urgency in the minds of the couple and their parents, does not, of itself, constitute adequate justification for marriage or for the abbreviation of the marriage preparation process. Statistics indicate that the majority of marriages involving a premarital pregnancy end in divorce. In fact, marriage due to pregnancy may itself be the cause of an invalidating defect of consent and must be handled with the utmost care and discernment.

If pregnancy is the motivating cause for the marriage, the parties should be strongly recommended to undergo counseling, and, if either person is under eighteen years of age, the parents/guardians of both parties are to be consulted (in addition to the requirements of civil law). In any case, the couple should be strongly advised to delay the wedding until after the birth of the child.

Factors that need to be considered include the parties' maturity and readiness for marriage, their freedom from parental and social pressure, their capacity to manage the financial responsibilities of a family, and the possibility of adoption. A premarital inventory is valuable in assessing the maturity of young couples in these difficult circumstances. In many cases, pastors and their delegates find it appropriate to recommend counseling. Parents and guardians should be invited to participate in the discernment process to assist the parties in the evaluation of their motivation

and readiness for marriage. Regardless of the ultimate decision, both parties must be strongly advised of their continued moral responsibility to each other and their child.

C. Marriage after the Death of a Previous Spouse

In the case of a proposed marriage following the death of a previous spouse, care should be taken that the person has recovered from the grief of separation.

It is often incorrectly assumed that, because a widow(er) comes to a new marriage with a person who may also have lost his or her spouse, the parties do not need a premarital inventory or catechesis. Both the inventory and marriage formation are essential for these proposed marriages because one or both parties may bring expectations from the previous marriage to the new one. The period of marriage preparation can assist the spouses in understanding that, while they may understand marriage based on their previous experience,, they must discern marriage to a new partner. Furthermore, the inventory and marriage formation will explore the impact of the children and grandchildren from the previous marriage on the proposed marriage.

D. Marriage after a Previous Union

The Church desires to strengthen the faith and devotion of divorced and civilly remarried Catholics, particularly when they have endured painful personal experiences that increase their desire for unity with the Church community.

Towards Christians who live in this situation, and who often keep the faith and desire to bring up their children in a Christian manner, clergy and the whole community must manifest an attentive solicitude, so that they do not consider themselves separated from the Church, in whose life they can and must participate as baptized persons.²⁸

Priests have a duty to “accompany [the divorced and remarried] in helping them to understand their situation according to the teaching of the Church . . . a process of accompaniment and discernment which guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God.”²⁹

Particular pastoral concern is required to meet the special needs of couples requesting marriage following a previous union that ended in divorce. Before proceeding with marriage preparation, the pastor must be careful to ascertain that both parties are canonically free to marry and that all responsibilities towards any children of the previous union have been satisfied (c. 1071 §1, 3°). Immediate marriage preparation may not begin, nor a wedding date be set, until *after* these obligations have been satisfactorily discharged. Before the parties can enter a new union, the

²⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1651. See also *Amoris laetitia*, 299.

²⁹ *Amoris laetitia*, 300.

minister must take care that any previously invalidating circumstances do not continue into the new union. In this regard, the pastor or his delegate should be aware of any *vetitum* or *monitum* placed by a tribunal when a declaration of nullity has been granted, ensuring that the circumstances have been properly addressed.

E. Regularization of a Civil Marriage Celebrated by a Catholic

When Catholic parties have already exchanged vows in a civil or religious ceremony outside the Catholic Church and seek to regularize their union within the Church, the priest or deacon must assess the motivation for the request. In the case of parties who marry contrary to the laws of the Church, the regularization of the marriage outside canonical form is permitted after they have completed the preparation steps of this Marriage Preparation Directory. The regularization of a civil marriage is not simply the renewal of the consent previously exchanged in another setting but the exchange of genuine consent and the creation of a true marriage. It is important to note that a regularization is not a “blessing” of an invalid union. It is a commitment and an exchange of vows in the sight of the Christian community—this is the actual celebration of marriage in the eyes of the Church. It calls for a full and complete preparation—one that takes into consideration the different needs for a couple in this circumstance. Under certain circumstances it may be more appropriate to seek a sanation of the civil marriage rather than a regularization. The diocesan Tribunal can be contacted to facilitate the sanation petition.

