

Avalon Pre-Cana Marriage course; Information for Clergy.

The Religious and Spiritual section of the course;

Avalon has interviewed a number of priests for this program.

In our video interview with Father Peter McVerry, He describes the sacrament of marriage to be ‘a huge commitment to each other, whereby couples reflect the unconditional, unwavering love of God to one another’.

When we interviewed Father John Hassett, Moderator at Lucan Parish, he described ‘a relationship’ as ‘faith’. He goes on to explain that while there are many factors to take into consideration when choosing to get married, the most fundamental factor is ‘faith’.. You would not get married if there was any ambiguity there.

Answering our question about ‘why do you think completing a pre-marriage course is important’, Father Hassett explained;

‘It is so important for couples to do this course, even if they have been together for 10 years and have children, there are always questions we haven’t yet asked. If you were to go on a solitary retreat, it is certain that questions directed at yourself would arise, and that is what the pre-marital course aims to do, to get couples off to the best of starts in their new marriage with a common understanding and goal’...

...‘You take time out to go to the pub and to work but often we forget to take sufficient time to talk about our relationships’...

...‘I have recommended that couples complete the Avalon course and the feedback that I have received has been 100% positive. It seems that as well as preparing the women in the relationship for the marriage, that it is also helping men to understand themselves better’.

Included in our pre-marriage, course we distribute a number of e-books for couples to read that help couples with understanding their faith.

Are premarital courses allowed to be completed at home?

The Catholic Church has an obligation to prepare couples for the Sacrament of Marriage and allows a number of various methods of marriage preparation.

Some courses are completed privately with priests or counsellors, some are completed online via Skype or a Webcam and some courses can be completed at home.

Once we are satisfied that couples have an adequate understanding of the Sacrament of Marriage, then we post out your certificate.

This analysis / review of the Avalon Home study course is undertaken from my perspective as a Family Therapist and Adult Educator.

The three DVD's on the Social Construction of Marriage, Communication and Conflict, and the Key Challenges of Marriage are designed for use in conjunction with the workbooks supplied.

Combined with the bonus supplementary material this forms an authentic comprehensive and wide ranging programme for all contemplating marriage and indeed for those in long term marriages and partnerships who are willing to assess and re-evaluate their relationships.

The videos and bonus material in particular are rich in substance utilizing relevant experts and up to date research. These videos are fast moving, compact, succinct and engaging. I found myself wanting to use the pause button so as to slow it down, and so peruse the depths of the areas covered. The course covers a vast range of topics essential for marriage preparation including finance, relationships, love, sex, faith, spirituality, parenting and conflict. More importantly with regards to best practice for adult education, this programme fosters experiential learning by inviting each member of the couple to reflect on their personal experiences and to critically reflect on their assumptions.

The programme also takes a social constructionist systemic perspective appreciating that each member of the couple has values, beliefs and attitudes which they learned and developed prior to entering the couple relationship. These values and beliefs continue to be alive and well, and are thus consciously and often unconsciously brought into the couple relationship. Each individual's past therefore offers the potential for great richness, possibility, diversity and conflict in the new couple relationship.

This is overtly a Catholic pre marriage course. The two PDF's on faith and spirituality are rooted in the Catholic Church's understanding of Marriage. The Church's teaching on Marriage succinctly articulates how Marriage in the Church is seen as, covenant, contract, community, partnership and family. The Essence of Catholicism positions Christianity, the Church and Marriage in the context of "salvation history" and is grounded in a traditional orthodox redemptive theology.

For those couples who are not on solid ground in their relationship and open to change in their lives, some of the issues raised in this pre marriage course may be disconcerting. This programme is not for the 'tinsel', faint hearted, ungrounded, un-rooted couple. It is for those who want their relationship to blossom and who are willing to engage, by nurturing the roots and the ground of their relationship. Couples are invited to address straight direct questions including for example: attitudes and openness to talking about, money matters and financial

decision making, their personal attitudes to sex and sexual needs and desires, dealing with conflict and with in-laws and out-laws.

