

ARCHDIOCESE  
of DUBUQUE

2025

# FRAMEWORK FOR THE MARRIAGE CATECHUMENATE



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# FORWARD

February 2025

Dear Pastoral Leaders,

In November of 2024, while attending the USCCB's meeting of bishops, I had the opportunity to attend a workshop on the marriage catechumenate, based on the Vatican's *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life* document. This workshop invited us as bishops to implement this vision in our dioceses in order to provide more robust marriage preparation and formation.

The Church in the United States is facing a marriage crisis. It is not just the priesthood that has a shortage of vocations; the number of marriages also has been in severe decline in recent decades. In our secular culture, it is becoming less popular to marry at all, let alone to marry in the Church. Nationally, the number of civil marriages has declined significantly in recent decades, while the number of marriages in the Church also has been on a steady decline, including here in the Archdiocese of Dubuque. Additionally, many marriages do not last; as we all know, there are high rates of divorce and separation in our society.

Despite these downward trends, we need not despair. Rather, this should inspire us to greater effort and intentionality in promoting the vocation of marriage and striving to offer high quality marriage preparation and formation. There is hope for the future of the vocation of marriage, but we cannot remain idle nor approach marriage ministry the same way we have always done it. We must frame marriage ministry within the context of the Church's mission to evangelize. While the decline of marriage in our culture provides a challenge, it is also an opportunity to proclaim anew the truth, beauty and goodness of God's design for marriage and family life.

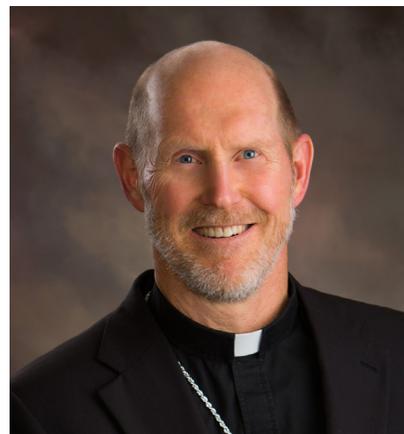
This new *Framework for the Marriage Catechumenate* was developed by the Marriage Formation Office to help meet the urgent need for more robust marriage ministry by providing pastoral leaders with a clear vision, guidelines and standard practices for implementing a marriage catechumenate process. I encourage you to read it, reflect on what it articulates, share and discuss it with those in your parish who are involved in marriage ministry, discern local action steps, and work collaboratively to implement the vision it sets forth.

To assist you in these efforts, I encourage you to reach out to Matt Selby in the Marriage Formation Office for consultation, resources and formation opportunities.

Sincerely in Christ,

+ *Thomas R. Zinkula*

**Most Rev. Thomas R. Zinkula**  
**Archbishop of Dubuque**



# INTRODUCTION



FOR THE CHURCH, IN EVERY AGE, IS CALLED TO PROCLAIM ANEW THE BEAUTY AND ABUNDANCE OF GRACE CONTAINED IN THE SACRAMENT OF MATRIMONY AND FAMILY LIFE WHICH FLOWS FROM IT, ESPECIALLY TO YOUNG PEOPLE.

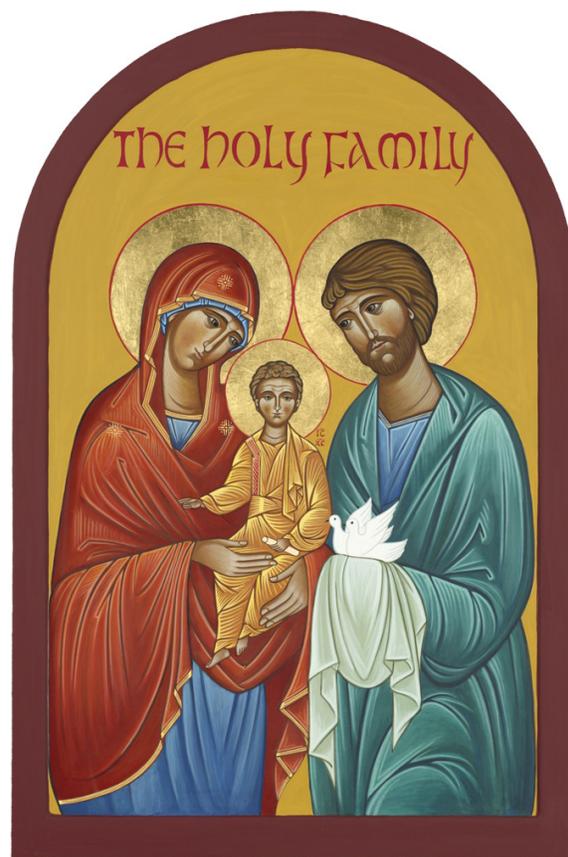
- **CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, PREFACE BY POPE FRANCIS**



**Marriage ministry “is a true work of evangelization”** (CPML, 10). The mission of the Church is to evangelize by proclaiming the Gospel through words and actions. The Holy Spirit guides and empowers our efforts in evangelization. Marriage ministry must be set within the context of the Church’s mission to “make disciples” (cf. Mt. 28:18-20). The development of a discipleship relationship with Jesus Christ in the Church lays the necessary foundation for prayerfully discerning a calling to the vocation of marriage, embracing the Sacrament of Matrimony in the Church, and faithfully living marriage and family life as the path to sanctification. Therefore, **the contents of this Framework for the Marriage Catechumenate “must be set within the urgent need to evangelize culture”** (PSM, 20).

**This document is intended to aid pastoral leaders in the Archdiocese of Dubuque in the many facets of marriage ministry, in order to promote and strengthen vocations to marriage.** It is a development from the *Standards for Marriage Preparation and Formation* document first released in 2020 and last revised in 2022, which this current document replaces. This framework seeks to provide an accessible guide for embracing and implementing a robust marriage catechumenate process. Furthermore, the guidance laid out here is intended to provide a common vision and to set standard practices for marriage ministries in parishes throughout the archdiocese. The framework allows flexibility to determine local applications and to adapt to particular situations. **This provides an invitation and opportunity for parishes to review their marriage ministries in order to find areas for growth and to better align those ministries with the vision set forth here. The archdiocesan Marriage Formation Office will provide associated formation, resources, and consultation for pastoral leaders in order to assist with implementing this framework.**

For additional information and resources, visit: [www.dbqarch.org/marriage-catechumenate](http://www.dbqarch.org/marriage-catechumenate).



# WHAT IS MARRIAGE?



CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE, AS A REFLECTION OF THE UNION BETWEEN CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH, IS FULLY REALIZED IN THE UNION BETWEEN A MAN AND A WOMAN WHO GIVE THEMSELVES TO EACH OTHER IN A FREE, FAITHFUL AND EXCLUSIVE LOVE, WHO BELONG TO EACH OTHER UNTIL DEATH AND ARE OPEN TO THE TRANSMISSION OF LIFE, AND ARE CONSECRATED BY THE SACRAMENT, WHICH GRANTS THEM THE GRACE TO BECOME A DOMESTIC CHURCH AND A LEAVEN OF NEW LIFE FOR SOCIETY.

– POPE FRANCIS, *AMORIS LAETITIA*, 292



**“God himself is the author of marriage”** (*GS*, 48). From the beginning of creation, **God established marriage as a sacred covenantal bond between a man and a woman.** Therefore, “marriage is not a purely human institution” (*CCC*, 1603). As such, it is more than just a civil contract which societies can dictate and define. Rather, **it is a natural institution designed by God to be a unique reflection of “the image of God, who is a communion of persons”** (*AL*, 71).

**In marriage, a man and woman commit themselves to a permanent and exclusive relationship of self-giving love that is free, total, faithful, and fruitful.** The bond established in a valid marriage is indissoluble, for Jesus proclaimed, “They are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate” (Mt. 19:6). **Marriage is “by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring”** (*CCC*, 1601).

**Jesus Christ raised marriage to “the dignity of a sacrament”** (*CCC*, 1601). For two baptized persons, marriage is a sacrament at the service of the community of faith as a sign and an instrument of God’s grace and love. **“Christian spouses [are] called to become ‘living icons’ of Christ the bridegroom,”** witnessing the spousal love between Christ and the Church to the world (*CPML*, 68; cf. Eph. 5:21-32). **Marriage is also a vocation,** which is a calling from God to a distinct state in life that serves as each person’s path to holiness and heaven.

Furthermore, **marriage is “the foundation of the family,** an intimate community of persons” (*CJL*, 9). **A Christian family forms a “domestic church,”** which serves as a building block of human society and the Church. Pope St. John Paul II profoundly proclaimed that **“the future of the world and of the Church passes through the family”** (*FC*, 75). Strong marriages are, therefore, essential to having a strong Church and society. This is why **“the Church must never fail to proclaim the divine plan for human love and marriage in all its beauty and grandeur”** (*CPML*, 56).



# WHY A MARRIAGE CATECHUMENATE?



THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS HAS ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS EXPRESSED HIS DESIRE FOR THE CHURCH TO OFFER A BETTER AND MORE THOROUGH PREPARATION OF YOUNG COUPLES FOR MARRIAGE, INSISTING ON THE NEED FOR A RELATIVELY BROAD APPROACH, INSPIRED BY THE BAPTISMAL CATECHUMENATE, WHICH WOULD ENABLE THEM TO CELEBRATE THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE WITH GREATER AWARENESS, BEGINNING WITH AN EXPERIENCE OF FAITH AND PERSONAL ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS.

– **CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, 1**



In 1981, Pope St. John Paul II described marriage preparation as a “journey of faith, which is similar to the catechumenate” and as “a gradual and continuous process” that includes three main stages of preparation: 1) Remote, 2) Proximate, and 3) Immediate (*FC*, 66). This was an initial call for a marriage catechumenate. In *Amoris Laetitia*, released in 2016, Pope Francis expressed that “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” (*AL*, 207). Since then, **the Holy Father has frequently called for the Church to embrace a marriage preparation model based on the baptismal catechumenate** (i.e. the *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults*, or *OCIA*). In response, in 2022 the Vatican’s Dicastery of Laity, Family, and Life released *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*, which provides guidance for local churches to use to implement a marriage catechumenate.

**The goal of the marriage catechumenate is “to offer couples a better and more thorough preparation for marriage”** (*CPML*, Conclusion). As in the *OCIA*, the marriage catechumenate approaches preparation and formation as a gradual process marked by stages and rites. This model provides the time and structure needed for:

- “the **evangelization** or re-evangelization of the couple” (*CJL*, 22)
- “an authentic **discernment** of their own vocation to marriage” (*CPML*, 5)
- substantive **catechesis** on marriage
- authentic **accompaniment** of the couple through relationships of trust

As Pope Francis challenges us: “What we need is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women to better respond to the grace that God offers them” (*AL*, 35). **Let us venture together, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to embrace this marriage catechumenate model in order to better promote and support the vocation of marriage in the archdiocese.**

# WHAT IS THE MARRIAGE CATECHUMENATE PROCESS?



THE CATECHUMENAL METHOD IS DIVIDED INTO THREE MAJOR PHASES: REMOTE PREPARATION, WHICH EMBRACES CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH MINISTRY; AN INTERMEDIATE RECEPTION PHASE; AND, THE ACTUAL CATECHUMENAL PHASE, WHICH IN TURN INCLUDES THREE DISTINCT STAGES – A FIRST STAGE OF PROXIMATE PREPARATION, WHICH LASTS LONGER BUT VARIES IN LENGTH; A SECOND STAGE OF FINAL [IMMEDIATE] PREPARATION, WHICH IS MORE BRIEF; AND, A THIRD STAGE OF ACCOMPANIMENT DURING THE FIRST YEARS OF MARRIED LIFE, WHICH CONCLUDES WITH THE COUPLE'S INCLUSION IN THE ORDINARY FAMILY MINISTRY OF THEIR PARISH.

## – CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, CONCLUSION



**The marriage catechumenate involves phases, stages, and rites, which parallel the baptismal catechumenate.** This process unfolds over time and has the following structure:

- **Phase 1:** Pre-Catechumenate (Remote Preparation)
- **Phase 2:** Intermediate (Reception of Candidates)
  - + **Rite 1:** Entry into the Marriage Catechumenate
- **Phase 3:** Catechumenate
  - Stage 1:** Proximate Preparation
    - + **Rite 2:** Betrothal (*Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple*)
  - Stage 2:** Immediate Preparation
    - + **Rite 3:** Marriage (*Order of Celebrating Matrimony*)
  - Stage 3:** Accompaniment of Newlyweds (*Mystagogy*)
    - + **Optional Rite:** *Order of Blessing a Married Couple*



The following chart provides more detail and outlines how the various aspects of the phases, stages, and rites included in the marriage catechumenate relate to each other, along with how they parallel with the OCIA process. It also summarizes ministry goals, major components, and key formation elements for each part of the process. The chart is intended to be a point of reference, but it is not meant to contain hard and fast rules or qualifications for marriage. **The marriage catechumenate should not be approached rigidly; rather, it should have the flexibility to be adapted to the particular situations of individuals and couples.** Always remember: “It is about guiding, assisting, and being close to couples along a path to walk together. The marriage catechumenate is not a preparation for an ‘exam to pass,’ but for a ‘life to live’” (CPML, 20). The structure helps provide signposts and steps along the journey.

