

# Marriage

## Church teaches couples have lifelong vocation

By Lee Strong  
Senior staff writer

Marriage-preparation's future in the Rochester diocese may be dawning at Pittsford's St. Louis Church on March 25.

On that day, the parish's marriage-preparation team has scheduled an all-day session for engaged couples. The one-day program replaces three separate sessions.

But an even greater difference will be on the program's emphasis.

In addition to covering such traditional topics as communication, finances, and children, the day is being planned around discussion of marriage as a sacrament and a vocation.

"If they are coming to pre-Cana with the idea of marriage in the church, then it must be treated as a sacrament," noted Sue Payne, a member of the Pittsford parish's marriage-preparation team and one of the people who helped to develop this new approach. "Divorce is not an option. By getting married in the church, you are getting *married* in the church."

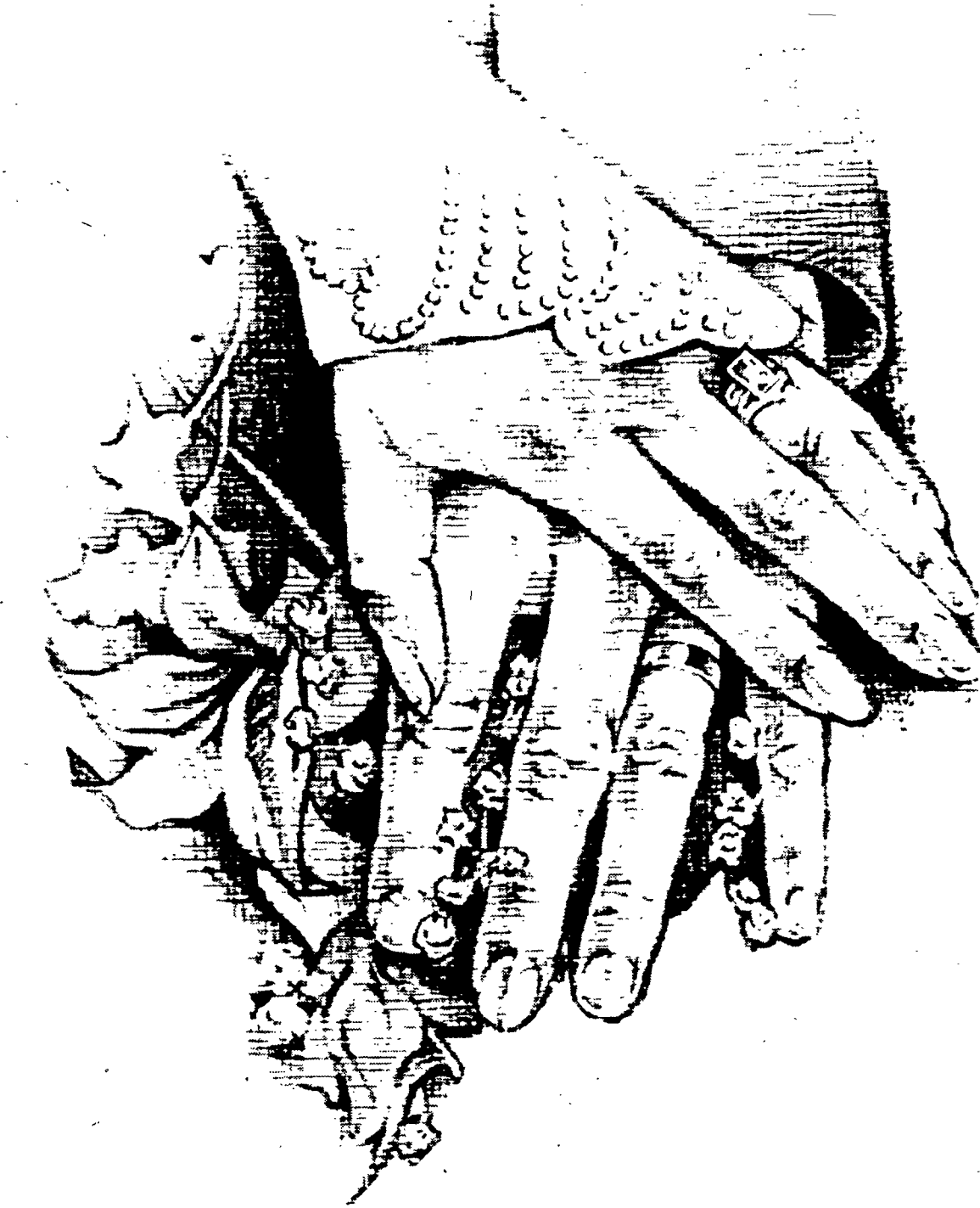
Thus this new program is being built around the wedding Mass, with emphasis on three components: the word, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of marriage.

The word component stresses the Word of God, and how that enters into the marriage and forms a center of the couple's life. The Eucharist portion of the program focuses on the couple's life as a community in the home and within the broader church community. And through discussion of marriage as a sacrament, the couple is told that they have a vocation and that they receive grace from God.

"They need to know that Christ is part of their lives," Payne noted.

