

Summary — Marriage Preparation Guidelines, as specified for the Diocese of Baton Rouge

This is a summary of the longer formal *Marriage Preparation Guidelines* for the Catholic dioceses of the State of Louisiana. The full set of Statewide guidelines can be accessed on the diocesan website, at www.diobr.org/documents

In the Diocese of Baton Rouge:

1. The engaged couple must personally contact the parish priest or deacon who will officiate at least six months prior to their tentative wedding date. At their first meeting this priest or deacon is responsible for determining the apparent freedom of the couple to marry. If either party has ever attempted any kind of a civil or church wedding, no binding reservation of space or date can be made until the diocesan Tribunal has verified that the parties are indeed free to marry. If the wedding being prepared is the convalidation of an already-established civil union, the six months of preparation is permitted to begin only after a period of at least six months first has elapsed since the attempted marriage.
2. If certainly free to marry, the engaged couple will immediately wish to reserve space and a date for the planned wedding. The Catholic Church insists that weddings must be held in a church building. Application to reserve space must be made to the individual parish office, and is not final until the pastor of that parish agrees. Note that in Catholic Churches of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, weddings (even without Mass) cannot be scheduled after 3:00 pm on Saturdays and the vigils of holy days of obligation, or on Sundays and holy days of obligation.

When the parties come from different religious backgrounds, it is usually possible for the Catholic Church to accept the non-Catholic minister's officiating at a wedding in that religion's worship-space, provided the couple is free to marry and that the usual Catholic premarital preparation also takes place. When this happens, the attendance and participation of the Catholic priest or deacon in the non-Catholic wedding service, if permitted, is highly recommended.

Steps 3, 4 and 5 below should be completed at least two months before the date of the planned wedding.

3. Within a month after their first meeting with the priest or deacon who plans to officiate, the couple will take a premarital compatibility survey, such as the FOCCUS test, the Pre-Marital Inventory (PMI), or the PREPARE instrument. The priest, deacon or another, official lay minister who from here on supervises the premarital preparation, shares the findings with the couple, highlighting areas of personal and relational strength and weakness. Usually, the results of this serve as good discussion-starters.
4. The couple also must register for and attend a pre-marriage preparation program led by married couples. The earlier this is done, the better, for the programs "fill up" quickly. Approved programs include:

Group programs:

Diocesan Marriage Preparation – "Life Choice" (often called "Pre-Cana")

Diocesan Program – "Re-Marriage Program" (for those entering a second marriage)

Engaged Encounter

Programs more tailored to individual couples:

"In-Home Marriage Preparation" *

"Sponsor Couple" Program*

"Evenings for Engaged" *

* Note that these last three programs are parish-based and are available only in some parishes. Check with your parish as to availability.

5. A special sort of premarital education, introducing couples to means of natural family planning in accord with Church teachings, is also increasingly available, and may be made mandatory in certain circumstances.
6. The couple must also meet, usually several more times, with the priest, deacon, or official lay minister to review the basic doctrines of the Catholic Church regarding marriage.

All persons who wish to embrace Catholic marriage are required to accept that the mutual good of the spouses and the good of children are essential to the married state, and to embrace the Church's teachings regarding marital permanence and fidelity.

When a Catholic person wishes to marry someone who is not Catholic, the Catholic must promise formally to remain Catholic, and to do all in his/her power to have the children of the union baptized and raised as Catholics. The non-Catholic party is to be made aware of this solemn promise made by the Catholic.

In the course of these meetings with the priest, deacon or official lay minister, the formal paperwork is completed, and any needed permissions or dispensations are requested. The preparation is always tailored to the individual needs and situation of the couple in light of the doctrines and canon laws of the Catholic Church.

7. If at any point the priest, deacon or official lay minister who is preparing the couple determines that some significant problem exists, more special counseling may be required from specialists in the appropriate area of need. This kind of special counseling is almost always required when a party is still a minor; when a parent opposes the wedding; and when the unmarried woman already is pregnant. Special counseling is in order when there is any indication of problem drinking or drug abuse, of mental illness, or of physical violence within the relationship. If an unmarried couple already is cohabiting publicly, they often will be challenged to separate and resume chaste living as a way of preparing for their marriage.
8. If for any reason the priest or deacon who has been asked to officiate, in consultation with the pastor and other Church officials as necessary, decides that the proposed wedding must be delayed, this decision must be conveyed immediately to the couple with all due sensitivity and charity. This is never an absolute refusal: the wedding may be postponed only for as long as the reasons for the delay continue to exist. Yet no other priest or deacon may undertake to officiate at a subsequent wedding of the parties without consulting first with the priest or deacon who refused to proceed, and with the bishop.

The couple always has the right to file a written appeal against such a decision to postpone the wedding with the Bishop of Baton Rouge, who will consult with the priest or deacon, and with the pastor(s) and others as warranted, before responding.

9. At an appropriate time during the marriage preparation, the wedding liturgy itself is planned. A wedding of two Catholics is ordinarily celebrated at Mass, with a priest as officiant; when one party is not Catholic the wedding liturgy does not include holy communion, and so the officiant can be a Catholic priest or deacon, or a non-Catholic minister. When the parties come from different religious backgrounds it is frequently a good idea to invite the non-Catholic party's own minister to take part in the service in some way. A convalidation ceremony usually takes place outside of Mass as well.

Ordinarily the couple is invited to select the Bible readings that must be proclaimed at the wedding, and to "personalize" the service by the décor, music and other ritual symbols they choose. The various liturgical laws of the Church and all applicable parish policies – as well as good taste! – must be followed in conducting the wedding, with the local pastor having the final say in matters of this sort.

10. An unmarried engaged couple must obtain a Louisiana State marriage license from the Clerk of Court in a Louisiana civil Parish between 30 days and 72 hours prior to the planned wedding ceremony. It is usually brought to the rehearsal which takes place 1 to 7 days before the wedding itself.

Additional guidelines and policies – including brochures about group programs such as *Life Choice* and *Engaged Encounter*, policies regarding music and décor, and the like – are available both from the Office of Marriage and Family Life of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, and from each local Catholic church parish office.

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