

CATECHUMENAL PATHWAYS FOR MARRIED LIFE

Pastoral guidelines for local Churches

Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life

2022

Below are quotes from and comments about relevant sections of the [Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life](#) (hereafter “Pathways”) that diocesan NFP leaders can cite as supporting a need for diocesan NFP staff (volunteer and paid) and services. These sections include content that support educational programs on human sexuality and fertility appreciation for youth and their parents. Remote marriage preparation is essential to form Catholics from their youth about the vocation and nature of marriage and the need for ethical family planning—NFP.

The information below follows the structure of the original document. In some sections a simple explanation noting the connection to NFP ministry is provided followed by the direct quote from the document. In other sections, a discussion of what NFP leaders can do is connected to the document’s section with simple reference.

Comments and discussion on certain sections of the Pathways document.

Background

Produced by the Holy See’s Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, *Pathways* is a fruit of the 2015 Synod on the Family. That synod produced Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, [Amoris laetitia](#) which has a substantial section on conjugal love and responsible parenthood and the incompatibility of contraceptive use in marriage as designed by God (see AL, especially nos. 68, 82, 222).

In the Preface and the first section of the document, Pope Francis identifies the reason for the publication of *Pathways* as an answer to strengthening the Church’s pastoral preparation of the faithful for the Sacrament of Marriage. In doing so, he notes that a “superficial preparation” for the Sacrament of Marriage, runs “the real risk of celebrating a marriage which is null and void.”

- NB: Here is where marriage ministry must always include Church teaching on married love and the gift of life (conjugal love and responsible parenthood). Strong Catholic marriage preparation programs must include the teachings articulated in *Human vitae*, that the nature of conjugal relations is designed by God and expresses His gift to husband and wife to fortify the spousal communion of persons *with* the sacred responsibility to cooperate with the Lord God in bringing new life into the world. These gifts are not “footnotes” to the vocation to marriage but essential elements in marriage catechesis and formation. Catholics need to understand that contraception harms this reality.

The Holy Father states that the Church must do all that can be done to prepare couples to receive the Sacrament of Marriage validly. To make his point, Pope Francis compares the rigorous preparation of men to the Priesthood as compared to the inconsistent and often brief preparation

of Catholics for the Sacrament of Marriage. In addition, the document is presented as guidelines, and it urges diocesan bishops to examine their individual marriage preparation efforts with an intention of strengthening them.

Pathways issues an urgent call of pastoral program evaluation and improvement to especially address the contemporary problems of high divorce rates, co-habitation, and other such negative trends that harm the people of God and God's gifts of marriage, conjugal love and the gift of life, and the family.

- Diocesan and national NFP leaders must prepare themselves in Church teaching so that they can make compelling arguments to include NFP education in any program that educates, catechizes, and forms Catholics in the vocation and theology of marriage.

Guidance for Diocesan NFP Leaders and Quotes from Pathways

Marriage preparation and supporting marriages is a shared responsibility of clergy and laity under the authority of the bishop. Diocesan NFP leaders can take their place in marriage ministry to support the bishop's pastoral efforts (see No. 6).

No. 6:

It is the duty of the entire ecclesial community to elaborate a catechumenal pathway for marriage preparation and to offer concrete accompaniment to couples along this path. The journey should be shared among priests, Christian spouses, religious men and women, and pastoral workers, who must collaborate among themselves and in agreement with their bishop.

NFP education contributes to strengthening diocesan marriage preparation since the pastoral programming ought to be substantial covering all the elements that comprise married love and the gift of life. A comprehensive marriage preparation program will do its best to support the vocation of marriage and that means offering NFP education as an ethical support to husband and wife (see No. 7).

No. 7:

The conviction from which to begin—for engaged couples preparing for marriage and for pastoral workers accompanying them—is that marriage is not a point of arrival: it is a vocation, a path to holiness that embraces a person's entire life. Moreover, by virtue of their participation in the prophetic and royal priesthood of Christ, the lay faithful also receive a specific ecclesial mission in the Sacrament of Marriage for which they need to be prepared and accompanied. ... the Church has a duty to adequately prepare those lay faithful who feel called to accept the vocation of marriage and to persevere in it throughout their lives by carrying out the mission with which they have been invested.

