

Preparing a Diocese for the Joy and Blessings of Marriage

Task Force and Its Responsibility

In 2009, The Bishops of Wisconsin commissioned a review of the guidelines for immediate marriage preparation. Called Phase I, this review was completed in 2013 with the publication of a Catholic Marriage Compendium entitled “In Perfect Union” which clearly outlined the marriage process, the theology of marriage, and the pastoral guidelines to be used throughout the state.

Upon the completion of Phase I, a discussion began between the Bishops of Wisconsin and the Directors for the Offices of Marriage and Family Life in each of the five Dioceses on the need for a Phase II study of the remote, proximate and aftercare of marriage. In March of 2014, Bishop Callahan approved the formation of a Task Force on Marriage within the La Crosse Diocese for the purpose of reviewing the current state of Marriage as it is impacted by remote preparation, proximate preparation and the aftercare of Marriage.

The task force membership included Priests, Married Couples and Directors from the Curia offices of Marriage and Family Life, Catholic Education, Catechesis and Evangelization and Youth and Young Adult Ministry.

The Task Force met three times between April and July of 2014. Before each gathering, the Task Force was sent a White Paper to review. The White Papers provided an overview of each of the areas including Remote, Proximate and the Aftercare of marriage. The overview included national and local demographics and trends as well as a deeper understanding of Catholic Church teachings on marriage. In addition, each White Paper contained a list of questions that the Task Force addressed at each of the meetings. Each meeting lasted 2 to 3 hours.

The following represents the challenges, recommendations and strategies from the Task Force.

Challenges that We Face in Upholding Marriage

Paragraph 1601 from the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, *“The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.”*

A 2014 study conducted by the Bishop’s Task Force on the state of Marriage (remote, proximate, and aftercare) revealed that the Catechism understanding of Marriage was widely held and promoted in the Diocese until the early 1970s at which time profound cultural shifts began to challenge this definition. At that point in time, societal acceptance of cohabitation, no-fault divorce, sexual liberation both within and before marriage, gender sexual identity issues, self-identity issues, artificial birth control, abortion, self-fulfillment rather than self-sacrifice, a sense of entitlement, declining religious affiliation or involvement, children viewed as a burden rather than a blessing, and rugged individualism began. As these behaviors became more prevalent, a slow and steady retreat from traditional marriage occurred.

The aforementioned cultural challenges were compounded in the Diocese of La Crosse by a general lack of intentional catechesis and formation on the Sacrament of Marriage. Only a handful of parishes offered educational programs on Marriage as a Sacrament and a vocational call. Even fewer parishes presented instruction on Marriage as the right and proper foundation for family life. Still fewer priests and deacons chose to preach or teach about God’s plan for sexual expression as a right and good of spouses.

What has resulted in the Diocese of La Crosse from these societal shifts and the deficiency of solid catechesis regarding Marriage and family life? How have these two elements impacted the state of Marriage? The task force identified seven conclusions.

1. Most Catholics in the Diocese of La Crosse are unable to explain or defend the Catholic Church's teachings on marriage. This makes them vulnerable to secular ideas on love and life often ending with these unformed Catholics accepting the world's view and disagreeing with Catholic Church teaching. This lack of formation has resulted in a slow and steady journey away from the Catholic Church.
2. A growing number of Catholics have lost sight of Marriage as the natural foundation for family. Where the faithful used to get married in order to have children, it is now commonplace to reverse that order. In addition, spouses who generously choose to have more than two children are often labeled as irresponsible and lacking in sexual self-control.
3. More and more youth are struggling to accept their noble dignity as children of God. Many youth believe that they have to create themselves rather than discover the talents and charisms that they have been given by God. Many think of themselves as the "creator" rather than the "creature". This has caused them to become fragile, finding it difficult to give themselves to God or another in authentic love. In addition, a growing number of youth have accepted the world's understanding of gender neutrality and have abandoned God's plan for maleness and femaleness.
4. There is a growing acceptance of narcissism which makes it very difficult to portray authentic love as something more than sentimentality. The expanding acceptance of self-centeredness makes it easier for spouses to abandon their marriage vows and family responsibilities, for young adults to avoid a commitment to marriage and gravitate to cohabitation and for youth and single adults alike to engage in fornication as they pursue self-centered and undisciplined pleasure and happiness.
5. Many parents lack confidence in their role as the primary educators for their children. They have become so comfortable with the philosophy that it *takes a village to raise a child* that they willingly abdicate their parental responsibilities to coaches, educators and social workers. This is most obvious when it comes to the formation of young people on matters of human sexuality and chastity.
6. Many Catholics have lost a sense of value in the sacramental nature of the Catholic Church and faith formation. Thus adults find it easy to step away from regular participation in the Mass or religious education in order to participate in other activities and social events that appear more important (e.g. sporting activities). In addition, there has been a loss of value in the power of prayer and the need to form one's interior life.
7. Many clergy have chosen to be silent on Church teachings regarding contraception, cohabitation and other sexual temptations. Without guidance from Church leadership, parents and youth alike do not understand what constitutes sexual morality and what does not. Without any guideposts or direction on matters of love and life it is understandable that there is an increasing number of Catholics who are in irregular marriages or situations.

