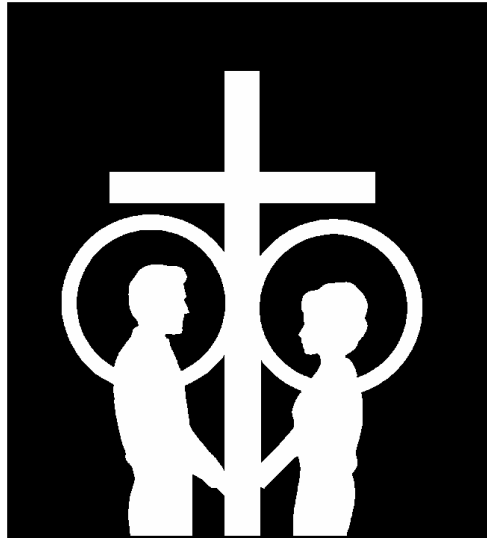


Preparing for the  
**Sacrament of Marriage**  
at Ascension of Our Lord Catholic Church,  
Donaldsonville, Louisiana



Guidelines of the Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge  
Office of Marriage and Family Life  
& Policies of Ascension of Our Lord Catholic Church

**DIOCESAN POLICIES & GUIDELINES: INTRODUCTION**

Marriage as a sacrament is a serious and sacred commitment. By the grace of this sacrament, a couple loves one another as Christ Himself loves.

**PHASE ONE: A Beginning.**

Although a couple desiring marriage is encouraged to contact a priest, deacon, or the Marriage Preparation Team Couple in a parish at least six (6) months prior to the proposed date of their wedding, they have an obligation to do so at least four (4) months before the desired date of a tentative wedding. At this initial meeting, all concerned will become better acquainted with each other. The PMI (Pre-Marital Inventory) will be completed at this time also. Catholic parties to a marriage must acquire a *newly-issued* Certificate of Baptism from the church parish where they were baptized, and bring these certificates to the initial meeting.

The preparation period allows a couple ample time to take an active part in the entire program provided by the Catholic Church guidelines in the State of Louisiana:

- participate in assessment and preparation
- deal with any difficulties in their relationship
- identify and cultivate strengths
- recognize the importance of unity, fidelity, and the permanence of the marriage bond
- benefit from the findings of the PMI (Pre-Marital Inventory) assessment

- work at understanding natural family planning principles

## PHASE TWO: Assessment Process.

In one or more meetings, the priest, deacon, or lay minister(s) will review and discuss with the engaged couple the results of a PMI (Pre Marital Inventory). A decision is reached at this time concerning the couple's readiness for sacramental marriage. If all is in order, the tentative date is confirmed and liturgical plans can be made.<sup>1</sup> Information on parish customs and building usage fees are mentioned at this time.<sup>2</sup>

In the event that a delay in a couple's wedding date is necessary, the reason(s) are to be shared with a couple as soon as this is determined by the priest or deacon. If a couple disagrees with the decision, they have the option of an appeal, first to the local Dean<sup>3</sup>, and then to the bishop.<sup>4</sup>

## PHASE THREE: Formal Preparation

The couple then begins an instructional phase of preparation. The diocesan programs judged most beneficial by the Pastor of Ascension of Our Lord Parish to meet the requirements of this phase are:

1. **Catholic Engaged Encounter Weekend** --a retreat type weekend experience currently (2003) conducted at the Bishop Tracy Center (located at the rear of the Catholic Life Center, 1800 S. Acadian Thruway, Baton Rouge, LA. The program begins on a Friday night at 7:00 P.M. and ends with Mass on Sunday afternoon at about 4:00 P.M. The all-inclusive (rooms & meals) cost per couple is currently (2000) \$150.00 (...a relatively small investment of time and money towards a lifetime of happiness in marriage! If a couple demonstrates financial need, assistance may be requested) About 10 of these weekends are conducted annually, and a schedule is available at the church office.
2. For couples entering their second marriage, who have previously participated in an Engaged Encounter Weekend, it may be more appropriate for them to participate in the "**New Love, New Life**" program conducted at the Bishop Tracy Center in Baton Rouge.

