

# Introduction

Dear Family Life Ministers,

We have been involved in marriage-and-family ministry for most of our married life, which now spans four decades. It is a ministry we feel called to, and we are glad to have the opportunity to share our own experiences of the ministry and of married life with you, with those who will work alongside you in this crucial work of the Church, and with the engaged couples whom you hope to reach with *Joined by Grace*. Years ago when we served the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas as family-life coordinators, we were responsible for hosting monthly marriage-preparation retreats and for helping parishes across the archdiocese to recruit and train mentor couples who would open their homes to small groups of engaged couples preparing for marriage. We continue our involvement with marriage preparation as volunteers in the Diocese of Nashville where we now live.

Those getting married today have grown up in a very different culture and have different needs than the engaged couples of fifteen or twenty years ago. And the Church has a far better understanding of what our responsibility is toward them as they prepare for marriage. Perhaps most importantly, they need mentors, companions, people in the parish faithfully living out the vocation of Christian marriage whom they can follow as role models and turn to for guidance. *Joined by Grace* is built on the vision of marriage preparation as a ministry of encounter and accompaniment, as is described by Pope Francis in his 2016 apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love)*, 205–216.

Today, most engaged couples seeking marriage in the Church belong to the millennial generation. Millennials are the generation born between 1980 and 2005 by most accountings. According to recent research, millennials are not well versed in their Catholic faith, few attend Mass regularly, and many are not connected in any practical way to a parish community. In addition, a significant number of young Catholics are marrying partners who are not Catholic or not religious, and some of them are cohabiting. Most

engaged couples today need not only to be catechized but to be evangelized and connected in positive ways to the life of the Church. They need to be introduced to Jesus Christ and his Church in a most fundamental way. What better way to evangelize than through the powerful personal witness of married couples who struggle and rejoice each day in their vocational calling? What better way to catechize than to explore the sacramental life of the Church and the graces it affords us? What better way to connect the engaged to the life of the Church than inviting them to attend Sunday Mass and asking the members of their parish to pray for them. These three aspects of immediate preparation for marriage lie at the heart of *Joined by Grace: Preparing for the Sacramental Journey of Marriage*.

The Synod Fathers agreed on the need to involve the entire community more extensively [in marriage preparation] by stressing the witness of families themselves and by grounding marriage preparation in the process of Christian initiation by bringing out the connection between Marriage, Baptism, and the other sacraments . . . [and] the need for . . . giving couples a genuine experience of participation in ecclesial life.

—Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 206

Evangelizing, catechizing and connecting the engaged couples to their faith tradition and community is the three-fold goal of *Joined by Grace*. Know that you, your engaged couples, and your marriage preparation team are in our prayers.

God bless you,  
John and Teri Bosio

# 1.

## Exploring the Vision of Joined by Grace

Genuine spiritual accompaniment always begins and flourishes in the context of service to the mission of evangelization.

—Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 173

### **Marriage Preparation Is an Opportunity and a Challenge**

On the front page of our parish bulletin, along with Mass schedules and times for celebrating the sacrament of Reconciliation and the Baptism of Infants, there is a simple notice: “Marriages: contact Deacon Hans, (phone number), at time of engagement (ASAP).”

“Couples call me,” says Deacon Hans, “because someone told them that to get married in the church they need to call me. Their wedding plans are on their mind, and they want to know what they need to do to be married in the parish church.”

When a couple contacts the parish to talk about getting married, it is a great opportunity for the Church but it is also a challenge. All that couples seem to want at that moment is to have their wedding in the parish church. But as we who have answered the call to marriage ministry know well, the Church has so much more to offer!

The challenge for all pastoral ministers receiving such calls is to welcome these couples with warm enthusiasm, listen to their stories and their questions, try to understand their fundamental needs, inform them, and guide them without turning them off. The wedding is a huge moment in these couples' lives, and for some reason they want the Church to be a part of it. It is important that the parish staff, especially whoever is the first point of contact—often the parish secretary—be trained in basic hospitality and be well versed in the information couples will want and need to know.

Deacon Hans explains: "Their decision to call the parish is an inkling of faith that is alive." Whoever receives the first call from an engaged couple asking for information about marriage in the Church begins a relationship. This relationship is the beginning of a faith journey.

Joined by Grace is a program designed to help those in ministry meet engaged couples where they are and walk with them to the altar and beyond, while forming them and preparing them to become a sacrament of Christ's love for the Church.

## Marriage Preparation: A Ministry of Accompaniment

In our day-to-day conversations we often speak of marriage preparation as a program. However, marriage preparation is first and foremost a ministry. It is a ministry of accompaniment. It is the whole parish community, led by the pastor, walking the engaged couple to the altar, and in the words of Pope Francis, making present to the engaged "the fragrance of Christ's closeness and his personal gaze" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 169).

