

Fit for Mission?

Marriage

A Preparation Course

Course Presenter's Book

Patrick O'Donoghue - Bishop of Lancaster

With the collaboration of the Diocese of Lancaster's
Marriage and Family Life Commission



CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY
Publishers to the Holy See



Preface for Course Presenters

Introduction

Christianity is, first and foremost, a religion of joy. There was so much joy at the birth of the Church at Pentecost that people thought the first Christians were drunk! (Acts 2:15). What is the reason for our joy? There are many – joy at the goodness and pleasure of the created world, including our bodies; joy at the bounty and blessings of God; joy in the person of Jesus, his life, teaching, and resurrection from the dead; joy in our Christian life together, and the promise of eternal fulfilment in heaven; but most of all, joy in the knowledge and experience that God is a God of love.

One of the most important occasions of joy in the life of the Church – which brings all of these other joys together – is the celebration of the sacrament of marriage. Is it any wonder that marriage is one of the most powerful and ancient images of God's love for humanity in the Bible?

For too long we have forgotten this truth by allowing our discussion and treatment of the institution of marriage in the Church – and wider society – to be dominated by a sense of crisis, verging on panic. This is not to downplay the pain and trauma caused by the high rate of divorce – as high among Catholics as the general population – or by the high incidence of infidelity, or spousal abuse.

However, part of the problem with 'marriage' is that most people – deep down – expect it to fail, as if the vows of fidelity and permanence are beyond 'ordinary' men and women, requiring super-human commitment and virtues.

The message of this Catholic preparation course for marriage is threefold:

- First and foremost, the Catholic approach to marriage cannot be a list of prohibitions – particularly about sex – but is a celebration of the joy of married love. However, because the Church takes marriage and sexual love so seriously, there must be a clear understanding and observance of Catholic sexual ethics. To be clear, the joy of married love is the fruit of certain conditions being fulfilled which arise from the very nature of marriage. These conditions we call sexual ethics, the moral order written into our very being as humans.

- Secondly, men and women are hard-wired by biology, psychology and spiritual nature to thrive in monogamous, faithful, life-long marriages that are open to the new life of children. We must reject as utterly false the ‘urban myth’ current in the media and society that human beings are naturally promiscuous and that adultery is only ‘human’. The degree of suffering and heartache among couples, their extended families and children is proof that this is a lie.
- Thirdly, that God the Trinity – the intimate community of divine persons in triune unity – has revealed his optimum plan for marriage in Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Catholic Church. The sacramental nature of Holy Matrimony is at the heart of God’s plan for wives and husbands. This plan reflects God’s nature as love. It includes the gift of divine love for the couple to realize God’s plan in their lives.

The Marriage Preparation Course

This *Course Presenter’s Book* provides the structure, content and activities for those delivering the course, drawing upon the richness of the Scriptures and the Church’s living teaching. The course content needs setting in the living context of the experience and wisdom of those who live the sacrament of matrimony, but priority must always be given to the doctrine of the Church, which is God’s gift to humanity for its happiness. While the experience of married couples is important to illustrate the Church’s teaching, a couple’s opinions or experience must never take priority over the Church’s teaching.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that marriage preparation courses must be a ‘journey of re-discovery’, that distinguishes between what ‘everyone else is doing, and what our own being intimately tells us’. As stated earlier, men and women are hard-wired to live faithful, life-long, monogamous marriages. The revelation of God about marriage does not contradict the nature of human beings created by him, but further confirms and gives it a deeper meaning. When this marriage preparation course works at its best it will help young couples re-discover truths about love that they already sense and know deep down.

These preparatory courses for marriage must be a journey of re-discovery. They must help us learn anew what our being tells us. They must help couples reach the true decision of marriage in accordance with the Creator and Redeemer. (Benedict XVI, 24 July 2007)

I would like to thank all the members of the Marriage and Family Life Commission – couples and clergy – for the commitment and hard-work that has been so evident in our collaboration in producing *Fit for Mission? Marriage*. One of the strengths of this course is that it has drawn on the practical experience and insight of married couples, clergy and laity experienced in delivering marriage preparation courses. I would also like to thank my own team for their assistance in developing this new addition to the *Fit for Mission?* series.

✚ *Patrick O’Donoghue*
Bishop of Lancaster.



