

A message from Rob Ruhnke, C.S.S.R, author of *“For Better and For Ever”*. <http://www.marriagepreparation.com>

I have been involved in the design and implementation of marriage preparation for Catholics since my ordination as a priest of the Redemptorist Order in 1966. In 1970 I was assigned to the Redemptorist community in Houston TX and helped with the diocesan Pre Cana programs. When I was asked to become the Family Life Director for the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston in 1975 I already had the experience of setting up the RCIA process in our parish and I think this influenced my thinking that preparation for Matrimony should be a formation process similar to the RCIA. Thirty-four years later, I think these are the key elements of an effective “RCIA for Matrimony”:

1. It is parish based. Pre-Cana and Engaged Encounter developed as diocesan or deanery experiences apart from the local parish because there were no marriage preparation programs prior to WWII. However, we now know that preparation for all the Sacraments (including Matrimony) is *rightly provided by the local Church (the parish)*. Diocesan oversight is important for assuring quality and consistency of parish programs.

2. The appropriate content to be taught. From the beginning of Pre-Cana until 1998, the content of marriage preparation programs was completely flexible and every priest/parish/diocese could design their own program. To this day no “Catechism for Matrimony” (approved text) has been produced. In 1998 *For Better and For Ever, Unitas and Perspectives on Marriage* were the first programs to publish a text that included the appropriate content for couples to study. In addition, *For Better and For Ever* has an on-going process for collecting feedback from sponsor couples and engaged couples and uses this feedback to improve the content with each new printing. Also, the web site at www.marriagepreparation.com provides additional content, email addresses and phone numbers for support and/or clarification about the content (this service is free).

3. The work of the engaged couple. *For Better and For Ever* puts the engaged couple to work learning the skills of lifelong marriage, such as, how to dialogue with one another, make financial decisions together and pray together. This “homework” is a critical part of the process of learning to live the counter-cultural vocation of Matrimony. Successful marriage is the result of the daily efforts (“homework”) to serve one’s spouse and children.

4. Use sponsor couples of the parish. It is exceedingly “Catholic” to assume that the best teachers of Christian marriage are married couples of the parish who are willing to “sponsor” engaged couples. Sponsor couples are not perfect couples; they are couples of the local parish who are committed to the lifelong project of living the Vocation of Christian Marriage and are willing to share this reality with engaged couples.

5. The importance of follow-up. Sponsor couples establish a relationship that will continue beyond the wedding day into the first year(s) of marriage. This is a critical element (like mystagogia) that has mostly been ignored by marriage preparation programs. The *For Better and For Ever* program assumes that sponsor couples will make this follow-up a real priority.

6. Benefit to the parish. While it is indeed a serious project to recruit and train married couples of the parish to be sponsor couples, the “pay back” to the parish more than makes up for the effort. Sponsor couples consistently say that they “get more out of the project of sponsoring than the engaged couples” so the parish ends up with a *marriage enrichment program* that may be the best in history. [September 10, 2009]