PHASE	PRE-CATECHUMENATE	INTERMEDIATE	CATECHUMENATE			MARRIAGE SUPPORT
STAGE	Remote Preparation	Reception of Candidates for Marriage	<b>Stage 1:</b> Proximate Preparation	<b>Stage 2:</b> Immediate Preparation	<b>Stage 3:</b> Accompaniment of Newlyweds	Marriage Enrichment and Pastoral Care
TIMING	Childhood, Youth, and Young Adulthood	As soon as possible after engagement	3-12+ months prior to wedding	1-3 months prior to wedding	2-3+ years after wedding	Ongoing
LENGTH	Varies	A few weeks or possibly months	1 year (if possible); 6 months minimum	2-3 months	2-3 years and beyond	Lifelong
rites	Sacraments of Initiation during Childhood and Youth	Entry into the Marriage Catechumenate	Betrothal ( <i>Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple</i> )	Marriage ( <i>Order of Celebrating Matrimony</i> )	Option: <i>Order of Blessing a Married Couple</i>	Option: <i>Order of Blessing a Married Couple</i>
OCIA PARALLELS	Period of Evangelization and Pre-Catechumenate	Rite of Entrance	Period of the Catechumenate; Rite of Election	Period of Purification and Enlightenment; Celebration of Sacraments of Initiation	Period of <i>Mystagogy</i>	Life in Christ
MINISTRY GOALS	Help families form their children as disciples of Jesus; establish a strong foundation for a future vocation	Welcome the couple; develop a relationship of trust; overview the process; determine the freedom to marry	Provide Christian formation for married life, including finalizing discernment of vocation	Prepare couple for a free, conscious, and fruitful participation in the Rite of Marriage	Provide continued accompaniment and formation for newly married couples	Provide ongoing support for married couples through enrichment and pastoral care
MAJOR COMPONENTS	Family Life; Sacramental Prep; Faith Formation; Youth Ministry; Catholic Schools; Young Adult Ministry	Initial Meeting; Canonical Interview and Forms; Scheduling the Wedding	Preparing minister sessions; Inventory; Mentor/Sponsor Couple; Retreat; NFP	Wedding Liturgy Planning; Sacrament of Reconciliation; Wedding Rehearsal	Mentor/Sponsor Couple Accompaniment; Parish Adult Faith Formation and Marriage Ministries	Date Nights; Small Groups; Mentor Couples; Retreats; Resources
KEY FORMATION ELEMENTS	Discipleship; vocational discernment; Christian understanding of the human person; chastity and sexuality; dating	Proclamation of marriage as "good news;" requirements for marriage; expectations for the process, discernment	Theology of marriage; couple's relationship; sexuality; prayer life; participation in life of the Church	Synthesis of previous formation for married life; preparation for the Rite of Marriage	Marriage <i>mystagogy</i> ; healthy relationships; sexual intimacy; parenting; mission of marriage	Managing transitions, tragedies, conflicts, and crises; forming a community of support

# WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MARRIAGE CATECHUMENATE?



IT IS THE DUTY OF THE ENTIRE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY TO ELABORATE A CATECHUMENAL PATHWAY FOR MARRIAGE PREPARATION AND TO OFFER CONCRETE ACCOMPANIMENT TO COUPLES ALONG THIS PATH. THE JOURNEY SHOULD BE SHARED AMONG PRIESTS, CHRISTIAN SPOUSES, RELIGIOUS MEN AND WOMEN, AND PASTORAL WORKERS, WHO MUST COLLABORATE AMONG THEMSELVES AND IN AGREEMENT WITH THEIR BISHOP. MARRIAGE IS NOT ONLY A SOCIAL ACT; FOR CHRISTIANS, IT IS AN 'ECCLESIAL' ACT. THEREFORE, THE WHOLE CHURCH, AS THE BODY OF CHRIST, TAKES CHARGE OF IT, AND FEELS THE NEED TO BE OF SERVICE TO FUTURE FAMILIES.

- **CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, 6**



To be successful, implementation of the marriage catechumenate cannot be merely the responsibility of a few in the parish (e.g. clergy and staff). Rather, **marriage ministry ought to include the involvement, prayers, support, and especially the witness of the entire parish community.** "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" (AL, 206). In particular, married couples who have a strong relationship with God and with each other should be invited to assist with marriage preparation and formation ministries in order to offer their witness to others. Thus, the role of pastoral leaders is to invite the community to embrace this shared responsibility and work toward having a marriage-building parish culture.

**Determining local action steps should be prayerfully discerned.** Transforming hearts and minds is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our job is to listen to the Lord's guidance and follow His lead. We cannot simply have good processes in place and dynamic programs to use; we must strive to be the hands and feet of Christ to couples. **It is through prayer and discernment, combined with intentional and proactive efforts on our part, that good fruit will come from marriage ministry.** Let us work together as the Body of Christ and rely on the Holy Spirit as we implement the marriage catechumenate in our particular settings.



# HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE MARRIAGE CATECHUMENATE PROCESS



ALTHOUGH THE FEAT OF CREATING SUCH A LENGTHY FORMATIVE ITINERARY MAY SEEM UNATTAINABLE, WE URGE PARTICULAR CHURCHES TO BE COURAGEOUS AND EMBRACE A FAITH-FILLED PERSPECTIVE, RECALLING JESUS' TEACHING THAT THE WORKS OF THE KINGDOM ALWAYS BEGIN AS A SMALL MUSTARD SEED, BUT THAT IN TIME THEY CAN BECOME LARGE TREES OFFERING SHELTER AND PROTECTION TO THOSE IN NEED. BY OFFERING YOUNGER GENERATIONS A CATECHUMENAL JOURNEY OF GROWTH TOWARD MARRIAGE, THE CHURCH SHALL MEET HEAD-ON THE URGENT NEED TO ACCOMPANY YOUNG PEOPLE.

## – CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, CONCLUSION



Implementing a marriage catechumenate may seem like a daunting task, but it need not be overly complicated. Start by reviewing your parish's existing marriage ministries and identifying strengths and areas for growth. Then, collaboratively and prayerfully discern new aspects to implement, considering the landscape of your parish(es). **This framework offers a comprehensive approach to what the marriage catechumenate could look like, while recognizing that not everything can be done in every parish nor with every couple.** This is an invitation to strive for stronger parish marriage ministries. The stakes are high due to the current state of marriage in our society, so it is worth investing time, energy, and resources into building a more robust approach to marriage ministry by implementing this vision of a marriage catechumenate. It is okay to start small and slow in order to grow into this model over time.

The following **principles** are important to keep in mind:

- Ensure that the process lasts long enough for couples to experience **real maturation**. Utilize the phases, stages, and rites in the process to help the couple adequately **discern** their readiness for marriage and to connect them with the **parish community**.
- That said, **“quality is more important than quantity”** (AL, 207). While the marriage catechumenate calls for a sufficient amount of time dedicated to the preparation of couples for marriage, the focus should be on offering high caliber formation and accompaniment to couples.
- The marriage catechumenate should not be presented to couples merely as a list of things to do, but as **a journey of growth and formation**.

- If multiple couples are preparing for marriage at the same time, **consider offering some of the components together as a group**, including the rites.
- “At all phases and stages, the catechumenal approach should always retain its kerygmatic nature. The initial proclamation of the faith should return at each new stage, as if marking successive waves, to recall that the Sacrament of Marriage is ‘good news’, that is, it is God’s gift to couples who wish to live their love to the fullest” (*CPML*, Conclusion). **Place the kerygma (the proclamation of the Gospel) and an encounter with Christ at the center of the marriage catechumenate process.**
- “The overall ‘tone’ ... should tend ... toward one that is purposeful, persuasive, encouraging, and fully-oriented to emphasizing the good and beautiful aspects of married life. Completeness, precision of content, and style of accompaniment should always seek to bring to light the dignity and value of each person, as well as the dignity and value of the vocation to which they are called, with full awareness of their concrete reality” (*CPML*, 20). **Maintain joy throughout the process!**

What follows explains how to approach each phase, stage, and rite in the process.

## THE PRE-CATECHUMENATE PHASE (REMOTE PREPARATION)

“REMOTE PREPARATION INCLUDES INFANCY, CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE AND TAKES PLACE FIRST OF ALL IN THE FAMILY AND ALSO IN THE SCHOOL AND FORMATION GROUPS, AS A VALID ASSISTANCE TO THE FAMILY.”

### - PREPARATION FOR THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE, 22

**“For every couple, marriage preparation begins at birth”** (*AL*, 208). Remote marriage preparation focuses on providing children and youth with a strong foundation for a potential future marriage vocation. In other words, **“it aims, from childhood, to ‘prepare the ground’ on which to sow the seeds of a future vocation to married life”** (*CPML*, 27).

**“The decision to marry and to have a family ought to be the fruit of a process of vocational discernment”** (*AL*, 72). This discernment is dependent upon the formation received during each individual’s upbringing, especially in the family. This formation should be centered on the development of a discipleship relationship with Jesus Christ in the Church, which sets the foundation for prayerfully discerning God’s calling in life. Therefore, efforts to help young people and their families live as active disciples of Christ bolster the vocation of marriage.

**“It is primarily through his or her experience of family that a young person absorbs a blueprint regarding interpersonal relationships, love, marriage, and family life”** (*CJL*, 19). Parents are the primary formators of their children. Therefore, especially pertinent to the pre-catechumenate phase is the parents’ witness of self-giving love in their marriage and family life. As Pope Francis explains, “Those best prepared for marriage are probably those who learned what Christian marriage is from their own parents, who chose each other unconditionally and daily renew this decision. In this sense, **pastoral initiatives aimed at helping married couples to grow in love and in the Gospel of the family also help their children, by preparing them for their future married life”** (*AL*, 208).

It is especially important to help families understand that the Catholic faith is not only to be lived at the parish by doing activities and receiving the sacraments; it begins at home. Parishes, therefore, must support families in living as true domestic churches in their homes. As the *Catechism* explains, “The Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason the family home is rightly called ‘the domestic church,’ a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity” (*CCC*, 1666). **For recommended resources for parents, visit: [www.dbqarch.org/parenting](http://www.dbqarch.org/parenting).**

**While parents are essential for the formation of their children, they cannot successfully fulfill this role alone.** Families need support in the formation and vocational discernment of their children. In fact, “extended family, friends, parishes, schools, the local community, media, and society all contribute, in varying degrees, to remote preparation for marriage” (CJL, 19). In particular, **parents need the assistance of their local Catholic community.** Remote preparation, therefore, involves intentionally promoting the vocation of marriage through catechesis and witness in ministries for children, youth, and young adults. This includes faith formation programs, sacramental preparation, youth ministries, Catholic schools, and young adult ministries.

In order to lay a solid foundation during the pre-catechumenate phase, **it is important to help young people develop a Christian understanding of the human person and receive a clear vision of what love is.** Unfortunately, our society has mostly lost its way in its vision of the human person and its definition of love. “In the dominant cultural interpretation, love is mainly understood as romantic love; therefore, programs [of formation] must be permeated by a clear marital vision of love, understood as mutual self-giving by spouses” (CPML, 30). Forming young people in a correct view of anthropology and love must be rooted in helping them embrace a correct view of God, for he is love and he created human beings in his image and likeness (cf. 1 Jn. 4:8 and Gn. 1:26).

**The formation during this phase also should include “a faithful and courageous education in chastity and love as self-giving”** (PSM, 24). Helping young people understand and embrace the virtue of chastity is important, regardless of what vocational state in life they discern, since “all the baptized are called to chastity” (CCC, 2348). According to the *Catechism*, “Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being” (CCC, 2337). Development of this virtue will help young people avoid sins against chastity that would cause harm to a future marriage (see CCC, 2351-2359). It also will help them to be formed in a healthy understanding of “sexuality in view of their future call to generous, exclusive, and faithful love” (CPML, 32). Formation in chastity and sexuality could utilize the collection of teachings from Pope St. John Paul II called the *Theology of the Body*. **For resources on the Theology of the Body, visit: [www.dbqarch.org/theology-of-the-body](http://www.dbqarch.org/theology-of-the-body).**



During remote preparation, **young people also should be provided with formation and guidance on dating.** Since most young people today are entering into dating relationships at earlier ages, and waiting to get married until later ages, there is now typically a long window of time in which they are in dating-type relationships. At the same time, much of our society has lost the art of dating, especially due to the “hook-up culture.” Young people, therefore, need to be taught the purpose of dating and given practical guidance and tools on how to date. When approached through the eyes of faith, the years of dating provide an opportunity for growth and discernment, rather than

creating baggage to bring into a future relationship. **Healthy dating relationships can build a strong foundation for marriage. For resources on Catholic dating, visit: [www.dbqarch.org/dating](http://www.dbqarch.org/dating).**

## THE INTERMEDIATE PHASE (RECEPTION OF THE CANDIDATES)

“THE RECEPTION PERIOD SHOULD NOT BE LIMITED TO A HASTY MEETING TO PRESENT THE COUPLES AND DEAL WITH BUREAUCRATIC FORMALITIES. RATHER, IT SHOULD BE PREPARED AS A PERSONALIZED PERIOD OF ENCOUNTER AND GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER. A DETERMINING FACTOR FOR SUCCESS WILL BE ESTABLISHED BY HOW THE PASTORAL TEAM CREATES A WELCOMING AND FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT.”

– **CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, 38**

**The intermediate phase provides the opportunity to welcome a newly engaged couple into the marriage catechumenate process. It is recommended that this phase begin as soon as possible after the engagement.** With that goal in mind, parishes should promote marriage preparation using statements such as, “Please contact the parish as soon as possible after you have become engaged in order to begin the marriage preparation process.” This can help avoid the issue of couples thinking they can wait a while before approaching the parish about their intention to get married. Clear information should be communicated in an accessible manner (whether in the bulletin, on social media, or on the parish website) about whom to contact and how to get started with the process.

**Responding to initial inquiries from an engaged couple should be done in a timely, joyful, and hospitable manner, showing the parish’s care and excitement for the couple’s journey toward marriage.** Having a parish plan in place for handling inquiries about getting married at the parish can be beneficial for both the engaged couples and those ministering to them. This could include training the first point of contact (e.g. the parish secretary) on how to respond to initial inquiries. Oftentimes, couples have many questions upfront and want to know answers immediately, so it is important for the first point of contact to know where to direct inquiries and how to initially respond to common questions in a welcoming way.

“The intermediate reception phase may vary in duration: a few weeks is sufficient for those already coming from a journey of Christian formation; while a few months may be required for those who, in addition to making an initial discernment regarding their engagement, need to deepen their baptismal identity” (*CPML*, 37). **This phase primarily serves as a transition point with the goals of welcoming the couple, developing a relationship of trust with them, determining whether or not they are free to marry, and giving them an overview of the marriage catechumenate process.** This phase sets the tone for the rest of the phases. It is important to start off with a good first impression. It is also important to keep a kerygmatic focus, by proclaiming marriage as “good news.” Congratulate them on their pursuit of marriage, and encourage them to be open to what God has in store for them through this process of preparation and formation.

The intermediate phase involves the following major components.

## **INITIAL MEETING**

Couples inquiring about marriage at the parish should typically be invited to set up an initial in-person meeting with a priest, deacon, or lay coordinator of marriage preparation. **This initial meeting should be focused on welcoming the couple and beginning to develop a relationship of trust with them.** It is best to not jump too quickly into the logistics or formalities of the process, but rather, take time to get to know the couple and their desires for marriage. This may require more than one meeting.

There are multiple goals for the initial meeting(s) with the engaged couple:

- **The minister should warmly welcome and congratulate the couple.** This is often one of the most exciting times in a person’s life, and it is vital that the Church’s ministers show they are sharing in this joy. Even when a couple approaches marriage in the Church without the correct understanding or disposition, they should be welcomed and encouraged. The minister’s hospitality often helps the couple to be more open to the preparation process.
- **The initial meeting(s) provides the opportunity to get to know the couple.** The minister should take the time to hear the couple’s story (if not already known). For example, the minister could ask how they met, what attracted them to each other, and how they became engaged. Other conversation points could include their desires for their wedding and the reasons for their decision to marry.

