

“Joined by the Church, Sealed by a Blessing is a must-have resource for parishes who desire to revitalize sacramental ministry with couples who are preparing for the Sacrament of Marriage. Aware of today’s cultural challenges and inspired by the baptismal catechumenate, the authors present a new approach to marriage ministry focused on conversion and lifelong discipleship. The book outlines a formation process that engages the couple in a deeper life of faith and calls the entire community of faith to accompany them on the journey. Like the RCIA, this new approach to marriage sacramental ministry has the possibility of transforming the entire parish community through marriage preparation, celebration, and ongoing pastoral ministry with couples. If you are hoping to inspire young couples and your parish community to a deeper, living faith, you will find great inspiration in this book!”

Karen Kane
Director of Worship
Archdiocese of Cincinnati

“A wedding that celebrates the conversion process of a man and woman like the Easter vigil does for the catechumenate? Could that be? In *Joined by the Church, Sealed by a Blessing*, Macalintal and Wagner propose a fresh vision for marriage preparation that parallels the RCIA process: a call to discipleship formed within a parish community that nurtures neophyte families. Pastors and parish leaders—if your marriage prep isn’t ‘working’ to create committed Christian couples, this book offers practical pathways to rethink, restructure, and breathe new life into your process.”

Karla J. Bellinger, DMin, author of *Connecting Pulpit and Pew*, director of the Center for Preaching, Evangelization, and Prayer

Joined by the Church, Sealed by a Blessing

Couples and Communities
Called to Conversion Together

Diana Macalintal and Nick Wagner



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How can I ever express the happiness of the marriage that is
joined together by the Church,
strengthened by an offering,
sealed by a blessing,
announced by angels,
and ratified by the Father?

—Tertullian (160–220 AD),
in a letter to his wife

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Stop Preparing for Marriage; Start Preparing for Discipleship

There are a lot of reasons to get discouraged when you think about helping couples prepare for marriage in the Catholic Church. Beyond the weird stories about unusual liturgical requests, the frustrating stories about demanding couples, and the sad stories about broken families, there is a bigger story. This story is about not only our changing social values but also the inadequate state of our parishes to meet those changing needs. You know these stories. They're happening right in your own parish.

Joe and Karen Become a Statistic

Joe and Karen are your typical “middle-pew” parishioners. They come to Mass more regularly than most young adults, but that's the extent of their participation in the parish. They were married at this same parish last June, and they're now expecting their first child. The parish staff had led them through the basic marriage preparation process and had even added a couple of special blessings for them at Mass during their engagement. The liturgical staff had made sure their wedding was not only beautiful but also followed good liturgical principles, and the couple's families and friends were impressed. On top of all that, the pastor had sent them a note one month after the wedding with continued prayers for a happy marriage. This parish puts a priority on building strong Catholic families, and so they invest a lot of time, money, creativity, and resources into preparing the engaged couples who come to them. Everyone seems happy . . . until Joe loses his job, and Karen's father moves in with them after his stroke. Over the next couple of years, the strain on their relationship and the long nights fighting cause them to come

to Mass less and less often. One Sunday, Karen shows up by herself, sitting in the back pew with her toddler.

Joe and Karen have become one of the 40 to 50 percent of marriages in the United States that end in divorce. Even for people like them, who marry in the church and are relatively active in their faith, they still only have a slightly better chance at not getting divorced than their nonreligious, civilly married friends.¹

More Time with the Grandkids but Less Money for the Budget

Josefina prides herself at the care she takes in helping wedding couples on their big day. She's been coordinating weddings at her parish for almost ten years, and couples say she's the best. She doesn't mind spending all of her Friday evenings and Saturday mornings at the church, running rehearsals and being there for the weddings. However, lately, she finds that she has a lot more free time, since there aren't as many weddings being scheduled on the parish calendar. She's not upset because it gives her more time to spend with her grandkids. However, it does worry the pastor, who sees a lot more people in long-term committed relationships choosing not to get married. How can he help them understand the value and dignity of Christian marriage in today's society? And the parish bookkeeper is also anxious because of this drop in the number of weddings. That's because fewer weddings also means less money coming in to pay not only for Josefina's part-time salary but also for basic maintenance of the parish facilities.

