8 - A parish plan for Proximate & Immediate marriage preparation.

I. Proximate marriage preparation: Providing Information and Formation to families and dating/engaged couples.

1 - Junior High and High School Religious Ed Programs & Young Adult Ministry. Direct the leaders of these programs to incorporate material about Relationship Skills and Christian Marriage, in age appropriate ways, into all educational programs.

2 - Pulpit announcements: Do this periodically. "I believe we all agree on the importance and value of Christian marriage and family life. Because we at [Holy Trinity] are committed to helping couples prepare well for a lasting and satisfactory Christian marriage, we are now offering an Information Night for Those Considering Marriage in the Church. The next Information Night is (date) at 7PM. This is for couples and/or singles....and parents who might want to get information for their children. We will explain [Holy Trinity's] marriage preparation process, answer questions you may have, and provide materials for couples to use to evaluate their relationship."

3 - Bulletin: Include this every week. "Marriage: Contact us for a packet of information about preparing for Christian Marriage and planning your wedding. Study this information even before[1] you get engaged!"


5 – Specialized Deanery &/or Diocesan Programs that may not be available in the local parish...workshops/retreats for couples that addresses topics such as: Evangelization: A Call to Discipleship for Adults; Confirmation; the Rite of Marriage: Sacrament and Vocation; and Natural Family Planning.

II. Immediate marriage preparation.

Step One: Welcoming couples when they contact the parish because they wish to be married in the Catholic Church or have their civil marriage validated.

When a couple contacts the parish ~ often by phone ~ the responsibility of the church secretary (or whoever answers the phone) is to record information for the Pastor or Staff Person. If the person/couple is making the "first contact" with the church and has not yet met with the pastor or someone on the church staff, the secretary should be welcoming and answer questions, but it is not the role of the secretary to make decisions about who is to be married in the Church. The secretary should record information from the caller and assure him/her that the Pastor or someone on the church staff will return the call as soon as possible. Why? A request for marriage requires a conversation with someone qualified to make important judgments about the couple's "freedom/readiness for sacramental marriage" before it is appropriate to reserve the church for a wedding.
The secretary will ask the couple if they have gotten the parish packet of information about preparing for Christian marriage and planning your wedding. If they have not obtained this packet, they can be invited to come and get these materials at the parish office. Note: This is the Information Packet mentioned in Bulletin/Pulpit announcements.

Note: In the above paragraphs, there is no option for the couple to "reserve the church" for their wedding before they meet with the Pastor or Staff Person. However, the Pastor may decide to allow for the parish secretary to check the church calendar to see what dates are available when a couple calls to see on what dates it is possible to celebrate their marriage at the parish. This is a practical way to be "user friendly" to couples seeking to marry while maintaining an appropriate pastoral strategy for providing quality marriage preparation. When the couple is making contact with the parish they often/usually already have a date in mind for their wedding. If the church is already booked for a wedding or some other event, the couple knows they need to re-think their wedding plans (or look for another church for their wedding). On the other hand, if the church is available, the parish secretary can "pencil in" the wedding for a specific date and explain to the couple that: we will hold this date for you until you can meet with the Pastor or Staff Person and get official confirmation from the Pastor or Staff Person that the church can be reserved for your wedding. So be sure you don't print your wedding invitations until you have this date confirmed by the Pastor.

This process also works well for the situation in which the couple is trying to reserve the church for the wedding and also get permission to have a priest/deacon from outside the parish officiate at the wedding. In this situation, it is necessary to talk with the Pastor or Staff Person (but this could be done by phone and does not necessarily require a face to face meeting) to determine who will officiate at the wedding, who will take responsibility for the marriage preparation of the couple, and who will be responsible for the necessary paperwork.

Step Two: Assessment Phase. (By Pastor/Deacon/Trained Lay Person)

1. The first contact between the Pastor and the engaged couple is likely to be on the phone. This first conversation provides the Pastor an opportunity to clarify a number of issues (e.g., whether either of them has been married before, their age, their faith tradition, etc.). If there is a major issue, such as, the need for an annulment, the pastor may decide to meet with the couple to address such an issue face to face.

If there are no major issues that need to be addressed, the pastor asks whether they have copies of For Better and For Ever (they might already have copies). If they don't have copies, he explains how they are to get them at the church office (or how they can order from www.marriagepreparation.com) and he explains how page 7 of For Better and For Ever directs them to cover certain chapters in "preparation for their first meeting with the pastor." The pastor says something like: "Be sure to follow the directions on page 7, that is, write your answers to all the questions (actually WRITE in the book!), then ~ after you have both done the writing ~ share your answers with one another in dialogue, and then call me to set an appointment for our first meeting." This is a simple but effective way to make it clear that they are to
do the "homework" before they set an appointment to meet with the pastor. This avoids the excuse that they "forgot" or "did not have time" for the homework!

