

# Chapter 1

## PATHWAYS™ – AN INVITATION & AN OPPORTUNITY

*This ministry is an innovative and intentional invitation filled with welcome, compassion and support providing the opportunity for civilly married or cohabitating couples to examine and follow a pathway toward Sacramental Marriage in the Catholic Church.*

**M**arriage is a call to give oneself to one's spouse as fully as Christ gave himself to the Church.

The natural meaning of marriage as an exchange of self-giving love is not replaced but fulfilled and raised to a higher level in the Sacrament of Matrimony.<sup>1</sup>

These words from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops echo the sentiment of the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* which states that "By reason of their state in life and of their order, [Christian spouses] have their own special gifts in the People of God.

**This grace proper to the Sacrament of Matrimony is intended to perfect the couple's love and to strengthen their indissoluble unity."<sup>2</sup>**

Scripture describes this union when God spoke in Genesis: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become

<sup>1</sup> MARRIAGE: Love and Life in the Divine Plan, USCCB, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2:24.

one flesh."<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt, God wants marriages to be sacred through and through.

PATHWAYS™ to Sacramental Marriage & Marriage Convalidation is about fulfilling and raising natural marriage to a higher level in the Sacrament of Matrimony. It is about living out God's Plan for Marriage and being in communion with the Church thus allowing Catholic spouses to receive the Sacraments of the Church.

PATHWAYS™ is one of the most exciting ministry efforts the nonprofit *MarriageBuilding/ConstruyendoMatrimonios USA* has designed and implemented.

The USCCB document "Called to the Joy of Love: National Pastoral Framework for Marriage and Family Life Ministry," provides the following four pillars for the framework,

### FOUR PILLARS

- I. Prayer & Relationship with Christ
- II. Formation
- III. Accompaniment
- IV. Advocacy

PATHWAYS™ implements and is structured around all four of these pillars. For example, pillar III which is Accompaniment, asks that pastoral strategies be developed “that identify and respond to the realities of married couples, families, and those discerning marriage.”<sup>4</sup> It speaks to the need of being “missionary, going out to where people are” and leading them to the Lord.

It calls for a sensitivity that shapes programs and resources with “care and compassion” to help all grow in the love of God and neighbor. That pastoral leaders are to reach out in the “art of accompaniment,” that couples and families in need experience “our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.”<sup>5</sup>

## AN INVITATION TO SACRAMENTAL MARRIAGE

can start with PATHWAYS™

**T**oo often the only avenue a priest has to identify couples who are in an irregular marriage is when a couple comes to him to have their child baptized or for First Communion or are in the RCIA process. While this effort is meritorious, not all couples in need of convalidation and Sacramental Marriage fit into these groups. In addition, we are finding that many have given up on the possibility or think the Church doesn’t care about them or their situations. PATHWAYS™ seeks to reverse this kind of thinking.

Each of these concerns have been included in the design of PATHWAYS™ to Sacramental Marriage & Marriage Convalidation. The response from couples that have participated in PATHWAYS™ has been filled with gratitude, enthusiasm and hope in an area of marriage ministry that often is thought of as difficult at best.



<sup>4</sup> National Pastoral Framework for Marriage and Family Life Ministry. (2021) p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium [EG], November 2013. No. 169.

What we propose is a more “intentional pathway” for couples starting with the INVITATION.

Often, we think of invitations as being for large events like birthday parties or weddings. They usually have some fanciful design that announces the importance of the event and they include some RSVP information. While certainly these invitations are important, there are other invitations that occur, and which form the foundation of community, especially communities of faith.

Each of us is called to embrace this model of invitation, which asks for nothing in return. This is the invitation modeled by Jesus on the cross. With his arms outstretched, Jesus invites each into a relationship with the God of love who is our creator. It is a selfless invitation, focused on what the recipient can receive from it instead of the sender.

There is no expectation of an RSVP, only a hope that those in need will reach out and accept this invitation. This is how we build up the Body of Christ. For while faith is inherently personal, it is also rooted in community. Communities of faith gather to pray and worship together, to rejoice with one another in times of consolation and to support one another in times of desolation.

