

THE SACRAMENT OF MATRIMONY

Information for Engaged Couples



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A WORD FROM POPE FRANCIS

“Short term preparations for marriage tend to be concentrated on invitations, clothes, the party, and any number of other details that tend to drain not only the budget but energy and joy as well. The spouses come to the wedding ceremony exhausted and harried rather than focused and ready for the great step that they are about to take... Here let me say a word to fiancés. Have the courage to be different. Don’t let yourselves get swallowed up by a society of consumption and empty appearances.

What is important is the love you share, strengthened and sanctified by grace. You are capable of opting for a more modest and simple celebration in which love takes precedence over everything else. Pastoral workers and the entire community can help make this priority the norm rather than the exception.”

Amoris Laetitia, Pope Francis, 212

Congratulations and best wishes

on your recent engagement! We hope you find this booklet to be a helpful guide as you prepare for the Sacrament of Marriage in the Roman Catholic Church. Your priest or deacon, together with the Diocese of Allentown, look forward to assisting you in planning a wedding and preparing for a marriage that is loving, lasting, and sacred. Please be assured of our prayers for you. May God lead and guide you as you prepare to receive the Sacrament of Marriage, and may He richly bless you now and always.

+ Alfred A. Schlert

Most Reverend Alfred A. Schlert
Bishop of Allentown

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DISCERNING MARRIAGE

Your engagement is an important time of *discernment*, the process of patiently considering God's will for your life. The vocation of marriage is a special calling placed in the hearts of men and women by God to draw them closer to Him. God desires far more for us than basic happiness, good feelings, or simple comforts. He wants our complete joy and fulfillment. We can find this by drawing close to God and living out His amazing plan for our lives.

Your engagement is an opportunity to spend time praying and reflecting on your personal call to the vocation of marriage, a sacrament oriented toward the service of others. Each spouse works for the good of the other. Together they raise their children in the life of the Church, guiding them toward salvation.

Your engagement is also a time to determine if your fiancé is indeed the one God intends for you. The best way to know God's plan is to stay close to Him, praying often and frequently receiving the sacraments. Knowing that God truly desires to bless you, we invite you to entrust yourself and your future to Him. Do not be afraid to lean on the power of the Holy Spirit for guidance.



PRAYING TOGETHER

As you journey through this time of discernment, preparation, and formation, we invite you to pray regularly together. Praying with and for your fiancé is a powerful way to help strengthen your relationship with God and one another. This will look different for each couple – there is no single “right way” to pray. Here is one example to help get you started.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for bringing us together. We give you our hearts and our lives. We entrust ourselves to your divine plan.

As we prepare for the Sacrament of Marriage, please guide us and bless our relationship.

Help us look to the blessed Trinity and the Holy Family as models for our love. Help us to cherish and respect one another.

Strengthen us, that we might approach our wedding day with confidence, purity, and grace.

Please continue to open our hearts and minds to your will for our lives.

Inspire us with the gifts of your Holy Spirit. We pray all this in the holy name of Jesus. Amen.

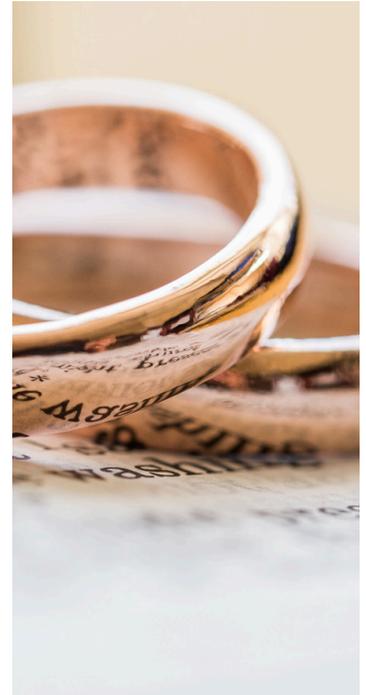
WHY PREPARE FOR MARRIAGE

The Power of The Sacrament

All seven Sacraments were instituted by Jesus and entrusted to the Church. They lead us to an encounter with God and draw us closer to Him. The Sacraments allow Christians to be filled with God's grace, God's divine life and love, so that the faithful may one day be united with Him forever in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Sacrament of Marriage binds one man and one woman freely and permanently together in a lifelong covenant of love. Through the power of this Sacrament, Jesus dwells with the married couple. He gives them all they need to respond to their vocation of marriage as sons and daughters of God. The grace of this Sacrament sustains, strengthens, and orders the love of a married couple. God's Grace helps them to forgive one another, bear one another's burdens, and love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love.

