

Couples must prepare before sacrament of matrimony

By Edgar V. Barmann
NC News Service

When my future bride and I made an appointment and visited a priest to tell him of our marriage plans, we expected to receive instructions on married life.

Instead, the priest took us on an extended tour of his new rectory.

Before we left, almost as an afterthought, he asked us if we understood what married life was all about. When we assured him we did (even though in retrospect we know now that we didn't), the date was set for our wedding.

That was 1953, and by a combination of God's grace, good fortune, perseverance, love and commitment, our marriage has been for keeps.

We were not unlike many couples who married in that era. In those days, two of three marriages in the United States were the lasting kind, and Catholics had a considerably better track record for stable marriages than did the general population. The possibility of divorce never occurred to most of us; it was never considered as an option.

But times have changed. The probability of divorce for couples marrying in the 1980s is nearly one in two. In the United States there are almost 1.2 million divorces a year. Getting married is almost like investing in the stock market: It's a big risk.

As a result, U.S. bishops have placed renewed emphasis on pre-marital instruction programs. The theory, which statistics bear out, is that the more preparation, the less chance of a marriage break-up.

In consequence, there isn't a diocese which doesn't offer a marriage prepara-

tion program. And enrollment in a program is a pre-requisite to every couple's trip down the aisle.

Thus, as soon as a couple becomes engaged, it's important for them to make an appointment with the priest in the parish where they expect to be married. Most dioceses require a notice of at least six months before the wedding date and some insist that the preparations be completed three months before the wedding. Church approval for the marriage should be a certainty before the first wedding invitation is mailed.

One of the priest's first tasks is to determine if the couple is free to marry. An existing marriage bond, blood relationship (including first cousins), impotency, lack of consent and serious mental illness are among possible impediments.

Age is also a factor. While church law sets a minimum of 16 for men and 14 for women, U.S. bishops have exercised the right to raise the age requirements. The minimum age, without special permission from a bishop, is 18 in most U.S. dioceses, and in some the age is 20 or 21.

The reason for the age policy is clear from statistics which show that 81.3 percent of marriages involving those between 16 and 18, and 58 percent of those between 19 and 21, experience marital breakdown.

The priest also must evaluate the couple's understanding of marriage as a sacrament and vocation and examine their attitudes on such concepts as permanence, fidelity and openness to having children. At least one of the parties must seriously intend to practice the

Catholic faith. In mixed marriages, the Catholic party pledges to make every effort to raise their children in the church.

Though the priest meets with the couple and addresses many of these major concerns privately, he ordinarily relies on the expertise of married couples, physicians and sometimes psychologists and counselors to assist in the presentation of a comprehensive pre-marital preparation program.

Offerings include diocesan-wide conferences, usually consisting of a series of three or four instruction sessions, Engaged Encounters which are intensive weekends of dialog, Pre-Cana programs of one or more sessions conducted by parish teams, and Sponsor Couples or Couples Ministry, in which an engaged couple meets three or four times with a married couple, often in a home setting.

In addition, many dioceses have begun to offer Cana II, a relatively new program designed for previously married engaged couples who are in a position to remarry in the church due to annulment or widowhood.

Without exception, these programs focus on 10 areas: religion and life, marriage readiness, interpersonal communication, personal development and maturity, role adjustment, children and parenthood, sexuality and conjugal morality, extended family and in-laws, interests and activities and financial questions.

To tackle practical issues, many dioceses administer series of written questions to the prospective bride and groom to answer independently. "Yes" or "no" answers are invited to such statements as: "I am getting married because I want to." "We agree to teach

Catholic values to our children." "I'm afraid that my spouse and I may not agree on the way we should have a good sex life."

Inventory results form the basis of a dialog. The couple discusses the statements to which they have given opposite answers, as well as answers they have given which are outside the norms established by thousands of others who have completed the same evaluation.

Discussions give them the opportunity to clarify their responses, work out disagreements, or at least realize that they must live with each other's divergent views. In some cases, the questionnaire forces the couple to bring up important subjects like religion which they have avoided talking about for fear they will have a serious disagreement.

Opposing views on inventory questions have sometimes spawned heated arguments and postponement or cancellation of marriages.

While the prospective bride and groom may be annoyed at what they consider "red tape," they can be assured that the extensive marriage preparation doesn't stem from their pastor's whim or from a diocesan committee in search of a project.

Statements in recent years by Pope John Paul II, by a synod of the world's bishops, and by Vatican commissions on education and on marriage and family life have all stressed the necessity for pre-marital instruction.

As a result, the couple who decides to skip class is in for a shock. Most likely they will be told: "No preparation, no marriage."

WEDDING ORGANIST

- Experienced at Catholic weddings
- Competitive rates
- Eastman-trained
- Includes rehearsal & music planning

865-0056 or 225-7426

Betty Kawiak's

Bridal Fashions
One of the
LARGEST SELECTIONS
IN ROCHESTER

- BRIDAL
- BRIDESMAIDS
- MOTHER'S GOWNS
- COCKTAIL DRESSES
- PROM GOWNS

Special attention for the Full-Figured Woman
Open Mon-Thurs. 10-9, Fri., Sat. 10-5

We carry a full line of Jewelry,
Dyeable Shoes and Accessories

call 225-2650
2590 Ridge Rd. W. (Buckman's Plaza)



Empire Lanes

- Receptions
- Rehearsal Dinners
- Showers
- Bowling Banquets
- Luncheons
- Private Parties
- Retirement Dinners
- Christmas Parties

Smoke free private banquet facilities for up to 175 people with private entrance and parking.

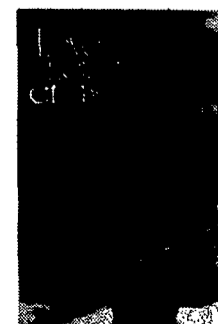
We'll cater to you
671-2556
2400 Empire Blvd.

Trant's Inc

Church Supplies & Religious Articles
696 South Ave. (corner of Gregory St.)
Rochester, New York 14620
(716) 442-7120



A COMPLETE LINE OF
WEDDING CANDLES



A LARGE SELECTION OF
WEDDING BULLETIN COVERS