- **The minister should inquire about the faith practices of the couple.** The initial meeting(s) provides a venue for proclaiming the Gospel, inviting couples to grow in their relationship with God, and encouraging them to become more involved in their parish, especially by participating in Sunday Mass, since “the Eucharist is the very source of Christian marriage” (*FC*, 57). When one party is not Catholic, this provides an opportunity to discover whether that individual is practicing another faith tradition and explore ways for the individual to further develop a relationship with God.
- **The couple should receive a summary of the marriage catechumenate process in order to help them know what to expect and plan accordingly.** This could include providing directions for completing a pre-marital inventory, discussing the role of a mentor/sponsor couple, supplying information about marriage preparation retreats, and scheduling future sessions with the preparing minister (see the sections under “Proximate Preparation” for more on these topics).
- **The minister should establish whether there are any canonical impediments to the couple’s marriage.** Determination of whether or not impediments exist is best done through the completion of the “Pre-Nuptial Questionnaire” (see next section). This form could be completed at the initial meeting, or during the second or third meeting, in order to focus the first meeting on welcoming and getting to know the couple.
- **The initial meeting(s) provides an opportunity to talk about scheduling the wedding,** if it has been determined that the couple is free to enter into marriage in the Catholic Church.

During the initial meeting(s) and throughout the process, it is important to maintain a positive tone and to assure the couple that the Church is there to aid them on this journey of formation.

## **CANONICAL INTERVIEW AND COMPLETION OF REQUIRED FORMS**

After the couple has been welcomed, it is necessary to complete the canonical interview in order to determine if there are any impediments to their desired marriage. Impediments include, for example, being too young to enter into marriage, being too closely related to each other, being bound by the bond of a prior marriage, or impotence, among others (see *CIC* cc. 1083-1094 for more). **The Church requires some form of pre-nuptial investigation in order to ensure that all expectations for a valid and licit celebration of marriage are met. This is fulfilled in the Archdiocese of Dubuque by completing the “Pre-Nuptial Questionnaire” (Form 1).** This should be accomplished early in the process, before progressing into the catechumenate phase. **The purpose of Form 1 is to:**

- Determine that the parties are free from impediments to marriage
- Ascertain if there is sufficient understanding of the nature and obligations of marriage
- Determine that they are freely consenting to this marriage

It is vital that the “Pre-Nuptial Questionnaire” be thoroughly and accurately completed. To ensure the integrity of the couple’s answers, each person must be questioned separately and their responses recorded by the preparing minister. In these in-person interviews, it is the duty of the preparing minister to ensure that each person understands the meaning of the questions that are being posed. Both the engaged couple and the preparing minister are to sign the forms. The “Pre-Nuptial Questionnaire” should be completed at the parish where the marriage preparation is taking place, even if the wedding will take place elsewhere.

After completing the “Pre-Nuptial Questionnaire,” **if there is not moral certitude that one (or both) of the parties is free to marry, then the “Affidavit Concerning the Freedom to Marry” (Form 2) should be completed.** Form 2 also should be completed when a marriage will be taking place outside of the Archdiocese of Dubuque because many other dioceses require it. To complete the form, an individual who personally knows the party whose freedom to marry is uncertain must be interviewed by a parish authority (priest, deacon, or lay minister). The interviewer should record the answers on the form, sign it, and return it to be included in the marriage file.

**Depending on the circumstances of the couple, Form 3 may also need to be completed if any dispensations, delegations, or permissions are required.** These include:

- Dispensation in the case of Disparity of Worship (i.e. when one party is not validly baptized)
- Dispensation from Canonical Form (i.e. when one party is not Catholic and the couple requests that a non-Catholic minister witness the marriage)
- Permission for a Catholic to marry a baptized non-Catholic
- Declaration and promise of a Catholic who is marrying a non-Catholic to reaffirm their faith and agree to do all in their power to raise their children in the Catholic faith (the non-Catholic partner is to be informed of this promise)
- Delegation for a priest or deacon from another diocese to witness the marriage
- Permission for the marriage to take place in a parish other than that of the Catholic party
- Permission for a Catholic minister to witness the marriage in a non-Catholic church or other suitable place

**Current versions of Forms 1, 2, and 3 may be obtained from the Metropolitan Tribunal.**

**The following documents also will be needed:**

- Baptismal records for Catholics and non-Catholic Christians must be obtained and included in the parish marriage file. Since Catholic baptismal records contain notations about the reception of other sacraments, the record must be issued within six months prior to the marriage. If it is discovered that a Catholic has not yet received the Sacrament of Confirmation, arrangements should be made for the individual to be confirmed before entering into marriage, if it can be done without grave inconvenience (*CIC* c. 1065).
- If either person was previously married, a death certificate or a protocol number for a church decree of nullity or dissolution for each previous marriage must be provided.
- The couple must obtain an Iowa marriage license (or a license from the state where the marriage will take place) and give it to the officiant prior to the wedding (unless they are already civilly married, in which case they should provide that marriage certificate).

**The completed “Pre-Nuptial Questionnaire” (Form 1) and other necessary forms must be sent to the Metropolitan Tribunal when any of the following circumstances are present:**

- Any dispensation is required
- Permission is needed for a Catholic minister to witness the marriage in a non-Catholic church or another suitable place
- The marriage is to take place in another diocese
- One (or both) of the parties was previously married

**When documents must be sent to the Tribunal, please do so as soon as possible, and no later than 30 days prior to the scheduled wedding date** so they may be reviewed in a timely manner to ensure there are no obstacles to the anticipated marriage. If the wedding is to take place outside of the United States, documents should be sent at least 90 days prior to the wedding date.

After the wedding, the officiant must send the signed Certificate of Marriage to the county recorder's office where it was issued. **The "Pre-Nuptial Questionnaire" and all other required documents must be retained in the marriage file at the parish where the wedding took place, or in the parish from which a dispensation from canonical form was requested.** The marriage also must be recorded in the Marriage Register of the parish where the marriage was celebrated (see the Metropolitan Tribunal's "Sacramental Register Handbook" for specific directions on what information to include in the register). Finally, for Catholics, the marriage must be recorded in the Baptismal Register. If the church of baptism or profession of faith differs from the church of marriage, then the church of baptism must be notified of the marriage.

## **SCHEDULING THE WEDDING**

**If it has been determined that the two parties are free to enter into marriage in the Catholic Church, you may proceed with scheduling the wedding.** If there is any canonical impediment to marriage, a wedding date cannot be set until that impediment has been removed. The most common canonical impediment is a previous marriage that has not been declared null. If either individual needs to apply for an annulment or has a pending annulment case in process, a date for their wedding should not be set until a declaration of nullity has been granted, since the previous marriage is assumed valid until declared otherwise. The couple should be made aware of any impediment, along with any steps that could be taken to remove it, as soon as possible. If the impediment cannot be removed, the couple cannot validly enter into marriage. **The minister should patiently and charitably assist couples in these situations, helping them understand the teachings of the Church on marriage and guiding them in addressing any impediments.**

**Except in special circumstances, a wedding date should not be set less than six months from the time of the first meeting with the couple, since "sufficient time is necessary for a suitable preparation for Marriage" (OCM, 15).** Keep in mind that weddings may not take place on Good Friday or Holy Saturday (OCM, 32). Additionally, the standard practice in the Archdiocese of Dubuque is that priests should not preside at weddings beginning later than 2:00 PM on Saturdays, nor those scheduled on Sundays, unless the wedding takes place during a regularly scheduled Sunday Mass.



With the pastor's approval, deacons may preside at weddings scheduled later on Saturdays or on Sundays if they do not conflict with the parish Mass schedule. While uncommon in our culture, "several Marriages may be celebrated at the same time" (OCM, 28). Ultimately, **the preparing minister must work with the couple to determine the best date and time for all the parties involved.**

## + RITE OF ENTRY INTO THE MARRIAGE CATECHUMENATE

“AT THE END OF THE RECEPTION PHASE, WHEN THE DECISION TO ENTER THE CATECHUMENAL JOURNEY HAS MATURED, THE COUPLE MAY ENTER THE FIRST STAGE OF FORMATION FOR MARRIAGE (PROXIMATE PREPARATION). THIS PASSAGE CAN BE EXPRESSED WITH A RITE OF ENTRY INTO THE ACTUAL CATECHUMENATE. THE RITUAL SHOULD EMPLOY A SIMPLE FORMAT SO AS TO AVOID MAKING IT SEEM IN ANY WAY TO BE A ‘MARRIAGE RITE’, AND MAY INCLUDE THE PRESENTATION OF THE COUPLES TO THE COMMUNITY DURING THE SUNDAY CELEBRATION, WITH A SHORT INTRODUCTION, A PRAYER SUITABLE FOR THE PURPOSE, AND A CONCRETE GESTURE, E.G. THE HANDING OVER OF THE BIBLE. IT SHOULD BE MADE CLEAR TO THE COMMUNITY THAT THE COUPLES ARE ENTERING INTO THE CATECHUMENAL JOURNEY, AS A PERIOD OF DISCERNMENT REGARDING THEIR CHOICE TO MARRY.”

### – CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, 47

The marriage catechumenate envisions using rites to mark transition points in the process, similar to the rites in the *OCIA*. **“Rituals serve the function of delineating the conclusion of one phase and the beginning of the next, and can offer couples a suitable opportunity to freely manifest their willingness to continue with the program, thus marking a gradual deepening of the journey.** Moreover, rituals offer a sign of the gradual merging of faith and love of engaged couples” (*CPML*, 23). While the rites are not absolute requirements in the process of preparing couples for marriage, they are helpful signposts along the journey, which encourage couples to be more committed to the process and provide opportunities to include the parish community.

The first of these rites takes place at the end of the intermediate phase and serves as a celebration of the entry of the couple into the marriage catechumenate phase. It corresponds to the Rite of Entrance into the Catechumenate in the *OCIA*. Since the intermediate phase is typically rather short, **this rite should take place rather early in the couple’s engagement.** Once it has been determined that the couple is free to enter into marriage, arrangements could be made to celebrate this Rite of Entry. The following practices are recommended for this rite:

- Ideally, **this rite should be celebrated during a Sunday Mass** (after the homily) in order to present the couple to the parish community. If one or both of the parties does not reside where the wedding will take place, it may be fitting for this rite to take place in the parish where they live. This rite provides the parish community with awareness of the couple’s engagement, the opportunity to welcome and congratulate them, and the invitation for parishioners to pray for, support, and encourage them along the journey. That said, this rite should be approached carefully so pressure is not put on the couple which might impede their freedom. If it is deemed “more appropriate to avoid a ‘public’ and community ritual, couples may be invited to a more intimate moment of prayer, which could take place among the group of new catechumens, together with the accompanying team” (*CPML*, 47).
- **The rite should incorporate handing on gifts from the parish, which could include: a Bible, a Couple’s Prayer, and/or a Crucifix.** These provide tangible means to remind the couple to keep their relationship centered on Christ. They should be encouraged to read and meditate on Scripture regularly, invited to pray the Couple’s Prayer together regularly throughout their journey of formation, and challenged to embrace the crucifix as a sign of Christ’s self-giving love which they are called to imitate.
- **The rite should be adapted with pastoral sensitivity when a Catholic intends to marry a non-baptized person.** For example, the text and the gifts could be modified accordingly.

**For a sample text to use for this rite (and adapt as needed), along with options for the Couple’s Prayer, visit: [www.dbqarch.org/marriage-catechumenate-rite-of-entry](http://www.dbqarch.org/marriage-catechumenate-rite-of-entry).**

# THE CATECHUMENATE PHASE

“THE CATECHUMENATE SHALL CONSIST OF A MORE-OR-LESS LENGTHY PERIOD OF FORMATION WHICH INCLUDES PROXIMATE PREPARATION, FINAL [IMMEDIATE] PREPARATION, AND ACCOMPANIMENT DURING THE FIRST YEARS OF MARRIAGE.”

– **CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, 48**

After the Rite of Entry, the couple enters into the catechumenate phase. This is the lengthiest part of the process and includes the proximate and immediate stages of preparation, along with continued accompaniment and formation in the first few years after the wedding (i.e. *mystagogy*). **Sufficient time should be given to this phase, allowing the couple to adequately discern their calling to marriage and receive the formation and accompaniment needed for a firm foundation for a lifelong marriage.** While significant time is necessary, “the duration of these stages should be adapted ... according to the religious, cultural, and social aspects of the local environment, as well as the personal situation of each couple. One essential element to safeguard is the regularity of encounters, so as to accustom couples to responsibly care for their vocation and marriage” (CPML, 48). In other words, **while the length is adaptable to particular circumstances, the process should always include consistent connections with the couple in order to help them develop the habit of investing time and energy into their relationship.**

## STAGE 1: PROXIMATE PREPARATION

“PROXIMATE PREPARATION TAKES PLACE DURING THE PERIOD OF ENGAGEMENT. ... IN VIEW OF THE NEW STATE IN LIFE AS A COUPLE, THE OPPORTUNITY SHOULD BE OFFERED TO DEEPEN THE LIFE OF FAITH, ESPECIALLY REGARDING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE SACRAMENTALITY OF THE CHURCH.

THIS IS AN IMPORTANT STAGE OF EVANGELIZATION IN WHICH THE FAITH MUST INVOLVE THE PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY DIMENSIONS BOTH OF THE INDIVIDUAL ENGAGED PERSONS AND THEIR FAMILIES. IN THIS PROCESS, IT WILL ALSO BE POSSIBLE TO IDENTIFY ANY DIFFICULTIES THEY MAY HAVE IN LIVING AN AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN LIFE.”

– **PREPARATION FOR THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE, 32**

Proximate marriage preparation builds on the foundation laid in remote marriage preparation and provides more specific formation during the period of engagement. **This stage ought to guide the couple toward deeper conversion to Christ through formative experiences that prepare them for joining their lives together in the sacred bond of marriage.** During this time, the couple also should be finalizing the discernment of their vocation to marriage. Key formation elements to emphasize during this stage include:

- **Re-proclaiming the Gospel** (kerygma) and inviting the couple into a **more intentional life of discipleship in the Church.**
- Providing formation on the **theology of marriage.**
- Guiding them into a **stronger relationship as a couple** by exploring “the ‘practical aspects’ of married life” (CPML, 55), including developing virtue and relationship skills.
- Inviting them to **embrace God’s design for sexuality.**
- Encouraging them as individuals and as a couple “to **acquire a habit of prayer** which will offer immense support for their future married life, especially in difficult moments” (CPML, 49). **For couple prayer resources, visit [www.dbqarch.org/couple-prayer-resources](http://www.dbqarch.org/couple-prayer-resources).**
- Helping couples “to **approach the life of the Church and take part in it.** ... The invitation should be made gradually (according to each couple’s concrete experience) ... without coercion” (CPML, 50). In essence, they should be welcomed into parish community life and gently encouraged to engage more actively in the life of the Church.

In essence, **“the goal is to help couples understand the difference between the ‘preparation of a wedding’ and ‘preparation to a marriage’”** (CPML, 55). Therefore, adequate time and attention needs to be given to providing substantive marriage formation.

