

The National Pastoral Initiative



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

What is the National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage?

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has identified **Strengthening Marriage and Family Life** as one of its five priority areas. The Marriage Priority extends the work that the bishops began nearly five years ago with the **National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage (NPIM)**. The NPIM is a multi-year effort to communicate the meaning and value of married life for the Church and for society. The Initiative brings together Catholic teaching and pastoral practice, social science research, and the experience of married couples. It offers guidance and resources, including a pastoral letter, to promote and strengthen marriage as a human institution and a Christian sacrament.

In developing the Initiative, the bishops recognize that marriage as an institution has suffered in recent years. The persistent high rate of divorce, rapid rise of non-marital cohabitation, and falling marriage rate testify to its social decline. Young people wonder if a healthy, lifelong marriage is even possible. In addition, the issue of same-sex unions has produced heated debate about the nature and purposes of marriage. This is a critical moment to join with others who seek to strengthen marriage. The bishops believe that the Catholic Church can make a distinct contribution to shaping public awareness about the value of marriage.

What activities has the Initiative undertaken?

A few examples:

- The “For Your Marriage” public awareness campaign, consisting of ads and a website, began in June, 2007. The ads (television, radio, billboards) are based on the theme “What have you done for your marriage today?” The website, **ForYourMarriage.org**, offers practical information and resources for engaged and married couples and people who are involved in marriage ministries.
- “Making the Case for Marriage” is a series of brief backgrounders on specific topics (e.g., cohabitation, divorce, marriage and children), bringing together social science research and church teaching/pastoral response. The backgrounders are available in English and Spanish (www.usccb.org/npim).
- At the request of the Marriage and Family Committee, many dioceses sponsored focus groups with married couples, including interfaith couples, as well as separated or divorced persons, single young adults, and couples in a second marriage. The findings have informed the development of NPIM resources. Reports on the focus groups are available at www.usccb.org/npim.

- A national research project on Catholics' understanding of marriage is available at: <http://cara.georgetown.edu/MarriageReport.pdf>.

See www.usccb.org/npim for reports on other activities.

What activities are current or planned?

- A pastoral letter on marriage, "Love and Life in the Divine Plan," is scheduled for a vote during the Bishops' Nov. 16-19 fall meeting. The letter is the theological foundation for the bishops' efforts to strengthen marriage and to defend it against attempts to redefine marriage as other than the union of one man and one woman. If approved, the text of the letter will be immediately available on the USCCB website.
- If the letter is approved, several follow up activities are planned. In December, the English print version of the letter will be published, followed by the Spanish version. A summary version of the letter in brochure format is also anticipated. A Leader's Guide that explores key themes in the document is expected to be available by mid-2010. In addition, an online annotated version of the letter will link specific topics in the letter to official Church documents and other resources.
- A Spanish language website, **Por Tu Matrimonio**, will debut early next year. The website will include many of the resources on the For Your Marriage site, as well as information of particular interest to Spanish-speaking communities.
- The For Your Marriage website will be re-designed and expanded in early 2010. A follow-up TV and radio ad campaign is expected to begin in 2011.
- "Living Your Catholic Marriage," a series of brief, popular and topic-oriented resources will be available in multiple media formats.
- Work will continue with diocesan offices and national groups to promote and improve pastoral ministries that strengthen marriage and family life. There will be particular emphasis on ministries and outreach that can take place in parishes.

How can parishes participate in the Initiative?

- Link to www.foryourmarriage.org from your parish website. A variety of animated and static ads can be downloaded from the website.
- Mention the website in your bulletin and promote it when people register for a marriage and family program.
- Promote small faith sharing groups around the theme "For Your Marriage." Use the website for resource materials (articles may be reproduced with credit to the website).
- Plan a parish celebration of World Marriage Sunday (February 14, 2010). The Prayer Card for Married Couples and For Your Marriage Bookmark, both available from USCCB Publishing, make excellent giveaways.
- Consult the For Your Marriage and NPIM websites for additional ideas. Both sites are regularly updated with reports on current projects.