



Illustration by Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

R E M A R R I A G E

Marriage prep faces couples' changed needs

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

The days are long gone when marriage-preparation programs consisted primarily of pre-Cana sessions attended by young, almost exclusively Catholic couples.

Couples seeking marriage in the Catholic Church these days are generally older (25-30 years old as opposed to late teens or early 20s). Less than half of today's marriages involve two Catholic partners.

Because of the high rate of divorce, marriages today are more likely than ever before to involve at least one partner who has been married before. And with society's current moral climate, the odds are greater that some of the engaged couples are already living together.

Changing times, changing needs and a changing understanding of what fosters successful marriages have led to a more sophisticated focus in marriage-preparation programs, and to an awareness that one program does not fit all.

In addition to Engaged Encounter — a weekend-long intensive program for engaged couples — and the standard parish-based programs, the Diocese of Rochester now offers special sessions for teenagers, couples expecting the birth of children, Hispanic couples, hearing-impaired couples, couples separated due to working situations or military service, and programs for couples in which one or both partners have been married previously.

"We try to cover as wide a range as possible of situations," acknowledged Shari Fischer, regional coordinator for marriage preparation and family ministry at the Catholic Family Center in Rochester.

Fischer and her counterparts at the other diocesan offices of social ministry — Joe Federowicz in the Southern Tier and Esther Young in the Finger Lakes — coordinate programs that attempt to meet the varied needs of engaged couples. But despite the diversity of situations, the basic

thrust of the programs remain the same.

Marriage, in the eyes of the Catholic Church is a sacrament and a lifelong commitment, Fischer noted. Consequently, she observed, "It's something the Catholic Church does not take lightly."

The basic diocesan program is called "When Families Marry."

"We're not taught how to be married," Fischer explained. "We get it from models."

The primary models are the couples' parents, and unconsciously the partners mirror what they learned from their parents. Consequently, marriage-preparation programs call upon the engaged couples to examine not only their individual attitudes, but also their families' attitudes about such topics as money, communication, sexuality, spirituality and the issues Fischer described as the "nitty-gritty" of married life — alcohol, in-laws, jealousy, and how to fight constructively.

The aim, Fischer said, is to get the couple talking about issues that could potentially pose problems in the future. "Yes, maybe they have talked about things, but only on a surface level," she said. "We try to get them to a deeper level of communication."

The sessions are all conducted by married couples who use their own experiences to help illustrate the points being discussed, and to help convey the realities of married life. "We find that peer-to-peer talks have a much greater effect on the couples," Fischer said.

For couples involving one or both partners who have been previously married, the diocese offers New Horizons. The program, now eight years old, has the same family-of-origin focus as the basic marriage-preparation course, but also takes into account families formed by the earlier marriages.

All too often, Fischer noted, these couples assume that because one or both of them have been married, they already

know what it will take to make the new marriage work. New Horizons helps to point out what they don't know, she said.

"We try to go into the aspect of shadows from the past," Fischer said. "What happened with the relationships that made them dissolve? Have you put the marriage behind you?"

New Horizons is available in Rochester — where 120 couples participated in sessions during 1989 — and the Southern Tier. Couples in the Finger Lakes region attend sessions in Rochester.

Cohabiting couples present an entirely different set of problems, Fischer noted. In addition to a lifestyle unsanctioned by church teaching, these couples often bring with them a belief that living together has already taught them what marriage will involve.

Fischer pointed out, however, that 38 percent of the couples who cohabited before marriage eventually will get divorced, while only 26 percent of the couples who did not live together before marriage will do so.

An even higher divorce rate is encountered among marriages involving

Vatican OKs lay witnesses at Alaskan weddings

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (CNS) — Archbishop Francis T. Hurley of Anchorage has delegated six lay parish administrators to witness Catholic marriages when a priest or deacon is unavailable.

The measure was approved by the Vatican in January, following a petition from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"There is no intention to take the priest or deacon from the scene," Archbishop Hurley said Jan. 30 in announcing the move.

"Rather," he said, "this permission will remove the uncertainty that at times hovers over a planned wedding when fog, rain or snow hovers over the town and makes the arrival of the priest or deacon ques-

tionable." According to Fischer, a failure rate of approximately 95 percent can be expected for marriages when one or both partners is under 18.

Because of this high rate of failure, the sessions designed for teen couples try to get the partners to look at their reasons for getting married and at the realities of married life. The goal, Fischer noted, is to get them to assess more honestly their chances of success, and even to delay getting married.

Essentially, the marriage-preparation programs are intended to give the couples a jump on married life, Fischer observed, and a greater chance for success not only as a couple, but as a family.

"I think that the church as a whole recognizes that many of the problems today would be alleviated by stronger family ties, and one of the best ways to make them stronger is to have adequate preparation for marriage," Young said.

"From the standpoint of my own growth as an individual," Federowicz said, "it's taken me 50 years to get to a point where I could have been 20 or 25 years ago had this information been made available to me."

A first in the country, the measure stems from a case last summer when fog prevented the archbishop from officiating at a wedding in Valdez.

In that case, the archbishop suggested that the couple have a civil ceremony officiated by the local parish administrator, a nun. Vatican approval was not needed because the case involved a mixed marriage. The archbishop gave the couple a dispensation, which enabled the nun to perform a civil ceremony.

But if both parties to the marriage had been Catholic, the dispensation would not have been possible and the couple would have had to postpone the wedding, Archbishop Hurley said.