

A Catechumenal Approach to Marriage Formation

Catholic Diocese of Cleveland

May 2026



My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church.¹

I am pleased to promulgate the “A Catechumenal Approach to Marriage Formation.” This document is a response to *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life* released on June 15, 2022, by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life. This document calls for a new approach for those preparing for the vocation of marriage which forms and accompanies couples during the “time of preparation for marriage, its celebration, and the years immediately thereafter.”² Pope Francis articulated that this approach was born out of his concern for couples who enter into marriages with only superficial preparation. “Built upon weak foundations, such marriages often fall apart at the first instance of a crisis.”³

The vocation of marriage is a noble calling that invites man and woman to participate in the reality of sharing of God’s love with the world. Man and woman, through their mutual self-gift, illustrate the divine love of God and they act as a visible sign of the invisible Trinity. St. Paul describes marriage as mystery, a mystery that reflects Christ’s love for the Church. A mystery piques our curiosity and draws us out of ourselves. It invites us and captures our imagination. The truth, beauty and goodness of the mystery of marriage is a gift that must be safeguarded. The Church “bears a duty of justice to devote time and energy to the preparation of those whom the Lord calls to the great mission of family life.”⁴

Through these guidelines I seek to provide pastoral leaders with a clear vision and best practices for implementing a catechumenal approach to marriage which enlightens and enriches the whole life and ministry of the Church. They are intended as a framework for the discernment, formation, and support of every couple that approaches the parish with a vocation to married life. This effort builds upon the existing commitment, care, and tireless effort shown by countless priests, deacons, lay pastoral ministers and volunteers who accompany couples.

The marriage catechumenate spans the entirety of one’s life and supports the accompaniment of couples and families through the joys and struggles of life, all while pointing them to Christ and the strengthening grace of His sacraments. Following the organizational structure and aims laid out in *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*, the guidelines lay out the six stages of the marriage catechumenate, which have been grouped into three phases: pre-

¹ Eph 5:31-32 (RSV)

² Pope Francis, *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

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catechumenate, intermediate, and catechumenate. During the first two phases, special attention should be given to assisting young people in discerning their vocation through establishing and fostering deeper relationship with God. During the catechumenal phase, the preparing minister is empowered to utilize a personalized approach to accompany the individual couple and respond to their unique formational needs whether theological, spiritual, or interpersonal. This is achieved through a detailed couple inventory, time of intentional formation before and after the ceremony, and the use of developed best practices such as marriage mentoring.

This approach provides a significant opportunity to facilitate an encounter with Christ and to encourage growth of the couple's relationship with Him. Just as every relationship looks different, so too our paths to discipleship. Marriage formation cannot be a rigid program or process which attempts to fit all people, but one that responds to the unique character of each couple, providing careful accompaniment as they discern, grow in faith, determine their mission and adjust to married life. The goal is to welcome couples and offer them loving and individualized formation so they may become life-long, missionary disciples of Jesus Christ.

Ongoing support, guidance, and development of resources will be provided through the Office of Marriage and Family Ministry. These resources and best practices should be applied according to the local realities of the parish or deanery. I encourage you to read, reflect, share and discuss these guidelines and to work collaboratively to implement the vision it sets forth. Consider offering all of what is envisioned regardless of whether each couple takes advantage of the fullness that's offered.

It is the responsibility of the local ordinary to ensure that preparation for marriage is duly organized (canon 1064, *CIC*). On this 1 June 2026, as Bishop of Cleveland, I hereby establish that a catechumenal approach to marriage centered on the Lord's call to mission will be adopted in the Diocese of Cleveland, encompassing formation, vocational awareness and accompaniment through all its stages.

I hope you will find that the guidelines presented in this document reflect the Church as both Mother and Teacher. Seeking the intercession of the Holy Family, let us undertake the vitally important task of promoting and supporting holy marriages.

May God bless you and those you love.

Your brother in Christ,



Most Reverend Edward C. Malesic, JCL
Bishop of Cleveland

Rev. Arnold R. Chikowski
Notary

Marriage Formation Guidelines: A Catechumenal Approach

2. Introduction

On June 15, 2022, the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life released *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life* with an introduction written by Pope Francis. This document calls for a new catechumenal approach for those preparing for the vocation of marriage. Pope Francis articulated that this new approach was born out of his concern for couples who enter marriage with only superficial preparation. Built upon weak foundations, such marriages often fall apart at the first instance of a crisis.¹

The contents of this document follow the organizational structure and aims laid out in *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*. There are six stages to the marriage catechumenate, which we have grouped into three phases: pre-catechumenate, intermediate, and catechumenate. (See Table 1. Phases of the Marriage Catechumenate) Each stage summarizes the current situation, grounds it in our faith, and lists responsibilities at the appropriate ecclesial level.

Supporting these guidelines and best practices is a glossary of terms. Additional resources to support parishes and deaneries as they work to implement the catechumenal approach to marriage are available from the diocesan office of Marriage and Family Ministry.

The recommendations included here are not all inclusive. Parishes are highly encouraged to work with surrounding parishes, the deanery, and diocesan ministries to develop plans to support the implementation of the marriage catechumenate locally.

¹ Ibid.