## PHASE FOUR: Final Stages of Preparation

The priest or deacon or lay ministers will discuss with the couple what they have learned and experienced at their formal marriage preparation program. They are asked about their understanding of the sacrament at this point, and their awareness of future parental responsibilities is explored and deepened.

All documentation is completed by now. Any dispensations or permissions needed for an inter-faith marriage are obtained by this time.

The written permission of the Bishop is necessary before a priest or deacon may officiate at the wedding of a couple in a non-Catholic **church** building. Catholic clergy in the Diocese of Baton Rouge are not permitted to witness or officiate at a marriage conducted outside of a **church** building.

Weddings in Catholic churches (with or without Mass) may not be scheduled in the Diocese of Baton Rouge after 3:00 P.M. on Saturday (not later than 1:00 P.M. at Ascension of Our Lord Church), and the vigils of holy days, through

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<sup>1</sup> Please find the specific policies concerning the reservation of the church building and confirmation of wedding plans at Ascension Catholic Church, found later in this brochure.

<sup>2</sup> Please find specific customs and costs later in this brochure.

<sup>3</sup> The local Dean is a priest representative of a specific geographical area of the Diocese in which a particular church parish is located. Ascension Church is in the Southwest Deanery of the Baton Rouge diocese, and the Dean is currently (2003) Fr. Gary Belsome at St. Elizabeth Church, Paincourtville.

<sup>4</sup> Currently, (2003) the bishop is +Robert W. Muench at the Catholic Life Center, 1800 S Acadian Thruway, P O Box 2028, Baton Rouge LA 70821.

midnight of the following day. No weddings, with or without Mass, are permitted on Holy Days or on Sundays in the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

## SELECTING THE DATE AND TIME OF A REHEARSAL & WEDDING AT ASCENSION CATHOLIC CHURCH

At Ascension of Our Lord Church, weddings will not be scheduled to begin after 1:00 P.M. on Saturdays, so as not to interfere with preparations for the scheduled confessions and Vigil Mass. In Catholic Churches within the Diocese of Baton Rouge, weddings are not permitted on Saturday evenings, Sundays, or Holy Days of Obligation. There are no restrictions on scheduling weddings from Monday through Fridays, except those concerning Holy Days which fall during the week, and those necessitated by the availability of the church building and any given proposed officiant. **Because of Catholic Church liturgical guidelines which restrict Church decorations during the Advent season (4 weeks before Christmas) and during the penitential season of Lent (5 weeks from Ash Wednesday to Easter), it is not advisable to schedule a wedding during these nine weeks of the year.** Altar cloths and hung banners during these seasons are violet (purple), and no floral arrangements are permitted. **An Advent wreath will obstruct movement in the sanctuary during Advent and Lenten theme displays will obstruct movement in the sanctuary during Lent.**

Rehearsals for Friday weddings are customarily scheduled for the day before (Thursday evening) at 6:00 or 6:30 P.M. or the Saturday evening of the previous weekend at 5:30 or 6:00 P.M. Rehearsals may be scheduled on any other days on which the church is available. For consideration of other special arrangements, contact the pastor (473-3176) or Mrs. Kathryn Hebert (473-4383).

## RESERVING ASCENSION CHURCH FOR REHEARSALS & WEDDINGS

From a religious and spiritual perspective, please be reminded, that under normal circumstances, it is appropriate that a couple be prepared for and celebrate their marriage as a faith-centered event in the church parish to which the family of at least one of the parties to the marriage belong. Contact with the pastor about when and with whom a couple plans to begin the marriage preparation process **MUST** be made before the church building may be reserved for a wedding. If a couple plans to ask another priest or deacon to officiate at a wedding at Ascension Church, the pastor must be informed of this fact when a couple makes initial contact with the pastor of Ascension Church. The Church secretary maintains the reservation book for the church facilities, and can inform a couple of dates on which the church building is available. **The pastor maintains his own scheduled commitments, and his availability should be assessed before reserving the church,** unless a couple will be engaging another officiant. **Just because the church building may be available for a wedding on a certain date does NOT mean that the priest celebrant will be available.**

