

Part I

Getting Started

Welcome to *Joined by Grace: Preparing for the Sacramental Journey of Marriage!* This *Mentor Guide*, along with information available in the *Program Manual*, in the *Couple's Book*, on the program's DVD, and at JoinedbyGrace.com, will help you in your marriage-preparation ministry and guide you through all the crucial aspects of the program. As you accompany engaged couples preparing for marriage in the Catholic Church, know that we and many Catholics around the country are praying for you.

As your first step, carefully read part 1 of this book. It will help you understand the big picture before you dig into the details of facilitating marriage-preparation meetings or retreats using the *Joined by Grace* program. To be effective in your role, it is important that you understand the structure, spirit, and goals of this program, and that you are aware of some of the cultural and social indicators that characterize today's young adults preparing for marriage. A good place to begin is by reflecting on the four core principles of the *Joined by Grace Mentor Guide*.

1. God is the model for our loving.

God, who is love and who is a communion of persons, created us in his image, capable of tremendous love. God is the source and model

of all love. This program explores how God's love for humanity—revealed in the scriptures and in the sacraments—gives us the perfect model for how to love. When we make a decision to open our hearts and minds to this plan for our lives, we begin to see how our love stories are part of the larger story of God's love. As St. John Paul II wrote: "The divine *we* is the eternal pattern of the human *we*, especially of that *we* formed by the man and woman created in the divine image."¹

2. Christ's love for the Church is our blueprint for marriage.

Pope emeritus Benedict XVI wrote in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (*God is Love*): "God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love."² God's way of loving was made visible and tangible in the person of Jesus, who is God's love incarnate. Through his actions, Jesus taught us to love God and one another. That is why St. John Paul II pointed the attention of married couples to Jesus as the model for their loving, when he wrote: "Husbands and wives discover in Christ the point of reference for their spousal love."³ And this model of love is the same love that we experience in the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. Through the sacraments, Christ shows us his love in the following ways:

- He embraces us and welcomes us into God's family to share in his divine life in Baptism.
- He remains always present with us to give us strength through the Holy Spirit in Confirmation.
- He gives himself completely to us in sacrificial love in the Eucharist.
- He forgives us and frees us from the effects of sin in Reconciliation.
- He comforts, consoles, and heals us in the Anointing of the Sick.
- He serves the Church through Marriage and Holy Orders.

These core acts of love, through which Christ builds and cares for the Church, are the blueprint for building a marital relationship.

You and the engaged couples you mentor will recognize these foundational acts of love in the titles of the six chapters of the *Couple's Book* and in the title of each meeting outlined in this *Mentor Guide*:

1. Welcoming and Accepting: The Grace and Call of Baptism
2. Being Fully Present: The Grace of Confirmation
3. Giving Oneself Completely: The Grace of the Eucharist
4. Forgiving: The Grace of Reconciliation
5. Healing: The Grace of the Anointing of the Sick
6. Serving: The Grace of Marriage and of Holy Orders

3. Marriage preparation is a journey of faith, not a class.

This marriage-preparation program is not a course on marriage, but rather part of the faith journey a couple makes in preparing for the sacrament of Marriage. We hope that with your help the engaged couples will find in this program the opportunity to renew and strengthen their faith and will better understand the commitment they are making. We suspect you will also deepen your faith and strengthen your own marriage.

4. You have been called to be companions and guides on this journey.

Pope Paul VI wrote in *Humanae Vitae (Of Human Life)*, "Married couples themselves by the leadership they offer will become apostles to other married couples."⁴ Your work as a mentor is a ministry, a service

to the Church. It is an expression of your vocation as a Christian married couple.

Understanding Your Role in This Ministry

You are trusted counselors and guides. Whether you help lead a small group of engaged couples in your home, work with a single couple, or help lead a weekend retreat for the engaged couples of your parish or diocese, your presence and interactions with the engaged couples will speak volumes to them about the attitudes of the Church toward them and about marriage. How you communicate with each other verbally and nonverbally portrays to the engaged couples an image of marriage. Your presence, no matter what you do or say, teaches. You are mentors and representatives of the Church for the engaged couples whom you will lead through the Joined by Grace program. This book and the supporting materials available to you free of charge at JoinedbyGrace.com will assist you in this crucial role.