Table 1. Phases of the Marriage Catechumenate

		CATECHUMENATE				
PHASE	PRE-CATECHUMENATE	INTERMEDIATE	Proximate Preparation	Final Preparation	First Years of Married Life	Accompaniment & Crisis Support
STAGE	Remote Preparation / Foundational	Period of Reception / Transitional	Proximate Preparation	Final Preparation	First Years of Married Life	Accompaniment & Crisis Support
TIMEFRAME	Childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood	Few weeks or months before engagement	12 months before the wedding ceremony	1-2 months before the wedding ceremony	First 5 years after the wedding ceremony	Anytime
PURPOSE	<p>1. To teach children self-esteem and respect for others, and the awareness of their own dignity and respect for that of others</p> <p>2. To introduce children to Christian anthropology and the vocational perspective implicit in Baptism that will lead to marriage or consecrated life</p> <p>3. To form adolescents in affectivity and sexuality in view of their future call to generous, exclusive, and faithful love</p> <p>4. To offer young people a journey of human and spiritual growth to overcome immaturity, fears, and resistance in order to open themselves to relationships of friendship and love. (CPML, 36)</p>	<p>1. A personalized period of encounter and getting to know each other.</p> <p>2. A proclamation of the kerygma and the Sacrament of Matrimony.</p> <p>3. Special attention given to pastoral concerns without legalism. (CPML, 38-40)</p>	<p>1. To revisit a catechesis of initiation into the Christian Faith.</p> <p>2. To begin a unique initiation into the Sacrament of Matrimony.</p> <p>3. To deepen understanding of the couple's relationship and to become aware of psychological and affective shortcomings.</p> <p>4. To complete an initial phase of discernment about the couple's vocation to marriage.</p> <p>5. To continue more decisively along a spiritual journey. (CPML, 63)</p>	<p>1. To recall the doctrinal, moral, and spiritual aspects of marriage.</p> <p>2. To have spiritual experiences of encounter with the Lord.</p> <p>3. To prepare for a conscious and fruitful participation in the liturgy of matrimony. (CPML, 73)</p>	<p>1. To present a "mystagogical marriage catechesis"</p> <p>2. To help married couples embark upon a healthy path</p> <p>3. To explore in depth the themes of sexuality in married life</p> <p>4. To instill in couples the firm will to defend their marriage bond</p> <p>5. To facilitate an encounter with Christ</p> <p>6. To recall the meaning of the unique mission of Christian spouses. (CPML, 85)</p>	<p>1. Prevention of relational breakdown.</p> <p>2. Pastorally accompany couples. (CPML, 87)</p>
rites	Sacramental - intersection of Confirmation with gifts of the Holy Spirit and vocation awareness	Rite of Entry to the Marriage Catechumenate	The Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple	Liturgy of Matrimony	Milestone blessing	Milestone blessing
PARALLEL TO OCIA	Period of Evangelization and Pre-Catechumenate	Rite of Acceptance	Period of the Catechumenate; ends with Rite of Election	Period of Purification and Enlightenment; ends with Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation	Period of Mystagogy	

2.1 Glossary

**These definitions have been informed by the Catechism of the Catholic Church.*

Accompaniment: The formative process that facilitates the act of faith and the internalization of the Christian virtues with the help of another.

Affectivity: A person's capacity to experience and express emotions and feelings, or their overall emotional disposition.

Anthropology: The study of human beings and the theology of dealing with the origin, nature, and destiny of human beings.

Catechumenate*: The long period of formation that introduces one into the whole of Christian life including life of faith, liturgy, and charity of the People of God by successive sacred rites. The aim is to bring about ongoing conversion and maturity of faith within an ecclesial community.

Discernment: An intentional process by which one is carefully evaluating options and making decisions, particularly those with significant moral or spiritual implications, often with the goal of aligning one's choices with God's will or the natural law.

Formation: The process of spiritual and personal growth, shaping one to become more Christ-like.

Kerygma: The proclamation of the message of the Gospel as preached in the New Testament. The core of this message is the Kingdom of God and the redemption of man by Christ.

Mission*: Continuing the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit, according to the plan of God. This apostolic mission of the Church is fulfilled differently according to states of life by the clergy, laity, and religious.

Vocation*: The calling or destiny we have in this life and hereafter. God has created the human person to love and serve him; the fulfillment of this vocation is eternal happiness. Christ calls the faithful to the perfection of all holiness. The vocation of the laity consists in seeking the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. Priestly and religious vocations are dedicated to the service of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation.

2.2 Abbreviations

- *Amoris Laetitia* (AL)
- Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)
- Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life (CPML)
- *Familiaris Consortio* (FC)
- *Gaudium et Spes* (GS)
- *Lumen Gentium* (LG)

2.3 Bibliography

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Pope John Paul II. “*Familiaris Consortio: The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World.*” Rome, November 22, 1981.

Second Vatican Council. “*Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.*” December 7, 1965.

Second Vatican Council. “*Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.*” November 21, 1964.

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3. The Vocation and Sacrament of Marriage

3.1 Remote Preparation

Remote preparation aims, from childhood, to “prepare the ground” on which to sow the seeds of a future vocation to married life (CPML, 27).

3.1.1 Understanding the Reality

There is cause for great concern and great hope surrounding family life today. The makeup of families is quite diverse with unique demands, stressors, and situations. Some families may feel incapable of forming their children with an adequate understanding of vocation and marriage due to a lack of intellectual formation. Others feel deeply committed and adequately equipped to raise their children in the faith.

In addition to the fundamental influence of one’s family life, secular culture plays a role in molding and shaping a young person’s attitude toward marriage. Friendship and dating have evolved in many ways over the last several decades. For example, the growth and development of the interpersonal relationships of young people have been seriously impacted by the technological advances of modern times. As a result, there is a loss of the concept of healthy friendships and how to date with the hope for marriage.

