

# New marriage preparation plan for couples

## Marriage officials hope to better prepare couples for challenges; takes effect Jan. 1

By Andrew Junker  
The Catholic Sun

In an effort to better prepare couples seeking to get married, the Diocese of Phoenix will update its marriage preparation policy effective Jan. 1, 2010.

The policy, "Covenant of Love," is the beginning of a three-year initiative for marriage in the diocese.

Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted spelled out the changes and the reasons behind them in a pastoral letter he issued on July 26, the Feast of Saints Anne and Joachim, the parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Under the new guidelines, couples will have to complete about 12 extra hours of classes, covering everything from practical concerns like shared finances to Theology of the Body. They are also required to take a full complement of Natural Family Planning courses, and the normative preparation time before marriage will be nine months instead of six.

Marriage preparation ministers and marriage preparation lay leaders will also receive additional training.

Diocesan leaders have been studying ways to improve marriage prep for a couple of years, said Mike Phelan, director of the diocesan marriage and respect life office, and these changes better reflect the challenges now being posed to marriage.

Phelan pointed out that the quality of marriage in the United States has been on a rapid decline for the past 50 years. The Church's "tenuous hold on its meaning and its hopefulness" has been slipping, he said.

He mentioned three particular concerns: the fading connection between marriage and child-rearing, the growing number of couples who cohabitate and the "ever-increasing attempts to redefine marriage in its civil meaning."

"We need to do better to evangelize and catechize our own Catholic children and young adults, and we can do that," Phelan said. "The Church has tremendous good news when it comes to marriage. And I think it is impossible to overstate what is at stake in marriage."

### Marriage as vocation

Following the new marriage policy outlined in "Covenant of Love," diocesan leaders will stress marriage as a vocation. As such, marriage requires preparation and instruction.

"If a man becomes a priest, he's going to spend eight years in discernment," said Jenelle VanBrunt, a veteran Natural Family Planning instructor. "Marriage is no less a vocation than the priesthood or religious life."

Phelan agreed and mentioned a new program called "God's Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage" that will be part of marriage preparation in the New Year.

"This program is explicitly evangelistic and catechetical on the meaning of the sacrament of matrimony and the 'why's' behind the 'what's' of Catholic teaching on sexuality," he said.

"God's plan is relevant and accessible to today's couples, speaking in their language and challeng-

ing them to understand and embrace the freeing life that can be theirs in following Christ's call in marriage," Phelan said.

This new course, as well as the additionally required Natural Family Planning courses, will help the couples maintain a happy, healthy marriage and reduce the rate of divorce among Catholics, said Bishop Olmsted.

"Many of our couples are poorly catechized, which almost always leads to weakened faith. Without a strong faith, it is hard to resist temptations to individualism and consumerism, where the evil one tricks us into believing that selfishness will lead to happiness," the bishop said.

"Of course, selfishness leads instead to a contraceptive, anti-child mentality, to divorce, loneliness, guilt and separation from God and others," he said. "Only authentic love makes sacrifice possible, and even a joy."

### Natural Family Planning

One way to combat the temptation of a contraceptive mentality is through the promotion of Natural Family Planning, which according to its diocesan Web site, describes itself as an "umbrella term for modern, healthy, scientifically accurate, natural and reliable methods of family planning."

But it's also much more than that, Phelan said. "As an NFP instructor with my wife for the past 10 years, I am amazed by the transformation we see in couples over the entire course. Men come to respect their fiancées in deep ways, and women get knowledge about their bodies and fertility that they get nowhere else," he said. "It is, in the best sense of the term, 'empowering' for their relationships."

In addition to fostering deeper communication and intimacy between the couples, Natural Family Planning courses also delve into the sacramental nature of marriage, its theological underpinnings and the reasons why the Church forbids the use of contraception.

"We're certainly hoping that we're going to be building stronger marriages," VanBrunt said.

"Couples will go into marriage with a better understanding that they're going into a sacrament, that it's a true vocation," she said. "We hope the divorce rate is going to plummet. We hope that couples will examine their relationship more fully during this longer process."

That's the main reason for making the standard engagement time nine months instead of six. With all the stresses of wedding planning, many couples are hard-pressed to devote much of their time to Natural Family Planning classes, which last a few months and require daily charting of fertility signs.

With a nine month engagement, couples will be able to fulfill all the new requirements and still have the final two months before their wedding for "prayer, the sacrament of reconciliation and wedding preparation," Phelan said.

The three extra months will also help couples work through potentially thorny issues like their relationships with their families of origin or past relationships that may still be influencing them.



Jean Estes-Gonzales, who in her role as marriage preparation coordinator at St. Anne Parish in Gilbert helps guide approximately 100 couples per year in their preparation journey, said, "I'm excited for our couples. The new policy provides more opportunities to explore and deepen their relationship — not only with each other, but with God."

Cynthia Lemieux has been working in marriage prep for the diocese for the past two decades. She said that many important issues aren't even broached by couples until a marriage prep lay leader introduces them during an engagement weekend or parish course.

"Giving them nine months to prepare for marriage gives them a few more weeks to look at some areas, especially related to their spirituality," she said. "It will help them grow closer as a couple and it will help them to walk down that aisle on their wedding day feeling very prepared for their marriage."

Better-prepared couples will make for happier, holier marriages, which, in turn, will strengthen the Church, be a fount for vocations and positively influence the culture. It's all connected, Phelan said.

"If we sense this as a call to heroism, we sense rightly, especially in our time," Phelan said. \*

### So, you're getting married in 2010...

Here is a rundown of what to expect come Jan. 1:

- ▶ **Jan. 1:** A couple meets with pastor. The parish starts their Nuptial File;
- ▶ **January:** FOCCUS inventory;
- ▶ **January-March:** Married Life Skills Course (weekend or 6-7 evenings); for example: Love for Life, Engaged Encounter, Unitas or other approved program;
- ▶ **March-June:** God's Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage (weekend). This will include an NFP Introduction;
- ▶ **April-July:** Full NFP Course (four meetings);
- ▶ **Aug. 15-Sept. 15:** Reconciliation;
- ▶ **Aug. 1-Sept. 1:** Final meeting with pastor; and
- ▶ **Oct. 1:** Wedding.

For more information or to read the new marriage policy, visit:

[www.ourcovenantoflovephx.org](http://www.ourcovenantoflovephx.org)