

COVENANT of LOVE

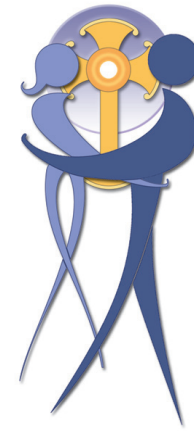
A pastoral letter from Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted



To the Faithful of the Diocese of Phoenix:

“The man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery. But I speak in reference to Christ and the Church.”

— St. Paul to the Ephesians 5: 31-32



This “great mystery” of spousal love, the spousal love of Christ for His Bride the Church, and the spousal love of husband and wife joined together by our Triune God, manifest to the world that *God is indeed with us*. Wherever God is, there is mercy, there is truth.

Because of this great mystery of love and of life that flows from the marriage bond, the family is “the first and vital cell of society and the Church.” Where marriages flourish in virtue, the Church teems with life and society becomes a civilization of love.

For this reason, preparation for marriage is held in profound respect within the Church. Families themselves sense the serious obligation to prepare the next generation to enter into marriages that are healthy, joyful and life-giving. In recent times, the Church has done much to assist families with their role in preparing the next generation for this sacred vocation. John Paul II recognized nearly 30 years ago that more extensive marriage preparation programs were needed. In his apostolic exhortation, *The Role of the Family in the Modern World*, he said, “...the changes that have taken place within almost all modern societies demand that not only the family but also society and the Church should be involved in the effort of properly preparing young people for their future responsibilities. The Church must therefore promote better and more intensive programs of marriage preparation, in order to eliminate as far as possible the difficulties that many married couples find themselves in, and even more in order to favor positively the establishing and maturing of successful marriages” (FC 66).

On July 26 of this year, I promulgated “Covenant of Love,” a new marriage preparation policy for the Diocese of Phoenix. Over the next several months, our Office of Marriage and Respect Life will be working with our parishes to launch this policy in January 2010. This policy will begin a three-year diocesan initiative for marriage in our diocese. In 2010, the diocese will be devoted to a greater zeal in helping engaged couples prepare for life together. In 2011, we will give special energy and focus to our people already married, endeavoring to help them deepen and renew their marriages. In 2012, we will dedicate a particular diocesan focus to our young people, still years away from marriage, and their parents, in the stage called “remote marriage preparation.”

Background to ‘Covenant of Love’

In the early 1970s, the Diocese of Phoenix adopted its first comprehensive marriage preparation policy, establishing a six-month time of preparation before marriage. Later, the policy was enhanced to include an introduction to Natural Family Planning. In 1998, in response to Magisterial urgings as well as

a deepened understanding of the cultural situation through growing social science evidence, the policy was updated to include more helpful guidelines on pre-marital situations requiring professional counseling. All of these have been significant developments. Our marriage preparation programs of the past have accomplished much good. Yet, at this time in our nation even greater efforts are needed to hand on the full truth of Church teaching on the sacred, sacramental nature of marriage and the family.

Further concerns and reasons for a change:

1. Parents, pastors and marriage preparation catechists report frustration about the pervasive doubts and fears now regularly encountered in young people who, seeing few role models for lifelong marriage and even fewer for happy ones, have a difficult time committing to a lifelong union. Pre-marital

cohabitation is tragically on the rise. The number of couples opting for this scandalous lifestyle, which dramatically lessens one’s chances for a successful marriage, has nearly doubled since the year 2000. This reflects a tragic crisis of trust in the love of God and His plan for our happiness. Since marriage is the “first school of love” for children, it is easy to see the cause of this crisis.

2. A “culture of divorce” persists in our nation. The divorce rate remains high, even among Catholics, and petitions for annulment continue to evidence large numbers of Catholics whose consent to their marital vows at the altar was ill-informed. Many simply enter marriage without an even rudimentary understanding of the sacrament.

