CATECHETICAL GUIDELINES
FOR MARRIAGE INSTRUCTION

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Background

Secular society has made marriage a target for some time. Media as well as public policy activists (educators, social workers, feminists, militant homosexuals) and businesses are promoting a situation which minimizes the role of the family in society. This undermines not only Christian marriage but secular family values as well. The family is an endangered species, at least in the main.

Given this situation, our Church cannot continue to assume that people absorb from parents or the culture what we believe Christian marriage to be. There must be a serious commitment (a) to preparing people for marriage and also (b) to providing an energetic, even aggressive atmosphere for living Christian family life. People must be helped to see the challenges to Christian marriage as well as the vision of the sacramental view propounded by the Church. They must be given the opportunity to live out this vision in a community of other committed Christian couples.

In our situation, it is extreme folly to assume that this applies to "American" families, but that Middle Easterners don't have these problems to face because they are emerging from a strong family structure. If anything, the opposite is true: the immigrant needs more formation and support, because he is coming from a mindset which in general says, "American materialism is the way to go". He has discovered the possibilities of the secular way of life and wants what it has to offer. Every pressure needs to be brought to bear to see that the new immigrant realizes the choices he is making. "I know the family from Damascus", or Zahle, or Ramallah is no reason to omit pre-marriage instruction. If anything, it is reason to extend it.

Aspects of Marriage Preparation

The spiritual formation of adults in our Tradition has always been conceived of as a one-on-one process, because each adult is different, with distinct background, felt needs, etc. The same is true of couples who are preparing for marriage. We must realize that each preparation must take these individual differences into account. And so what we are recommending here, while it proposes a basic program and range of topics, also recognizes that the specific situations of some couples may require more attention. It is hard to imagine couples who would need less.

Remote Preparation

The first "marriage preparation program" each person undergoes is the marriage of his or her parents which has been experienced firsthand over a number of years. What has this contributed to their formation? The contacts which the priest has with parish families, especially where teens are to be found,
will at least give him a sense of where the young adults in the parish are coming from and what expectations and experiences they bring to marriage. Thus the priest should focus special attention on those families and the young people in them, rather than allow them to slip into the secular mainstream.

The parish catechetical program must include formational experiences for teens and young adults. In many parishes, even the majority, this is lacking today. A small number of young people in the parish does not absolve us from catechizing them, if only on an individual basis. Part of this catechetical formation should include remote preparation for marriage, which at this stage should concentrate on how Christians conduct family relationships.

Immediate Preparation

There are a host of commercially available Christian marriage preparation courses on the market and several considerations have been considered in the following recommendation. First of all there is the question of content. The topics covered in most of these programs are similar, but the perspectives vary. Some, although of Christian origin, are written from a completely secular or humanistic standpoint. Some, for example, never mention the Gospel as a standard for Christian living. Thus the didache aspect is often either a simple sharing of the couple's personal ideas or includes teaching from psychology or the social sciences with no references to the didache in Scripture, much less the rest of the Tradition.

Other available programs are to one degree or another evangelical, still others rely primarily on Church policy statements for their authority. Among many of them, however, we often find a tendency to treat the New Testament teaching on order and headship in marriage as cultural conditioning. Finally, in all programs produced by Western Catholics, there is a minimalizing of mystagogia (often reduced to “planning your ceremony”). As a result there is no specifically Christian or sacramental vision of marriage communicated.

In addition, there is great variety in the area of dynamics. Some programs are basically books to be read or tapes to be heard. This type of technique does not motivate people to see the Church as a community in which to live as a sacramental couple. There must be interactional dynamic in the program, not only between the intended spouses, but with the Church (the Tradition, the community, the priest).

It was long customary that the parish priest conducted the marriage preparation himself, and that was that. Increasingly the practice has changed to include a number of other participants. At first, in places where the instruction was given to a large group of couples together, professionals (psychologists, physicians) were often brought in to lecture about communication skills, reproduction, and the like. Today the trend has been rather to invite parishioners who can witness to their own experience of Christian married life to become involved in the entire catechetical process. Thus several programs are written to
include the participation of parishioners as "sponsor couples". The six session program, *Evenings for the Engaged* (W.H. Sadlier, Inc., 11 Park Place, New York, NY 10007) is perhaps the best program of this design. There is one practical drawback to recommending such a program. It presumes, first of all, that the parish priest or deacon can team teach, allowing others' gifts to come forward. Secondly it presumes that both clergyman and couples will take the additional time to be prepare and coordinate their presentations to make their witness as effective as possible. While in larger parishes several committed married couples may be interested in this kind of ministry, it may not be as easy to implement in smaller communities.

