



## PROCEDURE TO BE FOLLOWED BY PASTORAL MINISTERS WHEN PREPARING COUPLES WITH SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation (PP&G) have identified 21 *special circumstances* for engaged couples that may have implications for the validity of their marriage as well as their ability to maintain lifelong marriage. In addition to information gathered about the couple when completing the Pre-Nuptial Inquiry, the FOCCUS premarital inventory is the primary tool for pastoral ministers to determine when a *special circumstance* exists in an engaged couple's relationship.

When preparing a couple with special circumstances for marriage, the pastoral minister's primary resource is page Section III- "Special Circumstances in Marriage," pp. 32-55 of "*Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation for the Catholic Church in New Jersey*" (PP&G).

Steps in the Special Circumstances Process:

1. The FOCCUS pre-marital inventory can help you gain further insight about the couple's relationship and identify strengths and weaknesses for you to address with the couple as well as determine if any of the 21 special circumstances apply to them. Often a couple can work through many issues during the months of marriage preparation with your assistance.
2. In cases where you as pastoral minister cannot resolve the matter with the couple, you should ask the couple's verbal consent to discuss their situation with your pastor. This consultation may produce recommendations for you to follow with the couple which may resolve the problem.
3. As an additional resource, the Diocese of Trenton is required to provide a list of diocesan consultants with particular experience in the pastoral care of couples with special circumstances. If you would like to speak with one of our consultants, or would like to serve on the consultation committee, you may contact Peg Hensler, Assoc. Director for Marriage Ministries, at 609-403-7156 or [phensler@dioceseoftrenton.org](mailto:phensler@dioceseoftrenton.org).
4. When referral is recommended after consultation, or you as pastoral minister feel it is advisable for the couple to be referred, please use Form E-1 to refer the couple for evaluation. When attaching FOCCUS Results, use the *FOCCUS Pre-Marriage Facilitation Summary Form* (available at [www.dioceseoftrenton.org/marriageministryresources](http://www.dioceseoftrenton.org/marriageministryresources)).
  - a. The use of Form E-1 for referral is required for the following three special circumstance categories.
    - 1) Marriage of minors – i.e. at least one party under age 18
    - 2) Pre-nuptial agreements "that severely limit the complete commitment" to marriage
    - 3) Choosing not to have children--refusing to be open to procreation.
  - b. For the following five special circumstance categories, use of Form E-1 is not required but is often strongly recommended to refer couples for professional counseling, based on results of the consultation with the pastor and/or a diocesan consultant:
    - 1) Abusive relationship
    - 2) Active addiction
    - 3) HIV/AIDS
    - 4) Pregnancy (Note: FOCCUS must always be used)
    - 5) Sexual identity problems -- conflict about sexual identity or orientation
  - c. There are 13 additional special circumstance categories listed that may warrant the use of Form E-1 for evaluation. For a complete list of the 21 most common Special Circumstance categories, see p. 32 in Section III, Special Circumstances section of the *Pastoral Policies and Guidelines for Marriage Preparation* (PP&G).

5. WHERE TO SEND FORM E-1:

- a. After you have completed Form E-1 and each of the couple has signed it, send the referral form and any necessary attachments directly to:

Diocese of Trenton Department of Evangelization and Family Life  
Peg Hensler, Associate Director for Marriage Ministries and NFP  
701 Lawrenceville Road, P.O. Box 5147  
Trenton, NJ 08638-0147

- b. Please note that Catholic Charities is the primary provider of psychological evaluations and counseling services in the Diocese of Trenton for marriage preparation cases by referral. However, Form E-1 must be sent to the Department of Evangelization and Family Life, not Catholic Charities. When it is determined that a psychological evaluation is necessary, the referral form will be forwarded to Catholic Charities by the Department of Evangelization and Family Life.

6. NEXT STEPS AND FOLLOW-UP:

- a. Upon receipt of Form E-1, Catholic Charities will contact the couple and instruct them to make an appointment for an evaluation through the Access Center. Immediately prior to their evaluation, the couple will be asked to sign a *Catholic Charities Authorization to Release Information* form.
- b. The parish will consider the couple's financial situation in determining whether the couple or the parish will cover some or all of the cost of the evaluation.
- c. During the evaluation, the counselor will concentrate on areas of concern identified on Form E-1. The counselor will write up an evaluative report and send it to the referring priest/deacon/pastoral minister. One copy will also be sent to the Department of Evangelization and Family Life. The report will include one of the following recommendations:
1. No further professional counseling recommended
  2. Further pastoral counseling recommended
  3. Further professional counseling strongly recommended

To summarize, the purpose of this process is to provide the pastoral minister with practical assistance and an opportunity for consultation in helping couples discern readiness for marriage. The process was designed to assist both the pastoral minister and the engaged couple in this important period of formation.

If you have a question or concern about the procedure for preparing couples with special circumstances for marriage, please contact Peg Hensler, Associate Director for Marriage Ministries & NFP, Department of Evangelization and Family Life, 609-403-7156 or [phensler@dioceseoftrenton.org](mailto:phensler@dioceseoftrenton.org).

