

“*Witness to Love* provides deeper parish connection and authentic accompaniment for engaged and newly married couples.”

– Archbishop Gregory M. Aymond

1. What is Witness to Love?

Witness to Love is good news for the Catholic Church and for Catholic marriage prep. It is a dynamic mentor-based marriage prep program that prepares engaged* couples to transition into a welcoming community of faith after they are married. It addresses the problem of isolation and lack of parish involvement that is an issue for so many engaged and newlywed couples. *Witness to Love* exists to provide Catholic parishes with the tools to transform existing programs of marriage preparation into wellsprings of dynamic marriage discipleship that foster both parish community and nurture authentic accompaniment before and after the wedding day. This program is aimed at, not only formation of new marriages, but renewal of existing ones. *Witness to Love* answers the call of the new evangelization to go out and spread the Good News. It invites couples who would otherwise not be involved, to connect and share what is important to them: their marriage.

Unlike common practices of Catholic marriage prep, which usually include a classroom model of catechesis and do not incorporate trust-based relationships prior to communicating the good news about God’s plan for marriage, *Witness to Love* relies upon personal evangelization of engaged couples by veteran mentor couples in a trust-based relationship. We help to train the mentor married couples who evangelize the engaged couples, and often the mentor couples find that their own marriage is invigorated and evangelized. Every marriage has a need to grow; however, not many seek growth opportunities. *Witness to Love* creates an avenue to meet the existing need in a way that is affirming and encouraging.

We strongly suggest parishes use this same model for those seeking a convalidation because they are truly the hidden gems of our church! These couples consistently have powerful conversions and benefit greatly from the use of mentor couples.

2. How do the *Witness to Love* materials lay the foundation for the rich depths of Catholic doctrine on marriage--fertility awareness, theology of the Sacrament of Matrimony, etc?

It is reasonable to conclude that the Catholic Church’s teaching on contraception is not one that all, or even a majority, of self-described Catholics, welcome. The point could be made that the most intimate act of marriage remains unfulfilled for many couples, due to a poor or non-existent understanding of the revealed and traditionally-upheld view concerning the goods of marriage and the sexual act. It could be said that many, if not most, couples who enter the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony do not understand the vows made to each other and God before the Church community and do not commit to a marriage that is lifelong, total, free, faithful and fruitful. It is this poverty in catechesis and in practice that *Witness to Love* addresses.

To bridge the gap between the un-catechized who seek a sacramental marriage and between the beautiful teachings of the Church regarding sexuality and marriage, *Witness to Love* utilizes chosen and trusted married mentor couples who can best propose Christ’s missionary invitation to the engaged. The relationship between mentor couple and engaged couple builds a strong platform to begin the process of re-evangelizing not only the engaged, but also the existing marriages as well as the entire community.

3. What is the role of the mentor couple?

The mentor couple is a dynamic part of the engaged couple’s marriage journey. Mentors are lifelines who connect the engaged couple to the wellspring of their church and enables them to become an integral part of the parish’s life. The mentor couple is not expected to cover materials that are moral or theological in nature with the engaged couple. Most mentors are not prepared to cover this material. With that in mind, the *Witness to Love* workbook is designed specifically to draw from the strengths of mentor couples, even those who are not well-formed in Catholic doctrine; those strengths are relational ones based upon the acquired virtues, such as friendship, humility, and patience.

* Engaged couple or civilly married couple

4. What happens when an engaged couple chooses a mentor couple who is not well-formed in Catholic teaching or does not agree with Church doctrine, such as, for example, contraception?

As mentioned above, the mentor couple is not expected to cover materials that are moral or theological in nature with the engaged couple. Catholic moral and theological material is covered in the retreat or weekend conference that a parish or diocese provides. Then, after the diocesan/parish retreat, the priest (or deacon) meets with the engaged couple and mentor couple during the prescribed Theology Discussion Night to unpack the theological material that was covered at the diocesan/parish retreat and offer a night of personal evangelization and catechesis. The priest (or Marriage Prep deacon) helps the engaged couple and mentor couple to understand the retreat material, answers questions about Catholic teaching, and clear up any confusion. This Theology Discussion Night is an amazing opportunity for the priest (or deacon) to personally evangelize the engaged and mentor couples, as well as to clear up any confusion of the Church's authentic teaching regarding sexuality and fertility awareness.

