
**REQUIRING A FULL COURSE OF NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING INSTRUCTION IN
MARRIAGE PREPARATION**

A Report

Natural Family Planning Program
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
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Introduction

The Church is concerned about preparing couples for marriage. Historically, the format, content and length of these marriage preparation efforts have varied widely. The intent of these programs, regardless of their diversity, is to evangelize and form the faithful on the Sacrament of Marriage as well as gift couples with sound theological, spiritual, practical, and interpersonal skills for marriage.

With regard to the Church's teachings on conjugal love and responsible parenthood and the methods of Natural Family Planning (NFP), the annual national *Diocesan NFP Program Profile* survey reveals a range of formats and time devoted to NFP education in diocesan marriage preparation programs. For the past two decades, the majority of dioceses have included at least some basic information about NFP (an average of 30-45 minutes). About a quarter of all dioceses require an introduction to NFP in their marriage preparation programs. In recent years, the *Profile* report has shown that a handful of dioceses have taken the additional step of requiring a full course of NFP instruction as part of their marriage preparation efforts. To date, a full course of NFP instruction as part of marriage preparation is required by the dioceses of Amarillo, Colorado Springs, Denver, Fargo, Laredo, Phoenix, and St. Augustine. Many diocesan bishops, priests, Family Life and NFP staff have expressed an interest in how these dioceses have implemented and are experiencing the requirement. To answer this question, six of the dioceses were able to participate in a survey. They are: Amarillo, Colorado Springs, Denver, Fargo, Phoenix and St. Augustine. We are grateful for their participation. Although the Diocese of Laredo was not able to take part in the survey, readers may feel free to contact chancellor, Mrs. Lucy R. Cardenas, 1-956-727-2140.

Gratitude is extended to Rev. Robert Cannon, M.Th., M.A., J.C.L. and Mrs. Janet Kistler, NFP National Advisory Board, for assisting in the development of this report. It is hoped that this information will aid diocesan bishops and their staffs as they consider implementing such a requirement in their dioceses.

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Background

The specific question of requiring a full course of Natural Family Planning (NFP) instruction prior to marriage has been the subject of much discussion within the Church in the United States since the 1980s. Bishops, priests and diocesan marriage and family life/NFP communities have been split over the question of the ultimate effectiveness and wisdom of universally mandating such a requirement versus having NFP instruction readily available for couples to participate voluntarily. Some worry that requiring engaged couples to attend an NFP course will foster a hostile attitude, certainly not the kind of openness needed for this sensitive and delicate form of instruction. Others involved in NFP and marriage preparation efforts insist that the Church must do all that it can to educate about Church teachings on conjugal love and responsible parenthood as well as offer a viable means to live those teachings. They ask, “If not us, who will speak the truth about the true meaning of life and love?” Adding urgency to this concern is the fact that the medical community is lacking in understanding of the science and methodology of NFP and is predisposed to treating human fertility as a pathology with few ethical constraints. Couples are therefore not likely to receive NFP information from their healthcare providers.

In addition, there is the canonical question as to whether such a prenuptial requirement applied rigidly by pastors is canonically supportable, if the requirement acts as an impediment to couples from exercising their natural right to marry (see Appendix for a deeper reflection on this question). There is no doubt that bishops and pastors are obligated to ensure that couples are carefully prepared for marriage.¹ But, if a bishop decided to include a full course of NFP instruction as part of the overall marriage preparation process, a reasonable policy should be in place to safe-guard a couple’s natural right to marry.

Finally, there are also programming challenges that need to be considered when reflecting on whether or not to require NFP instruction as a staple of marriage preparation in the local Church. Some of those pastoral challenges are: assessing the level of knowledge about NFP and Church teachings which support its use in marriage among clergy and lay ecclesial ministers engaged in marriage preparation; an adequate number of certified NFP teachers, including bi-lingual teachers servicing local needs; remoteness of some parishes; pros and cons about the effectiveness of NFP home study (via post or the Internet); and/or financial constraints of both diocesan NFP programs and the clients themselves. All of these very real issues were faced by the dioceses that have established NFP as a requirement for couples preparing for marriage. In the following report, an attempt was made to both summarize the common experiences of these dioceses as well as allow their NFP coordinators to directly speak about their programming.

