

Goin' to the Chapel

With marriage in crisis in America, the time has come to take marriage preparation programs more seriously

Anna Abbott

Wedding preparations are a daunting task: complex, time-consuming, and sometimes trying, as brides try to refine every aspect of the ceremony and reception. In her excitement over color schemes, invitations, dresses, flowers and cakes, she often overlooks the most important detail - marriage preparation programs.

A bride should be as diligent about educating herself on these programs as she is in choosing a caterer. A wedding is more than an 'event'; it is a transformative sacrament, changing separate individuals into a marital unit. "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh (Gen 2:24)."

Marriage is a call to radical transformation. Like any vocation, it requires soul-searching and discernment. Individuals must ask themselves if they've found the right person, or if they are called to marriage at all.

On January 29 of this year, the Holy Father spoke out about the high number of annulments. The U.S. accounts for 90 percent of them, often because couples do not understand the true nature of the marital covenant and, as some canon lawyers contend, cannot give informed consent.

The Pope told the Roman Rota to assume that marriages are valid until proven otherwise. He warned the



Tribunal, "Without truth, charity ends up in sentimentalism. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled arbitrarily... It falls prey to the emotions and contingent opinions of the individuals, an abused and distorted word, to the point of signifying the contrary."

The concern is that in the name of compassion, marriage will be demeaned through rampant annulments.

The current crisis of marriage is partly rooted, then, in poor preparation. The Pontifical Council on the Family is looking to remedy this with a marriage preparation handbook.

On February 8, the Pope blessed their efforts. He described the three stages of marriage preparation; within the family, the engagement process, and immediate preparation for the rite itself. The Holy Father has a lofty view of marriage preparation, seeing it as a catechetical period, a “gift that contributes to spiritual growth.”

But “Pre-Cana”, as it is often called, is a mixed bag for couples in this country.

Sheila Garcia, who heads the Family and Youth Programs for the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) said, “There is no national curriculum, or national guidelines, for marriage preparation. The USCCB does not have the authority to mandate a curriculum.”

Diocesan requirements vary; the sole constant is the code of canon law, with its 110 canons devoted to marriage. The lack of uniformity can be confusing for conscientious couples desiring a

challenging program that will sufficiently equip them for their new life.

Two principles, however, can help a bride optimize the pre-Cana experience:

Is Church teaching central to the program?

Personality tests, questionnaires and checklists are helpful, but passing a test doesn’t guarantee marital bliss. Instead of offering a secular approach, parish programs should set themselves apart by presenting God’s design for marriage, and the religious core of marriage as the “primordial sacrament.” In his epistle to the Ephesians (5:32), Paul says, “This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church.”

Janine Applegate, who provides marriage preparation at Holy Rosary



Church in Portland, OR, works to emphasize this mystery. She said that she occasionally deals with couples that want to pen their own vows. Applegate said, “Some couples will say ‘It’s my wedding.’ I tell couples that it’s bigger than the two of them. I’ve had to turn down Pinocchio’s ‘When you wish upon a star’ being played at a ceremony. It (marriage) is a tremendous mystery.”

Without a spiritual sensibility, marriage runs the risk of being treated as another secular contract. The concept of marriage as a vocation is profoundly spiritual; it is about God’s personal plan for the individual and the Church. Marriage is a sacrament, a channel of invisible grace through visible everyday acts. Just as priests and religious take solemn vows, so do the laity in the Sacrament of Matrimony. And just as religious live their lives sacrificially for the Church, so do married laity live for the sanctification of their spouses, children, and the world. Strong marriage preparation takes these mystical aspects into account, and inspires couples to the depths of the married state.

A clue to the orthodoxy and substance of a program is the subject of NFP (Natural Family Planning). Couples who use NFP have lower divorce rates than those who use artificial contraceptives, so that even on a secular, natural level the bishops would be justified in focusing on it.

Nonetheless, many premarital programs devote only an hour to the subject; some parishes only broach NFP if the couple has prior interest.

Applegate is more in-depth with NFP, explaining, “I approach NFP in the context of a holistic approach to the Church. Unitive/procreative doesn’t resonate with couples, but creation/recreation does... All sex should be creational, and re-creating the bond... I’ve gotten a more enthusiastic response to NFP from non-Catholics, especially if they’re into eating organic food.”

Since today’s young people are concerned about what they are putting into their bodies, NFP can be presented as an appealing alternative to artificial contraception. It can be shown to be in harmony with nature, as well as the cycles

of the human body, a truly “green option.”

How can one compensate for a weak program?

Be actively engaged: question the program leaders. Be persistent, but also be aware that some programs carefully avoid appearing ‘judgmental.’

Dr. Selimo Rael of the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Santa Fe, NM, said that the parish’s Sponsor Couple program, which pairs the engaged couple with a married one, doesn’t discuss issues like cohabitation and

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NFP. Rael said, “We’re not here to preach, that’s up to the priest... We don’t pass judgment.” This hesitancy keeps leaders and couples from discussing crucial issues.

When inquiry is fruitless, education with faithful resources can come to the rescue. The Catechism’s section devoted to marriage furnishes a foundation. There are helpful and inspiring books such as Christopher West’s *Good News about Sex and Marriage*, Edward Sri’s *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love* as well as Alice Von Hildebrand’s *Letters to a Young Bride*. A classic is Archbishop Sheen’s *Three to Get Married*. Pope John Paul II’s talks on the theology of the body are immensely helpful. The Holy Father’s *Deus caritas est (God is love)* discusses the interrelationship between *eros* and *agape* in marriage.

And EWTN offers several practical and motivating series that deal with marriage.

Ideally, a marriage preparation program is more than getting ready for the big day - it takes the sacrament seriously as a lifetime commitment.

Applegate offers meetings for couples a year after the wedding to touch base with them. If a program doesn’t offer follow-ups, seek out activities that develop awareness and

devotion to holy matrimony. For example, Women of Grace’s foundational series is a great introduction for brides, and Opus Dei offers evenings of recollection for men and women to help them live out their vocation to marriage.

Marriage is in crisis, but informed women can help by remembering that the best preparation is invested in the marriage, not the wedding. The sacrament of matrimony is more than a

means of procreation or personal self-fulfillment; it is, as Pope Benedict affirms, “a missionary and prophetic testimony.” Marriage not only belongs to “the form of this world which is passing away” (1 Cor 7:31), it is a foretaste of the union between Christ and His Church. It is a means of fulfilling Our Lord’s Great Commission to spread the Gospel,

and witnesses, in this world, the angel’s words “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage of the Lamb” (Rev 19:9).

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Anna Abbott is a columnist from the Napa Valley.