

Bulletin Announcement

Often, parishioners don't have a chance to see the "behind-the-scenes" work that Father or I do here in the parish when it comes to ministry. The only encounter with us many might have is for that one hour on Sunday during Mass. While there are many ministries here in the parish all doing God's work, I thought I would write about one ministry in particular, how we prepare couples for marriage. This is a particularly relevant topic since the release of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, which calls upon Catholics to support those preparing for marriage.

In our (Arch) Diocese, a couple seeking marriage must approach the priest or deacon in the parish at least 6 months prior to the date of the wedding. The reason for this is to give the Church and the couple adequate time to properly prepare for the sacrament. However, I prefer for the couple to approach me almost a year in advance. The reason for this extended period of time is that 6 months simply feels rushed. Generally, at our first meeting, I tell the couple that it is best if we can finish the prep at least 2 months before the date of the wedding because when it starts getting close to the actual date, it becomes crunch time and the stress level for the bride, groom, and families starts to exponentially increase with each passing day.

For the past year and four months that I have been here, I, along with a few sponsor couples have prepared around 10-15 couples for marriage. But, honestly, I have felt that something has been missing. I would question the program we were using and ponder if we were giving the engaged couple every chance for success or were we just doing the best we could with the resources we had? That was until a few weeks ago. Myself, along with a married couple here in our parish, attended a day-long seminar for a new marriage program that was created in Lafayette, Louisiana, called Witness to Love. We left truly excited that this program could give us the element that has been missing, integrating the couple into parish life.

You see, that is what most marriage programs lack, the integration into parish life.

Most couples that approach us are younger and have been in school during their courtship and they are just now starting their career. Their faith and going to Mass haven't always been in the forefront of their lives. Therefore, they don't have a solid foundation in the parish and don't know how to go about establishing one. Witness to Love fills that void and helps them not only prepare for a life together, but a life within the Church as a married couple. The main practical difference in this program is that the engaged couple gets to choose their own mentor couple. The mentor couple they chose must be parishioners who have been married for at least 5 years, active in a ministry, and are in full communion with the Church. The mentor couple is then trained in their role with the engaged couple present during one of the sessions. The main role of the mentor couple is to be a positive example for the engaged couple while helping integrate them into parish life. They will be given a "scavenger hunt list" of to do items. This may entail tasks such as: attending Mass at least twice a month with their mentor couple, having a date night with their mentor couple, and engaging in a ministry with their mentor couple. The goal is that after the literal honeymoon is over, the newly married couple will feel comfortable and established in our parish and become an active member of our faith community. This program, with a few variations, can also help couples who have been civilly married but wish to have their marriage "blessed" or as the Church calls it, convalidated.

It will take a few months to get this program started in our parish and there will be some learning curves along the way. However, we pray that the end result will be a happily married couple that keeps God as the foundation in their relationship and this parish as part of their faith family.

In Christ,

Father or Deacon