¹ CIC/83, Can. 1063, “Pastors of souls are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful the assistance by which the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection.”

**A STRATEGY FOR ESTABLISHING A DIOCESAN REQUIREMENT OF
A FULL COURSE OF NFP INSTRUCTION FOR THE ENGAGED**

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

A common and useful practice among diocesan staff before implementing a policy requiring a full course of NFP instruction for engaged couples, was to form a diocesan team of knowledgeable or at least amenable clergy and laity in order to conduct a comprehensive feasibility study.² These and similar questions were typically considered:

- What is our goal? (e.g., What do we want to accomplish? What is the end result?)
- What is the bishop's role and how will he be involved in the implementation and ongoing support of the effort?
- What are the limiting factors in the diocese that could impede implementation?
- Before a policy is created, should a process of consultation be undertaken with the clergy, lay marriage ministers, NFP teachers?
- Does the diocese have a Natural Family Planning Coordinator who can oversee the effort?

If the answer to the above question is "No," who will oversee the effort?

- How many couples are expected to take the NFP course annually?
- Are there enough teachers to train couples?
- If the above answer is "No,"

What strategy will be created to recruit and train new teachers?

Is it possible to draw upon NFP teachers from a neighboring diocese to help?

Should home study programs (both via post and Internet) be used to fulfill the requirement?

- Are teachers needed in languages other than English?
- What is the total cost in dollars and personnel for implementation, initially and annually?
- Where will the funding for programmatic and administrative support come from?
- How will the clergy and laity be educated in the new policy?
- Will an introduction to NFP continue to be included in the existing marriage preparation programs?
- How often will classes be offered and where will they be held?

² See CIC/83, Can. 1064, "It is for the local ordinary to take care that such assistance is organized fittingly, after he has heard men and women proven by experience and expertise if it seems opportune."

- Are there exceptions to the policy?

If the answer to the above question is “Yes,” what are the reasons and who will grant exceptions?

- What is a reasonable time line to implement the requirement?
- Will the policy be evaluated?

If the answer to the above question is “Yes,” how will successful implementation of the process be measured – what will be the “marks” of success?

If the answer to the above is “Yes,” will couples who have completed the instruction be surveyed?

If the answer to the above is “Yes,” will clergy, marriage ministers, and NFP teachers be surveyed?

COLLABORATION AND EDUCATION – THE KEYS TO IMPLEMENTATION

Prior to the establishment of a requirement for engaged couples to attend a full course of instruction in NFP, it is essential to lay a comprehensive, theological, and pastoral foundation, while simultaneously encouraging the support of those associated with marriage preparation; e.g., presbyteral council, clergy, tribunal and marriage/family life staffs. In addition, the diocesan Catholic laity should be informed about the proposed changes in the marriage preparation policy. All of the dioceses surveyed used a variety of formats to begin this process; e.g., surveys of clergy, gatherings or meetings of clergy, deanery meetings, parish information nights, diocesan newspaper, bulletin announcements, a pastoral letter from the bishop in the diocesan newspaper and/or read to the faithful at Sunday Masses.

NFP is best presented when it is offered as an aspect of evangelization and as an opportunity to form conscience correctly according to Church teaching on human sexuality, marriage, conjugal love and responsible parenthood.³ Done well, it challenges and encourages couples to live chastely both before and after marriage. In this way, NFP instruction forms a necessary and beautiful part of the proximate preparation for marriage.

EXAMPLES OF IMPLEMENTATION

Each diocese surveyed had similar but varied approaches to launching their policy of requiring a full course of NFP instruction for couples entering marriage. The involvement and visibility of the diocesan bishop was absolutely critical for both the successful implementation and continuing success of the NFP program in each of the dioceses.

