

A GOAL FOR MARRIAGE PREPARATION

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Central importance of Christian marriage in the evangelizing role of the family.

The focus of this meeting is to discuss evangelisation through the family. The evangelising capacity of the family is energised by the unitive and procreative energy of the love between the husband and wife. If the marriage is not strong then the family is weakened and it becomes self absorbed and less life giving; it becomes more a consumer of support services from the Church and the community rather than an expression of the domestic church evangelizing in the community.

So, to maximise the evangelising capacity of the family, we must give proper attention to the strength of the marriage on which the family is founded.

Immediate marriage preparation – in urgent need of a change in mindset

Many factors contribute to a married couple's ability to live a fully sacramental, life-giving way of life. However, our experience of working in the area of marriage enrichment for over twenty years has convinced us that we are at a unique moment in history. We believe that immediate marriage preparation requires an urgent and radical change in current practice. It is this topic we wish to briefly address.

Our comments arise predominantly from our personal experiences in Australia, but we believe that they are relevant to most Western secular societies. Furthermore, it seems possible that it is only a matter of time before they also apply to most of Africa, South America and Asia.

The basis of our sense of urgency is as follows:

- Marriage and family have traditionally been supported by cultural expectations. Even those of low, or no, faith level have grown up expecting to get married and have a traditional family. Within a generation that expectation has declined dramatically.
- Traditional faith practice has been a major association of strong marriages and families. However, faith practice has declined dramatically, again within a generation. Currently, the strongest support of faith practice in children often comes more from grandparents than from parents.
- The Church's response could be labeled 'more of the same'. By that we mean that there has been a very striking, and admirable, increase in effort put into marriage preparation – more money and more personnel working in the area of marriage preparation than ever before. This is a much needed response. However, by 'the same' we mean that there remains a prevailing attitude that marriage is good but somewhat ordinary¹. There is little sense of a call to something great and wonderful. At times it seems that we are more in the business of divorce prevention rather than developing a 'power house' for evangelisation.

¹ Pope John Paul II General Audience, Dec 12, 1979) "... these essential experiences are so intermingled with the ordinary thing of life that we do not generally notice their extraordinary character"

- Furthermore, the strong response of the Church is being far outstripped by the rate of change in the prevailing culture.

Why is this so critical?

Why are we making such a fuss over marriage preparation? Surely this is just one of many things we need to do better in the area of marriage and family, like support for the newly married, marriage enrichment, supporting marriages in stress, etc? Surely remote and proximate marriage preparation are equally important?

Well, actually no. Our experience of having worked in all these areas at differing levels, is that in our culture, at this time in history, marriage preparation lies at the very heart of our relevance as a Church. It therefore requires an urgency and intensity of focus different from all others. This is not to say that the others are not important, but rather, we have more time to deal with them.

What has led us to have this sense of importance and urgency? It is this....

That we have at this moment in history engaged couples, albeit diminishing in numbers², who still present themselves to be married in the Catholic Church. They come for different reasons, few because they are fully engaged with the Church, more often because of expectations of parents, childhood memories of Church, the desire to be married in a beautiful church, etc. But for what ever reason they come. And we welcome them and require them to attend a marriage preparation course. This they do, often reluctantly and with reservations.

So now we have this couple, presenting for a marriage preparation course. It is a *teachable moment*. It is a moment of evangelisation. They are in love and are, usually, open to doing anything for each other. If at that moment, we provide ordinary, uninspiring marriage preparation, if we hold back information because we judge they will reject it, if we offer only what good secular courses provide, if they don't experience some aspect of the loving embrace of their faith community, then we unwittingly confirm what they already unconsciously assumed - that the Catholic Church has nothing unique or compelling to say about marriage, sexuality and family.

That engaged couple then leaves our courses and, with this confirmation of our irrelevance, is unlikely to feel drawn into parish life, will continue a life disconnected from faith practice, will not care if their children are married in the Church, and will not provide their children with the faith experiences that will one day lead them to be married in the Church. We lose not only the engaged couple but we lose the generations that follow. This makes everything else harder; marriage enrichment, family groups, parish life, etc, all start from a lower base and increasingly focus on remediation of the couple and the family.

If our engaged couples leave our courses without being delighted, surprised, and enthused about the Church's vision for *their* marriage, then we have failed in our task.

² Currently the percentage marriage ceremonies performed by religious celebrants in Australia is 30% and declining. We estimate less than 50% of Catholics marrying in Australia are doing so in Church ceremonies.

The general insufficient quality of marriage preparation is not a new phenomenon. It is not that the courses have deteriorated. Rather, the need for marriage education of the highest quality has become increasingly important, faster than we have been able respond.

Of course, every generation faces new challenges. Christian hope helps us to realize that the Holy Spirit raises up new, usually unexpected, responses to every challenge. However, our responsibility is to read the 'signs of the times'. The harsh reality we face is that this generation is making the choice. This is going to be a very rapid transition. It will be complete within one generation. Time is not on our side. For this reason we believe that marriage preparation needs to be treated like a crisis, with urgency and high expectations. Everyone at this meeting, whether they work in the area of marriage formation or not, needs to be a part of the mindset shift we need - to raise expectations of what we should expect from ourselves in the area of marriage preparation.

