

The Common Policy for Marriage Preparation

By FATHER ROBERT COLLINS

Every person has a natural right to marry but not every person has a natural right to enter the Sacrament of Matrimony.

Every priest or deacon who officiates at a wedding has a responsibility to determine the faith commitment of the couple standing before him pledging their vows.

These two principles are the foundation of the Common Policy of Pastoral Marriage Preparation for the Diocese of Rochester which was issued by Bishop Hogan last year.

The social and cultural pressures which ensured the life-long commitment of marriage in the past are breaking down today. Young people enter marriage with high even unrealistic expectations and once they pass from the romance to the disillusionment stage almost one third of them divorce. Since the highest values in marriage is companionship, one searches for the ideal companion and as the cliché puts it "if at first

you don't succeed, try, try again." Some social scientists speak of trial marriages as inevitable and pre-marital cohabitation as a healthy trend.

The Catholic Church, however, still upholds the idea of matrimony as a life-long commitment, as a sacrament which witnesses and images Christ's love for his Church, as a ceremony in which a young couple receives the affirmation and promise of support of the faith community to which they belong.

Many young couples come to the parish priest with a less than perfect notion of matrimony and a less than perfect commitment to the faith community of the Catholic Church. They want to get married in the Catholic Church because of parental pressure or romantic notions or respect for tradition. They have rather fuzzy notions about sacrament, Catholic Church and matrimony. Parish priests and deacons as representatives of the faith community of the Catholic Church have a serious responsibility to determine whether these fuzzy notions are in fact signs of inability to enter into the Sacrament of Matrimony and insufficient faith commitment to the community of the Catholic Church.

If so, then the priest or deacon has every right to refuse to officiate at their marriage. But a decision to refuse to officiate at a marriage places tremendous pressure on the priest or deacon who has to make that decision. The Common Policy takes some of that pressure off the priest or deacon and distributes it among the various agencies and programs of the community which can assist him to make his decision. The Common Policy sets down the responsibilities of the priest or deacon, the Pre-Cana Conference, the social service agency and the regional bishop's delegate.

The priest or deacon is required to hold a number of interviews with the engaged couple to get to know them as people and to explore their attitudes toward the Catholic Church, the Sacrament of Matrimony and the goals of their marriage. The number of interviews is left up to the discretion of the priest or deacon. He may wish to involve some of the Marriage Encounter couples in his parish in these interviews. Together they can explore as a group the counseling goals for marriage preparation as listed in the Common Policy, namely, to help the couple:

1. understand themselves as persons and what they bring to marriage as individuals.
2. examine their motives for wanting to marry.
3. clarify role expectations and consider the personal adjustment that marriage demands.
4. explore the faith dimension of marriage.
5. learn to communicate and give them insights in the area of problem solving.
6. explore any unusual circumstances present in their relationship, e.g. differences in religion, age, ethnic background, physical handicaps, etc.