3. A troubling disconnect between marriage and children is growing in popular culture. Although there was positive news this past March from the National Center for Health Statistics that more children were

born in 2007 than any other year in our nation’s history, the corresponding fact that nearly 40 percent of these children were born outside of marriage is stunning. This means that from the outset nearly half of our nation’s children will experience the confusion and pain of a fatherless home.

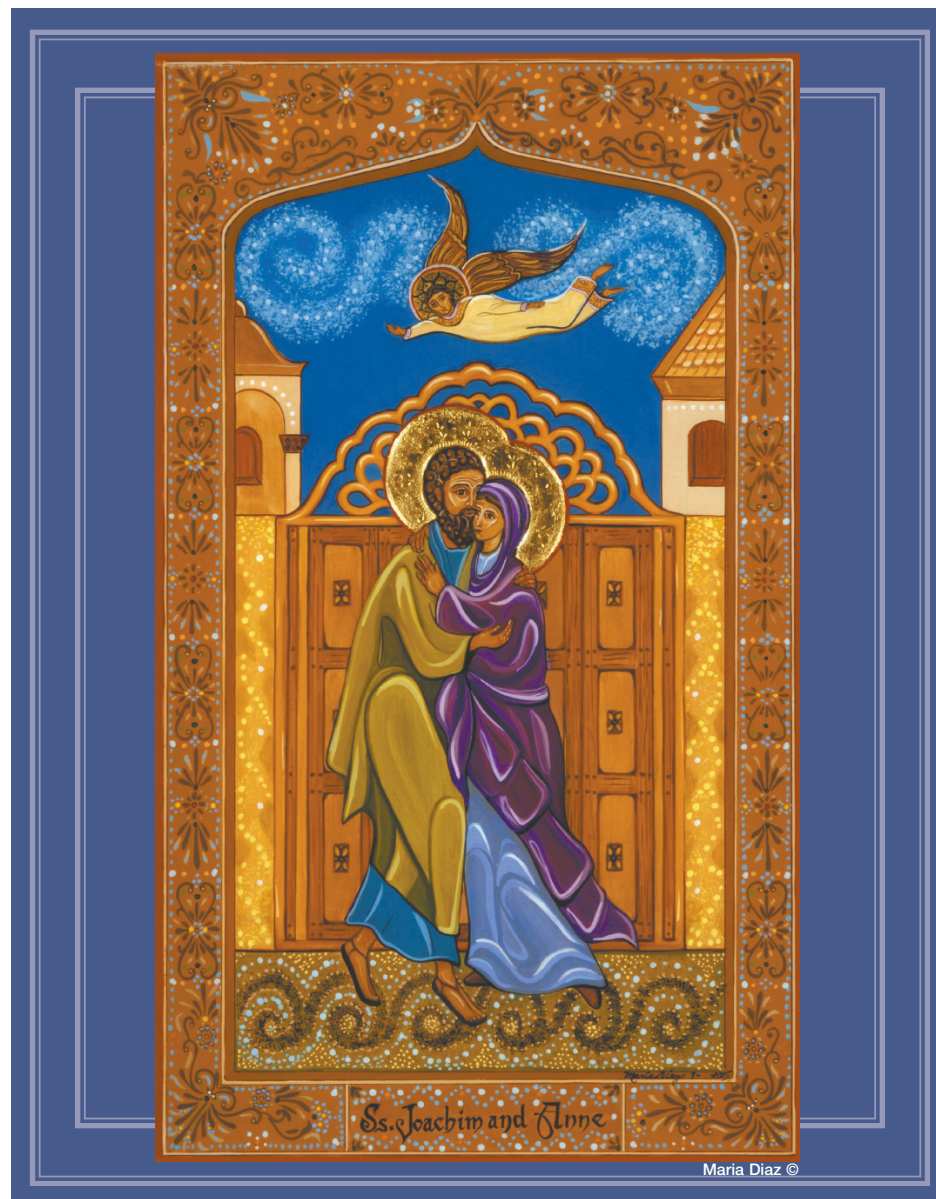
4. Increasing confusion in the public square over why it is good and just to protect the traditional and longstanding definition of marriage in law — something crucial for the good of marriage itself and particularly critical to the healthy development of children.

