

Preparing for marriage takes on new look

By Margaret M. Russell

The culture has redefined marriage and the Church wants its members, and anyone else who will listen, to know why it teaches what it does about this sacrament.

So, the diocese is adding new content to the steps couples take to get ready for mar-

riage.

A revised preparation policy presents to couples the concept that marriage manifests Christ's love. That love is "free, total, faithful and fruitful."

Bishop McManus yesterday put into effect the revised "Pastoral Policy for Marriage Preparation" that states as its goal to "lead engaged couples

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to a more complete appreciation of what marriage means as a vocation, a sacred covenant, and a Christian way of life."

"Given the fact that our culture is profoundly confused and in some cases quite mistaken about the nature of marriage,

the Church at this time has a very serious responsibility of helping her members who are preparing for marriage to enter into this relationship with full knowledge and a sense of responsibility," Bishop McManus said in an interview this week.

The changes have been in the works for two years. In

2007, Bishop McManus asked Allison LeDoux, director of the Office of Marriage and Family, to take on the job of updating the marriage preparation policy in order to address the cultural shift away from Catholic marriage. She worked with priests in the diocese to craft the new plan.

A survey of parishes, Mrs. LeDoux said, showed a trend that was disturbing but not surprising. Many of the couples who came to the Church for marriage preparation were living together, had fallen away from sacramental practice and had little knowledge of their faith.

The policy adds a one-day seminar titled "God's Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage" to the one-year process of preparing to marry in the diocese. It also asks couples to attend an Engaged Encounter Weekend in conjunction with meeting with marriage preparation ministers, often a married couple who share their experiences and talk about life issues and skills needed for successful marriages.

Formation and information are the basis of this "opportunity to continue to bring the light of truth and light of faith to the people we serve," said Mrs. LeDoux.

"The whole understanding of marriage has changed so greatly," said Father Michael J. Roy, pastor at Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Webster, who has attended sessions regarding the new preparation policy. "The whole connection between faith and marriage needs to be re-established - restated."

"Marriage is the centerpiece of God's creation. From there the future is created: families are formed, faith is formed," Father Roy said.

The lack of faith formation in the family is growing, the bishop said. He cites the fact that 90 percent of Catholics were practicing their faith 40 years ago and now it is down to about 30 percent. A couple who are about to marry bring with them their life experience and often that does not include a firm foundation in the faith.

"The only way this immediate preparation for marriage can address the quality of the remote preparation (the life experience) is by discussing some human issues - one's ability to communicate, one's sense of self and purpose - these real personality issues that are fundamental to a healthy strong love relationship. Those issues are discussed several times during several steps of this process," Bishop McManus explained.

"What we are doing (new) ... is asking the couple to go to a one-day seminar, "God's Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage," exposing them for a day to not only what the Church teaches about the gift of human sexuality and the sacrament of marriage, but equally importantly, to teach why the Church teaches what it actually does," he said.

"Most people haven't heard the truth of the Church's teaching on human sexuality," Mrs. LeDoux said. The God's Plan seminar is based on the Theology of the Body developed by Pope John Paul II.

"What has been eliminated from the understanding of marriage is the procreation and education of children," the bishop said. "The Church wisdom is that when one enters into a marriage relationship there are two inseparable purposes: the loving relationship between the man and woman, and the procreation and education of children," he explained.

"Forgetting about the gift of bringing of new life into the world in cooperation with God, who is the giver of all life, ... opens up (the definition of) marriage to any type of 'love relationship,'" the bishop said.

"The Church's understanding of the gift of human sexuality is seriously misunderstood in our contemporary society," he said.

"The whole culture is eroticized. Sexuality, the way it is presented in sitcoms and movies and music, is presented as a recreational thing that really ... doesn't have much to do with who you are but is something you can use to enjoy yourself. That is so far from what the Church teaches about the gift of human sexuality," he said.

"It is through the proper use of the gift of sexuality that we actually as human beings have the privilege of participating in the creative activity of God. That's really an extraordinary responsibility," the bishop said.

This one-day seminar brings into direct focus what may have been addressed sporadically in the old formation program, the bishop explained. It sharpens the focus on Christian marriage and the gift of human sexuality, he said.

The Engaged Encounter Weekend allows couples to exercise the skill of communication with each other, and to share experiences with couples their age, he said.

The Church spends many years preparing a man to become a priest, which is a life commitment, the bishop said. "I think we should do the best we can in preparing people for the sacrament of marriage which is also a lifelong commitment," Bishop McManus said.

Weddings

in the Diocese of Worcester

■ Catholic
■ Ecumenical or interfaith