Diocese of Amarillo: The diocesan NFP coordinator began by having teachers trained and offered presentations at clergy meetings on the theology and science of NFP. Priests were asked to send couples to NFP classes voluntarily for about 1 year. In the words of the diocesan NFP coordinator, “the response was tepid.” After reviewing the level of voluntary participation of couples, Bishop John Yanta decided to require the classes. There have been 8 classes per year in the 4 deaneries in both English and Spanish.

³ See, *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*. Pontifical Council for the Family, Rome: 1996.

The diocesan NFP coordinator reported that at first, the priests were somewhat resistant due to perceiving the requirement as an additional burden to themselves and also because they anticipated facing resentment from couples. However, when it was made clear that the teachers handled all the scheduling and teaching, and that the priests had only to inform the couples of the requirement, their reluctance dropped dramatically. In addition, there has been much less resistance from the couples than anticipated.

All couples are required to take all of the classroom hours of a recognized methodology. Charting is not required, since not all couples will forego contraception but it is encouraged and monitored. The requirement was implemented July 25, 2006.

Diocese of Colorado Springs: An Ad Hoc committee was created by Bishop Michael Sheridan. This committee met monthly for six months and the members included the Bishop, two priests, one deacon and two married couples involved in marriage preparation, including the Directors of the Office of Marriage and Family Life. A draft of the new norms was written by the Ad Hoc committee. The committee used several diocesan policies from other dioceses as models, primarily the Archdiocese of Denver. The new norms were presented to the clergy and at each region/deanery meetings. Every priest and deacon had the opportunity to ask questions and make suggestions. An invitation was sent to individual parish staff for comments and suggestions. All suggestions and questions were reviewed by the Office of Marriage and Family Life. If requested, staff members from the Office of Marriage and Family Life visited individual parishes to discuss the new norms. The new norms were approved unanimously during a clergy meeting in 2006.

As far as practical realities permit, a course of NFP instruction is a regular part of proximate marriage preparation. The bishop allows pastors to use their pastoral discretion for exemptions on a case by case basis.

Archdiocese of Denver: The archdiocesan norms, *What God Has Joined*, were written by the Office of Marriage and Family Life in conjunction with the office of Archbishop Charles Chaput. It includes a discussion of NFP. The norms were inspired and based on the document *Preparation for the Sacraments of Marriage* by the Pontifical Council for the Family. In addition, in his pastoral letter, *Of Human Life*, Archbishop Chaput directed the archdiocese to require adequate instruction in NFP as part of all marriage preparation programs. During the formulation of the norms, the Presbyteral Council was engaged in the process. Throughout the process, the tribunal staff provided key insights and reviewed proposed changes to the norms. The documents were bound as one resource and promulgated with a letter from the Archbishop to all priests and deacons

Couples are required to complete a full course of NFP instruction prior to the wedding. In order to learn NFP, it takes several months of tracking a woman's monthly cycle. The intent is to allow time for a couple to grow in their appreciation of NFP, rather than simply to understand the Church's reasoning for encouraging NFP. The time needed for this is usually between three and six months. Exceptions are allowed at the discretion of the priest or deacon working with the couple.

Diocese of Fargo: The Diocese of Fargo had an extensive approach to implementation. Before the Diocese of Fargo implemented its policy, from 2003 until its implementation in September 2005, clergy and laity were prepared for the change in diocesan policy through workshops for clergy, married couples, and college students. Articles about fertility appreciation were featured in the diocesan newspaper. Mailings were sent to priests and NFP teachers with particular emphasis on National NFP Awareness Week. After this thorough educational effort, Bishop Samuel Aquila set the stage for introducing the new policy through a *Fertility Appreciation Seminar* held for all priests and deacons. During the seminar, Bishop Aquila introduced the policy. The Fargo Diocesan NFP Coordinator explained the procedural points of the policy. Fr. Richard Hogan (from NFP Outreach) provided teaching on the *Theology of the Body*. Representatives from the Couple to Couple League explained the practice of the Sympto-Thermal Method of NFP. A second

day (optional) included a NaPro Technology medical conference with Dr. Thomas Hilgers. At deanery meetings throughout the diocese, teachers and clergy had an opportunity to get to know each other and ask questions. From the outset, Bishop Aquila was and continues to be actively involved in the education and formation of priests and deacons regarding Natural Family Planning and the *Theology of the Body*.

