

# Catechumenal Pathways<sup>1</sup> for Married Life.

[http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/amorislaetitia/OrientamentiCatecumenatomatrimoniale/Catechumenal%20Pathways\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/amorislaetitia/OrientamentiCatecumenatomatrimoniale/Catechumenal%20Pathways_ENG.pdf)

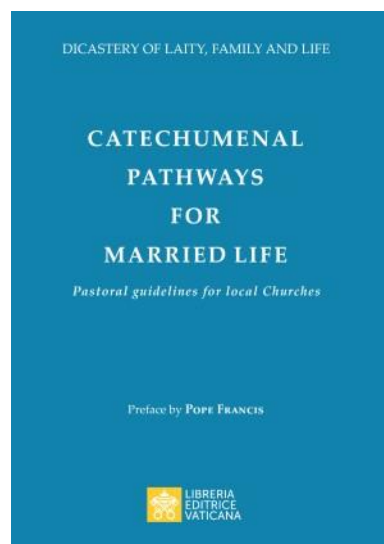
## Rob's Notes. 10-14-2023

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface by Pope Francis .....	p7
Proposal for "marriage catechumenate" .....	p13

### I. General Guidelines

Reasons for a catechumenate .....	p17
Those responsible for this task .....	p19
Renewing pastoral care of married life .....	p23



### II. A Concrete Proposal<sup>2</sup>

Modalities.....	p28
Phases and Stages .....	p32
Two clarifications .....	p33
A. Pre-catechumenal phase: remote preparation .....	p35
B. Intermediate phase: reception of candidates.....	p41
C. Catechumenal phase .....	p50
First stage: proximate preparation .....	p51
Second stage: final preparation .....	p64
Third stage: Accompaniment during first years of marriage life...	p72
Accompanying couples "in crisis" .....	p84
Conclusion .....	p95

<sup>1</sup> Note the title speaks of "pathways" (plural not singular)...no one "pathway" will meet the needs of every couple of the parish or diocese.

<sup>2</sup> Calling this "A Concrete Proposal" is confusing because the document itself says on page 13 that it is: *"...to support the local Churches in thinking about or rethinking their pathways to marriage preparation and pastoral accompaniment during the first years of married life. Therefore, these "pastoral guidelines" should not be understood ~ in neither form or content ~ as a structured and complete premarital course which can be readily employed in ordinary pastoral care....(Their) purpose...is to invite each local Church to consider...its own catechumenal pathway(s)...thus responding creatively to the Pope's appeal."*

## Preface by Pope Francis p. 7

p.8 - Preparation for marriage needs something like the catechumenate for Baptism as an antidote to prevent the increase of failed marriages which (sadly) quality for a declaration of nullity.

p.8/9 - We have learned the necessary value of formation for priesthood and religious life; and that this takes TIME (it cannot be done in a single day or weekend in large groups). If formation for priesthood and religious life involves YEARS of study/formation, couples preparing for marriage and family life also deserve formation that is appropriate for those the Lord calls to the great mission of family life which is the very foundation of the Church.

p. 9 – A catechumenate for marriage needs to include not only adequate formation, suitable celebration of the sacrament, and the years following the celebration of the sacrament. The goal must be to set up an accompaniment process whereby the Church is “mother”, “teacher”, “traveling companion” always at our side. **[The is exactly what *For Better & For Ever* and parish sponsor couples do with and for those preparing for marriage in meeting with just one couple at a time.]**

## The proposal of Pope Francis for a "marriage catechumenate" p13

The goal of a "marriage catechumenate" would be that couples would celebrate the Sacrament of Marriage with an experience of faith and personal encounter with Jesus. These "pastoral guidelines" [Catechumenal Pathways] are not a structured and complete premarital course. Their purpose is to provide general principles that dioceses and parishes can use in designing their own programs/processes for married life. [Since 1975, *For Better & For Ever* has been designed for dioceses & parishes....in 5 languages and in various cultures...to accomplish what Pope Francis is asking of a "catechumenate for marriage".]

***Rob's information about the DIFFERENCES between Catechumenate for marriage and RCIA – There are likely to be significant differences between adult catechumens (making an adult decision to choose to be baptized and live the Catholic Faith) and couples who are preparing for marriage in the Church.***