Guidelines for leading the course

Before presenting the first session it is important that the Course Presenters have a clear understanding of the overall goals of this Catholic marriage preparation course. The four goals are:

1. The couple will be able to describe – appropriate to their stage of faith development – the Catholic doctrine of marriage and sexual ethics.
2. The couple will be fully prepared to receive the Sacrament of Marriage; this includes two elements:
 - They will be able to describe the significance of the different aspects of the Nuptial Mass or Marriage Service.
 - They will be able to describe how to live out the Sacrament of Marriage in their life together.
3. The couple will begin to feel at ease in the Church and begin to be confident about their roles in the marriage service.
4. The couple will be given the opportunity to develop skills that will help them maintain and deepen their relationship.

In view of these goals, it is important that Course Presenters consider the following two aspects contained in the following sections:

- basic requirements to be Course Presenters, and
- presenting the course to meet the needs of couples according to their faith development.

Basic requirements to be Course Presenters

For the success of this course it is essential that Course Presenters – clergy and laity – accept and are convinced by the full teaching of the Church concerning marriage and sexual ethics. Failure in this regard would be a huge disservice to the Church and to the couples in our pastoral care. The most convincing lesson that these young couples will receive is the enthusiastic and realistic living out of the truth of Catholic faith by experienced husbands and wives.

Observance of the following requirements is expected of Course Presenters, whether clergy or laity:

- Acceptance of the full teaching of the Church concerning marriage and Catholic sexual ethics.
- Full consciousness of the fact that they are teaching the Faith of the Church, in the name of the Church. It is never appropriate or acceptable to present personal opinions that are contrary to doctrine as the teachings of the Church. Neither is it helpful or acceptable to express any personal doubts or criticisms of Church teaching, particularly with regard to contraception.
- Willingness to share experience. Participants on the course will benefit from a realistic account of the difficulties and joys of fully living out the Catholic understanding of married love.
- Sensitivity. It is essential that Course Presenters are not critical or judgmental about the life-style of the couples attending the course. However, we must ourselves be confident and clear about the moral teaching of the Church. If we don't have the courage of our convictions, why should new couples take them seriously?

In addition, leading a course can be daunting if you have never done anything like this before. Some experience of how to train, perhaps by working alongside an experienced person or through attending a 'train the trainer' event, should be completed.

Meeting the needs of couples according to their faith development

The modern identity of Roman Catholics is complex, involving different levels of adherence and involvement in the life of the Church and parish community:

I think the first thing to acknowledge here is that nowadays people use the word 'Catholic' in many different ways. Some identify themselves as being Catholic through a grandparent or going to a Catholic school. Others identify themselves as being Catholic because they were baptised in the local Catholic Church and attend family christenings, weddings and funerals. There are also those men and women who occasionally attend Mass at Christmas and/or Easter...

... Our fundamental identity as the Catholic Church is to be inclusive not exclusive. This is why we welcome all people who turn up at our presbytery doors, attend our liturgies, or meet the criteria for admission to our schools. However, this does not mean that everyone who has some type of relationship with the Catholic Church fully belongs to the Catholic Church.

(Bishop Patrick O'Donoghue, *Fit for Mission? Church*, p.35)

The basic fact of life in the Church's provision of marriage is that the majority of couples presenting themselves for marriage preparation are non-practising and, more often than not, mixed – that is, the other partner is either a non-practising member of another Christian Church or ecclesial community, or has no religious background.

These couples often have little or no knowledge of the faith or experience of the Church and their motives for wanting a 'church wedding' can be varied and complex.

In these cases, the fundamental approach of the *Marriage Preparation Course* is one of evangelisation.

Evangelisation is the proclamation of the gospel. The evangelist's purpose is 'to touch the hearts of the hearers and turn them to God'. Evangelists trust that their word and example will, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, move others to a first act of faith'...First and foremost, evangelisation is motivated by love for those who do not yet know Christ, 'recognising that such persons are lacking a tremendous benefit in this world: to know the true face of God and the friendship of Jesus Christ, God-with-us'...

(*Fit for Mission? Schools*, p. 27)

We have therefore developed two different courses: *Marriage Preparation* and *Marriage Preparation Plus*, both of which are contained in this *Course Presenter's Book*. There are separate *Couple's Books* for each course.