Our schools and parish ministries are continually adapting and creating offerings to address the needs of the young Church. Such efforts include the integration of Theology of the Body catechesis in the school curriculum and parish faith formation programs, along with the increase of youth ministry programming and ongoing formation opportunities offered for schoolteachers, catechists, and youth ministers.

Ultimately, the most impactful factor on a child’s attitude towards marriage is their own personal experiences and observations. This reality leads to vast ranges of spiritual maturity and understanding of the vocation of marriage which leaves some with wounds around love and fear regarding the stability and permanence of marriage while others feel confident and full of hope.

3.1.2 Our Catholic Faith

Christ sanctified family life by the very fact that he was born into a family and raised by a mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and guardian and foster father, Saint Joseph. The Holy Family is the preeminent model of Christian family life.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “the family is the original cell of social life.” (CCC, 2207) Children, through the norms of daily life, learn the most about life from their parents. It is by God’s divine design that family life with support of the entire faith community hand on two fundamental truths to the youth (CPML, 31):

- First, that man is called to live in truth and love.
- Second, that everyone finds fulfillment through the sincere gift of self in a vocation.

Through Baptism one receives one's identity as a son or daughter of God, and by that relationship is called to live the Christian life in love. "They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature" (*Lumen Gentium*, 40). Every person then is called to holiness. "All the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (*LG*, 40). From this universal call stems one's call to a primary vocation of priesthood, religious life, marriage, or consecrated single life.

No one is excluded from this call. When questioned about the greatest commandment, Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," but the command that follows is just like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Mt. 22:37-39) God calls all to Himself and desires His faithful to give of themselves fully and freely in love.

Preparing young people to live the fullness of Christian life and accept God's calling for their life is the responsibility of the entire Church. What is begun in the family should be reinforced and strengthened through the formational communities.

The aims of the remote preparation phase (CPML, 36):

- *To teach children self-esteem and respect for others, and the awareness of their own dignity and respect for that of others.*
- *To introduce children to Christian anthropology and the vocational perspective implicit in Baptism that will lead to marriage or consecrated life.*
- *To form adolescents in affectivity and sexuality in view of their future call to generous, exclusive, and faithful love (whether in marriage, priesthood, or consecrated life).*
- *To offer young people a journey of human and spiritual growth to overcome immaturity, fears, and resistance in order to open themselves to relationships of friendship and love which are neither possessive nor narcissistic, but are rather free, generous, and self-giving.*

3.1.3 Responsibilities of the Diocesan Offices

- Promote the truth, beauty, and goodness of the vocational call implicit to all Baptized through the training of clergy, educators, and lay ministers.
- Provide formation guidelines, resources, and training for ministry leaders on topics related to Christian anthropology, affectivity, and sexuality.
- Support parishes, deaneries, and families in their efforts of community education and activities.
- Periodically, review and assess curriculum standards for vocations in schools and parish formation programs.
- Support parishes, families, and the faithful through active listening.

3.1.4 Responsibilities of the Parish and Catholic School

- Identify, invite, and encourage adults to participate as youth ministers, catechists, or volunteers in the formation of youth and families.
- Provide and/or promote ongoing education, formation and networking for youth ministers, catechists, and volunteers at parish, deanery, and/or diocesan levels.
- Educate and provide formational opportunities on vocation, Christian anthropology, healthy relationships, and sexuality at age-appropriate levels.
- Participate in curriculum review to ensure vocational topics are adequately covered and promoted to school and parish families and students.

3.1.5 Responsibilities of the Christian Faithful and Parents

- Model healthy, holy marriage and family life through the cultivation of a Christian home and the practice of Christian values.
- Create an environment open to conversations and questions.
- Participate in the life of the parish community.

3.2 Intermediate Preparation

Intermediate preparation is a reception period of a few weeks to a few months when dating couples are discerning engagement (CPML, 37).

3.2.1 Understanding the Reality

Today, many couples are giving careful thought to entering marriage and whom they marry. Often the Church is contacted after the proposal, and the engagement has already occurred. While a process of decision making is naturally taking place in some form, a sign and recognition of the importance of this phase, it is excluding the Church, and possibly the Holy Spirit. The Church can and should offer support to men and women as they discern their call to the vocation of marriage before specifically discerning whom they are called to marry.

Couples approach the Church for marriage with a wide range of pastoral needs and considerations proceeding from their different personal experiences of family life. It is not uncommon for dating people to be living together, previously married, and/or from different faith backgrounds. Also, some individuals may be bound to a previous marital union, and that preexisting marriage bond must be respected as part of any authentic vocational discernment. For these reasons, the intermediate phase may last only a few weeks, a few months, or much longer. Recognizing the uniqueness of each situation, clergy and parish staff should strive to meet each person where they are and accompany them during this time with charity and mercy.

A common challenge faced by those in Church ministry during this stage is helping men and women reframe the discernment and preparatory processes with less of a “to-do list mentality.” The Church’s responsibility is to help each person enter a rich period of discernment.

3.2.2 Our Catholic Faith

The intermediate phase is intended as a period of welcoming, invitation, and reception. During this time of growth in accepting their vocation, the couple is focused on listening for God's call. The parish should accompany each person along the path of discernment regarding marriage. "The sacrament of marriage is not a social convention, an empty ritual or merely the outward sign of a commitment. The sacrament is a gift given for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 72).