Renewing God's Plan for Marriage

Despite the deleterious impact that the Church has suffered in its mission to promote a proper understanding of marriage and family life, the Task Force never lost sight of God's plan for marriage and family life. His plan is still the best for all persons and it is the obligation of the Church to share what God has created with the faithful. The following represents the recommendations, considerations and strategies from the Task Force.

Intentional Catechesis Recommendations

The Task Force recommends that the Diocese intentionally catechize the faithful using clear thinking methodologies on several key Catholic Church teachings so that they can witness to the truth about Marriage and family life and meet the challenges of today's society. These teachings include;

- Natural law
- A proper understanding of authentic love
- The sacramental nature of Marriage, its connection to the family and responsible parenthood
- The nature and meaning of the conjugal act; (authentic love that is open to life)
- The significance of God's plan for complementarity between males and females

Specific Strategies by Stage of Marriage Preparation

General Considerations

The task force offers several general considerations that apply to all strategy recommendations. These considerations include:

1. Utilize personal invitations to increase attendance at any adult programming in addition to general announcements in the bulletin or parish website.
2. Identify solid resources that can be lay lead or deacon led with a pastor's approval. Explore ways to offer these resources directly to the end user instead of relying solely on the pastors or parish leadership to do the distribution and promotion.
3. Identify and/or design catechetical resources for all levels that use a plug and play format: introduction by lay leadership, video that is professionally done, discussion (Example; That Man is You – program for Men's Ministry). Audiences that would benefit from this delivery method include; catechetical teachers, school teachers, adult faith formation, parents, students in upper elementary through high school. Length of video segment should be no more than 30 minutes with 20 minutes being preferred. These resources should be easily accessible on the diocesan website or from the diocesan resource library.
4. Identify and/or design catechetical resources for all levels that can also be used by an individual when they are unable to attend a program that is offered in Church on a specific evening. This type of catechesis should complement on-site religious education programs. These resources should be accessible on the diocesan/parish websites and promoted through the parish bulletin and website.
5. Offer individuals on-line resources that will enhance and expand what they learned in any formal training. The education and formation should not end with the "formal" program.
6. Develop personal relationships between the Curia Office staff and the individual parish staff so that pastors are more willing to interact and collaborate.
7. Connect the parish website (if one is available) directly to information found at a specific Curia pastoral office's webpages rather than to the homepage of the diocesan website.

Remote Preparation for Marriage Strategies with Examples

1. Increase adult catechetical and evangelization opportunities in each parish.
 - a. Promote the Knights of Columbus membership challenge campaign to learn more about their faith and then personally witness their faith to others in the parish.
 - i. Medics of Mercy concept.
 - ii. Develop a resource list of inexpensive marriage and family resources that a parish can provide at a small or low cost to the lay faithful. (Examples include but are not limited

to: Dynamic Catholic resources; Lighthouse Ministry resources; Gus Lloyd's a Minute in the Church)