In some places it also has become customary to prepare several couples together. This has some advantages: there can be more opportunity for interaction between the various couples. However, unless the couples are very similar in background, the discussion may be more superficial in such a setting that in an individual preparation format. The personal qualities of each couple as well as the facilitators must be considered before deciding which style is most appropriate.

In small parishes which may not have several couples preparing for marriage at the same time and where group preparation may be desired, two options present themselves. You may join with another Eastern Catholic parish or parishes for marriage preparation. This has the advantage of introducing your parishioners to other Eastern Christians of the same age and perhaps stimulate the desire for further contacts. Another option is asking your most recently married couple(s) to repeat the program once or twice with the next prospective bride and groom as a way of assisting those who follow them. In this way your marriage preparation sessions will also become part of your ongoing marriage formation.

Another major area of concern is the second marriage, whether the result of divorce, annulment or the death of one of the spouses. Totally different issues must be dealt with here, such as the emotional closure of the first marriage(s), expectations and key issues of the new marriage as colored by the earlier experience, the blending of children and families, and the continuing of existing relationships among extended family members and the Church community. These concerns demand the designing of a didache different in many respects from one appropriate to a first marriage.

Finally, the mystagogia must be drawn from our own liturgical tradition. Our marriage rites are not simply beautiful ceremonies, but statements in worship of what we believe a Christian marriage is meant to be. This needs to be communicated to couples as they enter into the Church's particular way of living a marital relationship.
Ongoing Formation

The parish which considers the formation of the couple concluded with the marriage ceremony can expect at least to lose the couple as active participants in parish life.

In addition, by casting the couple out on its own without a supportive Christian environment in which to live its new life, the parish is exposing it to the worst forces of secularism. Parishes must thus explore ways of providing an ongoing opportunity for couples to relate to the Church and to one another as Christian community, and to support one another in the difficult early years of marriage. Periodic potluck suppers in one another's homes coupled with presentations on specific issues of marriage and family life are one way of assuring this continued and supportive relationship in the Church.

Such ongoing formation may include three areas of concern. In the first two or three years of marriage time may best be spent on extending the didache aspects of the marriage program. While these topics were discussed in theory before the marriage, they have now become practical realities which the couple must face on a daily basis. Their way of dealing with issues such as communication, finances and the like are usually set in these early years.

A second approach seeks to extend the mystagogia side of the program. The couple seeking to live as a domestic church needs specific helps and concrete ideas on how to do this. It can also benefit from group opportunities to practice extending the Church's life into their daily experience. Common observances of the feasts and fasts are one way of providing such opportunities. The third aspect of the ongoing formation of couples is concerned with parenting concerns. The expectation and arrival of the first child(ren) provide opportunities for catechesis on the nature of creation, the gift of life, and the mysteries of Christian initiation. This is also the obvious time for discussing ways to incorporate children into the life of the domestic church.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

A - Remote Preparation (17-20 year-olds)

Marriage Encounter Community, Matrimony: Jesus Invites Us to Love (W. H. Sadlier, Inc., 11 Park Place, New York, NY 10007) - A 14 session program stressing sharing and communication as an essential dynamic to family life, their present life situation as a training for marriage, and God's plan for married couples. Student pak, teacher's guide and an audio cassette on how to teach the course are available.

Father Charles Gallagher, Helping Young People Get Ready for Marriage (Tabor Publishing, 1 DLM Park, Allen, TX 75002) - A three segment video cassette presentation on marriage, our ability to love others, and dating. May be used in conjunction with the above course or as a mini series of its own.
B - Immediate Preparation

The immediate preparation must be conceived of in several stages: the prolog, in which the individual situation is assessed, the didache (different in first and second marriages), and the mystagogia. In addition, sessions on basic evangelism and Church life should be considered essential for mixed marriages and advisable for most others.

1 - Prolog

The first session with a couple generally begins by determining whether a person is canonically free to marry. The Church's procedure for securing this determination must be followed. If it is determined that an annulment of a previous marriage must be obtained, the priest may not set a date for a subsequent marriage, but proceed with securing the declaration of nullity. If the couple is canonically free to marry, the next step is to determine the appropriate didache by administering one of the following assessment questionnaires.

a - In a first marriage (Individual Couples):

Premarriage Awareness Inventory (Shepherd's Staff, 6160 Carmen Avenue East, Inver Grove Heights, MN 55075) - A 105 item inventory in nine topic categories including communication, marriage expectations, finance, interests and preferences, personality/relating style, emotions, sex, inlaws, and religion. The inventory is followed by three sessions of didache based on the results of the inventory (see below). An administrator's portfolio, counselling packet, and participants' reader are available.

b - In a subsequent marriage:

Second Marriage Inventory (Family Life Office, PO Box 390, Fort Wayne, IN 46801) - A similar inventory including questions relating to issues mentioned in the guidelines above. Inventory and training manual available.