## CHURCH USAGE FEES

For registered, active, contributing parishioners, the church usage fee is **\$350.00**; for inactive or non-contributing parishioners (no record of regular, ongoing financial and/or ministerial support and/or involvement at the Church), the church usage fee is **\$550.00**. It actually costs the Church \$550.00 to host a rehearsal and full-scale wedding. The current (2003) fees have been determined by the Parish Finance Council to help defray the actual cost of lighting, AC/Heat, equipment, supplies, custodial salaries and benefits, liability insurance, materials, wear & tear, printing, office/clerical salaries and benefits, and other expenses related to marriage preparation, wedding rehearsal, and wedding ceremony.<sup>5</sup> The Church usage fee is payable to the Church and is presented to the parish secretary at the time the church is reserved for the rehearsal and wedding, and is required to hold the reservation. In case of change in plans, the fee is 100% refundable up to 4 months prior to the wedding, and 75% refundable thereafter up to the date for which the church is reserved. In cases where financial need is demonstrated, and proof is provided of the serious curtailment and constriction of other wedding-related expenses, i.e. reception, decorations, etc., application may be made for assistance with the church usage fees. **No one is refused a wedding in the church on the basis of an inability to pay the expenses incurred by the church for its use, and hardship circumstances should be discussed personally with the**

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<sup>5</sup> The expense of using the Ascension Church building for a wedding is substantially larger than that at other Catholic churches because the building is the largest and oldest and more costly to maintain than other smaller and newer Catholic churches. The space equivalent is comparable to three six-story office buildings, which would fit inside the church in their entirety.

**pastor.** Making a personal gift (honorarium) to the officiant (priest or deacon) for his services is not required, and is left to the discretion of the couple. He personally receives no portion of the church usage fee for his services.

### CONDITION OF CHURCH NOT GUARANTEED

While significant preservation repairs have been accomplished to our church recently, the building and its furnishings are constantly in a state of being repaired and restored, owing to their age. Please be informed by this notice that NO GUARANTEE is given as to the condition or cleanliness of the building or its furnishings, and by reserving the building for a rehearsal and wedding a couple understands that they do so at their own risk. If the condition of the building is not to their liking because of progressive restoration and repair work which may be underway at the time of their wedding, they have the right to cancel their reservation and change the location of their wedding at any time. Restoration and repair work is being progressively accomplished on a “pay as you go” basis by the Church parish, and there is simply no way to project the exact dates or the nature of work which may be underway at any given time on the interior or exterior of the building.

### A WEDDING WITH OR WITHOUT MASS

It is the norm (policy) in the Diocese of Baton Rouge, and in the Church generally speaking, to celebrate wedding Masses **ONLY** when both parties are Catholic, and can, along with both families, received Holy Communion. For only one party and family to receive Communion, highlights a separation which exists at the beginning of the marriage. The nature of the marriage ceremony should be such that all the things which unite a couple are emphasized, and none of the things, like faith or religion, which may separate them. So, for marriages between a Catholic and a non-Catholic, the norm is to celebrate the marriage ceremony with a scripture service and homily, but without Mass and Holy Communion, unless special permission has been granted. For example, permission may be granted if the non-Catholic party to the marriage has intentions of becoming Catholic in the near future, or if very few non-Catholics will be in attendance at the wedding.

### SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION BEFORE MARRIAGE CEREMONY

Catholic parties to a marriage should plan and make arrangements with a priest to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation (confession and absolution) and the Eucharist as a fitting final spiritual preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage. Speak to a priest about scheduling a convenient time.

