

# ORIENTATION FOR COURSE LEADERS

The Catechetical Centre has done a major revision of the marriage preparation course *Love is for Life*, the aims being to reduce the contents to a size manageable to cover in four or five meetings, to digitize course-related resources and to translate the booklet and resources to other languages. The following is a short introduction to how the material is now structured and how it is possible to implement marriage preparation catechesis in the parishes.

## A. OVERVIEW OF COURSE MATERIAL

The 2021 version of the Catholic Diocese of Oslo's marriage preparation course consists of:

- **A booklet** which the parishes purchase through the bookstore St. Olav and give for free to the couples. The booklet is in Norwegian and will soon also be available in English and Polish.
- **Internet-based resources:** <https://katekese.no/ekteskap/>

### The booklet's structure

We have divided the booklet into **five chapters**, one for each course meeting. Each chapter has **two main sections**, such that all the ten main themes in the earlier course material are still included but in a slightly different order.

**All paragraphs (indicated in the assignments with the symbol §) are numbered.** This facilitates the parallel use of the various language versions for bilingual couples or multilingual groups.

At the end of the booklet is a **suggested reading list** that includes the Church's most important documents relating to marriage.

### Webpage contents

- **PDF files with three questions for reflection on each chapter**
- **Assignment sheet for each chapter**
- **PDF files with additional resources for each chapter**

**The questions for reflection** are intended to help the couples as they reflect on the themes in each chapter on their own, **after each course meeting**.

The assignment sheets and additional resources can be printed out and distributed to course participants.

**The assignments** are coordinated with the booklet's paragraph numbers. Most assignments are carried forward from earlier course material, but all are revised. Each one is marked as intended for group discussion or for the course participants to work on as couples.

As course leaders, you yourselves determine which assignments you want to use, depending on what is fitting for the particular group and the time available. We strongly recommend that you use at least some of the assignments in your teaching – in order to enliven the sessions and give couples opportunities to discuss and reflect on important themes.

The assignment sheets, moreover, contain **practical assignments** for the couples to work on after each meeting, **suggested reading** relating to each main chapter section, and **useful website addresses**.

**The PDFs with additional resources** consist of **questionnaires** and **overviews** of some of the assignments, the **wedding liturgy**, and a **list of Bible readings** suitable for weddings – all ordered according to the chapter themes.

## **B. HOW CAN PARISHES HOLD A MARRIAGE PREPARATION COURSE?**

### **Getting started**

Here are some general and practical tips on how to organize and carry out a marriage preparation course.

The Catechetical Centre recommends that parishes start by setting up one or several **marriage preparation teams – MP teams** – each consisting of a priest and a couple who have been married to each other for at least ten years. It is advantageous if such couples have a background in a Catholic movement or prayer groups that have marriage and family as their special apostolate. If a parish has permanent deacons, these can also be recruited to the MP teams. It can be very helpful if the married couples who are course leaders have a professional background in medicine, law, psychology or family counselling. Large parishes may need three or four MP teams. Smaller parishes can collaborate on setting up a joint MP team that serves two or more parishes, all depending on the local conditions and circumstances. The Catechetical Centre will be happy to provide training for the MP teams in how to hold marriage preparation courses. We will offer **MP team seminars** for course leaders on a regular basis.

Since most weddings take place in the spring and summer months, it is often a good idea to hold courses from January through April. Large parishes may also need to hold autumn courses or several parallel courses to meet the demand. **Announce the courses** well in advance on the parish website, social media platforms and also in local newspapers.

We recommend that the courses consist of four or five sessions held over a two-to-four-month period. This gives participants the possibility to undergo **a genuine reflection process over time**. A crash course is not recommended in advance of making such a decisive step in life.

Marriage preparation catechesis is mandatory for all who want to get married in the Catholic Church. Oftentimes, however, couples have relatively little time before their planned wedding day. If their wedding is scheduled to be held before the MP course is finished, they should be encouraged to follow through to the end even after their wedding. Experience shows that couples benefit from this, even though we would ideally have wanted them to complete the entire course before the wedding.

Systematically-presented advance information about the courses is essential for counteracting the tendency of couples to schedule too little time for thorough marriage preparation. This is a long-term project which parishes should prioritize. It entails reaching out to, and raising awareness amongst, the target group. One way of doing this is for parishes to announce, systematically, the times for the next marriage preparation catechesis at Sunday masses, to use the webpages of the diocese and parish, local mass-media channels and social media platforms. At the same time, it is important to clarify the time required for the courses. Young parishioners will get used to hearing these announcements, and when their turn comes, they will already understand that they should set aside plenty of time for marriage preparation.

