

Preparing Couples for the Sacrament of Marriage during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Accord Catholic Marriage Care Service CLG



Accord CLG is providing a four hour facilitated virtual interactive programme for couples preparing for the Sacrament of Marriage (owing to the temporary suspension of its face-to-face programme) during these emergency times of Covid-19. In addition there will be a fifth hour comprising a face-to-face meeting, between the couple getting married and a priest or deacon from the parish of the bride, which will last for approximately one hour.

The virtual part of the programme will take place over two nights, two hours per night or over four hours on a Saturday, (two modules in the morning and two following a break of one hour minimum) and will be facilitated by experienced Accord facilitators. The sections which will be covered over the two nights are:

- Family of Origin
- Communication
- Conflict
- The Sacrament of Marriage including Commitment and Children.

All aspects of the programme are influenced by the Sacrament of Marriage and will explore how they as a couple will live out the sacrament in their daily lives; their openness to each other, the manner in which they communicate, resolve their differences, and how they will witness this vocation as a married couple in their parish community.

The Sacrament of Marriage is a call from God to live in unity. All aspects of the programme aim to help couples reflect on how they will live out their mission in the life of the Church; to live in unity with a common mind and a common purpose.

The gift of unity from the Holy Spirit will be conferred on the couple when they consent to marriage during the Rite of Marriage.

The unity of the couple is a call to be living witnesses of Christ's unity with His people in the life of the Church.

This unity of the couple reflects the qualities expressed in Christ's love for us, e.g. fidelity, exclusivity, permanence, generativity (openness to the gift of new life), forgiveness, and compassion.

Modules 1 - 4 will focus on the following:

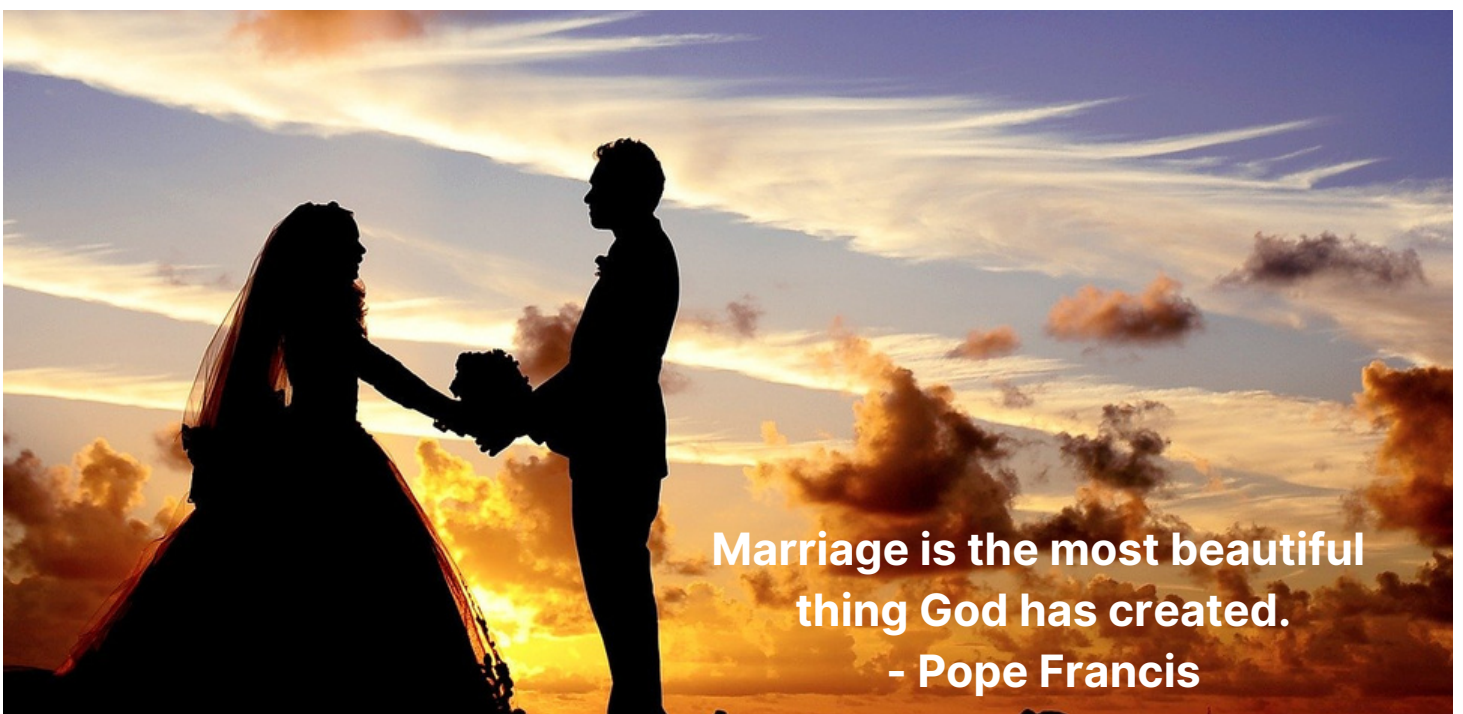
In the **Family of Origin** module, the couple will explore the uniqueness of each of their families, reflect on some personal experiences growing up, the amalgamation of families and a better understanding of each other's family. They will reflect on the possible challenges of two different family histories amalgamating. Using the exercises in the Accord Couple Workbook, the couple will reflect on and share with each other their expectation of marriage and of their future spouse.