"Therefore, a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). God is the author of marriage, which Jesus raised to a sacrament between the baptized. It is not purely a human institution. "From a valid marriage arises a bond between the spouses which by its very nature is perpetual and exclusive; furthermore, in a Christian marriage the spouses are strengthened and, as it were, consecrated for the duties and the dignity of their state by a special sacrament" (CCC, 1638). The man and woman are the ministers of holy matrimony.

Through the guidance and support of the Church, each person is discerning first, their call to marriage, secondly, their call to marriage with this specific person, and finally, the Sacrament of Marriage. Taking the necessary time to reflect on one's intentions at each stage is essential. "There remains a necessary condition for access to the Sacrament of Matrimony and its validity ... their intention to do what the Church intends to accomplish in the celebration of marriage between baptized persons" (CPML, 44). Perfection or mastery of catechesis is not needed, rather a willingness and desire to enter deeper into matrimonial formation.

The journey through this phase allows all involved, especially the man, woman, and minister, to become acquainted with each other. This time together will greatly influence how the couple is best accompanied. If the discerning persons desire to move forward with formation for marriage, they will enter the formal catechumenate. The intermediate phase may conclude with the optional Rite of Entry which marks the transition into the formal catechumenate.

The aims of the intermediate preparation phase (CPML, 38-40):

1. *To provide a personalized period of encounter and getting to know each other.*
2. *To proclaim the kerygma and the special character of the Sacrament of Matrimony.*
3. *To give special attention to pastoral concerns without legalism.*

3.2.3 Responsibilities of the Diocesan Offices

- Offer formation guidelines and resources related to marriage discernment.
- Train ministry leaders on topics related to dating and marriage discernment.
- Collaborate with other offices and ministries on formation opportunities that engage dating persons and their families on the topics of relationship skills, affectivity, self-reflection, prayer, and discernment.

3.2.4 Responsibilities of the Parish and Young Adult and Campus Ministries

- Promote community/small groups for dating persons and singles ministry within the parish, region and/or deanery.
- Offer resources and opportunities for discernment.
- Build and sustain a team of marriage ministers at the parish and/or deanery level to welcome and accompany dating and discerning persons.
- Identify, invite, and encourage married couples to become involved in sharing their vocational discernment stories.
- Celebrate the Rite of Entry with newly engaged couples (optional).

3.2.5 Responsibilities of the Christian Faithful and Parents

- Be involved in family life and the parish community through conversations and activities that promote the goodness of marriage with a focus on the importance of discernment.
- Pray for those discerning their vocation.

3.2.6 Responsibilities of the Dating Persons

- Be open to discernment that invites God into the process with a particular focus on discerning vocation to marriage before discerning marriage with a specific person.
- Seek guidance and formation from the Church and parish community.
- Be curious to learn others' vocation stories.

4. Preparation of Candidates for Marriage

4.1 Proximate Preparation

Proximate preparation is approximately a one-year time period, which assumes the character of a true journey of faith, as a couple begins initiation in the Sacrament of Matrimony (CPML, 49).

4.1.1 Understanding the Reality

Preparing couples for marriage within the Church is a cause for great joy! Unfortunately, due to the busyness of life, the Church is often seen and treated as a vendor that places unnecessary burdens on the couple. Some required parish programs fall into this trap as well. The couple may feel they are just moving along a conveyor belt of to-do lists until the wedding day. In moving away from strictly intellectual formation, the catechumenate looks to form and accompany the whole person and the couple in their journey of initiation to the vocation of marriage.

Parallel to the Order of Christian Initiation, the proximate phase of the marriage catechumenate is an opportunity for the couple to continue discernment through revisiting the Sacraments of Initiation, re-awakening their Christian identity within the faith community, and deepening both their relationship with God and their future spouse through individual and shared prayer experiences. During this time, it is important to recognize that each person will not be in the same place in their journey of faith. For instance, there may be situations where one person is not Christian. The catechumenal approach aims to be more intentional about meeting the unique needs and circumstances of each couple.

Ideally, individuals will have received formation concerning vocation and the opportunity to discern their primary vocation, but that is not always the case. For a number of reasons, the intermediate phase may not have fully taken place. Therefore, each couple's proximate phase will need to be tailored to adequately and appropriately prepare them for initiation into marriage and accompany them in their spiritual journey.

4.1.2 Our Catholic Faith

The proximate phase is the initial phase of the formal marriage catechumenate. It is a period devoted to the rediscovery of the truth and beauty of the Sacraments and Sacred Scripture, the deepening of the couple's prayer life, participation in the life of the Church, and preparation for the unique mission of the spouses (CPML, 49). Proximate preparation requires the parties to deepen their relationship with each other through consideration of marriage, and, therefore, cannot begin unless both bride and groom are free to marry.

The couple's prior experience, knowledge, skills, and individualization should be considered in determining an approach to their formation, which requires that all aspects of the human person be examined and addressed. The nature of this phase is intended to be experiential and reflective. "Quality is more important than quantity, and priority should be given—along with a

renewed proclamation of the kerygma—to an attractive and helpful presentation of information that can help couples to live the rest of their lives together ‘with great courage and generosity’” (AL, 207). In understanding where the couple is in their journey, formation needs to be holistic and transformative. Ultimately, the couple should be brought into a greater fullness of the means of salvation through the Catholic Church.

As the couple grows in their understanding of the theology of marriage and practicalities of daily married life, they realize the unique mission and public nature that marriage holds in building up the Body of Christ. “In this manner, they offer all men the example of unwearying and generous love; in this way they build up the brotherhood of charity; in so doing, they stand as the witnesses and cooperators in the fruitfulness of Holy Mother Church; by such lives, they are a sign and a participation in that very love, with which Christ loved His Bride and for which He delivered Himself up for her” (LG, 41). For this reason, fidelity, honor, and respect, along with the understanding and cultivation of the virtue of chastity, are important values to integrate throughout this phase of formation.