Marriage preparation is a ministry of accompaniment that is best described and understood using the gospel story of Jesus and the disciples on the road to Emmaus, found in Luke 24. Joined by Grace helps parishes accompany engaged couples on their journey to marriage following the example of Jesus in the story. Like Jesus we:

1. meet the engaged wherever they are on their journeys, and listen to them,

2. share the Good News of salvation that we know in Jesus Christ,
3. celebrate the Lord's presence with them, especially in the Eucharist, and
4. help them connect or reconnect with the faith tradition and community.

## 1. We Meet the Engaged Where They Are, and Listen to Them

Jesus himself drew near and walked with them.

—Luke 24:15

Walking with them and discovering where the engaged are on their journey is the first crucial step to this three-fold ministry of evangelization, catechesis, and incorporation into the life of the Church. You can read more about the millennial generation on pages 7–11 of the *Mentor Guide*, but here are some key highlights.

- Millennials come to marriage later in life than previous generations: age 29 for men and 26.6 for women are average.
- Most of them have attended college and have started a job or career.
- Many are marrying a non-Catholic or someone who is a nonbeliever.
- Many are already living together, and some already have children.
- Many are not going to church regularly.
- Some have attitudes about sex and intimacy that need redirecting. For example, according to a 2007 study, 66.5 percent of young men and 48.7 percent of young women attending high school said that “viewing pornographic materials is an acceptable way to express one’s sexuality.”<sup>1</sup>

Understanding where these couples are coming from requires that we listen to them with a pastoral ear. This helps us better learn what each couple needs. Pope Francis describes the listening that must take place when we accompany others: “We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening . . . is an openness of

heart which makes possible closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 171).

Joined by Grace envisions six key parish ministers called to accompany the engaged, helping them come to know and love Christ by their example, their sharing of the Church’s teaching, and their varied levels of interaction. Sometimes these ministries overlap, yet each plays a crucial and distinctive role:

1. the first point of contact (often the parish secretary)
2. the priest or deacon who will witness the couple’s marriage vows
3. the Joined by Grace program director or coordinator
4. the mentor couple
5. the wedding planner
6. the whole parish community

More will be said about each of these in chapter 2. Here it is important to note that each person assuming a role in the ministry of marriage preparation must listen, get to know, welcome, and guide the engaged couple in this most fundamental approach to evangelization. As Jesus did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we share the Good News beginning with the way we interact with one another.

## 2. We Share the Good News

In the Gospel of Luke, we read, “He [Jesus] interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures” (Lk 24:27). Just as Jesus catechized the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we take on the ministry of catechizing in marriage preparation. A peek at the demographic profile of millennial Catholics underscores the challenges in approaching this aspect of the ministry.

- Fewer millennials have attended religious education or a Catholic school than previous generations.<sup>2</sup>
- Only 26 percent of millennial Catholics say their views on marriage have been informed by their Catholic faith.<sup>3</sup>

- A lot of catechesis or handing on of the faith happens during Sunday Mass. However, only 10 to 20 percent of millennials attend Mass weekly. This is a significant statistic because, according to the findings of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), the frequency of Mass attendance correlates positively with a person's views about marriage that are consistent with the views of the Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup> The low Mass attendance by millennials may also explain the next point.
- The majority of millennials believe that a person can be a "good Catholic" without adhering to the Church's teachings on contraception and its teachings about Sunday Mass attendance.<sup>5</sup>

Joined by Grace places great importance on grounding the sacrament of Marriage in the story of our salvation. It does so by tapping into the compelling joy engaged couples experience because of their love for one another. The program frames the couple's love story in the context of the mystery of God's love story—the story of our salvation.

This program communicates to engaged couples the following teachings in the *Couple's Book*, in the small-group or couple-to-couple meetings or weekend retreat, and in the witness videos.

- When God's grace joins two people in the sacrament of Marriage, their love story is merged with God's love story.
- Their love story becomes part of God's love story, and they agree to play a special role in it.
- God the Father becomes their teacher, Jesus becomes their model of love, and the Holy Spirit the source of strength to carry out their role in God's love story.
- Married couples become visible signs in their families and communities of God's love for us. They become living sacraments for the world, conduits of God's saving grace.
- Married couples sustain and nourish their union through participation in the life of the Church, especially celebration of the sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation
- They will find in the parish community support and guidance as they grow in their life together as husband and wife.

Once couples understand they are part of a plan that is greater than themselves, their life as married couples takes on a new meaning. It is a sacred vocation, initiated and blessed by God. We read in *Familiaris Consortio*: “Among the elements to be instilled in this journey of faith, which is similar to the catechumenate, there must also be a deeper knowledge of the mystery of Christ and the Church, of the meaning of grace and of the responsibility of Christian marriage” (66).