All couples preparing for marriage receive an introduction to the Church's teaching on conjugal love, modeled on the *Theology of the Body*. Couples are required to attend a full course of instruction in a method of NFP. Special consideration is given to couples who are entering a second marriage. But if they are within child-bearing years, it is expected they will attend a full series of instruction. Couples who are beyond child-bearing years or where one or both have been sterilized are to receive instruction in the *Theology of the Body*.

Diocese of Phoenix: Bishop Thomas Olmsted expressed his goals for NFP within a month of being installed as Bishop of Phoenix. They included: education and formation of priests on NFP and *Theology of the Body*; diocesan acceptance of all recognized and Church approved methods of NFP; commitment to increasing the number of trained and certified NFP teachers; meeting with Catholic OB/GYN physicians to discuss NFP and the moral practice of reproductive medicine; and establishment of an NFP representative in every parish.

Bishop Olmsted took responsibility for the education of priests, deacons, lay leaders and the laity. He began with a 5-part series in the diocesan newspaper which concluded with his plan to require NFP classes of all engaged couples in the diocese. Bishop taught the priests during in-service days, retreats and through the diocesan education department. He required all deacons to take a *Theology of the Body* class. He established a *Theology of the Body* department under the leadership of Katrina Zeno, who is available for workshops to parishes, youth groups, and adult education, etc. Bishop Olmsted has met with physicians. Currently there are three NFP-only OB/GYN physicians in the dioceses as well as four supportive physicians in Family Medicine and others in a variety of medical specialties. Recruitment of parish NFP resource couples has already begun. Some pastors have begun to require the full series of classes for couples marrying in their parishes. This has created an opportunity for study. After about 2 years of this practice, the parishes have received few complaints. The time line for full implementation of the policy was approximately six years with recruitment and training of teachers perceived as the biggest challenge.

To facilitate and to coordinate its own educational efforts, the Diocese of Phoenix established a new diocesan office, the *John Paul II Resource Center for Theology of the Body and Culture*. This department provides workshops and education for parishes, youth groups, and adult education. The Diocese of Phoenix also established an NFP Center over thirty years ago. The Phoenix Natural Family Planning Center is an independent 501(c) (3) non-profit corporation established to meet the needs of the Diocese of Phoenix but operating independently of the diocesan structure. In July of this year, the well-established work of the Phoenix Natural Family Planning Center was incorporated into the diocese, and their employees were hired to form the Diocese of Phoenix Office of Natural Family Planning.

Presently the only diocesan requirement is an introduction to NFP, provided by a certified NFP teacher. It is anticipated that the full course of instruction will be implemented in approximately 2 years, allowing time to recruit and train new teachers.

Diocese of St. Augustine: In March 2006, the Diocesan Pastoral Council approved a motion to survey priests and deacons on the matter of implementing a full course of instruction in NFP as a requirement for marriage preparation. The results of the survey indicated a split between those clergy who wanted the requirement, those who did not want the requirement, and those who were undecided. In January 2007, the Presbyteral Council was asked for approval of the formation of an ad-hoc-committee to study the issue in greater depth. Approval was given and the ad-hoc-committee was comprised of three priests who

were undecided, one deacon in favor of the policy and one opposed, an NFP teacher at whose parish the proposed policy had been piloted, and the Family Life director/NFP coordinator who served in a non-voting, advisory capacity. The rationale for the choice of members of the ad-hoc-committee was that they would proceed cautiously. After the ad-hoc-committee studied the matter, it was decided that the full course of NFP requirement was desirable. Bishop Victor Galeone then proceeded with plans to develop and implement the requirement.