Seeing that further help for parents, educators, and families was necessary, I gave our Office of Marriage and Respect Life the task in 2005 of developing an updated policy for marriage preparation in alignment with the 1996 Magisterial document from the Pontifical Council for the Family, entitled *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*. Additionally, I asked that thorough instruction in Natural Family Planning be implemented for every couple preparing for marriage. This led to the formation in early 2008 of a drafting committee made up of both laity and clergy. After a first draft was reviewed and honed by official readers from among the diocesan presbyterate, several more drafts were created and improved before Covenant of Love was presented to the whole of the diocese’s priests and deacons for their review in the fall of 2008. Many additional practical suggestions have strengthened and brought a rich pastoral sense to the document. I am very grateful for this prayerful, painstaking work which is nothing less than an act of love for the Lord, His Church, and the couples we will prepare for marriage in the future.

A people of faith, hope and love

It is commonly but mistakenly believed that certain trends in history are inevitable — such as trends toward the dissolution of marriage and family life. In fact, such trends are not inevitable. Evil does not get the last word, thanks to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Who, for example, would have predicted in 1978 the fall of communism in the Soviet Bloc? Who, upon the election of John Paul II to the papacy that year, would have forecasted that the Berlin Wall, that symbol of oppression and error regarding the nature of the human person and of freedom, was just 11 years from demolition? And all this without a single drop of revolutionary blood!

Similarly, in our day, can it not feel at times like the lies and deceptions that assail marriage and the family, and the corresponding culture of death, which tramples the dignity of the most vulnerable with a yawn, will inevitably win the day? Of course this is not true. It is merely the discouraging illusion of the devil, the father of lies. In reality, Christ the



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Bridegroom of the Church is inviting us to say with that valiant Old Testament woman Judith, “We should be grateful to the Lord for putting us to the test” (Judith, 8:25). This is not a time to despair. It is a time to hope. What are these reasons for hope? In short, the Church has a map for success and holiness in marriage. Here is the good news:

► Many are discovering the wisdom and healing power of John Paul II’s Theology of the Body, in which he explains God’s plan for each human being, created in God’s image as male or female. As understanding of this teaching grows, a counter-sexual revolution is emerging, establishing dating relationships and marriages on the solid foundation of the virtue of chastity, which brings freedom and peace.

► The vast majority of married couples who live Natural Family Planning avoid divorce and experience a happy marriage. They develop strong communication skills and learn to trust God’s plan for their lives. The excellent work of our diocesan Office of Natural Family Planning gives us the opportunity to offer these courses to every couple preparing for marriage.

► Husbands and wives who attend religious services together and who pray regularly as a couple also very rarely divorce. This speaks to the need for God in a marriage, and marriage prep provides a wonderful opportunity to encounter Christ.

I am confident that the teaching and provisions of “Covenant of Love” will guide us in forming couples in this renewed sacramental understanding of marriage. It also encourages educating of our youth toward hearing and responding to God’s call to marriage, the priesthood or religious life. Finally, it calls on parishes to redouble their efforts to bring enrichment to existing marriages, which are always in need of support, renewal and celebration.



The Church’s understanding of marriage

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines marriage in this way:

“The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.”

— CCC 1601, Canon 1055, GS 48

This beautiful, concise statement about marriage begins the Catechism’s teaching points on marriage. It is a helpful “nutshell” statement to summarize what we as Catholics believe marriage to be.

Marriage is...

► A “covenant” — That is, an *exchange of persons*. While marriage is “contracted” between spouses at the moment they have given their consent through their vows, it is more than a mere contract. They exchange themselves and their whole future lives. Moreover, the covenant involves a third Person, that is God. It is sacred and permanent.