“The specific goal of this stage is to finalize each couple’s discernment about their vocation to marriage” (CPML, 55). To mark the end of this phase and entry into the final phase of the catechumenate, the Rite of Betrothal² may take place.

The aims of proximate preparation (CPML, 63):

1. *To revisit a catechesis of initiation into the Christian faith and to draw couples into the life of the Church.*
2. *To begin a unique initiation into the Sacrament of Marriage and to come to a clear awareness of its essential aspects.*
3. *To deepen understanding of the couple’s relationship and to become aware of psychological and affective shortcomings.*
4. *To complete an initial phase of discernment about the couple’s vocation to marriage.*
5. *To continue more decisively along a spiritual journey.*

4.1.3 Responsibilities of the Diocesan Offices

- Offer guidelines and resources related to the framework for proximate marriage formation, which encompasses the intellectual, spiritual, human, and pastoral needs of couples.
- Develop and support a network of marriage mentor couples that align with the deanery pastoral plan and structure for marriage formation.
- Encourage and support the incorporation of the Rite of Betrothal (optional).
- Promote ongoing training for leaders on the catechumenal approach to marriage formation.

² *Book of Blessing* (New York, USA: Catholic Book Publishing, 1989).

4.1.4 Responsibilities of the Parish

- Participate in assessing the needs of parish and deanery within the deanery pastoral plan for proximate marriage formation.
- Determine the role, responsibility, capacity and resources of the parish as part of the deanery pastoral plan and execute a parish action plan.
- Assess needs and develop personalized formation plans for the engaged, as individuals and as a couple.
- Ensure couples are being offered and supported by marriage mentors.
- Integrate couples into the entirety of parish life, while continuing to emphasize the importance of Sunday Mass.
- Organize and/or promote marriage ministry activities, such as retreats and the celebration of the Rite of Betrothal.

4.1.5 Responsibilities of the Christian Faithful and Parents

- Actively engage in parish life and marriage ministry activities through prayer and personal witness.
- Take the initiative to welcome, accompany, and build relationships with engaged couples on their journey of initiation into marriage.
- Integrate family blessings and prayers throughout the period of engagement.
- Discern becoming marriage mentors.

4.1.6 Responsibilities of the Couple

- Continue discernment of marriage with an open heart and mind.
- Adopt an intentional focus on deepening the relational aspects of initiation to marriage from the intellectual, spiritual, human, and pastoral dimensions.
- Begin an examination of the married couple's call to mission and formation of identity as a couple.
- Consider celebrating the Rite of Betrothal (optional).

4.2 Final Preparation

Final preparation takes place in the months leading up to the wedding celebration with emphasis on the essential characteristics of marriage (CPML, 64-65).

4.2.1 Understanding the Reality

As the time leading up to the celebration of the marriage liturgy draws near, many emotions may be stirred up for the bride and groom. It is an exciting, joy-filled time, but it can also bring about different stressors. As with the anticipation of any vocation, the anxiety, stress, and doubt that may creep in is an invitation for the couple, parents, family, and friends to draw closer to the Lord.

For the couple, the last meetings with the preparing minister and marriage mentors occur. There are many details regarding the liturgy to finalize, which may be a trigger for undue stress not anticipated by the couple. In many ways, this can prevent the couple from truly entering into the spiritual richness of the time leading up to the marriage liturgy.

The church location chosen by the couple for the celebration of their marriage often holds deep sentimental value for them and their families. The preparing minister may invite the parish community into celebration by announcing the marriage in the bulletin, praying for the couple during the Universal Prayer, etc.

Of particular concern are those couples preparing remotely and/or celebrating the marriage liturgy in another city. This presents a challenge both for the couple and the preparing minister to ensure the bride and groom are being drawn into the life of the faith community.

This phase is a summation of the previous phases of the catechumenate. In many ways, the bride and groom are preparing to give their final “yes” to God’s call to enter marriage with each other.

4.2.2 Our Catholic Faith

The final phase of preparation is a time where the Church reminds the couple that God delights in their choice to accept His call to marriage. As they walk toward initiation, they are also embarking on a mission. Every marriage has a mission. “Just as ordained ministers are called to become ‘living icons’ of Christ the priest, so are Christian spouses called to become ‘living icons’ of Christ the bridegroom” (*CPML*, 68).

This phase of preparation includes the actual planning of the liturgy and the available scripture selections and music. The wedding liturgy is the celebration of the creation of a new domestic church.

Elements of this phase include:

1. The indispensable conditions of freedom and full awareness regarding the commitment assumed in the choice of marriage;
2. The essential characteristics of marriage—indissolubility, unity, fidelity and an openness to children—will form the specific content of the interviews with the pastor required by canon law; and
3. The doctrinal, moral, and spiritual aspects of marriage.

“Spouses must never forget that sin is ultimately the real threat to their love.” (*CPML*, 67). Spiritual experiences and encouragement should be offered for the couple to encounter the Lord. He is the source and center of marriage and all Christian life. In addition to Reconciliation, a spiritual retreat is recommended thirty days ahead of the celebration of marriage.