“Proximate preparation, in general, should ideally last approximately one year, depending on the couple’s previous experience of faith and ecclesial involvement” (CPML, 48). While this is the ideal, often spending a full year in this stage may not be possible. Still, **there should be a minimum of six months dedicated to this stage.** As much as possible, the components in the proximate stage should be completed at least three months prior to the wedding, allowing couples time to reflect during the immediate preparation stage on what they have learned and experienced before entering marriage. While various methods can be used to approach proximate marriage preparation, **the major components outlined below should be included as the standard practice in the Archdiocese of Dubuque.**

- **Sessions with the Preparing Minister**
- **Completion and Processing of a Pre-marital Inventory**
- **Accompaniment by a Mentor/Sponsor Couple**
- **Participation in a Marriage Preparation Retreat**
- **Formation on Natural Family Planning**

These components and recommended ways of approaching them are explained in detail in the following sections.

## **SESSIONS WITH THE PREPARING MINISTER**

**The preparing minister should meet with the engaged couple multiple times to help them prepare for the wedding and for their marriage.** These sessions should be oriented toward meeting the couple where they are, and helping them grow in their relationship with God and with each other. The sessions provide the context for a ministry of accompaniment and present an opportunity for formation on marriage. It is important to utilize these sessions to build a relationship of trust with the couple, discern their readiness for marriage, and address their particular needs, questions, and concerns. Any special circumstances pertaining to the couple (e.g. cohabitation, faith differences, cultural differences, etc.) also should be pastorally addressed during these sessions (see the appendix on “How to Approach Special Circumstances” for guidance). Ideally, these sessions should take place in person, although some circumstances, such as the couple living in a different location, may require them to be done remotely.

**The content of these sessions could include processing the pre-marital inventory results and addressing areas for growth, discussing the couple’s experiences of working with their mentor/sponsor couple, and following up on their participation in a marriage retreat.** Particular marriage preparation programs and resources also could be used to facilitate catechesis and discussion on the Church’s teachings on marriage. During the Immediate Preparation stage, these sessions should include working on preparations for the wedding liturgy (see the “Wedding Liturgy Planning” section for guidance).

## **COMPLETION AND PROCESSING OF A PRE-MARITAL INVENTORY**

**Each couple should complete a pre-marital inventory in order to help pinpoint their strengths, growth opportunities, and any areas of concern in their relationship.** The inventory should be completed early in the proximate stage to provide the preparing minister and the couple with a snapshot of the relationship. The first follow-up session to begin processing the results should be scheduled shortly thereafter. **The inventory is not a test** and should not be used to determine whether or not a couple may marry. Rather, **it is a tool to help the couple better communicate with each other and work through potential challenges in their relationship.**

**The processing of the inventory results should be done by a facilitator who has gone through the necessary certification training for the inventory being utilized.** Ideally, the facilitator is the preparing minister, but also could be a mentor/sponsor couple or another trained minister. The facilitator should meet with the engaged couple as many times as needed in order to complete a thorough processing of the inventory results. The focus should be on affirming the couple's strengths and providing guidance and tools to help the couple in areas of growth. Couples should be encouraged to discuss and work on any issues raised by the inventory in-between the sessions. **Confidentiality is critical when processing the results with the couple.**

**The following inventories are recommended for use in the Archdiocese of Dubuque:**

**Prepare/Enrich** is an in-depth assessment tool for helping couples recognize and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their relationship. This well-researched and versatile inventory is available for couples to complete online. While multiple versions are available, the Catholic pre-marital inventory should be used for engaged couples preparing for marriage in the Catholic Church. Also, the Catholic version of the Workbook for Couples can be utilized to provide couples with exercises to work on their growth areas. *Prepare/Enrich* also has an inventory for married couples, which could be used for marriage enrichment or in some special marriage preparation circumstances, such as couples who have been civilly married for many years. All of the inventories are available in many languages, including Spanish and French. Facilitators must go through an online training or attend a live training before using the inventory with couples. In-person trainings are offered regularly in the archdiocese. **To learn more and see any upcoming local trainings, visit [www.dbqarch.org/prepare-enrich-training](http://www.dbqarch.org/prepare-enrich-training).**

PREPARE  ENRICH  
• building strong relationships •

The **FOCCUS** inventory provides insight into topics pertinent to marriage through its detailed assessment tool. This inventory may be completed either online or through a paper version. A trained *FOCCUS* facilitator guides the couple's discussion based on their *FOCCUS* Couple Report. The processing of results is supported by a detailed *FOCCUS* Facilitator Manual which provides supplemental questions that help elicit positive couple discussion. Training is necessary to be a facilitator and is available online. The Catholic version of the pre-marital inventory typically should be used. **REFOCCUS** is a marriage enrichment inventory that also could be used with couples who have been civilly married for many years. These inventories are available in multiple languages, including English and Spanish.

 **FOCCUS**<sup>™</sup>  
Marriage Ministries

**Learn more at [www.foccusinc.com](http://www.foccusinc.com).**

## **ACCOMPANIMENT BY A MENTOR/SPONSOR COUPLE**

“CHRISTIAN MARRIED COUPLES WHO ARE APOSTOLICALLY COMMITTED, IN A VISION OF SOUND CHRISTIAN OPTIMISM, CAN CONTRIBUTE TO SHEDDING GREATER LIGHT ON CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE VOCATION TO MARRIAGE AND IN THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF ALL THE VOCATIONS.”

**- PREPARATION FOR THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE, 37**

**Utilizing mentor/sponsor couples in the marriage preparation process can be very beneficial to engaged couples by providing them with positive witnesses of the lived experience of married life and helping them connect with the parish community.** These couples “should welcome them and ‘be there for them’ throughout the journey” (CPML, 20).

**The mentor/sponsor couple accompanies the engaged couple toward a deeper relationship with God, the Church, and each other.** They offer a sign that the parish cares about the engaged couple and their upcoming marriage. The mentor/sponsor couple should help the engaged couple feel welcome at the parish and connected to the faith community, especially by inviting them to participate with them in Mass and other parish functions. If the engaged couple lives in a different location than the parish where the marriage will take place, it may be best to have them work with a mentor/sponsor couple from a parish where they are living in order for that couple to provide a connection with a local parish community.

**The mentor/sponsor couple also facilitates conversations with the engaged couple on topics pertinent to marriage, witnessing to God's plan for marriage by sharing their lived experience.** Mentor/sponsor couples could utilize the pre-marital inventory results (if they are trained to facilitate the processing of these results) or materials from a marriage preparation program as the content for the formation and conversations during their sessions.

**There are two approaches that could be taken in utilizing mentor/sponsor couples.** One is for the parish to recruit qualified married couples for this role, train them, and then assign them to engaged couples. This provides a pool of trained couples available for this ministry. The other model is for the engaged couple to be invited to choose their own mentor/sponsor couple (see below for an explanation of *Witness to Love*, which uses this model). In this case, there are still qualifications that the mentor/sponsor couple needs to meet, which should be shared with the engaged couple upfront. Ultimately, the preparing minister gives approval (or not) of the married couple they choose. This approach allows more input from the engaged couple and for an initial trust to be in place, since the couple already knows the married couple. Both are valid approaches.

With either model, **mentor/sponsor couples should meet certain qualifications:**

- Validly married in the Catholic Church
- Married long enough to have experience to share (five years is a good minimum)
- Uphold the Church's teachings on marriage, family life, and sexuality
- Actively living the Catholic faith and in good standing in the Church
- A reasonably joyful and healthy marriage
- Good relational skills

Formation, resources, guidance, and marriage enrichment opportunities should be provided for mentor/sponsor couples to aid them in their role. **More information and resources are available at [www.dbqarch.org/sponsor-couples](http://www.dbqarch.org/sponsor-couples). For assistance with training mentor/sponsor couples, contact the Marriage Formation Office.**

Sessions with the mentor/sponsor couple should take place in person in a comfortable setting, although some circumstances may require them to be done remotely. The number of sessions depends on the needs of the couple and the materials being used. That said, **ministering to the couple should not be limited to the scheduled sessions. The mentor/sponsor couple should try to foster a deeper relationship with the engaged couple through connections such as going on double dates, attending parish gatherings or other events together, and utilizing means of communication to keep in touch between sessions.** Additionally, the mentor/sponsor couple should make a commitment to pray for the engaged couple regularly.

**The mentorship relationship should continue beyond the wedding.** If the engaged couple is open to it, the mentor/sponsor couple should invite them to continue getting together after the wedding in order to accompany them as they begin their married life (see the section on "Accompaniment for Newlyweds" for more on this). These post-wedding sessions serve to remind the couple that the Church cares deeply about their marriage and wants to support them in living their vocation.

**The preferred model/program to use in the Archdiocese of Dubuque for this component of the marriage catechumenate is *Witness to Love*.** While this does not mean other programs and materials cannot be used, pastoral leaders are invited to explore utilizing the *Witness to Love* approach and materials to discern if it is a good fit for their parish.

***Witness to Love*** is a virtues-based, catechumenate model of marriage preparation that integrates modern principles of psychology and the virtues to help couples facilitate an authentic dialogue about their relationship. In this model, the engaged couple chooses their own mentor couple, rather than having a sponsor couple assigned to them by the parish (the preparing minister must still approve of the couple). This mentor couple provides a concrete connection to the parish community and a “lifeline” of support in their commitment to Jesus, His Church, and their marriage. Materials include online video content, a workbook for the engaged couple, and a guide for mentors. The materials are available in English, Spanish, and French. Training is necessary for clergy and marriage prep coordinators prior to offering *Witness to Love* at your parish. Contact the Marriage Formation Office to find out about training options. **Learn more at [www.witnessstolove.org](http://www.witnessstolove.org).**



## **PARTICIPATION IN A MARRIAGE PREPARATION RETREAT**

**Engaged couples should participate in a marriage preparation retreat as part of the marriage catechumenate process.** Ideally, they would attend one toward the middle or end of the proximate stage of preparation. The retreat serves as an opportunity for spiritual renewal, proclamation of the “good news” of marriage, formation on the theology of marriage, insights into practical skills for marriage, the witness of married couples, and an opportunity to connect with other engaged couples.

**One-day marriage preparation retreats are available in various locations throughout the Archdiocese of Dubuque on multiple dates throughout the year.** These weekend programs are not intended to take the place of marriage preparation at the parish, but instead fulfill one component that complements the more personalized and localized elements offered at the parish level. While other retreat options also could be considered, the primary option for an archdiocesan marriage preparation retreat is the *Pre-Cana* program:

***Pre-Cana*** is a day-long marriage preparation program that emphasizes topics important to a healthy marriage. *Pre-Cana* provides catechetical content on the Church’s teaching on marriage and practical insights into life skills for marriage through the personal witness of the team of married couples and a priest. Topics covered include the Sacrament of Matrimony, Communication, Conflict Resolution and Forgiveness, Financial Stewardship, Sexual Intimacy, Natural Family Planning, and Marital Spirituality and Prayer. **For more information, including dates and locations, visit: [www.dbqarch.org/pre-cana](http://www.dbqarch.org/pre-cana).**



**Two Become One: Embracing the Sacrament in Remarriage** is a marriage preparation retreat option for those entering into a remarriage. See the section on “Remarriage” in the appendix, entitled “How to Approach Special Circumstances” for more information.

## FORMATION ON NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

“MARRIAGE AND CONJUGAL LOVE ARE BY THEIR NATURE ORDAINED TOWARD THE PROCREATION AND EDUCATION OF CHILDREN. CHILDREN ARE REALLY THE SUPREME GIFT OF MARRIAGE AND CONTRIBUTE IN THE HIGHEST DEGREE TO THEIR PARENTS’ WELFARE.”

- POPE ST. PAUL VI, *HUMANAE VITAE*, 9

Sexual intimacy is integral to the marital covenant. This conjugal love is “proper and exclusive to spouses” (CCC, 2361). **In marriage, “the two become one flesh” (Mt. 19:5), and spouses express with their bodies what they vowed in their consent on their wedding day.** Like the consent, each marital act ought to be:

- **Free** (not coercing each other in any way)
- **Total** (not withholding anything from each other)
- **Faithful** (not being sexually intimate with anyone else, in thoughts or actions)
- **Fruitful** (not hindering the procreative nature of the sexual act)

**The sexual act has by its very nature two primary purposes: unity and procreation.** Sexual intimacy serves to bond the couple more closely together and to generate new life. These two purposes, having been “established by God,” are inseparable (HV, 12). By maintaining these qualities in sexual intimacy, married couples exercise the virtue of chastity.



**Methods of contraception contradict God’s design for sexuality and, therefore, should be avoided.** Contraception is defined as “any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means” (HV, 14). These methods include: the birth control pill, condoms and other barrier methods, intrauterine devices (IUDs), and direct sterilization.

While “each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life” (HV, 11), **there are natural methods of spacing children that are morally acceptable.** These methods are fundamentally different from contraception in that they do not directly thwart the fertility of the couple. In other words, they do not render the act of intercourse sterile. Rather, **they maintain the inseparability of the unitive and procreative natures of sexual intercourse, and respect the natural functions of the reproductive system. They also can be utilized to help achieve pregnancy.**

Pope St. Paul VI explained these methods in *Humanae Vitae* as follows:

“If therefore there are well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances, the Church teaches that married people may then take advantage of the natural cycles immanent in the reproductive system and engage in marital intercourse only during those times that are infertile, thus controlling birth in a way which does not in the least offend the moral principles” (HV, 16).

Since he wrote those words in 1968, modern medical research has provided a much better understanding of the reproductive system, allowing for many developments and advancements in the area of Fertility Awareness Based Methods of family planning, also known as Natural Family Planning (NFP). **NFP refers to various scientific, natural, and moral methods of family planning and reproductive health awareness that are based on the observation of the naturally occurring signs and symptoms of the phases of a woman’s menstrual cycle.** By determining a couple’s natural phases of fertility and infertility, NFP can be used to help couples either achieve or avoid pregnancy. This medical science also can be used to monitor gynecological and reproductive health.

Unfortunately, **many engaged couples have been formed primarily by the secular culture that promotes a radically different view of sexuality and family planning.** Furthermore, many engaged couples are already sexually active and using some form of contraceptives, resulting in this being a pastorally sensitive topic. Therefore, it is necessary to include formation on sexuality, family planning, and fertility care in the marriage catechumenate. The tact through which this is delivered is important and can make or break the receptivity of the couple to the teachings. Propose, but don't impose. Invite couples to consider using NFP, and provide them with current information and the personal witness of married couples, so they can experience a fuller understanding and living of God's design of human sexuality. As Pope Francis stresses, "encouraging them to be generous in bestowing life" is important. Thus, **"greater emphasis needs to be placed on the fact that children are a wonderful gift from God and a joy for parents and the Church"** (AL, 222).

**Helping the couple understand what NFP is, why it is beneficial for their marriage, and where to learn more about it is a necessary component of marriage preparation.** This information should be shared and discussed with the couple by the preparing minister, the mentor/sponsor couple, or by a trained NFP parish ambassador, instructor, or medical provider. Sexual Intimacy and Natural Family Planning also are topics covered in the archdiocesan *Pre-Cana* program (although formation on these topics also should be provided as part of the other components during the marriage catechumenate).