5. What is the role of the parish Marriage Prep Coordinator in *Witness to Love*?

The Marriage Prep Coordinator is trained by *Witness to Love* to serve as the facilitator of the marriage-prep process for every engaged couple, together with their mentor couple. Some of the duties of the Marriage Prep Coordinator are: reviewing the pre-marital inventory/questionnaire (ie. FOCCUS, Prepare-Enrich) with the engaged couple and offering ongoing support and formation to the mentor couple and the engaged couple. In a large parish, the marriage prep coordinator may delegate the actual reviews of the questionnaire and the initial meeting with the mentors and engaged couple to "coaches" who have been trained in *Witness to Love*. The suggested number of coaches to be used per parish is based on the number of weddings per year. For example, a parish with 50 weddings per year is encouraged to have a Marriage Prep Coordinator who supervises 5-7 coaches and keeps track of the couples and what they need. A coach or Marriage Prep Coordinator would usually meet with an engaged couple and their mentor two times.

6. What is the pastor's place in the relationship between the mentor couple and engaged couple?

The clergy (ideally the priest or deacon witnessing the marriage) are invited to utilize the standard three meetings that they have with the engaged couples. First, the clergy meets the engaged couple, welcomes them warmly to the parish, and determines if the engaged couple is free to marry, thereby completing the prenuptial inquiry. Second, the clergy participates in the Theology of Marriage night with the engaged and mentor couples in the home of the mentor couple; this night of conversation and evangelization follows upon the marriage-prep retreat required by the diocese and offers a fruitful opportunity to share God's plan for marriage (note that the Theology Discussion night has been preceded by four meetings with the mentors and engaged couple to "till the soil" and provide a solid foundation in living the virtues so that the church's teaching on morality can be more readily received). Finally, the clergy meets with the engaged couple one month before the wedding to review the wedding rehearsal and required paperwork; this final meeting is a wonderful opportunity to offer another warm welcome to parish life and plant further seeds of evangelization.

If a priest or deacon feels himself too busy to participate in each of the three meetings, he can choose the initial welcome and prenuptial inquiry, or the Theology of Marriage night; the final wrap-up meeting can easily be delegated to the Marriage Prep Coordinator.

Many clergy feel weary, even disheartened, when it comes to marriage prep, having seen so many couples divorce and seek annulments in the following years. Some clergy even say that they prefer a funeral mass to a wedding mass; we understand. The good news is that many priests or deacons receive new energy for marriage-prep upon seeing the parish renewal that flows from *Witness to Love*; pastors see young married couples participating in parish life, couples who are excited about Catholic teaching and who have encountered Our Lord in a personal way. We feel confident that pastors will see new life in their churches and feel renewed hope for Catholic marriages when they incorporate *Witness to Love* as their marriage-prep ministry model.

7. How does an engaged couple choose a mentor couple? Can they just choose anyone?

We take this question very seriously and we make sure that the engaged couple does as well. An engaged couple is invited to go to Mass at the parish where they will live after their wedding and approach a married couple whose family model they find appealing. Their chosen mentor couple must meet the following criteria:

1. Married for five years or more
2. Active in parish life
3. Have a marriage that the engaged couple admires
4. Preferably go to the same parish as the engaged couple although it is not necessary
5. Ideally not an immediate family member or a peer friend although exceptions can be made for very good reasons.

8. What happens in a large parish, where an engaged couple might not be acquainted with any married couples or they just don't know a couple who meets the guidelines?