If the marriage celebrated outside canonical form has taken place recently, the priest or deacon will want to determine the motivation of the couple to get married in the Church at this time and the reason for marrying outside the Church in the first place. Possible concerns to address are whether the parties married “out of the Church” because another priest wanted to delay their marriage or if there is pressure from the family to get married in the Church now. The relationship will need to be assessed, based on the couple’s needs and experience, to evaluate the reasons for regularizing the union. The priest or deacon needs to discover whether a good appreciation of Christian marriage is present. If the union is already of long duration and seems to be stable, it is unlikely that detailed personal instruction or counseling regarding marriage as such will be needed. Deeper evangelization in the faith may be required. However, in addition to personal meetings with the priest or deacon, formal preparation suited to the couple’s situation is still expected. Note how section F below may apply in these situations.

F. Cohabiting or Otherwise Sexually Active Engaged Couples

The situation of engaged couples who are cohabiting or sexually active requires “a constructive response seeking to transform them into opportunities that can lead to the full reality of marriage

and family in conformity with the Gospel. These couples need to be welcomed and guided patiently and discreetly.”³⁰

Cohabitation is not a canonically established impediment to Matrimony (see c. 1076). This does not, however, negate the responsibility of the priest, deacon, or pastoral minister to assist the couple through personal preparation for entering marriage, so that, through such preparation, the parties may be predisposed “to the holiness and duties of their new state” (c. 1063, 2°). Even if not a formal impediment, the objective situation calls for careful discernment since the nature of cohabitation may make it more difficult for the parties to see themselves individually and as a couple with the objectivity required to choose freely the marital relationship.

Cohabitation is of great concern to pastoral leaders throughout the United States. This is particularly true in the framework of marriage preparation, as an ever-increasing percentage of couples who come to the Church to be married are cohabitating. These couples need to be affirmed for their willingness to take this step. However, the priest or deacon is cautioned to carefully assess the motives of both persons, their readiness for marriage, especially its call to fidelity, and their intent on making this a lifelong commitment.

It has been the constant teaching of Christ and the Catholic Church that sexual intimacy belongs exclusively in marriage. Pope John Paul II stated: “The gift of the body in the sexual relationship is a real symbol of the giving of the whole person.”³¹ Sexual intimacy is the marriage vows incarnated. For the parties to engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage is to trivialize the sacredness and to negate the true meaning of making of a formal, public, and permanent commitment of their whole lives to each other. The Church, therefore, rejects cohabitation and calls on couples to follow Christ’s teaching.

Despite negative statistics about cohabitation, most of the engaged couples coming to the Church to be married have grown up in a culture that accepts and even condones that lifestyle. The fact that many of them are also “unchurched” makes their preparation for Matrimony even more difficult and complicated: When they come to the Catholic Church asking to be married, they see no reason why they should be treated differently than engaged couples marrying in other “venues”.

Good pastoral practice requires that the uniqueness of each individual person be taken into consideration. Cohabiting parties require specialized care depending on their relationship to God and the teaching of the Church, as well as to each other; this means increased attention during marriage preparation. Any pastoral approach should be directed toward the couple’s welfare and not become a bureaucratic barrier that must be negotiated on the way to the altar. The couple should be clearly counseled to refrain from sexual intimacy prior to the wedding. Cohabiting

³⁰ *Amoris laetitia*, 294.

³¹ *Familiaris consortio*, 80.

couples should be encouraged to find other living arrangements. If this is not practical because of children, financial considerations, or other reasons, couples should be instructed to live as brother and sister. Perhaps they can at least arrange to sleep in separate rooms or separated beds. Couples should be reassured that living chastely will also allow them to focus on other aspects of their relationship and improve their intimacy. In some cases, it may also be advisable to postpone the marriage temporarily to allow the parties to come to terms with the call to chastity.

Sincere hospitality, concern, and encouragement are key elements in assisting these couples to realize the Catholic Church cares about them. In general terms, there are four main pastoral goals:

1. Practice charity, patience, and understanding—not merely because of *what* the Church teaches about marriage and sexuality but, more importantly, because of *why* she teaches it.
2. Challenge couples charitably, gently, yet directly to stop having sexual relations until those relations can be an honest expression of their marital commitment.
3. Assist the parties to reflect on their situation and why they decided to cohabit and/or engage in sexual relations. Provide them with tools to address various effects of cohabitation/pre-marital sex that put them at risk for later marital difficulties.
4. Help the spouses heal from the spiritual and emotional wounds they have inflicted upon themselves through their behavior, which, if not healed, will likely have a deleterious effect on their marriage. This includes not only their present relationship but also previous sexually active relationships. At the same time, “respect also can be shown for those signs of love which in some way reflect God’s own love.”³² This should include the sacrament of penance where possible.