► A “partnership of the whole of life” — All must be given in marriage. The husband and wife exchange more than property, they give themselves to each other, with all of their gifts and flaws, despite whatever comes in the future, “for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.” This is a public act, requiring witnesses and community to be present, because in this moment, the reality of their lives changes. The two are no longer two, but one, by a divine act of God through the ministry

of the Church.

► “Ordered toward the good of the spouses” — Marriage is good for husband and wife. It helps them learn to love, to mature, to sacrifice, and to grow in holiness. This is why marriage is a vocation in the Church.

► “And the procreation and education of offspring” — Children are the “supreme gift” of marriage. They are not an optional accessory to marriage. Children flow naturally and normally from the heart of the marital relationship, the “one flesh” union of the spouses. This “supreme gift” blesses the world and the Church. The Church has consistently taught that marital love requires an openness to the gift of children (therefore contraception is forbidden) and a dedication to educating them (called “responsible parenthood”).

► “Between baptized persons...raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.” — Baptism changes a person — he or she becomes a “new creation” in Christ. Therefore, when a man and woman have been baptized as Christians, their marriage is *de facto* a sacrament, a sacred sign in this world of God’s love for humanity, and a place where this love *happens*.

What a high calling! We might reasonably look at the language here and say, as did the disciples in Matthew 19, after Jesus forbid divorce — “If this is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry.” But that is fear talking. God joins the Christian couple sacramentally, He makes marriage an ongoing channel of His grace, and He does not abandon it. We do, however, need to prepare for marriage, and for all that it demands and promises.

Tilling the covenantal ‘holy ground’— the marriage preparation process under ‘Covenant of Love’

Couples who experience the marriage preparation process under the guidelines of “Covenant of Love” will proceed through seven helpful steps during their journey of

Questions and Answers: Covenant of Love

Mike Phelan, director of the diocesan Office for Marriage and Respect Life Issues, took some time to tackle some of the more commonly asked questions regarding the diocese’s new marriage policy, “Covenant of Love.”

1. When will these changes take place?

The change takes place Jan. 1, 2010. During the fall of 2009, parishes will be preparing for it.

2. What are the main changes to the diocese’s marriage preparation policy?

The policy is richer in its theological reflection on the “is” of marriage and goes into the latest developments in the cultural situation our couples face. These teaching points are accompanied by the following enhancements in the policy:

- Deeper analysis, diagnosis, theological understanding and pastoral response;
- Parish/diocesan/online education programs encouraged;
- More thorough training for marriage preparation ministers and lay leaders;
- Three courses required (previously two);
- Full course in an approved method of Natural Family

Planning (previously just the introduction class at most parishes);

- Nine month preparation period (previously six).

3. Why did the diocese make these changes?

For the past 50 years, marriage has been on the decline in the United States; however, in the past 10 years we see indications that the cultural grasp on the meaning of marriage is slipping radically and quickly. Among these indications is the explosion of extramarital cohabitation, the growing disconnect between marriage and children, and the attempts to redefine marriage in law.

Today it is no exaggeration to say that when the culture is not actively attacking the idea of lifelong marriage and the welcoming of children, it is indifferent.

It would be a grave injustice not to give our couples proper support and guidance in today’s anti-marriage culture. Couples living the fullness of God’s plan for marriage have less than a 4 percent divorce rate. It takes sacrifice, openness to God’s will, and love in all of its fullness — but isn’t this what those in love really desire?

4. Why does the Church require marriage preparation?

Requiring marriage preparation flows from the Church’s

deep respect for the dignity and mission of the laity in marriage. Because the Church values marriage so highly, she asks those entering marriage to understand what they are entering and to prepare for it.

Canon Law has two instructions for bishops on the importance of marriage preparation. For example, one of these states, “Pastors of souls are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful the assistance by which the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection.”