Both spouses are called to help one another grow closer to God. They face the blessings and struggles of daily married life together. By God's grace and their love, the couple helps one another grow in holiness to reach the ultimate goal of spending all eternity with God in Heaven.



Marriage reflects God's life and love

God intended for the spouses to share in His perfect love. God's love is free, total, faithful, and fruitful. Sacramental married love is meant to be a reflection or image of God's love for us and the perfect love between God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God's grace freely given in the Sacrament moves the couple beyond simple emotions and romantic feelings to lifelong sacrificial love.

We can best understand God's plan for married love by looking at Jesus's love for us.

Free: Jesus freely chose, in obedience to the Father's divine plan of salvation, to sacrifice his life for each one of us to save us from sin and death. In turn, married couples must enter into the Sacrament of Marriage of their own free will and without reservation, with the plan of helping one another obtain salvation.

Total: Jesus' sacrifice and love was and is unconditional. Likewise, husband and wife are called to unconditional love without limits, making a total gift of themselves to one another.

Faithful: Jesus will never turn his back on us, never abandon us, and never give up on us. Likewise, married couples are called to be faithful to one another until death.

Fruitful: Even now, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection continue to bring new life and love into the world. Like God's love, the love between a husband and wife is also meant to be life-giving and love-giving.

Called to reveal God's love to the world

“The Christian family is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the communion of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit” (CCC 2205).

Marriage is the foundation of the family and the most basic building block of society.

A married couple, in a unique way, participates in God's life-giving love in their openness to children. Husband and wife answer the call to love and grow in holiness through the welcoming and educating of children. Children are the "crowning glory" (CCC, 1652) of the couple's vocation. They are a sign of the generous and unconditional love between husband and wife. This is an incredible gift.

Married couples also participate in God's life-giving love through their service to those in their local parish, community, and the society at large. The grace of the Sacrament helps the couple to serve beyond their family. They witness to God's love by showing all those they encounter that a devoted, joyful, and lasting marriage is both possible and desirable. Through the permanent, faithful, and exclusive giving of themselves to one another, the couple is called to reveal God's unconditional love to the world.



FERTILITY AWARENESS & NFP

The gift of Natural Family Planning supports God's design for married love.



The Catholic Church celebrates human sexuality and science as a gift from God. Natural Family Planning (NFP) is a term used to describe a variety of different scientific, natural, and moral methods of fertility awareness. Similarly, Fertility Awareness-Based Methods (FABMs) are scientific tools that empower men and women to understand their combined fertility.

Together, married couples choose a method of fertility awareness that works best for them. Together, they learn to observe and chart the signs and symptoms of their combined fertility. They then use this information to regularly and prayerfully evaluate, discern, and act upon God's plan for their marriage and family. Married couples are called to make responsible decisions about parenthood, while always remaining open to God's plan and the gift of life.

Unlike contraception, which is morally unacceptable, NFP respects and protects both the love-giving (unitive) and life-giving (procreative) nature of the marriage act. Couples are able to honor and renew their wedding vows and express their free, total, faithful, and fruitful love for one another in and through every conjugal act. NFP allows for married couples to consciously and intentionally invite God and His blessings into their marriage and family.

These methods are true forms of family planning. They are extremely accurate and versatile in assisting couples to achieve, postpone, or avoid pregnancy. They are nearly three times more effective than other means in helping couples with infertility successfully achieve a pregnancy. All methods of NFP are between 98-99% effective in assisting couples in avoiding pregnancy if needed.

In addition, scientific advances show various fertility awareness health models to be of tremendous assistance in identifying and treating the various underlying causes of women's health issues including ovarian cysts, hormone disorders, acne, miscarriage, PMS, PCOS, infertility, perimenopausal symptoms, and even some cancers. Science is showing ovulatory function to be just as important for assessing a woman's overall health as body temperature, blood pressure, pulse, and respiration rate.