### A PRIOR MARRIAGE IN THE BACKGROUND OF EITHER PARTY

Many times, a previous marriage, even one that took place between two non-Catholics and not in the Catholic Church, can impede a future marriage to a Catholic or of a Catholic in the Catholic Church. If there has been a previous marriage in the background of either prospective bride or groom, regardless of religion or religious affiliation, please speak to the pastor before making ANY marriage plans.

### AGE REQUIREMENT FOR THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE

In view of the many circumstances adversely affecting marriage today, especially the need for personal maturity, special concern and care must be given to a couple requesting marriage when one or both of the parties has not celebrated his or her 18th birthday. Restrictions apply.

### POSTPONEMENT OF MARRIAGE PREPARATION

If the pastor decides, at any stage of the preparation process, that it will be in the best personal, emotional, and spiritual interests of a couple to delay or postpone any marriage plans, he will be obliged to notify the bishop’s office of his decision. No priest or deacon may then officiate at the marriage of a couple refused the Sacrament of Marriage by another priest without the permission of the bishop. The specific permission of the pastor is required before making arrangements that hinge on a particular wedding date. The complete four to six month waiting period gives ample time to complete preparations, and receive permission to proceed with arrangements. If a couple seeking marriage has spoken to another priest who has refused to continue marriage preparation, the couple is under a serious moral obligation to inform at the outset any other priest whom they may contact concerning the same.

## EVENT OF PREGNANCY

The event of pregnancy does NOT alter or change these procedures and policies in any way. At the same time, the event of pregnancy does not mean that a couple cannot prepare for and have a sacramental marriage. But, the event of pregnancy cannot, by diocesan regulation, speed up or dispense with the required preparation process or 4 month waiting period. There is nothing the pastor can do about this. Neither can the pastor advise the couple to enter a non-sacramental marriage, although it happens that couples in some instances make this decision in the interest of their child, and then apply later to have their civil marriage convalidated (i.e., blessed) or sacramentalized in the Catholic Church. In such cases, the preparation process will still apply, and additional professional counseling as well may be required. If pregnancy is a factor in your decision to marry, speak with the pastor or deacon personally.

## INITIAL CONTACT WITH THE PASTOR

The **first** thing to tell the pastor is whether or not you have spoken with any other priest or deacon already about your plans for marriage. The **second** thing to tell the pastor is whether you have asked or plan to ask another priest or deacon to officiate at your wedding at Ascension Church.

If it is likely that a wedding will be celebrated at Ascension Church, the pastor should be contacted at the time of engagement before any tentative dates for a ceremony have been discussed. His personal schedule limitations and those for the church building usage, along with circumstances affecting your preparation for the sacrament may pre-empt any plans you discuss independently. Don't set yourself up for disappointment! While four to six months is the minimum allowed waiting period, the earlier the better! Remember that when a previous marriage is in the background of either party, regardless of whether Catholic or non-Catholic, 2 or 3 years is not too early to speak with the pastor.

Catholic parties to a prospective marriage will want to bring with them to their first meeting with the pastor or lay minister a newly issued certificate of their baptism from the Catholic Church at which they were baptized. Newly issued baptism certificates may be requested simply by calling the Church of Baptism. (This step is not necessary if Catholic party was baptized at Ascension Church)

## OFFICIANT "NOT GUARANTEED"

Catholic clergy personnel resources are at a premium in our diocese. Proposed marriage officiants make a commitment to officiate at your wedding based on their circumstances at the time they make the commitment. If their circumstances change, i.e. by re-assignment to another church parish or ministry, so may their availability to officiate at your wedding. A pastor's first obligation will always be to his current duty assignment. If the pastor committed to officiate at your wedding is re-assigned to another parish, he will likely have weddings in his new parish at which he must officiate, and the usual procedure is for his replacement (the new pastor) to pick up his weddings in his former parish. If this is not to your liking, have in mind the names of other possible clergy you want to ask should the priest or deacon you selected be unable to officiate at your wedding.