Among the requirements to bishops and pastors, it is emphasized that couples must receive “personal preparation for marriage, which disposes the spouses to the holiness and duties of their new state.” This is where the focus on preparation between engagement and the wedding ceremony originates.

5. Isn’t it late at this point? Shouldn’t young children, teens and single young adults be getting prepared before they are engaged?

Indeed they should! Beginning in the family and continuing through every level of Catholic education, we must be a “marriage-building Church.” This question is asking about what the Church calls “remote preparation” for marriage. The Christian maturity and guidance of parents, and ideally most educators that the child encounters, is crucial. This

discernment and preparation:

1. An initial meeting with the pastor or his delegate for marriage prep;
2. A pre-marital dialogue instrument and review to facilitate discussion around key topics of marriage and about expectations each person brings;
3. A Married-Life Skills Course which could be several meetings or a weekend;
4. A God's Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage course, giving God's revealed vision for the sacrament of marriage, human sexuality, and an introduction to the Theology of the Body;
5. Natural Family Planning instruction;
6. Meeting to review preparation thus far and an opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation;
7. Planning the wedding ceremony.

These seven steps will take place during a nine-month preparation period. The reasons that this length of time is necessary are as follows:

1. Natural Family Planning Instruction requires three months for thorough instruction in the method.
2. The final two-months before the wedding should be "course-free" for couples, allowing them time to prayerfully prepare for the wedding day and to integrate elements from their preparation into their lives. The focus during this time naturally gravitates toward the wedding preparation, which is time-consuming, and this is not a time to be discussing new information regarding the meaning of marriage.

The Catholic Church, which is rightly called the *Bride of Christ* (because Christ is the *Bridegroom*), has throughout her near 2,000 year history taught every culture it enters the true nature of marriage. The Roman Empire's convoluted marriage laws, which failed to protect the dignity of women and children, were transformed by this vision. Polygamous societies have also been transformed. We, in the third millennium, have this opportunity again, to bring



Photo courtesy/Mark Cafiero

the transforming power of Jesus Christ to a culture that has grown ill in its "fundamental cells," and that awaits renewal through the Gospel of Life.

Exhortation to renewed zeal for a new evangelization of engaged couples

I want to conclude by addressing all those priests, deacons and laypeople who are laboring in the vineyard to prepare couples for marriage. With a united effort, we can encourage our youth, our engaged couples, and our couples already living the magnificent sacrament of marriage to a higher vision for the married vocation. This work of marriage preparation is not for the lukewarm. It is the work of faith-filled disciples, the work of joyful witnesses of Christ. I ask that you approach this work with all the zeal it calls for, with confidence in our Lord's provision and in the truth as taught by the Church.

Finally, I call each married person to a renewed commitment to love your spouse. God's word reminds us: "A cord of three strands is not easily broken" (Ecclesiastes, 4:12). Neither is God's plan for marriage broken. Marriage vows need not be broken. Seek to understand and embrace God's plan for your life with gratitude. Prepare yourself for a lifelong, exclusive bond of love. Then, trust in the Lord. Be not afraid!

The covenant of love that the Sacrament of Marriage establishes is designed by God to be enriched as years go by. Dear married couples, always participate freely and courageously in the grace of this sacrament, so that in the heart of each spouse this Scripture echoes:

*"Set me as a seal on your heart,
as a seal on your arm;
For stern as death is love...
Deep waters cannot quench love,
nor floods sweep it away."*

— Song of Songs, 8: 6b, 7 *

Questions and Answers: Covenant of Love

extends to mom and dad themselves sharing their faith with their children as well as daily family prayer and attendance at Sunday Mass, supported by the parish and the schools. Covenant of Love begins with reflection on this early preparation for marriage, for the child's vocation to follow Christ and to give him or herself away in love.

