

Catholic Marriage Preparation Survey 2010:

Some Observations, Reflections, and Recommendations from a Theological and Pastoral Perspective

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I. Introduction: Aims, structure of the paper, and data to be analysed

Aims

The Catholic Marriage Preparation Survey carried out in 2010 by the Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales was intended to complete a largely unfulfilled objective remaining from *Listening 2004: My Family My Church*, i.e. to review the provision of Marriage Preparation within the dioceses in order to explore options for further growth and thus to provide couples in the Catholic Church the best possible support for their marriages. The more specific objectives of the survey have been to assess:

- the numbers of couples experiencing Marriage Preparation;
- the profile and current situation of providers of Marriage Preparation in terms of formation, resources, and support by the Catholic community;
- the shape, content, and delivery of the programmes;
- the expectations and experiences of couples attending Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church.

An independent assessment of the evidence along with a number of recommendations has been presented by One Plus One, mainly on the basis of a review of the international literature on (non-religious) marriage enhancement programmes and with regard to improving the overall efficiency of Marriage Preparation in the dioceses of England and Wales (Coleman, 2012). While being based on and referring to this report, the following observations and reflections are intended to provide additional elements of assessment *from a theological and pastoral perspective*. The aim thereby is to respond to a couple of questions that will have been at the origin of the survey but possibly have not been fully covered by the One Plus One report. These questions will structure the present paper.

Structure of the paper

The following questions will be addressed in this paper in particular:

- What is the religious profile of couples attending Marriage Preparation and what are the implications of it for the future provision of the courses?
- What vision and expectation do providers have with regard to their contribution to the life and mission of the Church and how does this affect the provision of Marriage Preparation?
- How do couples experience Marriage Preparation, does this experience match the providers' expectations and intentions, and what conclusions should be drawn from it for the provision of the courses?
- How is the religious component integrated into the overall shape and content of the courses and what option should be taken here?

These issues will be dealt with successively in this paper. From here light will be shed also on some practical and strategic questions which have been raised at the outset of the survey. The paper will

provide analysis of each of these issues and, where appropriate, formulate recommendations for further orientation and practice.

Data to be analysed

For the present paper only a limited amount of data were used.

From the two online cross-sectional surveys, i.e. the questionnaire-based survey self-completed by 116 individuals prepared for marriage and the questionnaire-based survey self-completed by 261 Marriage Preparation providers in 2010, data were only used from the open-ended responses which were part of both surveys. For the quantifiable data, the present assessment draws on the findings presented in the One plus One report (Coleman, 2012).

From the national conference (November 2011) which was intended to share the findings from the survey data and to use them as a trigger for further reflection among the conference participants, only the further recommendations, collected via an evaluation form from 105 conference participants, were analysed. The post-it responses from 190 conference participants (working in discussion groups) have not been consulted.

Concretely, the following data have been analysed for the present assessment:

- From the provider's survey:

- Responses to Question 6: "How does your ministry preparing couples for marriage contribute to the life and mission of the Church?";
- Responses to Question 16: "Does the course facilitate the raising of interfaith issues?";
- Responses to Question 21: "Share feedback received from couples".

- From the couples' survey:

- Responses to Question 24: "Additional feedback".

- From the conference

- Responses to Question 7: "What are, for you, the most critical aspects of the role of marriage preparation within the wider life and mission of the Church?";
- Specific recommendations: "Have you anything in particular to recommend to the Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life as a result of the Conference?".

For all other data and findings, the present paper draws on the One Plus One report *Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Community: An Independent Assessment of Evaluation Data*, first draft, August 2012 (Coleman, 2012) and on the Marriage and Family Life Project Office's "Summary of Findings of the Catholic Marriage Preparation Survey 2010" (1 November 2011).

