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Catholic Marriage Preparation in Ireland

– *Church Teaching and Practical Guidance*

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The Irish Catholic Bishops have recently issued a revised edition of what is called the Pre-Nuptial Enquiry Form (PNEF). This form has to be filled in and signed by each partner of the couples preparing for marriage in a Catholic Church in Ireland today. Of course their local priest will assist in this process but the individual partners will provide the information needed to complete the form, which is personal to each of them. And it is expected that the partners will do this separately and alone as they visit their local priest. This new edition of the PNEF is to be used from the First Sunday of Advent, 27 November 2016, its predecessor having been in use for over twenty years.

As a context and background for our explanation of and reflections on the new document it will be helpful to look briefly at what Pope Francis has recently said about preparation for marriage in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)* of 19 March 2016. We will also outline the Irish Catholic Church's official programme of marriage preparation as presented to numerous couples every year across the country by the Church's own marriage preparation agency, Accord.

POPE FRANCIS ON THE FAMILY AND LOVE IN MARRIAGE

Pope Francis' inspiring and challenging Exhortation on love in the family is addressed to, among others, Christian married couples and all the lay faithful. He refers to his Letter as a post-Synodal document, indicating thereby that he was responding to the teachings and suggestions of the two Synods of Bishops that took place in Rome in 2014 and 2015. Noting 'the rich fruits of the two-year Synod process,' he set out to gather the contributions of those Synods, while adding other considerations as an aid to reflection, dialogue and pastoral practice (n. 4). So, in his first five chapters he reflects on several major aspects of his central theme

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in a very informed, realistic and helpful manner. Beginning with the teaching of Scripture (Chapter 1), he moves on to examine the actual situation of families (Chapter 2), in order, as he says, to keep firmly grounded in reality (n. 6). Then he recalls 'some essential aspects of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family, (Chapter 3). All this sets the scene for two central chapters dedicated to love (Chapters 4 & 5). It is only after this long, weighty and insightful discussion of the foundations and basic realities of marriage and the family in the Christian tradition in contemporary Church teaching and practice that the Pope turns his attention to what he refers to as 'some pastoral perspectives' (Chapter 6). It is here that he presents his teaching and advice on preparing engaged couples for marriage (nn.205-211). We will summarise his main points and recommendations in what follows.

THE POPE ON PREPARING FOR MARRIAGE

In line with his repeatedly stated wish to enhance the role of local churches and episcopal conferences in the Church, Francis begins with the firm assertion that 'different communities will have to devise more practical and effective initiatives that respect both the Church's teaching and local problems and needs'(n.199). In this context he makes clear, as the consultation in the synodal process affirmed also, that there is a need to train lay leaders who can assist in the pastoral care of families. Courses and programmes planned specifically for pastoral workers can be of assistance by integrating the premarital preparation programme into the broader dynamic of ecclesial life (n.204).

The Pope devotes just four pages to the topic of preparing engaged couples for marriage (nn. 205-211). He again emphasises that 'each local church will discern how best to provide a suitable formation' for young people approaching the sacrament of marriage, and doing so will bring great benefits to the particular Christian community (n.207). Priority should be given to an attractive and helpful presentation of information that can help couples to live the rest of their lives together with great courage and generosity (n.207). Taking up ideas put forward by the Synod Fathers, as he calls them, Francis indicates that we need to help young people discover the dignity and beauty of marriage and so provide the best context for the growth and development of their children (n.205). Hence, rather than emphasising rules and norms, the Pope calls for a prominent place to be given to the virtues, including of course chastity. This is in line with the recent focus in Catholic theology on the virtues in our understanding and living of the Christian life, moral and religious. In this context the witness of families themselves will be important and the whole community will need

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to be involved more extensively, so that couples may learn from their experience how beautiful and enriching married life can be (n.206). It is valuable and encouraging that the Pope speaks so positively and warmly about marriage and preparing for it and in doing so he sets the tone for his further reflections on the matter.