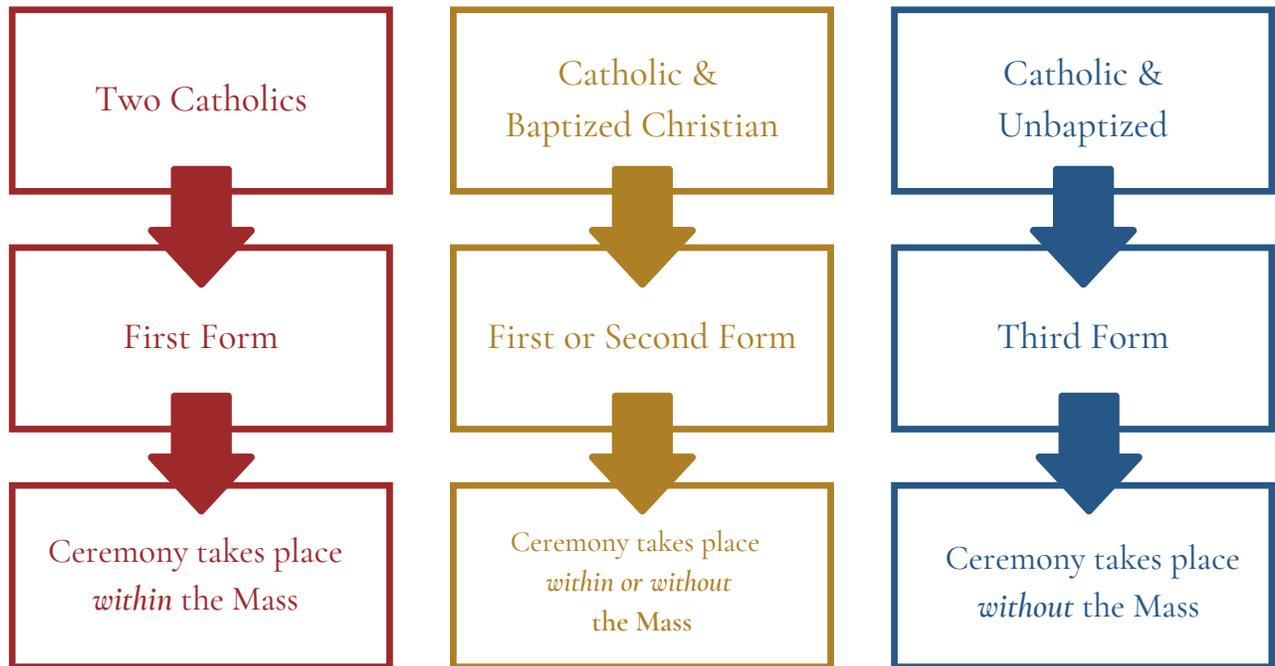


NFP is a gift that supports God's design for married love. Ultimately, NFP fosters the virtues needed for a strong, healthy marriage relationship, such as increased communication, self-control, and trust in God and one another. The relationship between husband and wife is strengthened as they speak openly about their intimacy and plan their family together with God.

To learn more and find the best method for you, visit www.allentowndiocese.org/nfp

YOUR WEDDING CEREMONY

The Wedding Ceremony can be celebrated in three different forms depending on the religious affiliation of the couple getting married. Together with your pastor, you will decide which is appropriate for the occasion based on the guidelines provided by the Catholic Church.



YOUR WEDDING CEREMONY

Below are helpful general guidelines. Please direct all your questions to your pastor and/or parish.

VOWS AND LOCATION

The priest or deacon will invite you to plan your wedding with him, using a special booklet which will be provided to you. The booklet contains prayers, readings, blessings, forms of consent (vows) and other formulas approved by the Church.

Each sacrament is comprised of three elements: *matter*, the physical part through which the grace is bestowed; *form*, the words that accompany the actions; and *minister*, the one who performs the actions and says the words. The ministers, as well as the matter of this sacrament, are the bride and the groom themselves, who confer the sacrament on one other through the form of the vows.

The exchange of consent between the bride and groom, often known as the “vows,” is at the heart of the Catholic wedding ceremony. This consent “is the indispensable element that makes the marriage.” (CCC #1626) Without consent there is no marriage. For these reasons, only the Church’s version of the vows is used during the ceremony. Therefore, couples are not permitted to write their own vows.

A Catholic Church is the proper location to celebrate the Sacrament of Marriage. The Church is a sacred space appropriate to honor sacred vows. It is here in God’s house that you invite God’s blessing and place Him at the center of your marriage. For Catholics, the wedding ceremony is a public statement of God’s love, not simply a private or family event. Your ceremony provides an opportunity for the Church community to celebrate your love. In turn, you receive the prayers and support of your community.

MUSIC

Music plays an important role in the beauty of your wedding. You can select hymns that are meaningful to both of you. The music chosen for your wedding should reflect the sacred nature of the ceremony and encourage prayerful participation by all. Therefore, secular songs are not used during the wedding ceremony. Please discuss your hymn selection with your priest/deacon and music director prior to your ceremony.



YOUR WEDDING CEREMONY

Below are helpful general guidelines. Please direct all your questions to your pastor and/or parish.

FLOWERS

Couples are encouraged to use real flowers to enhance the beauty of the Church. Please discuss your plan for decorations with your priest or deacon prior to your wedding. Each parish will have their own guidelines and suggestions regarding decorations.