In the **Communication** module the couple is invited to identify the most important ingredient in a successful marriage, levels of communication, what they understand by verbal and non-verbal communication and how open are they as individuals and as a couple to talking about issues and difficulties in this area. Activities in the Couple Workbook will be used, to assist.

The importance of **Conflict** management is covered in the third module and given current Covid-19 pressures, couples are asked to reflect on how they have dealt with these and coped with any difficulties that may have arisen in their relationship associated with this time of crisis. Couples will be invited to use the Couple Workbook to reflect on their own styles of handling conflict after the programme, how to manage conflict in the marital relationship particularly as it pertains to the wellbeing of children, and how to identify potential areas of conflict and effective conflict management as a core skill in a healthy marriage.

In the **Marriage as a Sacrament** module, couples will be invited to reflect on opening their love for one another to the possibility of children, and the examples of love that Christ gave. Couples will be reminded that the validity of the marriage requires them to have the intention to have children. The exchange of vows will be explored as an example of the love God has for His people. In this sense, Christ commits himself to help and support the couple all the days of their life. In particular, He offers Himself to the couple in the sacraments of the Church, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation.

Couples will consider their own Spirituality, the importance of praying for one another, and their decision to get married in the Catholic Church, as well as the role of the Church in their married life.



**Marriage is the most beautiful
thing God has created.
- Pope Francis**

Module 5: Meeting with Priest/Deacon

(approximately 50 to 60 minutes)

The priest/deacon of the parish of the bride should have responsibility for this. As this is a significant additional workload at this time, adding perhaps an additional hour to the time already required for the pre-nuptial enquiry, it is essential to ensure clarity about where responsibility lies. As it is the responsibility of the priest/deacon of the Bride's parish to ensure that the couple are free to marry and prepared, the responsibility therefore lies with him.

Suggested areas for discussion:

- (1) Their understanding of the Sacrament of Marriage and the importance of consent. This aspect should highlight the vocation to live in unity, as the particular gift of Christian spouses. This call to unity is a mission given to each couple so that they reflect in their lives together, the unity between Christ, the bridegroom and His Church, the bride.
- (2) The priest/deacon may explore with the couple some of the challenges they may have faced in preparing for the Sacrament of Marriage. The emphasis should be around issues such as commitment, trust, fear of the unknown, shared hopes, etc. rather than challenges around preparing for the wedding day. This is an opportunity to explore the role of faith and prayer in dealing with challenges in the future, as well as any particular insights the couple may have found helpful from the pre-marriage workshop.
- (3) The priest/deacon should use a scriptural text to create discussion with the couple around the Christian understanding of marriage as Covenant and Sacrament. He may use the readings the couple have already chosen, or guide them in choosing the readings for their ceremony. This is a valuable opportunity to awaken in the couple an awareness of how God will speak to them at their ceremony, calling them to a vocation, and entrusting to them a mission.
- (4) The decision whether or not to include the celebration of the Eucharist along with the Rite of Marriage as part of the wedding celebration. This should be discussed in the context of a) whether or not the couple practice their faith regularly by attending Sunday Mass, or b) an inter-Faith or Inter-Church wedding or where one of the parties is not a Christian or belongs to another faith tradition.
- (5) The benefits of participating in the virtual part of the marriage preparation programme; what was their greatest learning? Are there areas the couple have reflected upon following the programme which they wish to explore further or something which was not covered that they now wish to discuss?
- (6) Their understanding of mutual trust and the belief that each of them is now thinking for two; the need to consider the effect any choice or decision will have on their future spouse.
- (7) Being a parent or planning to become a parent in the future: are they united about their plans and aware of learned parenting styles? Are they united in terms of their desire to raise the children in the practice of the Christian faith, and how do they hope to achieve this in practical terms?

(8) The vocation of marriage and being part of the parish community; the responsibilities, benefits and implications for the couple. Explore how the parish in which they intend to live might benefit from the contribution of the couple to its life, and equally how the couple can benefit from being part of a faith community that values their vocation, and will encourage and support them in their efforts to live in unity and fidelity.

(9) The priest/deacon should encourage the couple to receive the Sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation prior to the wedding. This should be presented as the celebration of a new beginning, an opportunity to let go of any burdens of guilt/shame/regret from the past so as not to carry them into the marriage.

NOTE: Couples, when they have completed module four, will advise the facilitators of the name of the priest/deacon to whom their Certificate of Attendance should be sent.

The priest/deacon will countersign the Certificate when he has completed module five with the couple.



The commitment of the young couple getting married is so moving because it says against all odds, no matter what happens, 'we'll be there for one another'.

- Bishop Denis Nulty,

President of Accord Catholic Marriage Care Service CLG