In a large parish, where the engaged couple might not already be acquainted with any married couples, the *Witness to Love* paradigm still works very well. The engaged couple simply goes to Mass and, afterward, approaches a couple who they admire and to whom they feel drawn. Large parishes might offer the following aids to engaged couples who are seeking a mentor at Mass:

1. Provide a sampling of potential mentor couples on the parish website
2. Have “showcase” couples who have been given some preparation for the mentorship role and who are made visible to engaged couples during Mass through serving in the choir, as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, as lectors, and so forth. The key is that the engaged couple chooses their mentor and asks them. “Matchmaking” will not help the engaged couple to make a choice of mentors with whom they will commit to a long-term relationship. If the engaged couple will be moving home after the wedding you may consider “Skype training” their mentor couple. The key is that you are helping the engaged couple to have a connection to a couple and a parish where they are most likely to benefit long term.

9. How does an engaged couple transition into parish life after their wedding?

The engaged couple is welcomed into parish community in two ways. First, the goal is for the relationship between the mentor and engaged couple to continue indefinitely; in a parish that offers small groups, the mentor and engaged couples could form a new small group with other couples. Ideally the introduction to the parish's small groups will occur at the parish marriage prep retreat where both the mentors and engaged couples will get to experience the small groups that the parish has to offer. Leaders for these small groups will be present at all couple's retreats. Second, on the sixth meeting of the engaged and mentor couple, they could spend some time with the parish's Director of Marriage Enrichment who would invite the engaged couple to ongoing support/formation after the wedding; the Marriage Enrichment Director, or the mentor couple, is encouraged to schedule a personal phone call after the honeymoon to check-in with the newlyweds and invite them to an upcoming parish event.

Remember that the dynamic of an engaged couple choosing a mentor works differently than the model of being assigned a mentor. The positive attraction engaged couples have for the “generous” mentors sharing a unique and personal experience of faith formation, creates a space for authentic friendship and support. Our experience has shown that it is difficult to replicate this model essential for rebuilding the Church in any other way.

10. What is unique about the *Witness to Love* workbook and can a workbook other than the *Witness to Love* workbook be used in the *Witness to Love* process?

The *Witness to Love* workbook was developed by psychologists, clergy, and theologians to be able to provide a resource for engaged couples to grow in virtue with their mentor couples. The workbook strategically pairs life-skills with key virtue areas that are necessary for healthy marriages. While foundations for deeper moral and theological conversations are laid throughout the workbook, we took care not to give material to the mentor couple to cover with the engaged couple that they were not equipped to cover. As stated above, the moral and theological teachings about marriage are reserved for the diocesan retreat, as well as the Theology of Marriage night with the pastor. This is a workbook like no other. It is vital to the *Witness to Love* process.

11. What is the cost of the *Witness to Love* materials for an engaged couple? For the participating parish or diocese?

The parish fee for a *Witness to Love* training is only \$135. Any parish that cannot afford that initial training/resource fee can receive a discount upon request. If the diocese hosts the training and there are more than 10 parishes being trained then the cost becomes a \$1500 stipend plus travel and only \$55 per couple trained. For trainings that involve extensive travel and more than one night away, the stipend is \$2000. All ongoing support for the parish is included in their training cost. The cost of *Witness to Love* marriage prep materials is usually paid by the engaged couple, but can be covered by the parish.

Total cost per couple prepared for marriage is \$75 and includes:

- 3 workbooks (two for the engaged/civilly married couple and one for the mentor couple to share)
- 1 Mentor's Journey book
- Full access to the web based *Witness to Love* app which includes the accompanying workbook video series

12. Is *Witness to Love* an approved marriage prep resource?

Absolutely. *Witness to Love* is recommended on the "For Your Marriage" website hosted by the USCCB. In addition, Archbishop Gregory Aymond of New Orleans is on our advisory board. *Witness to Love* is being used in over forty US dioceses and in one Canadian diocese. Over 70 dioceses in the US, Canada, Australia and the Philippines are working to implement *Witness to Love* over the next two years. Diocesan Family Life Directors who are working to implement *Witness to Love* or are using *Witness to Love* would be happy to work with other dioceses seeking to learn more. Please contact us to be connected to *Witness to Love* clergy, parish or diocesan marriage prep personnel.