A call to the 'extraordinary' in the 'ordinary'

It is important to acknowledge the many challenges that arise in practice. Many couples presenting for courses may have a low level of faith and we are rightly sensitive to the danger of turning them away from the Church³. However, in approaching difficulties with pastoral sensitivity, we should never lose sight of the goal towards which we are striving. We need to maintain our own awareness that preparation for marriage is a call to mission – to become active evangelisers, a process that starts in the family and naturally extends beyond it⁴.

It is also important to acknowledge the advances made in recent years with a greatly increased emphasis on marriage preparation. However, it is equally important to recognise that, as a generalization, most of the marriage preparation provided in the name of the Church is not sufficient. Naturally the courses we offer across the Church vary in their standards but we believe that, generally, most couples presenting to be married in our Church receive inadequate preparation *compared to what they should receive*. While this should not be a controversial statement, for those like us who are heavily involved in this area of the Church's mission it is a somewhat confronting and uncomfortable challenge.

What is more controversial perhaps is how we should we respond to this situation. This situation needs, we would argue, to be treated as a major failing of our Church, and not just one of the many areas where we need to do better. This is not a criticism of the Magisterium, our Bishops or Priests; rather it is more a wake up call for we lay leaders, most of whom live our adult lives within this vocation. Marriage is *our* vocation and it is facing unprecedented challenges. The Institutional Church, in part through the good work of the PCF, has sounded this 'call to arms'. However it is largely up to we lay couples to respond to this challenge. Marriage formation, within which marriage preparation is but one element, is largely the work of lay people and this is, if you like, our 'institutional' crisis.

³ Pope John Paul II, *FC 68*: "As for wishing to lay down further criteria for admission to the ecclesial celebration of marriage, criteria that would concern the level of faith of those to be married, this would above all involve grave risks."

⁴ Pope Paul VI, *EN 71*: "In a family which is conscious of this mission, all the members evangelize and are evangelized. The parents not only communicate the Gospel to their children, but from their children they can themselves receive the same Gospel as deeply lived by them. And such a family becomes the evangelizer of many other families, and of the neighbourhood of which it forms part"

We believe we need to bring a mindset change to the work of marriage preparation. We need to start by changing our language. We need to describe our goal as providing *extraordinary* marriage preparation, not *adequate* preparation. If, as St Paul tells us, marriage is indicative of how Christ loves the Church and if, as the Theology of the Body leads us to recognise, the fullest expression of the sacrament of matrimony is in the sexual relationship, then every married couple is called to live an extraordinary vision. This requires extraordinary preparation. If we set the goal as providing extraordinary preparation, then more often than not we will at least provide an adequate preparation.

A goal, a benchmark

What then are the elements of extraordinary marriage preparation? Of course marriage preparation should be approached within a mindset of trust in the Holy Spirit... it is sacramental in the general sense of the word – the Church in action. It is a channel for the action of the Holy Spirit. Thus our approach needs to be marked by prayerfulness, confidence and humility and with joy and enthusiasm for the potential gifts that the Spirit may provide through the love of the engaged couple.

Beyond this, our experience suggests that there are five key elements for sound marriage preparation. Specifically it should:

1. *Be Experiential.* Marriage preparation courses must be primarily lead by married couples (not just individual lay persons). The engaged couple needs to *experience the sacrament of matrimony in action*, as well as receiving *instruction about the sacrament*. Furthermore, providing processes (exercises) that the engaged couples undertake during their developing relationship help them to internalise what they learn from their married couple presenters. *Mentoring by one married couple in their home to one engaged couple* would be an ideal towards which we should aim. This would provide the witness of married love in its natural environment of the Domestic Church.
2. *Integrate faith formation and skills education.* Marriage preparation should fully integrate faith and life skills, not just teach one, nor even both side-by-side. Marriage preparation is a process of faith formation and not just divorce prevention. It must integrate aspects of the mind, the body and the soul, especially in the understanding of the fullness of human sexuality. Implicit in this is the extent to which the mentoring couple naturally incorporate prayer, scripture and the other sacraments in their daily lives.
3. *Empower to evangelise.* It must aim to awaken the engaged couples to the nature of love; which is outgoing and expanding. Thus they are called to a vocation of loving each other intimately for the sake of others. They are called to be agents of evangelisation through how they choose to love and live.
4. *Connect the engaged to the rest of the Church.* It must reconnect them to the worshipping community of the parish for two reasons. One is so that the seeds of faith can be nurtured. The other is that in the parish they can be encouraged to expand their vision for evangelization, not only within their family but in the parish community and beyond. Thus marriage preparation should ideally be Parish-based so the course can begin to 'embrace' them into their local faith family.
5. *Relevant.* Finally, it must be provided in a way that is engaging and relevant; a critical part of any effective adult formation. Married couples have a special responsibility in this aspect.

You will note the above is not prescriptive about topics, duration, techniques or timing. These must be reflective of the specifics of the culture and local conditions. We believe however, the above should be a benchmark from which we start in designing and assessing our course offerings.

Surely what we are describing is impossible. Yes, this is true, *but only for as long that we do not make it our goal*. What we are describing is impossible today, but we propose that it should be our goal for tomorrow. Does this mean that every marriage preparation course be conducted this way?... of course not. But could most of them be this way?... again yes... *but only if we make this our goal*.

In closing, we reiterate that our point is not to be critical of the good work that is being done. Rather, to name a challenge we do not hear being discussed with the urgency it deserves; and then to face that challenge with the enthusiasm and hope that is consistent with our faith and with the energy that our God deserves.

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