2 - Didache

a - In a first marriage:

At least three sessions based on the Premarriage Awareness Inventory listed above, as detailed in the administrator's portfolio. The sessions indicated are: (1) Communication and Emotions; (2) Marriage Expectations, Finances, Interests and Preferences; (3) Personality, Relating Style, Sex, Inlaws, and Religion. You may distribute the time differently or extend the sessions, depending on the readiness of each couple as determined in the inventory.
For Groups of Couples:

Jim and Paula Dahl, Rev. Charles Gallagher, *Evenings for the Engaged* (W.H. Sadlier, Inc., 11 Park Place, New York, NY 10007) - A six session program involving from two to six engaged couples, a priest and at least one sponsor couple. Topics discussed include the situation of marriage today, communication, sexuality, God and the marriage, divorce, and mixed marriages. Session five, the sacrament of matrimony, may be omitted in light of the mystagogia section indicated below.

b - In a subsequent marriage:

Rev. James Young, *Basic Elements of Remarriage Preparation*, in Steven Priester and James Young, "Catholic Remarriage: Pastoral Issues and Preparation Models" (Paulist Press, 997 Macarthur Blvd., Mahwah, NJ 07430) - Four single couple conversations or six group meetings covering the former marriage(s), the time in between marriages, the prospective new marriage, and the relationships with extended families and the Church. Again, one would use the assessment inventory to help allot time for these sessions.

c - 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 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.

3 - Basic Evangelism

Rev. John Matusiak, *Our Faith: a Popular Presentation of Byzantine Christianity* (New Life Publications, available through the Office of Educational Services, 19 Dartmouth Street, West Newton, MA 02165) - A clearly written introductory exposition of the basics of Eastern Christianity (revelation, the Trinity, the mysteries, the Divine Liturgy). One or two sessions for mixed marriages or with nominal believers as indicated.

4 - Mystagogia

*With Glory and Honor: Catechesis on the Mystery of Crowning* (Office of Educational Services, 19 Dartmouth Street, West Newton, MA 02165) - A four session presentation on the sacramental dimension of Christian marriage based on the rites of betrothal and crowning. Sessions focus on the quality of sacrament, the couple as icon of the Trinity, the priesthood of marriage, the domestic church. Leader's guide and participants' text available.
Background for the Facilitator:


Paul Evdokimov, **The Sacrament of Love** (SVS Press, 475 Scarsdale Road, Crestwood, NY 10707) - Basically the same presentation as the above, 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.

5 - Ongoing Formation

**Didache**

Randall and Therese Cirner, **Ten Weeks to a Better Marriage** (Servant Publications, PO Box 8617, Ann Arbor, MI 48107) - A ten session program reinforcing elements of the didache on Christian family life. Intended to be used by a couple in their home, the program treats topics including communication, order in the home, affection, and sex. The ten weeks of interaction culminate in a weekend away. Needs adaptation for group use.

Father Charles Gallagher, **Evenings for Couples** (W.H. Sadlier, Inc., 11 Park Place, New York, NY 10007) - A four session, serendipity style program for groups of couples exploring issues of communication (listening, decision making, fighting, healing). A Leader's Guide and pad of Response Sheets containing handouts for 10 couples are available.

**Mystagogia**

**A Guide for the Domestic Church** (Office of Educational Services, 19 Dartmouth Street, West Newton, MA 02165) - A manual for persons seeking to implement the traditional Byzantine expressions of the priesthood of the faithful in their daily lives. Vision, suggestions for implementation, and directions for obtaining needed materials are included. Can be used as a basis for discussion and planning by couples, thus reinforcing the mystagogia side of marriage catechesis.
Parenting

Educational Services Committee, Adult Instruction Program on the Sacraments of Initiation (Sophia Press, P.O. Box 265, Newton Centre, MA 02159) - Six volumes for use in three situations with new parents: pregnancy, preparation for the christening of the child, catechesis during the first 30 months of life.

Fathers Charles Gallagher and Tom Morrow, Evenings for Parents (11 Park Place, New York, NY 10007) - A four session, Marriage Encounter/Serendipity program for groups of parents, designed to strengthen the way they relate to their children. A Leader's Guide and pad of Response Sheets containing handouts for 20 persons are available.