As a therapist who has worked with couples for thirty years I am particularly struck by the forthrightness of the worksheets that address learned old patterns of relating. e.g. “Where have you learned to argue in the way that you do?” Ways of learning to deal with conflict in one’s family of origin and unresolved issues from the past, ultimately affect each person and consequently the couple relationship. Genuine individual and couple engagement in this programme may well save hours of pain, torment and even separation in the future. More significantly it may help them to have life in their relationship, in all its fullness. This is not a therapy course. However it is therapeutic as it facilitates the possibility of allowing some breath and wind to blow into areas of life that have the potential to become tight and stuck. This will ultimately benefit the couple, and because it is a home study programme with no intrusion from an outsider, it can be done at the individual’s and couple’s own pace. To quote Bateson an old sage from the field of Family Therapy, this programme has the potential ‘to introduce news of a difference that makes a difference’. The secret is that it is done in a light hearted, affable manner, that deals with serious matters and the news of a difference comes across as “not too different”. But this is the difference that makes the difference.

For this reason I strongly recommend this pre marriage course, as it has the length, breadth and depth necessary for transformational learning. This programme invites couples to engage in the joy, loveliness and messiness of relationships. This can also be hard work, but the programme ultimately invites us to enjoy being forever young and open to possibilities.

- *Written by Liam Roe, M.A. S.T.B. Reg. F.T.A.I., I.C.P. E.A.P. Family Therapist / Psychotherapist.*

IRISH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

This document was approved at the June 2010 meeting of the Irish Episcopal Conference in order to assist Bishops in their duty to ensure suitable preparation for the celebration of the sacrament of marriage.

Criteria for Courses of Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage

At the October 2009 General Meeting of the Irish Episcopal Conference, the Bishops decided that any programme of preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage should reflect, both in its content and process, the Christian understanding of marriage and promote a positive attitude towards marriage at all times.

In accordance with the Church’s pastoral practice and discipline, the pastoral care and the prerequisites for the celebration of marriage require dedication on the part of all

involved in the preparation for sacramental marriage. The following is a list of criteria outlining marriage preparation course content and process of delivery which will offer couples the best possible programme of preparation.

1. Course content:

1.1. The sacramental nature of marriage should form the basis on which all other elements are discussed. All topics covered should reflect a covenantal understanding of marriage within the Catholic tradition, which means a lifelong and exclusive commitment of the husband and wife to each other.

1.2. This means that the Catholic understanding and vision of marriage will permeate and be integrated into all elements of marriage preparation.

1.3. The spirituality of marriage will be a central part of the marriage preparation.

1.4. As well as drawing from human experience, the vision of marriage will be informed by sacred scripture, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Familiaris Consortio*, *Love is for Life* (issued by the Irish Episcopal Conference), <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=5276> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage* (issued by the Pontifical Council for the Family).

1.5. The core elements of a marriage relationship should form the basis of any programme. These include: choosing the sacrament, family of origin, communication, conflict management, commitment, couples as parents, owning your sexuality and fertility awareness and well-being.

2. Course process:

2.1. The emphasis at all times should be on the couple and their needs. This should be reflected in the methods used to engage the couples throughout the programme. Time and space should be allotted for couples to discuss topics and issues that are personal. Where appropriate group discussion should be part of the process and couples should feel free to engage in any discussion as they desire.

2.2. The marriage preparation course should offer a safe space for couples, in conditions that offer the best possible opportunity for reflection and learning. If suitable parish facilities are available for marriage preparation programmes these could be used.

2.3. Programmes of preparation should be co-facilitated by a team comprising laypersons and clergy reflecting the collaboration between the laity and the clergy in promoting sacramental marriage.

2.4. Facilitators should be selected from within parish communities and have a clear understanding that they are acting as witnesses for marriage in their local communities.

2.5. All programme facilitators should receive the highest standard of training and this training should, ideally, be accredited by a Catholic educational institution.

2.6. Facilitators should engage in ongoing supervision and annual professional development training to maintain the highest possible standards.

2.7. The programmes should involve a minimum of nine facilitated hours of client contact and be multi-sessional. The multi-sessional aspect allows couples a period of reflection between sessions and the course to be delivered at a leisurely pace, which reflects current best practice in adult education.

2.8. The programme of preparation should comprise a maximum of twenty couples, to ensure best practice in group work.

2.9. Programmes of preparation should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that their content and process of delivery are of the highest standards and that the courses reflect the changing circumstances of couples coming for marriage preparation.

Full text directly quoted from

“Irish Episcopal Conference Criteria for Courses of Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage June 2010”