## COHABITATION (OR "LIVING TOGETHER")

Special procedures and policies also apply in the event of cohabitation (i.e., "living together" prior to marriage) of the couple requesting the Sacrament of Marriage. In the interests of avoiding scandal, and in order to decide what type of marriage preparation and ceremony will be appropriate, the pastor must consider a couple as either *legally married* husband and wife or *engaged* to be married. If a couple are *engaged* to be married, it is presumed that they are not already enjoying the privileges of marriage, i.e. sexual intercourse. In the Bible, Jesus clearly does not "bless" a couple "living together as husband and wife" when in fact they are not husband and wife, and so, neither can the Church bless or condone this arrangement. This determination makes a BIG difference in the plans that can be made for a wedding. Speak with the pastor about this, or see the "Open Letter..." at the end of this brochure.

## STANDARD VS. "COVENANT" MARRIAGE LICENSE

In 1997 the Louisiana Legislature enacted a unique law establishing the option of getting a "Covenant" Marriage license to better emphasize the commitment spouses should make to a life-long marriage. It requires a couple not only receive counseling about the nature and purposes of marriage prior to getting married, but also requires that a couple receive

counsel prior to granting a divorce. While the Catholic Church doesn't require couples to get a "Covenant" Marriage license, the sacramental marriage does require the life-long commitment. Because of a 1999 amendment which eliminated the necessity of discussing divorce as an option for ending a covenant marriage, it is now possible for the priest or deacon preparing a couple for marriage to sign the affidavit required for a "Covenant" marriage stating that the parties have been counseled concerning the nature and purposes of marriage. Couples planning a Catholic marriage are free to select either marriage license made available by the State, since they are already committing themselves to more than either civil marriage license requires. **When the civil marriage licenses have been obtained from the courthouse (as early as 30 days prior to the wedding, but not less than 4 days prior to the wedding), they should be delivered to the Church office at least two working days before the wedding rehearsal so they can be properly prepared.**

## REHEARSAL

Wedding rehearsals at Ascension Church will normally be conducted by trained lay ministers, **Mrs. Kathryn Hebert (473-4383)**. NO ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES should be consumed by anyone in the wedding party prior to the rehearsal or actual ceremony. Loud talking, irreverent behavior, alcohol-on-the-breath, gum-chewing in church, will cause delay and possible postponement/cancellation of the rehearsal/wedding ceremony (Shouldn't all this really go without saying?)

If your respective mothers or other relatives or friends will have input or suggestions as to just how the ceremony will be conducted, please bring them with you to your meeting with the marriage preparation lay ministers when the rehearsal details about the actual ceremony will be worked out and finalized. A wedding (involving 4 bridesmaids/groomsmen) with Mass takes about 50 to 60 minutes. A wedding (involving 4 bridesmaids/groomsmen) without Mass takes about 30 to 40 minutes. The rehearsal should last about half as long as the wedding, and the lay minister should be able to conduct the rehearsal without interruption. Help us minimize last minute headaches and irritations. Members of the wedding party, if not active practicing Catholics, should be reminded that, in cases of a nuptial Mass, worthy reception of Holy Communion demands a state of grace, i.e., no serious sin, and they may need to make arrangements with a priest to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation prior to the wedding. *Non-Catholic members of the wedding party cannot be invited to receive Holy Communion at a nuptial Mass.*

Please make a concerted effort to have all members of the wedding party at the Church on time for the rehearsal and wedding. The lay minister conducting the rehearsal does so as a voluntary service to the pastor and Church parish, and may have family plans or other commitments after the rehearsal. If a priest is conducting it, he may have other plans or appointments scheduled after the rehearsal. Patience and promptness are both virtues for which we should strive.

## CHURCH DECOR

Before planning for flowers and decorations, speak with the marriage preparation lay ministers and a member of our Liturgical Environment Committee, and let us share with you the benefit of our experience about what works in our church building. Our Liturgical Environment Committee members are: **Mrs. Wayne LeBlanc [473-7857], Mrs. Murline Diez [473-8842], and Mrs. Annette Schexnayder [473-4618]**. What you see in our church is what you get. No sanctuary furnishings or existing decorations may be moved. On the other hand, let us know if you want what is there or it may disappear. **Seasonal banners will not be removed. The color of these banners changes only owing to the liturgical season.** Consider the color of the banners when coordinating your other decorations.