In marriage, the spouses are a visible sign of Christ’s love, and thus, “should realize that they are thereby cooperators with the love of God the Creator, and are, so to speak, the interpreters of that love” (*GS*, 50). As cooperators, spouses are the ministers of marriage. For this reason, the couple

should increase their understanding of the wedding liturgy and be engaged in its preparatory planning.

The aims of final preparation (CPML, 73):

- 1. To recall the doctrinal, moral, and spiritual aspects of marriage (also explicitly discussing the contents of the prescribed canonical interviews).*
- 2. To have spiritual experiences of encounter with the Lord.*
- 3. To prepare for a conscious and fruitful participation in the liturgy of matrimony.*

4.2.3 Responsibilities of the Diocesan Offices

- Develop and provide guidelines for spiritual retreat.
- Provide guidelines for wedding liturgy.

4.2.4 Responsibilities of the Parish

- Encourage couples to participate in a spiritual retreat prior to wedding liturgy.
- Invite and offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
- Help couples to develop an appropriate understanding of what constitutes good liturgical preparation and prepare the wedding liturgy as an expression of that faith.
- Encourage couples to talk about family customs and expectations for the wedding day.
- Provide opportunities for the parish community to pray for all couples nearing the celebration of marriage.
- Accompany parents and families as they navigate changes in welcoming new members and embracing their unique family dynamic.

4.2.5 Responsibilities of the Christian Faithful and Parents

- Pray for the bride, groom, and extended families of all couples nearing the celebration of marriage and their entrance into the vocation of marriage.
- Make an offering of support to the bride, groom, and parents during the final steps towards the marriage liturgy.

4.2.6 Responsibilities of the Couple

- Participate in the planning of the liturgy.
- Participate in a spiritual retreat.
- Pray for one's future spouse.
- Frequent the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist.

5. Celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage

As they approach the wedding, couples should become aware that they are not spectators but rather, in the name of Christ, ministers of the celebration of their marriage (CPML, 68).

5.1 Understanding the Reality

The wedding day is a momentous occasion in the life of the bride and groom. The journey they have taken culminates in the celebration of the marriage liturgy, where they give their final “yes” to God’s call to enter the vocation of marriage.

Often, couples form their image of the wedding day from popular culture and may have only a limited understanding of the Catholic Rite of Marriage and the celebration of Mass. The individualized pastoral accompaniment through the previous phases, especially the final phase, should have given them time to reflect and discuss the liturgy and available options within it, e.g. scripture selections. All choices should reflect the demands of appropriate liturgical expression and the role that the couple has as ministers of the sacrament.

The importance of personal accompaniment is particularly true and significant when the Christian vision of the wedding liturgy is at odds with the secular culture’s view of a wedding ceremony. The challenge for those who prepare the Rite of Marriage is to help the bride and groom understand the nature of the wedding liturgy, which is the public prayer of the Church, a celebration of God’s new and eternal covenant of love.

Few celebrations so vividly express the central role of the family in the life of a Christian as does the wedding liturgy. The role of the family as the domestic church has nurtured and formed the bride and groom, and now, the couple is preparing to unite themselves and form a new domestic church in marriage. The family’s role should be encouraged throughout the period of engagement. In this way, the sacred partnership between the parish church and the domestic church is supported and strengthened.

5.2 Our Catholic Faith

Marriage is a human and divine institution rooted in God’s creation. “The liturgical Rite of Marriage contains a pedagogical approach, which encompasses the richness of anthropology (the life of people), Scripture (God’s plan for the family), the Church (the mission of the family in the Church and in the world), and spirituality (the journey of conversion and response to the action of the Spirit)” (CPML, 68). The bride and groom are the visible signs of the Sacrament of Marriage.

Liturgy is sacred, but good liturgy is also sacred work. It praises God, builds up the Church, and thus should be powerfully creative and life-giving for the couple, the clergy, other ministers and the gathered faithful.

“One aspect which should be heavily emphasized is the awareness of a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the Rite of Marriage. This effusion of the Spirit forms part of the dynamism of

grace initiated in baptism but also provides a new aspect to the divine charity infused in us from baptism, one which now takes on the features of 'conjugal charity'" (CPML, 69). The work of worship is of immense worth. The celebration of the marriage liturgy has profound potential to be transformational as it most clearly witnesses to divine love and Jesus' bond with the Church.

An essential part of the catechumenal journey is strengthening the couple's prayer and spiritual life. Prayer should be integrated into all phases of preparation and encouraged throughout married life. When the Rite of Marriage is celebrated within the Mass, "Christian spouses encounter the source from which their own marriage covenant flows, is interiorly structured and continuously renewed. As a re-presentation of Christ' sacrifice of love for the Church, the Eucharist is a fountain of charity. In the Eucharistic gift of charity, the Christian family finds the foundation and soul of its 'communion' and its 'mission': by partaking in the Eucharistic bread, the different members of the Christian family become one body, which reveals and shares in the wider unity of the Church" (FC, 57). In the wedding liturgy the couple, surrounded by family, friends, and parish community, is praying in communion with the universal Church, as they embark on their new mission as husband and wife.

5.3 Responsibilities of the Diocesan Offices

- Provide prayer resources for parishes, families, and couples.

5.4 Responsibilities of the Parish

- Encourage the spiritual life of the couple and instruct them in the meaning of the sacrament and its liturgical expression.
- Take time to explain, plan, and rehearse the wedding liturgy.
- Create a prayerful environment for the wedding liturgy rehearsal.
- Help the gathered faithful participate fully, consciously, and actively in the celebration.

