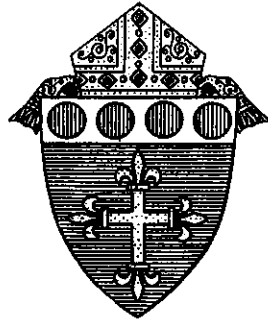


Pastoral Policy
for
Marriage Preparation



Diocese of Worcester

EFFECTIVE: AUGUST 6, 2009
FEAST OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

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DECREE

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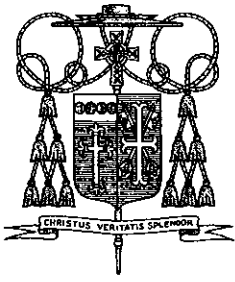
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Decree



Diocese of Worcester
Office of the Bishop
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DECREE

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, paragraph 47, state that "the well being of the individual person and of both human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of conjugal and family life. Hence, Christians today are overjoyed, and so too are all who esteem conjugal and family life highly, to witness the various ways in which progress is being made in fostering those partnerships of love and in encouraging reverence for human life; there is progress too in services available to married people and parents for fulfilling their lofty calling: even greater benefits are to be expected and efforts being made to bring them about."

The Code of Canon Law captures in juridic language the teaching of the Second Vatican Council concerning the vocation of Christian marriage in its canons on marriage (cc 1055-1062) and delineates in canons 1063 to 1072 the pastoral care which must be afforded prospective spouses as they prepare to assume the rights and obligations of their sacred calling.

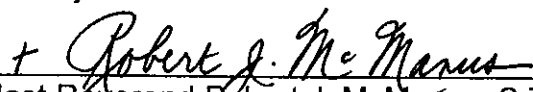
Canon 1063 of the Code of Canon Law states that "pastors of souls are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful the assistance by which the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances to perfection."

In view of this teaching of the Second Vatican Council and codified in the Church's legislation on marriage, and at the same time keenly aware of my pastoral obligations to this particular Church in the Diocese of Worcester, in accord with canons 7, 8, §2, 12, §3 and 13, I hereby approve and promulgate the following:


The Pastoral Policy for Marriage Preparation, revised December 1, 2008, as particular law for the Diocese of Worcester, becomes effective Thursday, August 6, 2009 the Feast of the Transfiguration.

I order that this decree be published.

Given at Worcester, Massachusetts, this the third day of August in the year of our Lord, two thousand nine, in the Office of the Chancery.



Most Reverend Robert J. McManus, S.T.D.
Bishop of Worcester



Reverend Monsignor Thomas J. Sullivan
Chancellor

Part One

Overview of Christian Marriage

Part One: Overview of Christian Marriage

I. The Vocation of Marriage

Christian marriage has its origin in God the Creator. It is a true vocation to a particular state and a life of grace. Adequate and particular preparation for this sacrament is required because this vocation is given to a couple for the good of the Church and of society. "As an expression of the new life made possible by the Risen Christ, Christian marriage always expresses the truth about married love and is like a prophecy that clearly proclaims a human being's real needs: that man and woman are called upon from the beginning to live in a communion of life and love and that this complementarity will lead to strengthening the human dignity of the spouses, the good of the children and of society itself, through 'the defense and promotion of life...everyone's task and responsibility'(Evangelium vitae, n. 91)."¹

The theology of the Second Vatican Council characterizes Christian marriage as an "intimate partnership," and a "conjugal covenant" of life and love: "By the very act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other, a relationship begins, which by Divine Will and in the eyes of society, too, is to be a lasting one. It is an intimate

"Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."

~ *Gaudium et spes*, n. 24.

union which involves total fidelity and a permanent oneness between the spouses for its own sake and for the good of their children. To insure the good of the spouses, their offspring and society, the existence of this sacred bond no longer depends on human decisions alone. For, God Himself is the author of matrimony, endowed as it is with various benefits and purposes. All of these have a very decisive bearing on the continuation of the human race, on the personal development and eternal destiny of the individual members of a family, and on the dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of the family itself and of human society as a whole. By their very nature, the institution of matrimony itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown. Thus a man and a woman, who by their compact of conjugal love "are no longer two, but one flesh," render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions. Through this union they experience the meaning of their oneness and attain to it with growing perfection day by day. As a mutual gift of two persons, this intimate union and the good of the children impose total fidelity on the spouses and argue for an unbreakable oneness between them."²

God's plan for married love was set forth at the dawn of creation. Through the fall and the onset of original sin, man has lost sight of the very essence of his identity: that of a unique and unrepeatable human person created in the image and likeness of God. However, in the Divine Plan of God's infinite and merciful love, what was once lost to sin is redeemed in Christ. The beautiful words of the *Exsultet*, sung at the Easter Vigil liturgy, share a profound truth: "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam that won for us so great a Redeemer." It is in the Paschal Mystery that sin and death are conquered and our redemption won; our dignity is restored in Christ and we begin to realize the depth of the love to which we are called. The sacrament of marriage has been instituted by Christ to confer the grace of redemption. Living out one's vocation with Christ at the center and understanding marriage as a sacrament is critical in the

¹ Pontifical Council for the Family, *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage* (1996), n. 7.

² Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, n. 48.

engaged couple's formation. In marriage, Christ's love, a love that is *free, total, faithful, and fruitful*, is made manifest.

In the sacrament of marriage, man and woman are called to live in a relationship that mirrors the inner love of the Trinity, an eternal exchange of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is imaged in the communion of persons joined in holy matrimony, in the complementarity of male and female brought together in a sincere gift of self, and through the blessings of physical and spiritual fertility.

