



# Plan for Strengthening Marriage

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**Diocese of Trenton  
May, 2015**

## **Introduction**

There has been a dramatic decline in the number of Catholic marriages celebrated in the Diocese of Trenton over the past decade. Some of this decline can be attributed to demographic change; there are fewer Catholics of marriage age. Certainly this is part of a national trend in which a smaller percentage of single adults are choosing to marry at all. Analysis has revealed, however, that the number of Catholic marriages in our diocese has declined much more steeply than the number of marriages in the general population of the four counties. In addition, divorce and remarriage among Catholics in our diocese is a reality which presents complex pastoral challenges, and contributes to a decline in the number of Catholics who attend mass regularly. In an effort to care more effectively for the Catholic faithful, and in light of the importance of marriage and family life as basic building blocks of the Church, Bishop O'Connell has named strengthening marriage as one of three pastoral priorities for the Diocese 2014 – 2019.

Over the last several years, the diocesan staff has undertaken a widespread consultation among clergy and lay leadership to assess our pastoral practices in the remote preparation of children and youth regarding marriage, preparing couples for sacramental marriage and in sustaining married couples throughout their lifelong journey. The consultation laid the groundwork for a Study Commission on Marriage which was appointed by Bishop O'Connell in October, 2013 and charged to develop a set of recommendations for strengthening Catholic marriage at every stage of development and throughout married life. The Study Commission was made up of Pastors, Deacons, Vowed Religious, Lay men and women, from the full spectrum of educational, pastoral, and peer support settings. After a year of work, the Commission made a series of recommendations for the Bishop to consider. The following plan is taken from those recommendations.

The plan describes seven objectives and articulates necessary elements of outreach and evangelization, formation in Catholic doctrine, walking with couples in difficult situations, enlivening the faith of young adults, equipping parents as teachers of the faith and as witnesses of unconditional love, and sharing in the inevitable struggles and joys of lifelong

Catholic marriage. It is essential that training and resources be made available in English and Spanish whenever possible. The necessary shift in our pastoral practices will take place in phases over a three year period beginning July 1, 2015.

## **Our goal is to strengthen marriage in the Diocese of Trenton**

### **Objective 1: To equip Catholic clergy and lay ministers to be authentic teachers and witnesses to the truth and beauty of sacramental marriage**

The Diocese will...

- (1.A) Develop homily notes and talking points about sacramental marriage for clergy to use on Sunday when appropriate, and to incorporate into their presentations to parents during sacramental preparation.
- (1.B) Provide training and resources about sacramental marriage for teachers, catechists, youth and campus ministers, and parish sacramental prep teams to help them more pastorally address divorce, remarriage and other contemporary cultural challenges.
- (1.C) Create opportunities for Catholic Campus ministers to develop and share activities that promote qualities of strong marriages, ie. fidelity, honesty, commitment, forgiveness.

Parishes and schools will...

- (1.D) Instruct teachers and catechists annually regarding aspects of Catholic doctrine and the importance of sacramental marriage in the life of the Church.
- (1.E) Seek out and ensure that catechists and teachers of the faith are practicing Catholics in good standing (per 602.c and 602.d Parish Religious Education Administration Manual).

### **Objective 2: To integrate teaching and witness on the vocation of marriage within all formational settings**

The Diocese will...

- (2.A) Produce a DVD on Marriage as part of the Sacrament series with Bishop O'Connell.
- (2.B) Identify ways to incorporate a focus on sacramental marriage into the U.S. Bishop's High School religion curriculum.
- (2.C) Design and pilot a marriage readiness program for use in college campus ministry.

Parishes will...

- (2.D) Seek out married couples to co-teach religious education programs as living witnesses to Sacramental Marriage.
  - As co-teachers in religious education
  - As guest speakers in schools and RE programs during curricular discussions
  - Interact with adolescents
- (2.E) Highlight sacramental marriage within Confirmation programs
- (2.F) Equip parents to talk to their children about healthy sexuality and answer difficult questions in light of Catholic teaching.
- (2.G) Incorporate age-appropriate instruction on Natural Family Planning into Religious Education and Youth Ministry settings.
- (2.H) Integrate teaching about healthy relationships, sex and marriage as part of Youth Ministry efforts.

### **Objective 3: To influence the decision of Catholics to marry in the Church through the development and widespread dissemination of a compelling message about Catholic marriage**

The Diocese will...

- (3.A) Develop a multi-media awareness campaign about Catholic marriage using both Catholic and secular outlets.
- (3.B) Produce psa's and paid ads for TV and radio outlets utilizing the marketing model of "Catholics Come Home."
- (3.C) Create a set of informational videos on various marriage topics for use in parishes. These would include:
  - Why marry Catholic?(the benefits of Catholic marriage)
  - Who can marry? (including information about Interfaith Marriage)
  - Why Catholic weddings are celebrated in church
  - Resources for Married Couples
- (3.D) Develop strategies and pastoral responses to address the current practice of outdoor and destination weddings.