Marriage ministry leaders must be adequately educated and formed to minister to the engaged and married (see No. 8). When diocesan NFP leaders are formed in Church teaching which supports NFP use in marriage and are certified in an authentic method of NFP, they will be ready to support the bishops' marriage preparation efforts.

No. 8:

In order to effectively implement a renewed pastoral care of married life, it has now become indispensable that couples offering accompaniment, in parishes and family movements, as well as priests, already from the time of their seminary formation, and religious and consecrated men and women, be adequately formed and prepared in mutual complementarity and ecclesial co-responsibility.

The document discusses the problem of prolonged periods of “pastoral abandonment” in the lives of the Catholic faithful—especially after a couple marries. Pathways points out that the Church correct this weakness by responding with pastoral support. Given this realization, NFP emerges as a helpful ethical tool that Catholic couples can use to not only live God’s design for married love and the gift of life but also to deepen their understanding of how God designed marriage, married love and the gift of life. NFP leaders must be prepared to created pastoral programming that leads with Church teaching and includes the general science and methodology of NFP.

No. 15:

...the Church needs to seriously rethink how she accompanies the human and spiritual growth of the faithful. ... [an example is provided regarding catechesis for baptism of infants. NFP leaders know that this is also a suitable time to educate couples about Church teaching and NFP science and methodology].

Section No. 16, comments:

This section discusses “the implementation of a true catechumenate for spouses including all the steps of the sacramental path: time of preparation for the Marriage, its celebration, and the years immediately thereafter” (No. 16). This is good news to diocesan NFP leaders who can collaborate with their colleagues in various diocesan ministries and offices to determine how to bring fertility appreciation, the virtue of chastity, and the basic science and methodology of NFP as an ethical support to married couples to the faithful in appropriate pastoral programming. The document states that in developing this project, certain requirements will have to be taken into consideration:

- “The program should last for a period of time sufficient to allow couples to truly reflect and mature;”
NB: NFP education (which should include the benefits of practicing an NFP method to the spouse’s relationship—especially communication) should be part of this reflection. It must be remembered that an introduction to NFP can be integrated in a marriage preparation program.
- “Although beginning with the concrete experience of human love, faith and personal encounter with Christ should be placed at the center of marriage preparation the program should be articulated in phases, and—where possible and appropriate— marked by rites of passage to be celebrated within the community;”
NB: Taking an NFP method class can be part of the process to prepare for marriage.

- “Each of the following elements should be included (without any exceptions): formation, reflection, discussion, dialogue, liturgy, community, prayer, and celebration.”
NB: Again, an introduction to NFP and even a required method course of instruction.

In section No. 22, *Pathways* discusses complex issues related to openness to life. Diocesan marriage ministry staff and parish leaders will have to partner with reputable NFP national providers as well as recruit appropriate people to be trained as teachers of individual NFP methods.

No. 22

Several complex issues pertaining to marital sexuality or openness to life (such as responsible parenthood, artificial insemination, prenatal diagnosis, and other bioethical issues) have important ethical, relational, and spiritual repercussions on spouses, which require specific formation and clarity of ideas. This is so because some ways of dealing with such issues present morally problematic aspects. Accompanying couples themselves are not always able to offer proper guidance on such issues, which are indeed extremely widespread. The involvement of people with more experience in these cases is most appropriate.

NB: Every diocesan marriage ministry program must maintain and share lists of not only reputable NFP teachers and/or providers (see uscgb.org/topics/natural-family-planning/nfp-national-providers), but also Catholic physicians who can treat patients ethically and in accordance with Catholic teachings. See for example:

[FertilityCare™ Centers of America](#) (where both NaProTechnology and the Creighton Model of FertilityCare are provided)

[Fertility Science Institute](#) (sponsored by the Couple to Couple League International)

[MyCatholicDoctor.com](#)

In sections Nos. 27, 28, 30, 32, NFP ministry leaders can help to develop appropriate programs on human sexuality, fertility, and the virtue of chastity for children, adolescents, and their parents.

No. 27:

Remote preparation precedes the actual catechumenal pathway. It aims, from childhood, to “prepare the ground” on which to sow the seeds of a future vocation to married life.