The *Marriage Preparation Course* is designed to meet the specific needs of those couples with an inactive faith and so assumes little or no knowledge of the Faith.

The *Marriage Preparation Plus Course* has been developed for those couples presenting themselves for marriage preparation who are practising Catholics, and/or where one partner is a practising member of another Christian church or ecclesial community, and they have an active faith and spirituality. The *Marriage Preparation Plus Course*, therefore, assumes knowledge of the faith and a living relationship with Christ. In these cases, the fundamental approach of the course is one of catechesis.

Catechesis is the process by which the faith of believers is nourished and educated. ...It may be described as 'a dialogue of believers'. Its purpose is to 'help them towards a greater maturity of faith, especially in the way of understanding'... To catechise 'is to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God's eternal design reaching fulfilment in that Person. It is to seek to understand the meaning of Christ's actions and words and the signs worked by him'. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 426).

(*Fit for Mission? Schools*, p. 27)

The descriptions *Marriage Preparation Course* and *Marriage Preparation Plus Course* have been chosen to avoid any sense of judgementalism or inferiority. However, both groups have very different needs which cannot be combined without doing a disservice to both. The language and concepts of the *Marriage Preparation Course* would be too simple and undemanding for couples with an active faith, while the language and concepts of the *Marriage Preparation Plus Course*, could be incomprehensible and alienating for couples with an inactive faith. This is just as it would be unreasonable to expect people who have been learning French for ten years to have the best learning and development experience in a class with beginners.

In order to discern which course would best suit couples attending marriage preparation it is necessary that Course Presenters have individual meetings with each couple to ascertain their needs.



Principles of Evangelisation for Marriage Preparation

Why do we need to evangelise some couples?

We cannot afford to be under any illusions about the faith background of many of the couples who present themselves for marriage preparation. If we fail to understand where they are coming from religiously, intellectually and emotionally, our *Marriage Preparation Course* will contain assumptions, concepts and language that will be unintelligible, easily misunderstood and alienating. To pretend that some couples are Catholics fully in communion with the Church when they are obviously not, is a disservice to the couple and a disservice to the truth entrusted to us by God.

The reality is that many of the couples who seek marriage in the Church are non-believers or are religiously indifferent. *The General Directory for Catechesis* [GDC] describes the situation as follows:

...entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel...[they] live in a religious context in which Christian points of reference are perceived purely exteriorly.

(GDC 58)

Though couples present themselves for marriage in the Catholic Church this does not mean we can presume that they believe the Faith of the Church or have a living relationship with Jesus Christ. In situations where the faith is inactive, what is needed is the much heralded New Evangelisation, which is, simply put, missionary activity aimed at non-believers and the religiously indifferent. New Evangelisation in the context of marriage preparation means proclaiming the Gospel about God's meaning and purpose for marriage, and to call the couple to conversion.

This makes the *Marriage Preparation Course* a missionary encounter. What, in practise, does this mean?

... the primordial mission of the Church is to proclaim God and to be his witness before the world. This involves making known the true face of God and his loving plan of salvation for man, as it has been revealed in Jesus Christ.

(GDC 23)

Therefore, for our *Marriage Preparation Course* to be missionary it needs:

- To proclaim God and for us to be his witnesses before the couples.
- To make known the true face of God in love and marriage, and challenge any false notions couples may have about God, love and marriage, including domestic abuse, contraception and divorce.
- To help couples see that God's plan for marriage – deeply personal union, indissolubility, faithfulness and openness to fertility – is not something imposed from outside but is already implicit in their love for each other. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1643).

How do we evangelise couples?

Jesus set out what he expects from his disciples in all types of evangelisation in what is known as Jesus' missionary mandate (*GDC* 34). A mandate is a command given by someone in authority which has the force of law. Jesus' missionary mandate to us as evangelists on the marriage preparation course is, therefore, not optional or open to re-interpretation but is mandatory for clergy and laity, no matter how challenging or difficult.

Non-practicing couples have the right to learn what God has revealed about the meaning and purpose of their marriage. We do not have the right to deny them the full truth, including the Church's teaching on openness to life and the wrongfulness of contraception because we may find it difficult or embarrassing to talk about such things.