II. Brief overview on magisterial documents and recent literature

The Church's pastoral solicitude for marriage finds its most visible expression in its care for (young) people in their preparation for marriage and family life. Since the pressure on the institution of marriage has increased over the past decades, the official church teaching has repeatedly emphasized the need for an adequate marriage preparation. The canonical regulations are stipulated in can. 1063-1072 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law which specifies that pastors have the obligation to offer appropriate assistance to those Christian faithful who enter the marital state and to make sure that nothing stands in the way of a valid and licit celebration of marriage (*Code of Canon Law*, 1999).

The diversity of catechetical instruction and personal accompaniment alluded to in the Code was further specified by Pope John Paul II in his 1981 Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* in which marriage preparation is described as a "gradual and continuous process" which includes the three stages of remote (formation of character and moral values from early childhood on, catechetical and spiritual formation), proximate (preparation for marital sacrament and family apostolate), and immediate preparation (premarital inquiry and preparation of the marriage liturgy) (John Paul II, 1981). The Pope also urged that the national episcopal conferences issue a "Directory of Pastoral Care of the Family" in which is laid down "the minimum content, duration and method of the 'Preparation Courses,' balancing the different aspects – doctrinal, pedagogical, legal and medical – concerning marriage, and structuring them in such a way that those preparing for marriage will not only receive an intellectual training but will also feel a desire to enter actively into the ecclesial community" (no. 66).

The Pontifical Council for the Family issued in 1999 a document entitled "Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage" which further expanded on the canonical requirements, theological rationale, and pastoral context for Marriage Preparation and again summoned the national Bishops' Conferences to provide adequate orientation for it (Pontifical Council for the Family, 1999). Since then, the Pontifical Council has encouraged the local churches to gather and provide examples of "good practices" and announced a new document on Marriage Preparation to appear in the near future.

Scholarly research over the past year has produced a few canonical and historical monographs (Gavin, 2004; Murtas, 2011) and also a couple of empirical studies in which the situation of Marriage Preparation has been analysed in different countries/regions. Although with varying objectives and scope, the following studies have pursued a similar aim to that of the 2010 UK survey:

- In 1995 the US-based Center for Marriage and the Family at Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska, was commissioned by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to carry out a nationwide study on the impact of Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church. For this purpose, some 700 couples were interviewed who had experienced Catholic Marriage Preparation during the preceding eight years (Center for Marriage and the Family, 1995; Coleman, 2012, 21-23).
- From the same year dates the Final Report of an inquiry commissioned by the Bishops' Conference of France and carried out by the regional officers of Family Life Ministry and the Commission for Marriage and Family Life of the French bishops. The inquiry was exclusively based on interviews with the providers of Marriage Preparation (Donius/Raymond, 1995).

- A study of Marriage Preparation in the Belgian-Flemish dioceses of Ghent, Bruges and in the Flemish Vicariate of the Archdiocese of Malines-Brussels was conducted in 2000 by the Dutch psychologist of religion J.Z.T. Pieper who had done a similar research in the Netherlands at the end of the 1980's. For the Flemish study, the author evaluated interviews with 290 couples and 380 providers, both priests and lay persons (Pieper, 1988; 2003).
- As part of a MA thesis, M. Wonka carried out a study on 21 Marriage Preparation courses in the German diocese of Eichstätt in 2003. He interviewed 374 participants at the beginning and the end of the courses and 4-6 weeks after the courses had taken place (Wonka, 2003; 2004).
- In 2003 the University of Surrey Roehampton presented the Final Report of research on the situation of Marriage Preparation in Southern England. The study had been commissioned and supported by the Church of England Diocese of Guildford and the Archbishop's Council's Board for Social Responsibility and was funded by the Lord Chancellor's Department. A questionnaire had been filled in by providers and couples who intended to or had already experienced Marriage Preparation in 400 congregations of different mainline Christian churches (Church of England, Roman Catholic Church, churches of the Reformation) (Roehampton Social Research Unit, 2003).

We do not summarize the wealth of findings in these studies here (cf. Knieps-Port le Roi, 2005), but will refer to them whenever relevant and appropriate for this paper.

