

Convalidation Strategies – How to Bring Marriages into the Church

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Peg Hensler – phensl@dioceseoftrenton.org | 609-403-7156

Why Aren't Catholics Marrying in the Church?

- Total Marriages Rates in General population versus Catholic Marriage– fewer total marriages and more and more Catholics marrying outside the Church; convalidations steadily increasing as percentage of total Catholic marriages
 - Marriage has been on the decline over the past 50 years– In 1960, 72% of all adults in the US were married compared to only 52% in 2010. The marriage rate has dropped 51% from 1960 to 2009.
 - From 1990 to 2007, in the four counties of the Diocese of Trenton (800,000 Catholics), marriages in the general population decreased 18% while Catholic marriages declined by 50%.
 - 2006 CARA Survey (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate) – 1/3 of married U.S. Catholics surveyed were not married in the Church; 5% of non-Church married couples sought convalidation.
 - Diocese of Trenton (~800,000 Catholics): In 2010: 193 convalidations of 1504 total Catholic marriages (13% of marriages were convalidations); In 2012: 281 convalidations of 1317 Catholic marriages (21% of marriages were convalidations)
- Marriage in today's society:
 - There is a widening marriage gap – those of higher socio-economic status still getting married and staying married at high rates; lower class, less educated Americans marrying and staying married at decreasing rates.
 - Society's approach to marriage impacted by individualism, secularism and feminism
 - The more traditional (institutional) model of marriage characterized by traditional gender roles, intimacy, mutual support, child-rearing, social obligation and sacrifice being replaced by newer soul-mate model.
 - Soul-mate model: ability of individual to feel intense emotional closeness – sort of a cosmic connection
 - Moderate social scientists see a hybrid approach combining best of both models as solid path to forming and sustaining family
 - Recent Survey of Marital satisfaction: happiest marriages place high value on commitment, sexual satisfaction, marital spirituality, attending religious services together, marital generosity, and child rearing (all highly valued traits in Catholic marriage)
 - Young adults in general still value the institution of marriage and plan to marry at some point; Today's young adult Catholics are far less

inclined to marry in the Church and practice faith than parents or grandparents.

- Reasons for not marrying in Church: non-practice of faith so would be hypocritical, too expensive, too many rules, destination weddings with no available Catholic Church; couples not registered in any parish are often turned away by well-meaning but uninformed or non-evangelizing parish staff.
- Finding and Reaching out to non-sacramentally married couples
 - Young Adult (YA) Evangelization
 - Essence of young adult faith is not doubt but search – a trusting, hopeful, persistent seeking or hunger for deeper appropriation of the Gospel and its power to guide, transform and fulfill lives (U. S. Bishops – “Our Hearts Are Burning”)
 - Methodist minister identifies 3 elements unique to Catholic faith that appeal to today’s young adults: mystery, Catholic Social Teaching, Pope Francis.
 - Where do we find young adults in our parishes? Opportunities for reconnection – Ash Wednesday, Christmas, wedding rehearsals, weddings, Baptisms, Confirmations, First Communions, funerals
 - Create a sense of connectedness and belonging by welcoming young adults
 - Provide resources that inform how to participate in rite but also its content, meaning and connection to real life.
 - Great resource: *Connecting Young Adults to Catholic Parishes*, USCCB, quote on pp. 77-78 – YA’s need opportunities to dialog about views on marriage and covenantal commitment. Church has much proven wisdom to share on relationships, sex and marriage.

Outreach strategies based on Pastoral Approach to invalidly married couples – “The aim of pastoral action is to make them understand need for consistency between choice of life and faith they profess, try to do everything possible to induce them to regularize situation in light of Christian principle.” (Familiaris Consortio)

How do we find them? When a new person registers in the parish, registers children for religious education or Catholic school, seeks Baptism for their infant or child, seeks letter of eligibility to be godparent or confirmation sponsor – the registration form/intake process should include record of marriage information – Date of Marriage/Parish of Marriage (include City and State)/Name of Celebrant.

Have a strategy in place to invite couples not married into the Church to set up an appointment with pastor to begin the conversation (non-judgmental, welcoming)

May include a (personalized) form letter from pastor to invite couples into conversation; have a welcome packet for all new parishioners that includes brochures, booklets or handouts on sacramental marriage, annulments, convalidation.

Parish website and parish bulletin – always have a section inviting couples to consider bringing marriage into the Church – use evangelizing, non-Church language.

Keep brochures or handouts on sacramental marriage and bringing marriage into the Church in high traffic gathering spaces – make them colorful, attractive, inviting and evangelizing.

Baptismal Prep offers a great opportunity for the pastor (or Baptismal prep team) to invite couples to consider marrying in the Church.

Diocese of Trenton is holding a couples day of reflection (for Spanish speaking couples in civil or common law marriages). Will include praise and worship, witness talks from couples who've been through a convalidation, workshop on sacramental marriage, a handout and resources on next steps for bringing their marriage into the Church

- One obstacle for immigrant couples is the perceived expense of the sacramental wedding which involves either traveling to the home country or bringing in relatives from the home country. To minimize expense, the party can take place at a later date. The convalidation ceremony can be part of regular Sunday Mass, or some parishes or dioceses offer group ceremonies up to 10 couples with one reception in the parish or cathedral.
- Couples will be asked on their program evaluation – What is preventing you from marrying in the Church?

Overcoming Obstacles – How we can help

For those with prior marriages in need of annulments:

Diocesan Tribunal can hold annulment information evenings throughout diocese (advertise in diocesan and secular papers)

Diocesan Tribunal can have annulment advocacy program – train annulment advocates and offer advocacy services throughout diocese; have Spanish speaking advocates (and representatives for other cultural groups as well).