***Difference #1 – Adults who choose to become catechumens can be presumed to be making an informed decision to begin a process of formation that will involve significant self-change (personal conversion). The parish leaders of the RCIA process can speak to the whole group of catechumens about personal conversion with the assumption that everyone is ready and willing to learn how to make the changes that will be needed to live as a disciple of Jesus. In contrast, those who seek the sacrament of Matrimony are often unaware that to correctly live the vows of Christian marriage they will have to be willing to begin ~ and continue every day of their marriage ~ a process of self-change (personal conversion). The parish leaders of the marriage preparation process are wise to take into account that couples (or individuals of some couples) are unaware that, while they are consciously asking for the sacrament of Matrimony, they are also assuming that they can continue living their current values/commitments without knowing their current values/commitments are ~ often ~ in contradiction to the values/commitment of Matrimony. This reality does not mean that the couples seeking Matrimony are "bad." It usually means that they are "invincibly ignorant" of the gap between their person intuitions about Christian marriage and the formal teaching of the Catholic Church. Those who are going to be sponsor couples need to be trained so they can deal with engaged couples "where they are at" (unaware of a need for personal conversion) and in an adult and respectful manner coax them ~ by sharing their***

*own journey of learning the importance of personal conversion ~ to begin a life long journey of person/couple ongoing conversion in the living of Matrimony.*

*Difference #2 – In Catholic tradition, the adult Catechumen is allowed/encouraged to select his/her sponsor and if the catechumen does not know someone who can fulfill this responsibility then the parish usually takes the lead to find a qualified Sponsor. A difference in regard to the selection of a sponsor couple for Matrimony is that the leaders of the marriage preparation process know that there are 2 factors that need to be addresses in the selection of a sponsor couple that make it much more practical that the parish leaders select the sponsor couple for each particular engaged couple. **Factor 1** – The sponsor couple must know and relate to the engaged couple as “equal in value/dignity”....the sponsor couple will never “take sides” in dealing with a couple they sponsor. For this reason, it is almost always best that the sponsor couple have **no previous relationship with either of the individuals engaged to be married**. So family and friends of the engaged couple are usually NOT appropriate to be a sponsor couple for them. **Factor 2** – The engaged couple is unaware of the level of intimacy that is likely to develop between them and their sponsor couple. **The fact that there is no previous history of relationship actually provides the opportunity for a deeper level of honesty/intimacy between the two couples**. These two factors make it a better pastoral strategy ~ most of the time ~ for the parish leaders to select the sponsor couple for each engaged couple.*

## I. GENERAL GUIDELINES

### Reasons for a catechumenate p17

In the early Church, those who wanted to become Christians ~ likely were **attracted to the healthy relationships between husbands and wives<sup>3</sup> they witnessed in their Christian friends**. They did not necessarily know the radical lifestyle changes they might need to make to live as Christians. The Catechumenate was the structure that guided folks into the kind of relationship with Jesus and the lifestyle expected of disciples of Jesus.

Today ~ when couples ask to be married in the Church ~ they are living in a world and cultures that are likely **lacking examples of the healthy/holy marriage and family life that is consistent with Christian Marriage & Family Life**. The doctrine and theory about “Christian Marriage & Family Life” is available in documents and sermons, but it is the effective witnessing by married couples that they know and associate with that is **missing**. Since 1975, *For Better & For Ever* has been helping dioceses and parishes to provide trained sponsor couples who are able to function as a “catechumenate for marriage” by spending time **“accompanying”** those preparation for marriage. “Accompaniment” is a relationship whereby a married couple and an engaged couple have “real conversations” about marriage and family life; it is remarkable how Jesus can make use of these conversations to inspire the engaged couple to take on the **Vocation** of Marriage and Family Life.

This brings to mind the “strategy of Jesus”<sup>4</sup> on the Road to Emmaus. He walked along with them & listened to their conversations for miles and hours before they become attracted to him enough that they insisted he stay with them that evening...which led to further conversation...and eventually they recognized the

---

<sup>3</sup> Rodney Start's *The Triumph of Christianity*, 2011, Harper One, is an excellent aid to understanding that it was friendships and relationships that were the key to why so many converted to Christianity. The doctrine of preachers was important, but the Christian doctrine was accepted because it “made sense” in the context of healthy relationships (especially the fact that Christian wives and children were treated better).

<sup>4</sup> Our educational/formation programs too often rely upon TELLING / PREACHING AT folks. We need to learn the Socratic method of engaging with others by means of open ended QUESTIONS & LISTENING to what people choose to share.

stranger to be Jesus and shared a meal (eucharist) with him and then returned to Jerusalem (from where they had fled) to share the Good News of Resurrection.