III. Religious profile of couples

Practically all existing studies point to the heterogeneity of couples who receive Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church or any other Christian community in terms of age, biographical background, duration of relationship and living together, motives for marriage and expectations for Marriage Preparation.

With regard to couples' religious profile, existing research on religious Marriage Preparation has been limited so far to collecting data on the religious belonging of couples, i.e. whether partners belonged to the same or different denominations (Center for Marriage and Family, 1995), and to investigating in what way same-church and inter-church belonging impacted the married couple's further religiosity in terms of religious affiliation, church attendance and religious practice (Center for Marriage and Family, 1999; Williams & Lawler, 2001) and what its impact was on marital satisfaction (Williams & Lawler, 2003).

Due to its design and the limited sample size of the couple survey, also the 2010 UK survey does not provide substantial and representative evidence on the religious profile of couples experiencing Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church. However, two main characteristics can be derived from the quantifiable set of the data which should be taken into account in the theological and pastoral assessment.

- **Inter-church/interfaith couples**

There is a notable proportion of couples in which the partners come from different Christian denominations. According to the couple survey 59% were Catholic-Catholic couples, 22% were inter-church couples in which a Catholic married a partner from a different Christian denomination, while the remainder were interfaith couples (Catholic with a person of another faith) or Catholic-Agnostic or Catholic-Atheist couples. This means that 41% of marriages were not Catholic-Catholic (Coleman, 2012, 32). These data match the experience reported in the provider survey: the majority experience of providers is to prepare couples that are not both Catholic, a clear majority of them being identified as inter-church (Coleman, 2012, 34).

Notwithstanding this relatively high percentage, 41% of the providers report that the course does not enough to “facilitate interfaith marriages” (Coleman, 2012, 72). Likewise, a look into the topics discussed during Marriage Preparation reveals that religious heterogamy is not included in any of the courses (Coleman, 2012, 69 and 70). The open-ended comments in the provider survey (Question 16), however, provide a more nuanced picture:

Some of the providers clearly distinguish between interfaith and inter-church couples (whereas the formulation of the question in the provider survey speaks indiscriminately about “interfaith”) and seem to have a good sense of the different treatment that is required for each of these groups.

Interfaith or interdenominational? We have had many couples where one is not really of any religion, and one couple where one was a muslim. The majority say they are Christian, inter-church aspects are embedded. One of the presenting couples is strongly linked to Interchurch Families.

Where the couples are of different faiths, it is a natural topic of conversation. Where couples are of different Christian denominations, it is more a question of challenging the Catholic party and to ask what their faith means to them.

Others, however, highlight spiritual differences in a general way and focus on the practical issues that are common to both interfaith and inter-church families.

Within the module on Spirituality we discuss how their own personal spirituality affects the way they view the world, and how this affects their relationship if their spirituality is different. This initiates a discussion and the couples learn what they have in common and what matters to each other. We ask them to make an effort to understand each other's spirituality and to respect the commitment to their different faiths.

By acknowledging that the majority of couples are not both Catholics, one of the sheets used asks about individuals' relationship with God and another poses questions about whether children will be baptised and go to a Catholic school.

Only in rare cases, is the topic of different denominational or religious backgrounds an integral part of the courses. In general, the issue is raised when it emerges in the discussions and proves relevant for the group. Courses that operate with the FOCCUS inventory are more likely to pay attention to it since the issue is referred to in the questionnaire. If addressed, the issue is dealt with in group discussion or pursued in one-to-one discussions. One course refers the couples concerned to a resource pack for their further reading.

We discuss it in general at the first session and follow it up if any of the couples wish to. We also refer couples to the book 'Surviving being married to a Catholic'.

Separate 2 1/2 hour evening exclusively for Catholics marrying any non-Catholics, with a lot of time devoted to answering their questions and concerns, as well as dispelling misinformation and encouraging them to become aware of the values that they do share.

It is raised as an issue where relevant to the couples taking part. It is part of a general discussion of the different gifts each person brings to a marriage.