**The archdiocesan "Top Ten Reasons to Use NFP" resources can be utilized to help couples understand the benefits of NFP for their marriage.** Copies of the "Top Ten" brochures, posters, and flyers (in English and Spanish) may be ordered by contacting the Marriage Formation Office. **Couples also should be invited to visit the archdiocesan NFP website at [nfp.dbqarch.org](http://nfp.dbqarch.org),** where they can find informational and inspirational videos about NFP, recommended NFP resources, and a list of trained instructors and medical providers for various methods of NFP who are available in the Archdiocese of Dubuque. Couples should be encouraged to contact an instructor in order to learn how to practice a method.



**Unfortunately, some couples will face challenges in trying to have children, including infertility, miscarriage, stillbirth, life-limiting pre-natal diagnoses, or infant loss (and some may have already experienced these challenges in their relationship or in a previous relationship).** Engaged couples should be made aware of these all-too-common struggles faced by many couples when trying to have children. Awareness of both the Church's ethical teachings related to these situations and the pastoral care available to them through the Church in these circumstances could plant a seed that may be revisited by the couple if they experience infertility or the loss of a child. If the couple has already dealt with any of these experiences, this could provide an opportunity for pastoral care. If the couple already knows they will have difficulties having biological children, this could present an opportunity to encourage exploration of adoption, since "the choice of adoption or foster parenting can also express that fruitfulness which is a characteristic of married life" (AL, 82).

**When addressing the topic of infertility, couples should be made aware of the reasons why it is not morally permissible to use certain reproductive technologies,** such as In Vitro Fertilization (IVF), surrogacy, artificial insemination by donor, or artificial insemination by husband. At the same time, it should be emphasized that there are means of assessing and treating infertility which are morally acceptable, including various diagnostic tests, medications, corrective surgeries, Fertility Awareness Based Methods of family planning, and the related field of NaProTECHNOLOGY. For assistance in evaluating the morality of various treatments for infertility, see the *Handbook of Catholic Health Care Ethics for Pastoral Ministry* from the archdiocesan Medical-Moral Commission, available at [www.dbqarch.org/handbook-for-pastoral-ministry](http://www.dbqarch.org/handbook-for-pastoral-ministry). **For recommended resources on infertility, visit [www.dbqarch.org/Infertility](http://www.dbqarch.org/Infertility).**

The archdiocese has developed a ministry called *Behold Your Child* to provide training and resources for parish leaders to equip them in providing hope and healing for parents and families who experience the loss of a child during pregnancy or early infancy. Engaged couples could be made aware of the resources available through the *Behold Your Child* ministry, along with the local support that is accessible if they experience this type of loss. To learn more, visit [www.dbqarch.org/beholdyourchild](http://www.dbqarch.org/beholdyourchild).



## + RITE OF BETROTHAL (ORDER OF BLESSING AN ENGAGED COUPLE)

“AT THE CONCLUSION OF THIS [PROXIMATE] STAGE, THE RITE OF BETROTHAL COULD TAKE PLACE AS A SIGN OF ENTRY INTO THE SUBSEQUENT STAGE OF FINAL [IMMEDIATE] PREPARATION. THIS RITE—WHICH INCLUDES THE BLESSING OF THE BETROTHED AND THEIR ENGAGEMENT RINGS (IN PLACES WHERE THIS CUSTOM IS COMMONPLACE)—EXPRESSES ITS FULL MEANING ONLY WHEN CELEBRATED AND LIVED IN FAITH, SINCE THE RITE OFFERS THE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE COUPLE TO ASK THE LORD FOR THE GRACES NEEDED TO GROW IN LOVE AND TO PREPARE WORTHILY FOR THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE. THE MOST APPROPRIATE MOMENT FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THIS RITE SHALL BE CHOSEN IN DIALOGUE WITH THE MEMBERS OF THE ACCOMPANYING TEAM AND THE ORDAINED MINISTER.”

– **CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, 59**

**When the proximate stage of preparation nears its conclusion, the couple should be invited to celebrate what *Catechumenal Pathways* refers to as the Rite of Betrothal.** Since in the Latin Church there is no formal ritual text for betrothal, ***The Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple, which is found in Appendix II of the Order of Celebrating Matrimony, should be utilized for this rite.*** This blessing serves as a recognition of the couple’s progress in their journey toward marriage, an invitation to continue to grow deeper, and a celebration of the transition into the immediate preparation stage.

The ritual itself should be kept rather simple and follow the guidelines and text in the *OCM*. It is essential to avoid any appearance of marriage in this celebration and to remind the couple that “no legal obligation to contract marriage derives from this promise, and the freedom of the contracting party to express matrimonial consent is always safeguarded” (*CPML*, 61). For this reason, the *OCM* specifies **that this blessing is “never to be combined with the celebration of Mass”** (*OCM*, 221). Rather, it could be celebrated after a Sunday or daily Mass, at a formation session for engaged couples, or more privately with the families of the two parties.

For the celebration of this rite, “one of the **parents** may appropriately preside at the rite of blessing. If a **Priest or Deacon** is present, however, then the office of presiding more appropriately belongs to him, provided that it is clear to those present that the rite is not a celebration of Marriage itself” (*OCM*, 219). It is also permissible for **another layperson**, such as a marriage preparation leader or mentor/sponsor couple, to preside. “While maintaining the chief elements and structure of the rite, **[the presider] should adapt the individual parts to the circumstances**” (*OCM*, 220).

**“The outline of the celebration should be simple and sober: opening rites, proclamation of the Word of God, prayers of the faithful, perhaps a ‘sign of commitment’ (e.g. exchange of engagement rings), prayer of blessing, and conclusion of the rite”** (*CPML*, 61). The exchange of engagement rings or other gifts is optional (most likely, the couple has already exchanged engagement rings). The *OCM* includes a short blessing of the rings or gifts that could be included. **In short, the text of *The Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple in the OCM* should be followed with adaptations as needed.**

## STAGE 2: IMMEDIATE PREPARATION

“THE IMMEDIATE PREPARATION FOR THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE MUST FIND SUITABLE OCCASIONS TO INTRODUCE THE ENGAGED COUPLE TO THE RITE OF MARRIAGE. AS WELL AS DEEPENING THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE ON MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY WITH PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO MORAL DUTIES, IN THIS PREPARATION THE ENGAGED SHOULD BE GUIDED TO TAKE AN INFORMED AND ACTIVE PART IN THE MARRIAGE CELEBRATION, AND UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF THE LITURGICAL ACTIONS AND TEXTS.”

### - PREPARATION FOR THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE, 52

Immediate marriage preparation “takes place in the months leading up to the wedding celebration” (CPML, 64). Ideally, this stage would begin about three months prior to the wedding. **This stage primarily focuses on preparation for the wedding liturgy itself, while also offering the opportunity for the couple to recall and reflect on the previous formation received.** During this stage, “emphasis needs to be placed on the indispensable conditions of freedom (within the couple and as a couple) and full awareness regarding the commitments assumed in the choice to be made. Those commitments are linked to the essential characteristics of marriage (indissolubility, unity, fidelity, fecundity)” (CPML, 65). In other words, the focus should be on making sure the couple is ready to commit themselves to a relationship of self-giving love that is free, total, faithful, and fruitful.

**The wedding liturgy preparations should seek to help the couple “to prepare for a conscious and fruitful participation in the liturgy of matrimony”** (CPML, 73). It is also important to help the couple to be properly disposed to receive the graces given in the sacrament, especially through an invitation to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation prior to the wedding. Additionally, “as they approach the wedding, couples should become aware that they are not spectators but rather, in the name of Christ, ministers of the celebration of their marriage” (CPML, 68).

This stage also builds on the formation received in remote and proximate marriage preparation, by **providing a “synthesis of the previous preparation, especially its doctrinal, moral and spiritual content, thus filling in eventual gaps in basic formation”** (PSM, 50). This formation should also include opportunities for “spiritual experiences of encounter with the Lord,” especially through the Scriptures and times of personal and communal prayer (CPML, 68). Finally, **immediate preparation should be oriented toward helping the couple transition into the lived reality of married life.** This would include making the couple aware of continued accompaniment, support, formation, and resources available to them after the wedding (see the sections on “Accompaniment of Newlyweds” and “How to Provide Ongoing Marriage Enrichment” for ideas).

## WEDDING LITURGY PLANNING

**The focus on evangelization throughout the marriage catechumenate also should be central to preparations for the wedding liturgy.** The liturgy has the potential to be a point of contention between the Church’s ministers and the couple, as secular society may have formed the couple’s expectations of a wedding ceremony in a way not aligned with the Church’s vision. It is important, therefore, to uncover the couple’s expectations for the wedding early in the marriage catechumenate process. Then, **the preparing minister can work to meet the couple where they are and help them journey toward a fuller understanding and appreciation of the sacredness of the Church’s liturgy.**

**There are non-negotiables regarding the wedding liturgy, and one should not add, remove, or change anything in the liturgy that is not permitted in the OCM.** The Church provides clear parameters with room for some adaptation when appropriate. If the couple has expectations for their wedding that contradict the Church’s liturgical norms, then those aspects of the wedding liturgy should be charitably explained to them. In this process of helping the couple understand the Church’s expectations for a wedding liturgy, one should not mandate anything that the Church herself does not mandate, nor forbid anything that the Church herself does not forbid.

**The couple should be encouraged to avoid undue extravagance in the wedding liturgy in order to keep the focus on the marital union.** “Care should be taken that the details of the marriage celebration are characterized by a restrained, simple and authentic style. The festive tone should not be disturbed by excessive display” (PSM, 71). On this note, the words of Pope Francis to engaged couples are motivating: “You are capable of opting for a more modest and simple celebration in which love takes precedence over everything else. Pastoral workers and the entire community can help make this priority the norm rather than the exception” (AL, 212).

Furthermore, it is all too common today that “many [young people] concentrate on their wedding day and forget the life-long commitment they are about to enter into” (AL, 215). **Those assisting the couple in preparing for marriage should encourage the couple to not allow preparations for the wedding day to overshadow their preparation for entering into and living married life.** Therefore, the focus should go beyond the logistics of the wedding day in order to provide formation to strengthen the couple’s relationship.

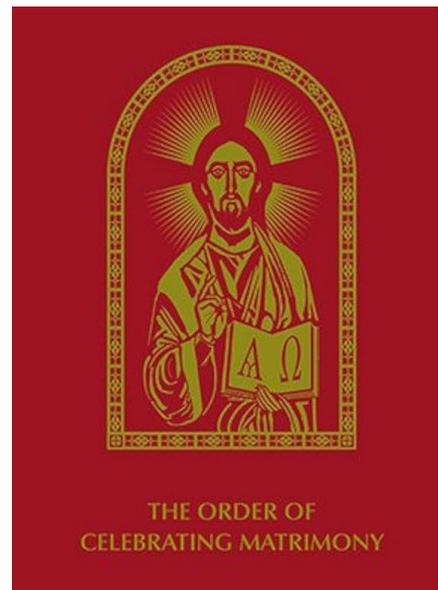
## **Choosing the Form of the Wedding Liturgy**

“MARRIAGE SHOULD NORMALLY BE CELEBRATED WITHIN MASS. NEVERTHELESS, WITH DUE REGARD, BOTH FOR THE NECESSITIES OF PASTORAL CARE AND FOR THE WAY IN WHICH THE PROSPECTIVE SPOUSES AND THOSE PRESENT PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH, THE PASTOR SHOULD DECIDE WHETHER IT WOULD BE PREFERABLE TO PROPOSE THAT MARRIAGE BE CELEBRATED WITHIN OR OUTSIDE OF MASS.”

**- ORDER OF CELEBRATING MATRIMONY, 29**

The OCM provides a few options for the form of the wedding liturgy based on the circumstances of the couple and the discretion of the pastor. **The celebration of marriage between two Catholics should ordinarily take place within the Mass, utilizing *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony within Mass*** (see OCM, Chap. 1). Special circumstances could allow two Catholics to be married utilizing *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony without Mass* (see OCM, Chap. 2). For example, this exception could be used when one of the parties has recently been received into the Catholic Church and desires to accommodate non-Catholic family and friends who will be in attendance. This option might help to avoid tension caused by their unfamiliarity with the Mass and their exclusion from receiving Holy Communion.

**In a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic, *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony without Mass* should ordinarily be used** (see OCM, Chap. 2). “If, however, the situation warrants it, the rite for celebrating Matrimony within Mass may be used, with the consent of the local Ordinary” (OCM 36). The Archbishop has granted priests of the Archdiocese of Dubuque the faculty to permit these marriages to take place within Mass. If Mass will be celebrated, the couple should be made aware that non-Catholics should not receive Holy Communion. **In a marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person, *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony between a Catholic and a Catechumen or a Non-Christian* must be used, and the wedding cannot take place within Mass** (see OCM, Chap. 3).



## **Selecting the Elements of the Wedding Liturgy**

“THE FOLLOWING SHOULD BE CHOSEN WITH THE ENGAGED COUPLE, AS THE CIRCUMSTANCES SO SUGGEST: THE READINGS FROM SACRED SCRIPTURE, WHICH WILL BE EXPLAINED IN THE HOMILY; THE FORM FOR EXPRESSING MUTUAL CONSENT; THE FORMULARIES FOR THE BLESSING OF RINGS, FOR THE NUPTIAL BLESSING, FOR THE INTENTIONS OF THE UNIVERSAL PRAYER OR PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL, AND FOR THE CHANTS. MOREOVER, ATTENTION SHOULD ALSO BE GIVEN TO THE APPROPRIATE USE OF OPTIONS PROVIDED IN THE RITE AS WELL AS TO LOCAL CUSTOMS, WHICH MAY BE OBSERVED IF APPROPRIATE.”

### **- ORDER OF CELEBRATING MATRIMONY, 29**

The *OCM* provides various options for certain components of the wedding liturgy, with due regard to the liturgical season within which the wedding will take place. **The engaged couple should play an active role in the process of choosing from the available options, under the direction of the preparing minister, liturgist, and presider.** “In their preparation for marriage, the couple should be encouraged to make the liturgical celebration a profound personal experience and to appreciate the meaning of each of its signs” (*AL*, 213).

Regarding selection of the Scripture readings, the options listed in Chapter 4 of the *OCM* should be presented to the couple, and they should be encouraged to prayerfully reflect together on which readings to choose (see *OCM*, 34 regarding the particular occasions when the readings of the day should be used rather than readings for the Rite of Marriage). “At least one reading that explicitly speaks of marriage must always be chosen” (*OCM*, 144). **Once the readings have been selected, couples should be invited to study them and prayerfully reflect on their meaning.**

Options for the consent, blessing of the rings, and Nuptial Blessing may be found within the various forms of the wedding liturgy in the *OCM*, including additional options in Chapter 4, “Various Texts to be Used.” “Examples of the Universal Prayer” may be found in Appendix I of the *OCM*. **The preparing minister or liturgist should present these options to the engaged couple and guide them through the selection of the various components, including the writing of the Universal Prayer, for their wedding liturgy.**

**Wedding music “should express the faith of the Church”** (*OCM*, 30). It is not appropriate to include secular music in the liturgy, nor to use prerecorded music. Pastoral sensitivity should be utilized in conveying to the couple that a particular requested song is not fitting for the occasion. They could be encouraged to incorporate the song into the reception, rather than having it as part of the wedding. Furthermore, since **music is intended to draw all present to participate in voice and spirit in prayer and the worship of God**, consideration should be given to the accessibility of the songs for those who will be present. The liturgical season in which the wedding will take place should also be taken into account when planning music. **The parish music coordinator or preparing minister should guide the couple in selecting fitting music for the liturgy**, including providing a list of approved and available musical selections from which the couple may choose.