The NFP education requirement for marriage preparation became effective for all marriages scheduled after January 1, 2008, that is, whose prenuptial papers were not filled out until after that date. Only couples of childbearing age are required to take the NFP course. It is required only of those couples who are *preparing* for marriage in the Diocese of St. Augustine. It is not required of couples from *another diocese* who will be married in the Diocese of St. Augustine, but who are doing their marriage preparation in their home diocese. By the same token, it *is required* of a couple to be married in another diocese, but doing their marriage preparation in the Diocese of St. Augustine. Should there be a special circumstance, such as the prior sterilization of one of the engaged, or should a couple simply refuse to participate, the priest or deacon preparing the couple for marriage must inform the chancellor that circumstances preclude completion of the requirement. The circumstances need not be specified. Couples may also fulfill this requirement by taking their NFP course online. The online version is not the preferred option, but it may be used in cases of necessity. All couples required to take the course must give the priest or deacon witnessing their wedding a certificate of having successfully completed the course. Scholarships are available for those couples experiencing difficulty in paying the modest fee for materials.

NFP PROGRAM RESOURCES

As mentioned previously, successful NFP programs are dependent upon each bishop being vested in their success; i.e., direct personal involvement, funding, and personnel.

Personnel: The majority of dioceses in the U.S.A. place NFP ministry in the Office of Marriage and Family Life. Most dioceses have a person identified as the diocesan NFP coordinator. Typically, that person is often responsible for a variety of ministries in addition to NFP. In the six surveyed dioceses, the dioceses of Fargo and Amarillo appointed one person as the NFP Coordinator exclusively. There were also a couple of creative structures. The Archdiocese of Denver and the Diocese of St. Augustine treat each NFP provider as an independent apostolate with reporting responsibilities to the Director of Marriage and Family Life. Prior to July 2008, the Diocese of Phoenix established an NFP center independent of the diocesan structure. Today it is incorporated as part of the diocesan structure.

An effective NFP program requires sufficient teachers. This is a concern in almost every diocese in the country. Most of the dioceses in the survey developed a plan to recruit and train additional teachers. For example, Amarillo recruited deacons and their wives. Denver developed a plan with the local chapter of the Couple to Couple League to recruit 10 new teaching couples per year over a 5 year span. All avenues of media were incorporated in the dioceses to raise awareness about NFP and provide contact information regarding classes and teacher training; e.g., parish information nights, articles on NFP in the diocesan newspaper. NFP instructors attempted to identify potential teachers from couples attending NFP classes. In one diocese, the NFP Coordinator visited with priests in areas of the dioceses where teachers were needed in order to identify local couples who could be invited to become NFP teachers.

Funding: The annual diocesan budgets for NFP program efforts vary widely, from a low of \$2,000.00 to a high of \$113,000.00, depending on the individual diocesan approach to its NFP program; e.g., course fees, stipends to teachers, course materials, and staffing. The NFP course fee is separate from any diocesan marriage preparation program fees. The NFP tuition fees range from \$30.00 to \$280.00. Fees are set by the diocese, independent NFP teacher, and/or national NFP provider.

INTERNET AND HOME STUDY INSTRUCTION

The Archdiocese of Denver and the Dioceses of Colorado Springs and St. Augustine offer the option of a home study course for engaged couples to fulfill the NFP education requirement. Many national providers offer home study (either via post or Internet). For further information see, <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/homestudy.shtml>. In the dioceses that make use of NFP home study, couples must provide a certificate of online completion of the course as part of their marriage preparation.

The reason given for rejecting NFP home study among the other dioceses was the lack of personal contact which, in this area of life, many believe plays a significant role in evangelization.⁴

PROGRAM EVALUATION

The Diocese of Colorado Springs and the Archdiocese of Denver are developing evaluation tools. The Diocese of Phoenix uses a client evaluation form at the end of both the required NFP introduction and the full series of classes. The Diocese of Fargo uses a comprehensive questionnaire measuring the overall effectiveness of their marriage preparation programs, which includes questions about NFP.