While not being an integral part of the course, inter-church and interfaith issues emerge when the discussion turns to the topics of family of origin, communication/conflict management or spirituality.

The module on Family of Origin includes opportunities to share beliefs and expectations about marriage and family life including how faith will be lived.

By raising the issue in the sessions on "Communication" and "Managing conflict".

During the section on Spirituality the couples are encouraged and given the opportunity to discuss these matters together.

It is clear from the above that inter-church and, to a much lesser degree, interfaith issues are a relevant item in most of the courses and that the providers are in general well aware of its implications on the future life of the couples and willing to deal with it when the need occurs. Given the relatively high number of inter-church couples who marry in the Catholic Church, it is recommended for consideration here whether the inter-church issue should be given a more prominent, independent and regular place in the curricula. To live unity in diversity and to overcome differences – whether related to gender, provenance, character traits or personal spirituality and religious practice and affiliation – are challenges for most couples today. Insofar, also same-church, Catholic-Catholic couples could benefit from a module on inter-church issues.

Furthermore, introducing such a module would add a properly religious component and thus also strengthen the religious and spiritual profile of Marriage Preparation (see also *VI. What about the religious component in Marriage Preparation?*). In this way, it would be possible to accommodate the striking evidence that couples report a relatively high satisfaction with regard to the perceived effects of the course on improving their understanding of themselves, the partner, the relationship and marriage in general while the results are not that positive when it comes to assess whether the course has improved their view on Catholic faith and the Catholic Church: 62% say that their view of the Catholic faith has remained “about the same” with only 36% reporting that the course has improved their understanding; with regard to their view of the Catholic Church, 47% perceive a positive effect, but another 43% indicate no improvement (Coleman, 2012, 45, fig. 7). To include the inter-church issue on a regular basis in Marriage Preparation would necessarily imply that the distinctiveness of Catholic faith and the Catholic Church are highlighted in comparison with other Christian denominations. When introduced in an open and ecumenical spirit, such an approach would promote Catholic identity while at the same time recognizing the value and the riches of the other Christian traditions and inviting inter-church couples to remain attached to their respective communities. In today’s pluralistic and increasingly multi-religious context Catholic identity can only be affirmed in an open and dialogical way, so this would provide the opportunity to increase the

couples' knowledge and understanding of Catholicism without succumbing to a close-minded reading of its teaching and discipline.

Some of the providers and provider couples are themselves living in inter-church families. It is essential that their experiences and competences are integrated into the course contents. It should be considered whether organizations such as the Association of Interchurch Families can be approached to help elaborate and implement a module on the inter-church issue.

- **Cohabitation**

The 2010 Survey does not provide conclusive evidence on the number and profile of couples who cohabit before marrying in the Catholic Church. The One Plus One assessment only indicates that "the majority of people (60%) had been 'courting' (term used in the survey) for between two and five years inclusive" (Coleman, 2012, 32). The Marriage & Family Life Officer's "Summary of Findings of the Catholic Marriage Preparation Survey 2010" reports 55% cohabiting couples in total and 48.4% when the Catholic-Catholic couples were distilled. This corresponds to other surveys over the past years which come to the conclusion that unmarried cohabitation is common and likely to become the norm also among couples who attend Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church (Knieps-Port le Roi, 2005, 164f.).

It may seem strange to include premarital cohabitation among the factors that feed into the religious profile of couples who attend Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church. However, we do include it here because the growing practice of living together before marriage is in contradiction with and thus indicates a departure from the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church (John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981, nos. 80-81; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1999, no. 2390). It may suffice here to note that Marriage Preparation courses ought to acknowledge the fact that a majority of couples have already shared the experience of living together and thus to provide courses tailored to the specific situation of these couples. It will then depend on the particular stance taken on the national or diocesan level to decide on whether and how the issue is to be addressed theologically and pastorally.

