

## **Consultation on Sustaining and Enriching Marriage**

### **The Parish Community and Marriage Enrichment**

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Marriage enrichment – the strengthening and sustaining of the vocation of marriage throughout the life cycle – is both a challenge and an opportunity for the Church. We believe it is also a responsibility for parish ministers. While many dioceses and parishes have very well-developed and comprehensive marriage preparation processes, couples are often left on their own to seek and find ways to nurture and sustain their marriage. It is the parish where couples gather Sunday after Sunday...celebrating the sacraments...where couples often participate in marriage preparation and experience a connection with a mentor couple...where couples often turn to pastors and pastoral ministers if they are experiencing difficulty in their family life.

When a parish is intentionally committed to offering marriage enhancement opportunities, couples can depend upon their Church for support, encouragement, education and an experience of sacredness. Parishes have a unique opportunity to strengthen the bond not only between the couple – but also between the couple and the community. For couples who are formed in the Sacrament of Marriage in the parish, there is a natural progression from marriage preparation to marriage enrichment. Their sponsor couples, who prepared them, ideally stay in contact with them – friendships are formed and relationships develop. Through *Unitas, God's Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage, For Better & Forever*, etc., mentor couples, modeling for the engaged a sacramental marriage, are often the people couples turn to if they find themselves struggling in their own marriage. They frequently become extended family.

Parishes also have distinct opportunities to incorporate marriage education in other programs where couples and families are already active. Offering family-centered sacramental preparation processes, for example, provides occasions for support and enrichment. In addition to sacramental theology, Baptism formation can also include discussion and resources dealing with the stress on a marriage that often comes with a new baby. Parents, who attend First Reconciliation and Eucharist preparation sessions with their children, can be reminded of the importance of forgiveness in the family, the sacredness of family meals, and the value of spending time together. Renew Groups, Why Catholic? and scripture study groups are structures that can be encouraged for couple participation.

As with any ministry – there are strengths and limitations. Perhaps the greatest strength is that parish marriage enhancement can impact the couple on a regular basis and with an intentional Church connection. Through various creative methodologies, married couples can hear a homily which encourages marriage, pray a Prayer of the Faithful for married couples, witness a rite for couples preparing for marriage, read an article in the bulletin regarding their Sacrament, hear a verbal announcement about an upcoming marriage enrichment evening, view a selection of marriage education resources and experience community as it is lived in and through married couples....all on any given Sunday!

Gathering of busy couples is certainly one of the challenges. Persistence, creativity and flexibility are important factors as events are planned. Child care is a must – if we want couples to participate, we must make it as convenient as possible for them. For parishes that have no designated Marriage and/or Family Minister, the lack of awareness often prevents such events from being offered. Budget limitations can also preclude these offerings. The Pastor plays a key role in the success of ministry with marrieds. He must be one who will support the efforts and be willing to include ministry with marrieds in the budget. His encouragement for couples is essential and his presence at such events is a plus.

Couples who experience a parish which supports, enriches and encourages them as they *become* married are empowered to share that love with their family, and their community. Very often, as couples are mentored in life-giving relationships, they, in turn, become mentors and share their Sacrament, their love, with others. Mentoring and enrichment opportunities give married couples the skills and strength to journey through the dyings and risings as well as to celebrate the joys together.

Parish Marriage Ministry has evolved in response to the contemporary needs of married couples and in light of new communications technology. As we consider the hectic schedules and many demands on couples today, it is important to offer a variety of methods of education and enhancement for couples. Non-gathering ways of ministering have become even more important – not to replace bringing couples together – but to augment. Parish website articles, bulletin and newsletter articles, e-mail news articles, such as Susan Vogt’s weekly *Marriage Moments*, are ways to support and educate. The important factor is that we recognize the crucial need and offer opportunities that can positively impact marriages.

Perhaps by looking through the lens of a “Marriage Friendly Parish,” parish ministers can become conscious and responsive in sustaining and enriching marriages through the life cycle. This ministry will not happen without intentional and committed effort, but the message of “Marriage is important in this place.” will speak loudly and clearly. Couples will be encouraged to stay committed to their commitment.

**Recommendations for parishes to strengthen the Church's ministry of marriage enrichment:**

Allocate necessary funds to support marriage ministry

Celebrate blessing rites for engaged and married couples during liturgy

Include intentions for engaged and married couples in the Prayers of the Faithful

Sponsor Marriage Enrichment evenings, afternoons, retreats, candlelight dinners, *10 Great Dates* Programs [David and Claudia Arp]

Encourage Diocesan enrichment events; participate as a parish – traveling together to such events as Jim Healey's "*When the Cake is Gone...*" large group events

Host marriage anniversary celebrations

Offer enrichment opportunities for mentor couples, with current sociological findings

Schedule book studies, with resources such as *A Daring Promise: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage*, by Dr. Richard Gaillardetz or *The Power of Commitment*, by Scott Stanley

Institute family-centered Sacrament Preparation and RCIA

Invite couples to serve together as liturgical ministers and catechists, on Pastoral Advisory Councils, and in leadership

Be certain families and couples are scheduled together as Liturgical Ministers

Have a counselor on staff

Offer Stepfamily Ministry

Draft bulletin, newsletter and website articles ~ "non-gathering" ways of ministering [or use Susan Vogt's weekly *Marriage Moments* and *Parenting Pointers*]

Preach on the sanctity of marriage

Provide quality training for parish lay ecclesial ministers, such as NACFLM *Ministry with Families* Courses

Encourage collaboration with other ministry departments [i.e., Youth Ministry, Catechetical Office] to incorporate households of faith in catechetical programs