No. 28

The Church, with considerate maternal care, shall seek the most appropriate way to “narrate” to children the plan of love that God has for each person, of which marriage is a sign, and which, even in their case, will manifest itself as a vocational call. The happiness of entire generations depends on it. After all, the vocation to family life comprises most people in the world. To this end, a healthy Christian anthropology should be formed already in children – including the first elements of human sexuality and the theology of the body – and their baptismal identity should be developed in a vocational perspective, whether to marriage or religious life.

No. 29

The process of formation begun in children can be continued and deepened with adolescents and young people, so that they do not come to the decision to marry as if by chance and in the wake of an adolescence wounded by affective and sexual experiences which prove painful for their spiritual life. Such experiences can cause deep emotional wounds, which will spill over into adulthood in their sexual and marital lives. Faced with these wounds, the pastoral team should be able to offer the assistance of experts who can accompany these young people on a personal level.

No. 30

There is a particularly urgent need to create or strengthen pastoral programs geared especially toward young people in the age of puberty and adolescence. Faced with contemporary challenges, the family cannot and is unable to act as the exclusive environment for formation in affectivity. The help of the Church is therefore required. To achieve this goal, adequate training should be provided for formators who accompany the very young in formation in sexuality and affectivity. Experts should be involved, for example, and synergy should be created with Christian-inspired counselors or pastoral projects offering affective formation, which have been approved by the diocese/eparchy or the national Bishops' Conference.

No. 32

The formative journey of remote preparation should receive consideration in the pastoral program of every parish or other Church community. In particular, it should be explicitly proclaimed in the context of youth ministry (including adolescent groups) and be presented as a favorable time to begin to promote the maturation of a vocation to marriage.¹⁰ It would be appropriate to initiate collaboration with lay associations and movements to implement pastoral projects in synergy and a spirit of ecclesial communion.

Diocesan NFP leaders can be a support in remote marriage preparation. They can contribute to a pastoral education on the meaning of human sexuality, fertility, and the nature of married love and the gift of life.

No. 36

In summary, the purposes of remote preparation are: (a) to teach children self-esteem and respect for others, and the awareness of their own dignity and respect for that of others; (b) to introduce children to Christian anthropology and the vocational perspective implicit in Baptism which will lead to marriage or consecrated life; c) to form adolescents in affectivity and sexuality in view of their future call to generous, exclusive, and faithful love (whether in marriage, priesthood, or consecrated life); d) to offer young people a journey of human and spiritual growth to overcome immaturity, fears, and resistance, in order to open themselves to relationships of friendship and love which are neither possessive nor narcissistic, but are rather free, generous, and self-giving.

No. 39

Not only does the “first proclamation” of the faith have a *kerygmatic* character, but the Church should treat the Sacrament of Marriage itself as an opportunity for genuine proclamation, especially for people who lack a mature experience of faith and ecclesial involvement. They must be able to see in married couples, and experience for themselves, that married life is the answer to the deepest expectations of the human person in their desire for reciprocity, communion, and fruitfulness, both physical and spiritual. The catechetical program shall therefore seek to bring out the conjugal and familial nature of love, while highlighting each of its special characteristics: totality, complementarity, uniqueness, finality, fidelity, fruit-fulness, and public nature. The “Gospel proclamation” on marriage should show that these characteristics flow from the intrinsic dynamism of human love. In other words, fidelity, uniqueness, finality, and totality form the “essential dimensions” of every authentic bond of love which is understood, desired, and consistently lived out by a man and a woman; they are not just the “well-known characteristics” of “catholic” marriage. Consequently, the Sacrament of Marriage may be presented to couples not as a mere moral or legal obligation to endure, but rather as a gift, an offer of grace, and an aid which God offers them precisely to fulfill the demands of authentic love.

In marriage preparation, the diocesan NFP leader can contribute to pastoral education efforts about human sexuality and the proper understanding of responsible parenthood.

No. 53

There are many other aspects related to the human reality of the person and the couple which need to be properly explored: the human dynamics of conjugal sexuality, the proper understanding of responsible paternity and maternity, and the raising of children. Catechesis and Christian teachings will help consolidate knowledge of the truth related to marriage and the formation of personal conscience.⁴¹ At this stage, the experience of spouses with several years of marriage behind them can offer a precious contribution.