PHOTOGRAPHERS AND VIDEOGRAPHERS

Couples are invited to have photographs and video taken as a remembrance of their ceremony. Couples must instruct their photographer and videographer that care should be taken that photographs and videos do not disturb nor distract from the ceremony. Additional lighting and flash photography is discouraged.

RICE, FLOWER PETALS, AND CONFETTI

For insurance reasons and environmental factors, please do not use flower petals, rice, confetti, bird seed, etc. either inside or outside the Church.

UNITY CANDLE

While the lighting of a unity candle has been done in the past, it is not a formal part of the ceremony. The exchange of rings symbolizes the unity of the couple. If the couple chooses to use a unity candle on the wedding day, they may want to consider using one at the reception.



REQUIRED STEPS FOR MARRIAGE PREP



To learn more and register (fees involved) for the various steps to Marriage Preparation, please visit the diocesan website <https://www.allentowndiocese.org/marriageprep>

Meet with your priest or deacon (first meeting).

Contact your parish approximately one year prior to your desired wedding date. The priest or deacon will assist you in preparing to receive this Sacrament. Together you will choose an available date. He will review the process and documentation needed to be married in the Church.

1 year prior

Complete the Diocesan recommended Marriage Preparation Course Process.

This process can be found on our Diocesan website <https://www.allentowndiocese.org/marriageprep> and offer a comprehensive approach to both the sacramentality and theology of marriage, as well as the practical life skills necessary to live out the rich Catholic vision of marriage.

6 months - 1 year prior

Complete the FOCCUS Inventory.

FOCCUS stands for "Facilitate Open, Couple, Communication, Understanding and Study." The FOCCUS Inventory is a questionnaire the bride and groom complete separately. The results are sent to the priest/deacon preparing the couple to help facilitate open and honest communication about important topics in marriage.

Meet with your priest or deacon (second meeting).

In this meeting he will review the results of your FOCCUS Inventory with you and provide you with further guidance and Sacramental Formation. At this meeting, you will also provide him with your Marriage Preparation and NFP Course Completion Certificates.

3 - 6 months prior

Meet with your priest or deacon (third meeting).

In this meeting he will help you plan your ceremony by reviewing your options and choices.

DOCUMENTATION CHECKLIST

The following documents should be presented to the priest or deacon who is presiding at your ceremony:

- Annotated Baptismal Certificate (lists the dates of all your Sacraments) which can be obtained through the Parish of your Baptism.
 - If your parish has merged or closed, it can be obtained at the newly formed parish.
 - For non-Catholics, if documentary proof is not available, affidavits of parents or trustworthy persons are acceptable.

- If there has been a prior marriage, a Death Certificate of Spouse or Decree of Nullity of Marriage.

- Written testimony that each party is free to marry.
 - Typically provided by a parent or close relative.
 - If under 18, any parental objections to the marriage must be disclosed to the priest.

- Certificates of completion of a diocesan-approved marriage preparation program, marriage preparation retreat, and NFP Basics Course.

- Marriage License.
 - If the marriage license is issued in Pennsylvania, applicants can be married anywhere in the state. The licensing process takes at least three days. Once granted, the license is only valid for 60 days.
 - A marriage license is not issued to a minor under the age of 18 unless the parents or legal guardians of the minor accompany the minor to the courthouse.
 - When applying for a marriage license at the courthouse, both parties must go together with the following items:
 - Identification (birth certificate or driver's license)
 - Social Security Card
 - Credit Card or Cash (ask your courthouse for the fee amount and forms of payment)
 - Divorce or Decree of Death Certificate (if previously married)
 - Green Card or Passport (if not a U.S. citizen)
 - Interpreter, if needed (one applicant cannot interpret for the other)

NOTE: The Marriage License must be signed by the priest or deacon and returned to the courthouse (mailed or in person) within 10 days of the marriage. Call your county courthouse for additional information or questions.



RESOURCES

Papal Encyclicals and Church Teachings

Over the centuries, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Catholic Church has reflected on the Sacrament of Marriage, married love, and the gift of life.

Here is a list of foundational documents that articulate these beautiful teachings:

[On Human Life \(*Humanae Vitae*\)](#), Pope Paul VI

[The Family in the Modern World \(*Familiaris Consortio*\)](#), Apostolic Exhortation

[The Gospel of Life \(*Evangelium Vitae*\)](#), St. John Paul II

[Instruction on Respect for Human Life \(*Donum Vitae*\)](#), Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

[Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), The Sacrament of Matrimony

Please visit our website for more resources on the Sacrament of Marriage:

www.allentowndiocese.org/marriageresources



References

CCC 1131, 1641, 1642, 1648, 1996-1997
Humanae Vitae

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Revised July 2024