He refers to the remote preparation for marriage, which is provided in and by the families of the couples themselves through example and good advice (n.208). At the same time some individual meetings are essential as one prepares for marriage and so are discussion groups and optional talks on topics of interest and relevance. The Pope is realistic in reminding engaged couples that they should not depend on mutual attraction and desire alone to provide a foundation for marriage but they need to deepen their understanding of love and commitment. They need also to clarify their individual expectations of each other and of the life they would like to build for their future (n.209). Sadly, he says, many couples marry without really knowing one another and this may make it difficult for them to detect danger signals in their relationship and to find effective ways of responding to them before the wedding (n.210).

Marriage preparation is intended to ensure that couples do not view the wedding ceremony as the end of the road but see marriage as a lifelong calling. In addition, such preparation aims to assist them in deepening their love and helping them to overcome problems and difficulties in their relationship (n.211). To achieve this, marriage preparation will offer practical programmes, sound advice, proven strategies and psychological guidance as well as pointing out available services that can help couples when problems arise. The sacrament of reconciliation will be valuable as it provides God's and the Church's merciful forgiveness and healing strength after sins and past mistakes (n.211).

THE WEDDING CEREMONY: POPE FRANCIS

Francis realistically reminds couples to avoid being pre-occupied or distracted by the material preparations for their wedding. This will ensure that their liturgical celebration, that is, the wedding ceremony, is a 'profound personal experience' in which they really appreciate the meaning of each and all of its elements and signs or symbols. The deeper meaning of these, points to and reveals the covenant of love and union between Christ and his Church (n.213). In consenting to love each other 'till death do us part' couples need to be clear that freedom and fidelity are not opposed to one another. Rather they are mutually supportive (n.214). Couples need to see the sacrament of marriage as a reality that permanently influences the whole of married life and is a continuing source of God's grace

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and help in and through the spouses' love for each other and the love and support of their families and friends (n.215). The biblical readings in the wedding ceremony and the exchange of rings are both filled with meaning, insight and even challenge, and, of course, praying together will be an important element that will always be beneficial (n.216).

CATHOLIC MARRIAGE IN IRELAND TODAY

As is well known the Catholic Church's agency for marriage preparation in Ireland nowadays is called Accord, the Catholic Marriage Care Service, formerly known as the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council (CMAC). It is a nationwide organisation serving the 26 Irish dioceses and with three separate branches: Accord in Northern Ireland, Accord in Dublin Archdiocese and Accord for the rest of the Republic. It has 55 centres around the country at present, though that may well change as the new governance structures being put in place in accordance with the Charities Act 2009 are rolled out in the coming months.

Now, in accordance with the Irish Bishops' directive as contained in the new Pre-Nuptial Enquiry Form (PNEF) it is appropriate to look at the first section of this Form before going on to outline the Accord Course of marriage preparation.

THE NEW PRE-NUPTIAL ENQUIRY FORM – SECTION A

This Section is headed 'Freedom to Marry' and concerns the individual man or woman about to marry. It is preceded by a half page, that is called 'Concerning the Marriage', and which corresponds to page 1 of the previous PNEF, i.e. it requires one to insert the names and parishes of the partners and the names and addresses of the two witnesses (the chief bridesmaid and the best man). In addition, the particulars of the priest/deacon officiating at the wedding and the priest to whom the papers are to be sent are called for.

Section A itself in just over one page covers the same ground as pages 2 and 3 of the PNEF that is now being superseded and in substantially the same terms, though somewhat shorter. Here the spouse-to-be has his/her name inserted and also the details about his/her Baptism and Confirmation and the parents' names and address(es). He/she is required to answer the usual questions as to his/her relationship to the proposed partner, whether he/she is bound by religious vows/promises or has ever been married.