After the priest or deacon has asked the parties to consider chaste, separate living and given them sufficient time to reflect on their decision, he should request their commitment to abstain from sexual intimacy until their wedding. If they make that commitment, the usual preparation continues. If they are unwilling to make that commitment, the usual preparation may continue after an admonition from the priest or deacon regarding the serious offence of celebrating marriage while living in conflict with Church teaching and potentially not being in a state of grace.

It is the goal of the preparation process to bring the sexually active/cohabiting couple to realize the sin in sexual activity outside of marriage and the very meaning of the “one flesh” union as a sacramental sign of Christ’s love for the Church. An unrepentant attitude with regard to living unchastely affects how the couple sees and lives sexuality within marriage as well. Thus, an attitude of simply “get them married so it isn’t a sin anymore” is counterproductive and betrays

³² *Amoris laetitia*, 294.

an overly legalistic approach to sin that does not recognize the damage it does, nor provides healing from its effects.

G. Marriage of those with Disabilities

Catholics with disabilities have the right to participate in the sacraments as full members of the local ecclesial community. *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* (USCCB) stresses the importance of all the sacraments and provides general catechetical guidance for celebrating the sacraments with persons with a variety of disabilities.³³

It is essential that all forms of the liturgy be completely accessible to persons with disabilities, since these forms are the essence of the spiritual tie that binds the Christian community together.³⁴ The pastor and his delegates must demonstrate particular care and sensitivity when a disabled person requests marriage in the Diocese of Stockton. Each situation must be assessed individually, and a determination made only after consultation with both family and professionals who can assess the person's level of independence and his or her ability to make a permanent commitment and to live out the responsibilities of marriage.

For matrimonial consent to be valid, it is necessary that the contracting parties possess a sufficient use of reason; that they be free of any grave defect of discretion affecting their judgment about the rights and duties to which they are committing themselves; and that they be capable of assuming the essential obligations of the married state (c. 1095). Minimally, "the contracting parties must be at least not ignorant that marriage is a permanent partnership between a man and a woman ordered to the procreation of offspring by means of some sexual cooperation" (c. 1096 §1).

H. Marriage of Minors

Without the permission of the local ordinary, no minister is to assist at a marriage of a minor (a person under the age of eighteen) when the parents or guardians are unaware of the marriage or are reasonably opposed to it (c. 1071 §1, 6°). As regards civil law, in the State of California a person under 18 years of age must obtain consent from at least one parent or guardian and permission in the form of a court order to marry.

Because marriage is a lifelong commitment, the Diocese of Stockton has a responsibility to ensure that engaged couples truly understand its sacred nature. Many teenagers are not sufficiently mature to successfully bear the obligations and responsibilities of marriage in our

³³ USCCB, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* (June 5, 2017).

³⁴ USCCB, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* (June 5, 2017).

society today (c. 1072). Age clearly does not guarantee maturity, but time is required for a person to achieve the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual development and balance necessary to make the commitment to married life. Clear evidence of immaturity, particularly when reinforced by parental opposition, demands that the Church counsel the couple to delay the marriage. In such a case, the pastor and his delegates should demonstrate utmost respect and sensitivity.

I. Marriage of Couples Over the Age of 35

During the process of marriage preparation, special consideration should be given to engaged couples over the age of thirty-five when both persons are requesting marriage for the first time. The pastor or his delegate is to invite them to proceed with the normal marriage preparation process but offer whatever modifications may be appropriate to address their specific needs. Older couples, by virtue of their longer and richer life experiences, have different needs than engaged couples who enter marriage at a younger age. During the preparation period, the pastor or his delegate should evaluate their emotional stability, capacity to enter a permanent and exclusive relationship, and ability to relinquish their prior financial and social independence. It must never be assumed that a couple is ready for marriage in the Church simply because the parties are older.

