Catechesis on the Mystery of Crowning

Leader's Guide

Diocese of Newton
Office of Educational Services
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West Newton, MA 02165
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Introduction

Catechesis on marriage includes many levels: remote preparation as young people grow in readiness for marriage, didache or instruction on the Christian way of living in a committed relationship, and mystagogia, the subject of this present work, which is concerned with the specifically sacramental vocation of marriage in the Lord. Still to come are the times during the all-important first years of marriage when you will enlarge the couple’s awareness of these basic themes through opportunities for continued reflection.

Those whom you are preparing should have completed the didache section of their preparation, reflecting on the basic dynamics of life together: communication, sexuality, finances, personal interests and preferences, and their own expectations for marriage. Two useful resources for this section are Peter Velander, Pre Marriage Awareness Inventory program (Shepherd’s Staff, Inver Grove Heights, MN 55075) for use with individual couples and Dahl and Gallagher, Evenings for the Engaged (W.H. Sadlier, Inc., New York, NY 10007) for use with groups. Unless they have a good grasp of our Church tradition, you should have also spent some time with them discussing this topic as well. Rev. John Matusiak’s Our Faith (New Life Publications, Wayne, NJ 07470) is useful for presenting such an overview.

Our purpose now is to turn our attention to sacramental aspects of this mystery according to the understanding of the Tradition. This mystagogia encompasses four general themes: sacramentality, unity, the kingship and priesthood of marriage, and their exercise in the domestic church. While these themes are all drawn from the crowning ritual, our aim is not simply to explain ceremonies but to unfold the realities of the sacramental life they represent. Thus our discussion of the rite of marriage is directed to deepening the couple’s awareness of what that rite invites them to in their daily life.
DYNAMIC OF THE SESSIONS

The guide to each session in this program is built on a dynamic adapted from Thomas Groome's *Christian Religious Education* (Harper and Row, New York, NY 10022) and consists of the following basic steps:

1 - Present the Session Aim - The purpose here is to give the participants an idea of what you hope to accomplish in your time together. You may limit it to a simple opening statement of what the topic is. You may phrase it as a question, "What does this topic mean to you?" You may begin by citing an illustration of the session theme in practice and bring the participants to deduce the theme from the example.

2 - Discuss the Participants' Stories - Everyone has some experience of marriage, good or bad, from the witness of their parents and other couples they have known. The purpose of this section is to reflect on their own past experiences as related to the session theme. Our attitudes are formed by our experience and so their reaction to the Church's vision for marriage will be colored by what they have experienced of other marriages.

3 - Present the Church's Story and Vision - This is the time for your presentation on what the Church's experience and teaching is on the theme of the session. The participant's text presents a digest of this material. You may wish to consult the references at the end of this section for further background on the subject.

4 - Create a Dialogue Between Their Story and the Church's - By dialog is meant asking what the Church's story says about our experience and vice versa. If the Church's vision of Christian marriage is at odds with what the couple's experience has been, either the Church's ideals are impractical or the couple has yet to see a marriage which embodies that vision.

5 - Setting a Vision for the Participants - Here we attempt to make some specific resolves based on the above dialog which this couple can try to implement in their own life together. This can present you with material for further reflection and discussion in the first year or two of the marriage.

USING THE WITNESS OF OTHER COUPLES

Much of what is discussed in this program will remain theory unless the couple comes to know a man and woman who are committed to living a sacramental relationship. Finding such a couple should be the first step in providing immediate preparation for your young people looking to marriage. They will be in fact the Church's sponsors for new Christian
families in the community. During the sessions their witness can play an important part in the presentation of the Church's Vision (# 3 above). The continued contacts such a sponsor couple could have with newlyweds in the community would provide an even deeper source of support and strength as they begin their life together. Such a couple will be the greatest resource in your catechetical program.
BACKGROUND FOR THE FACILITATOR

Stephen Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ* (Servant Publications, PO Box 8617, Ann Arbor, MI 48107) - An extensive examination of the roles of men and women in the light of the Scriptures and the social sciences as well as a design for pastoral strategies in creating a modern Christian social structure for couples and singles.