Many wedding guests often are not familiar with the prayers and rituals of a Catholic liturgy due to being non-Catholic or fallen-away from the practice of the Catholic faith. Thus, in planning for the wedding, **parishes should explore ways to invite and guide the congregation into active participation in the liturgy.** For example, a detailed worship aid that includes the liturgical responses, readings, and music could be provided (while making sure to follow licensing requirements for copyrighted music and Scripture texts). Pastorally sensitive and liturgically appropriate explanations and directives during the liturgy could also be offered to help guide the congregation (see *PSM*, 65). If the wedding is celebrated within Mass, the celebrant could briefly and sensitively explain that only Catholics in a state of grace should receive Holy Communion.

**If one or both of the individuals getting married is from a different cultural background, consideration should be given to including distinct cultural customs in the wedding liturgy.**

“Praiseworthy customs that belong to various peoples or ethnic groups can be brought into the celebration, provided that they express above all the coming together of the ecclesial assembly as a sign of the faith of the Church” (*PSM*, 60). The *OCM* already includes the customary options of the “Blessing and Giving of the *Arras* (coins)” and the “Blessing and Placing of the *Lazo* (wedding garland) or the Veil.” Other cultural practices must be discerned for their fittingness in the liturgy, including utilizing music and instrumentation unique to the particular culture. Having a bilingual wedding liturgy also could be an option.

Discretion must be used regarding some wedding customs that are popular in the United States. **Practices that have their origin in secular culture, with little or no grounding in the Church’s tradition, generally should not be included in the wedding liturgy.** That said, the following commonly requested customs should be considered on a case-by-case basis:

- **Having the father of the bride process in with his daughter.** While not expressly included in the rite, this could fit within the context of the second option for the procession. Thus, if requested by the couple, there is no reason to deny this practice.
- **Using a unity candle or other symbol of unity.** This type of custom is not envisioned in the *OCM*, so it is best to exclude it from the wedding liturgy itself. Such customs could instead be done before or after the liturgy or during the reception.
- **Presenting flowers before a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary.** Since this is not included in the *OCM*, it is not advisable to do this in the wedding liturgy itself. If desired, couples could instead make the presentation before or after the liturgy or at the rehearsal. Other options for expressing Marian devotion could be offered, such as choosing a Marian song.

## **Determining Local Procedures**

**Parishes should determine local procedures regarding facility usage and church etiquette for the wedding liturgy and corresponding events.** For example, the parish might suggest donation amounts for the use of church facilities, along with stipends for the presider, a volunteer wedding coordinator, musicians, cantors, altar servers, etc. That said, **it should always be made clear that there is no cost for the Church celebration of marriage itself.** Suggested donation amounts for facilities and for those helping to coordinate and celebrate the wedding should not cause an undue burden to the couple. Couples also could be encouraged to make a charitable donation to a worthy cause in conjunction with their wedding.

**Parishes should determine local procedures for the appropriate use of wedding decorations in the church, keeping in mind reverence for the sacred space and the liturgical season in which the wedding will take place.** “The festive character of the celebration of Marriage should be suitably expressed even in the manner of decorating the church” (*OCM*, 31). Parishes should also develop clear guidelines regarding the appropriate use of photography and videography during (as well as before and after) the wedding liturgy. Additionally, expectations should be established regarding proper etiquette while on church grounds. This includes what is and is not appropriate regarding food and beverages (including alcohol) in parish facilities, along with providing guidance on proper attire for the wedding liturgy.

**All local procedures should be clearly communicated to the engaged couple early in the process.** The engaged couple, the wedding party, wedding professionals, and family and friends may not be aware of what is or is not appropriate for a Church wedding. Thus, charitably reminding them of reverent behavior may be necessary.

## CELEBRATION OF THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

“SHORTLY BEFORE THE WEDDING, COUPLES SHOULD CELEBRATE THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION ... EXPERIENCE SHOWS THAT RECEIVING GOD’S FORGIVENESS PREPARES SPOUSES BETTER THAN ANYTHING ELSE TO WELCOME THE GRACE WHICH GOD OFFERS THEM IN THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE.”

– **CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, 71**

Since it is “appropriate for the bride and groom to prepare themselves for the celebration of their marriage by receiving the sacrament of penance” (CCC, 1622), **an invitation should be extended to the couple (or just the Catholic party) to go to Confession prior to their wedding.** For some, it may have been years or even decades since they last went to Confession. Thus, this is an opportunity to provide formation on the Sacrament of Reconciliation and to offer resources to help guide their preparation for making a good Confession. Making the Sacrament of Reconciliation easily accessible to the couple before the wedding can be done by providing them with the regular Confession times at the parish, encouraging them to set up an appointment with a priest, or making the sacrament available in conjunction with the wedding rehearsal, before the wedding liturgy, or at another time in close proximity to the wedding. Furthermore, **marriage preparation is an opportunity to encourage the couple to make celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation a regular practice in their married life.**

## THE WEDDING REHEARSAL

The rehearsal is a time of joyful anticipation of the celebration soon to take place. **It provides a venue to welcome family, friends, and parishioners who will be involved in the wedding liturgy.** It, therefore, should be set within the context of evangelization, as an opportunity to share Christ’s hospitality with all involved. **The wedding rehearsal can help set the tone for the wedding day and help those involved to be well-prepared for full, conscious, and active participation in the wedding liturgy.**

## **+ RITE OF MARRIAGE (ORDER OF CELEBRATING MATRIMONY)**

“FREQUENTLY, [AT A WEDDING] THE CELEBRANT SPEAKS TO A CONGREGATION THAT INCLUDES PEOPLE WHO SELDOM PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH, OR WHO ARE MEMBERS OF OTHER CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS OR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES. THE OCCASION THUS PROVIDES A VALUABLE OPPORTUNITY TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST.”

– **POPE FRANCIS, AMORIS LAETITIA, 216**

After the final preparations have been completed in the immediate stage, the couple arrives at the culmination of the journey thus far with the celebration of the Rite of Marriage. The couple is now ready to enter into their marital union. **“In the marriage rite they become a permanent sacrament of Christ who loves the Church”** (CPML, 68). This is a sacred and grace-filled moment! The couple receives “a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the Rite of Marriage” (CPML, 66). Every effort should be made to celebrate this occasion reverently and joyfully!

**As with the entire marriage catechumenate process, the Rite of Marriage is an opportunity for evangelization for the couple and all those gathered for the celebration of marriage.** Weddings typically have many non-Catholics and non-practicing Catholics in attendance. Thus, every effort should be made to ensure all feel welcomed at the church through intentional hospitality. Furthermore, the music should draw people’s hearts and minds toward God, and the homily should illustrate the truth, beauty, and goodness of God’s design for marriage and proclaim the Gospel anew. All present should be invited to actively participate in the liturgy and to pray for the couple as they enter into this new union.

**The Order of Celebrating Matrimony must be utilized for the Rite of Marriage.** The correct form should be used, according to the parameters provided above in the section on “Choosing the Form of the Wedding Liturgy,” along with the particular elements selected by the couple.



## STAGE 3: ACCOMPANIMENT OF NEWLYWEDS (*MYSTAGOGY*)

“THE CATECHUMENAL PATHWAY DOES NOT CONCLUDE WITH THE CELEBRATION OF MARRIAGE. IN FACT, THE ENTIRE PROCESS SHOULD NOT BE UNDERSTOOD AS AN ISOLATED ACT, BUT RATHER AS THE ENTRY INTO A ‘PERMANENT STATE,’ WHICH THEREFORE REQUIRES A UNIQUE ‘ONGOING FORMATION’ INVOLVING REFLECTION, DIALOGUE, AND HELP FROM THE CHURCH. FOR THIS REASON, THE FIRST YEARS OF MARRIED LIFE NEED TO BE ‘ACCOMPANIED,’ AND NEWLYWEDS SHOULD NOT BE LEFT IN SOLITUDE”

- **CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, 74**

**The wedding day is not the end of the formation process for the couple but the beginning of a new life together.** “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 lifelong calling based on a firm and realistic decision to face all trials and difficult moments together” (AL, 211). **It is essential that the support of the parish community continues, and even increases, after the celebration of marriage in order to accompany the couple in living their vocation.**

**“The first few years of marriage are critical to the life of a married couple” and can often be the most challenging,** as the two individuals work to bring their lives together as one “during this time of transition and change” (CJL, 23). Therefore, support, formation, and accompaniment are especially important during the initial years. **Every effort should be made to remind newlyweds that the Church continues to care for them deeply and desires to help them live the fullness of God’s plan for marriage.**

**The early years of marriage constitute a period of *mystagogy*,** which means an “introduction to the mystery” (CPML, 77). During this period, **the couple should be invited to reflect on the graces received in marriage and work to set a solid foundation for the rest of their married life.** “Spouses, therefore, must be helped to discern the ‘signs’ of Christ’s presence in their union” (CPML, 77). It is important to remember that “the grace contained in the sacrament is not automatically actuated, but rather requires the spouses to cooperate with it by responsibly taking on the tasks and challenges that married life presents” (CPML, 75). **The parish should assist couples on this journey of entering more deeply into the mystery of marriage.**

Prior to the wedding, **the couple should be made aware of opportunities available at the parish to help them continue to grow in faith and enrich their relationship in the initial years of married life and beyond.** After the wedding, they should be invited and encouraged to participate in those formative opportunities. These could include adult faith formation programs, young adult ministry groups, and marriage enrichment offerings.

**Mentor/sponsor couples should continue to accompany the couple after the wedding by inviting the newlyweds to meet with them regularly to continue to provide support, guidance, and a personal connection to the parish community.** The mentor/sponsor couple plays an essential and primary role in mystagogy, since “this stage of the catechumenate is ... one of ‘apprenticeship,’ during which the closeness and concrete suggestions of more experienced married couples may offer great guidance, as they share with younger couples what they have learned ‘along the way’” (CPML, 80). Newlyweds need good role models of married life. **Therefore, the mentor/sponsor couple should provide an ongoing witness to married life, an anchor of prayer and support, and a lifeline in times of crisis.**

**Formation during the initial years of married life should focus on helping the couple develop a strong and healthy interpersonal relationship, live chaste marital sexuality, learn parenting skills (when children enter the relationship), and embrace the mission of marriage to be an image of God’s self-giving love to the world.** The parish should maintain contact and be present to the newlyweds in order to provide “assistance during this very early stage, as they begin to gain experience of the ‘project of life,’ which is inscribed in marriage but not yet fully realized” (CPML, 75). During this final stage of the marriage catechumenate, “couples need to be invited to become part of the ordinary family ministry in their parish or the Church community with which they have established some connection” (CPML, 84).

**Providing support after the wedding is challenging if the couple does not live where the wedding took place.** In that case, the parish of marriage should strive to help the newlyweds connect with a parish community where they are living, and encourage them to seek support and ongoing formation. This could include contacting the parish where the couple is living to learn about opportunities for marriage enrichment and accompaniment, and to make sure pastoral leaders at that parish are aware of the newlyweds in their community. **Efforts to build a bridge between the newly married couple and the parish where they are living can bear much fruit.**

The next section will provide further guidance on how to provide ongoing marriage enrichment.



# HOW TO PROVIDE ONGOING MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT



ONGOING MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT IS ESSENTIAL FOR COUPLES TO GROW IN VIRTUE AND TO CHERISH THE GIFT THAT THEY ARE TO ONE ANOTHER. MARRIED LIFE IS ENHANCED AND ENRICHED THROUGH THE YEARS BY THE FAITHFUL, FRUITFUL GIFT THAT THE SPOUSES MAKE TO ONE ANOTHER DAY BY DAY.

– CALLED TO THE JOY OF LOVE, 24



Married couples need ongoing support from their parish community to help them further develop and maintain a strong marital relationship. Thus, **parishes should offer marriage enrichment ministries in order to provide “constant and permanent care for spouses”** (CPML, 83). These can provide couples with “assistance in the form of spiritual accompaniment, practical solutions, and strategies derived from experience and psychological guidance” (CPML, 81). These are suggestions of ways to provide marriage enrichment:

- **Couple Date Nights** are regular (often monthly) parish gatherings for couples (engaged and married) that provide the opportunity to spend time with other couples and each other. Date Nights often include a meal, some formational content on marriage (such as a presentation or video), socializing and discussion with other couples, one-on-one time, and prayer. It is recommended to offer on-site childcare to accommodate parents of young children (archdiocesan Safe Environment policies must be followed). **For more information and a list of Date Nights in the archdiocese, visit [www.dbqarch.org/date-nights](http://www.dbqarch.org/date-nights).**
- **Couples Small Groups** provide an opportunity for married couples to connect. A group of four to six couples could meet regularly (for example, weekly or monthly) in a comfortable location to share their married life experiences and to mutually support one another. Utilizing a marriage enrichment program that provides structure and content to the sessions is recommended to keep the group focused and formative. **For recommended programs, visit [www.dbqarch.org/couples-small-groups](http://www.dbqarch.org/couples-small-groups).**
- **Mentor Couples** can provide ongoing support, encouragement, and accompaniment for married couples. This could be the same couple who mentored newlyweds during marriage preparation, or a new mentorship relationship (especially if a couple did not have a mentor/sponsor couple during marriage preparation, or if they no longer live where they went through marriage preparation). Parishes could recruit and train experienced married couples to serve in this role, or utilize the archdiocesan *Covenant of Love* Marriage Mentor Couples (see the next section for more about this ministry).

- **Marriage Retreats** could be offered or promoted by parishes as an opportunity for married couples to spend time away together to foster conversation with God in prayer and with each other. These retreats provide an opportunity for the couple to “develop a true ‘marital spirituality’ which nurtures and sustains the unique path to holiness that they travel in married life” (CPML, 83). **Recommended retreats for married couples are available here: [www.dbqarch.org/marriage-retreats](http://www.dbqarch.org/marriage-retreats).**
- **Marriage Resources** could be shared with couples to enrich their relationship. Many marriage resources are available in print and digital formats, including marriage devotionals, books, programs, online videos, apps, websites, and more. **For recommended marriage resources, visit: [www.dbqarch.org/marriage-resources](http://www.dbqarch.org/marriage-resources).**

**Parish leaders are invited to prayerfully discern which marriage enrichment opportunities to offer.** It is beneficial to have a marriage enrichment team at the parish to plan and implement offerings. Whichever options are offered should be clearly communicated to couples.