J. Causes for Denial or Delay of Marriage

Although people have a natural right to marry, a priest or deacon is not to assist at a marriage unless he is morally certain that nothing impedes its valid and licit celebration (c. 1066). This is done within a continuing process of discernment and accompaniment. “[T]he Church has the responsibility of helping them understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives and offering them assistance so they can reach the fullness of God’s plan for them’, something which is always possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.”³⁵ Nevertheless, “when in spite of all efforts engaged couples show that they reject explicitly and formally what the Church teaches are constitutive elements of marriage, the pastor of souls cannot admit them to the celebration of marriage.”³⁶

This decision is not to be arrived at lightly but must come after prayer and thorough consideration of the problems involved. The decision to delay should be a joint pastoral decision, made by the priest or deacon and the couple with the good of the couple in mind. As a minister, a priest or deacon cannot recommend a civil union (which the Church would not recognize as valid) when the marriage has been delayed or refused.

³⁵ *Amoris laetitia*, 297.

³⁶ *Familiaris consortio*, 68.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of situations that may call for delaying or refusing a marriage.³⁷

- Refusal of the parties to cooperate with the preparation process or participate in good faith. In this case, marriage must be delayed.
- A lack of physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychological maturity required for marriage. In this case, marriage must be refused until this lack is remedied.
- Non-practice of the faith by the Catholic party or parties, with no reasonable hope of resuming such practice. In such a case, the marriage is to be delayed until there is some indication of intent to practice the faith such that the rite could be celebrated with integrity.
- Declaration of intention to deny the other party's right to a permanent and exclusive union. Until the essential marital properties of unity and indissolubility (c. 1056) are not excluded, the marriage must be delayed. If, after all attempts to encourage the person to accept this teaching have failed, the priest or deacon must refuse the marriage, since such an intention constitutes a defect of proper matrimonial consent.
- Refusal to be open to children. By its very nature, marriage is "ordained towards the begetting and education of children."³⁸ If the questions on the Prenuptial Inquiry Form concerning children are answered negatively by one or both of the parties, the marriage is to be delayed until the parties agree to be open to the possibility of children.
- Existence of a canonical impediment (until dispensed). If no dispensation is possible, the marriage cannot be celebrated in the Church.
- Marriage in the Catholic Faith only to satisfy parents, due to parental pressure, or simply for appearance's sake. In such a case, marriage is to be delayed until the couple demonstrates a more substantive motivation for marriage in the Church.
- Indifference to or disdain for the Catholic instruction of their children. In such a case, marriage is to be delayed until this attitude has changed.³⁹

VIII. PASTORAL CARE AFTER THE WEDDING

The U.S. bishops have observed: "Once the wedding is over and the honeymoon a wonderful memory, the real work of marriage begins. The faith community must continue the hospitality

³⁷ This list is adapted from the Marriage Policy of the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C.

³⁸ *Gaudium et spes*, 50.

³⁹ A non-Catholic is not required to promise to raise the children as Catholics but must be informed of the Catholic party's promise to do everything in his or power to do so (see c. 1125, 1°).

and welcome offered during the marriage preparation period, so the couple remains part of the local church.”⁴⁰

Pope John Paul II placed the duty of accompaniment following marriage upon “all the members of the local ecclesial community” who are entrusted with the task of “helping the couple to discover and live their new vocation and mission.”⁴¹

Care for newlyweds is also rooted in awareness that young adults may tend to distance themselves from institutions just when church affiliation could be mutually beneficial.

Ministers need to be aware that 50% of all divorces occur during the first five years of marriage, and 33% of all separations happen within two years.⁴² A national study on the first five years of marriage conducted by the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University listed three problematic issues:

Balancing Time and Relationship: The most intense cluster of problematic issues included balancing job and family, balancing parent and couple time, and time spent with one’s spouse.

Sexual Issues: The second most intense cluster of problematic issues was frequency of sexual relations and unsatisfying sexual relations.

Financial Issues: The third most intense cluster of problematic issues included debt brought into the marriage, financial situations, financial decision-making, the employment of the husband, and the employment of the wife.⁴³

Individuals in our parishes often seek advice for these and other marital problems from friends and/or from parents. But they may be unaware of current programs and resources in the community or not make use of them. There are non-profit organizations and religious movements within the Diocese of Stockton and the United States that offer a wide variety of support for marriage. Some offer specific enrichment programs for married couples. Marriage preparation itself should provide the names of places, people, and services spouses can turn to for help when problems arise.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ NCCB, *Sons and Daughters of the Light: A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults* (Washington, DC: USCC, 1997) 38.