In your work with the engaged couples, strive to do the following:

- Witness through your words and actions the warmth of God's love, which is a love that is self-giving, comforting, and healing; it is a love that cares. Interact with the engaged couples in a style that is respectful, nonjudgmental, and most of all welcoming.
- Make your presentations a sharing of yourself and not a lecture. Use anecdotes from your life. Introduce the key points from the *Couple's Book* and illustrate them with personal examples. Lessons learned from your daily life are more powerful than concepts from a book. Whenever possible invite the engaged couples to draw from and share their own experiences—especially what they have learned about marriage from their parents and extended family, the good and the not-so-good.
- Become well-acquainted with the program DVD. Consider the couples and pastoral experts who appear in the videos crucial

members of your ministry team. These individuals and couples are inviting and give powerful, candid witness to the joy and beauty of Christian marriage. Their stories and advice will encourage engaged couples to explore not only the sacraments but full, active engagement in the Catholic Church. As you begin to explore the videos, keep in mind that they are not the primary means of doctrinal content delivery but rather serve to give witness to our faith. Doctrinal content is first presented in the *Couple's Book* and explored more deeply in your meetings with engaged couples. The videos enhance the teaching by the witness of real married couples and pastoral experts.

- Show a genuine interest in each couple. Get to know each person, his or her background, how each couple met each other, and what their dreams are. Find something that you have in common with each couple. This will help you connect with them.
- Share your faith, and invite couples to practice their faith. Show them what marriage means when it is seen through the eyes of Christian faith. Encourage couples to attend Sunday Mass every week. Offer to meet them for Mass once you are comfortable together. That will give you the chance to introduce these couples to the life of the parish and to the community.
- During your meetings or retreat sessions with the engaged couples, you will share with them the rich faith tradition of the Catholic Church as expressed in our prayers and devotions. You will find in the chapters of this *Mentor Guide* how to explain our devotion to Mary including the Rosary, our prayers to the saints for their intercession, the meaning and blessing of our Sunday Mass obligation, the practice of praying before meals, and a wide range of other Catholic traditions. More support materials are available at JoinedbyGrace.com.

Special Opportunities for Evangelization

Among the couples you mentor, you will find some, perhaps many, in which one of the partners is not Catholic. As you welcome those who are not Catholic, encourage them to ask as many questions as they like. Let them know that their Catholic partner may well have the same questions or want a deeper understanding of what the Catholic Church teaches about various aspects of marriage. Through your personal attention and care, you can make this a positive experience for the couples you work with and perhaps plant seeds that will lead to their further exploration of the Church and to their deeper relationships with Christ. Please read the article “Ministering to Couples from Different Christian Communities or Different Religions” for ideas and guidance about ministering to these couples. This article and many others are available at the Joined by Grace program website (JoinedbyGrace.com). A brief article titled “A Welcome to Those Who Aren’t Catholic” is available for free download at the same site and can be especially helpful to engaged couples. Please direct the engaged couples to it or print it and hand them a copy. It might help with any awkward feelings couples have when only one of them is Catholic.

A second very common situation that might be awkward for engaged couples to discuss with you is their living together before marriage. While Church teaching is quite clear on sex outside marriage, once couples have moved in together, there are many delicate matters that need to be addressed. Many, if not most, pastors will prefer to speak directly with these couples. You will need to ask your pastor how he prefers you to handle these situations and then work with him to find the best pastoral approaches. Please read the article “Ministering to Couples Who Are Living Together” available to you in the Mentor section of the Joined by Grace website for guidance with ministering to couples who are already living together. A brief article titled “Living Together before Marriage” is available for couples at JoinedbyGrace.com, so you can direct engaged couples who

will benefit from it to the site or print the article and give to them. Encourage them to discuss their living situation with the priest or deacon who, along with you, is helping them prepare for marriage.

To all of us working with couples who are living together before marriage, Pope Francis advises, “These couples need to be welcomed and guided patiently and discreetly.”⁵

A Look at Engaged Couples Today

As with any ministry, it is crucial to begin with a solid appreciation for those to whom you will minister. In marriage preparation this means examining basic demographics of engaged couples today. According to the US Census Bureau report of November 2011, the median age of first marriage for men is 28.7 years and for women it is 26.5 years. These marrying couples belong to a generation identified by demographers as generation Y, or the millennials. Authors William Strauss and Neil Howe are credited with naming this generation with the title of their book, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*.⁶ They call millennials those born between 1982 and 2004. There are approximately 80 million Americans that belong to this generation.