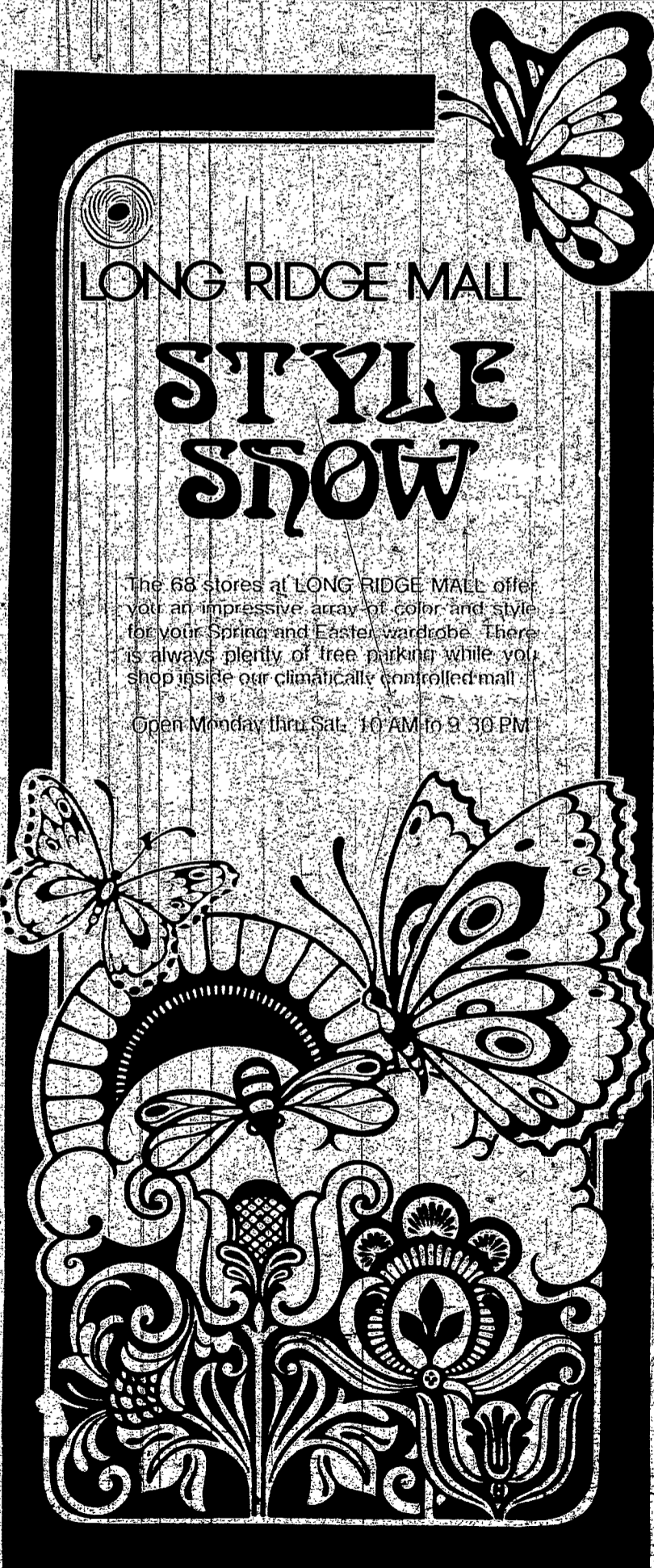
7. evaluate the degree of readiness of each couple, noting their maturity to cope with the realities of marriage.

If in the course of the interviews with the couple, the priest or deacon should encounter ex-

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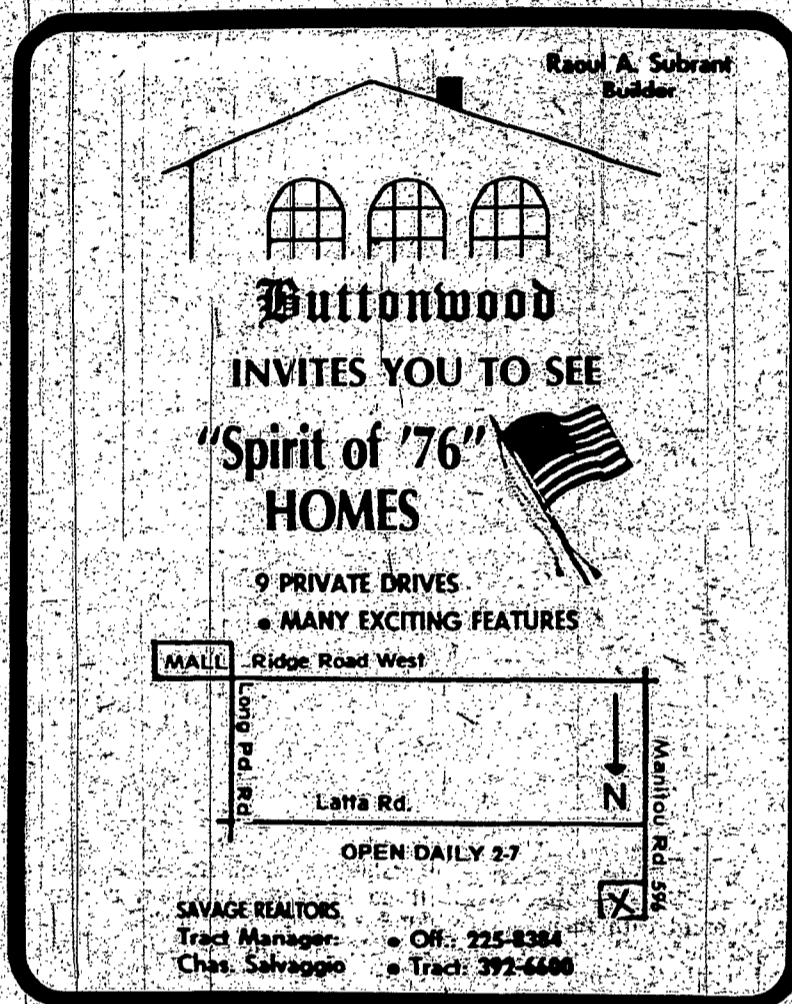
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