However, this need for "remote" preparation, fundamental as it is, does not mean that "proximate" and "immediate" preparation after engagement is not valuable. Actually, engagement puts couples in a time of opportune focus on their relationship and creates a "teachable moment" for them; we see this all the time in marriage preparation. As long as the wedding is far enough off and the stresses of invitation list and the dress and the tuxedos are not at the forefront, couples typically enjoy putting in the time — because all these courses do is encourage authentic love in different ways. Many important conversations happen and many important decisions are made.

6. Why will marriage preparation under 'Covenant of Love' take nine months?

This has been a common question from all who have seen the policy. First, the only reason for a set period of preparation time is so that couples can accomplish the preparation fully and peacefully. There are two reasons why nine months will be the new norm.

The newly required Natural Family Planning course takes an "apprenticeship" period of three months to learn the method well.

The final two months before the wedding should be "workshop-free" for couples. At this point, attention naturally moves to the wedding day and all courses should be completed. For the final two months, they are in "immediate preparation" for marriage and should review their prep so far, Catholics should be given an opportunity and encouragement to seek the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and they should plan the wedding ceremony. This amount of time should give couples a peaceful period to accomplish all their preparation.

7. Isn't there a risk that with these changes more people will get married outside of the Church?

Hasty marriage decisions are quite common in our culture, and it may be that for couples who have never heard of their call and duty to be married in the Church or who are not aware of the most recent dangers couples face, the new policy may seem like difficult news.

But with a united effort of communication of the good news that we as a Church have for marriage, and with dedication to the truth of Christ and a New Evangelization of our people, we are confident that our marriage numbers will increase over time. Every human heart is made by God to respond to this message.

8. What is hoped for in the lives of couples who prepare for marriage under 'Covenant of Love' ?

That those who enter marriage preparation in our diocese without ready role models, or without strong hope for a lifelong, fulfilling marriage will find them; that those who enter without a clear understanding of the faith or relationship with Christ will begin one; that the God-given desire they and their parents have for their faithful and fruitful marriage will be affirmed and strengthened; and finally that where true seeds of faith and love have been planted by our couples' parents, priests and teachers, they will blossom and become the truly heroic witnesses to God's love that we need today.

How do we build a culture of life? As our two recent popes have been teaching us, we begin with the family. *

On the Web
For more information about getting married in the Diocese of Phoenix, or to read the new marriage policy, visit:
www.ourcovenantoflovephx.org

COVENANT of LOVE

Times have changed but hope remains

Today's couples and marriage preparation

Fifty years ago, marriage preparation for Catholics in the United States was pretty simple stuff.

Take Jim and Mary Jane. At age 21, they fell in love. Jim went to talk to MJ's dad to ask permission to marry. MJ's dad threatened Jim with bodily harm if he ever were to hurt his daughter, then smiled and hugged Jim and gave his blessing.

Jim got down on one knee (still a great symbolic move, much to be imitated) and Mary Jane said yes and they went right to their neighborhood parish to speak to the pastor, who often knew them both, and he congratulated them. He asked a few simple questions and gave them a wedding date.

Generally, this was all that was needed. After all, Mary Jane and Jim had been breathing in for years what marriage was. They knew that it was for life, that it was a sacrament, that it was for better or worse, richer or poorer, sickness and health, and (significantly) that it was possible. They knew that not all marriages were happy ones, certainly, but they knew that that wasn't really the chief point either.

A happy marriage was devoutly to be wished, but an unhappy one was not without value. A promise was a promise. And Father could count on the fact, again generally, that this couple was leaving the church on that beautiful wedding day and moving right out into a neighborhood full of marriages and families, full of natural support for their vocation.

Things have radically changed. Many, indeed most, couples today move into a marriage desert. (It is for this reason that in marriage preparation our team congratulates them on their engagement as an initial act of heroism.) When Jason and Brittany, let's call them, get engaged today, first they have some explaining to do. After all, are they really ready? They are only 28 years old, and much with careers must still be accomplished. And do they really know each other?