Pope John Paul II illustrates how God has revealed Himself to us in the mystery of the human person. "The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it."³

In their living out of God's plan in their vocation, the new family accepts a special call and mission. Marital consent defines and consolidates the good common to marriage and the family. When the spouses give their consent to each other by a solemn promise, they confirm the truth of that consent which is "written in their hearts" in the sight of God, expressing what is essential to the common good of the spouses and the common good of the future family. The acceptance and education of children – two of the primary ends of the family – are conditioned by how that commitment will be fulfilled. Fatherhood and motherhood represent a responsibility which is not simply physical but spiritual in nature, indeed, through these realities there passes the genealogy of the person, which has its eternal beginning in God and which must lead back to Him.⁴

"The family is placed at the center of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love."

~ Pope John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane*, Letter to Families, n. 23

II. The Significance of Marriage Preparation

The Sacrament of Matrimony signifies the union of Christ and the Church. It gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved His Church; the grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity, and sanctifies them on their way to eternal life.⁵

Marriage is a vocation, a call from God, and a life-long commitment. While preparation for marriage at its earliest stages begins in the family and is an on-going process, a couple enters into a period of formal preparation once they become engaged. When a man and woman decide to marry in the Catholic Church, their preparation for married life should result in:

- a clear awareness of the characteristics of Christian marriage: ***unity, fidelity, indissolubility, and fruitfulness***;
- an understanding of the centrality of the sacramental grace uniting husband and wife to the love of Christ; and,
- the willingness to carry out the mission given to families to evangelize the culture by their living witness to the faith.

³ Pope John Paul II, *Theology of the Body* 19:4.

⁴ *Gratissimam Sane*, Pope John Paul II (1994), n. 10.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1661.

Marriage preparation constitutes a providential and favorable period in which God calls upon the engaged and helps them discern the vocation to marriage and family life. This careful preparation is necessary for the sake of the spouses, for the whole Christian community and for society. The Code of Canon Law (Canon 1063) tells us there should be personal preparation for entering marriage, so that the spouses are disposed to the holiness and obligations of their new state.⁶

Alive in the tradition of the Church and deepened by the Magisterium, the Word of God stresses that marriage for Christian spouses implies a response to God's vocation and the acceptance of the mission to be a sign of God's love for all the members of the human family, by partaking in the definitive covenant of Christ with the Church. Therefore, spouses become cooperators with the Creator and Savior in the gift of love and life.⁷ Thus, the engagement period, set within the context of a renewed and deepening understanding of the faith and a process of evangelization, should help the couple to more fully understand the importance of preparing themselves for this great grace and vocation.

It is the task of the Church, then, to assist engaged couples in the process of their proper formation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out, "So that the 'I do' of the spouses may be a free and responsible act and so that the marriage covenant may have solid and lasting human and Christian foundations, preparation for marriage is of prime importance." (1632) The assistance offered by the ecclesial

"The greater the difficulties caused by one's surroundings for knowing the truth of the Christian sacrament and of the institution of marriage, all the greater must be our efforts to prepare spouses adequately for their responsibilities."

~ Pope John Paul II, *Address to the Ninth General Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family*, Oct. 4, 1991.

community provides the Christian faithful the means by which the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection. This assistance is offered in a variety of ways:

- through preaching, catechesis, and social communications directed to all ages, providing instruction about the meaning of Christian marriage and family
- through personal preparation to enter marriage, which disposes the spouses to the holiness and duties of their new state
- through a fruitful liturgical celebration of marriage demonstrating that the spouses signify and share in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church
- through on-going formation and pastoral care for those who are married and their families, providing opportunities for growth in holiness and the safeguarding of the marriage covenant.

The Church reminds us that it is essential that the time and care necessary should be devoted to the *doctrinal* preparation of the engaged. The content of marriage preparation centers on fostering an understanding of the nature of the sacrament the couple is about to receive, and all that flows from it regarding the family. The Pontifical Council for the Family points out that questions concerning the unity and indissolubility of marriage, and all that regards the meaning of the union and of procreation in married life and its specific act, must be treated faithfully and accurately, according to the clear teaching of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (cf. nn.11-12), as

⁶ *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, Pontifical Council for the Family, 1996.

⁷ *Ibid.*

"If the task of secular ideologies at work in the twentieth century was to rid that century of the Christian sexual ethic, the task of the Church in the twenty-first century must be to reclaim it; [and] the Christian sexual ethic is a liberating message of salvation that corresponds perfectly with the desires of the human heart."

~ Christopher West, *Proclaiming Theology of the Body*

well as everything that pertains to the gift of life which parents must accept responsibly and joyfully as the Lord's collaborators. Without neglecting the various aspects of psychology, medicine, and other human sciences, the content should be centered on the natural and Christian doctrine of marriage.⁸

"The very preparation for Christian marriage is itself a journey of faith. It is a special opportunity for the engaged to rediscover and deepen the faith received in Baptism and nourished by their Christian upbringing. In this way they come to

recognize and freely accept their vocation to follow Christ and to serve the Kingdom of God in the married state."⁹

In *Evangelium vitae*, Pope John Paul II affirmed that "the family is the heart of the New Evangelization". Married love is meant to be life-long and life-giving. The union of the spouses in the sacrament of marriage clearly reveals that "human life is a gift received in order then to be given as a gift".¹⁰ Through the prayerful efforts of all the faithful, and in particular of those involved in the ministry of marriage preparation, we will help to build a culture of life and a civilization of love.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 51.

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, n. 92.