Barbara Carroll, diocesan coordinator for sacramental catechesis, is hoping that more parishes will shift the focus of marriage preparation to emphasize its sacramental dimension.

"One of the problems is that we have so many social customs mixed in with the liturgical cus-



oms so that we have a hard time sorting out the social customs from the liturgical ones," Carroll observed.

"What we are trying to look at this point in time is shifting the emphasis of what we are doing in marriage preparation," Carroll added. "Sacramental preparation is not an education program. To celebrate a sacrament you must be converted."

All sacraments have a dimension of conversion to them, Carroll said. Marriage is "living out our baptismal covenant," she said. "In baptism, we die and rise. How do you continue to do that as a couple rather than as an individual?"

“*The relationship is between us, but theologically, what it says is as a couple we make a commitment to build the body of Christ.*”

Barb Carroll

Marriage preparation has stressed some of the traditional church teachings about the sacrament, mixing them in with treatment of practical issues. These church teachings emphasize that marriage must be entered into freely and knowingly, that the couple must be genuinely committing themselves to lifelong faithfulness to each other, and that they must be open to procreation.

But the new approach seeks to place the "practical topics" as well within the context of faith, and to emphasize that marriage is not a one-day event, but an ongoing process of conversion and living out of this

faith. "The number one priority of the sacrament is lifelong formation," Carroll noted.

The vocation of marriage is related to that of priests in that couples and priests serve the community over the years.

"The relationship is between us, but theologically, what it says is as a couple we make a commitment to build the body of Christ," Carroll explained.

If, for example, finances are being discussed at the marriage-preparation session — beyond such issues as who handles the checkbook or balancing budgets — the sacramental focus, Carroll explained, will include such questions as "How do you use your money to build the kingdom?"

Or as the couple shares their feelings about each other, they might be asked, "How do I find God in my future spouse?"

Part of the new emphasis in marriage preparation is on readiness.

"Is there fully a sacrament if the people celebrating have no sense of what it is about?" Carroll queried. "Why are you getting married in the church? Why is it important? If it's not important, why are you doing it anyway?"

In addition, the couples must be aware of the fact that the church teaches it is not the priest or deacon who marries, "They are the ones who administer the sacrament to each other," she noted.

Carroll explained that part of the reason why marriage-preparation programs need to be reevaluated is the high failure rate of marriages today.

"If one of two marriages end in divorce — Catholic or not — I think that says we are missing something," Carroll observed.

One area also being discussed is ongoing support for the couple even after they marry. Thus some parishes are considering follow-up sessions during the marriage's early years to provide support and to help couples deal with issues as they arise.

"The majority of (adult) people in our church are married," Carroll said. "It just seems to me we've got to do something different. We've got to figure out a way to do it better."

## Louisville adopts guidelines to help strengthen marriages

By John R. Karman III  
Catholic News Service

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — An ecumenical group of pastors, lay people and church leaders has produced a set of marriage guidelines they believe will strengthen marriages and reduce the divorce rate in the metropolitan Louisville area.

The guidelines are the result of 18 months' work by the Kentuckiana Marriage Task Force and titled "Recommended Guidelines for Marriages in Kentuckiana." They were announced late last year to 100 local religious leaders gathered at a Louisville Baptist church.

About 20 of the leaders, representing 14 denominations in Louisville and southern Indiana, signed a pledge supporting the document. Louisville Archbishop Thomas C. Kelly did not attend

the event but has signed on in support.

The document consists of six recommendations that encourage:

- Sexual abstinence outside marriage.
- A minimum of four months of marriage preparation, to include scriptural teachings on marriage, communication and conflict resolution skills, finances, and sexuality.
- Clergy and/or mentor couples to follow up with newly married couples approximately six and 12 months after the wedding.
- All married couples to attend programs designed to enrich and strengthen marriages.
- Married couples who are experiencing serious difficulties to seek help.
- Clergy to exercise leadership in helping couples bond for life by participating in and promoting programs to enrich

marriage and family life; preaching on the theology of marriage; modeling healthy relationships; cooperating with clergy of other denominations to foster marriage preparation and follow-up for interfaith couples.

Michael McManus, nationally syndicated columnist and author of the book "Marriage Savers," gave the keynote speech at the marriage guidelines presentation. He said, "I think you could actually push the divorce rate in half in five years in Louisville if your churches sign on to these guidelines."

McManus, who has been married 29 years and is the father of three sons, said the guidelines are based on proven principles. He cited Peoria, Ill., which adopted a community marriage policy in 1991, when the city recorded 1,210 divorces. A year later, he said, divorces

dropped to 947.

Churches and clergy should be at the forefront of ensuring that the marriages of their parishioners start strong and stay strong, McManus said.

He quoted a Gallup poll that said 80 percent of all Americans had no premarital counseling. Part of the reason, he said, is that pastors are overworked, and he stressed the importance of mentor couples.

"In every church, we've got couples whose marriages have been strong and have endured for two, three, four or five decades," he said. "They have learned something about how to love one another, how to forgive one another, how to argue. We are not passing that on to our children."

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