If they are not already cohabitating, tremendous pressures pour in — from financial to media-driven — to cohabit and “try it on for a while” in order to be sure of a match. It seems like wisdom. It is the current popular cultural orthodoxy. (It is also a disaster, as even social science points out that “no recognizable benefit has ever been found” to recommend this experimental lifestyle, and that marital success post-cohabitation is far less likely.)

But after all, just like Mary Jane and Jim, Brittany and Jason have been breathing in what the culture has to say on this whole marriage thing; it is just very different air.

So, given that a desert is what Jason and Brittany face, and that isn't changing until we rebuild a culture of life, what do they need in marriage preparation?



Mike Phelan
Special to
The Catholic Sun

A map through the desert: One can survive and even thrive in a desert, yes? But we have to know where the water is, where the oases are located, where our friends are and where what looks helpful is a mere mirage. Here is the beginning of the really good news. The Church has just such a map. It is a challenging one and promises sacrifice as well as joy, but couples that live the fullness of God's plan for marriage have a divorce rate of less than 4 percent.

Wise guides: Many couples today struggle to call to mind a married couple they know who is happily married for any

extended length of time. Our parishes do well to provide them where possible with mentor couples who live marriage faithfully and passionately, who take delight in the Church's teaching and understand that the Church teaches this vision for marriage because it is true and meant for our happiness. These mentors radiate love, confidence and fidelity, as well as the joy of children and the goodness of motherhood and fatherhood.

Encouragement of their true desires: Nearly every couple brings to preparation a desire for nobility in their relationship, a yearning for authentic love. Popular culture rarely supports this desire, offering a multitude of counterfeits instead, but it remains innate. This is a great source of hope that God is with couples in their engagement, and our marriage prep programs do best when they encourage this vision, while pointing out the counterfeits clearly.

Time: Relationships are not built or strengthened in a day, or with “10 techniques for better communication” articles. It takes time and patience, silence as well as speaking, to learn how to love a person better. Couples need time to get a sense of the map.

We need to talk

Many of our parishes are doing fantastic work in providing the above for couples, and for that we must be very grateful. Yet many couples need more — they are facing a drier desert than was the case even 10 years ago, often without enough time to understand their call in marriage.

One story strikes me as particularly illustrative of this point and why we must do all we can for engaged couples. On one of the engaged weekends my wife and I are privileged to host, a couple who were four weeks from their wedding day heard for the first time that a “pre-nuptial agreement” in case of divorce was out of the question for a Catholic marriage, that it violated the very vows the couple makes. The future bride was relieved, as she had never liked the idea. The groom panicked and insisted they would still get a pre-nup. During one of the breaks, in tears, she came to me to share her worries about his reaction. He walked up behind her and was visibly upset that she had shared this with me. I found myself in the middle of a conversation they were unable to have with each other a month before their wedding — in this case over something that would literally invalidate their Catholic wedding vows!

Though particularly memorable, this instance is not an isolated case; important conversations waiting until very late in the process is quite common. What is a couple to do when they discover just weeks before their wedding that an undisclosed maxed-out credit card in the amount of \$10,000 exists, or that an addiction to pornography is really a serious problem? It takes a decision bordering on heroic virtue to cancel or postpone a wedding this late. It shouldn't happen. Under Covenant of Love, the diocese's new marriage policy, it will be far less likely to happen.

Hope remains strong for today's couples who prepare well for marriage. Those of us with the sacred task of assisting them can be inspired by and take up the challenge from Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted's exhortation in his recent pastoral letter: “This is a time to trust the truth God has revealed and a time to teach it with patience, persuasion and hope. We need not fear — indeed, human hearts are made for the Lord's message.” *

Mike Phelan is the director of the diocesan Office of Marriage and Respect Life. Comments are welcome. Send e-mail to letters@catholicsun.org.



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