We must be clear here: we don't insist on teaching the full truth about marriage out of a motive to enforce blind obedience to Church teaching, but because we believe that God's meaning and purpose for marriage gives couples the best chance of being loving husbands and wives, and for their love to grow and flourish.

First, let's see what Jesus tells us about evangelisation:

Go into all the world; and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. (Mark 16:15)

Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20)

You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:48)

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses... to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Love one another. (John 15:12)

The goals of evangelisation

From these New Testament passages we can draw the following principles of evangelisation (cf. *GDC* 46):

Proclamation and witness: We must seek to proclaim the full meaning God has given to marriage (*CCC* 1602), as revealed in Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. As Jesus commands us, we must be witnesses to the truth of marriage in how we live our own marriage and the way we talk about marriage.

Teaching the Word and Sacrament: We must seek to teach couples about marriage in ways that respect the Word of God and the sacrament of marriage; and that also respect the couple, their intellectual, emotional and religious background, and their personal needs.

Personal change and love of neighbour: We must seek to encourage conversion in both the couples and ourselves to the full meaning God has given marriage. The ultimate purpose of the *Marriage Preparation Course* is to foster a deeper awareness and commitment to love between husband and wife, which can only be fully realised through participation in the life and love of the Holy Trinity through the grace of Jesus.

These three principles of evangelisation must inform the content and structure of the *Marriage Preparation Course*.

The process of evangelisation

We do not need to invent a methodology for evangelisation in our *Marriage Preparation Course*, but rather discover in Scripture the methodology used by God to evangelise and catechise his people. The Old Testament shows us that God is understood as the creative and insightful teacher of Israel, who transforms the events in the life of his people into lessons of wisdom. (*Fit for Mission? Schools*, p.22).

Our role as evangelists and catechists is to enable couples to encounter the God of love in a way that invites them to respond to that love.

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise.

(Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

Simply put, our goal for a couple participating in the *Marriage Preparation Course* is for them to be able to make a whole-hearted response of love to God and to his commands. However, if that is not possible, at the very least we should hope that the couple will begin to see the connection between their experience of love and the God of love, and have a deeper appreciation of the meaning and purpose of marriage, including sexual love.

How do we enable couples to encounter the God of love in a way that invites them to make the whole-hearted response of love, love of God and love of the commands of God?

First, if we think that such a goal is unrealistic, too ambitious, or impossible because of the depth of non-belief or religious indifference we have found in many couples, then we are defeated before we start! It is essential that the Presenters of the course are convinced about the truth of God's plan for marriage and the joys it brings – and are confident that God can bring about conversion in the most unexpected ways.

Once we are convinced that this is a realistic goal, then we can begin to apply the following methods used by God to invite the response of love:

1. Reach out and welcome

The Old Testament and New Testament give testimony to God's method of going out to people and welcoming them into a relationship with him. God adapts himself to the culture and stage of development of Israel, based on knowing and understanding the conditions in which he finds individuals. Therefore, in the *Marriage Preparation Course*:

- We must adapt the style of teaching and language of the Faith to the culture and stage of faith development of the couple.

2. Proclaim and educate

The Lord teaches Israel through words and deeds, symbols and liturgy, about the meaning and purpose of a fully human life. He expects Israel to adopt his ways and model her behaviour on the divine attitude of love, kindness and faithfulness. Therefore, in the *Marriage Preparation Course*:

- We must proclaim the fullness the Church's teaching on marriage in a way that conveys the fact that receiving the sacrament of marriage also carries the expectation that the couple will adopt the meaning and purpose God has given marriage.

3. Call and invite to belong

The Gospels make clear that at the heart of Jesus' method of teaching was his personal call to each individual to repentance, conversion and membership of his community, the Church. Dialogue and questioning were his preferred way of calling each person, exemplified by his common question, 'What do you think?' This question shows a real interest and concern for the other person.

But Jesus didn't leave it there at the level of eliciting a personal opinion or judgment; he went to the next level of challenge and gave an explanation of the truth through the Word of God. Jesus did not follow the modern misguided approach that everyone's opinion was equally valid or equally truthful. He spoke with authority, with the expectation that everyone who listened to him with good will would achieve insight and recognise who he was.

