

# Marriage Policy Guidelines

## Diocese of Kansas City~St. Joseph

*A brief overview for engaged couples requesting marriage within the Catholic Church*

Marriage demands a lifelong commitment. The Church has the pastoral obligation of assisting those desiring to marry to make a prayerful and mature decision concerning their marriage intentions. In particular, the priest has the responsibility of assisting the couple in an assessment of their readiness for marriage.

Catholic couples are generally married within the parish community of the bride unless other arrangements are made. Interfaith couples typically are married within the parish community of the Catholic partner. It is, therefore, necessary that an initial contact with the pastor is made to determine this preliminary decision. *The parish priest must be consulted if a couple elects to be married in another parish or city.*

**Section 1:** The Initial Interview is usually conducted by the parish priest, associate pastor, deacon or other pastoral designee. The purpose of this interview is to discuss the Diocesan Marriage Policy and to develop a relational understanding of the individuals approaching the Church for a sacramental marriage. Issues of importance may include the couple's faith and psychological readiness for marriage and their canonical freedom to marry. Couples are also extended an opportunity to share their concerns with the pastor or associate at this time.

**Section 2:** Each couple preparing for marriage within the Church is asked to complete a premarital assessment. One of two standardized assessment instruments (either Prepare II or FOCCUS) is administered. These written assessments are designed to provide the engaged couple with insight to their potential, marital relationship. Information about their relative strengths and challenges as individuals and/or as a couple are identified through this assessment process. The assessment process is not designed to rule out the possibility of marriage. The process produces no wrong or right answers.

**Section 3:** The marriage preparation process is required of all couples marrying within the diocese. Three preparation programs are recognized by the diocese for first marriages: the parish-based Lead Couple Program, God's Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage and the Catholic Engaged Encounter weekend experience. Couples who may be remarrying within the Church are encouraged to take advantage of either parish-based preparation efforts or to participate in the diocesan Remarriage preparation experience entitled To Trust Again!

The ***Lead Couple Program*** requires three weekly sessions (two hours each) involving the engaged couple and a pastorally trained married couple. The purpose of this program is to provide the engaged couple with necessary input and content regarding issues impacting the married life; to stimulate necessary dialogue between the engaged and to assist the couple in assessing their readiness for marriage.

*God's Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage* is a required supplement to all preparation programs. This program is designed to offer the engaged definitive catechesis regarding the sacramentality & spirituality of marriage, as well as, an introduction to the sacredness of their human sexuality.

The *Catholic Engaged Encounter* experience is designed to provide the engaged couples with an opportunity to talk honestly and extensively about their prospective life together. These sessions are facilitated by a priest coordinator and two married couple facilitators within a large group setting (20-25 couples). This process requires an overnight commitment from the engaged couples.

The *To Trust Again!* remarriage preparation process invites the remarrying couple into focused conversations (large/small group activities) on issues facing their relationship. Each couple is encouraged to develop an understanding of the challenges incurred in forming a successful remarriage.

The pastor, in collaboration with the engaged couple, makes the decision about the most appropriate preparation program. On occasion, the pastor may require additional preparation efforts.

**Section 4:** in most situations, the pastor or parish coordinator of marriage preparation will request follow-up interviews with the engaged couple. It is during these sessions that both the couple and the pastoral minister gain an appreciation of the couple's readiness for marriage. At this time, issues of cohabitation, pregnancy before marriage and other issues are discussed, if pertinent. The couple is encouraged to examine their spiritual, emotional and physical commitments to each other, their parish family and to God.

**Section 5:** Marriage involving individuals under the age of 19 requires special care and concern. The Church must be assured of the younger couple's understanding of the degree of maturity necessary for such a serious and permanent commitment as marriage. The decision to proceed with marriage involving minors may be given by the pastor, only after consultation with the parents or guardians of the minors. Pre-marital counseling for minors may be indicated to assist with the assessment of their readiness for marriage.

**Section 6:** Similar precautions are warranted when the couple approaches the Church for marriage when they are already pregnant. Pregnancy is not a good enough reason to get married. When a marriage begins under significant stress, more maturity is required of the couple to make the marriage successful. The engaged couple will be challenged to examine all of the ramifications of marriage when pregnancy is involved in the decision.

**Section 7:** Couples desiring to be married within the Church are required to give sufficient notice to the pastor as soon as they have the intention to marry. Generally, the engaged couple can expect a preparation time of at least 9 months **before** the date of their marriage can be set. This is done only after they have completed the assessment process.

**Section 8:** On rare occasion, a decision to marry may require a delay. A delay generally may occur when the couple or the pastor determines that there is sufficient reason not to proceed with marriage preparations. A couple's refusal to participate in the marriage preparation process or a couple's intent not to practice their faith may be serious factors precipitating a decision to cause a delay in marriage. A couple's inability to substantially appreciate the spiritual nature of the marriage relationship may also contribute to a delay.

**Section 9:** If a marriage is delayed, the couple may have recourse to the Bishop or his delegate who can review the case and recommend further considerations. The pastor shall assist the couple in initiating an Appeal through the proper diocesan channels.

**Section 10:** To ensure that couples receive at least a basic exposure to current Natural Family Planning teachings, an introductory session will be included as part of the Marriage Preparation process. An early referral to either of the two accredited programs of instruction should be made: *Fertility Care Center of Kansas City* or *The Couple to Couple League of Greater Kansas City*. Programs of orientation and instruction are held at various sites around the diocese.

**Conclusion:** The engaged couple can expect to participate in a general course of preparation that might include these basic themes:

- communication/conflict resolution
- parenting/family skills/family of origin awareness
- financial planning/priority setting
- sacramentality & spirituality of marriage
- dignity & sacredness of human sexuality/natural family planning