Paul Evdokimov, "Conjugal Priesthood" in G. Crespy et al., *Marriage and Christian Tradition* (Divine Word Publications, Techny, IL 60082) - Still the best treatment in English from an Eastern Christian source, this essay presents the theology of marriage as well as some aspects of contemporary Church practice.

The Sacrament of Love (SVS Press, 475 Scarsdale Road, Crestwood, NY 10707) - A fuller presentation of the above themes by the same author, although somewhat less clear and straightforward.

Michael Henning, *Marriage and the Christian Home* (St. Nectarios Press, 10300 Ashworth Avenue North, Seattle, WA 98133) - A brief monograph presenting marriage in the Scriptures as well as a guide on how to set up an Orthodox home.

John Meyendorff, *Marriage: an Orthodox Perspective* (SVS Press, 475 Scarsdale Road, Crestwood, NY 10707) - A historical and theological exposition of the development of Byzantine marriage praxis.

Office of Educational Services, *Catechetical Guidelines for Marriage Instruction* (Office of Educational Services, 19 Dartmouth Street, West Newton, MA 02165) - Delineation of elements in parish marriage catechesis from remote preparation to the ongoing formation with suggested resources for each step.
SESSION ONE - A TRANSFORMING MYSTERY

Preliminaries

Prior to this first session the participants should have been given copies of the text, With Glory and Honor, and asked to read the first chapter, pages 7-11, and consider the Questions for Reflection on page 11.

Your meeting should be in as relaxed an atmosphere as possible, preferably in the home of a sponsor couple. Gathering at the dining room table over coffee and opening small talk is an effective and natural way of leading into the session. Be sure to say a blessing before sharing the refreshments as this action will be the starting point of your discussion.

The Session Aim

Begin by asking why we bless the food in Christian homes: what does the blessing “do”? Point out that the Church's blessing of moments in our life makes them sacramental, transforms them into aspects of God's kingdom. That's why we blessed this sharing: that's why we will bless your marriage and call it sacramental, a holy mystery of the Church.

Participants' Stories

Your aim here is to help the participants desire their marriage to be sacramental in fact as well as in name. Begin by asking them to describe their experience of the sacraments: what do we sanctify in these rites? What is offered to be transformed? Do we have immediate outward signs of transformation? Do we still believe that transformation is taking place?

Apply this concept to marriage: have they seen transformation taking place in Christian marriages they know? Do they see any differences in the lives of couples they know? For what should we be looking in a sacramental marriage?

Church's Story and Vision

Present the concept of the Kingdom of God: that this kingdom is where God's reign is recognized, and that when the rule of any aspect of life is turned over to Him, transformation happens.

Note that the Church understands this to work by synergy: that, because we are in God's image, we are free and must work along with God in this process. In the marriage rite we will turn the relationship over to the Lord and ask Him to reign there. But then we must surrender control in the marriage on a daily basis, work in synergy with the One we have asked to transform it.
Here the witness of a couple who have experienced transformation in their marriage by surrendering to the reign of God in it is invaluable. Their sharing should focus precisely on their experience of this process of surrender/transformation.

Point out how our liturgical rite suggests that a couple is bringing their relationship to the Lord to be transformed (participants' text, pages 8 and 10). If either party is not familiar with this rite you may wish to illustrate your description using a video cassette of a marriage in your parish. Note that this is not simply a nice ceremony to be performed, but a statement of offering which should echo the couple's desire to allow the Lord to reign in their marriage.

Read the first paragraph on page 11 and reflect on each of the transformations which the Tradition indicates takes place in the mystery of crowning. Remind the participants that this is the vision which the Church has for Christian marriage and invite them to make it their own.

The Dialog

Utilizing the Questions for Reflection on page 11 of the participants' text, move from the presentation of the Tradition to their expectations for this mystery (questions four and five). Are they willing to actually bring their marriage into the kingdom by allowing the Lord to reign in it? What areas are they not willing to surrender to Him and His way? Attempt to bring them to a decision as to what they are prepared to do in this regard.