It is assumed that the Baptism Cert will be a recent one, i.e., drawn up within the preceding six months. As such it will be, in effect, a Letter of Freedom, as the words 'No Record' in the space designated 'Marriage' on the Baptism Cert will indicate that the

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person has not been married in a Catholic Church anywhere. In case any doubt may remain about the individual's freedom to marry the new Form mentions the usual three ways in which one can remove that doubt, namely, letter(s) of freedom, statement of freedom to marry by a parent or sibling in the presence of a priest/deacon, or a sworn statement before a Commissioner of Oaths. Circumstances will determine which, if any, of these three is called for.

The booklet called *Pre-Nuptial Enquiry – Pastoral Guidelines* issued along with the new PNEF, speaks of these three ways as 'supplementary' to the recent Baptism Cert (p 16).

At the end of this process the spouse-to-be is required to declare orally that the questions asked in this Section have been explained to him/her, that he/she has answered truthfully and is free to marry in the Catholic Church. Then he/she is called on to sign Section A of the PNEF which has just been completed.

DOING A SUITABLE PRE-MARRIAGE COURSE

Section B of the new PNEF begins by stating that this Section should be completed as the final part of an appropriate course of instruction and catechesis. In other words, the partners to the proposed marriage are required to do a suitable course of marriage preparation before they return to their priest to complete Section B. The *Pastoral Guidelines* referred to above state in this context that 'the preferred choice of the Catholic Church is Marriage Preparation Courses under the aegis of Accord Catholic Marriage Care Service' (p 19).

This clearly does not rule out other courses that are judged to be suitable in terms of content and manner of presentation. However, several dioceses in Ireland impose an obligation on couples to do an Accord Course and at its completion to present a certificate indicating that they have attended such a Course. In light of this latter position it will be appropriate and helpful here to provide an outline of the usual Accord course which is presented to couples in all Irish dioceses nowadays and which generally receives a very positive response and much encouraging feedback from the couples who take part in it.

ACCORD PRE-MARRIAGE COURSE: A JOURNEY NOT A DESTINATION

This is the realistic and challenging title of the Accord Course. The value of such a Course is emphasised by the findings of a recent survey by Marriage Care – the British equivalent of Accord – which found that, though couples may live together for some years, there are still important topics that they do not want to or often, it seems, do not in fact discuss together in regard to their relationship and marriage. Examples from the survey are: whether to have children,

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how finances are to be managed, how children will be brought up, how couples will share chores and responsibilities, how much time they will spend together, how to talk about sensitive issues like sexual problems, etc.

One of the great advantages and benefits of an Accord Course is that it faces all these and other difficult issues that may arise in marriage and discusses them directly but sensitively in the eight presentations that form the central elements of the Course. And while the Presenters will, of course, speak publicly to the couples attending the Course, the couples themselves are only asked to discuss the issues raised privately, knee to knee, as the phrase has it. Here a brief outline of these eight presentations will illustrate the comprehensive and very relevant nature of what Accord does in its Courses.

Presentation 1: Marriage and your Family of Origin and Self-Awareness

Clearly, one's family of origin, in which one has spent one's early formative years, will be of pivotal importance for one's marriage relationship in terms of one's values, ideals, priorities, traditions and also one's personality and character. It will be important, then, to reflect on this early experience and for the partners to become aware of each other's and their own. Good self-awareness will be paramount here, so that one is alert to the baggage, as it is often referred to, that one brings to one's marriage and is open to change it in ways that will enrich the relationship in marriage.

Presentation 2: Marriage and Your Commitment

One's commitment to a lifelong marriage is basic and it involves a profound decision, requiring a high degree of personal and emotional maturity and freedom from undue pressure of any sort. That couples are marrying nowadays in Ireland in their early 30s gives them a good chance of being ready to make this commitment. In addition, there is usually little likelihood that there will be any undue pressure on man or woman in our country today as they opt for marriage. Still, reflection on the issues here will be of great value and importance.

