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Guidelines for Couples Preparing for the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony

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Your Guide to Getting Married in the New Hampshire Catholic Church

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1 Considering Marriage: What it truly means to have a Christian Marriage

Are you engaged or considering engagement? Congratulations! This section will guide you in your wonderful journey towards the altar and will make you one step closer to starting a strong, Christian marriage.

The Church community creates the opportunity for dialogue and personal assessment, providing the support and encouragement for you to “marry well.” The Diocesan Marriage Guidelines presented here are designed to pastorally guide you as you evaluate your own relationship and deepen it before a permanent commitment is made. The primary goal is to assist you as you prepare for a sacramental marriage, a lasting union in which Christ is always present, making both of you ministers of Christ’s love to each other and the whole world.

When it is determined that you are ready to be married in the Church, you will be asked to participate in marriage preparation, which may vary in structure from parish to parish. Speak with someone on your parish staff who is responsible for marriage preparation to determine which format would be best for you.

Christian Marriage - Commitment to an intimate partnership of life and love

Marriage is a vocation. The Church understands every human being is called to the fundamental vocation of love. This love is concrete, not abstract, and it wills the good of others. The love of spouses for each other is the way most Christian believers live their vocation. Both in its practice and in its hope, the love of husband and wife who love unconditionally are signs of God’s love for each other and the world. In doing so, they help each other attain holiness. This can occur through the giving of oneself and acceptance of the other throughout married life and in the raising of children.

Christian Marriage - Covenant not just a legal contract

The love of married persons mirrors and participates in the Love of God. Jesus Christ acknowledged marriage as a sacramental covenant. Covenant is a biblical term that describes God’s tremendous love to people throughout history. Jesus gave himself to humanity perfectly and concretely in service to all the people he encountered. His great love was shown through his sacrifice by death on a cross. Through living their marriage covenant, spouses mirror Jesus’ love for all. Married spouses try to imitate that perfect self-gift through loving service to each other.

Husbands and wives witness in a special way the Love of God, when they give and receive a love that always seeks the good of the other. This love is revealed in the marital relationship, the love that extends itself to family and friends, and finally, a love that seeks out the good of the “neighbor” in one’s community and world. Marital love is a form of Christian discipleship when it moves toward the spouse, family and community in a way that transforms others through loving service.

To be married in the Catholic Church means that you wish to say something important about your deepest selves. Marriage in the Catholic Church is the announcement that you are called to a sacramental covenant that goes far beyond marriage understood as a “legal contact.” In the Bible, “covenant” is signified by God’s absolute faithfulness, even when people turned away. When speaking of the covenant, the prophets often referred to marriage as the best way of understanding’s God’s relationship to us— absolute love of imperfect human beings. To say marriage is a “covenant” is to say that a couple commits themselves to each other both in the present and for the unknown future in fidelity and exclusivity.

Christian Marriage - Sacrament given to each other and affirmed by the community

Your public declaration of your vocation to love is supported by a community of people who share responsibility to support and nourish both of you in the commitment. In turn, your witness to God’s love through your marriage

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strengthens the worshipping community where you live. One's faith community is a necessary element for your marital commitment. Through your parish community you'll be continually reminded of God's love. This happens when a couple participates in the many aspects of parish life— from worship to service to fun.

Christian Marriage - Significance in the Catholic Church

To move unconditionally into a loving and trusting commitment to another person and to do so with one's body, mind and spirit is to witness to God's love. Giving oneself over to the other happens on many levels— the psychological, the physical, the spiritual, the familial, the social, the economic— and it is intended to be permanent. No fuller union of two human beings with one another is possible. It takes two to make it, one to break it. The success and growth of a marriage depends on both.

With this in mind, the Diocese of Manchester offers an approach to marriage preparation in New Hampshire that seeks to explain the various dimensions of Christian marriage more fully. These guidelines apply to all marriages in the Diocese in which a Catholic takes part.

2 Proclaim your commitment

Engagement represents a special time in your relationship. The Church views this time as a period of actively preparing for that more complete commitment of marriage. At least six months before the date desired for your wedding, you should contact your parish priest/pastoral associate/deacon and schedule an appointment. A minimum time of six months is for both schedule planning as well as to allow a full and active discernment process. The outcome of the discernment process should lead to a positive commitment by both you and the Church to celebrate your permanent sacramental union in the marriage ceremony.

Marriage and the Laws of the Church

Together, you should meet and talk with your pastor, pastoral associate, or deacon who will discuss the Church's understanding of the vocation you have chosen and the requirements for the valid reception of the sacrament. The Church presumes that its members have a basic right to marry. We encourage you to feel free to ask any questions you may have.

