

Fall Marriage

Marriage guidelines fight 'tempest'

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In a new set of guidelines on marriage preparation, the Vatican said church teachings such as those against divorce, cohabitation and birth control need to be better explained to today's young couples.

The corrosion of marriage values in modern society requires the church to offer deeper moral and theological formation, especially on responsible procreation and the total commitment required by the sacrament, it said.

The 30-page document, titled "Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage," was made public May 27 at the Vatican. It was written by the Pontifical Council for the Family as a point of reference for bishops' conferences and other church organizations around the world.

In an accompanying note, Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, president of the pontifical council, said the Vatican document responded in part to the "moral tempest" that has weakened the traditional stability of marriage.

He said the Vatican was especially concerned that other forms of cohabitation were being accepted by society as equal or similar to marriage.

The document elaborated on this social context, saying marriage today was buffeted by such developments as sexual permissiveness, a "contraceptive mentality," widespread divorce and a growing tendency to put off matrimony until a later age.

As a remedy, it recommended basic elements for three stages of marriage preparation:

- Remote preparation, which should try to instill at a young age respect for marriage as a form of complete self-giving, with special emphasis on chastity as a condition for eventual marriage.

- Such instruction can be accomplished through catechesis, sermons, church schools, parish programs and above all in the family, it said.

- Intermediate preparation, during the period of a couple's engagement. The document recognized that most parishes have pre-marriage courses for couples, but recommended strengthening the content and offering additional pastoral programs.

- Immediate preparation, involving prayer, the sacrament of penance and discussions between the couple and pastor in the period just before marriage.

The document focused on the intermediate level of preparation, saying these formation pro-



grams often had to make up for a lack of understanding among young couples.

It praised the growth of pre-marriage courses as a positive development, but said such courses should not be reduced to a "mere formality." It suggested that the amount of time necessary for a pre-marriage course was at least an entire week, or four weekends, or an afternoon once a month for a year.

The content of pre-marriage courses should be centered on basic Christian doctrine regarding matrimony, although it should also touch on various psychological, medical and other issues, it said.

Couples should be instructed in the Christian vision of the husband-wife relationship, including the idea of free consent in matrimony, the permanence of the marriage vow, the purpose of sexual relations and the raising of children.

In this way couples will better understand the church's teaching against premarital sex, cohabitation and trial marriage, it said.

The courses should give special emphasis to the defense of life, with insistence that on such issues as abortion and birth control the couples must not "conform to the prevailing mentality," it said. Couples should be aware of natural family planning techniques, which rely on periodic abstinence and are allowed by church teaching, it added.

The document recommended frequent prayer and discussion meetings between the engaged couples and priests, catechists and lay specialists.

To help carry out such programs, it suggested pastors form local groups composed of a priest and Catholic married couples, including people with expertise in medicine, law and psychology.

Those active in pre-marriage formation should be people of sound doctrine and complete fidelity to church teaching, it added.

At a diocesan level, the document recommended establishment of a commission to coordinate pre-marriage preparation activities, utilizing the services of couples, church movements and lay experts.

The document also included some basic guidelines about the marriage ceremony, saying it should be serious and simple in tone, avoiding excessive pomp and ostentation.

It suggested that readings during Mass be done by someone other than the couple being married; the readings are aimed first of all at them, the document explained.

Diocese to offer extra preparation sessions

The Diocese of Rochester is offering a limited number of marriage preparation sessions for couples who are unable to take advantage of programs offered through their parishes or parishes in their regions.

The schedules of parish-based programs are available through parishes or the diocesan Department of Evangelization and Catechesis, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, NY 14624, 716/328-3210, 328-3228, or 800/388-7177, ext. 279.

For information about Engaged Encounter, call 716/266-2040. For information about Once More With Love, the program designed for couples in which one or both were previously married, call the diocesan numbers.

The diocesan-sponsored events will take place on Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The non-refundable registration fee per couple is \$50.

The scheduled sessions through June 1997 are:

Sept. 14, Pastoral Center, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester;

Oct. 12, St. Mary Our Mother School, W. Broad Street, Horseheads;

Jan. 4, Holy Rosary Church, Lexington Avenue, Rochester;

March 15, St. Mary Our Mother School, W. Broad Street, Horseheads;

May 17, St. Mary of the Lake Church, Walworth Road, Ontario;

June 28, Holy Rosary Church, Lexington Avenue, Rochester.

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