Presentation 3: Conflict Management

The Accord presentation on this topic reminds couples that conflict is inevitable in marriage and that how they handle it will be of great significance for their future together. Dealing with anger and arguments will be a big issue in this context. This presentation aims to help the partners to be realistic and mature in understanding and dealing with the conflicts that arise in their relationship.

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Presentation 4: Communication in Marriage

It is often said that a relationship is as good (or as bad) as the communication within it. Communication is the vital ingredient in any relationship and requires not just talking but also deep listening. There are several levels of communication, going from clichés and social niceties through that of reporting facts, expressing one's judgments and opinions and finally, sharing one's emotions and feelings. This latter form of communication will indicate a very deep and trusting relationship. It is then that the spouses can be open and honest with each other.

Presentation 5: Choosing the Sacrament of Marriage

While this presentation will outline the legal requirements for marriage in Ireland for both state and church, its main emphasis is on the religious aspect of Christian marriage, especially on marriage as a sacrament. To begin it will be important to reflect briefly on marriage as a Christian vocation. This means that, in and through the partners' desire and wish to marry, God too calls them to be husband and wife and in their church wedding they respond positively to this call and enter on the Christian vocation of marriage. As a sacrament Christian marriage is a symbol or sacred sign of God's grace in Christ and as such, marriage contains that grace and makes it available to the couple all their days. This grace and divine help comes especially in and through the spouses themselves and in and through their families and friends, who support and love them. In this way we say in faith that Christ is present in and to the couple in their married life at all times and is discerned especially in the virtues the spouses and their families and friends practise and also in their life of prayer. Reflection on the difficult notion of spirituality is also included as is the idea of marriage as the domestic church.

Presentation 6: Parenthood

Here there is a treatment of the couple's desire to have a family and the qualities they feel they bring to this role. The three styles of parenting, autocratic, permissive and democratic are discussed, while there is an important emphasis on the role of the father in family life.

Presentation 7: Sexuality and Intimacy

In this presentation the aim is to raise awareness of the influences that helped to shape the sexuality of the spouses and to clarify the meaning of intimacy and its importance in marriage. Some problems of a sexual nature that may arise in married life are briefly noted and reflected on but some may need professional help to resolve fully.

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Presentation 8: Fertility in Marriage

Here Accord seeks to provide information about fertility and also infertility and to explore the impact of fertility issues on the couple's relationship and life together. Much of this information is technical but important for the couple to know so as to plan their family and work to overcome any difficulties that may arise in this area.

THE NEW PRE-NUPTIAL ENQUIRY FORM – SECTION B

This part of the new PNEF fills one page as in the previous edition of the form and is substantially the same as the earlier version. For example: the spouses are asked: Are you entering marriage free from any kind of pressure from parents, fiancé(e) or anyone else? Also: Do you intend to enter a permanent marriage that can be dissolved only by death? Again: Does your wish for a Christian marriage indicate your adherence to the Catholic faith and your desire to practise it regularly? This part of the PNEF differs from the earlier one in two respects: a) as already stated, it is to be completed by the spouses separately and alone on each one's visit to the priest, but only after they have completed a suitable pre-marriage Course; b) also it is to be concluded by a verbal declaration by each of the partners affirming that, after careful thought about the meaning of Christian marriage, each has answered the questions in this Section honestly and sincerely. The priest, then, countersigns this Section as the guarantor of authenticity.

CONCLUDING NOTES

The final page of this new edition of the PNEF, referred to as Section C, contains the pastoral and legal requirements to be found on the last three pages of the previous version of this Form. Examples are: the priest's assessment of the partners' suitability for Christian marriage; the form for Permission to marry outside the Parish, the Delegation form for a visiting priest, the form for the Notification of Marriage and for the Record of pre-nuptial enquiry (to be retained in the parish where filled in).

As already mentioned above, accompanying the publication of this new PNEF is a booklet of 46 pages called *Pre-Nuptial Enquiry: Pastoral Guidelines*. These Guidelines are, 'in many instances merely a reminder of what is required' (p 8).