

PRAYERFUL COMPANIONS:
SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN MARRIAGE PREPARATION

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Marriage preparation: From crucible to *crucibulum*.

The Church is actively responding to the need for more intensive programs of formation leading to marriage, but marriage preparation remains a crucible for the engaged couple.

Numerous voices, external influences and differing beliefs all pressure and form the couple in the months preceding the wedding. Society speaks of the irrelevance of marriage in the same breath that it proclaims it as a civil good owed to same-sex partners. The Church, on the other hand, proclaims the dignity of Christian marriage as a sacrament between one man and one woman that reveals the “great mystery” of love shared between Christ and the Church (cf. Eph. 5:32). Furthermore, the multifarious tasks of wedding planning, which often receive more attention from the couple than marriage preparation, are a source of stress particularly when they are compounded with deadlines and differing opinions from the couple’s two (sometimes four) families. In this crucible hopefully couples are not simply becoming a mixture of all the various influences with no clear identity or convictions.

In this milieu we must answer the questions: what *should* the engaged couple *become* as they emerge from the crucible of marriage preparation? And *how* can that be accomplished? The answer to the former can be signified by the Medieval Latin *crucibulum*, which refers to a night lamp illuminating a crucifix. The crucible of marriage preparation must form the couple into a light that will shine brightly in a dark world. Through the Sacrament of Matrimony, the couple’s love “will become a concrete expression of Christ’s love for his Church.”ⁱ The Church, along with the families of the future bride and groom, should tend to the engaged couple with pastoral care, keeping watch over the crucible to ensure the couple does not crack under the pressures of unhealthy influences, but instead receive the right mix of formative elements preparing them for the sacrament.

The *Order of Blessing* reveals what is lacking.

The Church has made important strides in marriage preparation, but we are still lacking in the spiritual formation of engaged couples. In the introductory rites of the *Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple*ⁱⁱ the minister disposes those present for reception of the blessing:

...let us ask God's blessing
upon our brother and sister (N. and N.),
that they may grow in mutual respect,
love each other more deeply,
and approach the celebration of holy Matrimony chastely
through appropriate companionship and prayer together.

I wish to draw attention to the phrase “appropriate companionship and prayer together”, which gets to the heart of the spousal relationship. The Rite of Marriage states, “By the Sacrament of Matrimony Christian spouses signify and participate in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church...they help one another to attain holiness.”ⁱⁱⁱ While preparing for marriage, this responsibility of appropriate companionship necessitates prayer together.

Maturing relationships, especially couples who are preparing to form a new family and are in “special need of...grace”,^{iv} must be taught how to dialogue with God as a couple. The Church has elsewhere recognized the importance prayer: “the formative journey of young engaged persons should therefore include deepening of personal faith and the rediscovery of the value of the sacraments and the *experience of prayer* [emphasis added].”^v This deepening of personal faith is meant to occur in “togetherness”,^{vi} so that the couple may discover and remain obedient to the plan of God, living together in the Spirit of Christ. Christian marriage will imprint a new form of baptismal life.^{vii} Indeed, the whole of Christian life is a reliving of the paschal mystery; yet, spouses live this in a unique spirit of togetherness. They reflect the spousal love that is shared between the Divine Bridegroom and the Church—they become a *crucibulum*. Their

“authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ’s redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church”.^{viii} Since Christian marriage purifies and elevates their spousal love by Christ’s love for the Church,^{ix} “the engaged should imitate this model”.^x

Moving forward: A proposed model for prayerful companionship.

Marriage preparation will continue to improve as the Church becomes proactive in teaching engaged couples how to become prayerful companions. I suggest teaching couples to pray with a simple format of prayerful dialogue modeled on the Mass.^{xi} This approach is uniquely justified because the Mass is the prayer *par excellence* that defines the spousal relationship between Christ and the Church.