## **+ OPTIONAL RITE: ORDER OF BLESSING A MARRIED COUPLE**

“THE WEDDING ANNIVERSARY SHOULD BE CELEBRATED AS PART OF A COMMUNITY LITURGICAL CELEBRATION, ALONG WITH A SPECIAL BLESSING FOR THE SPOUSES. ON MAJOR ANNIVERSARIES (E.G., EVERY FIVE YEARS), A RENEWAL OF MARRIAGE VOWS COULD BE SUGGESTED TO THE BRIDE AND GROOM.”

**- CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, 83**

**The Church provides a ritual for blessing a married couple that can be utilized “on the main anniversaries of Marriage” to strengthen the couple and invite them “to renew before God their commitment to live their Marriage in holiness” (OCM, 237 and 240, respectively).** The ritual text for *The Order of Blessing a Married Couple within Mass on the Anniversary of Marriage* can be found in Appendix III of the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*. This blessing should always take place within the context of the Mass, either at a special Mass for this occasion or during a regularly scheduled parish Mass. **This provides the opportunity for a public witness to the beauty and dignity of marriage, along with the enrichment of the couple receiving the blessing.**

# HOW TO PROVIDE PASTORAL CARE FOR COUPLES IN CRISIS



THEREFORE, PASTORAL CARE OF THE MARRIAGE BOND MUST ACCOMPANY NEWLY-MARRIED COUPLES EVEN FROM THEIR EARLIEST YEARS TOGETHER AS THEY ENCOUNTER THE VARIOUS STAGES OF MARRIED LIFE. INDEED, MOMENTS OF CRISIS FORM PART OF THE MARITAL JOURNEY, AND MUST BE TRANSFORMED INTO OPPORTUNITIES, WHICH MAY PRODUCE PAINFUL WOUNDS AND SORES OF THE HEART BUT WHICH ALWAYS LEAVE ROOM FOR RECONCILIATION, FORGIVENESS, AND THE BALM OF GRACE, WHICH CONTINUES TO WORK IN THE SACRAMENTAL BOND.

– **CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, 89**



In addition to offering marriage enrichment opportunities, **parishes should provide pastoral care for struggling marriages.** We must recognize that “crises are not ‘anomalies’ but ‘normal’ parts of married life, even those crises resulting from frailty or personal sin” (*CPML*, 91). **All couples will face challenges.** In fact, “even within strong marriages, spouses can harm one another, possibly leading to deep unhappiness and marital distress” (*CJL*, 27).

Crises could be spurred by major life transitions (such as the birth of a child, a career change, moving, etc.) or by tragedies (such as financial hardships; severe illnesses; or the death of a child, parent, close friend, etc.). In addition, they could be the result of regular points of conflict (such as navigating differences in families of origin, working out varying approaches to parenting, breakdowns in communication, etc.), or as a result of sinful behavior (such as marital infidelity, pornography usage, anger issues, domestic violence, etc.). **Regardless of the type of crisis, couples need pastoral accompaniment from the Church.** They especially need a faith-filled and marriage-building community to surround them with love and support.

No matter how serious the crisis is, we must remember (and help couples recognize) that God can redeem it for good. “Together with Him, even the ‘death’ of a crisis can be transformed into resurrection and new life!” (*CPML*, 91). For example, through crises “spouses can learn how to navigate difficulties and acquire skills” (*CJL*, 27). Therefore, **couples in crisis should be reminded that there is purpose and value to the relationship challenges they are facing. They need not give up hope, for through the crises they can grow stronger as a couple.**

**“The parish or community should offer a pastoral service for accompanying couples in crisis, to which those who perceive that they are in such a situation can turn”** (CPML, 87). Pastoral leaders should prayerfully discern how to support couples in crisis and be aware of the ministries and resources available to the couple in the parish, local community, and archdiocese. They should be prepared to respond with appropriate help when a couple in crisis comes forward. Unfortunately, “most people in difficult or critical situations do not seek pastoral assistance, since they do not find it sympathetic, realistic, or concerned for individual cases” (AL, 235). There is an urgent need for parishes to reach out, invite, and encourage couples in crisis to recognize the parish as a safe place to bring their wounds for healing. **Pastoral leaders should find ways to bridge the gap between couples in crisis and the parish or community support available,** and “should make couples feel that the Church is always there for them, like a mother ever ready to welcome her children” (CPML, 91).

**Couples who are struggling in their marriage must be approached with tremendous pastoral sensitivity.** Clergy or parish staff members could provide this accompaniment, but “trained marriage coaches or professional counselors may be critical to helping spouses through a crisis” (CJL, 27). Couples in crisis should be offered “both psychological and spiritual assistance, in order to rediscover the profound meaning of the marital bond” (CPML, 90). **All efforts to accompany couples in crisis should be centered on protecting the marital bond.** “Couples should be assisted whenever they face new difficulties and helped to seek, above all, to defend and consolidate their marriage union, for their own good and for the good of their children” (CPML, 81). Therefore, **reconciliation between the spouses should always be sought.** In this regard, keep in mind that “nothing helps couples heal wounds and forgive their spouse like forgiveness received from the Lord” in the Sacrament of Reconciliation (CPML, 91). Encourage couples in crisis to go to Confession and also to offer forgiveness to each other.



That said, **“despite all the support the Church offers to couples in crisis, there remain some situations in which separation is inevitable”** (CPML, 93). Sometimes separation is even “morally necessary, precisely when it is a matter of removing the more vulnerable spouse or young children from serious injury due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference. Even so, separation must be considered as a last resort, after all other reasonable attempts at reconciliation have proved vain” (AL, 241). Those who are separated or civilly divorced still need pastoral care. **For recommended resources for ministry to those who are divorced and separated, visit: [www.dbqarch.org/divorce](http://www.dbqarch.org/divorce).**

Finally, for married couples in crisis, the following services are available in the archdiocese:

- **Catholic Charities Counseling Services** provides marriage and family therapy in various locations throughout the archdiocese, as well as via telehealth. **For more information, visit: [www.catholiccharitiesdubuque.org/counseling](http://www.catholiccharitiesdubuque.org/counseling).**
- **Covenant of Love Marriage Mentors** are available throughout the archdiocese. These married couples have been trained to minister to struggling couples and to coach them towards a deeper understanding and living of the fullness God intended for marriage. Through this mentoring process, a couple can achieve relationship goals with effective support, formation, and guidance. **To learn more and find a list of mentor couples, visit [www.dbqarch.org/marriage-mentors](http://www.dbqarch.org/marriage-mentors).**



# CONCLUSION



THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY IS CALLED TO RADIATE GOD'S LOVE TO THE WORLD. WHEN THE WORLD SEES A JOYFUL FAMILY, IT SEES GOD WORKING IN HISTORY. MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE MINISTRY SHOULD ENCOURAGE AND ASSIST COUPLES AND FAMILIES IN THEIR MIDST TO BECOME EFFECTIVE AGENTS OF EVANGELIZATION.

- CALLED TO THE JOY OF LOVE, 49



In conclusion, **parishes in the Archdiocese of Dubuque are invited to implement the vision of the marriage catechumenate laid out in this framework.** Quality marriage preparation and formation is essential to strengthening the Church and evangelizing our culture. It will take work to enact the more robust approach to marriage ministry laid out here, but it is worth the investment. Especially in a society in which marriage is on the decline, it is necessary to be proactive in helping young people discern a vocation to marriage, and to be well formed prior to entering into marriage. It also is necessary to provide support for married couples through further formation, accompaniment, enrichment, and pastoral care. **Let us work together to promote the vocation of marriage in all stages of family life so that, by the grace of God, families will be strengthened and the Church will be renewed.**

For associated resources, visit: [www.dbqarch.org/marriage-catechumenate](http://www.dbqarch.org/marriage-catechumenate). The archdiocesan Marriage Formation Office can assist you with implementing this framework in your parish(es).

## PRAYER FOR MARRIED COUPLES



*Almighty and eternal God,  
You blessed the union of married couples  
so that they might reflect the union  
of Christ with his Church;  
look with kindness on them.  
Renew their marriage covenant,  
increase your love in them,  
and strengthen their bond of peace  
so that, with their children,  
they may always rejoice  
in the gift of your blessing.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord  
**Amen.***

# APPENDIX: HOW TO APPROACH SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES



PASTORAL CREATIVITY AND FLEXIBILITY WILL BE ESSENTIAL IN ORDER TO EMBRACE THE CONCRETE SITUATIONS FACED BY VARIOUS COUPLES: RELIGIOUS PRACTICE, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC MOTIVATIONS, AGE, COHABITATION, PRESENCE OF CHILDREN, AND OTHER FACTORS RELATED TO THE DECISION TO MARRY.

– **CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE, 18**



**Engaged couples today face many challenges, as do the marriage preparation ministers working with them.** The various special circumstances outlined below are becoming increasingly common and should be addressed with pastoral care, keeping in mind the following principles:

- **The marriage catechumenate should be tailored to each individual couple**, taking into account their personal needs, unique circumstances, and lived experiences.
- **Situations that present challenges to marriage and increase the potential for conflict and divorce should be addressed during the preparation stages** in order to, as best as possible, help the couple have a solid foundation for marriage.
- **These special circumstances should be approached with both clarity and charity.** Remember that “to show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being” (AL, 307). Couples should be invited and guided through a process of conversion to Christ to embrace the “full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur” (AL, 307).
- **Through prayer, rely on the Holy Spirit to give you wisdom for how to best minister to each couple**, especially in these exceptional circumstances.

**This appendix provides guidance for approaching various special circumstances experienced by couples preparing for marriage. Use it as a reference when these situations arise.**

## LONG-DISTANCE COUPLES

Today, a growing number of engaged couples live in different towns or states from each other, and one or both may not live in the same town where the marriage preparation or wedding is taking place. These circumstances, along with other situations such as regular work travel or service in the military, can hinder having in-person sessions with the couple. **Some creativity and use of modern technology can help make the various components of the marriage catechumenate accessible to these couples. While it is best to meet in-person, it is acceptable to use online resources for the preparation if face-to-face meetings are not feasible.**

Many marriage preparation programs now offer their video content and other materials online. In fact, some of these programs were specifically created for situations in which distance causes challenges to the marriage catechumenate process. By utilizing these online options, couples could go through the content at their own convenience wherever they are located. That said, online programs should not entirely replace local parish involvement in the marriage catechumenate process. As much as possible, there should be regular communication between the engaged couple and parish marriage preparation ministers. The online content, for example, could be discussed with the preparing minister or mentor/sponsor couple on the phone or by video conference. **These long-distance couples should be encouraged to connect with a parish where they are located, before and after the wedding.**

Here are recommended online programs to utilize in these circumstances:

- **Catholic Marriage Prep** from Agape Catholic Ministries provides online courses that immerse couples in Pope St. John Paul II's Theology of the Body as they prepare for marriage. The engaged couple completes the course content for each topic and discusses it together. Then a mentor couple who interacts with them online guides them to a fuller understanding of the Church's teachings. The course requires a minimum of 20 hours of active work. Versions for specific circumstances, such as military couples and civilly married couples, are available. The course is available in English, Spanish, and French. **Learn more at [www.catholicmarriageprep.com](http://www.catholicmarriageprep.com).**


- **Online Pre-Cana Program:** Participating in an online *Pre-Cana* is an option for those who cannot attend a live, in-person *Pre-Cana*. The same seven topics are covered as in an in-person program. Couples watch recorded talks at their own pace and use discussion questions provided to guide conversation after each talk. This fulfills only the marriage preparation retreat component of the marriage catechumenate; other components still need to be completed. **To learn more and access registration, visit: [www.dbqarch.org/online-pre-cana](http://www.dbqarch.org/online-pre-cana).**


- **Witness to Love Hybrid Experience:** This format provides access to the *Witness to Love* marriage formation process for couples who are not associated with a *WTL* parish or need an online marriage preparation experience. Through live video calls and support, couples and their chosen mentors can connect with experienced coaches from anywhere, allowing for scheduling flexibility and personalized guidance tailored to their specific needs. **Learn more at [www.witnesstolove.org/begin-hybrid-experience](http://www.witnesstolove.org/begin-hybrid-experience).**



## MIXED AND INTERRELIGIOUS MARRIAGES

“MIXED MARRIAGES AND INTERRELIGIOUS MARRIAGES MAY POSE CERTAIN CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES TO COUPLES AND THEIR FAMILIES. THESE CHALLENGES, AS WELL AS THE RESPONSIBILITIES AND DUTIES OF THE SPOUSES, SHOULD BE UNDERSTOOD BY THE COUPLE AND SUPPORT PROVIDED TO THE CATHOLIC SPOUSE AND CHILDREN BY THE CLERGY AND PARISH COMMUNITY.”

**- CALLED TO THE JOY OF LOVE, 43**

For a large number of couples presenting themselves for marriage in the Catholic Church, one party is not Catholic. **Marriages between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic Christian are called mixed marriages. Interreligious marriages describe those between a Catholic and a non-baptized person (also called disparity of worship).** The latter are non-sacramental marriages. Canon law is specific about the dispensations and permissions required in these situations (see the section on “Canonical Interview and Completion of Required Forms”). The OCM specifies which forms of the wedding liturgy to use for these marriages (see the section on “Choosing the Form of the Wedding Liturgy”). More on these situations also may be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 1633-1637.

**The preparation process may need to be customized to incorporate the formation that the couple will receive from the religious community of the non-Catholic party.** For example, if the engaged couple is also involved in marriage preparation through a non-Catholic Christian community, they may do a pre-marital inventory, pre-marital counseling, a pre-marriage retreat, mentor/sponsor couple ministry, or other components through that community. In those cases, it is not necessary to duplicate efforts, but rather to supplement those components received elsewhere with Catholic teachings and experiences. **“An effort should be made to establish cordial cooperation between the Catholic and the non-Catholic ministers from the time that preparations begin for the marriage and the wedding ceremony”** (FC, 78).

Still, **it is not permitted to have two different religious celebrations**, each including the giving of consent for the same marriage, nor to have a non-Catholic minister receive consent alongside the Catholic minister at the wedding liturgy (see C/C c. 1127). Non-Catholic ministers (or family or friends) may participate in the Catholic wedding liturgy only when appropriate and permissible, according to the norms of the Church (e.g. reading Scripture).

**Faith differences should be discussed with the couple throughout the marriage preparation process to help them understand and work through the challenges these differences could cause.** Of special importance is addressing the challenges of raising children in a home in which the parents do not practice the same faith. The Catholic party must promise to continue practicing the Catholic faith and to baptize and raise their children in it (to the best of their ability), while the non-Catholic party must be informed of these promises. Most pre-marital inventories address topics related to differences in faith, thereby providing an opportunity to discuss these issues. The couple also could be paired with an interfaith mentor/sponsor couple (if available), who could speak from personal experience. Despite the challenges, **interfaith couples should be encouraged to nurture prayer in the home in a form common to both spouses and to contribute to the ecumenical movement or interreligious dialogue** (see AL 247-248).

