

THE ROLE OF CLERGY IN MARRIAGE PREPARATION

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The involvement of clergy in marriage preparation has its own particular dimension. For many couples, marriage preparation is the first time that they have had any personal contact with a priest or deacon. Many engaged couples arrive more or less un-evangelized, and they lack an understanding of the great importance of marriage in the Church and society. Couples are often unaware not only of Church teaching about marriage, but even of the core notions of the Catholic faith and the basic expectations of Catholics. The participation of the priest or deacon in marriage preparation is a key chance to evaluate and set in place remedial actions to get the faithful on track and to begin to focus them on preparation for married life, as opposed to mere wedding preparation. In addition to the role of teacher, the pastor or deacon has a chance to involve the couple in the life of the parish during the period of marriage preparation. This is particularly successful if there is an in-parish team of couples trained to mentor the engaged couples and follow up with them in the first year or so of marriage. The priest or deacon can function not only as a gatekeeper, but also as the one to connect the engaged couple with other parishioners and ministries.

The priest's or deacon's involvement in marriage preparation does not only include his presence at programs. It also entails the development of parish-based ministries to deal with all the key elements of marriage preparation. Because good marriage preparation is time-consuming, and priests and deacons are often strapped for time, good development and leadership can assure quality, while allowing the priest or deacon to stay within his time constraints. The central role of the priest or deacon is to "sell" the engaged couple on the importance, to them and to the Church, of excellent marriage preparation. He can do this along the lines of the famous shampoo commercial, "because you're worth it." He can also do so by evaluating the lived experiences of the current generation (the high divorce rate and their experiences with friends and peers), and also by focusing on the Church's desire for the couple's happiness in marriage.

I have been involved at the national level with Catholic Engaged Encounter, and at the diocesan level with Christian Marriage Formation. Both are designed to include priest presence, ideally for the entire period of preparation. Both programs have adapted to accommodate, when necessary, less priestly presence. Attention is also being given to allow for more adaptation to the presence of the deacon in place of the priest. In some formats, the offering of the Sacrament of Penance plays a role, and so the presence of the priest is more central. Regarding planning, clergy have been at the front end of designing programs (e.g., the new program in St. Louis). They have had the chance to incorporate into the framework of these programs all that they have learned about marriage, as well as the Church's theology of marriage. The effectiveness of marriage preparation programs has been difficult to evaluate due to cost and effort. Two CARA reports over the past ten years have found a generally high level of satisfaction combined with an experience that the shelf life of a good marriage preparation program is three to five years. Currently, we are moving away from the marriage preparation model where the clergy plays the central role. This is due to aging and overwhelmed priests, and also to the increased

acknowledgement of the marvelous ministry done by those who are living the sacrament of marriage daily. The role of the clergy may now focus more on helping diocesan programs, recruiting and training the couples best suited for this ministry, giving them the clerical, pastoral, and theological support they need, and being present when possible in order to continue to motivate the married couples in the ministry.

Clergy bring a significant influence to marriage preparation ministry for a number of reasons. First, they see marriage at each stage: preparation, marriage nurture, counseling, and the great problems associated with divorce and annulments. They also see the effect broken marriage has on the Church, in the loss of the formerly married, the loss of children in religious education programs, Mass, and sacraments, and the difficulties in ministering to children when they are in different homes each weekend. Clergy have a particular point of view by which they see marriage, the successes and failures, and the children of those successes and failures, up close and personal down through the generations. In response to this particular standpoint, priests and deacons must address some vital concerns. They must consider how to give engaged couples confidence that God's plan is for lifelong marriage, despite the fact that this is not often what they have seen. Priests and deacons also have a special role in helping to incorporate, in an accessible fashion, the Theology of the Body. With its potential to give our Church an upbeat and compelling language of the body, fertility, sexuality, and intimacy, it is something that clergy need to develop in all their programs, and a language we all must learn to speak. This will give engaged couples a language they never received themselves, but one which they will hopefully be able to give to their children.

Clergy must help to foster discussions concerning difficulties that may arise in marriage preparation, or later in married life, such as the effects of alcoholism, divorce, molestation, adoption, debt, baggage from previous relationships, abortion, differences in faith, second marriages, the individualism of the culture, blended families, intergenerational issues, and the inability to enter into a fully mutual relationship. If clergy can help create settings where couples can begin to face these issues before marriage, we will have truly given them something helpful. Finally, priests and deacons play a central role in the formation of seminarians. Clergy can help prepare them for marriage ministry by educating them on the centrality of marriage in parish life and by helping them to develop the skills to identify, call forth, prepare, and organize couples and groups to be involved in grass-roots and marriage related ministries. These "entrepreneurial" skills, such as being a self-starter, are not the same skills required for priests a couple of generations ago. Perhaps it is an oversimplification, but in our time, the ultimate question facing the involvement of clergy and the overall issue of marriage preparation concerns the correlation between a successful marriage and a vibrant and faithful parish life.