IV. Provider's view on Marriage Preparation and its contribution to the life and mission of the Church

Among the main objectives of the 2010 Survey's objective has been to get a better view both on the profile of the providers and on the shape, contents, and delivery of Marriage Preparation programmes. Providers, however, were also asked how they think their service contributes to the life and mission of the Church. Due to their informal and personal character, the responses given in the open-ended comment field allow an exceptional insight into what moves and motivates the providers in their work. Perhaps more than the synopsis of the topics discussed during the course, they also reflect the overall scope and "spirit" that pervades the courses and thus provide a multifaceted picture of what Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church of England & Wales is actually like. In the following, these responses will be clustered into four main categories. These

clusters will finally be used in the next section to explore whether or not the courses match the expectations and experiences of the couples for whom they are designed.

First of all, it has to be noted, however, that the open-ended responses betray a high degree of personal commitment on the side of the providers. The vast majority are convinced that their input makes a difference and actually contributes to the life and mission of the Church. It seems important that the Church in England & Wales in general and its Bishops in particular become aware of this great potential and commit to searching for appropriate ways to sustain, encourage and promote this ministry.

Unsurprisingly, providers give different reasons for their involvement in Catholic Marriage Preparation. The following comment stands out as it covers almost the whole array of motives that can be found in the responses. It is therefore quoted here by way of introduction before a closer look will allow for a more differentiated view:

The sacrament of marriage is a far-reaching event, not just the actual day of the wedding, but the whole life of the couple, their extended families, their children and grandchildren. We have the privilege of helping the couples to learn more about their relationship, specifically by learning more about communication, conflict resolution, commitment, spirituality, sexuality and self-esteem. This gives them a better chance of surviving the stresses of trying to live a committed relationship which witnesses to the faith and morals of the Catholic Church and amidst a secular society with often diametrically opposed values. Within this nuclear family, their children will have a better chance of growing up in security and trust and hence learning the Catholic lifestyle. Their family life will then be a better witness of the Catholic faith to extended family, friends and acquaintances.

Upon closer look, four main clusters can be distinguished with regard to how providers attach meaning to their work within the Church which we label in the following as church-related, faith/spirituality-related, relationship-related and society-related.

- **Church-related motive**

Many of the providers refer in their comments explicitly to the Church. This is not surprising as the question asked how they estimated their contribution to the life and mission of the Church. Still, the comments reveal a great concern for the visible community of the Church to which Marriage Preparation is supposed to make a specific contribution and within which it is situated. Thus, some providers underline that couples do not marry just for themselves but that they do so within the larger community of the Church which they join thereby.

We hope to give young couples the benefit of our Catholic Marriage Experience and show that their marriage is a journey not just with themselves but with the Lord as part of a Catholic Community.

I see new couples as forming the very cells in the body of the Universal Church. The strength of the body depends on the health of the cells.

The fact of being integrated into the Church results in a double expectation. First, the couples themselves are now supposed to become more involved in the life of the Church and then in turn that same church community is expected to provide all possible help and support to the newlyweds.

I would hope that couples would feel a sense of belonging to the Church and perhaps as a result, would become more involved in the life and mission of the Church.

We help the couples see that they are part of a larger community and that marrying in church means marrying into the church as well, with all the help and support that provides.

The following comment combines both aspects simultaneously:

The preparation of couples for marriage contributes greatly to the life and mission of the church by emphasizing the importance of marriage and also by encouraging couples to take part in the wider activities of the church community. Couples are told we are here to help and support them, answering any questions they may have regarding all aspects of their marriage preparation.

If the church wedding connects with the larger church community, couples should be familiarized with what this Church stands for, mainly in terms of its teaching. Several providers underline that Marriage Preparation makes couples discover the rich teaching of the Church about marriage, sexuality, and the family and thus challenges them to correct the distorted image that often prevails in secular society about the Church and its teaching.

I think that our course helps couples hear the teaching of the Church about marriage, sexuality and the family.

Challenging stereotypical views (by couples) about the Church's attitudes to marriage, fertility and sexuality.