A Catechumenate for marriage is designed to make possible the relationships and changes of life that the **VOCATION** of marriage is intended to be. **Engaged are invited into marriage ~ not as a “destination” ~ but as a “way of life”.**

## **Those responsible for this task. p19**

**It is the Christian Community (Local Parish) as one group within the DIOCESE and eventually the world-wide Community of the disciples of Jesus. Within the Parish, everyone shares the responsibility of evangelization (which INCLUDES supporting marriage and family life).**

**That having been said, all married couples are especially responsible for witnessing the “Gospel of marriage and family life” to all in the Parish. These couples are especially the key “witnesses” who provide the foundation complimenting and affirming the teaching/preaching of Matrimony.**

**The practice of DIALOGUE in marriage is a unique element of the Vocation of marriage and family life that can ONLY BE EFFECTIVELY witnessed by married couples.**

## **Renewing pastoral care of married life p23**

**Find ways to interconnect marriage and family life to other groups of the parish...**

- **Youth Group helping with baby sitting during Eucharist**
- **Young married couples invited to meet with Youth Group.**
- **Invite priest, religious, married, to share their vocation story with Youth Group.**
- **Eucharistic minister invited to Youth Group.**
- **Food Bank visit for Youth Group to see how it works.**



## II. A CONCRETE PROPOSAL

Each diocese has the duty to work out, or rethink, its own marriage preparation **pathways**<sup>5</sup> inspired by the pre-baptismal catechumenate.....that means:

- It should be a period of time that allows for couples to reflect and mature (so no mere weekend program).
- It must include strategy for personal encounter with Jesus as a central element of marriage preparation for the couple.
- Other elements: formation, reflection, discussion, dialogue, liturgy, community, prayer and celebration.

---

<sup>5</sup> Important to notice this word is plural. Every parish needs to learn how to provide a helpful pathway for each person/couple that may be different from the pathway that works for others.

## Modalities p28

Each diocese should create its own form of marriage catechumenate and test it through a “pilot project” (experiment) to get feedback from leadership folks, folks directing the programs, engaged couples, and newly married couples who have participated.

In fact, this is what was done in 1975 in Houston....we began with 2 parishes and got 3 married couples (who were experienced marriage preparation leaders) to be the sponsor couples for 3 engaged couples in each parish. The feedback from the “sponsor couples” and those they sponsored was so positive that we ended the “experiment” and began promoting the use of “sponsor couples” ....

It took a while to learn that *For Better & For Ever* could be used in ALL the situations of those “preparing for marriage” (cohabitation, previous marriage, various cultures, various ages, even very mature to very immature, languages: English, Spanish, Vietnamese, French, Lebanese)

The document from Rome specifically mentions “*to meet in an accompanying couple’s house to make engaged couples feel welcome and comfortable*”....*For Better & For Ever* has been doing this since the beginning of the experiment in 1975. A particular challenge was the introduction of *For Better & For Ever* in the archdiocese of Agana in Guam. The local couples assumed they would meet with engaged couples at the parish church because they thought the parish meeting rooms were a better place to meet with people they did not already know and there was an unspoken element of thinking their private homes were not as attractive as they would have liked them to be. I explained to the couples that it was VERY IMPORTANT that the engaged couples be introduced to “marriage as it is actually lived”; and they decided that “made sense” and they opened their homes to the engaged couples!

Having the sessions in the homes of the sponsor couples makes it easier to introduce the engaged couples to “couple prayer” and “family prayer” (with their own children) and their “family altar” and use of Faith symbols and art and “holy water” and “candles”.

## Phases and Stages p32

In a parish, the **“pre-catechumenal phase”** is the term used to describe what Canon Law has long called “remote preparation” for marriage which begins in childhood. The problem has been that dioceses/parishes have mostly never designed programs for addressing the lack of communication/relationship skills for Children (Parenting Programs), Junior High & Senior High students, Young Adults that these folks are bringing forward into Matrimony.

Programs for children, youth and young adults tend to focus on doctrinal issues (It is said: “They don’t know their Faith.”) without addressing the lack of effective communication/relationship skills (learned in their Family of Origin) that tend to be the #1 reason that marriages fail.

The **“catechumenal phase”** consists of three stages:

Proximate preparation (Discernment for singles & dating couples).

Immediate preparation (for Engaged Couples that includes the accompaniment of a trained Sponsor Couple).

Continuing accompaniment by the Sponsor Couple during the first years of married life. The beginning of immediate preparation could be celebrated with a ritual of Solemn Engagement (which has long been available but is rarely used!).

***NOTE – Understanding and implementing these phases are essential responsibilities for the Pastor and Parish Staff because everyone in the parish will be involved in one or more of the parish programs that will be required to provide all of these services. At the same time, the successful parish will also have leaders who know how to minister to the needs of individuals and couples who show up at the parish, asking for marriage, with no previous awareness of what they need to do to make up for all they lack in proper formation for Matrimony. Pope Francis know this is a challenge, but he is asking us to acknowledge the importance of Marriage & Family life and do what we can to assist those asking for our assistance. Sometimes our most important resource for helping is simply to LISTEN to the needs folks bring to us.***

### Two clarifications p33

**Caution: These “phases and stages” are NOT intended to promote elements (such as Solemn Engagement) that might make sense to catechumens (who may be invited to take part in a number of rituals during their journey through the R.C.I.A.), but not necessarily to those preparing for marriage.**

