DIOCESE of CHARLOTTE

A Guide for Couples Getting Married in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charlotte, NC

Everyone so loves Jesus, we share Him with others.

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Marriage in the Catholic Church

Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church recognize marriage as a union of one man and one woman, the most basic unit of human society. Through the marriage covenant, man and woman are "no longer two, but one flesh." The meaning of this oneness is experienced in the intimate union of their persons and their actions. This union of marriage calls forth from spouses the mutual and complete giving of self, fidelity, permanence, and openness to children.

The sacrament of marriage consecrates you to each other and strengthens the life you will share. The Church encourages you to see in this union a reflection of the covenant between Christ and his Church.

Christian marriage is a life-long process of growth and faithful commitment to a continuing, supportive relationship in which each partner helps the other develop as fully as possible: "Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. By virtue of this sacrament, as spouses fulfill their conjugal and family obligations, they are penetrated with the spirit of Christ ... Thus they increasingly advance their own perfection, as well as their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God" (*Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, Second Vatican Council, No. 48).

Today's society is plagued with attitudes that are destructive to the Christian dignity of marriage. The sacrament of marriage, though guaranteeing Christ's presence in your marriage and the power of God's grace, does not force cooperation with that grace, nor does it remove you from negative forces at work in our culture.

These considerations make clear the Church's serious responsibility to assist you to enter a marriage that promises to be grace-filled, permanent, faithful, exclusive, and fruitful. Marriage is a God-given right that arises from the very nature of the human person. Exercising this right, particularly in Christ, requires a basic appreciation of marriage and a clear willingness to live out its obligations on the part of you both. Openness to a reasonable period of preparation for the sacrament is an indication of readiness.

THE PRIEST OR DEACON: HELPING PREPARE YOU FOR MARRIAGE

Because the Church has a pastoral duty to help those who desire to marry in making a prayerful and mature judgment concerning their readiness for so solemn a commitment, the priest or deacon who will witness your marriage is responsible for helping prepare you for entering your chosen vocation. In assisting you, the priest or deacon takes into consideration your personal attitude as well as various spiritual, psychological, and familial factors impacting preparation for marriage.

Weddings should be an integral part of the community life of a parish; therefore, priests and deacons normally witness the marriages of their parishioners. However, a Catholic priest or deacon from outside the parish who is a close friend of the couple or a relative of one party may preside at a wedding with special permission.

SETTING THE DATE AND PLACE OF YOUR WEDDING CELEBRATION

Prior to setting the date or place of your wedding it is important to keep in mind several important issues.

The Diocese of Charlotte requires that you begin working with a local priest or deacon at least 6 months prior to the wedding date to provide enough time for spiritual preparation as well as time to prepare the liturgy and complete the necessary documents.

If both parties are Catholic, the wedding will ordinarily take place in the parish church of the bride or the groom. The exchange of vows normally takes place during the celebration of the Mass.

In the case of a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic Christian, the wedding is normally celebrated in the parish church of the Catholic party. If for a good reason the couple desires a non-Catholic minister to witness their exchange of vows, a dispensation must be requested from the bishop. In exceptional circumstances, permission may be granted by the bishop for a Catholic priest or deacon to officiate at a marriage in a non-Catholic church or chapel.

Marriage between two baptized persons may not take place out-of-doors, in parks, on the beach, in hotels, or at private residences.

Marriage may take place in a college chapel when at least one of the parties is a student, alumnus/a or faculty/staff member of the college in question. In the case of Belmont Abbey College, permission may also be given if at least one of the parties is a relative of one of the monks or has a significant relationship with the monastic community.

The preferred location of the marriage between a Catholic and a non-Christian is the parish church of the Catholic party if this does not create an undue burden. Otherwise, permission may be given for the marriage to take place in an appropriate place.

PREPARING FOR YOUR MARRIAGE

WHEN THE WEDDING TAKES PLACE IN ANOTHER DIOCESE

If your wedding will take place in another diocese, it is important you communicate early with the priest or deacon who will officiate at the nuptials. Locally, you will receive the same marriage preparation as is afforded to other couples. However, be mindful that the wedding officiant who will witness your vows is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the proper forms are completed and dispensations/permissions are secured (as needed).

Normally at your first meeting, the priest or deacon will explain the requirements for marriage preparation and determine the dates of future meetings. These include:

- completion of a premarital assessment questionnaire (e.g., FOCCUS, PREPARE) and a review of results with you.
- participation in a marriage preparation program, such as a parish designed program, Engaged Encounter Weekend, or a one-day marriage preparation workshop.
- attendance at an introductory class in Natural Family Planning.
- interviews and instructional sessions with the priest or deacon (these are distinct from the marriage preparation program and instruction in Natural Family Planning).

Catholics who have not yet received the sacrament of Confirmation are to receive it before being admitted to marriage, if this can be done without grave inconvenience. Moreover, as an engaged couple, you are strongly encouraged to approach the sacraments of penance and the Holy Eucharist prior to the wedding.

INTERDENOMINATIONAL AND INTERFAITH MARRIAGES

On a national average, at least 40% of Catholics marry a Christian belonging to another denomination (interdenominational marriage) or another faith (interfaith marriage). The majority of marriages in the Diocese of Charlotte are interdenominational. These marriages have their own unique set of strengths and weaknesses.

If you are an interdenominational or interfaith couple, neither partner should enter marriage with the expectation of drawing the other away from his or her religious convictions. Such an attitude can easily result in the unhappiness and alienation of either or both of you.

