

Catholic U. Report: Getting Married Getting Harder

Researchers at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., have just published the results of a major survey on marriage preparation in the American Catholic Church. The survey, which includes information from

all 173 Roman Catholic and Eastern Rite dioceses in the U.S., reveals major changes in the way couples are prepared for marriage.

The report, "Preparing for Marriage," shows a definite increase in the requirements

for couples seeking Church marriage, an increase in the diversity of preparation programs offered to couples, and an evaluative approach to the couples' readiness for marriage.

According to the project's directors, Andrew Thompson of The National Center for Family Studies at Catholic University, and Father David O'Rourke of Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union, the typical couple must begin preparations from four to six months prior to their wedding date. In 1981, approximately half the 353,375 Catholic couples who married participated in some form of preparation program in addition to their initial meeting with the parish priest. This national average represents a substantial increase over the 39 percent figure gathered in 1976 by previous research. The increase is even more significant because the earlier study gathered information from only 83 dioceses, most likely those having greater than average participation, said the two researchers.

The figures from the 1981 study indicated the programs typically provided from between 11 to 30 hours of preparation; and, in the process, the couple's readiness for marriage was evaluated.

"Diocese have taken a giant step forward in the way they are helping engaged couples," said Thompson. "Diocesan personnel are offering more extensive preparation programs and are looking for ways to adapt their programs to couples' special needs."

Eighty-four percent of the dioceses now have formal guidelines or policies, and many are keeping accurate records of how many engaged couples have participated in the preparation programs.

Father Steven Preister, director of the Center for Family Studies and one of the co-authors of the report, said that the impetus for the changes can probably be traced to the decision made by the American bishops in 1978 to come up with what they called "a truly comprehensive strategy for family ministry." This decision has resulted in a marked increase in the number of dioceses now having marriage preparation policies — 146 out of 173 — and a major increase in the number of dioceses now requiring that couples take part in these preparations. While 90 percent of the dioceses provide marriage preparation, 60 percent require couples to take part in them.

The report also indicated a change in who prepares the couples for marriage. The work was once done mainly by parish priests. Now, the most common programs for preparation are conducted by lay couples and clergy working together as teams.

Evaluation of the couple's readiness for marriage has become an important part of the preparation process. The faith of the couple, and their commitment to the Church, play an important role in the evaluation. Couples who are not practicing Catholics will often be encouraged to renew their connections with the Church before continuing preparation.

Fr. John Reedy



Looking for the Lord

The Experience Of the Cross

"Who ever promised life would be easy?"

Not an original question, of course, but I was a bit surprised to hear it from this angry young woman. It's not the kind of observation I expect from younger people today.

She was talking about a friend she loved who was going through a painful time. Because of the difficulties, he was about to make a far-reaching decision this woman judged to be unwise.

Her remark came back to me about a month later, when I was visiting one of those God-awful shanty towns on the outskirts of Lima. The local pastor was talking about the high number of infant deaths.

"Of course, the families suffer," he said. "But they don't seem to be shattered by the loss — the way it has devastated families I have known in the States."

He was silent for a moment, then added, "These people have probably adjusted, psychologically, to the fact that it might happen to their family. In fact, I know very few families which have not lost a child."

When I think about the change that has taken place in America during my lifetime, I am astonished at the difference in our perception of suffering and hard ship as a part of life.

The impact of better health care on infant mortality rates and crippling diseases is only one aspect of it. There was also an acceptance — just as a fact of life — of limited opportunities for education, of a fairly narrow range of job opportunities, of personal vulnerability to a whole range of hardships for which there was no government or social support.

I'm not suggesting that these people were more virtuous because they accepted hardship and frustrations as a fairly normal part of life. But their experience and perspective left them better prepared to deal with suffering and disappointment when they were encountered.

This perspective also seemed to help them in their ability to make marriages

last. Brides and grooms, I suppose, have always seen each other in a kind of romantic glow, but few of the husbands and wives of my parents' generation expected their marriages to be constantly fulfilling, exciting, free of misunderstanding and disappointment.

Because their expectations were more modest, they seemed better able to deal with the pain and the problems when they did occur.

As I have watched generations of students pass through this campus, I have worried about how ill-prepared most of them are for the suffering and frustration which occur, at one time or another, in almost every life.

Because of the number of marriage failures they have known, many of them are skittish about committing themselves. When they do make their decisions, many of them are sadly naive in their expectations of how this marriage will escape the tensions and difficulties they see in so many others.

It is a question of experience. Our students hear me when I tell them that most of the success and growth I have seen in life has come from the way people manage to handle the pain and the hardships. They hear, but they can't really grasp this as a reality of their own lives.

Nor would they be able to appreciate my friend's question, "Who ever said that life was supposed to be easy?"

For the Christian, this probably means that we can't really understand all those sermons about the cross until we feel some of its weight on our own shoulders.

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