5.5 Responsibilities of the Christian Faithful and Parents

- Engage in full, conscious, and active participation when gathered in prayer for the wedding liturgy.
- Participate in prayers and blessings for couples, whether in the Sunday Eucharist or at special times.
- Integrate family blessings and prayers before and after the wedding rehearsal, during the rehearsal dinner, and wedding reception.

5.6 Responsibilities of the Couple

- Prepare both for the sacrament and for a liturgical celebration that expresses the mystery of Christ's love and the meaning of Christian marriage.
- Embrace their role as the ministers of the Sacrament of Matrimony.
- Become more comfortable with, and knowledgeable of, liturgical prayer.
- Take time to plan and rehearse the wedding liturgy.

6. Accompaniment of Married Couples

6.1 First Years after the Wedding Ceremony

The first five years of the “permanent state” of marriage, whose beginning is signaled by the celebration of the marriage liturgy, requires ongoing formation involving reflection, dialogue, and help from the Church (CPML, 74).

6.1.1 Understanding the Reality

In the first years of married life, couples are in a period of relational adjustments. The busyness and realities of daily domestic life are all converging at once. Clear communication and proper expectations are important factors to maintain during this time.

The formal blending of extended family happens during this time too, where interpersonal dynamics change, communication styles are learned, and family traditions are either renewed, adapted, or abandoned. This can be very emotional and stressful for the couple. In desiring to build and grow a family, couples may face the joy of welcoming new life and/or face the struggles of miscarriage and/or infertility. The Church needs to be a place where couples find ongoing pastoral support.

For couples who have cohabited or had children prior to marriage, these changes in relational dynamics may have already transpired, if only out of necessity. Marriage may provide the occasion to consider them anew, and to address them again considering the permanence of the couple’s new commitment.

Also, the couple’s relationship with their parish changes during this time. In returning for Mass and other parish events, they may be excited to see everyone who helped prepare and celebrate their marriage. There can be a feeling of strong connection with the priest and others who journeyed with them in their marriage formation. Transitioning to building relationships and friendships with the broader parish community is very crucial during this time.

However, at times the priorities of family life may cause the couple to drift away from engagement in parish life. It is in baptism and First Communion preparation that parents often re-engage and dive deeper into faith, providing an opportunity to seek guidance from the parish on how to pass on the faith, fully realizing their role of being their child’s primary teacher in the faith.

6.1.2 Our Catholic Faith

After the celebration of the marriage liturgy, the couple is rightly considered to have entered a “permanent state” (CPML, 74), but “the grace contained in the sacrament is not automatically actuated, but rather requires the spouses to cooperate with it by responsibly taking on the tasks and challenges that married life presents” (CPML, 75). Marriage then, while permanent, is also a journey of development that must remain centered on the encounter with Christ as the couple nurtures their marital spirituality and sense of mission.

This is a time of marriage mystagogy, where the couple gradually deepens their understanding of the sacrament of marriage. The mentorship of other married couples is very valuable during this time in offering an example of how to grow and develop together in their marital spirituality, identity, and mission (CPML, 82-84).

Overall, marriage ministry must be centered on the marriage bond (CPML, 81). Throughout their married lives, the couple will enter and leave different stages and seasons. While the first five years require a particular accompaniment, we cannot forget that marriage enrichment should be emphasized in all of them. “This process occurs in various stages that call for generosity and sacrifice. The first powerful feelings of attraction give way to the realization that the other is now a part of my life. The pleasure of belonging to one another leads to seeing life as a common project, putting the other’s happiness ahead of my own, and realizing with joy that this marriage enriches society” (AL, 220). This constant movement, development, and deepening of the relationship requires reciprocal giving and receiving. The parish community must be willing and ready to support the couple and their family on this journey.

The aims of accompaniment (CPML, 85):

- 1. To present a “mystagogical marriage catechesis” exploring the spiritual and existential implications of the Sacrament of Marriage.*
- 2. To help married couples embark upon a healthy path in their inter-personal relationship from the outset.*
- 3. To explore in depth the themes of sexuality in married life, the transmission of life, and the raising of children.*
- 4. To instill in couples the firm will to defend their marriage bond in any crisis situation that may arise.*
- 5. To facilitate an encounter with Christ to provide an indispensable source of renewal of the grace of marriage and to foster a marital spirituality.*
- 6. To recall the meaning of the unique mission of Christian spouses.*

6.1.3 Responsibilities of the Diocese

- Set tone and vision with clergy of the necessity for ongoing marriage accompaniment and enrichment ministries.
- Develop and support a network of marriage mentor couples that align with the deanery pastoral plan and structure for ongoing marriage accompaniment.
- Provide consultation, support, and promotion of resources for the development of local ministries, retreats, and events that serve all married couples.
- Collaborate within the deanery structure in developing and supporting programs and ministry for newly married couples.

6.1.4 Responsibilities of the Parish

- Continue to build and strengthen relationships with newly married couples with particular focus and intentionality during the first years of marriage.
- Promote the Church’s vision of the beauty of marriage through enrichment activities.
- Encourage marriage mentors to stay in touch with newly married couples over the course of the first three to five years of marriage.
- Develop Baptism preparation that fosters the building of the domestic church.
- Foster a parish culture that welcomes and supports parents and young families.
- Offer spiritual devotions and practices that bridge worship from the parish to the home.
- Acknowledge the daily challenges and realities of marriage through inclusion of prayers for the newly married into petitions and homilies.

6.1.5 Responsibilities of the Christian Faithful

- Personally greet and get to know young couples who join or visit the parish.
- Cultivate small group communities with other married couples for support, prayer, and formation.

