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Liguori Sacramental Preparation Series

Your Marriage

LEADER GUIDE

Deborah Meister

This *Leader Guide* provides an overview and practical procedures for leading engaged couples through the *Your Marriage* sacramental preparation program at the parish or diocesan level.



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Contents

Acknowledgments	2
Before You Begin	5
Program Components	7
The Essentials	7
Qualities of an Effective Leader	8
Materials and Supplies	9
Preparing the Facility	10
Inside the Sessions	11
Before the First Session	11
At the First Session	12
At Each Session	13
Managing Time	14
Breaks and Transitions	15
Personal Narratives	16
Determining Required Chapters	18
Program Schedules	19
Four Sessions	19
Two Full-day Sessions	20
Six Sessions	21
Weekend Retreat	22



Contents

Chapter Guides	23
Opening and Closing Prayers	23
Spirituality and Faith in Marriage	24
Theology of Marriage	26
Rite of Marriage	28
Communication in Marriage	30
Family of Origin	32
Money and Marriage	34
Intimacy	36
Sexuality	38
Natural Family Planning	40
Children and Parenting	42
Cohabitation	44
Annulment and Convalidation	46
Interchurch and Interfaith Marriages	48
Military Marriage	50
Closing Prayer Service	52
Maintaining an Effective Program	56
Building Community	56
Prayer for Marriage-preparation Leaders	57
Evaluation Forms	58
Resources	62



Program Components

The Essentials

Every parish is responsible for offering marriage preparation according to the direction of the local ordinary. The *Your Marriage* program meets the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' recommendations for preparing couples who seek the sacrament and provides the materials and training you need to facilitate this ministry as modeled in the *National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage* (USCCB, 2005).

What is Catholic marriage preparation?

Most couples will attend a series of sessions or a retreat and often meet separately with the priest or deacon who will witness their vows. The sessions include instruction in what the Catholic faith teaches about marriage and touches on the essentials of Christian living. It also brings the couple into a conversation about their current needs and challenges in the context of their faith(s) and assists the parish in determining their capacity for entering freely into marriage as directed in the *Code of Canon Law*.

How long does it last?

The length of time spent in preparation varies by diocese, though most ask the couples to meet with a priest or deacon before setting the wedding date and allow for a minimum of six months for preparation.

What's in Your Marriage?

The *Participant Workbook* presents the core program material, from the nature and purpose of marriage to practical suggestions and guided practice in relationship skills.

Each chapter covers an essential topic, applies it using various activities, and ends with reflection and discussion questions. Leaders introduce these topics and serve as living examples of the values and teachings therein. *In this guide, as a visual aid, italic type will denote workbook pages.*

The *Program DVD's* video segments complement and highlight each chapter, feature testimonies from Catholic spouses, and stimulate the couples' conversations. With little to no exception, **both the bride and the groom will attend every session and complete the material together.** For long-distance relationships, this may present a challenge. Your diocese may have separate guidelines for these couples, especially for those in the military. The *Your Marriage* workbook and video can be used in these circumstances with prior approval.

Finally, **Liguori Publications provides a variety of resources** for those who want more on the theology of marriage, Catholic teaching, communication, and other relevant topics. For online material, references, and links, visit Liguori.org/marriage.

Materials and Supplies

Every couple attending *Your Marriage* needs to have two workbooks: one for the woman and one for the man. This allows each of them to read the chapters ahead of the sessions and write down responses to the activities, questions, and evaluation independently. **Leaders also will need their own copies of the workbook.** Besides being an essential resource, many enjoy the ease of reference and benefit from reviewing and marking the material throughout—not just at the start of—their ministry.

For every session, have on hand:

- A private, prayerful setting;
- Individual copies of *Your Marriage: Participant Workbook*;
- Copies of *Your Marriage: Leader Guide* for each facilitator and presider;
- One copy of *Your Marriage: Program DVD*;
- Compatible disk player and screen and sound equipment for presenting the video segments;
- Notebooks or paper, and pens;
- Chairs for participants, and tables for medium and large groups;

- Bibles (*NABRE* recommended);
- Refreshments;
- Name tags;
- Icebreaker material(s), as needed;
- Personal narratives, well-crafted and succinct;
- Handouts, as needed (Additional resources are available at Liguori.org/marriage.);
- *Optional*: Device for playing quiet background music during private times.

For the last session, have on hand:

- Copies of the *Your Marriage* Certificate and/or official letter signifying completion of the program for each couple (available at Liguori.org/marriage);
- Stationery and envelopes or copies of the first-anniversary “Love Letters” activity for each couple for the Closing Prayer Service (see page 55 and online);
- Individual copies of the evaluation forms (see pages 58–61 and online).