Joined by Grace grounds its catechesis of the engaged during marriage preparation in the process of Christian initiation by showing the connection between marriage, baptism and the other sacraments, as Pope Francis suggests in *Amoris Laetitia*, 206. Joined by Grace invites engaged couples to focus their attention on the “mystery of Christ and the Church” as we experience it in the seven sacraments. There we find the model of spousal love. In the sacraments, through the actions of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Church is cleansed, strengthened, nourished, forgiven, healed, and cared for. The sacraments reveal to us the blueprint of God’s love, which needs to become the blueprint of love for every couple building a Christian marriage. St. John Paul II pointed to Jesus as the model for married couples when he wrote, “Husbands and wives discover in Christ the point of reference for their spousal love” (*Gratissimam Sane*, 19).

Because we believe that “God’s way of loving becomes the measure of human love,” as Pope Benedict XVI taught in *Deus Caritas Est*, Joined by Grace is built around what we call “the blueprint of God’s love.” This plan for love is explored in the six chapters of the *Couple’s Book* and in the six meetings with mentors or six segments of a weekend retreat:

1. Welcoming and Accepting: The Grace and Call of Baptism
2. Being Fully Present: The Grace of Confirmation
3. Giving Oneself Completely: The Grace of the Eucharist
4. Forgiving: The Grace of Reconciliation
5. Healing: The Grace of the Anointing of the Sick
6. Serving: The Grace of Marriage and of Holy Orders

This blueprint is comprised of six attributes of God’s love, which have been revealed throughout the history of our salvation and strengthened with the graces of the sacraments.

The attributes of love that anchor this program are inscribed in every person’s heart, because we have been created in God’s image. This is the type of love we deeply



desire. We all want to be accepted, to have commitments, to give and receive, to be forgiven, to be comforted, and to serve or take care of one another. Researchers and psychologists report that these qualities of love are the building blocks of any healthy relationship, and they are especially important in marriage.

Joined by Grace introduces a new paradigm in marriage preparation. Its content is not structured according to common topics, such as finances, sexuality, communication, and sacramentality. Instead, it is structured around an exploration of the seven sacraments, and from each sacrament we draw lessons that address such practical skills as communication, finances, sexuality, sacramentality, spirituality, Natural Family Planning (NFP), and more. This is the aspect of Joined by Grace that is unique in marriage preparation.

Joined by Grace uses an interdisciplinary approach that weaves together three strands of wisdom: the biblical traditions and teachings of the Catholic Church, the best knowledge from leading marriage experts, and the lived experiences of numerous married couples. Faith and science agree about the qualities of love that bring joy and lasting commitment to married couples. These are qualities that we find in Jesus' love for the Church, expressed in the sacraments. They are acceptance, commitment to being present, self-giving, forgiveness, healing, and serving. These qualities are the core of what engaged couples reflect on and learn when using Joined by Grace.

### 3. We Celebrate with the Engaged Couple

As Jesus did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we celebrate with our engaged couples. We read in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus "took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (Lk 24:30). We too come to know Jesus better in the breaking of the bread, the Eucharist. Therefore Joined by Grace emphasizes the importance of participation in the Mass for couples during marriage preparation. We encourage mentors to invite the engaged couples to Mass and perhaps meet afterward for coffee or brunch. We urge mentors also to introduce the engaged to other members of the parish so that the couples begin to find support and encouragement in the faith community.

The disciples were changed when they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Inviting and supporting the efforts of engaged couples to participate in the Mass every Sunday marks the beginning of a gentle process of connecting the couple to the life of the parish that hopefully will continue after the wedding.

#### 4. We Help Engaged Couples Connect with Their Faith Communities

They set out at once and returned to Jerusalem.

—Luke 24:33

As you help millennials connect to parish life, remember that they want to contribute to the community, despite the fact that many of them lead very hectic lives. Jeff Fromm and Christie Garton write in their book *Marketing to Millennials* that millennials want to be engaged in the community and want to participate in what's happening. We need to invite them and give them opportunities to contribute.<sup>6</sup>

Millennials are talented and have a lot to offer. They are tech savvy, most of them are college educated, they have high ideals, they report that making a contribution to society is very important to them, and they want to lead.<sup>7</sup> Yet, many of the couples whom we prepare for marriage disappear after the wedding. We must continually ask ourselves why this is and what changes our parishes can make to help them stay connected and active in the parish.

Very few parishes follow up to stay in touch with them and to invite them to be active parishioners, so they head to other churches or more likely simply find other things that seem more satisfying on Sunday mornings. There are, of course, couples who are married in parishes with no intention of remaining there because they have jobs in other places. It is very likely that if they find a new parish home, no one there is aware of their presence.

Joined by Grace helps parishes find ways to maintain the connections made between engaged couples and the faith community. This is where program directors or coordinators and mentor couples are key. We recommend that all engaged couples, even those who attend a diocesan or regional retreat, be assigned a mentor couple to be their guides and role models during the preparation and into the first months or even years of marriage. More information on this is available in chapters 2 and 4.

The program director or the mentor couple are encouraged to stay in touch with each couple at least once a quarter during the first year and to invite them to social activities or marriage-enrichment events at the parish, as well as to become involved in the parish in such roles as lectors, ushers, parish council committee members, catechists, and so on.