There are many cases, which are clearly defined in Church law, where a wedding may not be possible or may have to be delayed. It is up to the Church leaders (on behalf of the community) to verify your freedom to marry. These same leaders also have the responsibility and privilege to assist you in preparing for the reception of the Sacrament of Marriage. In those special circumstances where delaying the wedding may be required, the priest, pastoral associate, or deacon will explain the difficulty and help you to overcome an obstacle that is present. Once the difficulty is overcome, a mutually agreeable wedding date may be established.

3 Enrich your commitment

A premarital survey (FOCCUS) will be administered to aid in discussion. The results of the survey or inventory will be discussed and a catechesis on Christian marriage will be shared with both of you. After these meetings, the priest, pastoral associate, or deacon will discuss with you your readiness for a Catholic Sacramental Marriage.

Together you will attend an enrichment experience aimed at helping you gain insight into yourselves and your relationship. This enrichment process is also intended to provide you with techniques for maintaining and deepening that relationship. Married couples, witnessing their life in the sacrament, will share this experience with you. Couples are free to choose from the following Diocese of Manchester programs:

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1. Engaged Couple Seminar
2. Engaged Encounter Weekend
3. Thinking about Remarriage (For those couples who are re-marrying in the church)

These programs are directed to helping you explore more deeply your decision to marry. Topics covered are marriage as a vocation, critical issues that can be obstacles in marriage and family life, skills for healthy communication and conflict resolution, as well as human life and human sexuality as gifts from God. Early participation in this exploration is encouraged. Availability, timing and capacity vary throughout the year so advanced scheduling is important.

4 Celebrate your commitment

In a final meeting (or two) after the enrichment program has been completed, some time is given by the priest, pastoral associate, or deacon to review with you your readiness to enter into marriage. The detailed ceremony options will be reviewed and the three of you can work together to plan the liturgy for your wedding day (texts of readings, music selections, etc.)

5 Special Circumstances

Each person is unique and each marriage is like no other. Couples wishing to be married in a Catholic ceremony sometimes present special circumstances that need to be resolved before a wedding takes place.

Ecumenical and Interfaith Marriages

Marriage between a Catholic and a person of another Christian faith community is often called an Ecumenical marriage. Marriage between a Catholic and a person of a different faith tradition is often called an Interfaith marriage. We treasure our tradition and it is important for all those entering marriage with Catholics to become familiar with our history and beliefs. Catholics entering an Ecumenical marriage or Interfaith marriage should also make an effort to know and understand the faith traditions of their future spouses. Catholics will be asked to reaffirm their faith and to the best of their ability, continue to practice their faith with their children.

For good cause the Catholic church permits an Ecumenical marriage to take place in another Christian church in the presence of a Christian minister. Also, for good cause, the Catholic church permits an Interfaith marriage in another religious context. Whenever possible, the Roman Catholic priest or deacon should endeavor to be in contact and to cooperate with the minister or religious counselor in both preparing and celebrating the marriage ceremony.

There are many questions for the couple to discuss with each other. One is the development of their marriage ceremony in view of these differences; another, and more importantly, is their spiritual development together as a married couple in the context of differing Christian or religious traditions.

Cohabitation

(Couples who live together in a sexual relationship when not married).

If you are currently living together, your parish priest will want to explain the reasons for the Church's concern about this and to discuss with you the reasons why you have chosen to live together before marriage. The fact that you are now seeking a sacramental marriage in the Catholic Church can be a positive sign of your maturing relationship.

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Remarriages

The Diocese of Manchester offers enrichment opportunities for couples when one or both have been married previously. Couples are encouraged to take advantage of these opportunities. Before proceeding with a marriage the Church must resolve the status of any previous bond. If you or your partner have been previously married and an annulment has not been obtained, extra time may be needed to determine if you are free to marry in the Catholic Church. No wedding date can be set until all issues surrounding your freedom to marry have been resolved. Often the process for marriage annulment is helpful in healing the pain associated with the breakdown of a former relationship. You may come away from the process with a new view of the qualities necessary to sustain a lifelong marriage.

Pregnancy

If a couple has not been planning marriage, pregnancy alone will not be considered sufficient reason to enter marriage or to shorten the marriage preparation process.

Age Requirement

Any person under the age of eighteen must examine the particular issues of their intended marriage. The parents of a person under age eighteen should be contacted by the priest, pastoral associate, or deacon as part of the preparation process.