- b. Emphasize the meaning of marriage as the foundation of family in all catechesis.
 - i. Highlight the qualities of marital friendship that come from Casti Cannubi #90; goodwill, cooperation, fidelity, and peace. Tie this into the catechesis regarding the Sacramental grace that is provided couples when they are sacramentally married.
 - c. Develop intergenerational catechesis opportunities where parents and children can learn together. (Ex. Serve a meal for families that is followed by Religious education for youth by grade level. At the same time as the youth programming, provide catechesis for adults. When all education is done, end the evening with prayer and a blessing.)
 - d. Expand apologetics training for parents and adults so that they can both model the Catholic teachings on marriage and family and defend it. This can be done on-line or in small group.
 - e. Provide specific programming just for men or women. In particular, men need more formation on how to take care of their marriage and be a Godly spouse and father.
 - i. That Man is You (Men's Ministry)
 - ii. SHE (Women's Ministry), Momnipotent, Women's Evenings Out (St. Olaf)
 - f. Encourage Religious Education (RE) programs to give a concise catechesis to parents at the end of the child's RE sessions. This catechesis, lasting no more than 5 to 10 minutes, would let parents know what their child learned and how they can develop that teaching during the coming days. If it is not possible to designate a "time" at the end of every session for parents, then make a printed or electronic resource for parents that informs them of the lesson objectives and provides faith challenges for them to meet during the coming week. When possible, make resources available on the web.
2. Celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism at and beyond the ritual.
- a. Create the "best practices" for Baptismal preparation and make available to all parishes.
 - b. Develop a Baptism Ritual for parents and God parents to use when celebrating the anniversary of the child's Baptism each year.
 - c. Provide the parents with a baptism gift bag that may include; basic prayers of the Catholic Faith, onesie with the parish logo, a stole, prayer ritual (see above) to do on the anniversary date with the child and his/her family, invitation to attend Catholic school in area...
 - d. Send a baptism card on or near the date of the Baptism to every person from either the Pastor or the Bishop congratulating them on their anniversary. This could take place at either the parish level or the diocesan level.
 - e. Distribute copies of The Gift of Joy pamphlet developed by Archbishop Joseph Kurtz to the clergy that provides a blessing to infants still in the womb and their parents.
 - f. When you do ritualize the Baptism, make sure that you acknowledge the roles of both the mother and the father. This is especially important for the father who often falls in the shadow of the mother. Consider providing a St. Joseph blessing for him.
 - g. Include parent catechesis and family activities in Baptismal Preparation so that young families get connected immediately.
 - i. Refer to the Baptism Preparation Program from the Diocese.
3. Renew the understanding that the family is the school of virtue and the Church (parish) is the school of Prayer. The Church needs families and the families need the Church.
- a. Promote Catholic Church teaching on parents as primary educators for their children and the understanding of the domestic church.
 - i. Teaching the Way of Love series at www.twl4parents.com.
 - b. Utilize social media to "constantly" connect with families.

- c. Emphasize the power of parental witness to the living and loving as Christ. Children will do what their parents do; right or wrong. When children see “marital friendship” lived out by their parents, they learn what pure love is meant to be.
 - d. Consideration should be taken in every parish to plan family activities and programming that includes the parents *with* their children.
 - e. Develop a video series on parenting that a parish can offer.
 - i. Teaching the Way of Love website at www.twl4parents.com .
 - f. Develop **practical** examples of intentional parenting that can be widely distributed using as many communication outlets as possible; website, blog, social media, print, etc.
 - i. Teaching the Way of Love series.
4. Increase a parish’s sense of “family” so that families within the parish can get to know one another.
 - a. Ministry of Hospitality
 - b. Family of the Month Programs
 - c. Teams of Our Lady, Domestic Church Circles (coming 2016)
 - d. Investigate the possibility of mentoring opportunities for one to one ministries.
 - i. “Like to Like Ministries” such as Elizabeth Ministries
 5. Increase marriage and family events within the parishes.
 - a. See Marriage Building best practices document.
 6. Explore ways to create a culture/environment of vocation in each parish. This culture should include all parts of the parish but in particular the school (if one exists), the RE program, the RCIA program, and Sacramental Preparation.
 7. Find ways to pastorally work with those who are in “irregular” situations. This includes two strategies; developing the humility of those in regular situations so that they demonstrate charity to those who are not and developing ways to write and talk about the beauty of marriage in a parish where some couples are divorced, raising children outside of marriage, remarried. (Ex: collect sermons from pastors who have developed pastoral messages on marriage and family life).
 - a. Develop and distribute sermon resources (both what to say and how to say) that highlight marriage and family pastorally. Focus on being marriage minded in irregular situations.
 - b. Clarify Catholic teachings regarding divorce and annulment for the parish.
 - c. Clarify Catholic teachings about the beauty of Sacramental marriage for the parish.
 - d. Consider parish or deanery implementation of programs on surviving divorce.