**P**ATHWAYS™ is this kind of invitation. It is an invitation to what often is a hurting or disparaged part of our Catholic community. It is to those who have married in the Church and are now divorced and may be remarried outside the Church. It is to those who married without the dispensation required for a valid Catholic Sacramental Marriage. It is to those who have married outside the Church without the benefit of an annulment. It is to couples who have chosen to live together for a significant time without the benefit of Sacramental Marriage. And it is to family members whom we love and have a desire for them to be married in the Church. In many cases,

An invitation maintains the notion of offer and request, of “opening the doors” to those who have a desire to have a Sacramental Marriage in the Catholic Church.

***The invitation to PATHWAYS™ happens in a variety of ways and should include all of the following:***

- Bulletin inserts
- Flock Notes
- Parish Announcements
- Parish Facebook posts
- Banners
- Personal Invitations
- RCIA participants

Send a letter to the parishioners encouraging them to reach out to family members in need of a Sacramental Marriage

Promotional materials, a sample letter for pastors, Banners, and more are explained later in this Coordinator Guide. We have a variety of items available for purchase at our on line store

# AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SACRAMENTAL MARRIAGE *has a start with* PATHWAYS™

*Invitations create opportunities.*

**A**n opportunity makes something possible that may otherwise not happen. While birthday parties and wedding invitations give a chance to celebrate a turning point with family and friends, PATHWAYS™ gives a chance to begin a celebration of Church, and a turning point in the lives of couples who have a desire to be sacramental married. One that potentially can bring couples marriages into the Church. PATHWAYS™ offers an opening, a chance, a time to act. We want this opportunity to be welcoming, growth-filled and hopeful.



In the words of the Synod Fathers, “although the Church realizes that any breach of the marriage bond ‘is against the will of God,’

<sup>6</sup> Amoris Laetitia, #291.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid #293.

she is also ‘conscious of the frailty of many of her children.’ Illumined by the gaze of Jesus Christ, ‘she turns with love to those who participate in her life in an incomplete manner, recognizing that the grace of God works also in their lives by giving them the courage to do good, to care for one another in love and to be of service to the community in which they live and work.’

Although she constantly holds up the call to perfection and asks for a fuller response to God,

**“The Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and troubled love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the beacon of a light house in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a storm.”<sup>6</sup>**

Considering the specific situation of civil marriage and even simple cohabitation, the Synod Fathers noted that “when such unions attain a particular stability, legally recognized, are characterized by deep affection and responsibility for their offspring, and demonstrate an ability to overcome trials, they can provide occasions for pastoral care with a view to the eventual celebration of the sacrament of marriage.”<sup>7</sup>

*We believe PATHWAYS™ serves as that beacon of light coming from the outstretched arms of Jesus inviting them into a relationship with the God of love and healing. From this vantage point, these individuals and couples can:*

- ♡ Strengthen their marriage STEP by STEP.
- ♡ Grow in Faith.
- ♡ Learn what makes for a valid Sacramental Marriage.
- ♡ Have the support of their Faith Community and experience its care.
- ♡ Gain accurate information on what it takes to Convalidate a civil marriage.
- ♡ Understand what an annulment is and what it isn't.
- ♡ Hear the witness of other couple(s) who had gone through an annulment and had their marriage convalidated.
- ♡ Seek forgiveness.
- ♡ Act out of love for their Spouse.
- ♡ Meet with an Annulment Advocate who will help with the Annulment process if needed.

*This is how we build up the Body of Christ!*

**S**aint Paul said it was his ambition and goal, not to become happy but to please God at every moment. What a transforming thought! When my car breaks down, when my kids act up in church, when there are more months left at the end of our money, my primary responsibility is still to please God! That's true when a marriage situation needs

a remedy, too! The responsibility is the same, to please God!

The goal of the Christian life and the goal of Sacramental Marriage isn't an individual's happiness. It is focused on what the recipient may receive from it. This includes being free to marry Sacramentally and to have the marriage be a pathway to heaven.