Liturgical logistics for focus and movement in our church during the ceremony must be considered. Appropriate floral arrangements may be left in the church for weekend Masses, and such a gesture will be greatly appreciated. Advise a member of our Liturgical Environment Committee AT LEAST ONE WEEK IN ADVANCE of your plans in this regard. Be careful about water or fluid seepage from floral arrangements onto carpet and/or altar linens. Sanctuary carpeting and back altar should be cleaned at the time wedding plants and flowers are removed from the sanctuary. Brass containers and pedestals owned by the church may be used, but should be returned to their original storage locations at the time floral arrangements or plants are removed from the church. **If wax candles arrangements will be used, your florist or decorators MUST place a square or circular piece of transparent plastic sheeting on the wood floor or carpeting under the arrangement to catch any wax drippings.** Florist/decorators are responsible for securing candlestands so that they will not fall. If a "candlelight" wedding is planned, the couple is responsible for assigning ushers or others to extinguish all candles after the ceremony, to decrease the risk of destroying the church by

fire. Electric lights must still be used in the church during a candlelight wedding because of liability insurance requirements. Please share a copy of these policies with your florist. Please advise family and friends that tossing or dropping rice, birdseed, rose petals, or any other material on the church aisles or outdoor plaza and sidewalks is not allowed for liability insurance reasons. These materials have caused persons to slip, lose their balance, fall, and injure themselves.

It is the responsibility of the couple to arrange for the prompt removal of all other wedding decorations immediately following the wedding ceremony. The disposition of the decorations left in the church will not be the responsibility of the church or its staff. Otherwise, we reserve the right to dispose of any decorations which are discarded.

## MUSIC AND MUSICIANS FOR WEDDINGS

Marriage celebrated in the Catholic tradition is first and foremost a worship celebration of faith. The purpose of the music is to help us celebrate God's love for you and your love for each other as Christ loves you. There are many beautiful traditional hymns and contemporary sacred songs which enhance this celebration. Secular and romantic music is inappropriate in this setting. Couples planning a wedding at Ascension Church are required to use **our liturgical music ministers** to plan the music for their weddings. (This is true even when a priest from another church parish has been invited to officiate, or other vocalists/musicians will be used.) A written letter from either of them to the pastor granting approval of your music is required before a wedding ceremony will be permitted to commence at Ascension Catholic Church. **(Contact Mrs. Jeanne Veron 473-7162 or Mrs. Sandra Mistretta 473-4341).** Let them help you select the most appropriate music. They can also suggest vocalists and accompanists familiar with our church, its sound system, and equipment. The organists who regularly play at our church are **Greg Spano and Jim Ramirez (225-687-7898)**. Their fees for weddings may be discussed directly with them. If you elect to use your own vocalists and accompanists, they will be required to meet with our liturgical music ministers concerning our music policies, and to gain access to the church.

## PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEOGRAPHY

Your wedding is a once in a lifetime occasion (we hope and pray). You'll want it well captured on film. We highly recommend you get a professional videographer or photographer who is well-versed in working Catholic weddings so as not to cause any distraction or interruption from the ceremony or Mass. If video-taped, the entire Mass/ceremony, especially the homily, should be included. Photography/filming of peripherals, e.g. flowers, decorations, church appointments, choir, family, and friends assembled, or any panoramic shots---should all take place before or after the actual wedding ceremony/Mass. During the wedding, all cameras (and all eyes, for that matter) should only and always be aimed at the action as it takes place. When a photographer can be seen by the people, the people are usually looking to see what he is shooting. If his camera is aimed at the action, their attention will be focused there as well, and he ceases to be a distraction. Your photographer/videographer would be well-advised to contact the pastor or lay minister well in advance of the ceremony by telephone so that this information can be communicated to him/her. There are no restrictions placed on his movement or position in the church or sanctuary during the ceremony as long as the above outlined guidelines are followed. The pastor will not be available immediately prior to a wedding to speak with him. Other than these guidelines, there are no restrictions placed on photography at our weddings. *(Share these policies with your photographers.)*