The instruction the Church gives in connection with administering sacraments should be free. Spreading the Gospel amongst the various groups of believers is an apostolate, not a business. Course fees should therefore only be required to the extent that they are absolutely necessary for covering expenses, and they should never result in excluding anyone from participating.

### **Adaptation to the target group**

Given that so many nationalities and cultures are represented in the Catholic Church, there will always be challenges when teaching groups of couples who have signed up for marriage preparation. Group composition may vary considerably from course to course. Flexibility and improvisation are therefore catchwords. Sometimes a group will consist of persons with thorough insight into the faith; other times it will be necessary to supplement the marriage preparation course with a refresher on basic Christian faith or catechesis. (In such cases, the *Sycamore films* can be good resources. They are now available with subtitles in Norwegian, Polish, Vietnamese, Swedish and French.) Course participants, moreover, often have many practical questions which they ask the course leaders and the priest. A well-planned course takes this into account and gives couples the opportunity to get clarifying answers.

Group size, that is, the number of couples, varies from course to course. The number of participants will have much to say for how you organize a course. Our experience indicates that the ideal size is seven to eight couples. If there are fewer than three couples, they will benefit more from private teaching (i.e., as individual couples with one group leader). If 10–15 couples attend one course, there will be too little time to do the assignments and share reflections. In such situations, see if you can hold two or more courses – in parallel or one after the other.

**For a course to be successful, it must be well-prepared! Put some effort into planning how the course should proceed and how you as course leaders will emphasize and present the contents in the catechesis** (which chapters/chapter sections are presented by the priest, the married couple or the deacon; who takes responsibility for what).

It is fine to **supplement the material** we present here with other material – whether videos, your own material or resources from other countries. Nevertheless, we **strongly desire** that all couples in our parishes who are planning to get married, at the very least, go through the content gathered in this programme. This way, the couples will be offered the **most uniform marriage preparation catechesis possible**, no matter where they live in Norway.

### **Preparations for the first meeting**

Prepare the room you will use. If you have enough space, it can be advantageous to have a conversation area with chairs set in a ring, and a work area with a table around which the participants can sit. If you have less space, arrange the tables and chairs in a horseshoe and put the course leaders' chairs at the open end of the horseshoe.

Have writing tools and note paper available for the participants. Set up a projector, whiteboard or flip-over block if needed. Make it very simple!

Feel free to provide tea, coffee, water and glasses, serviettes and something to nibble on. On the last day of the course, couples can be invited to bring a small dish each.

You can create a nice atmosphere by having a vase of flowers and lighting a candle. Maybe calm background music could be nice when the course participants arrive, while they are working on assignments and during breaks.

### **A comprehensive and evangelising approach**

A marriage preparation course is an important opportunity to introduce couples to what our faith stands for and to give them an introduction to parish life. Many people rarely attend church after confirmation. At one of the course meetings, it might be worthwhile to give the participants a tour of the church and to explain to them the most important elements – the baptismal font, the altar, the living presence of Jesus Christ in the tabernacle, and so on – and to pray a prayer together. At

another meeting, they could be invited to attend a scheduled mass, and on a third course night, they could meet key persons in the parish, or representatives for groups who are involved in marriage- and family-related apostolates. The parish should also make it easy for couples to go to confession before the wedding itself.

Give participants the opportunity to **discover and experience who we believe in**: the Triune God – **the Father, Son and Holy Spirit**. Use the Bible texts in the course material actively; bring in the story of salvation. Give the participants good explanations of what all the sacraments mean. Make time for prayer and make the participants aware of the presence of Christ there where two or three are gathered together, and of God being with them in their life.

### **First course meeting**

At the first meeting, wholeheartedly welcome each individual participant.

The couples can sit in a circle so everyone can see each other. After everyone is seated, the leaders present themselves to the group. Tell a bit about yourselves, your background for leading the marriage preparation course and which role each of you plays in the course. The priest, for instance, could mention his many years of experience in marriage preparation catechesis and can give a testimony about his own vocation. The other course leaders could say something about how long they have been married, about whether they have children or grandchildren, about family life and involvement in the parish.

