

Diocese of Sacramento

Marriage Preparation Guidelines for Engaged Couples

The Catholic Church has established a number of basic requirements for the celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage. In order to fulfill these requirements, to ensure sacred celebration of the Sacrament and to facilitate preparation for marriage, the Diocese of Sacramento has adopted the following policies:

INITIAL CONTACT

Engaged couples desiring to be married in the Catholic Church must contact their parish priest, deacon or pastoral minister at least six months prior to the anticipated wedding date. It is recommended that couples make contact with the parish at the very beginning of their engagement. If the couple does not yet belong to a parish, [click here](#) to find one.

ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Every couple is asked to participate in an assessment process with the priest, deacon or pastoral minister. This process is designed to assist both the couple and the priest/deacon or pastoral minister in assessing the engaged couple's readiness for marriage. The process begins with an initial interview with the priest, deacon or pastoral minister. As part of the process, each engaged person is to complete a questionnaire or inventory tool.

The inventory tools which are approved in the Diocese of Sacramento are FOCCUS (Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study), PREPARE/ENRICH, FULLY ENGAGED and PMI (Pre-Marital Inventory). A decision to proceed with, or delay, the wedding is made by the facilitator and the couple following the assessment process. The wedding date will be finalized only at this time.

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The bridegroom and bride are to share with the priest, deacon or pastoral minister any of the following circumstances:

- If one or both are under the age of twenty (20);
- If there is a pregnancy involved;
- If they are presently cohabiting (living together);
- If one of the engaged is not Catholic;
- If one or both have been married before in any type of ceremony or common law union;
- If they are now civilly married and wish to have their marriage convalidated in the Catholic Church.

It is a canonical requirement (“canonical form”) that a Catholic be married before a properly delegated priest or deacon and two witnesses. A Catholic who marries outside the church without a dispensation from the canonical form does so invalidly, i.e., the Church does not recognize the marriage. Some circumstances require special steps to assist the couple in preparing for marriage in the Church. If any of these special circumstances exist, it does not necessarily mean that one cannot be married in the Church. However, it does mean that an honest discussion of these circumstances should take place between the couple and the marriage preparation facilitator.

PLACE OF THE WEDDING

Two parties who reside outside the diocese and are requesting to be married within the diocese should normally do their marriage preparation in their home parish/diocese. Since the parish church is the spiritual home of the family of God and the heart of sacramental life and ministry, when two Catholics marry, they are expected to marry in the parish church of either the bride or the groom. Otherwise, a letter from their parish church, that the pastor gives permission for the bride or groom to be married in another parish. For any exceptions, please refer to the diocesan policy.

REQUIRED DOCUMENTS

The priest, deacon or pastoral minister who is preparing the engaged persons for marriage will assist them in obtaining the following documents:

- **Baptismal Certificate(s):** The baptismal certificate of the Catholic(s) should be issued within the last six months and include any notations (regarding other sacraments received). A certificate of baptism is also required of a non-Catholic Christian.
- **A Letter of Freedom (Form B)** is to be completed by two witnesses on behalf of each engaged person (i.e. two forms for each of the engaged). Forms are available at the parish.
- **A Pre-Nuptial Inquiry (Form A)** is to be completed by each of the engaged. This inquiry includes questions regarding one’s freedom to marry and one’s views on Christian marriage.
- **State of California Marriage License:** Unless the license is present, no wedding can occur.
- **Confirmation Certificate(s):** If it can be celebrated without serious inconveniences, Catholics who have not yet received the sacrament of confirmation are to receive it before being admitted to marriage.
- **Permission for a Mixed Marriage** (for a Catholic to marry a person baptized in a non-Catholic Christian denomination).
- **Petition for Dispensation for Disparity of Worship** (for a Catholic to marry a non-baptized person).

All documents are to be kept on file at the parish where the wedding takes place.

FORMAL MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Every engaged couple wishing to be married in the Diocese of Sacramento – whether theirs is a first-time marriage, a convalidation, or a re-marriage – must attend a formal diocesan-approved marriage preparation program. This is to be completed during the first four months of their preparation. Since the last few weeks prior to their wedding are filled with so many practical details, it is important that the engaged couple spend quality time early on to prepare themselves for the Sacrament of Matrimony.

There are three different formal marriage preparation programs in the Diocese of Sacramento. The pastor or his delegate will meet with the engaged couple to determine which program best meets the couple's needs:

(1) Parish-based marriage preparation class. These classes consist of four to six short sessions (one to two hours) usually spaced a week apart, held in small group settings at a host parish. Though a host parish will offer these classes mainly for the sake of its own engaged couples, it may also welcome couples from other parishes.

(2) Engaged Encounter Weekend. This is a weekend retreat experience presented by two married Catholic couples and a priest. It is designed to help engaged couples self-reflect, communicate, understand their sexuality, etc. The main thrust of the weekend is personal reflection and dialogue. The retreat is offered five times per year at local retreat center. For more information and to register go to <http://SacEE.org>.

(3) Online Marriage Preparation. For engaged couples unable to attend either a parish-based marriage preparation class or the Engaged Encounter weekend, an online course is available. This interactive course lasts from one week (minimum) to three months (maximum) depending upon the couple's pace. Each couple is assigned a personal instructor who follows them throughout the course. For more information and to register, [in English click here](#), [En Espanol haz click aqui](#)

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING OVERVIEW SESSION

In Natural Family Planning (NFP), the couple understands, accepts and uses their God-given phases of fertility and infertility for the purpose of achieving or avoiding pregnancy. In this way, the unitive and procreative, the love-giving and life-giving meanings of sexual intercourse are maintained together in a responsible way. The NFP component for marriage preparation is to be a minimum of one full hour of information and discussion provided by an individual or couple with specific training and expertise in NFP. A certificate of attendance will be given to the couple and must be submitted to the pastor or his delegate.

A current list of NFP instructors in the Sacramento area is available at www.scddec.org/natural-family-planning. If an instructor is not available from this list, the couple may receive this introductory class from a certified instructor outside of the Diocese in either a live class setting or on-line. Contact the Diocesan NFP Coordinator at 916-733-0133 to discuss.

CELEBRATION OF CEREMONY BY VISITING PRIEST OR DEACON

If a priest or deacon other than the one assigned to the parish where the wedding is held is to witness the exchange of vows, he must receive specific delegation from a priest of that parish in order to officiate at the ceremony. To make these arrangements, the engaged couple must inform the parish immediately of their desire to have a visiting priest or deacon officiate the ceremony.

If the priest or deacon is from out of town, or is not able to handle the couple's preparation, it remains the responsibility of the local parish priest, deacon or pastoral minister.

CELEBRATING OF THE SACRAMENTS

Catholic engaged persons are expected to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance (regularly) and the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist (at least once a week on Sunday) as part of their preparation process. The celebration of the sacraments will prepare the couple for a more meaningful experience of the wedding liturgy and deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ who is the source of fruitful married life.

PREPARATION FOR THE MARRIAGE LITURGY

It is the responsibility of the engaged couple to take seriously the planning of the wedding liturgy. To assist the couple, suggested readings, music guidelines and a wedding planning sheet are available from the parish.

ADDITIONAL PARISH REQUIREMENTS

In addition to the above requirements, there may be additional requirements of the particular parish.

The comprehensive [Marriage Preparation Policy](#) is an extensive and thorough document, which offers significant background, detail, direction and resource material for all inquiries and circumstances. Pastoral forms, interview and testimony guides are included.