Validation

If you have been married in a civil ceremony and wish your marriage to be validated (or blessed by the Church) you should contact your local pastor. You will be asked to complete an appropriate preparation before validation.

Delay of Marriage

Circumstances may arise which would necessitate more extended consultation and evaluation in determining a couple's readiness for Christian marriage. These circumstances can exist where:

- ~ The priest, pastoral associate, or deacon is convinced that one or other parties totally lack an understanding of, or a commitment to, the essential properties of Christian marriage, e.g., fidelity, permanence and the right to children.
- ~ The Catholic partner explicitly rejects the practice of Catholic faith.
- ~ The couple, in good faith, refuses to take part in the formal marriage preparation.
- ~ One or both is judged to be lacking in the minimal maturity demanded by Christian marriage.
- ~ There is evidence of substantial and undue pressure to marry from external sources, e.g., parental pressure of premarital pregnancy.

In all such cases, the priest, pastoral associate, or deacon will be ready to assist the couple. If skills are required beyond those possessed by the priest, pastoral associate, or deacon, the couple will be referred to the appropriate professional persons. Every effort will be made to make available to the couple support programs and resources of diocesan agencies (e.g., Family Services Program of New Hampshire Catholic Charities).

If the priest, pastoral associate, or deacon decides to delay a wedding, the engaged couple has the right to appeal this decision by recourse of the bishop or his delegated representative who can review the case and make further recommendations. Final determination rests with the bishop. The engaged couple should inform the priest, pastoral associate, or deacon in writing their decision to appeal.

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Parish to Hold Ceremony

While it is traditional for the wedding to be celebrated in the parish of the bride's family, this is not a Church rule. The groom's parish may also be considered.

6 Required Documents

Certain documents are required for a wedding to take place:

Baptismal Record

For the Catholic party, a recent copy (no older than six months dated) is required by the Church. You may obtain a recent copy by contacting your church of baptism. Tell the pastor that you are getting married and that you need a copy of your baptism record.

Give the pastor your name, your parents' names, your date of birth and your approximate date of baptism. The record can be mailed directly to the parish or to your address. This is an official document of your freedom to marry in the Church of your baptism. Future copies of your baptism record will contain this information.

For the party that is not Catholic, if you were baptized, a copy of your certificate of baptism which you or your parents may have available will be acceptable. If the certificate is not available, a letter from your pastor or minister of the church in which you were baptized is sufficient.

For the person not baptized, no documents are necessary and this will not complicate your wedding.

Marriage License

The following are general requirements for the marriage license that you procure from the city/town clerk's office. This marriage license should be presented to the priest, pastoral associate, or deacon no later than the night of the wedding rehearsal.

1. To be married in New Hampshire you do not have to establish residency. A couple wishing to marry in the state of New Hampshire may complete a marriage application at any New Hampshire city/town clerk's office regardless of their place of residence. This includes out-of-state residents as well. Once a valid marriage license is issued, the couple will be free to marry within any city/town in New Hampshire.
2. License is valid for 90 days from the date of filing. Please make sure that you get your license sufficiently early. There is a three day waiting period after the license is issued before it can be used.
3. Non-resident ordained clergy who officiate in New Hampshire must apply (themselves) to the Secretary of State in Concord, NH for a special license to perform the marriage in the State of New Hampshire.

Blood Test

A blood test is not required in the state of New Hampshire.

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7 Resources

Foundations

Foundations is a bimonthly newsletter for newly married couples published by the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministries. To subscribe, write to FOUNDATIONS, PO Box 1632, Portland, ME 04104-1632 or call (800) 775-4757.

Natural Family Planning

Natural Family Planning is a method used by couples as a means of achieving or avoiding pregnancy. It fosters respect and acceptance of the total person by teaching couples the nature of fertility. Marriages are enriched through a mutual understanding of the shared responsibility for family planning creating a deeper appreciation for the value of life. For more information about natural Family Planning, ask your priest, pastoral associate, or deacon. You may also contact Kathy Rivet, Diocesan Coordinator of the Natural Family Planning Program at (603) 595-3947.

Catholicnh.org/marriage

Visit our website, catholicnh.org/marriage for a current listing of seminars for couples and more information on planning your wedding.

If you have any questions or would like more information on the Diocesan Marriage Preparation Programs, your parish priest would be happy to meet with you, or you may call or write:

Office of Family Life Ministries
153 Ash Street - Box 310
Manchester, NH 03105
(603) 669-3100

Office Hours: 8:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

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