

[Opinion](#)
[Guest Voices](#)



Madison Chastain and Guy Whittall-Scherfee were married Oct. 15, 2022, at Mont La Salle, the Christian Brothers Retreat and Conference Center, in Napa, California.
(Courtesy of Madison Chastain)



by Madison Chastain

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May 2, 2023

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The years I was engaged brought the most change my family had experienced in at least a decade. Loss, job changes, moves, retirements, medical diagnoses: All this, and we weren't even married yet!

But the straw that broke the camel's back came from an unlikely place: witness affidavit interviews. Witness affidavits are forms containing interview questions to be asked of two people who can attest to each partner's freedom and fitness to marry as well as their sacramental history. For some reason, my now-husband and I were told ours had to be completed in person (during the pandemic) by either our parents or godparents. For two people whose parents, godparents and friends are for the most part not local, not practicing, not present or not alive, this was exceedingly challenging. We had to schedule an extra trip across the country, scrounge up trustworthy witnesses and catechize them as to the reason for the interviews. Our paperwork was set back by months.

What's worse, my husband not being Catholic led to rigorous questioning. My mother-in-law was asked multiple times to prove how she knew my husband and for how long — "Well, I gave birth to him?" When it came time to discuss my husband's baptism, she attested to its Trinitarian form. She was again subjected to repeated questioning, as the deacon was suspicious of the authenticity of her testimony as merely a witness to the ceremony. My father-in-law, who performed the baptism, had died three years before our engagement.

In the context of our family's many changes, this could all seem like a very small straw. Yet it highlighted a lack of trust and pastoral sensitivity that nearly ruined our sense of belonging.

I was born and raised Roman Catholic, and have always been committed to the sacraments. My husband was not raised with any particular tradition or practices. Both my husband and I were equally excited about the opportunity to do premarital prep, mostly because we're talkers who love any chance to discuss ... anything. We were fortunate to receive a blended style of preparation — the [One in Christ](#) home study recommended by the hands-off priest we filed our paperwork with, and personalized accompaniment face-to-face with the priest who married us — which

together gave us an in-depth, practical, honest preparation for marriage.

Yet, even the best premarital programs seem to be oriented around whether or not the couple can be trusted. Can the church trust that this couple will attend Mass regularly? Participate in the sacraments? Not use contraception or in vitro fertilization? Baptize their children? Send them to Catholic school? Continue to open their wallets into happy old age?

In reality, however, couples are asking, "Can we trust *the church*?"

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We can view this inverted relationship between the church and parishioners through "needs" and "obligations." As it is now, marriage prep presents the church as needing consistent, pro-life, confirmed, money-making parishioners, and parishioners have the obligations, Sunday and otherwise.

What if we switched this perspective? The church is *obligated* to protect and serve the vulnerable, the church is obligated to help form consciences, the church is obligated to provide access to the sacraments. Engaged couples and their families *need* accompaniment and acceptance.

Premarital programs are aware that couples bring with them into their marriages the dynamics, traumas and lessons of their different families, and that talking about differences in upbringing and values before "I do" sets a marriage up for greater success. But life changes, family dynamics and traumas can overshadow the marriage prep and wedding planning process *itself*. Long before the exchanging of vows, wounds can be reopened. Addressing these in marriage prep would build interpersonal and institutional trust.

Family units look different and are evolving. Participation or interview by close family and friends, to determine eligibility and preparedness for marriage, should not be so rigid as to demand the contributions of people who have done (or experienced) harm or to ignore the myriad limitations to familial interactions in today's day and age.

We attended a number of funerals together during our years of dating and engagement. This prompted us to reflect on what we believe about death and dying.

How do we wish to mark those things together and for each other? Engagement was the closest I've felt to memento mori: Here is the person I will either watch die or who will see me die. The reality of death, which so often presents itself at the precipice of new life, was weighty. We didn't talk about aging, sickness or end-of-life realities during marriage prep at all.

Conversations around whether or not we will have children and the expectations for how we ought to raise them prompted a reckoning with the church's history of abuse. Do I trust a priest to be alone with my child in confession? And does my husband, for whom confession is not a practice? If we never have children, will we be cast out?

And what about my non-Catholic husband? Will *he* be cast out? What would it be like if, instead of viewing my husband with a suspicious eye, looking for reasons to doubt the inherent catholicity that made me fall in love with him in the first place, the church's marriage prep was designed to give *him* reasons to trust it?

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As we completed our individual interviews, the question regarding past mental health issues came up. My poor husband, unsure of how much detail to give after his mother's experience, spewed forth every moment of anger, greed and need for therapy that ever occurred across his 27 years of life. But my husband's vulnerability was not met with any sort of pastoral accompaniment. Instead, a large note was tacked onto our file and he walked out confused and ashamed. When an engaged couple books a parish for a wedding, they should know that far beyond being a nice venue, they can trust their vulnerable information and life challenges to the church and receive pastoral care.

Then, from acceptance, empowerment grows! Marriage preparation has the opportunity to embolden young people to claim the power they have in determining the future of their family and their church. Rather than merely testing couples'

commitments to the church's sexual ethic and sacramental expectations, marriage prep should emphasize the most unique reality of the sacrament of marriage, that it is the couple who perform the sacrament. It is the couple who function as conduits of the special grace God gives through holy matrimony. Does the church reverence that power like it reverences the power of priests?

Despite my lifelong commitment to the sacraments, towards the end of our engagement, I wondered if our wedding ceremony would be the last time I went to Mass. I never expected to be "that couple," but after the significant questioning and lack of space with which we felt we could speak honestly about our difficult season of engagement, we didn't feel we belonged anymore.



A pair of wedding bands symbolizing the sacrament of marriage is depicted in a stained-glass window at St. Isabel Church in Sanibel, Florida. (OSV News/CNS filer, Gregory A. Shemitz)

Our wedding Mass was immensely healing. Our celebrant was my former boss, who inspired and oversaw my undergraduate work in liturgical ministry. This history resulted in a wedding Mass that not only reflected the ways he'd empowered me as a young laywoman, but also warmly welcomed the 99% of our guests who were not Catholic. It was a teaching Mass. My husband and I picked readings that were not in the little book they give you in your paperwork packet but that spoke to us and to the sacrament. We wrote the prayers of the faithful together. Our non-Catholic Christian friends did readings. I gave the Eucharist (or a liturgically appropriate blessing) to every person in attendance. Because my husband and I were emboldened and encouraged as ministers, our Mass was a ministry of love.

Then, by the grace of God, we found our now-home parish. There, we finally felt we were given permission to be ourselves, to share the nuanced joys and struggles of our previous years, and we could imagine ourselves staying in the church. We haven't missed a Sunday since we were married.

Given the desperation with which it seems to be clawing at young attendees, the church should jump at the chance to facilitate healing moments and conversations like these, especially during preparation for the sacrament of marriage, which is all too often the last box checked by familiar or disenchanted Catholics who may disappear after satisfying Catholic Mom and Dad.

Just as we hope the conversations couples have during marriage prep will inform each couple's relationship post-wedding, how the church treats and interacts with couples and their loved ones during marriage prep will inform each couple's relationship with the church into marriage. Is it personal? Does it revere the couple and the work they've done on their relationship? Does it leave room for nuanced feelings leading up to the big day? Does it ask first what a parish might do for the couple, before asking what the couple might do for the parish? These are the restorative — and crucial — questions to be answered by those involved in marriage preparation programs, if the church is to continue to grow.

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A version of this story appeared in the **May 26-June 8, 2023** print issue under the headline: Marriage prep ministries should trust engaged couples.