Setting a Vision

Bring the discussion to a close by helping the couple outline a concrete step they can take to involve the Lord in their life together. It should be a specific, even measurable, action. If they have indicated a desire for transformation in question five, help them frame a plan of action in regard to that point.

Conclude by reminding them that prayer for one another is essential both as they prepare for marriage and each day throughout their life together. Suggest that they also pray daily for the Lord's help in carrying out the goal they have set for themselves above.

Prayer

Bring the evening to a close by reading Jn 2: 1-11 (the marriage at Cana), telling the couple that you will read this Gospel at their marriage, praying that the Lord who transformed water to wine at Cana may work a transformation in their lives as well. Then pray that their own relationship be
transformed according to the Lord's vision expressed in the teaching of the Church.

Ask the participants to read chapter two, pages 12 to 16, and consider the Questions for Reflection on page 16 before your next meeting.
SESSION TWO - TWO BECOME AS ONE

Preliminaries

Over coffee discuss their experience in implementing the vision they tried to set at the last session as to involving the Lord in their life together. Did they attempt to implement it or was it forgotten? What did they learn from the experience?

The Session Aim

In this session you are seeking to help the couple see unity and headship in the home in the light of these same realities in the Trinity and the Church. Display and explain the icon of the Hospitality of Abraham and why it is the usual representation of the Trinity in Byzantine iconography. Indicate that this icon is a sign of the unity in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that, because we are in the image of God, it has something to say to us about what it means to be one.

Participants' Stories

Ask the participants what "being one" means to them: how do they imagine a couple is one. Ask them to share some experiences which led them to that understanding: have they seen people live this way, is it something they are wishing for because they have seen people live the opposite way?

Ask them to describe marriages they may be familiar with, such as their parents', in terms of unity. What in their lives indicates that they are one or not one?

Church's Story and Vision

Return to the icon of the Trinity, pointing out that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct, yet one. Their distinctness does not detract from their unity. In fact, if there were no distinctness, there would not be unity but uniformity.

Look to the similar unity in the Church. Each local Church has its distinct tradition and practice and yet, where the commitment to unity is present, they remain one. Show that, because the Church is made up of people with fallen natures, its unity is not preserved automatically. We must work to maintain it in cooperation with God's gifts (synergy).

Make the comparison with marriage. Here, too, unity is not uniformity. The distinctness of each party is not to be eradicated but cherished while at the same time being committed to unity. Like the Church's unity, the couple's oneness needs to be preserved by
consciously cooperating with the grace of God in the mystery of crowning. Utilize the witness of a sponsor couple to show how their distinctiveness and unity work together.

Discuss the rite of the Common Cup. Ask the participants what they see this rite is saying about unity. Using the cup to symbolize elements in their life together (eg financial concerns, the sickness of one of their parents, a future call to ministry, eg. as deacon or catechist), ask the participants how they would share such a "common cup".

Read together the first three paragraphs in the section "God's Order in the Home" on page 15. To be certain that the participants see headship as a function rather than a claim to superior status or worth, ask them to explain these concepts in their own words. Help them refine their understanding until they see clearly what the text is actually saying. Comparing the headship of the Father in the Trinity and the bishop in the Church to the husband in the home may prove useful in this regard. Note: for additional insight into this difficult area, cf Clark, Man and Woman in Christ, Chapters Three ("The Family: Husbands and Wives", pp. 47-70), Four ("The Family: Key Texts", pp. 71-100), and Twelve ("Christian Tradition: Husbands and Wives", pp 281-298).

The Dialog

Utilize the Questions for Reflection on page 16, especially number two to four to explore their reactions to these concepts. Does the Tradition affirm their present beliefs or call them beyond these suppositions. Since contemporary culture is so opposed to the Scriptural concept of headship, it may be an accomplishment to get some participants to see that perhaps the Lord may be speaking in the Tradition to call them beyond our culture's ideas.

Setting a Vision

Bring the discussion to a close be helping the couple outline a concrete step they can take to express a commitment to unity in their relationship. It should be a specific, even measurable, action.