Frank Mercadante, a leader in youth ministry in the United States, published *Engaging a New Generation, a Vision for Reaching Catholic Teens*.⁷ He outlines five characteristics that can guide those who minister to this generation in understanding their needs:

1. These young adults were (and are) given a lot of attention and care by their parents. They expect personal attention.
2. They value relationships and like to be connected.
3. They are likely to be close to their parents, and they may identify with their parents’ values.
4. They have high ideals and want to make a difference.
5. They are often overcommitted.

Catholic Millennials and Marriage

In 2007 the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), located at Georgetown University, released a study called *Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of US Catholics*. This study was commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and was funded by the Knights of Columbus. The findings of this study are very useful to pastors and those ministering to married couples. The report helps us understand the faith practice of today's Catholics as well as their attitudes toward and knowledge of Christian marriage.

The report divides the population studied into four generations: the pre-Vatican II generation, the Vatican II generation, the post-Vatican II generation, and the millennial generation. Below are some important findings of the study.

Key Findings:

- Regular Mass attendance forms a person's attitude and his or her way of life. "Frequency of Mass attendance is a strong indicator of the general importance of Catholicism in a person's life and of his or her level of commitment to living out the faith."⁸
- Those who attend Mass frequently are considerably more likely to hold views about marriage that are consistent with the views of the Catholic Church.
- Ten percent of millennials attend Mass at least once a week.
- Thirty-one percent report praying daily.
- Thirty-one percent say they are very familiar with what the Church teaches on marriage.

What Millennials Think about Marriage:

- Sixty-nine percent of millennials believe that marriage is whatever two people want it to be.
- Eighty-eight percent believe that one's spouse should be first and foremost a soul mate.

- Eighty-two percent believe that marriage is a lifelong commitment, and 70 percent do not believe divorce is an acceptable solution to resolve difficulties.
- Eighty-four percent believe that couples don't take marriage seriously when divorce is easily available.
- Forty-three percent believe that living with a partner before marriage decreases the risk of divorce.

What Millennials Know about the Sacrament of Marriage:

- Fifty percent of millennials have heard that “for Catholics who have divorced and remarried civilly, the Church does not consider the second marriage valid.”⁹
- Thirty-seven percent understand that marriage is a calling from God.
- Sixty-two percent understand that the sacrament of Marriage extends beyond the wedding day.
- Thirty-two percent believe that married love brings the husband and wife closer together and therefore closer to God.
- Thirty-four percent believe that children bring husband and wife closer together and therefore closer to God.
- Twenty-six percent say that their view of marriage is formed by their Catholic faith.
- Forty-nine percent say their view of marriage is formed by their family experiences and background.
- Twenty-five percent believe that married love reveals God.
- Twenty-nine percent believe that married love is imperfect yet holy.

Attitudes and Expectations among Millennials not yet Married:

(At the time of the survey, 89 percent of millennials were still single.)

- Importance of marrying a fellow Catholic:
 - ◆ Seven percent of millennials say this is very important.

- ◆ Thirty-eight percent say this is not important.
- Importance of being married in the Church:
 - ◆ Twenty-six percent say this is very important.
 - ◆ Twenty-eight percent say this is not important.
- Importance of agreement between spouses on the number of children:
 - ◆ Fifty-four percent say this is very important.

Ministering to Millennials Preparing for Marriage

From the research conducted by CARA and from the insights of Frank Mercadante, we derive the following tips for working with young adults today.

