

# Faith Formation *Sacramental Prep*

S T . I G N A T I U S L O Y O L A P A R I S H

## MARRIAGE PREP

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FREEDOM TO MARRY

FORMS/DOCUMENTS

CONVERSATIONS  
(FOCCUS)

THE CEREMONY

THEOLOGY OF THE  
BODY

NATURAL FAMILY  
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RESOURCES

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Preparation for the sacrament of marriage is the most complex of all the sacraments. And many would say “rightly so” because there is a lot at stake. Likewise many would say that the process is overly burdensome. Let me say that the preparation process is not intended to be simply a series of hoops to jump through, it is intended to give a couple the tools to be successful in their marriage.

Now there is something special about a sacrament. It is not simply a ritual that is performed or a blessing given. It should be something much more—an opportunity to tangibly experience God and God’s grace in the relationship. We hope this begins in

the preparation process and even more so, hope that it continues throughout the marriage. Early on I ask a couple “Do you pray together?” In many cases this is something new and novel yet it centers the process of marriage prep right where it should be—how will this change my relationship with God.

Now don’t get me wrong, there are many places where couples often pray together. They do that side-by-side as they sit in the pew on Sunday. They may do that when they sit down for a meal. They probably will do that in the future with their children as they put them to bed. Yet this shift of thinking, of doing things together, includes growing in faith together as well.

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## Freedom & Consent

“I now pronounce you Husband & Wife.” That’s a line from the movies, but it is not a line from the Sacrament of Marriage. Central to the Catholic understanding of the sacrament and the ceremony is the fact that the couple “perform” the sacrament. They exchange vows. The role of the priest is to

witness these vows So the critical pivot in the sacrament is the couple’s consent. As a result, especially in the preparation process, is an understanding of consent and freedom to give consent.

You’ve probably seen enough detective movies to know the problem of a coerced confession as something

not admissible in court. And you can guess that an individual is not free to give consent if they are in any way coerced. When a couple begins to complete the documents for marriage there are a series of questions asked concerning freedom to marry. They include coercion as well as other impediments like

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## Marriage Prep (cont.)

Imagine getting to the point where one spouse would say “You really do reveal God’s love for me.”

One of the central tenets of John Paul II’s Theology of the Body is that God is revealed through the body. Even the complementarity of male and female is revelatory of God’s own self. Without being diverted into gender issues, you’ve got to admit that what we have learned of love we have learned not in the head, but in our own flesh and blood. And it is as embodied people that we learn of love and express love. This applies not only to intimacy and sexual expression, it applies to all the ways in

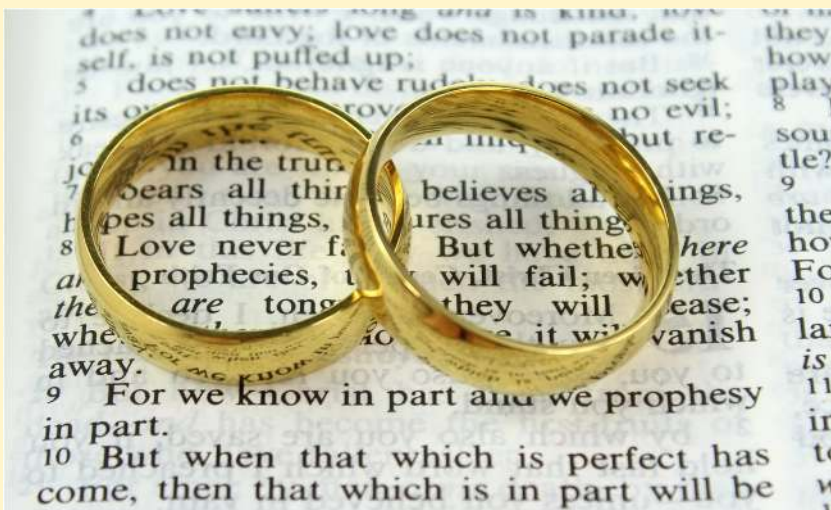
which we show our love. This includes doing laundry and putting down the toilet lid. This is as true for the couple as it will be for the family that will be formed.

Yet for a couple to share everything includes sharing one’s faith. It may be one of the most challenging places of vulnerability unsure whether one’s deeply held beliefs will be “acceptable” to someone else. Still, there’s always the possibility of great enrichment much as the merging of diverse cultural backgrounds.

So sometimes we start a bit slower and easier and ask “Do you pray for one



another?” “What do you pray for?” “What do you thank God for?” Believe me, this can be one of the most touching conversations to have with a couple, directing them to an experience of just how deeply they love one another. So marriage prep should be like the sacrament, wanting to grow in love for one another with God’s grace.