6.1.6 Responsibilities of the Couple

- Embark on healthy, virtuous habits that deepen the unique mission of marriage.
- Maintain communication with and engagement in a parish community.
- Develop a support network of healthy role models.

6.2 Pastoral Care for Couples in Crisis

In the course of every marriage, times will arise in which marital communion diminishes, and spouses find themselves experiencing periods, at times lengthy, of suffering fatigue, and misunderstandings, passing through true marital “crises” (CPML, 87).

6.2.1 Understanding the Reality

Throughout the entirety of marriage, couples will face experiences that are beyond the normal stressors of daily life. These types of experiences deeply touch one’s humanity, where its impact is felt individually, as a couple, and within the family. Such times can reach a level of crisis when one or both spouses pull away from each other and God and replace those relationships with unhealthy coping mechanisms. Often in these times of crisis, there is a loss of hope in the marriage’s mission and sense of identity.

When bad things happen, many couples do not know where or when to find help, and sometimes, couples wait to seek help until the relationship is in very poor condition. When parishes and clergy receive questions, those questions typically reflect an inquiry into what is normal, how to get one’s spouse to see things differently or change, and/or concerns over the salvageability of the relationship. Upon deeper inquiry, though, other issues of concern may be discovered, such as a spouse experiencing a situation of coercive control, domestic violence, or addiction to drugs,

alcohol, or pornography. Careful discernment about any professional services needed should take place with the individual, as a couple, and/or family as appropriate to the situation.

Wrapped in these experiences is a deep sense of shame, which often prevents one or both spouses from seeking the help they truly need and deserve. Divorce is a common response when things appear in disarray or there is a lack of support. Family, friends, clergy and those in pastoral ministry do not always know how to respond in a way that truly balances truth in love. Preservation of the bond is of the utmost concern, but it should never come at the expense of violating the dignity of the spouses or children in the marriage.

6.2.2 Our Catholic Faith

The journey of marriage is a purification process. It is a path of transformation and conversion to Christ that involves partaking in the Paschal Mystery. Not every moment will reflect the joy of Easter. A couple will be asked to endure the pain of Good Friday. “Moments of crisis form part of the marital journey, and must be transformed into opportunities, which may produce painful wounds and sores of the heart, but which always leave room for reconciliation, forgiveness, and the balm of grace, which continues to work in the sacramental bond” (*CPML*, 89). In moments of pain and suffering, a couple may be drawn closer to Christ. “Together with Him, even the ‘death’ of a crisis can be transformed into resurrection and new life!” (*CPML*, 91) It is not husband and wife alone. God is the center; the couple cannot journey through this life without God’s strengthening grace.

The Church must offer a listening ear and provide the couple with comfort and opportunities to bring their suffering to the Lord and lay it at His feet. The Church also must be ready to support those suffering unjust abandonment, separation, or divorce as they continue to pursue healing and process the relationship, including the marital bond or lack thereof.

Reminded by St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, the characteristics of love are ever new and necessary for couples during times of crisis. “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:4-7). This passage lays out of vision of living in the way of Christ’s love.

There is freedom in the practice of love and virtue in times of crisis and suffering. “Indeed, the grace of the sacrament of marriage is intended before all else ‘to perfect the couple’s love’” (*AL*, 89). Keeping God as the center of their marriage, husband and wife cannot journey through the seasons of life without God’s strengthening grace.

In the Church’s accompaniment of couples in crisis, she must always preserve the safety and dignity of the spouses and children. Careful and thorough discernment of the situation is necessary for their protection. “In some cases, respect for one’s own dignity and the good of the children requires not giving in to excessive demands or preventing a grave injustice, violence or chronic ill-treatment. In such cases, separation becomes inevitable. At times it even becomes morally necessary, precisely when it is a matter of removing the more vulnerable spouse or

young children from serious injury due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference. Even so, separation must be considered as a last resort, after all other reasonable attempts at reconciliation have proved vain” (AL, 241). Separation may be necessary for the protection of the vulnerable parties.

The aims of accompanying couples in crisis (CPML, 87):

1. *To prevent relational breakdown.*
2. *To pastorally accompany couples.*

6.2.3 Responsibilities of the Diocesan Offices

- Provide consultation and support for individuals who reach out for guidance on resources and best practices regarding potential crisis situations.
- Promote pastoral care ministries and local professionals.
- Provide support and training to deaneries and parish ministerial efforts about couples in crisis.
- Identify marriage mentors who are specialists in the accompaniment of couples in crisis.

6.2.4 Responsibilities of the Parish

- Raise awareness of the realities and support available to couples in crisis through homilies, the bulletin, and all other parish communication channels.
- Ensure all who serve on the parish front lines are properly formed in receiving individuals and couples who reach out with a potential crisis.
- Maintain and frequently update resource listings of support programs and professionals.
- Frequently promote workshops and resources on pastoral care topics.
- Offer opportunities for testimony from individuals and couples who have overcome challenges.

6.2.5 Responsibilities of the Christian Faithful

- Pray for couples facing difficult times and crises.
- Recognize our responsibility to protect the vulnerable to abuse and violence in all its forms.
- Participate in formation opportunities to increase awareness about potential crisis issues marriages may face.

6.2.6 Responsibilities of the Couple

- Pray prayers of intercession, healing, and mercy during difficult times.
- Participate in marriage enrichment opportunities—retreats, workshops, etc.
- Develop a posture of receptivity to seek and ask for help during difficult times.