- Connect with them on a personal level. Whenever possible and if the engaged couples are comfortable with it, communicate in person or by phone. Your voice conveys a greater personal interest in them than an e-mail or a text message.
- Through your actions and words, share your faith with them. Their practice of the Catholic faith and their knowledge of the faith may be limited. Make this an opportunity to help increase their knowledge and appreciation of the wealth of wisdom and truth found in the Catholic tradition. Encourage them to attend Mass, explore the Bible, and strengthen their prayer habits.
- This is a generation that learns more often from personal contact and electronic media than from books. In answering their questions, give them examples from your own life, or refer them to Catholic websites where reliable answers can be found. Good websites to recommend include JoinedbyGrace.com, TogetherforLifeOnline.com, PorTuMatrimonio.org, and ForYourMarriage.org.
- Make marriage preparation an opportunity to connect the couples preparing for marriage with the parish community. Through their relationships with you, the priest or deacon assisting them, and

other parish personnel, and by attending Mass regularly, they will feel a stronger bond with the community and grow in their personal relationships with Jesus. This preparation process is about evangelization—about helping engaged couples come to know Christ and follow him more closely—just as much as it is about helping them learn more of the Catholic vision of marriage.

Spirit and Goals of the Program

We realize that in religious programs such as this it is impossible and dangerous to set expectations in terms of tangible and measurable outcomes. Spiritual progress cannot be measured with human tools, and in setting expectations we may be tempted to take credit for the work of the Holy Spirit. In works of ministry we are imperfect instruments through which the Holy Spirit works. In this program we dare to set some desired outcomes, not because we will be able to measure them precisely, but to remind ourselves of what we hope and pray the Holy Spirit will accomplish in engaged couples through you.

It is worth asking ourselves: What impact do we expect this program to have on the engaged couples? Below are the targeted outcomes for this program.

On their wedding day we expect the bride and the groom to feel

- closer to each other because they have come to know each other better;
- closer to God, having learned that their love story is part of his love story and that Jesus Christ is present in their relationship;
- at home in the Catholic Church because you have helped them find there a community that welcomes them, and a place where they can grow spiritually;
- ready to make a permanent commitment to each other because you have explained and modeled for them the permanence of Christian marriage; and

- ready to accept a role in society as a married couple because they understand that marriage is not a private affair but a relationship in the service of each other, God, and society.

On their wedding day we expect the bride and groom to know

- each other better;
- that marriage is a vocation and is the path to holiness to which they are assenting;
- that Christian married love is modeled after Christ's love for the Church, and it is a sacrament of it;
- that their marital commitment is given freely, is indissoluble, and requires faithfulness;
- that love is self-giving, life-giving, and fruitful;
- that marriages have ups and downs, and it is important to find support in the local faith community;
- that the Catholic view of human sexuality is a positive one;
- that attending Mass regularly and going to confession is beneficial to their relationship;
- that Christ is a partner in their marriage and is ready to help them with his graces; and
- that nurturing and growing their relationship requires many life skills that need to be mindfully practiced, such as communicating effectively, negotiating differences and resolving conflicts peacefully, managing finances together, compromising, forgiving, and sharing household responsibilities.

These outcomes are not something that you will achieve on your own through your work as mentors. They require the couple's openness to the Holy Spirit as well as a good deal of work. Prayer will, therefore, be important on your part, on the part of the engaged couples, and on the part of your whole community.

We encourage you to send notes to your friends, tell them what you are doing, and ask them to pray for you and for the couples to whom you are ministering. Marriage preparation is not a private process. It needs the involvement of the whole community, especially its prayer. You can find more ideas about how to involve the whole parish, including developing a prayer partner ministry, homily aids, and weekly bulletin notes in the *Joined by Grace Program Manual* and at JoinedbyGrace.com.

The complexity of today's society and the challenges faced by the family require a greater effort on the part of the whole Christian community in preparing those who are about to be married.

—Pope Francis¹⁰

Program Structure

Dioceses and parishes approach the marriage-preparation process in various ways, depending on the number of weddings celebrated each year, the needs of engaged couples, the ability of the diocese or parish to have enough trained personnel to mentor the engaged, financial resources, and other such pastoral and practical considerations. This program is designed to be used in couple-to-couple ministry or with small groups of engaged couples (two to four couples) that meet over several weeks with one or two mentor couples. These approaches give engaged couples the opportunity to develop an authentic friendship with at least one other couple in the parish and ideally with several couples, both married and engaged.

The focus in *Joined by Grace* on welcoming the engaged and forming mentoring relationships with them sets the stage for an evangelizing ministry in which engaged couples come to better understand the meaning and purpose of sacramental marriage. Interaction

within a small community of persons representing the wider Church can better help to foster a growing commitment to Christian discipleship within those preparing for marriage than can teaching alone. The living examples of faithful married love provided by mentor couples is essential to building strong, Christ-centered relationships in those preparing for marriage.

