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Diocesan Marriage Formation Policy promulgated

STEUBENVILLE — A Marriage Formation Policy has been promulgated for the Diocese of Steubenville by diocesan Bishop Jeffrey M. Monforton.


“Pope Francis encouraged local churches to evaluate and to strengthen their pastoral outreach to married couples and families,” Bishop Monforton’s letter of promulgation reads. “The Holy Father calls particular attention to personal accompaniment and support for married couples, for those preparing for marriage, for parents and for those in homes experiencing great crisis.

“In an effort to respond to the invitation of the Holy Father and to address the particular needs of the Diocese of Steubenville, I have established new guidelines for marriage preparation.”

The requirements for marriage preparation will take effect Jan. 1.

“Married couples and families are truly a gift from God,” said Bishop Monforton. “They breathe life into the church. ...

“However, we recognize that there is greater need than ever for pastoral accompaniment and support” for married couples, parents, those preparing for marriage, those in broken homes. ... There is also a great need to foster a greater appreciation for the vocation of marriage, a deeper understanding of the gift of sexuality (with its inherent beauty and responsibilities) and to encourage our young people to embrace this calling with generosity and sacrificial love.”

Joseph A. Schmidt, director, diocesan Office of Marriage, Family and Respect Life, pointed out that the diocese’s Marriage Formation Policy actually is an outgrowth of the National Pastoral Initiative on Marriage, which dates back 10 years.

Subsequently, a Steubenville Diocese Marriage Commission was tasked by Bishop Monforton with offering advice on proposed ministries and initiatives to strengthen marriage. Marriage Commission members include [updated]: Joseph Schmidt, Chairman and Director of the Office of Marriage, Family and Respect Life, (Marietta), Michele Santin, Director of the Office of Catholic Charities and Social Concerns (Steubenville), Fr. H. Christopher Foxhoven (Glouster/Buchtel), Robert and Sharon Colvin (Athens), Skip and Fanny LeFever (Bloomingdale), Gerard and Joan McKeegan (Steubenville), Charles and Carol Menk (Steubenville), Thomas and Deborah Minton (Beverly), Stephanie Rivers (Bloomingdale), Ken and Janet Schilling (Marietta), Rhett and Toshia Young (Steubenville), Jerry and Johnna Zalmanek (Harrietsville), and Dr. Gregory and Lisa Popcak of the Pastoral Solutions Institute (Steubenville).

So, a recommendation was made to standardize marriage preparation within the diocese. An eight-member ad hoc committee – Santin; Father William D. Cross, diocesan judicial vicar; Father Thomas C. Chillog, diocesan episcopal vicar for pastoral planning and personnel; Permanent Deacon Mark A. Erste; Martina Erste; James G. Piazza, executive assistant to the bishop; the Menks, laity involved long term with marriage preparation in the diocese; Schmidt and Christine Schmidt – drafted a marriage preparation policy. The committee drew its policy recommendations from the Code of Canon Law, Pope Francis’ “Amoris Laetitia,” the Pontifical Council for the
Family, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and diocesan input, including proposals outlined by the Steubenville Diocese Marriage Commission.

After months of work, which included reviewing church documents and examining marriage preparation provided in other dioceses, the committee presented its document to Bishop Monforton.

As promulgated by Bishop Monforton, the diocesan Marriage Formation Policy builds on long-standing marriage preparation procedures used in the diocese, said Schmidt. As well, it adds components to strengthen a couple’s understanding of the church vision for human sexuality and provides tools for church teaching on responsible parenthood, he added.

The introduction of the policy reads: “Sacramental marriage is both a gift and a true calling. ... As the foundation of the family and the sanctuary of life, marriage plays a vital role in the life of both the church and society. ...”

Marriage formation includes that which “begins at birth,” as stated by Pope Francis; preparation that takes place in adolescence and early adulthood and provides intellectual, emotional and spiritual development; and, then, a period of formal instruction, discussion and reflection that takes place in the months leading up to the reception of the sacrament of matrimony, diocesan policy states.

In the diocese, marriage preparation has taken many forms throughout the years, the policy points out, but with Pope Francis’ “Joy of Love,” there is a “need to provide support to couples beyond their initial reception of the sacrament of matrimony. “The care must include those who are “separated, divorced or abandoned,” and particularly to single-parent families, the policy reads on quotation of “Amoris Laetitia.”

The pastoral care for families has to be missionary, “one that boldly proposes the Christian vision for marriage and family life and seeks creative and dynamic initiatives in support of married couples and families,” the policy continues, based on “Amoris Laetitia.”

Five steps are outlined for marriage preparation – meetings with a priest or deacon, an introduction to Theology of the Body, a workshop or retreat on marriage life-skills, a course in natural family planning and a finalization of preparations.

Since there are certain expenses associated with fulfilling the policy requirements, it is stressed that “no couple with financial hardship is to be excluded from participation. Parishes are encouraged to establish small ‘scholarships’ to assist couples when necessary.”

Along with the Marriage Formation Policy, a resource Guide for Marriage Formation has been drawn. The more than 20-page guide lists education and formational resources, planning resources, pastoral considerations for special circumstances, related activities in support of marriage and forms.

A tri-fold from the Office of Marriage, Family and Respect Life condenses “The Marriage Preparation Process – A Guide for Engaged Couples.” Not only does it outline the process for marriage formation, but also it answers frequently asked questions concerning marriage and the Catholic Church.