### **Objective 4: To improve the effectiveness of marriage preparation so that it is more responsive and relevant to the needs of today's young adults**

The Diocese will...

- (4.A) Survey the needs and faith readiness of young adults approaching marriage to better inform existing marriage formation programs and assess relevancy.
- (4.B) Establish a diocesan Marriage Ministry Training Team to assist with various parish marriage initiatives, including training and formation of parish Pre-Cana teams.

- (4.C) Conduct Pre-Cana facilitator training workshops that empower Pre-Cana teams with better skills and tools, and formation in Catholic doctrine on sacramental marriage.
- (4.D) Integrate a comprehensive catechetical segment on sacramental marriage into instructional sessions for engaged couples.
- (4.E) Recruit and train bilingual FOCCUS facilitators.

Parishes will...

- (4.F) Incorporate mentoring into the marriage preparation process.

### **Objective 5: To regularize the situation of civilly married couples so they may enjoy the fullness of the sacramental life of the Church**

The Diocese will...

- (5.A) Create an informational brochure describing convalidation.
- (5.B) Develop a standard set of convalidation preparation materials for priests/deacons/mentor couples to prepare couples for valid Catholic marriage.
- (5.C) Produce video segments of couples who have had their marriages convalidated so they may give witness to their experiences.

The Parish will...

- (5.D) Use the bulletin to create awareness of convalidation and how to go about it.
- (5.E) Hold information evenings on convalidation.
- (5.F) Make every effort to determine the marital situation of all parishioners upon registration for the parish, or registration for schools or religious education.
- (5.G) Invite couples in irregular situations to discuss the process of convalidation with the Pastor or other member of the pastoral team.

### **Objective 6: To establish a marriage ministry in every parish to provide intentional support and enrichment for married couples, including those who are struggling in their relationships or family situations**

The Diocese will...

- (6.A) Provide guidance to parishes on how to build and sustain a parish marriage ministry, and training upon request.
- (6.B) Establish the Retrouvaille Ministry to offer Retrouvaille weekends, 6 week follow up, and on-going monthly gatherings, in English and Spanish.
- (6.C) Re-establish Marriage Encounter weekends and on-going monthly gatherings in Spanish.

The Parish will...

- (6.D) Invite and train a core team of married couples to form a marriage ministry
- (6.E) Implement a locally-determined set of support and marriage enrichment activities (ie. outreach to newly married couples, support for interfaith couples, parenting, enrichment).
- (6.F) Utilize a kiosk to display cd's and pamphlets that offer information on marriage and family life, including resources for difficult situations. Make similar information and resources available on the parish website.

## **Objective 7: To promote a marriage-building culture in every aspect of parish life**

The Diocese will...

- (7.A) Compile a list of recommended programs and activities for parishes to engage with young families during the gap between Baptism and the onset of formal religious instruction.

Parishes will choose from among these or other best practices...

- (7.B) Post a weekly message on marriage in bulletin.
- (7.C) Offer Monthly Adoration hour for marriage.
- (7.D) Encourage family participation in sacramental preparation.
- (7.E) Host social gatherings with wholesome activities for adolescents.
- (7.F) Offer public blessing of engaged couples in parishes.
- (7.G) Promote Natural Family Planning instruction to parents, especially at times of transition (i.e. Baptism).
- (7.H) Hold yearly dinner dance in parish for couples celebrating marriage.
- (7.I) Conduct yearly parish mini retreat/marriage enrichment programs, especially for newly married couples.
- (7.J) Ensure that parish staff is trained to provide a positive, informed response to questions about marriage, annulments and convalidation.

### **Indicators of Success:**

In pursuing these objectives, our aim would be to realize:

- A 20% increase in the number of total marriages celebrated annually in the Diocese of Trenton over the next five years.
- A 20% increase in the number of couples attending marriage preparation programs in the Diocese of Trenton over the next five years.
- A 25% increase in the number of convalidated marriages in the Diocese of Trenton over the next five years.

We hope to not only increase the number of Catholic couples in the Diocese of Trenton who choose sacramental marriage, but also support all Catholic married couples in the hard

work necessary to live the sacrament as Christ intended, with fidelity, permanence and openness to life. Implementation of the recommendations will take place in phases over a three year period beginning July 1, 2015.

In following this action plan, we would also expect to observe a greater willingness among couples to serve in parish ministry, a greater variety of marriage enrichment opportunities offered in our parishes, and more young adults inquiring about Catholic marriage. Though results may not be dramatic during the five-year implementation period, ultimately we would expect to find more married couples and families relying on the parish community for support in family life, and more families becoming active participants in the sacramental life of the Church.

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