

IRISH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

Criteria for Courses of Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage

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At the October 2009 General Meeting of the Irish Episcopal Conference, the Bishops decided that any programme of preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage should reflect, both in its content and process, the Christian understanding of marriage and promote a positive attitude towards marriage at all times.

In accordance with the Church's pastoral practice and discipline, the pastoral care and the prerequisites for the celebration of marriage require dedication on the part of all involved in the preparation for sacramental marriage.

The following is a list of criteria outlining marriage preparation course content and process of delivery which will offer couples the best possible programme of preparation.

1. Course content:

- 1.1. The sacramental nature of marriage should form the basis on which all other elements are discussed. All topics covered should reflect a covenantal understanding of marriage within the Catholic tradition, which means a lifelong and exclusive commitment of the husband and wife to each other.
- 1.2. This means that the Catholic understanding and vision of marriage will permeate and be integrated into all elements of marriage preparation.
- 1.3. The spirituality of marriage will be a central part of the marriage preparation.
- 1.4. As well as drawing from human experience, the vision of marriage will be informed by sacred scripture, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Familiaris Consortio*, *Love is for Life* (issued by the Irish Episcopal Conference), *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage* (issued by the Pontifical Council for the Family).
- 1.5. The core elements of a marriage relationship should form the basis of any programme. These include: choosing the sacrament, family of origin, communication, conflict management, commitment, couples as parents, owning your sexuality and fertility awareness and well-being.

2. Course process:

- 2.1. The emphasis at all times should be on the couple and their needs. This should be reflected in the methods used to engage the couples throughout the programme. Time and space should be allotted for couples to discuss topics and issues that are personal. Where appropriate group discussion should be part of the process and couples should feel free to engage in any discussion as they desire.

- 2.2. The marriage preparation course should offer a safe space for couples, in conditions that offer the best possible opportunity for reflection and learning. If suitable parish facilities are available for marriage preparation programmes these could be used.
- 2.3. Programmes of preparation should be co-facilitated by a team comprising laypersons and clergy reflecting the collaboration between the laity and the clergy in promoting sacramental marriage.
- 2.4. Facilitators should be selected from within parish communities and have a clear understanding that they are acting as witnesses for marriage in their local communities.
- 2.5. All programme facilitators should receive the highest standard of training and this training should, ideally, be accredited by a Catholic educational institution.
- 2.6. Facilitators should engage in ongoing supervision and annual professional development training to maintain the highest possible standards.
- 2.7. The programmes should involve a minimum of nine facilitated hours of client contact and be multi-sessional. The multi-sessional aspect allows couples a period of reflection between sessions and the course to be delivered at a leisurely pace, which reflects current best practice in adult education.
- 2.8. The programme of preparation should comprise a maximum of twenty couples, to ensure best practice in group work.
- 2.9. Programmes of preparation should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that their content and process of delivery are of the highest standards and that the courses reflect the changing circumstances of couples coming for marriage preparation.