## COHABITING COUPLES

“THERE IS ‘A CONTINUAL INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF THOSE WHO, AFTER HAVING LIVED TOGETHER FOR A LONG PERIOD, REQUEST THE CELEBRATION OF MARRIAGE IN CHURCH. SIMPLY TO LIVE TOGETHER IS OFTEN A CHOICE BASED ON A GENERAL ATTITUDE OPPOSED TO ANYTHING INSTITUTIONAL OR DEFINITIVE; IT CAN ALSO BE DONE WHILE AWAITING MORE SECURITY IN LIFE (A STEADY JOB AND STEADY INCOME).’ ... WHATEVER THE CASE, ‘ALL THESE SITUATIONS REQUIRE 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.”

- POPE FRANCIS, *AMORIS LAETITIA*, 294

**Cohabitation is when an unmarried couple has been living together for an extended period of time.** Reasons for cohabitation can include economic factors, the desire to establish sexual compatibility, and an attempt to “trial” the relationship before entering marriage. This lifestyle, unfortunately, is becoming increasingly normative in our society, with vast acceptance and encouragement of it. In fact, the majority of couples preparing for marriage are cohabiting.

**The Church has multiple reasons why couples should not cohabit before marriage, including:**

- **Cohabitation leads to scandal**, which means “to make someone stumble.” Cohabiting couples simulate marriage without sacrificially laying down their lives in an enduring public commitment before God and the community. In doing so, they mislead one another and all those who might otherwise embrace the privileged character of God’s design for marriage.
- **Cohabitation leads to the likely occasion of sin.** When couples live together before marriage, they are disposed to exchange sexual intimacy and will not sense the call to holiness which centers upon making a gift of one’s entire self to another. They most often do not cultivate the whole range of human intimacy and the graced habits of chastity and self-giving love. Cohabiting couples who are sexually active displace and detach their sexual lives from the context in which God intended it, that is within marriage.
- **Cohabitation hinders a couple’s freedom to discern.** Living together can put pressure on the couple to proceed to marriage because they have already committed to a shared life in many ways. Therefore, cohabiting couples may not feel like they have the freedom to separate (if deemed best) because of the practical challenges to doing so.

**The Church, therefore, invites couples who are cohabiting and sexually active before marriage to a higher ideal—to live God’s plan for sexual intimacy within the context of a marital covenant.** Couples coming to the Church for marriage who are cohabiting and sexually active are already taking a step in the right direction by choosing marriage. **They should not be turned away from marriage in the Church because of cohabitation and premarital intercourse. At the same time, neither should these issues be ignored during the marriage catechumenate process.**

**Situations involving cohabitation and pre-marital sex should be viewed as an opportunity for evangelization, a privileged moment when the Good News can be shared.** Couples should always be encouraged to remedy their situation by committing to chastity. In this case, that would mean abstaining from sexual intercourse and living separately until the wedding day (see CCC, 2350). The preparing minister should prudently discern how to raise these issues with the couple in truth and love, striving to do so in a way that will not alienate the engaged couple from the Church, while still challenging them to conversion of life. This topic needs to be approached sensitively and tactfully, after some trust has been built with the couple.

**Providing formation on the virtue of chastity is essential.** Although it is a difficult subject to talk about, “the Church must never lack the courage to proclaim the precious virtue of chastity,

no matter how directly it contrasts with the prevailing mentality. Chastity should be presented as an authentic ‘ally of love,’ not as its negation” (CPML, 57). **The benefits of chastity should be shared with the couple to help them see that the Church is not simply telling them what not to do, but is concerned about their well-being.** One of the benefits is that “chastity lived in continence enables the engaged couple to get to know one another better. This is so because it prevents the relationship from becoming focused on the physical use of the other person, while also fostering deeper dialogue, more complete openness of the heart, and the emergence of all aspects of the personality—human, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional—so as to allow for true growth in relationship, personal communion, and the discovery of the other’s richness and limitations. Therein lies the true purpose of the period of engagement” (CPML, 57).

## CIVILLY MARRIED COUPLES

“THE CHURCH WELCOMES AND REJOICES IN A [CIVILLY MARRIED] COUPLE’S PURSUIT OF A VALID MARRIAGE. [THIS] IS NOT A ‘BLESSING’ OF AN EXISTING UNION, BUT RATHER A NEW, FREE ACT OF CONSENT TO MARRIAGE IN THE LORD. AS SUCH, COUPLES WHO HAVE BEEN CIVILLY MARRIED ... SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN MARRIAGE PREPARATION WITH AN EMPHASIS, IN THE CASE OF CHRISTIAN COUPLES, ON THE SACRAMENTALITY OF MARRIAGE. THIS TIME IS ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE CATHOLIC SPOUSE TO REINFORCE REGULAR RECEPTION OF THE SACRAMENTS AND FAITH FORMATION FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY.”

– **CALLED TO THE JOY OF LOVE, 29-30**

Couples who are already civilly married and are seeking marriage in the Church come to the marriage catechumenate with a unique experience. Although they have not yet entered into a valid marriage, their lived experience closely resembles that of couples who are already married. These couples “need pastoral care that is merciful and helpful” (AL, 293). **They should still participate in the marriage catechumenate, although every effort should be made to customize the process to speak to their experiences.** For example, an inventory specific to married couples could be used for these couples (in place of an inventory specifically for engaged couples) if it better fits their experience as a civilly married couple. If they are paired with a mentor/sponsor couple, it would be preferable for them to work with one that has been married for many years and, if available, one that entered marriage in the Church after being civilly married. In addition, a formational program that includes content specifically for couples who are already civilly married should be used. The following is recommended:

- **Witness to Love Civil Marriage Initiative:** In addition to their regular marriage catechumenate program, Witness to Love also offers a program uniquely for couples who are already civilly married. The content is catered to the unique circumstances of civilly married couples and presented by couples who went through the process of getting married in the Church after a civil marriage. Moreover, it is a little shorter than their regular program. **To learn more, visit: [www.witnesstolove.org/getting-married/civilly-married-couples](http://www.witnesstolove.org/getting-married/civilly-married-couples).**



Many couples may not know they are in an invalid marriage due to ignorance of the Church’s teaching on marriage and the requirement that Catholics be married before a Catholic minister (unless they received a dispensation to marry before a non-Catholic minister). Thus, education should be provided in the parish regarding the differences between a civil marriage and a canonical marriage. **Intentional invitations should be extended to civilly married couples to pursue marriage in the Church.** Opportunities to raise this issue include when couples become members of the parish, attend an infant baptism preparation session, register their children for faith formation, or participate in the OCIA. The goal is to offer civilly married couples “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” (AL, 297). **For information to share with civilly married couples about getting married in the Church, including an informational brochure, visit [www.dbqarch.org/civilly-married-couples](http://www.dbqarch.org/civilly-married-couples).**

## REMARRIAGE

**Remarriage describes a situation in which one or both of the parties preparing for marriage has been widowed or divorced.** No wedding date should be set if one or both of the parties has not received a decree of nullity for a previous marriage (assuming the former spouse is still living). The previous marriage is considered valid until it has been proven otherwise through the annulment process (see *CIC* c. 1060). If a person has received a *monitum* (i.e. warning) or *vetitum* (i.e. prohibition) with a decree of nullity, please contact the Metropolitan Tribunal for assistance in determining what (if anything) can be done to lift it, before proceeding with the marriage catechumenate process.

**For those entering into a remarriage, the preparation will need to be customized based on their particular experiences and needs.** For example, couples preparing for remarriage are often older than couples who are typically in marriage preparation, so they will have more life experience and may need guidance on different topics such as estate planning, caring for aging parents, and relating to adult children (or raising younger children). If one or both of the parties has children, there should be discussions with the couple about the dynamics of blending families and how best to help their children through the transition (see more on this in the next section).

**Having been in a previous marriage often affects the expectations and concerns about a new marriage.** Statistics show that second or third (or so on) marriages are less likely to succeed than first marriages. Thus, **it is important to offer robust formation and pastoral accompaniment to these couples, rather than assuming the preparation can be shortened.** When a couple is entering into a remarriage, it is also important to help individuals reflect on the causes of the breakdown of their previous marriage or the grief associated with the death of a spouse, along with reflecting on the new circumstances of their upcoming marriage. It is possible that an individual will not have fully healed from the loss of their previous relationship. For some couples, professional counseling may be advised in order to explore the psychological and emotional issues which cannot be resolved through standard marriage preparation sessions. It is also best to assign such couples to an experienced mentor/sponsor couple (ideally, one who has experienced remarriage, if available).

**These couples should be invited to attend the archdiocesan *Two Become One: Embracing the Sacrament in Remarriage* program to fulfill the marriage preparation retreat component:**

- ***Two Become One*** is a day-long marriage preparation program designed for couples who are entering into a remarriage (in other words, when one or both parties have been previously married and have gone through a divorce and the annulment process or have been widowed). Through the witness of married couples who have experienced remarriage, along with a team priest, the program covers topics such as Marriage as a Sacrament, Barriers to a Successful Remarriage, Communication, Conflict Resolution, Finances, Marital Intimacy, Trusting Together in God, and Stepfamilies. Each topic is explored through the lens of the unique circumstances of remarriage. **For more program details, dates, and registration, visit [www.dbqarch.org/two-become-one](http://www.dbqarch.org/two-become-one).**

Two Become ♥ One

*Embracing the Sacrament in Remarriage*

## PREGNANCY AND CHILDREN

Pregnant couples, or unmarried couples who already have children, may face societal pressure to marry. However, **pregnancy is not a sufficient reason for marrying. In these cases, it is important to discern whether or not the couple's choice to marry is being made freely.** If the preparing minister thinks that the couple is feeling internal or external pressure to marry, the couple should be encouraged to wait for a period of time. Parenting resources and other appropriate support could be provided by the parish during this time.

**Couples coming to marriage with children from previous relationships face the particular challenges of blending families.** For the good of the couple and the good of the children, it is important to address these challenges in advance and provide resources and guidance to help the couple bring their two families together peacefully. Pairing a couple in this situation with an experienced mentor/sponsor couple would be beneficial (particularly, if available, a couple who has experienced the blending of families).

## INTERCULTURAL COUPLES

“Marriage between people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds is common” (CJL, 44). **Cultural differences, with their own blessings and challenges, contribute to the richness of the Catholic community.** Just as every couple must negotiate differences in their families of origin, couples of different cultural backgrounds need to discuss how these differences will impact their marriage. Couples with cultural differences often have a greater need for communication about topics sometimes taken for granted by individuals from the same cultural background. When issues stemming from cultural differences arise, couples need to discern and communicate the difference between non-negotiable values and mere cultural preferences.

**“Particular attention should be given to the pastoral needs of these families with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds”** (CJL, 44). The marriage preparation ministers should be attentive to these circumstances and be open to listening to the unique cultural experiences of the couple and how those affect their relationship. The preparation process will typically need to be adapted to fit the culture and primary language of the couple. When appropriate, unique cultural practices could be incorporated into the marriage catechumenate process and the wedding liturgy (see the section on “Selecting the Elements of the Wedding Liturgy” for more information).

## PORNOGRAPHY USAGE

“PORNOGRAPHY CONSISTS IN REMOVING REAL OR SIMULATED SEXUAL ACTS FROM THE INTIMACY OF THE PARTNERS, IN ORDER TO DISPLAY THEM DELIBERATELY TO THIRD PARTIES. IT OFFENDS AGAINST CHASTITY BECAUSE IT PERVERTS THE CONJUGAL ACT, THE INTIMATE GIVING OF SPOUSES TO EACH OTHER. IT DOES GRAVE INJURY TO THE DIGNITY OF ITS PARTICIPANTS (ACTORS, VENDORS, THE PUBLIC), SINCE EACH ONE BECOMES AN OBJECT OF BASE PLEASURE AND ILLICIT PROFIT FOR OTHERS. IT IMMERSSES ALL WHO ARE INVOLVED IN THE ILLUSION OF A FANTASY WORLD. IT IS A GRAVE OFFENSE.”

**- CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 2354**

**Pornography usage and addiction, sadly, have become increasingly common today. This topic, therefore, should be addressed in the marriage catechumenate process.** If it is discovered that either the man or the woman (or both) regularly indulges in viewing pornography, the topic should be discussed with pastoral sensitivity. It may be the case that the other person is not aware of their partner's behavior in this regard. The couple should be invited to share openly with each other so they know fully their partner's views and practices regarding pornography before entering into marriage. The couple should be made aware of the serious harm inflicted on a marriage by the use of pornography (see CCC, 2354). Support should be provided to help the user overcome this habit as soon as possible, and for the other party to heal from hurt caused by the pornography use (including referring them to professional help, if needed). **For recommended resources to address pornography, visit [www.dbqarch.org/find-freedom](http://www.dbqarch.org/find-freedom).**

## ADDICTIONS

“WHEN A PERSON IS COPING WITH HIS OR HER ADDICTION OR THE CONSEQUENCES OF A FAMILY MEMBER'S ADDICTION, THE CHURCH CAN OFFER HOPE, HELP, AND HEALING. THE ROOT CAUSE OF THE ADDICTION NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED WITH EFFECTIVE TREATMENT AND COMPASSIONATE CARE.”

– **CALLED TO THE JOY OF LOVE, 37**

**Addictive behavior can have a detrimental effect on a marriage.** Addictions come in many forms, including drug addiction, alcoholism, excessive eating, technology or media addictions (e.g. social media, video games, TV, etc.), excessive gambling, and more. If one or both persons entering the marriage struggles with a serious addiction, professional help for recovery should be recommended as soon as possible. Pastoral support also can be offered to help provide healing. **The couple should be invited to discuss with each other any history of substance abuse or addiction, along with related behaviors present in their families of origin, in order to work together to prevent the serious harm this could cause in their marriage and family life.**

## ABUSE

**Multiple forms of abuse could be present in a couple's relationship, including verbal, emotional, mental, sexual, or physical abuse.** “The Church should offer assistance and healing to those who cause and suffer from these forms of abuse” (CJL, 38). **Abuse should always be addressed immediately in a pastorally appropriate way.** The safety of the victim must always be taken into account. Thus, it is best to address the issue when the abuser is not present. In the majority of cases, professional help should be sought. **For recommended resources and options for professional help, visit [www.dbqarch.org/domestic-violence](http://www.dbqarch.org/domestic-violence).**

**Furthermore, one or both of the parties may have experienced abuse in a previous relationship, including when they were children.** If this becomes evident, help should be offered to assist them with the process of healing. This often should include recommending professional help such as counseling. The partner also needs to understand the challenges this previous experience could cause to their marriage, and how to be sensitive to their partner in this regard.

**For further guidance and consultation on any of these special circumstances (or others), contact the Marriage Formation Office.**

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# NOTES





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