

Church Pre-marital Programs Good For Couple's Future

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Several years ago, a girl friend came to my daughter for sympathy and comfort. She felt that she and her fiancé were running into "ridiculous interference" from the Church in their plans to marry. Their parish priest was even suggesting they postpone their wedding for at least six months, she said.

In response to my daughter's questioning, the 18-year-old girl said the priest was concerned because she and her fiancé had only known each other for a few months and also because of her age. He wanted them to take the time for extensive premarital counseling, she said.

Highly indignant, the young woman added that she and her fiancé were thinking about getting married outside the Church. After all, she stormed, "We know we love each other. What more do we need?"

What that young couple encountered in the priest who advised them was the Church's intensified efforts to provide engaged couples with a more realistic kind of pre-marriage education.

Today, in line with the renewal in the Church following the second Vatican

Council, many dioceses in the U.S. have adopted policies which specify a period of preparation lasting anywhere from two to six or more months. A similar emphasis also is found in the preparation for First Penance, First Communion, and Confirmation.

The policy of the Diocese of Fall River, Mass., calls for a six-month period of preparation which "Will not be reduced unless grave reasons exist." The guidelines, issued in 1982, call for a period of personal contact between the priest who will perform the wedding and the couple, supplemented by marriage preparation program conducted by the diocesan Office of Family Ministry.

The Fall River guidelines emphatically discourage marriage when one person is a teenager and state that special counseling services are necessary in such circumstances. In common with many other dioceses, the diocese does not consider pregnancy a sufficient reason for marriage.

The Diocese of Pittsburg also implemented a new marriage preparation policy in 1982. Father John Price, director of the diocesan Family Life Office, said a six-month period will give the couple and the priest who will

witness the marriage an adequate amount of time to plan the liturgy properly.

"The bottom line is for the couple to make the highest quality marriage, to build a community of love and life," Father Price said in an interview.

The coordinator of Pittsburg's marriage preparation is Father Paul Bradley. He tackled a question about couples and parents who object to the more rigorous guidelines by pointing out that the right of a couple to marry in the Church goes "hand in hand with responsibility." He added the Church has the responsibility to ensure that each couple understands and appreciates what marriage involves.

And what happened to my daughter's young friend? Unhappily, future events proved the value of the priest's concerns. Though married in a Church wedding, that young couple encountered big difficulties in trying to live together. Today the young woman is the divorced mother of three small children and is struggling to earn a living.

... THE TOAST ...

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