Remind them to continue praying daily for one another, especially that their commitment to unity in Him may be strengthened each day of their married life.

Prayer

Bring the evening to a close by reading Eph 5:21-33 (the relationship of husband and wife). Note that at their wedding you will be praying that they accept God's order for their home "so that they may live according to Your will". Pray now that their commitment to unity in Christ
become so strong that they be willing to live according to His vision for their home.

Ask the participants to read Chapter Three, "Marriage: A Royal Priesthood", pages 17 to 20 and to consider the Questions for Reflection on page 20 before your next meeting.
SESSION THREE - MARRIAGE: A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

Preliminaries

Bring to your meeting place the marriage crowns used in your church and place them in the icon corner or at least together with an icon and the Scriptures.

Over coffee with the couple discuss their experience in implementing the vision for expressing a commitment to unity in their relationship which they tried to set at the last session. Did they attempt to implement it or was it forgotten? What did they learn from the experience?

The Session Aim

In this session you are seeking to help the couple perceive the distinctively sacramental quality of Christian marriage as a royal priesthood. Discuss the marriage crowns which you placed in the icon corner, explaining their symbolism in terms of victory and dominion. The couple is crowned because, like Adam and Eve, they are given dominion over a segment of creation, with the call to be faithful stewards, making of it an offering to the Lord.

Participants' Stories

Ask the participants to share some teenage memories: how they tried to decorate their room, place their mark on it, make it “theirs”. Point out that this was probably the first element of creation over which they were given dominion.

Compare this to the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis who are given the Garden in much the same way. They are allowed, within certain limits, to exercise dominion over it, with the injunction to make their rule a productive one (“Increase and multiply...”).

Now extend the imagery to marriage, using elements of the crowning ritual which refer to the Genesis theme. Show that the Church sees the couple as put in the position of Adam and Eve, called to exercise a fruitful dominion over their corner of creation.

Church's Story and Vision

Explain the Scriptural identification of dominion and priesthood. Point out that in the Tradition dominion does not mean the license to do with the kingdom whatever one wishes (exploitation), but includes the call to make of creation a worthy offering to God. Adam and Eve had this calling but failed. Now the couple will receive the calling as well.
Discuss the procession around the marriage table, emphasizing the connection with the rites of ordination. Stress that this is the most distinctive aspect of the mystery. By entering into a sacramental marriage, you are not simply blessing your private relationship but accepting the vocation to make of your home an altar, your life an oblation.

At this point afford them the opportunity to hear a witness from the sponsor couple as to their perception of the priesthood of marriage. A particularly effective testimony might be to contrast one’s earlier, self centered expectations with a later vision which sees marriage as a vocation to offer.

Ask the couple to describe marriages they know: are any characterized by self centered expectations? Do they know any which might be characterized as more priestly, or open to giving their kingdom to the Lord? How will this affect their own lifestyle together?

The Dialog

Utilize the Questions for Reflection on page 20, especially numbers one and four to explore their reactions to this concept. Give an example of this dynamic in the blessings popularly given during food preparation and the grace before meals. Demonstrate for the couple how they can do this in their own home. Remind them that, as was discussed in session one, we make such an offering with the prayer that the gift be transformed. Extend this principle to other aspects of life. You will likely have to offer a number of suggestions, based on their circumstances of life, in which this principle could be extended beyond the area of meals.

Discuss their reactions to this concept. What areas of discussion so far evoke agreement or disagreement? Can they see ways in which this concept can be brought into their own lives?

Setting a Vision

Bring the discussion to a close by helping the couple outline a concrete step they can take to offer some aspect of their life as an offering to the Lord. It should be a specific, even measurable, action of offering, whereby the couple gives some area of their life to God.

Note that at their wedding you will be praying that the Lord "accept their crowns in Your kingdom, spotless and blameless“ (prayer at the removal of the crowns), i.e. that their life together will be a fitting response to the call they are receiving from God. Remind them that prayer for one another is essential as well. Suggest that they pray regularly for the Lord's help in responding to His priestly call.
Prayer

Bring the evening to a close by reading Psalm 8 (the priesthood of creation) and praying that the couple respond to the Lord's call to share in that priesthood in a new way by their marriage.