Next, have everyone in the group present themselves. This can be done in a fun way that helps everyone memorize each other's names. If there are many participants, it is a good idea to make name tags. Let each couple say something about their expectations for the course.

A promise of confidentiality (vow of secrecy) should be given, along with an explanation of what it entails: that it is always permissible to talk about one's own experiences from the course to people external to the course, but never to mention or talk about other course participants. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that the participants, individually, must decide how much they want to say about their own life. They are welcome to speak about personal things, but not private things. No one should be pressured to say anything confidential or that would render them vulnerable. Advise everyone to take responsibility for themselves. Married persons who are course leaders must obviously take responsibility to give personal testimony of their life experience without compromising their own or their spouse's right to privacy.

Orient the participants on the goals of the marriage preparation course, its structure, contents and where they can find necessary online resources. The couples do most of the work themselves, especially by reading and talking together. The course is not a school class, there is no test to evaluate the participants, but everyone is encouraged to get actively involved, to make further

progress in their relationship as a couple and to lay a good foundation for their future together. Make it very clear that there is no obligation to get married. It is possible to take the course without any immediate marriage plans. Make the couples aware that the course can be clarifying for those who are in doubt about whether they should get married. Some may find that marriage not for them; this, in itself, is a very important clarification.

Invite the participants to feel free to present their own opinions and questions during the meetings; underscore that you welcome their input and exchanges of opinions. Take rounds of questions and clarification at regular intervals during the meetings. Indicate approximate times for work sessions and breaks.

### **Group exercises at the start of the first meeting**

Here are four short exercises to help break the ice and help participants get acquainted.

#### **1. How long have you been together?**

Mark three points on the floor, for example, by positioning three chairs:

Chair 1: You have known each other less than a year

Chair 2: One to three years

Chair 3: Three or more years

Ask the couples to stand behind the chair that indicates the length of their relationship. Ensure that everyone can see each other. Have each couple say how long they have been together.

#### **2. Geography and nationalities**

Use the room's whole floor space and indicate imaginary continents where participants can gather, e.g., one area for Latin America, one for Africa, Europe, Asia, etc. Use a bit of time to ask the participants, if they want, to talk about their homeland, how long they have been in Norway and why they came here. After each one has been asked, they can go to the area of their homeland.

#### **3. How large is the family you grew up in?**

Mark spots on the floor indicating the number of siblings (0, 1, 2–3, 4–6, 7+) and ask them to stand where it is most fitting.

#### **4. Who are Catholics, and which other denominations, faiths or worldviews are represented?**

Follow the same pattern as before. Use a bit of time to let everyone speak for themselves.

These group exercises involve physical movement and contribute to generating a relaxed atmosphere. At the same time, lots of important information is being presented in a way that is

more low-key than if all the participants are just sitting still. This helps the group get acquainted and discover possible shared characteristics; at the same time, the course leaders also gain useful information about the participants.

### **At the close**

End all course sessions with:

- A round of feedback (ca. 10 min.) where the couples can say what they have gotten from the session
- Telling the couples what they should work on between now and the next session
- A prayer – e.g., The Lord’s Prayer or the prayer at the end of chapter 1 in the course booklet
- The priest’s blessing

### **C. A MARRIAGE PREPARATION THAT INVITES COUPLES TO BECOME INVOLVED IN PARISH LIFE, AND PASTORAL CARE TO FOLLOWS THEM UP**

Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis have considered marriage and family as a particularly important focal area for the church. They have held sessions of the Synod of Bishops themed on the Christian family. Both popes have given us sketches of a marriage preparation which addresses situations faced by couples today, at the same time as communicating the eternally valid goal of marriage preparation catechesis: the call to faithful, life-long and fruitful love. Both popes have underscored the need for marriage preparation programmes that clarify the connections between the sacraments of marriage, baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist. They have also stressed the need for engaged couples to be taught the core of the Gospels in a way that is so relevant that they are strengthened in their faith and have a real taste of what it is to participate in the life of the Church.

Here are some of the suggestions from Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis:

The couples should have the opportunity to meet experienced married couples and families (e.g., as course leaders), gain an introduction to their parish’s liturgical life and apostolates in addition to the marriage preparation catechesis and information about the psychological, juridical and medical aspects of marriage.

