

In November, 2004 the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops unanimously approved a proposal from the Committee on Marriage and Family Life that the USCCB undertake a National Pastoral Initiative on Marriage. The Initiative is a broadly-based collaborative effort to strengthen marriage as a human institution and as a sacramental reality. It will make a pastoral letter its centerpiece, emphasizing the bishops' teaching and pastoring responsibilities. It will deal with contemporary concerns about marriage from a foundation in Catholic doctrine and pastoral practice. It will draw from the experience and expertise of many, including married couples. It will address various audiences within the Catholic community, and also offer a positive message and evangelizing witness to society. It will directly produce and encourage others to produce resources that help local pastoral ministers to do more effective teaching and pastoral care.

This multi-year project involves several phases. The first (2005-2006) consists of research and consultative activities. The second (2007-2008) involves the drafting, revision, and approval of the pastoral letter. During the third phase (2008 and beyond) the Committee will work with other organizations to produce parish-based resources to improve marriage ministry.

The Committee has prepared this report on its first year (2005) activities under the Initiative in order to keep our various audiences informed and to invite ongoing feedback and suggestions.

1. Laying the Foundation: Information-gathering

The Committee has sponsored various activities to educate itself about the current state of the Catholic Church's ministry with engaged and married couples, including major issues, trends in marriage preparation, opportunities and challenges.

Bishops' statements on marriage

From 1980 to 2005, many U.S. bishops addressed different aspects of marriage through pastoral letters, articles, and speeches. Most of these focused on concerns closely related to the sacrament (annulments, cohabitation, contraception, marriage preparation, sexuality), or they discussed marriage in the larger context of family life. The Committee has prepared a summary of these statements, including their audience, purpose, and major points.

Bishops' survey

In February the Committee surveyed all bishops about issues, questions, topics, and resources they would recommend as the Committee began its work. More than 120 bishops responded, yielding a valuable collection of information and insight. When asked to list marriage-related topics in order to pastoral importance, the responding bishops ranked the following as their top ten: sacramentality, commitment, marriage education,

spirituality of marriage, marital vocation, sexuality, purposes of marriage, cultural influences, cohabitation, and natural family planning/contraception.

Diocesan marriage preparation policies

The Committee analyzed the marriage preparation policies of 119 Latin-rite dioceses. The analysis identifies common practices, significant differences, and current trends that are evolving, such as cultural adaptations, an emphasis on the total life cycle of the marriage, and liturgical rituals. It references specific diocesan policies that are especially well-developed on particular topics. It also suggests sources for additional information and explanations. The analysis will be an important source of information for the Committee, as well as a resource for dioceses as they review and revise their marriage policies.

2. Consultations

The Initiative is a highly collaborative process that involves consultation with married couples, individuals and groups involved in marriage and family ministry, theologians, educators, communications experts and others. The Committee conducted several consultations in 2005.

USCCB Committees

In April, selected USCCB Committees were asked to respond to two questions: (1) From your Committee's viewpoint, are there specific issues that you would like to see treated in a pastoral letter on marriage? (2) Is there a project that your Committee might undertake, or courage a national association to undertake, that would help strengthen marriage in society and in the Church? The Committee is following up with the responses.

Ecumenical issues

At its June meeting, the Committee invited Fr. Arthur Kennedy, director of the Bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, to discuss the ecumenical issues involved in mixed marriages.

National organizations

Committee members and staff have attended meetings of several national marriage and family organizations to discuss the Initiative and receive feedback. Organizations include the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers (NACFLM), Christian Family Movement (CFM), Worldwide Marriage Encounter, Catholic Engaged Encounter, Retrouvaille, and the Center for Ministry Development. Meetings with additional groups are planned.

Focus groups

In June the Committee invited dioceses to sponsor focus groups in several categories: newly married, middle years, and older couples; interchurch, interfaith, and remarried couples; Spanish-speaking couples; separated and divorced persons; and single young adults. More than 80 dioceses agreed to organize one or more focus groups and submit a report by the end of the year. A summary of the focus group reports will be ready for the Committee's consideration in early 2006.

Colloquium with theologians and social scientists

In collaboration with the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University, the Committee sponsored a dialogue of social scientists and theologians on the topic of "Promoting and Sustaining Marriage as a Community of Life and Love." Three theologians and three social scientists prepared papers and engaged in a lively and fruitful discussion with Committee members, advisors, and guests. The colloquium's proceedings will provide helpful background for the Committee's work and be a resource for pastoral ministers.

3. Communications

The Initiative sends an important message about the Catholic Church's commitment to support marriage at all stages. The Committee places high priority on regular communication with the bishops as well as the general public by means of reports, press releases, and postings on the website. The Committee also hopes that dioceses will use aspects of the Initiative, such as the focus groups, as an opportunity to draw media attention to how the local church supports marriage.

The Committee expects the Initiative to generate resources that will assist those involved in marriage ministry and be of interest to the broader public. The Committee will post these resources on the website as they become available. The following resources are currently on the website or will be shortly:

- Additional information about the Initiative, its background and goals
- Summary of bishops' statements on marriage, 1980-2005
- Analysis of diocesan marriage preparation policies
- Summary of the colloquium with social scientists and theologians; texts of the six papers that were discussed

4. 2006 activities

In 2006 the Committee will broaden its consultative and research activities to include:

- A consultation with several experts who bring different models and approaches to marriage preparation that, taken together, give a full picture of how this ministry is currently practiced
- A consultation with canon lawyers on factors that strengthen and weaken marriages and how to promote a better understanding of the church's teaching on annulments, divorce, and re-marriage
- In cooperation with the Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, a consultation with priests on their experiences of ministering with engaged and married couples
- In collaboration with the Doctrine Committee, a theological cross-disciplinary conversation on the sacramentality of marriage
- Additional consultations on issues that emerge from the focus groups
- In cooperation with a research organization, a national research project to produce data on Catholic marriage that will inform pastoral responses.