- Annulment advocates and pastoral ministers in parishes who help prepare couples need to present realistic picture of annulment process, but be positive about the benefits as well - healing from past mistakes and painful memories will bring new freedom to accept and give God's forgiveness and grace so next marriage can be a sacrament in fullest sense of the word.
 - Diocesan website should have FAQ's about the annulment process – e.g. when a formal case is necessary versus lack of form. Parish websites should have a link to diocesan website or their own section devoted to the annulment process.

Pre-emptive strategies to prevent non-Church weddings:

- Couples not already registered in a parish are often turned away. One option is to encourage them to register

in the parish where they will settle after the wedding and do preparation there, or, welcome them back to the home parish where they grew up, or, prepare them in their local parish (couples have a canonical right to the sacraments in the parish where they currently reside, even if not registered)

- For couples insisting on outdoor weddings, encourage them to marry in the Church in a quiet ceremony prior to outdoor ceremony. The Non-church ceremony can be a blessing ceremony - couples can have whatever music, readings, poetry, etc., they want. Do the same for destination weddings when a Catholic Church is not available.

Once Couples decide to marry in the Church, how do we prepare them?

- For couples seeking convalidation after annulment:
 - Diocese of Trenton offers “To Trust Again” remarriage workshop and parishes encouraged to provide FOCCUS pre-marital inventory and include the remarriage section of inventory.
 - Couples may wish to seek professional counseling before entering remarriage to work through unresolved issues– diocese should keep an updated list of Catholic or faith-based marriage counselors. Divorced and Separated Support groups also a great resource for individuals and couples.
 - Diocesan Tribunal can be encouraged to focus more on psychological-spiritual healing of divorced rather than on legal aspects. Collaboration required between Family Life Office and Diocesan Tribunal.
- Parish preparation for all couples seeking convalidation
 - As with all sacramental preparation, preparing convalidating couples for sacramental marriage should be based on the catechumenal (RCIA) model:
 - Invitation/Outreach Strategies (corresponds with Inquiry/Beginnings Stage of RCIA)
 - Catechetical Preparation (Catechumenate/Faith Formation Stage)
 - Enlightenment/Spiritual Preparation Stage
 - Continuing Ministry/Mystagogy
 - Invitation/Outreach
 - Includes all printed materials, brochures, letters of invitation, welcome packet for new families, parish bulletin and parish website outreach.
 - Pastor or trained parish staff personally invites couples in irregular marriages to discuss convalidation process (and annulment process if necessary)
Catechetical Preparation in the parish

- Informed consent is the key to valid sacramental marriage; catechesis should be directed toward helping couples understand true nature of sacramental marriage- a covenant of love, partnership of mutuality, sign of God's presence, vocation to serve; a domestic church.
- Pre- Nuptial investigation forms – couples is asked why they did not originally marry before a priest or deacon – chance to discuss why the couple is seeking sacramental marriage at this time.
- The initial meeting with the couple in the parish enables pastoral minister to determine which marriage preparation process to follow depending on couple's situation, how long married, etc.
 - If married civilly two years or less, same as for first time marriages
 - More than two years, should have sessions with pastoral minister at the parish, some sort of convalidation marital self-assessment to determine if couple possesses qualities necessary for true sacramental marriage (areas of strength and areas that need work; can use *FOCCUS*, *ReFOCCUS*, *Enrich* or develop customized assessment tool)
 - Couple attends special Pre-Cana for convalidating couples offered by diocese
 - Sponsor Couple Model- If couple seeking convalidation is new to the parish community or the couple's faith readiness needs strengthening, couple could be paired with sponsor couple of the parish. The pastor should know the sponsor couple, practicing Catholics involved in the parish.
 - Sponsor couple model recommended for Hispanic community
 - Diocese or parish may offer catechetical sessions that the sponsor couple and convalidating couple can attend together
 - Sponsor couple is not responsible for catechetical formation but for journeying with the couple and acting as living connection to the parish community.

Diocesan Catechetical Preparation

- Diocese of Trenton piloted a new virtue-based life-skills program called *Living a Joy-filled Marriage (Ascension Press)*. Connects theology of marriage to daily living of the sacrament y emphasizing virtues needed for sacramental marriage. Enables couples to develop their own mission statement and action plan for their marriage. Program is *Theology of the Body*-based without over-emphasis on sexual relationship. Easily adaptable

to married audience. Filled with interactive activities for couples, witness based and skills based.

- Program was adapted to include entire component on the vocation of marriage as a call to serve and family as domestic church, connecting church of the home to parish community.
 - Used NACFLM family altar ritual to demonstrate connection between table of the home and table of the Eucharist
- Program was well-received by couples and priests/deacons who observed– unanimously accepted as the program we will use for convalidating couples. The plan is to hold one program four times/year in different locations in diocese, create regional teams for the program, include couples who've been through convalidation process.

Enlightenment/Spiritual Preparation Stage

- Planning wedding liturgy and understanding elements of marriage rite (while many parishes encourage couples to have simple ceremony outside of Mass, once couple is married they can receive the Eucharist so wedding Mass can mark a return to the sacraments)
 - Parish may wish to provide a packet of home activities; ritual guide to connect faith to celebration of special family events.
- Continuing Ministry/Mystagogy: Invite couples to form small faith sharing groups; invite couples into parish ministry and connect them to faith formation and ministry training opportunities.