Inside the Sessions

Before the First Session

Whether your sessions are prescheduled, preformatted, or arranged according to mutual availability, obey the instructions given by your parish or diocese. As you become more experienced and familiar with your particular program, you can more easily adapt it to meet your needs.

- 1. Gather a list of the brides' and grooms' names,** contact information, and their parishes or faith communities. (This can double as a check-in list.)
- 2. Contact every registered couple in advance** to introduce yourself, remind them of the time, place, and required materials, and answer any questions. (One call, either to the bride or the groom, is sufficient.) If they have not received their workbooks at this point, direct them to the proper office, staff member, or marketplace.
- 3. Begin to build expectations.** Convey the importance of reading the initial chapter text(s) prior to the first session. Assure them that all that is needed is a general understanding; you will discuss the key points, answer questions, and complete some activities in each session.
- 4. Begin to build a rapport.** The relationship between couples and their sponsors provides familiarity and extends beyond the program and into the parish community.

Group Dynamics

As the number of sessions can vary, so can the number of people meeting and facilitating with you. The dynamics will change, depending on the personalities and size of the group. Generally, leaders can “set the tone.”

Couples do not need to share with the group as much as with their future spouse. While facilitators are there to ease, and to some extent certify, this process, the critical sharing goes on whenever the couple discusses the topics.

This guide identifies three common group sizes:

- **LARGE**—ten to twenty couples, with one to three married, facilitating couples;
- **SMALL**—three to six couples, with one or two married, facilitating couples;
- **INDIVIDUAL**—one or two couples with one married, facilitating couple.

Cohabitation (25 minutes / 50 minutes)

Welcome and Hospitality

Greet the couples as they arrive or return. Be sure that they have the required materials, and provide supplies as needed. Begin on time.

★ Key Points (2 minutes)

Say, “Now let’s talk about cohabitation. This chapter will help you grow in three ways:”

1. *The truth about marriage, sex, and Catholic teaching* (see workbook pages 180–181)
2. *Debunking the myths of cohabitation and compatibility* (Three myths are discussed on pages 183–187.)
3. *Transitioning to marriage and chastity* (see workbook pages 188–190)

Transition to the video with a question. Take responses and reactions after the segment concludes.

*What is the difference between living together and being married?
What do the vows mean to you,
to your fiancé(e) and to God?*

▶ Video (6 minutes)

Play the “Cohabitation” segment.

♥ Review (7 minutes)

- To address concerns or criticisms of Church teaching, keep in mind the sacramental nature of marriage. Review the authentic meanings of marital love and fidelity and explain the impossibility of “trying out” a lifelong commitment.
- Illustrate what makes sacramental marriage attractive and the value of committing yourself fully to another person. Marriage preparation allows couples the time and guidance to explore the nature and depth of their love.

💬 Personal Narrative (5 minutes)

Consider sharing why you personally chose (not) to cohabit before marriage, or present examples from your experience of the challenges and potential damage of cohabitation on relationships.

– Tip –

Making yourself or another parish resource available outside of the sessions for guidance or counseling is especially beneficial to couples in sensitive or unique circumstances.

✎ Activities (10 or 15 minutes)

Introduce “True Love” and give ample time for personal reflection prior to calling the couples to each other or the group. If time permits, introduce “We Go Together.” Stress the importance of completing *all* the activities prior to the wedding so that their marriage begins on a strong foundation.

“**True Love**,” workbook page 182:

Suggested answers are below.

Paying for meals or bills / Giving gifts...

Is real when it expresses generosity.

Is fake when it becomes a quid pro quo or justification for dominance.

Sharing pet- or child-care duties...

Is real when it supports a loved one’s need for independence.

Is fake when it replaces the rightful duties of the pet owner or parent or interferes with the child’s relationship with either parent.

Staying late or overnight...

Is real when it expresses mutual desire or emotional support, say, during a difficult time.

Is fake when it leads to possessiveness or codependency or interferes with one’s responsibilities.

Spending time with an adult of the opposite sex...

Is real when it fosters healthy friendships.

Is fake when it becomes an occasion of sin, specifically lust.

Engaging in sexual activity with less than full interest or desire...

Is real when it shows trust and submission between spouses (and may lead to arousal).

Is fake when it is a sign of coercion or abuse.

“**We Go Together**,” page 186:

Each person needs to assess their responses and scores privately. Encourage them to be honest in rating the statements and sharing their scores when they have time to consider the implications thoroughly.

“**Your Story of Salvation**,” page 190:

This activity is best done on their own when each individual can thoughtfully prepare their response.

🔍 Reflection Questions (15 minutes)

Workbook page 192:

After writing their responses, the couples will discuss them privately, helping each other understand their beliefs and feelings and beginning some real conversations that will continue and deepen over time.

– Tip –

The USCCB site ForYourMarriage.org offers updated reports from studies on the effects of cohabitation.