Wedding coordinators across the country are getting more free time, and pastors and bookkeepers are getting more ulcers because since 1972, the number of church weddings in the US Catholic Church has dropped 60 percent.² Today, fewer people overall are deciding to get married, and if they do, they're more likely to choose a destination wedding at a beach resort rather than their neighborhood parish.

The New Normal

At Father George's church, the parish bulletin shows the total Sunday collection from the previous week, and it's hard for anyone not to notice the slow and steady decline in donations. Father George wonders if he's doing something wrong since he became the new pastor a year ago. He works hard at his homilies and tries to be as

welcoming as possible, going early to every Mass and staying long after to greet his parishioners. He's already married dozens of couples and baptized a bunch more babies in the parish, but he hasn't seen any of them back in the church. His staff and parishioners he's grown close to reassure him that he's doing a great job and he shouldn't worry. But empty pews don't lie. He may be a good pastor, but the people just aren't there to see it.

Father George is encountering the new normal in the church—Catholics who come to church only for Christmas and Easter or weddings and funerals. In 2012, less than 20 percent of US adult Catholics attended Mass once a week or more, aside from weddings and funerals.³ This isn't simply a case of parishioners having too many things to do and not enough time for Mass. Many younger people along with their parents believe that going to Sunday Mass is not necessary to be a good Catholic. They will be many of your newlyweds whom you won't see again until Christmas or when it's time for their babies' baptisms or their parents' funerals.

The Really Scary Part of This Story

Now imagine your church filled with your parishioners. See their faces, those who have been there for years before you even got there and those you barely recognize. Now remove 75 percent of those parishioners from your pews. That's how many people you might lose in the next five years to the fastest-growing denomination in the US—the “nones.” Almost three-quarters of people who self-identify as practicing no particular faith or religion are people who *used to be* part of a church.⁴ Most of us don't see the dramatic shift in our parish numbers because of the growth of Hispanic and Asian Catholics in the US. Their presence is certainly a blessing, but it also brings its own unique challenges as well. If you're not yet aware of wedding traditions such as the giving and receiving of *arras*, the use of the veil and cord, the multitude of sponsors, or the honoring of ancestors, then you'll need to start learning.

There Can Be a “Happily Ever After”

These four stories and their challenges are indeed daunting and can be upsetting. But we wrote this book to help you and your parish

face these challenges with confidence, creativity, and clarity. Other resources can help you plan excellent wedding celebrations and prepare couples well for a lifetime commitment. We'll also try to help you do that. However, what we hope that this book really helps you with is another C word—conversion.

What is at the heart of the preparation processes in this resource is the centrality of conversion to Christ. Certainly this conversion has to take place within the couples themselves. In their vocation of marriage, they will live out this conversion primarily in their dying to self for the sake of their spouses and children. Their preparation for marriage, then, needs to be an apprenticeship in this kind of joyful, sacrificial way of life for the other.

However, the couples are not the only place where conversion needs to happen. Their entire preparation for marriage touches the lives of so many of their own loved ones, friends, family, and even casual acquaintances who journey with them through their engagement and beyond. The couples and the parish that helps to prepare them have an opportunity to share moments of conversion with all these people in big and small ways. Their preparation for marriage, then, also needs to help them and the parish become “evangelizers” for the source of their love, who is Christ.

Now here's the kicker. For any of this to actually happen, conversion needs to begin with the parish, not the couples. Your parishioners are your most influential resource. They will be the reason your newlyweds decide to stay as parishioners. The parishioners will be the people newlyweds look to when they hit rough ground in those early days of married life. As imperfect as they are, and perhaps even because of it, parishioners are your best resource for helping couples learn what it means to live a life of faith and commitment in community together—because that's what they are.

Your job then is to guide your wedding couples on a journey of conversion by letting your parish and the people in it be the place where that conversion can happen.