Amarillo is considering the development of evaluation instruments for the NFP courses. Their experience with two other survey instruments that they use to evaluate NFP presentations in Engaged Encounter has already provided important information. The surveys are administered before and after the Engaged Encounter NFP presentations. One survey is administered prior to the NFP presentation by first separating the couples to ensure individual, non-biased responses (this information is also used to gain a sense of a couples' agreement on attitudes about family planning). A central question asks whether the couple would be more likely to use NFP after hearing the presentation. Results of the "after" survey suggest that an average of 50% would be more likely to use NFP.

From the limited anecdotal information of the surveyed dioceses, the majority of couples indicate that they enjoy the NFP classes. Some consider the NFP course of great value. Occasionally, a complaint is received about the instruction being required. None of the dioceses conducted a follow-up inquiry to determine whether couples are practicing an NFP method in their marriages after the course completion.

⁴ It should be noted that in those dioceses where few or no NFP teachers reside and home study is the only educational option, marriage preparation teams, deacons and priests should be prepared to witness to the truth of Church teachings on conjugal love and responsible parenthood. Besides teachers, NFP promoters can therefore play a significant role in this ministry.

SUMMARY

All of the dioceses that participated in this survey had some common elements, including:

- The direct and visible involvement of the local bishop
- A spirit of collaboration across the diocese
- Broad based educational efforts
- A desire to help couples live out the vocation of marriage and responsible parenthood according to Church teaching
- A step by step process for introducing the requirement as part of marriage preparation
- The commitment of sufficient diocesan resources to support the requirement
- Pastoral discretion and understanding of unique circumstances that would exempt couples from the requirement

In conclusion, it is hoped that the results of this limited survey further ongoing diocesan NFP efforts. The *Natural Family Program* of the *Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth* is privileged to assist your NFP diocesan programs. For further assistance, please contact Theresa Notare at nfp@uscgb.org; 1-202-541-3240.

APPENDIX

Canonical Reflection

Requiring a Full Course of Natural Family Planning as a Precondition for the Celebration of Marriage in the Catholic Church

Rev. Robert R. Cannon, M.Th., M.A., J.C.L.

Question

Can a course in a method of Natural Family Planning (NFP) be required as a precondition for the celebration of marriage in the Catholic Church?

Response

There is some confusion and genuine tension about what can be required of couples preparing for the celebration of marriage in the Catholic Church. The pastoral care for those preparing for marriage is the responsibility of the local bishop and his pastors. Each bishop is to ensure that marriage preparation efforts are coordinated and well planned.⁵ Without question, a bishop can make NFP a component of marriage preparation.⁶ Strictly speaking however, a bishop cannot make NFP a *precondition* for the celebration of marriage in the Catholic Church.⁷ It is beyond his competence.⁸ The specific requirements for marriage are limited by divine, natural, and universal ecclesiastical law.

Canonical Background

Those who develop programs for the engaged in the Church, both ordained and lay, have a framework in Canon Law to shape their efforts. Marriage is an original blessing of God to His creation not lost through original sin. Couples, therefore, have a natural right to enter into marriage. If a couple is free to enter into marriage and no diriment impediment exists, they cannot be prevented from exercising their natural right to marry. Thus, all persons who are not prohibited by Divine or universal ecclesiastical law can contract marriage.⁹ Regarding the requisite knowledge for marriage, the law of the Church presumes that individuals have sufficient knowledge¹⁰ about the nature of marriage after puberty¹¹ to enter into marriage validly.

In keeping with Can. 1067, the USCCB issued complementary norms dated October 20, 2000 for marriage in the United States. The first section of the complementary norms requires marriage preparation.

⁵ CIC/83 Can. 1064, "It is for the local ordinary to take care that such assistance is organized fittingly, after he has also heard men and women proven by experience and expertise if it seems opportune."

⁶ CIC/83, Can. 1063, "Pastors of souls are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful the assistance by which the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection." Can. 843, §2, "Pastors of souls and other members of the Christian faithful, according to their respective ecclesiastical function, have the duty to take care that those who seek the sacraments are prepared to receive them by proper evangelization and catechetical instruction, attentive to the norms issued by competent authority."

