

On marriage, the bishops should start over

NCR Editorial Staff | Oct. 12, 2009

When the U.S. bishops meet next month in Baltimore they should scrap the entire text of the proposed pastoral letter on marriage and start fresh ([see related story](#) [1]).

The primary problem with the draft, obtained by *NCR* and available for viewing on our Web site ([read the draft pastoral here](#) [2]), is that it is not, as advertised, pastoral.

In fact, it reads as if it was written by someone who has never once engaged in a marriage preparation program, let alone actually ever been married.

The bishops should demand a text that is specifically useful in helping young people prepare for marriage. Young couples come to the church for their marriage ceremonies not only because churches make good backdrops for the wedding photographs. And even if they do come for that reason, marriage preparation presents an opportunity to evangelize, an opportunity to teach about the vocation of marriage and the way that it is tied to our Catholic sacramental understanding of salvation. The document should be something a pastoral minister or parish priest can hand to a couple during their first meeting for marriage preparation, a sort of guide to what they are actually asking of the church and the mystery the church is about to celebrate with them. Instead, the first section of the draft spends too much time talking about the threats to modern marriage, such as high divorce rates, cohabitation, same-sex unions and, of course, contraception (an "intrinsic evil").

The lack of pastoral solicitude that characterizes the entire document is most prominently on display in the discussion of cohabitation, another "intrinsic evil." The draft states: "At the heart of cohabitation lies a reluctance or refusal to make a public, permanent commitment." Perhaps the drafters could have put the sentiment in a more positive light. Like it or not, many (most?) Catholic couples do cohabit prior to marrying, and when they come for marriage preparation, the pastor can and should lead them to grasp the church's teaching in its fullness. But that is not normally achieved by hitting them over the head.

Similar sweeping denunciations of modern trends plague the discussions of other issues, such as same-sex marriage. In the section that treats gay marriage, the draft does speak of the dignity of all people, including gays and lesbians, but it does not lead with this insight. Nor does the current draft examine any approach beyond mere opposition to same-sex unions. In Latin America, some church leaders have proposed, with Vatican approval, that their governments enact laws that allow those with a "shared domicile" to obtain health care and other benefits, whether it be a same-sex partner or an unemployed cousin or a retired aunt who share the domicile. After all, the church is in favor of the extension of social benefits to all, so when the church's leaders find themselves opposing such an extension of benefits, they need to look harder to find creative ways to honor the integrity of the church's teaching.

This section will doubtless garner a great deal of media attention given the push in several states to enact gay marriage. The bishops have a real opportunity to differentiate their posture from the stance of those whose opposition to same-sex unions appears rooted primarily in bigotry.

Any rewriting of the document should begin with the Rite of Christian Marriage itself. From the pastoral perspective, it is this rite that will most interest young couples coming to their pastor to begin marriage preparation. The best way to teach our Catholic people about the sanctity of marriage is to provide them with something that explains the how and the why of the rite. The current draft mentions two of the blessings found in the nuptial Mass, but then moves on quickly. That is a shame, because the prayers and the readings at the nuptial Mass would help demonstrate the ecclesial, sacramental and biblical foundation for the church's teachings. The lack of focus on the rite and on the scripture results in a text that is strangely, and fatally, at odds with the texts of the Second Vatican Council.

Nowhere does the document state the simple fact that the sacrament of marriage is conferred in a nuptial Mass. Why is this so? Our Protestant brothers and sisters do not usually celebrate Communion as part of the marriage ceremony. This is a distinctive Catholic tradition and one worth explaining to young couples preparing for marriage. Indeed, one of the characteristics of a "letter," pastoral or otherwise, is that it is sent to someone. If this pastoral letter is not intended for couples preparing for marriage, to whom is it directed? Young people are coming to request the sacrament of marriage because some part of their heart is drawn to the faith. This is a moment to evangelize them, to help them flesh out their own aspirations for their marriage, and to unite their marital vocation to the vocation to holiness.

The bishops have been invited to propose amendments to the draft at their meeting in November, but there is almost no way to turn this turkey of a text into something that lives up to its billing as a pastoral letter. They should start from scratch and entrust the writing of a new text to someone who has actually engaged in marriage preparation. If young couples can't find themselves in the text, this unique opportunity to present the church's teaching in all its beauty and attractiveness will be lost. We simply cannot afford to lose such opportunities.

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