

Walking Towards Marriage: The Phases of Sacramental Preparation

*Goal #1: Strengthen pastoral programs for marriage preparation with new **catechumenal itineraries** at diocesan and parish levels (cf. AL 205-222), in order to offer remote, proximate, and immediate marriage preparation, as well as accompaniment of new spouses in the first years of their marriage. This responsibility is especially entrusted to married couples who, together with pastors, become companions on the journey for engaged couples and those new to married life. (laityfamilylife.va)*

The Sacrament of Marriage is a gift received, but also contributed to by the spouses who offer the gift of themselves to each other, and their union to God. Their formation in this dynamic structure of mutual self-gift is life-long as they accompany one another, their families, and the Church in the family's pilgrimage to the Father's house.

Remote Phase of Marriage Preparation

Within this continuum, marriage - and the community it gives rise to - the family, is truly a house of formation: founded upon the sacrament of baptism and the consent of the spouses, nourished by the Eucharist and communal prayer, and extended beyond themselves in familial charity. From the very beginning, it is in the family that children engage their vocation to know, love, and serve Jesus Christ. Responding to the universal call to holiness, they begin their journey of responding to the call to a particular vocation within the family.

Family members accompany one another in the everyday routines of life. Each member exercises in a distinct way Christ's three-fold office of Priest, Prophet, and King, that is, to sanctify, teach, and govern. This three-fold ministry is exercised in family prayer, hospitality, Sunday Worship together, celebration of the liturgical seasons, responsible stewardship of the family's resources, and the service of charity to those in need. These are dimensions of the Christian family as the domestic church, a school of familial love, and it is here that the formation for a discernment of vocation takes place.

"Those best prepared for marriage are probably those who learned what Christian marriage is from their own parents, who chose each other unconditionally and daily renew this decision. In this sense, pastoral initiatives aimed at helping married couples to grow in love and in the Gospel of the family also help their children, by preparing them for their future married life."

– (Amoris Laetitia, 208)

This formation in a young person's life represents the *remote* phase of preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage, in particular, within their children and youth, providing a foundation for how a young person understands him or herself.

Some itineraries for the remote phase of marriage preparation include prayer in the home resources, forms of youth ministry, parish family events, religious education and faith formation, sacramental preparation, and support for and with family-oriented lay movements and ecclesial communities, etc.

Proximate Phase of Marriage Preparation

As youth enter young adulthood, they begin a period of greater personal responsibility which includes the discernment of vocation. In this context, responsible dating can be both the discernment of the vocation to marriage, as well as the discernment of a life-long commitment to religious life or some other form of self-gift. How can this discernment proceed absent of faith and prayer, and not be expressive of Christian discipleship? To assist young people in this discernment, periodic retreats focused on vocational discernment are important - especially in the early phase of young adulthood. A robust parish life and parish participation are significant contributions in continually keeping vocational discernment in view for young people through the Sunday homily, evenings of reflection, or opportunities for young people to meet one another and share their faith.

Some itineraries for the proximate phase of marriage preparation include dating ministries, college campus ministry, young adult ministry (20's and 30's), adult faith formation programs, World Youth Day, mission opportunities, houses of formation, gap year of service, etc.

Immediate Phase of Marriage Preparation

As the dating relationship matures, and through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this discernment becomes more focused and proceeds to the decision to either separate or become engaged. In the latter case, this begins the *immediate* phase of marriage preparation, which has the character of the catechumenate in the form of accompaniment of the young couple by the parish community.

“Marriage preparation should be a kind of ‘initiation’ to the sacrament of matrimony, providing couples with the help they need to receive the sacrament worthily and to make a solid beginning of life as a family.”
– (Amoris Laetitia, 207)

The Church, including clergy, consecrated religious, and laity, assists the couple to discern in faith, prayer, and the affective dimensions of their relationship God's call to marriage. This requires openness to God's presence in their lives and prepares them for the exchange of their wedding promises. The intentional catechesis of the engaged couple reveals to them the truth and irrevocability (the complete gift of self) of the promises they will make as ministers of the sacrament to one another other, and that, through their “yes,” they become a sign of Jesus' love for His Church (the “Great Mystery” found in Ephesians 5:32). Hence, one sees, at the very outset of marriage, that the spouses are missionary disciples bearing witness to Jesus Christ.

In the weeks before the wedding ceremony, the *immediate* phase of marriage preparation takes place as a spiritual oasis in the midst of the frenzied nature of this time. Contrary to the hecticness of how this period is typically experienced by the engaged, it is essential that the parish assist the couple in taking time for quiet contemplation and prayer through retreats, spiritual direction, other forms of reflection, reception of the sacrament of reconciliation, preparation in regard to the elements and meaning of the wedding liturgy, and the support of mentor couples, clergy, laity, and religious who accompany the engaged.

Some itineraries for the immediate phase of marriage preparation include adult faith formation, couples' retreats, NFP education, mentor programs, premarital inventories, accompaniment by parish priest, staff, and other ordained, consecrated, or lay leaders, preparation for the wedding liturgy, etc.

Following the Celebration

After the celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage, the couple is invited to find a “home” in the parish community. It is of vital importance that the relationship between the newlyweds, the parish, and its families be established in the early phase of marriage (with the initial work of this relationship established throughout the proximate and immediate stages of this journey). Here they encounter the Church as a “family of families,” forming relationships which can be life-long. Families, by their nature, accompany one another through prayer, listening, and generous responsiveness in times of joy, need, and in the celebration of the gift of life. The newlyweds can contribute their gifts to the life of the Church by giving witness to thanksgiving and joy... the joy of love!

Some itineraries for the early phase of marriage include: Outreach to the couples from the parish community, invitations to participate in parish mission, adult faith formation, NFP education, support for expecting parents, Baptismal preparation classes, programs for parents with young children, etc.

– LMFLY Staff