

Marriage Preparation Is a Key to a Successful Marriage

Pope Francis spoke movingly about the challenges of marriage when he said the following: *Today, there are those who say that marriage is out of fashion... They say that it is not worth making a life-long commitment, making a definitive decision, 'forever', because we do not know what tomorrow will bring. I ask you, instead, to be revolutionaries. I ask you to swim against the tide; yes, I am asking you to rebel against this culture that sees everything as temporary and that ultimately believes you are incapable of responsibility, that believes you are incapable of true love (Pope Francis, 2013).*

While there are many factors such as depth of religious attachment (Fincham, Lambert, & Beach, 2010) and education level (Martin, 2006) which affect the success of a marriage, one important factor in staying married is pre-marriage preparation. Larson, Newell, Topham, and Nichols (2002) found FOCCUS was an effective instrument for couples to discuss their communication patterns.

Larson, Holman, Klein, Busby, Stahmann, and Peterson (1995) suggest the FOCCUS pre-marriage inventory is an effective instrument to open discussion between engaged couples. The SRI Research Center (An Internal Analysis of the FOCCUS Attitude Scale, 1985) and Williams & Zurich (1995) concurred. In 1985, the Archdiocese of Omaha Family Life Office developed the first edition FOCCUS Pre-Marriage Inventory to enhance communication between engaged couples. In 2013, FOCCUS conducted a survey of its couples who had taken the third edition pre-marriage inventory. Ninety-six percent of the 3,257 respondents stated that FOCCUS facilitated discussion of important topics. Some of the participant comments were:

"The FOCCUS survey was fantastic. Before taking it my fiancé and I thought that we had talked a lot about what we wanted for our life together. The survey completely changed that, we realized how much we still needed to talk about and forced us to talk about things like our own finances that we'd been avoiding. Thank you so much for this great tool. Our relationship is already stronger because of it."

"The FOCCUS was a great program that helped my husband and me understand how each of us looks at and understands issues and problems. It was a great way to talk about important things that don't always come up and see where our strengths and weaknesses lie."

"The FOCCUS process was a wonderful experience that truly changed my life and my husband's." (FOCCUS Couples' Survey Report, 2013).

Marriage preparation's importance has also been recognized in legislative bodies around the country. Seven states have tied in a reduced marriage license fee with completion of a state approved marriage preparation class. The states of Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Texas all require some pre-marriage preparation in order to receive a reduced marriage license fee (Required pre-marriage preparation to reduce fee, 2007).

According to Carroll and Doherty (2003), marriage preparation is vitally important. Their research of eleven experimental studies indicates couples taking pre-marriage preparation have a 30% higher rate of marital success than those couples who did not participate in pre-marriage preparation. Researchers at Creighton University (Time, sex and money: The first five years of

marriage, 2000) found that the FOCCUS Pre-Marriage Inventory was a valuable tool for marriage preparation. According to a 2014 United Kingdom study (Spielhofer, T., Corlyn, J., Durbin, B., Smith, M., Stock, L., & Gieve, M. 2014), FOCCUS was determined to be effective at strengthening marriages and being cost effective to society.

The Archdiocese of Omaha Family Life Office also offers a marriage preparation class called Marriage: A Journey for Life (MAJ). This is a two day class in which engaged couples learn about different issues relating to marriage such as intimacy, finance, communication, families of origin and strengthening faith. MAJ is taken in addition to the FOCCUS Pre-Marriage Inventory. Our couples are predominantly in the 16-35 years age range. Some of the comments of our MAJ couples are "We really enjoyed our facilitators, we felt like they were really down to earth and made us feel comfortable" and "Great class - made us discuss things in our lives that we don't always take time to talk about. I suggest others take part in the class."

Of the 632 couples responding to a survey for the MAJ classes, 95% stated that attending MAJ helped them build a stronger foundation for their marriage. One couple, who are planning a wedding in six months, stated, "Overall a great program, we left feeling well prepared and very close to one another." Another couple, who are planning to marry in five months stated that hope was offered in addition to the great information, "Our facilitators did a wonderful job!! We were nervous about the retreat because we didn't know what to expect. The facilitators were so down to earth and a great example of what marriage should look like. They brought up some of their struggles and it was reassuring to know that everyone has problems and that everyone can get through them as long as you have faith, hope and love. They definitely made the retreat an enjoyable one!"

Although 58% of our couples in the 2014 MAJ classes were both Catholic, a growing number of interfaith couples attend. One of the comments from an interfaith couple was "The

future groom, as a non-Catholic, thought the preparation experience and MAJ classes were welcoming, informative, and helpful to our wedding preparation together." Another interfaith couple agreed, stating, "The facilitators were absolutely amazing. I honestly came into this thinking I wouldn't learn anything and it was just mandatory, but my fiancé and I walked away with such a positive attitude and learned a lot about each other and the marriage we want to build. The facilitators went above and beyond and made us comfortable enough to get open about some issues we needed to talk about. We would both sign up for another class if they taught it even if it wasn't required because we enjoyed them so much!"

In addition to the information provided, couples stated the following regarding the overall MAJ experience:

"Thank you for providing the couple discussion time. It was really helpful to give us time alone to discuss things when we were in a place with little distraction. Thanks for all you do!" "It was a great weekend and fun to meet the other couples. The couple discussion time was such a good experience to be able to separate and reflect on the material and get feedback from one another. I would recommend this class."

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