We realize that in many situations choosing the couple-to-couple or small-group format presents more burden than benefit, so we also provide an adaptation of the material in this program for use on a weekend retreat. If the latter is chosen, we urge the training of one or two mentor couples to lead the weekend experience and the involvement of several other mentor couples to facilitate some of the small-group conversations during the retreat, tend to hospitality, and provide for meals, social times, and any facility needs. The size and makeup of the retreat team should be in part determined by the number of engaged couples, available training, layout and adaptability of the retreat venue, and available financial resources. Session outlines and further guidance about leading a Joined by Grace weekend retreat is available at JoinedbyGrace.com.

Program Components

Learning through dialogue is key to Joined by Grace, and that conversation is driven by well-prepared mentors and by the program's published components consisting of three books, a DVD, and an online library of resources for mentors and engaged couples. The *Program Manual* provides help for organizing a marriage-preparation ministry based on Joined by Grace; it gives the scope of topics covered and discusses all the various individuals ideally involved in the ministry. The *Couple's Book* contains information about church teaching and practical exercises crucial for engaged couples to read and complete ahead of their meeting with mentors. Finally, this *Mentor Guide* gives you, the mentors, practical help for preparing and leading meetings or weekend retreat sessions. Your ministry accompanying

the engaged in their journey toward marriage will be made stronger by the online library of support materials, including articles about the sacraments, practical skills for strong marriages, guidance on growing one's prayer life, how to find help when a relationship is struggling, and many other useful materials for both you as mentors and for the engaged couples you will work with.

The *Joined by Grace* DVD offers brief videos for use during the meetings or retreats. Produced in partnership with Spirit Juice Studios, these videos feature five married couples of diverse backgrounds and four pastoral experts. The videos do not deliver the essential content of the program, but reinforce it by providing starting points for deeper conversation when mentors and engaged couples meet together. The couples in the videos play an integral role in the evangelizing goals of the program because by their witness, they also accompany the engaged through the marriage preparation process. They testify to their faith and deep commitments to the Catholic Church, offering realistic advice, good humor, and profound hope.

Meeting Format

The couple-to-couple or small-group format provides an ideal setting for the mentor couple or couples to accompany and guide the engaged through this crucial time of their lives and to help connect them to the life of the parish. The program is presented in six meetings, which ideally take place over a period of six weeks. You may also want to host an introductory, less formal meeting or potluck dinner in a comfortable setting, especially if you will work with a small group of engaged couples. This can help everyone get to know each other a bit and become acquainted with the program before digging in to the detailed topic-focused meetings. You might also consider having a celebratory dinner at the end of the six meetings.

Each of the six meetings is designed to last approximately two to two and one half hours, with minimal preparation required between meetings on the part of both engaged and mentor couples. The

duration of meetings will largely be dependent upon how engaged in conversation the groups become. Even so, it is important to set a schedule and stick to it as much as possible out of common courtesy.

During the meetings mentor couples strive to keep a balance between instruction in Church teaching, sharing from their own experiences, private time for the engaged couples to talk together, and group conversations.

Groups can meet in mentors' homes or at the parish, and they are led by a mentor couple who has been chosen by the pastor or the marriage-preparation director and who has been trained to lead the program.

Weekend-Retreat Adaptation

This format is helpful for engaged couples who live in different towns or cities or in which one or both travel a good deal. Retreat outlines are available for free download at JoinedbyGrace.com. Diocesan or parish leaders can easily change the suggested schedule to more appropriately meet local needs. For example, perhaps two or three retreat days are held, spanning over two or three weekends with free weekends in between.

The retreat is divided into six sessions of ninety minutes each. Each session will include time for input, private reflection time for couples, and group sharing. If possible, the weekend retreat should be held in a facility where couples can be housed for the night, such as a retreat center or a hotel. The retreat is led by a team of couples and individuals responsible for a variety of tasks, from greeting and welcoming attendees to facilitating the meetings, cooking (if necessary), and so on. In the retreat format it is important that there be a lead couple who coordinates all the activities and acts as directors throughout the event.