The goals of marriage preparation catechesis are to help young couples discover the value and beauty of marriage, to understand God’s original vision for marriage, and to invite them to become a living sign of ‘the mystery of unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church’ (see the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*, 8), mutually giving themselves for each other just as Christ gave himself up for the Church (Ephesians 5: 25).

We recommend that the MP teams do a close reading of Pope John Paul II's *Familiaris consortio*, 65–78 and Pope Francis's *Amoris laetitia*, 205–206, but do also read the documents in full if possible.

Suggested themes from *Familiaris consortio*:

- Make the couples aware of the values concerning marriage and family life; help them gain a correct understanding of the hierarchy of these values.
- The marriage preparation catechesis itself, which Pope John Paul II calls a journey in faith similar to the catechumenate, must give couples a deeper knowledge of the mystery in the relationship between Christ and the Church, an understanding of the importance of grace, an awareness of the responsibility of Christian marriage, and a resolve to participate actively and consciously in the marriage liturgy.
- A structuring of the marriage catechesis, which gives the couples not only intellectual teaching but also inspires a desire to become actively involved in the parish.
- For couples who have very different degrees of faith, the priests are obliged to nurture a rediscovery and maturation of faith. This is a highly relevant issue here in Norway. When couples belong to different Christian denominations or religions, it is especially necessary that they are aware of the Catholic partner's right to freely practice his or her faith, and the duty to ensure, as much as possible, that the children are raised in the Catholic faith. The ecumenical value of mixed marriages must be emphasized.

The sessions of the Synod of Bishops on the topic of the family (2014 and 2015) stressed the need to involve the whole parish in preparing couples for marriage, both by emphasizing the testimony of families and by clarifying the connection between the sacrament of marriage and the sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist). These synod sessions also pointed out the need to incorporate the virtues – especially chastity – in marriage preparation.

In the post-synodal exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (2016), Pope Francis emphasizes that each local parish must itself determine how it will offer suitable marriage preparation programmes that treat quality as more important than quantity; these programmes should have a renewed *kerygma* – the teaching that reveals the Gospel of Christ and makes it present and relevant for each individual – that goes hand-in-hand with information that helps couples live together for the rest of their life with great courage and generosity.

Suggestions for marriage preparation in *Amoris laetitia*:

- The couples should be admonished to discuss what each person 'expects from marriage, what they understand love and commitment to be, what each wants from the other and

what kind of life they want to build together [...] They should be helped to recognize deeper reasons that will ensure a genuine and stable commitment' (209). This will help them determine whether they have enough in common to stay together for life – or not (see also 210). (The assignments in the course material are geared precisely towards this end.)

- The couples should come to recognize that each other's weak points must be followed up by a 'realistic trust in the possibility of helping to develop the good points that counterbalance them' (210). This entails 'a willingness to face eventual sacrifices, problems and situations of conflict [...] Couples need to be able to detect danger signals in their relationship and to find, before the wedding, effective ways of responding to them' (210). In this way, by the time of the wedding, they will be ready to launch into a lifelong call with a resolute and realistic resolve to face all trials and difficult moments together (210).

In the same exhortation, an important aspect emphasized by Pope Francis is that the pastoral care of engaged and married couples should treat the marriage bond as central: 'This involves not only helping them to accept the Church's teaching and to have recourse to her valuable resources, but also offering practical programmes, sound advice, proven strategies and psychological guidance. All this calls for a pedagogy of love, attuned to the feelings and needs of young people and capable of helping them to grow interiorly' (211).

- The marriage preparation should 'provide couples with the names of places, people and services to which they can turn for help when problems arise' (211).
- The couple 'should be encouraged to make the liturgical celebration a profound personal experience and to appreciate the meaning of each of its signs' (213). Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of understanding and honouring one's word, keeping one's promises, and of being aware that this will often require sacrifice (214).
- The couples should be prepared to play an active and creative role in making the marriage good and to 'accept the other as he or she actually is: an unfinished product, needing to grow, a work in progress' (218), and be willing to overcome all hindrances, also with the help of the grace they receive in the nuptial blessing on their wedding day (217–218).

All this challenges us to think more deeply about marriage preparation catechesis in our dioceses here in Norway and to invest more time and energy into a coordinated development of the marriage preparation programmes, the permanent services available to engaged and married couples and to provide any follow-up the couples may need.

The Catechetical Centre therefore encourages the parishes to offer constructive input on these themes, such that we, together, can strengthen the marriage preparation.