Proximate Preparation for Marriage Strategies

1. Evaluate the current catechetical information that is offered to families and youth/young adults on marriage and family life for its alignment with the intentional catechesis components identified by the task force.
 - a. Use current research from reputable sources (Ruth Institute, Witherspoon Institute, Institute of American Values, CARA) to stay up to date on what is and is not working to change attitudes to accept traditional marriage as the firm foundation for family.
2. Identify and correct any unclear teachings that are found in the catechesis that is offered to families and youth on marriage and family life.
 - a. Clean up the terminology that we use. In particular, we need to clearly define what is meant by personal freedom, personal identity, and authentic love.
 - b. Consider modifying the current marriage preparation program entitled *Married Love: Two becoming One* as an instructional unit for high school students.
 - c. Increase chastity programming within both family and youth programs.
 - i. Theology of the Body resources
 - d. Develop a vocational discernment process that can be utilized by all youth and young adults. This process should begin early in the middle school years.

- e. Develop a vocational discernment resource that will be used by middle and high school guidance counselors.
 - f. Offer an inventory of charisms (spiritual gifts) to middle and/or high school youth.
 - g. Develop pastoral strategies to show the upside of sacramental marriage and the downside of same sex unions, contraception.
 - h. Offer reputable on-line resources for youth and young adult on marriage and family life.
3. Increase the outreach to parents, especially those who are in irregular situations. They are a vital part of this preparation and must be brought back into the picture.
- a. Develop personal relationships with the parents; listen to them first and discover what they need. Accompany them. Allow them to affect you.
 - i. Parents & Parish as Partners with Teaching the Way of Love
 - b. Provide parent formation on the importance of traditional marriage as the foundation for both strong families and a strong society. Help all parents become marriage minded.
 - c. Develop/Identify apologetics for parents that can be used to defend Church teachings on traditional marriage.
 - i. St. Augustine Foundation
 - ii. Humanum Videos – from the Vatican Colloquium November 2014.
 - d. Ensure that couples who are in fragile marriages have the necessary counseling and support they need to make it through their difficulty.
 - i. Marriage Mentors (deacons with wives)
 - e. Expose youth and young adults to as many married couples faithfully living out the Sacrament of Marriage as possible. Invite married couples to become chaperones, witness presenters, program assistants, etc. This is especially important for youth whose parents are in irregular situations.
4. Develop strategies and resources for families and young adults who are moving from high school to post-secondary education that will help them stay connected to the Catholic Church (sacramental preparation, parish involvement, and young adult programming).
- a. When families go on college campus visits, ask them to stop in at the Newman Center
 - b. Impress upon parents that when their youth/young adult say they don't want to continue Church participation they must disagree and strongly encourage their attendance
 - c. Ask parents to check in with their child who is away and inquire about Mass attendance.

Immediate and Aftercare of Marriage Strategies

1. Intentionally catechize adults about God's plan for marriage and family life. This can be done in a variety of ways.
 - a. Write a pastoral letter to the faithful that clearly and charitably explains God's plan for marriage and family life. Use clear thinking methods to explain the message.
 - b. Develop educational resources on God's plan for marriage and family life for parents that can be integrated into the religious education programs.
 - c. Develop educational resources for teachers that form their understanding on God's plan for marriage and family life.
 - d. Collect homily notes and ideas from the clergy and widely distribute them to the priests and deacons with the goal of increasing the number of homilies given each year on marriage and family life.
 - e. Link the USCCB websites (For Your Marriage and Marriage Unique for a Reason) to every parish in the diocese.
 - f. Create a Twitter Feed on marriage and family life for interested individuals. This Twitter Feed should offer "sound bites" that are catchy.

