

National Pastoral Initiative For Marriage Second Year Report (2006)

In the National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage (NPIM) the U.S. Catholic bishops call attention to the meaning and value of married life for the Church and for society. Bringing Catholic belief into dialogue with contemporary needs, the bishops urge the Catholic Church to become a community of hope and help for marriages and to join others in building a culture of marriage. The Initiative weaves together the Catholic faith tradition and its pastoral practice, the data of social science, and the experience of married couples to offer guidance and resources, including a pastoral letter, in order to promote, strengthen, sustain and restore marriages. More information about the Initiative is available at www.usccb.org/npim.

The Committee on Marriage and Family is developing the Initiative in three phases: (1) research and consultation, 2005-2007; (2) communication, including the writing of a pastoral letter, 2007-2008; and (3) implementation, development of parish resources, and evaluation, 2008 and beyond.

In 2006 the Committee completed many of its research and consultation projects. The remainder are in various stages of planning and execution. In late 2006 the Committee moved into the communications phase of the Initiative and laid the groundwork for intense activity in 2007.

Below is a summary of activities during the second year of the Initiative.

Research and Consultation

The consultative process that began last year is yielding important information about marriage-related issues, church teaching and pastoral care. In addition to their value for writing a pastoral letter, the consultations are also helping to create a broad sense of responsibility for marriage strengthening. In 2006 the process involved research into specific topics, as well as outreach to individuals and groups with a direct stake in healthy marriages.

Consultation on marriage preparation ministries

In conjunction with its February meeting, the Committee met with experts to discuss the current practice of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church. The consultation was organized around five dimensions of marriage preparation that are present in virtually all programs: the role of married couples; the role of clergy; the integration of natural family planning education; the Hispanic/Latino experience; and marriage preparation as the beginning of lifelong formation for marriage. Each of the presentations examined the present experience and suggested ways of building a more effective ministry of marriage preparation - one that is responsive to contemporary realities while at the same time maintaining its grounding in the Church's teaching and pastoral tradition. All of the papers from the consultation are posted on the website.

Consultations with canonists and tribunal officials

From February to May of 2006, approximately 280 canonists and tribunal officials participated in consultations on marriage and church ministries. The participants were drawn from five regions of the country. They discussed their experiences examining marriage cases, their insights about couples' understanding of marriage, and their ideas about what the Church might do better to minister to engaged, married, and divorced persons. A consolidated report from the meetings is on the website.

Focus groups with married couples

In late 2005 and early 2006 more than 1,500 people in 64 dioceses participated in diocesan-sponsored focus groups. Participants discussed their personal experience of marriage, church teaching about marriage, and parish and diocesan support for married couples. Focus groups were held with newly married, middle years and older couples; Spanish-speaking couples; and remarried couples. In addition, several focus groups were held with divorced and separated persons and single young adults. Reports on the seven groupings, plus an executive summary, were published in ORIGINS (July 6, 2006). They are also available on the website.

Consultations with priests, deacons and Hispanic leadership groups

Committee members agreed to organize a focus group of priests in their dioceses to discuss various aspects of pastoral ministry with marriage. A summary of the findings will be available in early 2007. If this pilot goes well, the Committee will offer the process to any bishop who wishes to replicate it.

The Committee is working with the Diaconate Committee and the Hispanic Affairs Committee to obtain input from deacons and Hispanic leaders respectively.

Committee members and staff have also been meeting with representatives from national associations and movements that have a ministry to marriages. The Chairman participated in the annual conference of the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers and used this opportunity to consult with many diocesan and parish leaders.

Colloquium on the sacramentality of marriage

In October, in collaboration with the Doctrine Committee, the Committee sponsored a theological colloquium on Understanding and Communicating the Sacramentality of Marriage in Our Contemporary Culture. The bishops had identified this topic as a priority in a 2005 survey.

The University of Notre Dame hosted the colloquium. Experts in the areas of systematic theology, Old and New Testament, Patristics and Liturgy discussed their insights based on papers that they had prepared in advance. Their presentations sparked an enriching conversation among Committee members, advisors and a few invited guests. The papers and a summary of the discussion will be posted on the website in January.

Communication

A major goal of the Initiative is to communicate positive, helpful messages about marriage. In 2006 the Committee began to identify various methods and opportunities to accomplish this. Communication is an ongoing effort and all the activities that began this year will continue in 2007.

Bishops' backgrounders/Making the Case for Marriage

At the 2005 colloquium on social science and theology, the Committee learned how current social science research reinforces and confirms church teaching on many topics. To make this insight more widely known, the Committee began to develop a series of bishops' backgrounders. Each backgrounder follows a similar format: (1) a summary of the issue or question, including statistics; (2) key findings from social science research; and (3) key points from church teaching.

Between October 2006 and May 2007 a backgrounder is sent each month to all bishops. The first three backgrounders looked at these questions: Why not live together before marriage? Why do children need married parents? Why is marriage good for men and women? All backgrounders are in English and Spanish.

Bishops can use the backgrounders as the basis for an article, talk, or column in a diocesan newspaper. They can be used as is or adapted for local circumstances. Shortly after each backgrounder is sent to the bishops it is also posted on the website under the heading "Making the Case for Marriage."

Bishops discussed the backgrounders during the regional meetings in November 2006. Feedback has been positive and bishops expressed appreciation for this kind of practical help. Bishops reported that they have used the backgrounders in their diocesan newspapers, sent them to their priests, and printed them as parish bulletin inserts.

Public Service Announcements and website

In June the Catholic Communications Committee allocated \$750,000 to create TV and radio PSAs on marriage. Crosby Marketing Communications is developing the spots, the first of which will be ready to air in June 2007.

Part of the grant will be used to develop a new website on marriage topics and resources. The Committee sees this as an evangelizing tool, oriented towards a general audience. It also hopes that the website will become "one-stop shopping" for information about Catholic marriage. The website will feature links to other marriage-related websites, including diocesan web pages that deal with marriage information at the local level. The PSAs are expected to drive people to the website, but the website will also be promoted separately and will continue even after the spots have gone off the air.

Research project

The Committee has wrestled with the challenge of conveying messages about marital sacramentality and commitment in a way that people can understand. To address this challenge, the Committee has begun to consult with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) about the possibility of a national research project on this topic. The project would utilize a national random selection method of Catholics and make use of internet survey technology. Responses to the survey could identify knowledge gaps among Catholics regarding their understanding of marriage in the Church. It could also compare Catholic responses on certain issues to responses among the general population.

2007 Activities

The research and consultative phase should wrap up in 2007, although consultation with national marriage groups and organizations is ongoing.

During its January meeting the Committee will conduct a half-day consultation on marriage enrichment. The Committee will bring in several experts to discuss major approaches or models that are used in the Catholic community. A report on the consultation will be available on the website.

The communications phase will move into high gear. Significant effort will be devoted to the website. It must be up and running by June, and refined and maintained after that. The Committee will encourage dioceses to examine their own marriage websites and, if necessary, upgrade them as part of their contribution to the Initiative. The Committee expects that new opportunities for communication will open up as the Initiative continues.

Finally, the Committee will turn its attention to writing a pastoral letter on marriage. It will consider the audience, purpose, tone, and parameters of the letter. The Committee will reflect on what it has learned during the research and consultative phase and what messages it wants to communicate to Catholics as well as the general public. The Committee hopes to bring the letter to the body of bishops for a vote in November 2008.