Diocesan NFP education can help couples live marital chastity. Diocesan NFP leaders can also assist in forming the faithful in the virtue of chastity by teaching the non-married about the meaning and nature of human sexuality.

No. 57

In this regard, the Church must never lack the courage to proclaim the precious virtue of chastity, no matter how directly it contrasts with the prevailing mentality. Chastity should be presented as an authentic “ally of love,” not as its negation. Chastity, indeed, is the privileged path to learn to respect the individuality and dignity of others, without subordinating them to one’s own desires. Chastity teaches engaged couples the times and ways of true, gentle, and generous love, and prepares them for the authentic gift of self to be lived out during a lifetime of marriage.

Chastity ultimately teaches a person to be faithful to the truth of their love, in every state of life. For engaged couples, this means living chastity in continence, and, once married, living conjugal intimacy with moral rectitude.

Detailed NFP method education is suited to proximate preparation for marriage (see section no. 63).

No. 63

To summarize, the aims of proximate preparation are: a) to revisit a catechesis of initiation into the Christian faith and to draw couples into the life of the Church; b) to begin a unique initiation into the Sacrament of Marriage and to come to a clear awareness of its essential aspects; c) to deepen understanding of the facets of the couple's relationship and to become aware of psychological and affective shortcomings; d) to complete an initial phase of discernment about the couple's vocation to marriage; e) to continue more decisively along a spiritual journey.

In the first three years of marriage, NFP leaders can assist to help married couples deepen their understanding about marital intimacy and God's plan for love and life in their marriages (see no. 79).

No. 79

Numerous aspects of married and family life may become topics of dialogue and catechesis during these initial years. It is essential, for example, to enlighten couples on the delicate topic of sexuality within marriage⁸⁹, along with related issues, i.e., the transmission of life and regulation of births, as well as other issues regarding morality and bioethics.⁹⁰ Another area which should not be overlooked relates to the raising of children, in both the human and Christian spheres, which constitutes a serious responsibility of parents. Couples should be made aware and adequately formed in this area, given the increasingly widespread tendency to be divided on the issue, or not to deal with the task of educating and raising children by delegating it to others.⁹¹ The Church's teaching on this theme offers spouses a treasure trove of wisdom which, when presented properly, is greatly appreciated and welcomed by spouses.

NFP leaders can contribute greatly to supporting married couples in the early years of marriage. Research shows that the benefits of the NFP lifestyle include: strengthening couple communication; fostering mutual spousal responsibility for their combined fertility and family-planning decisions; and helping husband and wife to prayerfully discern whether the Lord God is asking them to receive new life into their marriages. These are marriage strengthening characteristics (see no. 85).

No. 85

To summarize, the aims of accompaniment in the early years of married life are: (a) to present a "mystagogical marriage catechesis" exploring the spiritual and existential implications of the Sacrament of Marriage; (b) to help married couples embark upon a healthy path in their inter-personal relationship from the outset; (c) to explore in depth the themes of sexuality in married life, the transmission of life, and the raising of children; (d) to instill in couples the firm will to defend their marriage bond in any crisis situation that may arise; (e) to facilitate an encounter with Christ to provide an indispensable source of renewal of the grace of marriage and to foster a marital spirituality; (f) to recall the meaning of the unique mission of Christian spouses.

NB: Citing research that demonstrates the marriage-building qualities of couples

practicing a method of NFP can be helpful when striving to demonstrate the validity of the NFP methods. See for example the USCCB page on classic NFP research at usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/what-is-nfp/science/psycho-social.

Section No. 86 ends with a call to properly form and educate priests and lay leaders in the proper support of married couples. NFP leaders can request that they learn about the basic science and methodology of NFP as well as Church teaching which supports its use in marriage.

Please note, in the last section on “Couples in Crisis,” *Pathways* does not mention couples who discover that they have infertility once they marry or serial miscarriages. Diocesan NFP leaders can remind their colleagues that in remote preparation for marriage, early education in fertility appreciation can eventually help young women understand if their reproductive hormones are healthy. In addition, married couples who learn a method of NFP, can determine whether their fertile window is healthy because of charting their fertility. There are many benefits to including NFP leaders in the diocese’s marriage ministry programs!