

Program Overview

Marriage requires a lot of effort and a clear map—a blueprint—for building a strong relationship. *Joined by Grace* gives you such a blueprint. The chapters of this book will introduce you to something we call the *blueprint of love*. You can use this to build a strong marriage, just as you would use an architectural blueprint to build a home. Let your participation in this program be a next crucial step in the construction of your life together. Each chapter will provide you with insights, ideas, and tools you can use in growing a strong marriage.

We will present this blueprint for love by weaving together three strands of wisdom: God’s revelation transmitted through sacred scripture and the Church’s sacraments; advice from marriage and family experts about what makes strong marriages; and the lived experiences of happily married couples whom you will meet in this book and in the short program videos you will view when meeting with your mentor couple or retreat leaders.

Knowing Christ through Scripture and Sacraments

The blueprint of love is like a fingerprint that God, the great artist, left on us when he created humanity—his masterpiece. He made us man and woman, in his image and likeness, capable of loving as he loves. This blueprint is imprinted in your heart, and you have already tapped into this grace by choosing to love your future spouse. In this book you will learn to rely on this grace more intentionally by learning to love better as Jesus loves us.

We come to know God’s plan for married love by reading the Bible, in which we learn about his unconditional and faithful love for his people Israel, and about Jesus’ all-embracing and self-emptying love for us. In a very particular way, we come to know about the love of Jesus when we participate in the sacraments of the Church: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance (often called Reconciliation), Anointing of

the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. These are sacred rites by which the Church celebrates the abiding presence of God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in our everyday lives. In the sacraments, Jesus feeds us and heals our wounds and sinfulness; he calls us to follow him and gives us the graces we need to love one another. When we receive the sacraments, we are filled anew with God’s grace, which strengthens us as individuals and as spouses. And we encounter Jesus, who embraces us wholly and completely. Imagine for a moment hearing his voice in each sacrament:

- Baptism: “I accept you and welcome you to share my life.”
- Confirmation: “I am always present to strengthen and guide you.”
- Eucharist: “I give myself completely to you.”
- Reconciliation (or Penance): “I forgive you.”
- The Anointing of the Sick: “I comfort, console, and heal you.”
- Marriage and Holy Orders: “I serve you, and together we serve the Father.”

If you can honestly express these same commitments to your spouse each day you will have a strong marriage. You will be happy because your words and actions will be in harmony with the blueprint of love that God imprinted in your heart when he created you—that same blueprint that we learn about in the scriptures and we celebrate in the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church.

Jesus’ love for the Church expressed in the sacraments is the blueprint for your loving each other as a married couple. That is why we have structured the chapters of this book around the seven sacraments. In this program you will learn to love your spouse as Jesus loves us in each of the sacraments. In following the example of Jesus your marriage will thrive and truly become “the icon of God’s love” as Pope Francis describes marriage in *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)* (121).

This doesn’t mean, of course, that every day will be blissful or that you won’t have bad days. But through your ups and downs God’s grace will be with you, and “happily married” will ring true for your marriage.

Drawing on Marriage-and-Family-Life Experts

In this program we will share evidence from social scientists as well as marriage and family practitioners about what makes marriages strong. The research we use comes from many sources, but among these, two are most influential.

First is the work of John Gottman, PhD, who has conducted more than forty years of research on marriage through the Gottman Institute in collaboration with his wife, Dr. Julie Schwartz Gottman. Because of their ongoing research and work supporting stronger marriages, they stand out as standard-bearers in their field.

The other influential source we use most often is the work of the National Marriage Project, a nonpartisan, nonsectarian, and interdisciplinary initiative located at the University of Virginia. Like the work of the Gottman Institute, the work of this organization is highly regarded among those working in marriage-and-family counseling and support.

In brief, *Joined by Grace* offers good science alongside the Church's long tradition and beautiful teachings to help you and your future spouse build a lasting and holy relationship, rooted in Christ and the Church's sacraments which fill us with the abundant grace of his abiding love.

Using This Book

This book will be used in conjunction with a series of meetings you and your fiancé will attend with a mentor couple or in a small group of engaged couples led by a mentor couple. The book might also be used in adapted format on a weekend retreat. Each meeting will coincide with the materials in a single chapter of the book. Each chapter addresses one of the foundational elements for the blueprint of love from the perspective of what the Church teaches, what marriage experts are telling us, and what Catholic married couples experience.

The purpose of the couple-to-couple or small-group meetings or the weekend retreat is for you to set time aside from everyday concerns and distractions and reflect on the commitment you are about to make. The mentor couple assigned to you will be your companions

and guides. They are members of your parish or diocese who feel called to share their experiences of Christian marriage with you. Be open to learning from their experiences as you reflect on your own.

