

THE ROLE OF MARRIED COUPLES IN MARRIAGE PREPARATION

by Winnie Honeywell

Director, Family Life Ministry, Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston

Married couples today play an important role in marriage preparation. They serve as models, witnesses, mentors, and guides for engaged or convalidating couples. In these specific capacities they offer practical examples of marital issues, and utilize their experience to pose appropriate questions for consideration. Married couples, by living the reality of marriage, are in a position to share their day to day experiences of “for ever after,” specifically in regards to the cultural myths about marriage that both married and engaged couples must face. As role models, couples offer their journey of faith. They flesh out what it means to be sacrament by sharing their daily experiences of creating an “us.” Additionally, married couples are vulnerable. When they present themselves as examples to the engaged couples, they are openly offering themselves. Through this they create a line of communication with others and encourage the engaged couples to be vulnerable as well. This is like-to-like ministry at its best.

In addition to their lived experience and ability to engage with other couples on a common level, married couples are also more approachable. Specifically, this means that they are often asked different questions than those posed to the clergy. These are questions that may have gone unasked if the couples were not present in marriage preparation. Related to this approachability aspect, married couples do not share in the sometimes problematic view of clergy as authority figures. As a result, there is a special adult-to-adult relationship that is fostered between couples. This specific nature of married couple ministry is important for engaged couples when other family support is lacking. In cases when an engaged couple’s families aren’t accessible or are unchurched, married couples may be present to support them. Of course, this does not mean that we can dismiss the value of authentic models and witnesses within families and neighborhoods. At the same time that we encourage the involvement of these vital support systems, we can also see how the utilization of married couples in marriage preparation is an additional assistance.

Another significant aspect of the involvement of married couples is their service as bridge-builders in connection to the faith. As “lay ministers,” they bring the realms of family life and parish life together and, through this, can often times introduce other couples to the faith. Regarding this role, it is important that couples receive training and experience that will help them to present Church teaching in a style that invites and evangelizes others. Finally, the work of the married couple extends beyond specific presentations and meetings. As mentors they may invite couples into marriage preparation ministry to address the important faith dimension of their vocation. They are available to follow-up with couples after the wedding. In this regard, married couples are often the people others come to if they are in trouble.

The involvement of married couples in marriage preparation is found in various types of programs. They serve as presenters and support staff for Engaged Encounter and Pre-Cana. Also, they minister through parish based programs in small groups (Unitas, Picture of Love, God’s Plan for Joy-Filled Marriage, etc.). Married couples serve an important role in teaching, promoting, and witnessing to Natural Family Planning. They also assist in giving, grading, and reviewing the FOCCUS inventory. In all of these roles, it is necessary for the formation and

training of leaders to be taken seriously. It is best to use a “farm system” method in which we do not push people to present before they are ready. Leaders cannot assume that anyone with some theology background will be ready to teach without additional training. It is important for the diocese to provide quality training for parish ministers. In addition to the considerations of providing educated and trained married couples to serve in marriage preparation, it is also good to recognize the reciprocity or “mutuality” of marriage preparation ministry. The preparation for the engaged is also marriage enrichment for the married. We are strengthening the institution of marriage through the strengthening of marriage preparation ministers, which then leads to the strengthening of marriage for future generations.

This circular process of marriage enrichment is one aspect of the influence of married couples on the evolution of marriage preparation. It has allowed for an expansion of lay ministry in both quantity and quality. It has also provided for more married couples in other ministries, such as in RCIA and liturgical ministry. Married couples have been a witness to engaged couples of the “couple ministry” called for in the “Decree on the Apostolate to the Laity,” and “Familiaris Consortio.” Married couples have also influenced the style of marriage preparation. Their experience brings new formats and methods based on ever-adapting knowledge systems. Younger couples in particular are better at reflecting the needs of their engaged peers, while older couples offer more timeless wisdom. Finally, changes in marriage preparation reflect changes in the culture at large.

I have often reflected on the differences in marriage preparation between myself (married in 1959) and my son, who is twenty years younger and was married thirty years later in 1989. As a young married person I was surrounded by married couples, both peers and older couples, who were significant models within my family and in the neighborhood. Later on, Marriage Encounter and other movements met the need for marital support. When I look to my son’s experience and marriage today in general, it seems that there is a greater need for relational support. No longer as present in the family and neighborhood, the Church must now intentionally create such communal support. In doing so, married couples are the Church’s greatest resource because they are the experts!

In our constant efforts to include and develop the involvement of married couples in marriage preparation and ministry, I see, first, a great need and challenge to pass on the Church’s vision and teaching on marriage to younger generations. Second, I believe that this should be done through adequate training and education, and by finding appropriate roles for all interested married couples in ministering to engaged couples. While not all couples are perfect, I do not think we can have ministry standards that screen out imperfect couples or struggling believers. Rather, we must recognize that all married couples have particular experiences of having kept their marriages together. They are all credible examples of sacrificial love. Since I do not know anyone who wants to return to “just let Father do it all,” the challenge of carefully training and properly teaching couples, while at the same time incorporating all those who wish to be involved in ministry, is one we must meet for the sake of engaged and married couples, and the Church as a whole.