## ALTAR SERVERS

Altar servers are not required at weddings without Mass, and aren't absolutely needed at weddings with Mass. But in the case of Mass, at least one would be helpful. If you don't have one among your relatives and friends, inform the marriage preparation lay minister that one is needed. It is customary for the couple to arrange to have a gift of between \$5.00 and \$10.00 given to each altar server for his/her assistance at their wedding.

## NO WEDDING COORDINATORS

Don't bother engaging the services of a professional "wedding coordinator" to help you with the church flowers and decorations, choreographic details of the ceremony, or music selections, since such outside persons are not allowed to function inside of Ascension of Our Lord Church.

## A FINAL NOTE

There are always two ways of looking at things: negatively or positively, pessimistically or optimistically, immaturely or maturely. A person can read all these guidelines and policies and see nothing but rules and regulations and limitations and obstacles to be overcome or endured. Or, a person can read them and see something to be learned, some opportunity for personal and spiritual growth, the means for making a wedding day and married life the happiest the holiest of occasions! Remember that while your wedding is only one day, your marriage will be for the lifetime! While so much of your time and effort and energy will go into your wedding, isn't it worth making the greater sacrifice and investment in your marriage. It may seem that the Church makes it hard to get married; the fact is that the Church doesn't want your married life to be hard! Your SACRAMENT of marriage is meant to be so much more than the civil contract which will bind you legally and give a surname to your children. It makes the two of you a family in full partnership with God. And as you grow in faithfulness and closeness to God, you will automatically grow in love and closeness to each other. It's not a contract---it's a sacred covenant that calls you more and more each day to love each other as Jesus loves you. Everything about your wedding day should be seen with a view to your marriage as a SACRAMENT! So please see your time and effort spent in preparation for this lifetime commitment in a positive way. CHOOSE to see all the preparation and guidelines and policies as a sign of God's love and concern for you to help you decide if you are ready for marriage right now, to help provide you with a lifetime of happiness. Above all, continue to pray for the Lord's guidance during this critical time of discernment and decision-making in your life, and know that we are praying for you too!

## AN "OPEN LETTER" TO ANY COUPLES WHO MAY BE "LIVING TOGETHER" BEFORE MARRIAGE WHO WISH TO BE MARRIED IN CHURCH

*Dear friends,*

*St. Paul says that the greatest gift of God is love, and sometimes love demands that we be honest about where we stand. We live in an age when many people in our society look upon the teachings of the Church as outdated and out of touch. It is true that many of the Church's teachings do not reflect the "spirit" of our times, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing, not at all. In fact, sometimes, by being "out of step" with the times, our Church provides a powerful witness and urgent invitation for us to examine the decisions we have made about how we will live our lives. Marriage is a sacrament because it was willed so by Christ...and because it reflects the sacred union between Jesus and the Church. In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul says that Jesus himself is the bridegroom and the Church is his bride (5:21ff). Just as Our Lord's union with the Church is faithful, permanent, and life-giving, so the sacramental union of a man and woman in marriage is intended by God to possess those same three characteristics: faithfulness, permanence, and openness to new life. While an unmarried couple living together, presumably as "husband and wife," before marriage may reflect the "spirit" of our time, it does not reflect the teaching of Jesus nor the Church's constant tradition. If Jesus doesn't bless or condone this arrangement, neither can the Church bless or condone it, nor can any priest in good conscience bless or condone it. We live in an age of impermanence, of insecure family relationships, of lack of commitment. Many couples make the decision to live together before marriage for a variety of reasons: e.g. to see how their relationship will work; to economize living expenses; for convenience; or because they feel they are already committed to each other "in love." However, none of those reasons can ever supplant or replace the sanctity of Christian marriage, nor the commitment and permanence it brings to human relationships. Christian marriage is, by definition, a public commitment made in the presence of God and the Church. Through marriage, a new family is formed within the Body of Christ, the Church. The two people who marry bear primary responsibility for this new family, but the whole community of the Church has a stake in it. For the Church to uphold the teaching of Jesus on the sanctity of marriage, certain guidelines must be made. We have "marriage guidelines" on everything from music at the ceremony to minimum waiting periods before marriage. The wedding of two people who have been living together cannot be treated like "just another wedding." What would that say to the whole community and what would it say about our attempt to uphold the teaching of Jesus?*