The brief video segments that accompany each meeting provide insight into how sacramental graces will support you in marriage. You will also learn from five married couples who appear in the videos about how their faith shapes their married lives. These videos are intended to be starting points for great conversations between you and your spouse together with your mentor couple or small group.

To get the most out of *Joined by Grace*:

- Prepare for each meeting by reading the assigned chapter ahead of time, taking notes, and writing down any questions you have as you read.
- Come willing to listen, discuss, and learn. Conversation is the heart of this program.
- If your mentor couple cannot answer some of your questions, ask them to connect you with your pastor or another Church professional who can help.
- Reflection and prayer are important to finding success with this program. If you would like more information on how to grow your prayer life, ask your mentor couple for advice, or visit JoinedbyGrace.com.
- Visit JoinedbyGrace.com to explore the wide variety of articles and essays covering topics from Natural Family Planning and sexual intimacy to budgeting and work-life balance.

Not Both Catholic?

If you or your future spouse is not Catholic, please know that the Church happily welcomes you and rejoices with you as you prepare for marriage. The Church embraces all people of good will and is glad to share with you the wisdom of our tradition. The Church wants your marriage to be strong and wants both of you to grow closer and closer to God. The purpose of this program is not to convert you or to make

you feel uncomfortable but to help you understand what Catholics believe about marriage and to invite you to keep learning. Whether you or your fiancé has been baptized in another Christian community, is a person of a non-Christian faith, or has no religious affiliation at all, we encourage both of you to participate fully in this program as you strive to build a strong Christian marriage. It is imperative for your marriage that you and your fiancé understand and respect what each believes about marriage as well as the expectations and responsibilities that those beliefs place on your relationship.

If you are not Catholic, please read the short article “A Welcome to Those Who Aren’t Catholic,” which your mentor couple will give you or you can find at JoinedbyGrace.com. You also should meet with the priest or deacon who will celebrate your wedding to talk about differences in your religious beliefs and practices.

A Time of Discernment and a Journey of Faith

Christian marriage is a vocation. It is more than the promise a man and a woman make to each other. It is first and foremost a response to a call from God, an invitation to play a role in his plan for humanity. This program should help you to understand what God’s call is for you and to assess your readiness to respond. In his General Audience on April 2, 2014, Pope Francis reminded Catholics around the world that marriage is a “noble vocation,” but not an easy one. In his 2016 exhortation, *The Joy of Love*, Pope Francis encouraged engaged couples to pray together and for each other before their weddings, “to seek God’s help in remaining faithful and generous [and] to ask the Lord together what he wants of them” (*The Joy of Love*, 19).

In the weeks to come, think and pray about your decision to marry. Make sure that you are both free to make it and ready for it. It is important that you examine your relationship honestly and objectively. It is right that you are filled with joy and excitement, but it is important that neither the love and affection you feel for your fiancé—nor the plans you have already set in motion—blind you to the serious realities of married life. Keep asking, “Am I ready to make this commitment and keep it?”

Please talk with your mentor couple or with the priest, deacon, or marriage-preparation coordinator who is working with you at the parish where you will be married about any doubts or questions that you have. These individuals can guide you, help you address your concerns, and assess your readiness for marriage, or they can direct you to others who can. One very common question is, “What does the Church teach about living together?” A good way to begin addressing this concern is to read the article “Living Together before Marriage.” Your mentor couple can print this brief article for you or you can find it at JoinedbyGrace.com. Be sure to talk with your pastor or his delegate about your living situation.

We will be praying for you and trust that your parish community, family, and friends are also praying for you. They will accompany you as you walk to the altar with hope that this journey brings you knowledge, deepening faith, and enduring love. Faith is an important guide in your life, and this program will help you better understand how to embrace it as the wonderful gift God intends it to be.

Why do I want to be married in the Catholic Church?

What did I just learn about being married in the Catholic Church?

What questions do I have about being married in the Catholic Church?

1.

Welcoming and Accepting

The Grace and Call of Baptism

Covered in This Chapter and at Your First Meeting

1. Setting the Stage
2. Baptism Gives Us Graces to Welcome and Accept Each Other
3. Accepting Your Spouse as Precious Gift
4. Common Obstacles to Accepting One Another
5. Tools for Building a Strong Marriage
6. Takeaways and Next Steps

Meeting 1. Videos:

- 1.1 *Marriage Is . . .*
- 1.2 *The Grace and Call of Baptism*
- 1.3 *Choosing to Believe*
- 1.4 *It's the Little Things*