During marriage preparation the Mass can be explained to couples by breaking it the Introductory Rite, Liturgy of the Word, Liturgy of the Eucharist, and Concluding Rite. In the midst of the stressful crucible of marriage preparation, pastoral ministers should urge couples to set time aside weekly for prayer and dialogue. They can begin their prayer time by modeling the Introductory Rite, making themselves present to one another and together becoming present to God. After a few moments of silent recollection their discussion could begin by apologizing to one another and offering forgiveness for any recent offenses. Anxiety is high and virtues are challenged in the crucible, thereby making forgiveness a necessary practice for their journey. Couples must learn to turn to God, whose merciful love is more powerful than sin and “who reconstructs and brings to perfection the marriage covenant.”^{xii}

After disposing their hearts to prayer they can then model the Liturgy of the Word by spending time discovering God together. An appropriate practice for engaged couples may

involve reading the Scripture passages they can select for the marriage liturgy. They could choose a different Scripture for each time they come together, read it slowly, and discuss its significance for their relationship.

After spending time discovering God together through the Scriptures it will be appropriate for them to deepen their intimacy, both with God and each other, by resting in love. Just as the Liturgy of the Eucharist invites reverent expressions of mutual love between the Divine Bridegroom and Bride, engaged couples should be reminded that their love is a gift from God and they are vessels of Christ, who comes to them in and through their beloved. Couples may wish to rest in each other's arms, exchange "a loving kiss" (1 Pt. 5:14), speak words of praise and affirmation, or communicate their love to one another in other chaste and meaningful ways. Expressing their love and affection in this context of prayer will have the added benefit of counteracting the normalization of widespread impurity, by cultivating reverence for what is sacred in human love.

As their time of prayer and dialogue comes to a close, engaged couples should remember to go in peace, serving the Lord in each other. Their appropriate companionship and prayer together should carry on in their daily interactions and wedding planning.

Such a practice, if begun early in marriage preparation, will cultivate an awareness of God's presence in their relationship and will empower couples to become true helpmates—the "help of God" for one another. Together they will journey toward the Sacrament in which their spousal love can mature and then illumine for others the love poured out by Christ on the cross for His own bride.

Conclusion.

Benedict XVI once stated, “Dear newlyweds, learn to pray together, in the intimacy of the home, so that your love may be ever truer, ever more fruitful and long lasting.”^{xiii} An active prayer life as a couple is so essential to fulfilling the Catholic vision of marriage that if the Church does not begin tutoring couples in the ways of prayer during the crucible of marriage preparation, then they will, at best, become only a dimly lit *crucibulum* in the Sacrament of Matrimony. If couples are to be revealed “to the world as witnesses of his love.”^{xiv} then ministers must help them rediscover the sanctifying grace of their baptism while discovering a new fullness in the ‘togetherness’ of Christian marriage. I will conclude with these words of the minister in the *Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple*:

Through your Son’s paschal sacrifice, by which Christ loved the Church and presented her to you washed clean in his Blood, you mystically foreshadowed the fullness of wedded love in the sacrament of Matrimony.^{xv}

Fostering prayerful companionship must be seen as an essential task in marriage preparation, so that couples will come to radiate the sacramental reality of Christian marriage.

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ⁱ Pontifical Council for the Family, *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage* (1996), no. 47.

ⁱⁱ *Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple*, no. 259, in *Book of Blessings: The Roman Ritual* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Order of Celebrating Marriage*, English Translation of the Second Typical Edition (March 2012), no. 8.

^{iv} *Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple*, no. 259.

^v *Preparation*, no. 46.

^{vi} John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 51.

^{vii} *Preparation*, no. 47.

^{viii} *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 48.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, no. 49.

^x *Preparation*, no. 40.

^{xi} For additional reflections on using the Mass as a model for spousal prayer see Christopher Stravitsch, “Spousal Prayer in the Intimacy of the Home: Learning from the Mass how to Strengthen Your Marriage,” *Lay Witness*, July/August 2012 and on the USCCB marriage apostolate website see Christopher Stravitsch, “How to Pray

with Your Spouse: Four Simple Steps,” *For Your Marriage*, <http://www.foryourmarriage.org/how-to-pray-with-your-spouse-four-simple-steps/>. For another perspective and insightful model for spousal prayer see James Keating, *Spousal Prayer: A Way to Marital Happiness* (Omaha: IPF Publications, 2013).

^{xii} *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 58.

^{xiii} Benedict XVI, General Audience, September 7, 2011.

^{xiv} *Order of Blessing*, no. 265.

^{xv} *Ibid.*