Effective “new evangelization” requires radically re-thinking marriage preparation/formation.

The directives of Canon Law (canons 1063 & 1064) that local parishes (not the offices of the chancery) are to provide remote, proximate, immediate marriage preparation, and follow-up for married couples and families have been in place for decades but ~ for the most part ~ not implemented. The 50% divorce rate and interviews of petitioners for declarations of nullity about the effectiveness of their marriage preparation provide more than enough evidence that our historical narrowing of “marriage preparation” to immediate marriage preparation a few months before the wedding is not working. Well intended efforts to improve these crash course programs so they will effectively assist engaged couples to live the relationship skills needed for the lifelong commitment of Matrimony is a doomed strategy.

Why?

Study and reflection on the following 4 documents has helped me clarify WHY we need to do things differently and WHAT ministerial strategies may be more helpful/effective:

- Canons 1063 & 1064 and Commentary.
- Forming Intentional Disciples by Sherry Weddell
- The Joy of the Gospel by Pope Francis
- New Evangelization in a Pluralistic Culture by Deacon David Backes

1. Sherry Weddell is helpful in articulating that “intentional discipleship” is the “missing link” in our traditional methods of passing on our Catholic faith. If there was a time when the family of origin and the “Catholic ghetto” formed Catholics to become and remain “practicing Catholics”, this reality no longer exists. We now know from Pew research and Sherry Weddell (and our personal experience) that it is likely that 95% of those who are asking to be married in the Catholic Church are not intentional disciples, i.e., they lack a real/effective personal relationship with Jesus that nurtures them as individuals and as a couple. We need to create strategies for a “new evangelization” that begins with:
   - Step One - establishing a relationship of respect/trust/caring within which we hope to provide witness to our own real/personal relationship with Jesus (as an intentional disciple) so that others may become motivated to also become intentional disciples.
   - Step Two – Intentional disciples of Jesus will be motivated to choose to belong to the Christian Community (Church) by receiving sacraments of initiation.
   - Step Three - and discern their vocation & ministry (because that is how disciples participate in the building of the Kingdom).

Even for those who may already be intentional disciples, a focus on faith development must become a normal part of the process of remote, proximate, immediate marriage preparation, and follow-up beyond the wedding and enrichment for married couples because the “faith” we inherit (that might have served us well as children) needs to “grow” into a “faith” that can sustain us through the challenges of adult life and responsibilities and ministry.

[Using Sherry Weddell ideas, we can develop some kind of program/questionnaire for dating/engaged couples….something like FOCCUS style questions about relationship with Jesus and faith commitment ….which can be used as first step in formal marriage preparation. This can be “self-scoring” and designed to encourage next step(s). Can be put on web sites for pastors and engaged couples.]
2. Since it requires a certain level of development (infants/children do not yet have the necessary development to have an “intentional” relationship with Jesus), parents and youth teachers/leaders need to learn how to share their own relationship with Jesus with children, adolescents and young adults. [See http://www.vibrantfaithathome.org/ for ideas.]

3. The content of “immediate marriage preparation” needs to be move “upstream” so that the relationship skills necessary for successful marriage are learned BEFORE young people are into relationships that should/could lead to marriage. [See http://www.lovethinks.com/]

4. We can no longer continue to ignore the need for “follow-up” to immediate marriage preparation. One way of doing this is to use Sponsor Couples who are trained to “follow-up” beyond the wedding ceremony. However, in addition, we need to focus on “marriage enrichment” for all married couples as an essential element of successful marriage (not “optional” advancement for some ~ more advanced ~ couples). Advent & Lent ~ for married couples ~ needs to focus on becoming more intentional in their relationship with Jesus and also with one another (one’s spouse….and children). [See what the Diocese of San Bernardino CA created for making use of For Better and For Ever during Advent and Lent…..>>> http://www.marriagepreparation.com/assets/pdf/2-070714-942-Marriage_Initiative_-_for_Lent.pdf]

5. Questionnaires: Sample of a questionnaire > https://www.formstack.com/forms/?680003-cHsoKNFAl4
   a. Questionnaire for evaluation of marriage preparation given to engaged couple prior to marriage…..could include questions about level of faith commitment (esp. relationship with Jesus).
   b. Questionnaire that is part of the Petition for Annulment…could include questions about relationship with Jesus and marriage preparation prior to marriage.
   c. These questionnaires are on the Internet and the data can be made available for research about the effectiveness of marriage preparation programs. The diocese can formulate policies for getting these questionnaires filled out:
      i. Questionnaire for evaluation of marriage preparation is given to the engaged couple and returned to priest for inclusion in parish Pre-nuptial Investigation packet….the parish secretary could enter this data onto Questionnaire on diocesan web site (or mail the questionnaire to the Family Life Office).
      ii. Questionnaire that is part of the Petition for Annulment can be copied onto Questionnaire on diocesan web site by a secretary in Tribunal.

6. Collaboration of diocesan offices is essential because these strategies will require the services of many difference offices…such as, Tribunal, Catechetics, Evangelization, Youth Ministry, Continuing Education of Clergy, Seminary, etc.

7. My notes & quotes from Sherry Weddell, Pope Francis, and David Backes articulate the strategies and skills that are needed for “new evangelization” and “effective marriage preparation.” Indoctrination and propaganda will simply not work anymore. We need to learn & use the skills of dialogue, listening, dealing with people where they are at, and helping them fall in love with Jesus BEFORE we try to offer catechesis. Catechesis will be effective only after they have a relationship with Jesus and want to belong to the Church). Likewise effective marriage preparation must begin with dialogue/relationship (not theology). [http://marriagepreparation.com/page/?pg=116]