A Successful Conversion Model in Four Steps

The best process the church has for drawing people to deeper conversion to Christ is the catechumenate, or the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). The goal of the catechumenate is to

bring “the faithful of Christ, to his full stature and to enable [them] to carry out the mission of the entire people of God in the Church and in the world” (Christian Initiation, General Introduction, 2).

1. Evangelization

The way the catechumenate does this is by calling the church to do what it exists to do: to evangelize.⁵ By their very actions and words, your parishioners are called to “faithfully and constantly” proclaim the living God (RCIA, 36). When your engaged couples—and those thinking about getting engaged—encounter that living God through the words and actions of the parishioners they meet, there is an opportunity for conversion. Only then can true and honest formation into this vocation begin.

2. Formation

In their period of preparation for married life, your wedding couples are mentored by the parish in living out the paschal mystery by

- reflecting on and studying the word of God;
- immersing themselves into the life and mission of the community;
- praying and worshiping within the assembly and at home;
- serving others in ways that proclaim the living God in our midst.

3. Spiritual Preparation

During the weeks before their wedding, these engaged couples, having been apprenticed in this new vocation, prepare more intensely for their marriage through spiritual disciplines and deepened reflection on the marriage rite.

4. Mystagogical Reflection

Then, in the days, months, and years after the wedding, the parish continues to journey with these newlyweds as they break open the experience of the wedding liturgy and live out its meaning in their daily lives.

An engaged couple's journey to married life is a gradual process that takes place in and with the community. Their progress is marked and strengthened by rituals, prayers, and blessings that lead them into deeper conversion to the dying and rising of Christ. The goal of this process is not simply marriage but mature, intentional faith lived out in the vocation and mission of married life. Most of all, this process is not a one-size-fits-all preparation. Each couple will have unique needs and challenges. Each couple will come to you at a different place in their life of faith than the next couple and the one before. You and your preparation process need to be flexible enough and creative enough to meet each couple's specific needs while working with the resources you have at hand.

This kind of wedding preparation process is shaped after the basic structure and primary characteristics of the catechumenate. By using the RCIA as our model and inspiration, without slavishly reinterpreting its process for wedding couples, we can benefit from its power, comprehensiveness, and simplicity. Most of all, you will find that when you begin with conversion as the goal, not only will your wedding couples be transformed, but so will your parish.

Who Is This Resource For?

Because this preparation process is modeled after the catechumenate, which sees the formation of adults into Christian faith as "the responsibility of all the baptized" (RCIA, 9), this resource is written specifically for the Catholic parish and its leaders.

The Four Challenges

Pastors and pastoral leaders will find this resource most beneficial since it strives to address the four challenges that began this chapter:

1. Increased divorce rates even among Christians
2. Fewer Catholic weddings
3. Empty pews on Sundays
4. More people simply choosing no faith

These challenges cannot be solved overnight by any plan, as comprehensive as it might be. Yet if we go by our own experience of those

who have been initiated into the church through the catechumenate, we know that this kind of conversion-based process creates more passionate and engaged Christians. This marriage preparation plan, like the RCIA process, is certainly not foolproof. But it does give you a better way of doing what the Order of Celebrating Marriage asks when it says that “pastors are to welcome engaged couples and, above all, they are to foster and nourish their faith: for the Sacrament of Matrimony presupposes and demands faith” (16).

Rethink Your Team

Your wedding preparation team, of course, will also be enriched and challenged by this resource. However, this team may be bigger than you think. We will say a lot more about who is on your team in chapter 11. For now, keep these insights in mind.

Parishioners

The first and most valuable members of your team will be your parishioners. So this preparation process will challenge you to look differently at how your current process can be more integrated into the life of the parish. It will challenge you to look at the activities of your parish to see where formation for married life can happen outside of the classroom, meeting hall, or parish office. And it will call you to find “mentors” from among your everyday parishioners who can serve as guides and support for your engaged couples.

Liturgy Team

Next, this resource will give your marriage preparation coordinator, your wedding liturgy coordinator, your parish musician, and those who typically assist at your wedding liturgies guidance on how to make what they already do part of the conversion process of these couples and their families and friends. These meetings and moments that are focused on the wedding liturgy are golden opportunities to touch the hearts of not just the couple but more importantly the hundreds of family members and friends they bring to the church with them on their big day. Yet we too often miss these opportunities because we get so caught up on the couple alone. Your pastoral and liturgical staff

needs to focus on preparing conversion moments for those forgotten hundreds as well. We will give you simple ways to do just that.