Divine education is a process of questioning (Luke 24:13-24), explanation through the Word of God (24:25-28), insight [opening of eyes] (Luke 24:31) and liturgical recognition of Christ (Luke 24:31).
(*Fit for Mission? Schools*, p.24)

Therefore, in the *Marriage Preparation Course*:

- We must encourage an atmosphere of dialogue and questioning that asks couples what they genuinely think or feel. But we must not be afraid respectfully and politely to challenge any opinion that contradicts the teaching of the Church. The goal of our explanations, based on Scripture and the teaching of the Church, must not be to win an argument but to help the couple open their eyes to the truth. Every session of the course is an opportunity for the couple to hear the personal call of Christ and become members of his community, the Church.

Before each session with non-believing or religiously indifferent couples it is important to refresh yourselves about the method of evangelisation we are using in marriage preparation:

- Reach out and welcome,
- Proclaim and educate,
- Call and invite to belong.

Principles of Catechesis for Marriage Preparation Plus



Couples we do not need to evangelise, but to catechise

For those couples who present themselves for marriage preparation who have faith and participate in the Church, our joyful task is to help deepen their knowledge of the Church's Faith about the sacrament of marriage, and their relationship with Jesus.

However, one challenge facing Presenters working with practising Catholics may be that, due to poor catechesis, the couple have a confused or erroneous understanding of the Church's teaching, particularly regarding sexual morality, including contraception, sterilisation and IVF. Presenters must never convey any sense of blame because, in most cases, couples haven't been clearly taught the Church's teaching, at home, at school or from the pulpit. Again, it is only recently that the Church has begun to develop a positive and rich theology of the body to explain in greater depth and meaning why contraception and IVF undermine the dignity and purpose of marriage.

Pope John Paul II has given guidance about the purpose of marriage preparation for practicing couples:

Among the elements to be instilled in this journey of faith, which is similar to the Catechumenate, there must also be a deeper knowledge of the mystery of Christ and the Church, of the meaning of grace and of the responsibility of Christian marriage, as well as preparation for taking an active and conscious part in the rites of the marriage liturgy.

(Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 66)

The whole of Christian life is a process of continuing catechesis, and significant moments in the life of the Christian, such as marriage, baptism of children, first confession and holy communion, confirmation, and funerals, are 'peak experiences' when we can gain a deeper knowledge of the Faith and a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. (cf. *GDC* 51).

How do we catechise couples?

The purpose of this *Marriage Preparation Plus Course* is to help practicing couples to deepen their relationship with each other through seeing marriage as their path to holiness, through learning to share their relationship with Jesus together. The following passages from Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict convey the purpose of catechesis:

At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son from the Father ...To catechise is “to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God’s eternal design reaching fulfilment in that Person”... Catechesis aims at putting “people ...in communion... with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity”.

(Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi tradendae*, 5)

Catechesis is about making available to minds and hearts the word of him who gave his life for us. In this way, catechesis causes to resound within the heart of every human being a unique call that is ceaselessly renewed: “Follow me”.

(Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to French Bishops*, September 2008)

The fundamental task of catechesis with couples is to help them to know, to celebrate and to contemplate the mystery of Christ together, as husband and wife.

The goals of catechesis

The *General Directory for Catechesis* identifies six goals of catechesis that must be part of our *Marriage Preparation Plus Course*. (GDC, 85)

1. Promoting knowledge of the Faith: For couples who have a living faith, often the experience of love and the expectation of celebrating the Sacrament of Marriage cause them to want to know the God of love all the more. ‘Who has encountered Christ desires to know him as much as possible, as well as to know the plan of the Father which he revealed’. (GDC, 84). Catechesis through the *Marriage Preparation Plus Course* must lead the couple to gradually grasp the whole of God’s meaning and purpose for marriage, through Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

2. Liturgical education: Hopefully a practicing Catholic couple will already be participating in the celebration of the Eucharist together. One of the goals of the course is to help the couple to share their Eucharistic faith together and to prepare for meeting Christ, the bridegroom of the Church, in the Sacrament of Marriage. The course will promote greater knowledge of the meaning of the liturgy and the sacraments and educate the couple ‘for prayer, for thanksgiving, for repentance, for praying with confidence, for community spirit, for understanding correctly the meaning of the creeds...as all of this is necessary for a true liturgical life’. (GDC 85).