Improving the overall perception of the Church, however, does not only pertain to rectifying misunderstanding of certain aspects of its teaching. Marriage Preparation courses are also supposed to make the couples experience a more friendly face of the Church. Providers strongly believe that a welcoming attitude and their face-to-face contact with the couples can help to present the Church in a different light. They regard themselves in these instances as the outside face of the Church.

I believe that the marriage preparation we provide gives the church an accessible and friendly face... It keeps the church 'real.'

Marriage Preparation, apart from the obvious aims for their relationships and marriages, gives the chance for a welcoming 'first contact' with the church and the opportunity for them to meet the Lord in friendly and non-imposing circumstances.

In this way, Marriage Preparation has a particular role to play in reconnecting those couples who have lost their contact with the Church (differently referred to as “alienated” or “lapsed Catholics”).

With regard to others coming from a different denominational or religious background, it is seen as a “first contact” which should be welcoming and inviting.

It provides a link and a friendly face in the parish for those who haven't been to church for some time.

I think it also helps couples return to the church if they have lapsed and also helps non-Catholic partners learn more about their partner's faith.

I also think that as there are so many mixed faith couples now that this is maybe an opportunity to present a welcoming and friendly face to someone who may not have come into contact with the Catholic Religion that much.

Some providers thus regard Marriage Preparation as an opportunity to “evangelise” and to “witness to Christian life”. While these notions cover different meanings, it should have become clear from the above quoted comments that in this first cluster a strong emphasis is laid on the integrity of the Catholic community of which Marriage Preparation is seen as the outside face and hallmark and which it ultimately has to serve. As one of the providers succinctly expressed when summarizing the meaning of Marriage Preparation: “The community of the church is supported”.

- **Faith/spirituality-related motive**

An equally important number of providers do not see the church community as the primary beneficiary of Marriage Preparation courses but rather the attending couples in their personal faith journey and spirituality. There is of course some overlap and blending between the Church-related and the faith-related motives which makes it difficult to adequately differentiate between both categories. Several providers for instance say that the course helps “*to strengthen the sacrament and vocation of marriage*” and “*to live out the Gospel message in adherence to the teaching of the church*”. As is clear in particular from the second response, they do not always dissociate the personal practice of faith and of a sacramental life from its contribution to the larger Church community. However, one can single out a number of comments which regard it as the primary objective of the courses to help “*people with their faith journey as they celebrate the Sacrament of Marriage*”.

Reaffirms the couple's faith and commitment to each other and the importance of the sacrament – for God's blessing and grace.

The mission of the Church is to spread the Gospel message of God's love. By giving couples an opportunity to reflect on the sacrament that they are about to receive, we equip couples with the necessary strategies and tools to support each other and remain committed to their vows, even when the going gets tough. Our courses ultimately strengthen married couples and consequently, strengthen families.

Other answers go further in specifying what the faith life of married couples concretely includes and why Marriage Preparation may be particularly helpful in that regard. A recurring issue here is that the

courses draw the couples' attention to the fact that the most important thing in marriage is not the wedding day but the years of shared life that come afterwards.

Enabling couples to think of their long term future as opposed to the wedding day and to increase the chance of the marriage surviving the pressure and demands of modern life.

Because the sacrament of marriage is not just on the wedding day but is ongoing in the life of the couple and is a sign of the love between Christ and his people.

It is therefore important that the couple takes some time out from the busy time of preparation for the wedding to reflect seriously on what trajectory they are about to embark.

It enables young couples to think about marriage and how to deal with problems at a time when most couples are only thinking about the wedding service and celebrations.

The course provides the opportunity for couples to take time out of preparing for their 'wedding' to really focus on the 'marriage' that lies ahead and in doing so to consider issues and questions which they may not have given serious thought to before.

Many providers also have a clear vision about what couples should reflect on in particular. For them the sense of commitment, the meaning of the promise, and the nature of the vow are key features that give real significance to the wedding day far beyond a good venue for family and friends or just for photos.

This preparation enables couples to better understand the content of their commitment to each other and also the values that this commitment involves. It enables the mission of the church to reach out to everyday life for couples and then to families.