- g. Provide “free” and “usable” E-resources to couples – especially the newly married - that address the common issues they will face. These resources should be made available during the immediate marriage preparation process. Examples include:
 - i. First Years
 - ii. For your Marriage – foryourmarriage.org
 - iii. Marriage and Family E-News
- 2. Intentionally support married couples as they journey through the stages of married life.
 - a. Develop strategies to immediately connect with the newly married.
 - i. Pastor hosts a dinner/gathering at the rectory with newly married couples to connect and form a personal relationship.
 - ii. Follow-up meetings/activities between lay couples who helped in the preparation and the newly married couples just to check in and ask, “How is it going?”
 - iii. Correspondence (electronic, snail mail, etc.) between pastor or deacon or parish welcoming the couple and offering a connection.
 - iv. Offer gifts to couples from the parish when they become pregnant and give birth (blankets, onesies, baptismal information, etc.)
 - b. Offer diocesan wide marriage enrichment seminars annually.
 - i. Worldwide Marriage Encounter
 - ii. National Marriage Encounter
 - iii. Domestic Church (From diocese of New Orleans, LA)
 - iv. National speakers that come in for a diocesan conference that addresses a specific marriage issue or topic.
 - v. Modify the current immediate preparation program so that married couples can attend.
 - c. Provide parish based marriage enrichment resources (websites, books, out of the box programs, small faith sharing opportunities, fun and easy to implement activity event ideas like newlywed picnics, movie nights, pig roasts).
 - d. Offer parishes strategies to become “Marriage Building” communities.
 - i. Highlight couples who are celebrating significant anniversaries in the bulletin or with a picture display in a gathering space (wall of fame).
 - ii. Implement monthly blessings at each parish for couples celebrating a marriage anniversary in that month.
 - iii. Interview couples who have been successfully married and share their wisdom with the parish in the bulletin or on the parish website.
 - iv. Personal notes from pastor to couples who are celebrating significant anniversaries.
 - e. Provide parishes with marketing strategies and approaches to reach their couples and invite them to participate in parish life.
 - i. Staying in constant touch is necessary in order to “close the gap” between the reception of the sacraments (ex. Marriage and Baptism, Baptism and First Communion, First Communion and Confirmation).
 - f. Identify and train 50+ married couples in the diocese who will be marriage ambassadors. These individuals will be part of an ‘outreach’ team to married couples who are in need of support. They will have the skills and tools to spread a proper understanding of marriage in a network marketing campaign. This group of couples should focus their efforts on the “borderline” Catholics rather than on those already coming to the parish. Their efforts should be visible and accessible (especially electronically) with the intent of nudging Catholics who have minimal participation in the Church in the right direction.
 - g. Identify and train married couples to be marriage mentors in each deanery. These individuals would be responsible for supporting couples in specific times of struggle (miscarriage, illness, infidelity, job loss).

3. Intentionally support individuals who are or who have been married to honor God's plan for marriage and family life.
 - a. Widely support the That Man is You (TMIY) program in the diocese.
 - b. Offer women's programming that complements TMIY.
 - i. Book studies
 - ii. Wine, Women and Wisdom
 - iii. Mom's Night Out Options
 - iv. Like to Like ministries (Moms with little children, widows, grandparents)
 - c. Create a prayer presence in the parish that specifically addresses the beauty and goods of marriage and family life.
 - d. Widely promote and reference the USCCB Marriage and Family Life websites entitled **For Your Marriage** and **Marriage Unique for a Reason**.
4. Maximize the coverage of and participation in the World Congress on the Family that will be held in Philadelphia in September 2015.
 - a. Send a delegation from the diocese to attend
 - b. Give monthly updates to parishes about the Congress beginning in September 2014.
 - c. Highlight the preparation for the Congress in all news outlets of the Diocese (website, Bishop Blog, Twitter feed, Catholic Times, etc.)