**Involving friends and family members might be suitable for some couples, but might be quite inappropriate for a couple having their marriage validated (who may not want their extended family to know they were married in civil law).**

## A. Pre-catechumenal phase: remote preparation.... p35

**NOTE this is actually what Canon Law has been teaching since the reforms of Vatican Council II. Remote Preparation for marriage that begins in childhood is SUPPOSED TO BE taking place in every parish. It is named the “Pre-Catechumenal phase” in this document but it has been part of Canon Law since 1983 (although mostly ignored). Pope Francis is promoting this “Catechumenate for Marriage” as a NEW idea, but canon lawyers know it has been required of parishes since 1983.**

The most significant skill ~ essential for establishing and sustaining Christian marriage ~ can be taught to very young children. It is sharing with infants healthy “COMMUNICATION/RELATIONSHIP SKILLS”. Intimacy in marriage is primarily a communication skill, rather than details of sexual/genital behaviors.

When children are learning language skills they are learning how to establishing and sustaining healthy relationships if their parents/peers/teachers are witnessing (making use of ) healthy skills. If they are not witnessing healthy skills, then children will learn and practice inadequate (even destructive) skills and these are exactly the inadequate skills that result in troubled/failing marriages; and become the grounds for annulments!

In our world today, the many means of communication, including FaceBook, texting, TicToc, etc. are resulting in adults who do not know how to engage in healthy dialogue with their partner face to face. Retrouvaille is living proof of this sad reality.

## **B. Intermediate phase: reception of candidates .... p41**

This concept is an interesting theory, but likely unrealistic (especially as a group event).

One obvious reality is the concept of a Solemn Engagement....but this is not likely to become a new fad in the Western World. I, Rob Ruhnke, celebrated a Solemn Engagement with the very first couple to ask me to assist them with marriage preparation. That was in 1968, today is 2023 and I have yet to be asked by even one other couple to help them celebrate a Solemn Engagement!

There should be serious parish efforts to talk about and promote **DISCERNMENT** for Singles and Dating Couples. I think this is "DO-ABLE", but it is not being done! This effort needs to be taking place in Teen Youth Groups and Young Adult Groups (that could be for both Singles and young married couples).

### C. Catechumenal phase 50

This document is complex because it has already treated the **Pre-Catechumenal Phase**, and mostly re-peats it here (to address the needs of couples who have not been suitable formed by the efforts of the parish to do remote and proximate marriage preparation.) While I understand the writers trying to deal with couples who have “missed” remote preparation/formation, I think it results in a document that confusing to leadership folks and educators who are reading this document without the benefit of the experience of the past 50 years of pastoral experience.

Those of us who have been designing *For Better & For Ever* have been dealing with Pre-catechumenal and Catechumenal phases for 40 years. We know that *For Better & For Ever* can be used for individual and couples who might be considered “Pre-Catechumenal” OR “Catechumenal”. It requires the leadership folks to have the skills for DEALING WITH COUPLES WHERE THEY ARE AT (and resist the urge to label them and assign them to specific phases or stages).

Sponsor Couples can be trained to deal with ALL the needs of couples seeking to be married in our Church. And dioceses/parishes can aim at SPONSOR COUPLES to encourage them to gain more skills (for assisting engaged couples) and for helping them to find and make use of assistance that is beyond the personal experience of the sponsor couple (such as, financial advisor, planning end of life options, addiction assistance, natural family planning, dealing with aging parents, etc.). The website at [www.marriagepreparation.com](http://www.marriagepreparation.com) has some of this information and we can easily as more to the website.

### First stage: proximate preparation 51

See the previous page about Catechumenal Phase.....

### Second stage: final preparation 64

*For Better & For Ever* has Chapter 20 & 21...dealing with Pre-marital covenant, blessing of the couple, and planning the wedding.

### Third stage: Accompaniment during first years of married life 72

*For Better & For Ever* trains sponsor couples to follow-up beyond the wedding into the early years of marriage.

Parishes can and should do this for all the married couples of the parish.

Parishes can and must become pro-active in promoting Retrouvaille in regular bulletin inserts and announcements and inviting Retrouvaille couples well known in the parish to have a voice from the pulpit and parish meetings (parish council) and events (parish picnic).

### Accompanying couples "in crisis" 84

#### Retrouvaille and The Third Option

Making sure that Retrouvaille couples and Third Option couples are recruited to help with marriage preparation (Sponsor Couples).

### CONCLUSION 95

**This repeats and summarizes all that has been said. The most important thing is that it says the Catechumenal approach is all about assisting those preparing for marriage by a PERSONALIZED PASTORAL ACCOMPANYMENT (that means: SPONSOR COUPLES).**