Parish Staff

Finally, your wedding preparation team includes others on your parish staff. So this book will give ideas for your parish receptionist or secretary, who often is your parish's first contact with couples. For better or worse, this person sets the tone for your entire process. Next, your adult faith formation coordinator or director of religious education (DRE) will also find guidance here on how to collaborate better with the marriage preparation team so that the faith of your couples is systematically and completely nourished and strengthened. At times, you will also need to enlist the help of your RCIA and confirmation coordinators, since many engaged couples may also be seeking to celebrate the sacraments of initiation or to be received into the communion of the Catholic Church. These couples will need a specialized plan that integrates their marriage and initiation preparation while acknowledging that both processes are unique.

How to Use This Resource

This book is more than just another marriage preparation resource. It's a parish transformation tool. In this book, you will discover:

- How to connect the liturgy to people's daily lives
- Why people come to (and stay at) a parish
- How to preach the Gospel without being preachy about it
- Best practices for parish leaders to transform their parish into a place where people can thrive in their faith so as to live it out in their lives

Take Small Steps

That's a lot of stuff crammed into these pages. But ultimately, we want you to know how to make your wedding preparation process the best it can be. Doing that will not be easy; it may require you and your parish to make some changes. Yet making the choice to try

is simple. So don't get overwhelmed by the scope of this process. If the ideal goal is too big to even think about right now, then just decide to make one small change this year and another small change next year. Let your goals be achievable yet still challenging. Mark your successes, and make your shortfalls opportunities for learning.

If you don't have time to read the entire book right now, just pick the parts that you need most, and just read those chapters for now. We divided this book into parts that can be used independently.

What's Inside

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 go more in-depth into the catechumenate process, what it does to change people's fundamental outlook on the purpose of their faith, and how it does that. Too often, engaged couples see the marriage preparation process at their parish as simply more hoops to go through in order to have the wedding of their dreams. Here, we'll give you a method for helping them deepen their faith and connection to the church so they can live the marriage that God has prepared for them. If you want a good understanding of the principles of conversion and the parish's role in preparing opportunities for conversion, then don't skip these chapters. If you can get a solid understanding of these principles, you will be able to use them to transform any liturgy and preparation process your parish does—weddings, funerals, First Communion, confirmation, penance—to make them more powerful ways for your entire parish to draw visitors, first-timers, and marginal Catholics into a deeper life of faith.

Chapter 5 gives you an overview of the stages of marriage preparation, and chapters 5 through 8 show you step-by-step how to lead couples through each of those stages.

In chapter 9, we give you some ways to help couples engage in the practice of discernment. Most of them already know and believe they are ready for marriage. Yet discernment is more than just about knowing if you're ready; it's about learning to listen deeply to the Spirit throughout our entire lives. We'll give you ways to help these couples learn to follow the Spirit's lead in all the significant decisions they will make together.

Chapter 10 gives you practical ways to ritualize the various stages of the couples' preparation, and it provides prayers you can give

to them to use at home. This helps them, if they have not already, begin to integrate prayer into their daily lives so that their homes can truly be the domestic church that sustains their participation in the parish church.

Chapter 11 helps you develop a comprehensive team that is integrated into the entire parish's efforts at hospitality, sacramental preparation, adult faith formation, and liturgy. Chapter 12 gives you some help with the difficult issues that will certainly arise, such as annulments, mixed-faith marriages, pregnancy before marriage, difficult family situations, and couples who are indifferent to the Christian way of life.

The last chapter moves us back to the bigger picture, asking ourselves, "What if?" What if we really did marriage prep like this in our parish? How would it change us? How would it change our couples? How will Christ be more known to the world because of what we have done here? When we keep these big-picture questions in mind, we will be doing more than just preparing couples for their big day. We'll be doing the mission of Christ to transform the world in which we live.