⁷ Cf., CIC/83, Can. 843, §1, "Sacred ministers cannot deny the sacraments to those who seek them at appropriate times, are properly disposed, and are not prohibited by law from requiring them."

⁸ CIC/83, Can. 838, §4, "Within the limits of his competence, it pertains to the diocesan bishop in the Church entrusted to him to issue liturgical norms, which bind everyone."

⁹ "Omnes possunt matrimonium contrahere, qui iure non prohibentur." (CIC/83, Can. 1058).

¹⁰ "Ut consensus matrimonialis haberi possit, necesse est ut contrahentes saltem non ignorent matrimonium esse consortium permanens inter virum et mulierem ordinatum ad prolem, cooperatione aliqua sexuali, procreandam." (CIC/83, Can. 1096, §1).

¹¹ "Haec ignorantia post pubertatem non praesumitur." (CIC/83, Can. 1096, §2).

But the norm does not specify the content of the “appropriate education and pastoral preparation.”¹² It is left up to each diocesan bishop to develop local policies or norms for marriage preparation under such headings as *The Pastoral Care to the Engaged*, *Diocesan Marriage Preparation Guidelines*, or *Diocesan Marriage Preparation Policies*.¹³

The Pastoral Challenge

As the Second Vatican Council Fathers noted in *Gaudium et spes*, much of the Western world is faced with the plague of divorce.¹⁴ John Paul II noted that “More than ever necessary in our time is preparation of young people for marriage and family life.”¹⁵ Given the unprecedented divorce rates of the last fifty years, the challenge for bishops and pastors has been to enhance where possible the minimal requirements of the law without impeding the exercise of a couple’s natural right to marry.

The Catholic Church has been at the forefront of efforts to prepare couples for marriage. Programs and practices, such as marital readiness inventories, extended periods of engagement for marriage preparation, retreat weekends, Pre Cana days, counseling, and Evenings for the Engaged, are all elements of genuine pastoral “assistance” to the engaged.

The CIC/83 states very clearly, pastors of souls are required to offer assistance to couples preparing for marriage.¹⁶ The “offer” of assistance, however construed or well intentioned, cannot be turned into rigid requirements for marriage; e.g., “In this diocese/parish, everyone has to take a full course in NFP and attend an Engaged Encounter Weekend to get married. No exceptions.” Ideally, engaged couples will want to make use of all of the gifts of wisdom and experience the Church offers them before marriage, especially NFP.

The question of whether or not to mandate NFP is merely the tip of the iceberg of a much larger question: How can the Church be more effective in fulfilling its mission of preparing people for marriage and family life, especially people who have been immersed in a contraceptive and hedonistic culture? Dioceses must look at all of the opportunities available to the Church to form the faithful in a Christocentric vision of marriage and family; e.g., religious education, youth formation, family life, and education in human sexuality, etc.¹⁷ Only when couples understand this broader context of the spousal vocation will they have the knowledge, wisdom, and inspiration to answer the “call to celebrate God’s vision of human sexuality.”¹⁸

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¹² Cf., 2002 USCCB Complementary Norms for CIC/83, Can. 1067 for the Latin Rite dioceses of the United States, No. 1, “The couple should receive appropriate education and pastoral preparation through participation in a marriage preparation program approved by the diocesan Bishop.”

¹³ The National Family Planning Program, USCCB, 2007 *Profile* found that ninety-eight percent of dioceses in the U.S. have marriage preparation guidelines.

¹⁴ *Gaudium et spes*, 47.

¹⁵ *Familiaris consortio*, 66.

¹⁶ Cf., CIC/83 Can. 1063. Also, Can. 843, §2.

¹⁷ Cf., Gavin, Fintan, “Pastoral Care in Marriage Preparation (Can. 1063). History, Analysis of the Norm and Its Implementation by Some Particular Churches.” (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2004).

¹⁸ USCCB Committee for Pro-Life Activities, *Human Sexuality from God’s Perspective*, (Washington, DC: Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, July 25, 1993).