



Mike Phelan, director of the diocesan Office for Marriage and Respect Life Issues, took some time to tackle some of the more commonly asked questions regarding the diocese's new marriage policy, "Covenant of Love."

1. When will these changes take place?

The change takes place Jan. 1, 2010. During the fall of 2009, parishes will be preparing for it.

2. What are the main changes to the diocese's marriage preparation policy?

The policy is richer in its theological reflection on the "is" of marriage and goes into the latest developments in the cultural situation our couples face. These teaching points are accompanied by the following enhancements in the policy:

- ▶ Deeper analysis, diagnosis, theological understanding and pastoral response;
- ▶ Parish/diocesan/online education programs encouraged;
- ▶ More thorough training for marriage preparation ministers and lay leaders;
- ▶ Three courses required (previously two);
- ▶ Full course in an approved method of Natural Family Planning (previously just the introduction class at most parishes);
- ▶ Nine month preparation period (previously six).

3. Why did the diocese make these changes?

For the past 50 years, marriage has been on the decline in the United States; however, in the past 10 years we see indications that the cultural grasp on the meaning of marriage is slipping radically and quickly. Among these indications is the explosion of extramarital cohabitation, the growing disconnect between marriage and children, and the attempts to redefine marriage in law.

Today it is no exaggeration to say that when the culture is not actively attacking the idea of lifelong marriage and the welcoming of children, it is indifferent.

It would be a grave injustice not to give our couples proper support and guidance in today's anti-marriage culture. Couples living the fullness of God's plan for marriage have less than a 4 percent divorce rate. It takes sacrifice, openness to God's will, and love in all of its fullness — but isn't this what those in love really desire?

4. Why does the Church require marriage preparation?

Requiring marriage preparation flows from the Church's deep respect for the dignity and mission of the laity in marriage. Because the Church values marriage so highly, she asks those entering marriage to understand what they are entering and to prepare for it.

Canon Law has two instructions for bishops on the importance of marriage preparation. For

example, one of these states, "Pastors of souls are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful the assistance by which the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection."

Among the requirements to bishops and pastors, it is emphasized that couples must receive "personal preparation for marriage, which disposes the spouses to the holiness and duties of their new state." This is where the focus on preparation between engagement and the wedding ceremony originates.

5. Isn't it late at this point? Shouldn't young children, teens and single young adults be getting prepared before they are engaged?

Indeed they should! Beginning in the family and continuing through every level of Catholic education, we must be a "marriage-building Church." This question is asking about what the Church calls "remote preparation" for marriage. The Christian maturity and guidance of parents, and ideally most educators that the child encounters, is crucial. This extends to mom and dad themselves sharing their faith with their children as well as daily family prayer and attendance at Sunday Mass, supported by the parish and the schools. Covenant of Love begins with reflection on this early preparation for marriage, for the child's vocation to follow Christ and to give him or herself away in love.



However, this need for "remote" preparation, fundamental as it is, does not mean that "proximate" and "immediate" preparation after engagement is not valuable. Actually, engagement puts couples in a time of opportune focus on their relationship and creates a "teachable moment" for them; we see this all the time in marriage preparation. As long as the wedding is far enough off and the stresses of invitation list and the dress and the tuxedos are not at the forefront, couples typically enjoy putting in the time — because all these courses do is encourage authentic love in different ways. Many important conversations happen and many important decisions are made.

6. Why will marriage preparation under 'Covenant of Love' take nine months?

This has been a common question from all who have seen the policy. First, the only reason for a set period of preparation time is so that couples can accomplish the preparation fully and peacefully. There are two reasons why nine months will be the new norm.

The newly required Natural Family Planning course takes an "apprenticeship" period of three months to learn the method well.

The final two months before the wedding should be "workshop-free" for couples. At this point, attention naturally moves to the wedding day and all courses should be completed. For the final two months, they are in "immediate preparation" for marriage and should review their prep so far, Catholics should be given an opportunity and encouragement to seek the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and they should plan the wedding ceremony. This amount of time should give couples a peaceful period to accomplish all their preparation.

7. Isn't there a risk that with these changes more people will get married outside of the Church?

Hasty marriage decisions are quite common in our culture, and it may be that for couples who have never heard of their call and duty to be married in the Church or who are not aware of the most recent dangers couples face, the new policy may seem like difficult news.

But with a united effort of communication of the good news that we as a Church have for marriage, and with dedication to the truth of Christ and a New Evangelization of our people, we are confident that our marriage numbers will increase over time. Every human heart is made by God to respond to this message.

8. What is hoped for in the lives of couples who prepare for marriage under 'Covenant of Love'?

That those who enter marriage preparation in our diocese without ready role models, or without strong hope for a lifelong, fulfilling marriage will find them; that those who enter without a clear understanding of the faith or relationship with Christ will begin one; that the God-given desire they and their parents have for their faithful and fruitful marriage will be affirmed and strengthened; and finally that where true seeds of faith and love have been planted by our couples' parents, priests and teachers, they will blossom and become the truly heroic witnesses to God's love that we need today.

How do we build a culture of life? As our two recent popes have been teaching us, we begin with the family. *