When they call to set up the meeting with the pastor, it is easy for the pastor to confirm that they did the homework. ("How did your writing and dialogue with one another go?")

2. **The first face to face meeting.** The pastor spends some time getting to know the couple and then goes over the Chapters listed on page 7 of *For Better and For Ever*. **The goal of this meeting is to dialogue with the couple to determine what programs will best suite their particular needs.** Programs include:

   - **Specialized Diocesan/Deanery Programs.**

   In the process of getting to know the couple, it may become obvious to the pastor that the couple has missed out on important elements of adult Catholic living that ideally would have been part of their proximate marriage preparation. For example, one or both of them are currently “non-practicing” Catholics or are significantly lacking in what it means to be a disciple of Jesus or did not receive the sacrament of Confirmation or never learned anything about NFP. If the parish does not have a program designed to help the couple “catch up” on important elements of adult Catholic living, the pastor might direct them to a deanery or diocesan programs designed to address these needs **before going on to the Immediate Marriage Preparation Programs.**

   Then, the pastor can assist the couple in selecting the Immediate Marriage Preparation Program(s) that will best “fit” their needs.

   - **Immediate Marriage Preparation Programs.**

   The following programs are called “immediate marriage preparation programs” because they are designed for couples the pastor determines are “appropriately ready[4]” to begin preparing for sacramental marriage in the Catholic Church.

   - Inventories, such as, [FOCCUS](http://www.forbetterandforever.org/) or [F.A.C.E.T.](http://www.facet.org/).
   - Sponsor Couple program (*For Better and For Ever*).
   - Engaged Encounter.
   - Natural Family Planning.

3. **The pastor may schedule another meeting** to go over FOCCUS or F.A.C.E.T. and any additional chapters of *For Better and For Ever* which the pastor wants to go over with the couple.

   **Step Three: Couple participates in Immediate Marriage Preparation Programs.**
After the session(s) with the Pastor, the couple will take part in the Immediate Marriage Preparation Program(s) they have agreed to complete. If they are going to meet with a Sponsor Couple, they will be assigned a Sponsor Couple at this point and the Sponsor Couple will guide them through the remaining chapters of *For Better and For Ever*. If they are not going to be meeting with a Sponsor Couple they can use the *For Better and For Ever* “on their own” or select a Married Couple or Spiritual Director to share with.

**Step Four: Final Session(s) with Pastor.**

The pastor goes over the final chapters of *For Better and For Ever* (see page 7), completes any paperwork that needs to be done, and plans the wedding[5] (with input from the engaged couple).

**Step Five: Rehearsal and Wedding.**

Many/most parishes have a Staff person or volunteer who will oversee and be available to help with the rehearsal and the wedding so that all is done well and in accord with parish policies (for example, the decoration of the church, guidelines for photographers, etc.)

**Step Six: Follow up beyond the wedding celebration.**

We know today that it is not enough to prepare for marriage before the wedding day. Today we know that every couple will need support in dealing with the reality of marriage. This assistance is best provided by a sponsor couple who assisted the couple during the time of immediate marriage preparation and established an effective relationship which will provide an “open door” for continued support from the sponsor couple through the first year(s) of marriage. There are questions in *For Better and For Ever* designed to help focus on typical “areas of adjustment” in marriage. Often the newly married couple will not be living in the city of the sponsor couple. However, the sponsor couple can keep in touch by phone and email, and this may be just as effective as trying to have a face-to-face meeting.

Follow-up beyond the wedding celebration should not be “limited” to the kind of support that can be provided by sponsor couples. Pastors/parishes who understand the critical importance of supporting couples through the early challenging years of marriage will provide additional elements of support.

[Updated 9-18-2013]

[1] The most important change is to remove anything like “contact us 6 (or 9) months before you plan to be married” because we want to see them much earlier than 6 or 9 months before the wedding. If we tell them we want them to contact us even before they get engaged, we have a better chance of having time to work with them even before they have set a wedding date.
This Information Packet will include diocesan and parish policies about marriage preparation and the celebration of the Rite of Matrimony. It will also include copies of For Better and For Ever (or directions for obtaining copies of For Better and For Ever).

Note that all couples who are preparing for sacramental marriage are directed to use *For Better and For Ever* because we want to make that content available to them even if they do not meet with a sponsor couple for during the time of immediate preparation for marriage.

“ Appropriately ready” means the pastor thinks they are competent ~ intellectually, spiritually, emotionally ~ to benefit from programs designed for immediate marriage preparation and profess the vows of sacramental marriage with an adequate ability to live the vocation of sacramental marriage. If the pastor thinks, at this point, the couple is not “appropriately ready” to take part in the immediate preparation programs he will need to refer the couple to someone competent to assist them.

Some pastors/parishes have Staff persons or volunteers who assist the couple with planning the wedding ceremony.

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