## Freedom & Consent (cont)

“Have you ever been married before?” Or “Are you related by blood or marriage?” If so, you may not be “free” to make this commitment. There will also be a question or two about your psychological health, whether you are “competent” to make such a commitment.

These questions and responses are so critical that the couples’ responses are to be witnessed by a priest or deacon. The questions are also part of the marriage ceremony itself, right before the exchange of vows. Further,

this diocese requests additional documentation by a similar testimonial from a parent or long-time acquaintance. One last little piece from the past is the publication of “Wedding Bands” in the parish bulletin. This was a public announcement of the upcoming marriage giving the public ample time to “object” if they know of any impediment or problems with consent.

While these questions are stark and contractual in nature, the concept of freedom as well as an understanding of the

responsibilities will likely resurface throughout the marriage preparation process.

Freedom is essential to this special relationship of marriage. It mirrors the freedom that God offers to

each of us, the love that God freely bestows on us, without condition, without cost. The same for the marriage, God invites, does not coerce.



## Resources

The process of marriage preparation is pretty standard across the U.S. with some minor exceptions. So to get a “feel” for the process, you can go to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishop’s website “For Your Marriage” (<https://www.foryourmarriage.org>) You will find a “checklist” of items at <https://www.foryourmarriage.org/getting-married-catholic/>

But marriage is much more than just the checklist for the ceremony or the ceremony itself. The Bishop’s website includes discussions of the many different areas of marriage—everything from parenting to the need for “date

night”. It might be worthwhile to browse through all the different topics, not necessarily to read through it all, but to consider the questions or conversations you might want to have with your spouse. For example, there’s a section called “The Little Oratory” <https://www.foryourmarriage.org/blogs/the-little-oratory-a-beginners-guide-to-praying-in-the-home/> which talks about setting up a prayer space in your home—a place where you can teach your children to pray, or a place where a couple may learn to pray together. You may choose an entirely different style of place and style of prayer, yet it is an interesting conversation to have. I can remember the holy candles that we had for storms as well as the

icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. What do you remember of prayer spaces and family prayer in your home? What might you hope for?

This is just one of many questions you might one to consider as part of your marriage, whether that’s something you are preparing for or something you have been celebrating for years.

Other resources: Understanding the Wedding Ceremony from Witness to Love (<https://witnessstolove.org/understanding-the-catholic-wedding-ceremony/>) Archdiocese of Denver: <https://archden.org/marriage/newly-engaged/>

## Documents

An initial meeting with a couple planning marriage begins with opening a file. Some initial details are gathered including names of individuals, religious backgrounds, ages, date of wedding, etc. At the time of the first meeting we present a checklist of requirements that need to be completed before the marriage. This is to be initialed by both bride and groom and entered into the file—just so that we all know what's expected and required. We also begin with a sheet of basic details including date of wedding, wedding rehearsal, witnesses, etc. The latter helps us as a parish begin our process of "getting ready" including reservation of the church, arrangement for musicians, assignment of priest to perform the ceremony.

Official documents begin with an MA for bride and an MA for the groom. These are official documents completed by the couple attesting to: freedom to marry, understanding of marriage as an exclusive relationship that last a lifetime, openness to children, etc. This form is signed by the individual and witnessed by a priest or deacon.

The second official document is an MB, a testimony by others about the bride and groom their freedom to marry, their understanding of marriage, etc. Oftentimes a parent completes this testimonial and has it

witnessed by a priest or deacon.

A "normal wedding" is between a Catholic bride and Catholic groom, takes place in a church or oratory, all the forms completed with a priest or deacon officiating. However, there are often exceptions. If the wedding doesn't happen at one's home parish, if one or other is not Catholic, if the preparation process has to be completed in less than 8 months (e.g. a pending military deployment). All of these require receipt of permission from the diocese. An MC form is completed and sent to the diocese to obtain the requisite permissions.

Certificates of completion. These would include a certificate indicating successful completion of a Natural Family Planning class, a marriage preparation class approved by the diocese and a Pre-Marital Inventory like FOCCUS. All are included in the couple's file.

Baptismal certificates. Each is asked to include an official copy of their baptismal certificate sent from the place of baptism to our parish. What many

do not know is that all of your major sacraments are recorded at the church of your baptism. This includes baptism, first communion, confirmation, marriage, religious vows and/or ordination. So when all is said and done, our parish is required to notify the place of baptism of your recent marriage. (Notice that this document could tell us if you were married before, in the church, and show that you are not free to marry.)

Valid marriage license. Sounds trivial to mention but this is a legal ceremony as well as a religious one. All the I's have to be dotted and T's crossed.

Lastly, it is possible for preparation to take place at one parish and the wedding at another. If this transition crosses diocesan boundaries, well documents must be sent from the parish preparing the couple, to the local diocese, forwarded to the diocese of the ceremony, forwarded to the church of the ceremony. So, it is important to keep track of all the documents (the wedding file) and the timing of completion of particular programs in order that everything makes it to the church on time.