As part of our church community it is very important that the couples entering marriage are aware of the importance of the promises they are making to each other and that our whole community want them to have a successful and happy marriage. It also helps the couples understand the meaning of the vows they take and gives them support and strategies in dealing with the difficult times they will encounter throughout their lifetime together.

I feel it really helps the couple to explore why they have chosen a Church wedding. It also gets them to explore the meaning of saying the words 'I Do' in front of God. Therefore, it helps them to really look at their Church wedding and its meaning, rather than it's a good venue for photos etc.

In brief, Marriage Preparation in this second cluster is about enabling marrying couples to tap the spiritual resources that lie at the basis of their personal commitment and find their expression in the sacramental celebration of their marriage. Providers see it as their specific task to help couples become aware of this spiritual potential and thus increase their chances to have happy and successful marriages.

- **Relationship-related motive**

That future spouses may have stable, happy, and successful marriages and that Marriage Preparation may contribute to it, is a general concern of most providers. While for some faith and spirituality

have a role to play in this, others focus more exclusively on improving the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the partners. This concern for relational issues is clearly reflected in the main areas which the provider survey lists as topics discussed during Marriage Preparation. Among the five top topics, which all deal with changes and pressures that may arise in the course of couple relationships, interpersonal communication and conflict management feature as those which providers cover with strongest emphasis (Coleman, 2012, 69f.). This suggests that along with most non-religious Marriage Preparation and Relationship Education programmes, the overall focus of Catholic Marriage Preparation courses is “towards the coping skills to sustain and preserve relationship harmony” (Coleman, 2012, 70). As becomes clear from some of the responses given in the open-ended comment field of the provider survey, several providers do not have any difficulty in seeing therein a specific contribution also to the mission and life of the Church.

By helping couples to enter marriage better prepared for the reality of married life, hopefully more stable marriages will result, for the benefit of the Church community and society as a whole.

We are working to strengthen relationships and reduce the misunderstandings which damage love and intimacy between married partners and their families. We are supporting Christian marriage and family as best we can.

The aim of the course is to help couples strengthen their relationship by looking at some of the key features...If couples have a better understanding of what they are doing they are, we believe, much more likely to foster a long lasting relationship which accords with Church beliefs in the permanence of marriage.

This ministry involves helping couples to focus together on their relationship and to explore the vital aspects (especially communication and conflict resolution) which can be strengthened as they prepare to make their huge commitment through the Sacrament of Matrimony.

While no response was found complaining about an imbalance of relational aspects to the disadvantage of religious components, only one provider did not understand the question (“How does your ministry preparing couples for marriage contribute to the life and mission of the Church?”) and made a clear distinction between the faith-related and the relationship-related purpose while regarding the latter as the most natural component of the course:

A bit of a vague question this! We aim to help the couples develop their relationship skills and so survive the ups and downs of married life. Although we discuss marriage as a Sacrament, refer to the bible and pray, the course we run does not involve catechesis.

On the whole, however, providers felt that enhancing relationship quality and equipping couples with the necessary skills and tools to sustain a relationship over time is a major concern for the Catholic community and contributes, albeit indirectly, to its mission.

- **Society-related motive**

A fourth and last cluster includes comments in which the Church’s care for the stability of marital relations by means of Marriage Preparation is supposed to contribute to the common good and to

the broader society. Providers in this category refer to marriage serving as a bedrock for society and point to the well-being of children, families, and the larger community as a whole which is greatly served by strong marriages.

Marriage is at the core of family and community and forms the bedrock for society to flourish. The Catholic Church provides the foundation for the values and behaviours that support marriage. My part in marriage preparation gives me the opportunity to give something back to my community within the Church, my parish and adjacent parishes. It enables me to encourage and provide some steer for young couples entering into marriage, hopefully to contribute to a more harmonious and successful relationship and to bring children into a loving and nurturing environment.

