

First-Ever Marriage Summit Unpacks Vatican's 'Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life' as New Sacramental Marriage Preparation Model for U.S. and Canada

Houston gathering forges new pathway to serve couples preparing for lifelong marriage based on groundbreaking document from the Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life

HOUSTON, TX, June 28, 2023 – With the loneliness epidemic continuing to rage as a result of the collapse of marriage throughout society, Catholic marriage formation leaders gathered in Houston June 26 to 28 to take a deep dive into the Vatican's new document titled *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*, prepared by the Dicastery for Marriage, Family and Life. This newly published English translation outlines a vision for marriage preparation based on the ancient catechumenal model of sacramental preparation to better equip the needs of modern couples seeking marriage.

Written as a tool for evangelization and vocational accompaniment for couples preparing for marriage and newly married couples in their first few years when the relationship is most vulnerable, *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life* is rooted in Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* and the U.S. Bishops' 2021 call for a national renewal of family life ministry outlined in *Called to the Joy of Love*. With these in mind, select clergy, religious, and lay marriage experts, couples from marriage movements and formators from more than 40 U.S. dioceses, in addition to the Canadian archdioceses of Vancouver and Montréal, gathered to consider the document's guidelines as a means for addressing the sharp decline in sacramental marriages, the significant increase in the rate of divorce which rivals that of secular marriages, and ever-growing number of invalid marriages.

"What sets this Marriage Summit apart from a conference was that it was a collaborative effort between lay couples and experts, seminary formators and clergy, bishops and diocesan leaders, and religious and movement leaders. Everyone came together with the common goal and vision of finding a concrete path forward," reported Mary Rose Verret, Co-Founder of Witness to Love and a sponsor of the Summit. "This path is a road to missionary discipleship where every encounter we have with a couple or family will introduce and lead them to Christ."

In addition, Summit attendees were blessed with a personalized video message from Gabriella Gambino, Under Secretary of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, who reminded attendees that the purpose of the document is to repropose marriage as the "first and foremost vocation and path to holiness rooted in baptism." The grace conferred by marriage confirms and transforms the identity of the spouses as priest, prophet, and king within their domestic church.

"This Summit is a unique means of inspiring and affecting action at all levels of the Church to respond to the desire expressed from Pope Saint John Paul II to Pope Francis of establishing a catechumenal process of marriage preparation," said Julia Dezelski, Director for Marriage and Family Life Ministries at the USCCB, one of the sponsors of the Summit. "*Catechumenal Pathways* is the culmination of the Church's long-anticipated call for the renewal of marriage prep modeled on a catechumenate which precedes the Sacrament of Initiation or a pathway similar to what takes place in Order of Christian Initiation (OCIA), which can be characterized as pedagogical, gradual, and marked by rituals."

Included in the document are preparation guidelines that detail the need to prepare all of the Christian faithful for the reality of marriage in our modern culture, to assist couples to discern and prepare for

marriage so they may celebrate it validly and fruitfully, and to accompany them in the early years of marriage through ongoing formation and mentorship. Throughout the three-day Summit, more than 90 leaders collaborated to start the crucial work of ushering this vision into reality in parishes and dioceses. Through small group study and discussions led by experts, participants unpacked the document in light of the critical issues facing marriage in our culture today. “The ultimate goal,” proposed Dezelski, “is to draft specific strategies that can be practically implemented at the most local level, namely at our parishes and with those who lead marriage formation.”

Funds for this ground-breaking Summit were generously provided by the Houston-based Scanlan Foundation, in addition to sponsor support from the Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life, and Youth at the USCCB, Witness to Love, the University of St. Thomas-Houston, and the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston.

“Scanlan Foundation recognizes that fortifying sacramental marriage is fundamental to our founding mission to ‘further the Roman Catholic Church of Texas,’” stated Larry Massey, President of the Scanlan Foundation. “Thus, supporting the efforts of the Marriage Catechumenate Summit is one of our highest priorities today.”

As the Summit drew to a close, the hope expressed by Summit organizers was to “go forth and begin cultivating a vision of marriage preparation and accompaniment that builds life-long Christ-centered marriages for the transformation of families, Church, and society.”

To schedule an interview with Julia Dezelski, contact jdezelski@usccb.org. To schedule an interview with Mary Rose Verret, contact maryrose@witnessstolove.org.

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