These are the major components, and sometimes there's a bit more to process. But you get the idea. No wonder folks are asked to begin 8 months prior to the wedding date.



## Premarital Inventory

“Have you talked about...?” If I were to ask any individual on the street, “What’s the biggest problem in a marriage?” I know that everyone would have a different answer. So, can we prepare a couple for everything? Of course not. Yet there are some significant issues that studies should be discussed as part of the “getting to know you” process.

A pre-marital inventory like the FOCCUS offers a series of questions on all sorts of topics to see if bride and groom agree or at least

have discussed. Like what? Well, children, for one. Do you wish to have children? Right away or wait? One or a half dozen?

Now many people would probably have discussed the obvious like children, but there are many more subtle conversations.

These might include “How do you want to raise the children?” or “How much interference from your parents or in-laws do you expect rearing your children?” The answers are not right or wrong. What is important is to have the conversation and hopefully

come to an understanding in some way before your wedding day. This is what a pre-marital inventory helps with. In essence, it is a checklist of things to discuss, everything from finances to social life to cultural or religious differences. The inventory

is quite extensive—something like 160 questions—and broken out into categories of agreement.

Again, this is not a test, it is a tool to open up conversations for the couple.



## Ceremony

The wedding ceremony may be a Nuptial Mass if both individuals are Catholic. If one is a baptized Christian but not Catholic, the ceremony is usually not a Mass unless approved by the bishop. If one of the couple is not Christian, there is a third form of the ceremony that speaks in the prayers of covenant and not sacrament.

For a Mass, the couple gets to choose the readings used, various forms of the prayers used and a couple of versions of the vows. The couple may not make up their own vows. We wish to make very clear their commitment to one another.

Music for the ceremony is to be liturgical in nature. Yes, you may have Pacabel’s Canon for a processional but you may not have secular songs during the ceremony. Sorry, no Beatles, Garth Brooks or Elvis.

That said, there are many songs that may be chosen that help the couple to express their love and their understanding of God’s presence and blessing as they exchange vows.

There is a template for what is known as the Universal Prayers (intercessions). Often times the couple is able to add intentions for family that have passed, those who cannot attend and maybe a special prayer for a specific need.

Of course there are efforts made

to include family members and friends as part of the ceremony. This includes attendants, ushers, lectors, ring bearer and such.

And while the ceremony’s focus really is the wedding couple, I often ask the couple to simply turn and take in all the people who are there to support them, to pray for them and in many different ways care for them. This too is a reflection of God’s love for them. Not something to be missed.

As noted previously, there is no “I pronounce you...” or “Who objects...” The presider may do a presentation at the end such as “I now introduce to you, Mr. & Mrs....”

## To Ponder and to Share

St. Ignatius Loyola Church  
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Denver, CO 80205  
Phone: 303-322-8042  
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**Finding God in All Things**

- What parts of the ceremony are hold-overs from the past? How might you reconsider the father "giving away" the bride?
- What parts of the ceremony would you like to retain? Would you like to have a framed copy of the readings on the wall in your home? Maybe a copy of your vows?
- The "Unity Candle" is no longer a regular part of the ceremony, yet there are many other symbols of unity there. What might they be?

## Natural Family Planning

As the title implies, this part of the marriage prep program is about conception and contraception. It covers the basic concepts of ovulation, menstrual cycles, periods of fertility and the times when conception is likely or not. A short list of questions and answers is presented on the US Catholic Bishops website at <https://www.usccb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/what-natural-family-planning>.

While we can get into some serious arguments over artificial versus natural, there are many benefits to taking the class. First, it begins a serious conversation about sexual intimacy as something more than simply pleasure—there are consequences. Secondly, we don't often like to talk about certain body parts or body functions. But face it, at some point some of those parts or functions are not going to work properly. Then the question becomes, as a spouse, do I know enough about the other to be supportive? Third, this discussion, well I would hope it would bring out some of the wonder of the human body. As mentioned previously in an allusion to the Theology of the Body, we reveal God in our bodies. To understand the intricacies of procreation can carry with it the awe of something like looking upon the intricacies of the universe, the wonder of creation manifested in a star filled sky. We are truly, wonderfully made.

*For thou didst form my inward parts,  
thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. (Ps 139:13)*

Lastly, there's something to be said about a couple not making a decision alone, but doing so in the presence of God. The decision to have a family is not strictly biological nor is it only personal and secular. It is good to consider what God calls each of you to, and the fullness of marriage which includes an openness to children.

Marriage Websites:

- <https://archden.org/marriage/newly-engaged/>
- <https://www.foryourmarriage.org/>
- The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia) [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html)