3. Moral formation: Most importantly, the goal of *Marriage Preparation Plus* is to transmit the attitude of God to the morality of marriage. We aim to encourage the couple to undertake a journey of ‘interior transformation’ together, as they learn to give themselves to each other totally. The course not only seeks to communicate the Word, but also the force of the Word lived by experienced married couples.

4. Deepening prayer life: For the sake of the couple, and any future children, it is vital that they learn to pray together, so that their family becomes a 'domestic Church'. Also, it is important that the course is conducted in an atmosphere of prayer:

When catechesis is permeated by a climate of prayer, the assimilation of the entire Christian life reaches its summit. This climate is especially necessary when the catechumen and those to be catechized are confronted with the more demanding aspects of the Gospel and when they feel weak or when they discover the mysterious action of God in their lives. (GDC 85)

5. Education for community life: *Marriage Preparation Plus* also aims to show the couple the role and responsibility of married couples within the life of the parish community and wider Church. For example, how they make sacramentally present Jesus' faithfulness and self-giving love for the Church, his bride. It will also encourage them to have a place in their life together for single people, the poor and the elderly with openness and humility, so that they welcome others into the home they have built with their love.

6. Missionary initiation: The Presenters of the course must also seek to convince the couple of the importance of being present as married Christians in society through their professional, cultural and social lives. Now more than ever, society needs the witness of couples committed to unity, indissolubility, fidelity and openness to life. The Church needs Catholic couples to witness to the Gospel of life and, particularly, to show the world that there are realistic alternatives to contraception, abortion, IVF and divorce.

The process of catechesis

In the same way that we base our method of evangelisation on that used by God, we will also base our process of catechesis on God's method, as revealed by Christ and the Church.

Personal and sensitive

Jesus taught and challenged people in order to deepen their relationship with him and the Father, in the Holy Spirit. His teaching was never abstract but always personal, sensitive to the particular needs of the person he was with. Therefore, in *Marriage Preparation Plus*:

- We must be sensitive to the fact that God has a unique relationship with each individual and that his grace is working in their lives. We must be discerning about the stage of the faith journey they are on.

Jesus first and last

The whole purpose of salvation history is fulfilled in the revelation of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Nothing must put Jesus and his Gospel into second place in *Marriage Preparation Plus* – not our opinions, nor the opinions of the couple. Jesus must never be an afterthought, tagged on at the end. Therefore, in *Marriage Preparation Plus*:

- We must make sure that the teaching and person of Jesus is uppermost in each session, through Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and prayer, so that everyone has the opportunity – Presenters and couples – to deepen their relationship with Christ.

Love of the Church

The Old Testament and New Testament show us that the purpose of God's words and deeds was to shape a people to share in his life and love, and bring his justice, kindness and mercy to the world. The divine expression of God's love is the Holy Spirit, who is the life and guide of the Church, the People of God. Therefore, in *Marriage Preparation Plus*:

- We will encourage and foster love for the Church through our reverence for her teaching, liturgy, history and art, and cultivate respect and obedience to the Pope, the successor of Peter, and those Bishops in communion with him. At times you may be on the receiving end of criticism and anger aimed at the Church. It's best not to take this personally, but instead try to answer any misunderstanding with kindness and patience.

Seeing the holy

The Old Testament and New Testament witness to the transformation that is brought about in individuals through encountering the presence and power of God. The Father gives us his Word in nature and Scripture, Jesus has given the Church the sacraments to enable us to encounter his presence and power, and the Holy Spirit gives each one of us charisms. Therefore, in *Marriage Preparation Plus*:

- We will promote understanding and sensitivity to the words and signs that convey the power and presence of God through the sacraments, and deepen the couple's awareness of our need for grace, the virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit to live the vocation to married life.

Before each session with practising couples it is important to refresh yourselves about the method of catechesis we are using in *Marriage Preparation Plus*:

- Personal and sensitive
- Jesus first and last
- Love of the Church
- Seeing the holy

Tools for Evangelisation and Catechesis



The tools for evangelisation and catechesis are the same for *Marriage Preparation* and *Marriage Preparation Plus*, but are used differently, according to the two distinct processes for non-believing and believing couples.

The sessions for both marriage preparation courses will provide you with all the materials that you need, but it is necessary to understand why the principal sources of teaching material is the Word of God contained in Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Too often courses for couples have given over-emphasis to the personal experience and opinions of the Presenters and couples, and not enough attention to the doctrinal and moral teaching of the Church.