⁴¹ *Familiaris consortio*, 69.

⁴² *Faithful to Each Other Forever*, 128.

⁴³ Center for Marriage and Family, *Time, Sex, and Money: The First Five Years of Marriage* (Omaha, NE: Creighton University, 2000) 1.

⁴⁴ *Amoris laetitia*, 211.

Other resources are professional organizations or sources for those who minister to couples and families. See the Marriage & Family Life page on the diocesan website and foryourmarriage.org for links to these organizations and resources.

The aftercare of married couples is extensive in time and diverse in approach. Ministers are encouraged to become familiar with the USCCB Pastoral Framework for Marriage and Family Life Ministry in which the following areas are discussed:

- Accompanying Married Couples in the First Few Years
- Ongoing Marriage Enrichment
- Living Conjugal Chastity
- Supporting Married Couples in Welcoming New Life
- Accompanying Married Couples in Crisis
- Accompanying Parents as They Raise and Educate Their Children
- Accompanying Couples Who Are Unable to Conceive a Child
- Accompanying the Widow or Widower

Some complex or difficult situations listed are:

- Addictions
- Domestic violence and abuse
- Disabilities, Chronic Illness, or Mental Illness
- Same-Sex Attraction or Sexual Identity Incongruence
- Incarcerated Members
- Single Parent Families

Appendix I

ACCOMPANYING COUPLES PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE

The pastor or his delegate may conduct the initial interview with the engaged couple. It is essential that the person conducting the initial interview be aware of the canonical requirements for a valid marriage and have received pastoral formation to be welcoming and equipped to provide constructive guidance to the engaged couple.

Ideally, the priest or deacon who will preside at the wedding will meet with the engaged parties on a regular basis to accompany them during the time of preparation. Parishes are also encouraged to establish a marriage preparation ministry to accompany engaged couples throughout the time of preparation and, ideally, for a time after the wedding. This ministry may be staffed by individuals or couples whom we may refer to as Engaged Couple Sponsors.

Sponsors provide valuable expertise, guidance, and support to engaged couples on their journey to marriage in the Church. They should schedule regular meetings with couples during their time of preparation and be available to answer questions at other times. They may (but are not required to) assist with required elements of preparation, such as facilitating the premarital inventory, teaching NFP classes, presenting during the formal Marriage Prep Program, etc.

INITIAL INTERVIEW AND FOLLOW-UP SESSIONS GUIDE

The initial interview takes place one year to nine months before the proposed wedding date. The welcome extended and the attitude of the priest or deacon toward the couple should be one of hospitality and understanding. While many practical things need to be addressed, the care exhibited through the Church's minister will speak volumes to the couple about who we are as Church. This initial meeting provides a wonderful opportunity for evangelization and has the potential to create a positive attitude toward the marriage.

INITIAL INTERVIEW

The initial interview should always be done in person, never by phone or through a secretary.

The pastoral minister should get to know the parties and a little about their background. The following questions may be helpful:

- Where do you work?
- How did you meet?
- Why do you think you fell in love with each other?
- What is his/her most endearing quality for you, right now?
- Are there any serious obstacles standing in the way of your marriage in the Church, such as either one or both of you having been married before?
- Are there any other issues you think would be important for me to know?
- Would you tell me a little about your religious upbringing?

The couple should be encouraged to approach the time of engagement as a period of formation for the vocation of marriage. It can be helpful to explain the following to the engaged couple:

- The Church's intention to support them in building a great marriage and the steps toward marriage in the Church.
- The requirement to participate in a premarital inventory process (e.g., FOCCUS, PMI, Fully Engaged, or Prepare/Enrich).
- The purpose of the premarital inventory to assist them in evaluating their readiness to marry and in addressing issues of potential conflict. The inventory may be administered at this meeting or a later date. The process of discussing the results may take up to two or three sessions. **No wedding date should be set until the premarital assessment process is completed.**

If there are any special circumstances (e.g., parties are minors; pregnancy; non-practice of the faith; cohabitation; interreligious marriage; regularization; remarriage), further discussion will be called for and a delay of the wedding may be appropriate. If delay is discerned to be prudent, the reasons for the delay must be shared with the couple, along with a discussion of the ways to remove the concerns. **No wedding date can be set until the impediments have been removed and the concerns addressed.**

The parties should be informed that an Engaged Couple Sponsor couple or individual from the parish will accompany them on the journey toward marriage. The sponsor may be chosen/assigned at this meeting or soon after the meeting.