Ask the participants to read chapter four, pages 21 to 23, and consider the Questions for Reflection on page 23 before your next meeting.
SESSION FOUR - A DOMESTIC CHURCH

Preliminaries

Bring to your meeting place copies of A Guide for the Domestic Church for each participant.

Over coffee with the couple discuss their experience in implementing the vision for making some aspect of their lives a priestly offering to the Lord which they tried to set at the last session. Did they attempt to implement it or was it forgotten? What did they learn from the experience?

The Session Aim

This last meeting provides the opportunity for summarizing all that has been said in previous meetings about sacramental marriage as it presents the vision of the Christian family as a domestic church. Remind the participants of the priestly role of a husband and wife, summarizing thoughts from session three. Extend the image to see the home as the "place of the priests", i.e. a church.

Discuss the participants' reactions to reading this terminology in their text. Did the term make sense to them? Can they identify with any of the examples cited in the book?

Participants' Stories

Ask the participants to share memories of prayer in their family homes. Were they taught prayer as children? Did someone pray with them at bedtime? Did the family ever pray all together? And, most importantly, was prayer "something for the children's sake"?

Reflect with them what they actually learned about prayer in their home: was it mature, purely formal, for church only, etc.? What are their own experiences about prayer: is it something real for their own lives or in fact outside their experience?

Church's Story and Vision

Explain prayer as an expression of our relationship to the living God, communication with the One who would be in communion with us. You may have to give some basic catechesis on prayer here unless the couple is committed to the Christian life. In any case, stress that it is not an extra but is basic to our lives as priests, both individually and together.

Discuss the other aspects of church life (teaching, fellowship and service) as they apply to the domestic church. Indicate the way these
function in the local Church and suggest parallels for family life. Here again the witness of the sponsor couple to these kinds of activities in their own marriage will be invaluable at this point.

Review with the participants highlights of the Church’s vision for marriage as detailed in A Guide for the Domestic Church, especially the sections on the icon corner, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving in the Christian family. Note that the book contains practical suggestions on how to implement this vision in accordance with our Tradition. Recognize that such a vision is probably far from the couple’s minds at the moment, but that the Lord will open them up to this fuller Christian family life if they are willing to be transformed in this way.

Spend some time discussing the distinction between enough and abundance which St. Paul makes in 2 Cor 9:8 and which the crowning service takes up. Compare this vision in the Tradition with the couple’s own plans for their future.

The Dialog

Utilize Questions for Reflection numbers one and four on page 23 to explore the participants’ reaction to this concept. Does the Church’s vision confirm their experience of a Christian home or invite them beyond that experience to a deeper level of commitment? Stress that no one imagines implementing all the ideas in the book overnight, but that it does set forth a path which priestly couples in our Church should attempt to explore.

Setting a Vision

Invite the couple to assess their own level of Christian practice. Does their life now affirm our vision of the domestic church? Are they able by themselves to begin implementing it? Explore their response to the third Question for Reflection on page 23 as a way of initiating discussion of your follow up program.

Describe your parish’s ongoing program for couples. A number of models are suggested in Catechetical Guidelines for Marriage Instruction (Office of Educational Services, West Newton, MA 02165). Invite them to consider participating in the program once they are established in their new home as husband and wife.

Remind them that the rite of crowning will celebrate liturgically the themes you have discussed in these sessions. Take the opportunity during the celebration to help them make the connection with the ideas you have been discussing.
Point out that the entire community will be ready to welcome them back into its midst at the Removal of the Crowns on the first Sunday of their return. This will mark the beginning of their domestic church.

Prayer

Bring the evening to a close by praying Psalm 128 ("Happy are those who fear the Lord ...") which will be sung as the couple enter the church to present their relationship to the Lord. Remind the couple that the vision of Christian marriage promises the blessing mentioned in the psalm: life forevermore in the doing of God's will for their lives.