The priest or deacon preparing you for marriage normally will hold additional interviews for the purpose of: (1) deepening awareness of the influence of religious convictions and values in your lives; (2) helping you to see that being of different faith traditions will have a significant impact on your relationship; (3) exploring the areas of agreement and disagreement between your faith traditions; (4) appreciating the practical problems that will arise because of your different faith traditions; and, (5) encouraging reflection on the common beliefs you share, and on developing a faith life together.

It is very important that you understand the Catholic partner's spoken obligation (in front of the priest or deacon) to continue the practice of the faith and to do everything possible to share that faith with your children by having them baptized and raised as Catholics.

You are encouraged to meet with the non-Catholic minister, rabbi or religious cleric and to inform the other minister, rabbi or cleric of the Catholic Church's policies and procedures for marriage preparation.

MARRIAGE PREPARATION FOR THE PREVIOUSLY MARRIED

With increasing frequency, couples are coming to the Church for marriage after one or both parties have been in a marriage which has ended in divorce. While the priest or deacon may offer counsel and guidance to you, marriage preparation may not commence until a decree of nullity (i.e., an annulment) has been obtained. Once the Church has issued a decree of nullity, the following guidelines are followed:

- When the previously married party has not yet entered a second union, both parties should participate in pre-marital counseling and evaluation (when it is deemed necessary and beneficial). In some cases, such counseling and evaluation is required in the very decree of nullity.

- When the couple has lived in a civil marriage which has continued over some years and shown signs of stability, the priest or deacon may use his pastoral judgment in providing the preparation for marriage which seems most suited to the needs of the couple, such as a marriage enrichment program, weekend encounter or retreat for married couples.

If either you or your partner's former marriage ended by the death, care must be taken in preparing the widowed party for a second marriage. The priest or deacon will give special consideration to your ages, the length of the previous marriage(s), the grief process that must take place before the widowed person is emotionally prepared for a second marriage, and the effect of the second marriage on any children from the first marriage.

MARRIAGE OF MINORS

Generally, the marriages of persons younger than 18 years of age are discouraged since few persons this young possess the maturity necessary to fulfill the obligations that flow from marriage itself. If either you or your partner is not yet 18 years old, consideration for marriage in the Church will be given only after consultation with your parents and, if the priest or deacon considers it necessary, consultation with a counselor or another priest or deacon. The responsibility in determining the rare exception to permitting marriage involving minors ultimately rests with the priest or deacon working with you.

PREGNANCY BEFORE MARRIAGE

When pregnancy occurs outside of marriage, it is often a time of stress for the parties involved and for their families. The Church views such situations with compassion and concern. It is important to

keep in mind that marriage should not automatically be presumed to be the appropriate solution in these cases. Your priest or deacon may counsel you regarding other morally acceptable alternatives. The fact of pregnancy does not diminish your need for preparation. Indeed, it is even more vital if the decision is made to proceed with your marriage in the Church.

VALIDATION OF CIVIL UNIONS

If you were married outside the Church and desire that your union be validated, the priest or deacon who arranges for the validation must provide you with the adequate preparation for marriage.

Among other concerns, they will help you consider what brings you to the Church for validation and whether the marriage is having any major problems. A validation is not an automatic cure for a troubled marriage.

The priest or deacon will strive to lead you to an appreciation of the theological and spiritual dimensions of Christian marriage and to an understanding of the implications of marriage as a covenant relationship.

Guidelines that apply to the validation of invalid marriages are:

- When the couple has been civilly married for only one or two years, it is recommended that they participate in a marriage assessment instrument appropriate to their situation and a marriage preparation program.

- When the couple has been civilly married a number of years and the marriage has given evidence of being a true community of life and love, the priest or deacon will determine the adequate preparation for the validation of the marriage.

COHABITATION

In society today, many people see no problem with cohabitation ("living together") and having sexual relations before marriage. While this may be so, these views and practices can never be reconciled with what God expects of us. Additionally, countless studies have shown that couples who live together before marriage have higher divorce rates and a poorer quality of relationship than those who do not.

The period of engagement is meant to be a time of grace and growth in which you sincerely and maturely prepare for marriage. Therefore, if you are living together prior to marriage, it is urged that you separate until after the wedding. While some couples may view this as too difficult, living chastely prior to marriage can help you as a couple grow in the virtues of generous love, sacrificial giving, self-restraint, and good communication.

DELAY OF MARRIAGE

For serious and sufficient pastoral reasons a priest or deacon may conclude that a delay in a planned wedding is warranted. If this were to occur, you have a right to be informed immediately, to be provided with the reasons for the delay, and to be provided with information on how to make an appeal to the diocesan Vicar General. Upon examining the reasons for delay, the Vicar General may concur with the delay or present the case to another priest or deacon. Both you and the priest or deacon retains the right to appeal to the Bishop. It must be noted that no other priest or deacon may witness your marriage after a delay has been ordered, unless the Bishop or his official delegate (e.g., Vicar General) has given the necessary approval.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON PREPARING FOR YOUR MARRIAGE

Have a concern or issue that impacts on your readiness or preparation for marriage? Please contact the priest or deacon working directly with you.

Additionally, the Diocese of Charlotte's Marriage, Family and Life Office assists engaged couples by offering one-day Marriage Preparation Workshops and the required introductory classes in Natural Family Planning.

For more information on Marriage Preparation workshops, please call **704-370-3237** or visit **www.charlottediocese.org/faith-life/marriage-family-and-life**.

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