*Such a couple puts a pastor in a difficult position. He wants to minister to them in Christian compassion and welcome them to preparation for the sacrament of marriage with joy, but charity demands that he first remind them of Jesus' teaching. At the same time, he must attempt to uphold His teaching for the whole community. **His first duty therefore is to ask the couple living together who comes to him asking to prepare for the Sacrament of Marriage to separate and live in separate homes until the time of their marriage.***

Some will reply, "Well, a lot of people who are living together aren't sexually intimate!" First of all, whatever you might think or hear, not all engaged couples are sexually intimate, and many couples, with the help of their strong faith, do succeed in exercising self-control and maintaining their virginity before marriage. Jesus' teaching is clear: sexual intercourse is meant to be an expression of permanent, faithful love within the committed relationship of marriage. That is what God intends, and that is what the Church has always upheld. On the other hand, Jesus does not want a pastor to be a policeman, nor can he be a policeman. He can only counsel all engaged couples to follow Jesus' teaching and to repent and change when they have not.

Some might say, "Father, this is unfair, and you are punishing couples who engage in premarital sexual activity when the Bible relates the forgiveness of Jesus to Mary Magdalene when she was caught in adultery!" First of all, it must be said that it's dangerous to "use" scripture to argue a point. The bible is meant to be prayed, not argued. Secondly, this policy is not a punishment at all--it is a dutiful exercise of one of the Christian "spiritual works of mercy": to admonish the sinner. Thirdly, it is true that Jesus forgave Mary Magdalene, but it is also true that she stopped her sinful ways, immediately repented, and went on to become a saint! But it is also true that the Bible reflects severe punishment for seriously sinful ways. For example, the Bible reflects the serious sinfulness of fornication (pre-marital sex) with references in at least 18 different places to the fact that "there is no place in the Kingdom of God for the fornicator," or in other words, that the fornicator is going to hell. That sounds like punishment. It's also seriously wrong to presume God's love and forgiveness while continuing to engage in serious sin because God's Laws and Commandments are very clear. Jesus says we cannot say "we love God," and then exempt ourselves from God's laws: "If you love me, you will keep my Father's commandments." To do otherwise is actually to make ourselves out to be "gods" by making up our own rules by which we will behave.

The couple who chooses to continue to live together before marriage will be asked to plan their wedding to be like that of a **convalidation (or "simple blessing" ceremony) of a civil marriage in church**: that is, **celebrated in the presence of 2 official witnesses and the members of their immediate families only**. To plan a large wedding with many guests and a number of attendants would cause scandal by implying acceptance of couples living together before marriage. By witnessing a small, simple ceremony (about 15 minutes, without processions, music, attendants, invitations, decorations, Mass, etc.) the Church will attempt to uphold the teaching of Jesus on the holiness of marriage and at the same time minister to you in your present situation, namely, that of a couple already enjoying the privileges and living the responsibilities, duties, and obligations of the married state.

Please try to understand that this is addressed to couples--not in a spirit of judgment, but--in a spirit of charity. It is hoped that couples will choose the sacrament of marriage, with the Church as witness, if they feel truly called to do so by God, but please understand the pastoral considerations that make this policy necessary. This is not directed at any one individual or family, but is intended for everyone's prayerful reflection.

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