The danger in focusing on experience out of a concern to be ‘interesting’ and ‘relevant’ is that it ignores the fact that experience is not something ‘neutral’. As Pope Benedict XVI puts it, ‘experience detached from any consideration of what is good or true, can lead, not to genuine freedom, but to moral or intellectual confusion, to a lowering of standards, to a loss of self-respect, and even to despair’. (World Youth Day, 2008).

The major threats to marriage come from immoral behaviour, such as contraception or divorce, that have become accepted by most people as normal and acceptable, often due to their unquestioned promotion by the media and government agencies.

- It is not right to say “sex before marriage is recommended because it is essential that the couple learn if they’re sexually ‘compatible’”.
- It is not right to say “the use of contraception or IVF is up to the conscience of the couple” because people forget or ignore the fact that conscience can be ill-informed or erroneous.
- It is not right to say “when discussing long-term problems and difficulties in marriage sometimes divorce is in the best interests of the children”.
- It is not right to say “any type of sexual behaviour is permissible in a marriage if both partners consent”.

The premise underpinning this course is that the Church’s teaching is not just one opinion among many equally valid opinions, but the absolute and liberating Word of God about marriage.

Presenters of both marriage preparation courses are involved in a vital aspect of the ministry of the Word in the Church. As such, it is encouraging to remember that the Holy Spirit is, in fact, the principal agent of the ministry of the Word, the one through whom “the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the Church—and through her in the world”. (*GDC* 50).



General Notes - How to get Started

Some practical considerations

The *Marriage Preparation Course* and *Marriage Preparation Plus Course* have 6 sessions each and each session has been designed to last about one and a half hours. However, this is just a standard recommendation that should not constrain you from running your course to a different time scale, and adapting the material to the needs of your couples. Furthermore, once you are familiar with both courses you may want to 'pick and mix' the contents depending on the level of engagement of the group.

Initial pre-course meeting with couples

When couples present themselves for marriage preparation there should first be a preliminary meeting between the couple and the priest and/or deacon to conduct the pre-nuptial enquiry. During this meeting the priest and/or deacon can make a judgement on which course would best suit the couple depending on their inactivity or activity in the faith. It is important to determine which is the most appropriate course for them – *Marriage Preparation* or *Marriage Preparation Plus* – and agree the dates on which they will attend.

Materials

This *Course Presenter's Book* contains both courses, with guidance about presenting the sessions. There are separate *Couple's Books* for those attending either of the courses. These contain the session aim, objectives, key features, activities and a summary of the key points. Also, in the material for couples there is an introductory message to couples and course overview. You may want to give them this material prior to starting the course, perhaps at the pre-nuptial enquiry meeting mentioned above.

Activities

The activities included in each session have been designed to encourage the couples to engage with the material and apply the more formal input to their personal experience. It is important that the Presenters adapt these sessions to suit the couples where necessary – for example some may not be comfortable with reading from the handouts and jotting down ideas, in which case your approach would need to include less individual work by couples.

Role of the Presenter

It is also important that as Presenters you familiarize yourself with the content and activities and think what you can add from your understanding of Church teaching and personal experiences to bring the sessions to life. The idea is not to hold yourselves up as a model of perfection, but rather to show that your marriage is a “work in progress” and that success is possible (and joyful and wonderful) but that it requires a continual renewal of effort and commitment.

Preparing the room

Think about the surroundings.

- Is the room temperature comfortable?
- Is the atmosphere suitable for prayer? – e.g.: presence of Cross, icon, candle.
- Are there sufficient chairs?
- Do you have/want to use a table? – This can make the setting more formal. Table or not, couples may need means to take notes
- Is the furniture arranged in the best way? – Subject to the constraints of your room a circular arrangement, so that couples can sit together and see other couples, is often recommended.
- How will you limit distractions and noise? – Putting up a simple sign on the door and turning off any phone in the room can be helpful.
- How will you ensure you meet the special needs, if any, of the couples – e.g. access; requirement for larger print?
- Have you available pens and/or pencils in case couples wish to make notes?
- Do you have a flipchart? – This can be helpful to capture key ideas where couples are sharing or to illustrate points during your input. Occasionally, use of a flipchart will be specifically mentioned. If you do not have a flipchart consider alternatives.
- Occasionally one of the couple may not attend or be late. Think about how you will approach activities in this situation. Normally it will be fine for the individual to work alone; however, for certain activities you may like to ask the individual if they would like to work with you.

