Marriage Preparation Consultation
February 9, 2006

INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS
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Of all the ministries which the Catholic Church offers to and with those who are married or about to be married, marriage preparation (or what was customarily called Pre-Cana) is clearly the most extensive, the most systematic, the most developed and varied, the best researched and funded, and the most successful in achieving measurable outcomes. It is also the marriage ministry with the most history – having begun over 60 years ago with the Cana Movement in Chicago. We can be – and we are - proud of all this!

Almost 12 years ago several sources of energy began to coalesce into what has come to be called the "marriage movement" in the United States. This movement, which has grown stronger in recent years, first began to recognize, research, and advocate for the value of marriage education at all stages – and particularly pre-marital education – as an effective way to build and maintain stronger, healthier marriages. Many people associated with this movement are not convinced that therapy or, much less, making divorce easier are the best ways for couples to deal with unhappiness in marriage. Much of marital dissatisfaction and failure comes from attitudes and behaviors that are learned. And, to the extent that they're learned, they can be un-learned or replaced with new learning that is more likely to help couples build better marriages.

Marriage preparation is an excellent example of the broader phenomenon of marriage education that now seems to have achieved status in many sectors of our culture besides the religious one. This is good news for our society and for our churches,

particularly the Catholic Church inasmuch as we have quickly become a seasoned expert and leader in pre-marital education.

One of the benchmarks of our leadership in the field occurred ten years ago when this Committee encouraged Creighton University to undertake the first-ever national study of the effectiveness of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church. This study was a turning point in many ways. Within the Catholic community it helped us to measure what impact our programs are having on engaged couples and, in many cases, to re-evaluate and revise certain aspects of those programs. It gave us a national set of standards, so to speak. Within the larger marriage movement, our research triggered similar studies that expanded the body of knowledge and encouraged other institutions to support pre-marital education. For example, some states passed laws allowing a couple to get their marriage license at a discounted fee if they had taken a pre-marital course at a church, or school, or similar institution.

The Creighton study published a short and simple version of its findings. There are ten:

(1) Marriage preparation in the Catholic Church is rated as a valuable experience by a vast majority of those who participate in it. Couples in the earliest years of marriage value it most.

(2) Marriage preparation has a restricted shelf life. Its perceived value declines significantly over time.

(3) The mandatory nature of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church does not get in the way of couples valuing it highly.

(4) Marriage preparation is most valuable when presented by a team, especially a team of clergy and lay leaders. The total absence of clergy from the process reduces the value found in it.

(5) The intensity of marriage preparation impacts on its evaluation. Too few sessions limit value, and so do too many.

(6) Marriage preparation is rated most helpful when it deals with the 5 C's: communication, commitment, conflict resolution, children, and church. A sixth C, career, and especially dual careers, needs to be presented better.

(7) Prior formal high school and adult religious education impact positively on subsequent marriage preparation.

(8) Attitudes toward marriage preparation are colored by a sense of belonging to the Church and participation in church practice.

(9) Inter-church couples come to marriage preparation with lower levels of church involvement and lower expectations of marriage preparation. They are most likely to drift from church belonging and practice.

(10) Couples who expect more from marriage preparation get more out of it. Many report that they get even more than they expect.

(*Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church: Getting It Right.* Report of a Study on the Value of Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church for Couples Married One through Eight Years. Center for Marriage and Family, Creighton University, 1995)

The Creighton study developed its findings from a randomly selected number of couples who had experienced a Catholic marriage preparation program, which also included the FOCCUS inventory. It was a study about the perceived value of these

programs to the couples themselves who were, at the time of the study, married from one through eight years. The study could not show an absolute connection between having marriage preparation and having a successful and satisfying marriage because it lacked a control group. However, subsequent research done by other groups has shown a closer link between pre-marital education and marital success. For example, a national study published last year concluded that couples who had pre-marital counseling were 50% more likely to report marital success than those who did not. Marital success is a combination of having an intact marriage and having a high level of quality and satisfaction in it.

So, we know that marriage preparation can achieve results, but only if it's *good quality* marriage preparation. And, with the help of the Creighton study, we also know something about the aspects or dimensions of good marriage preparation. And finally, with the benefit of continuing experience, we also know some of the areas in which this ministry still needs to develop – especially in response to new pastoral needs and conditions.

Today's consultation with our group of ministry leaders and experts is meant to be a conversation about these two points: first, what are the key dimensions of marriage preparation as we currently practice it and why are they important; second, what are the "growing edges" or questions that need to be addressed in each of these dimensions in order to assure us of marriage preparation that will continue to be faithful to its goals and fruitful for couples setting out on their married life and Christian vocation.