Finally, a date and time are set for the couple's next appointment.

PREMARITAL ASSESSMENT EVALUATION

A person trained to evaluate premarital assessment discusses the results with the couple. This normally takes one to three sessions.

If serious issues are identified, they need to be discussed with the priest or deacon who is accompanying the couple.

POST-ASSESSMENT FOLLOW-UP SESSION WITH CLERGY

Shortly after the evaluation of the premarital assessment, the priest or deacon meets with the parties to discuss the results of their premarital inventory, even if it has been previously discussed by a qualified lay minister. It must be remembered that the inventory is not a pass/fail test. It is a tool to help the parties to understand themselves better and the areas where some further growth might be helpful.

The pastoral minister will also inquire how things are going for the couple. What are some of the topics that surfaced as needing further discussion? Where are they in processing these topics? Would they care to discuss any of them now?

This is also an appropriate time to discuss options for formal marriage preparation and Natural Family Planning instruction.

SET THE WEDDING DATE

Wedding ceremony options should be discussed. It can be explained that the care that goes into preparing the celebration will speak about their faith and the commitment they make to each other and God.

The minister can follow up with documents and address any questions the parties might have.

A date is set a date for the next appointment.

A prayer suitably closes this meeting.

FOLLOW-UP SESSIONS WITH CLERGY—Optional

The number and frequency of meetings with engaged couples will vary according to the needs, circumstances, and spiritual readiness of the couple to marry. Clergy should seek the assistance of the couple's sponsors in assessing the need to meet with couples.

FOLLOW-UP SESSION WITH CLERGY—About One Month Prior to Wedding Date

While there are many practical things needing to be addressed at this time, hopefully some quality time can be reserved to focus on the couple's relationship as well as the place of God and faith in that relationship.

Inquire how things are going for them. The following questions can guide the pastoral minister's conversation with the engaged couple:

- Are there any issues that you want to discuss with me now?
- How is the pressure of your upcoming wedding affecting you and your family relationships?
- How is your faith in God making a difference in your lives during these days?
- Is prayer an important part of your relationship?

Preparations for the wedding liturgy can be finalized with a review of the wedding ceremony planning sheet. If the parties have selected readings for the marriage rite, they might be asked how each speaks to their relationship with each other and with God.

After verifying the date and time of the rehearsal, the meeting can close with a prayer with/for the couple.

Appendix II**SAMPLE GRANT OF DELEGATION TO ASSIST AT MARRIAGE**

[On Parish Letterhead]

Delegation to Assist at Marriage

In accord with canons 1111 and 137 §3, I hereby grant PRIEST/DEACON delegation *ad actum* to assist at the marriage of NAME and NAME. This marriage will be celebrated on DATE at PLACE in CITY, California.

[Signature]
The Reverend NAME
Pastor/Parochial Administrator

Given at the PARISH,
CITY, California
on DATE.

Appendix III

SUGGESTED READINGS

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Latin Typical Edition, August 15, 1997, nn. 1601–1666.
- Barbara Markey, Ph.D., *Preparing Cohabiting Couples for Marriage*; available from FOCCUS, 3214 N. 60th St., Omaha, NE 68104 (Phone: 402-551-9003)
- Pontifical Council for the Family, *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, May 13, 1996 (https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_13051996_preparation-for-marriage_en.html).
- Pope Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, March 19, 2016 ([papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/esortazioni/20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.html) ([vatican.va](https://www.vatican.va))).
- Pope John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, November 22, 1981 ([Familiaris Consortio \(November 22, 1981\) | John Paul II](https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_fc_19811122.html) ([vatican.va](https://www.vatican.va))).
- USCCB, Pastoral Framework for Marriage and Family Life Ministry , 2021. <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/pastoral-framework-marriage-and-family-life-ministry>
- USCCB, *Marriage Preparation and Cohabiting Couples* (<https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/marriage-preparation-and-cohabiting-couples>).
- USCCB, *Sons and Daughters of the Light*, November 12, 1996 (<https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/who-we-teach/young-adults/sons-and-daughters-of-light>).
- USCCB, Statements on Marriage: 1994–2015 (www.usccb.org/topics/promotion-defense-marriage/church-teaching#tab--documents-and-statements-of-the-usccb).