Overview of sessions

The aim, objectives and key features for each session are set out below.

Session 1. Two become one
Aim: To introduce the course and make connections between the couple's experience of love and the Church's teaching on love.
Objectives: By the end of this session couples will be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Describe the connection between their love and the God of love.• Explain God's meaning and purpose for marriage.• Start to implement a plan to deepen the foundations of their love for each other.
Key Features: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your experience: How did you fall in love? What is it like being in love? How is love changing your lives?• God is love: God's love for humanity in the Old Testament.• What is marriage? Consent to total, unconditional self-giving which needs personal unity, indissolubility, fidelity and openness to life.
Session 2. Love is...?
Aim: To deepen the couples' understanding of love and how to increase their love.
Objectives: By the end of this session couples will be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• State the Christian understanding of love.• Discuss the opportunities and challenges of marriage.• Accept the benefits to marriage of leading a virtuous life.• Describe how the deadly sins endanger marriage.• Apply practical strategies for leading a virtuous life.
Key Features: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is love? Jesus and love. Affection, erotic love, friendship, self-giving love.• St Paul's 'Love is never...' and its mirror, 'Love is...'• The secrets to a happy marriage: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity, gentleness and generosity.• The threats to a happy marriage: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

Session 3. Respect the differences

Aim: To establish practical ways of positively engaging with the differences between man and woman and explore how these can be the source of marriage's strength and richness, but also a source of misunderstanding, conflict and hurt.

Objectives: By the end of this session couples will be able to:

- Explain that God made males and females to complement and complete each other.
- Use effective strategies for speaking and listening.
- Indicate ways of resolving conflicts.
- Accept the importance of forgiveness and what this means.

Key Features:

- The theology of the body about masculinity and femininity.
- How to listen effectively.
- How to speak positively.
- How to resolve conflicts.
- How to forgive.

Session 4. God's body talk

Aim: To appreciate that, being created by the God of love, our bodies reflect their origin in his loving purpose. This purpose informs what is the right and wrong use of our bodies.

Objectives: By the end of this session couples will be able to:

- Explain the meaning and purpose God has given sexual love.
- State why contraception and IVF contradict the meaning of marital love.
- State why the marriage vows of unity, indissolubility, faithfulness and openness to life are vital to the success of a marriage.
- Explain why the Church advocates Natural Fertility Awareness.

Key Features:

- The 'nuptial significance' of maleness and femaleness.
- The law of self-gift and the necessary conditions for self-giving.
- How contraception and IVF are a lie.
- Why it is important that sexual love is open to life.
- Natural Fertility Awareness.

Session 5. Jesus' helping hand

Aim: To see how a proper understanding of who Jesus is helps us understand what happens when we receive the sacrament of marriage. To appreciate the importance of this sacrament in helping us face the difficult times in marriage.

Objectives: By the end of this session couples will be able to:

- Explain what a sacrament is and how sacraments help and support us through life.
- Highlight why marriage is a sacrament.
- Indicate their approaches to dealing with change.
- Discuss how they deal with suffering.
- Apply some practical actions to help with change and suffering.

Key Features:

- Who is Jesus? Bad, mad or God.
- Sacraments: Jesus' power to heal and teach has been passed on through the sacraments.
- The nature of grace. Sharing the life and energy of God.
- Why do we need a sacrament to be married?
- Dealing with change.
- Coping with suffering.

Session 6. Loving each other in Christ

Aim: To appreciate the significance and meaning of the different parts of the wedding service and that marriage is made in prayer.

Objectives: By the end of this session couples will be able to:

- Explain that they confer the sacrament of marriage on each other, before the Church and sealed by God.
- State the significance of the different elements of the marriage liturgy.
- Explain the meaning of the symbols of marriage.
- Prepare for their own marriage service.
- Describe the importance of prayer.

Key Features:

- Liturgy as participation in the life of God.
- The different parts of the marriage liturgy.
- The marriage vows.
- The exact point at which they are married.
- Praying together.