I think that a stable, happy relationship in marriage is the best basis for children to grow up in. A secure relationship, whether as a childless couple, parents or children, enables people to serve the Church, their community and society better than an insecure one.

It gives support and encouragement to couples preparing for marriage. The day gives the opportunity to focus on the importance of marriage as strong marriages are good for families.

Because marriage matters – one-to-one lifelong relationships have been shown to make the family environment healthier & wealthier. Healthy families give children roots & wings. Roots to be safe and be able to grow as individuals. Wings to fly.

Marriage Preparation serves a variety of purposes which makes it a valuable endeavour for its providers within the Catholic community. For some, it is a direct service to the Church community and contributes to its sacramental life, whether oriented towards strengthening the Catholic Church in times of an overall decline of institutional religion or emanating from a strong belief in the sanctity of the marital sacrament. Others see it as a way to present a more welcoming face of the Church and thus to reach out more effectively to alienated Catholics and non-Catholics. Some providers are convinced that the couples' relationship will profit from uncovering the spiritual dimensions of lifelong commitment while others believe that coping strategies and relational skills have to be learned in the first instance. And again others see their contribution to the life and mission of the Church as a contribution to the larger society and think of happy children, healthy families, and thriving communities as primary beneficiaries of the courses they provide.

We can draw a first conclusion from this analysis and then end with a recommendation.

We may conclude that the plurality of views on and objectives attached to Marriage Preparation by its providers reflects a broad scope which seems inherent to and characteristic for marriage preparation in the Catholic Church. Whatever the personal preferences or different accentuations expressed by the providers and clustered here in four main categories may be, *all of them* can be linked in a plausible way to the mission and life of the Church and none of them is necessarily exclusive of any other. In other words, the variety of perspectives and purposes is not only a theologically legitimate expression of the broad scope of Catholic Marriage Preparation but also indispensable for it to realize its rich potential within the Catholic community and beyond.

Furthermore, the variety of motives and emphases on the side of the providers sheds light on and partly accounts for the heterogeneity of Marriage Preparation programmes in terms of their contents and possibly also of their shape and delivery. If the prospect of developing a standardized set of content guidelines is envisaged (Coleman, 2012), care should be taken that such a core curriculum, next to being flexible enough to be adapted to and tailored to individual couples' needs, also incorporates the key objectives which Marriage Preparation has to serve and which have been identified here as:

- To profile marriage as a sacrament and vocation within the Church;
- To give witness of Christian life to couples;
- To connect couples with the local and larger church community;
- To welcome couples who have lost contact with the Church and to reach out to partners who are not Catholic;
- To nourish the couples' journey of faith and uncover the spiritual resources of Christian marriage;
- To help couples understand the meaning of commitment;
- To help couples strengthen their relationship and prevent marital breakdown;
- To affirm marriage as a basis for a healthy family life and thriving communities.

V. Couples' expectations and experiences with regard to Marriage Preparation

After having gained insight in the preceding section into what providers expect from Marriage Preparation, we turn now to the couples' expectations and experiences with regard to the courses they have attended. Both perspectives will be compared in order to assess whether or not the courses match the expectations of the couples.

The quantifiable data set analysed from the couples' survey reveals clearly that most couples experiencing Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church report a high rate of satisfaction. The four questions which indicated the course value (referring to the quality of the facilitators, of the course content, the value of course to marriage, and the overall experience) were all rated very highly with 45.9% of the respondents rating their overall experience as "excellent" (Coleman, 2012, 49). While the couples' feedback shared by some of the providers in an open-ended comment field of the provider survey (cf. Response to Question 21: share feedback received from couples) largely confirms these survey findings, the additional comments in the couples' survey (cf. Response to Question 24: additional feedback) contain also some negative feedback either related to the quality of the facilitators or of the course content. However, a caveat with regard to the relevance of these single comments seems adequate here for two reasons: first, couples who are dissatisfied with the course will be more likely to express their discontent in the questionnaire rather than to the providers directly so that the couples' survey may be skewed here by a disproportionate number of dissatisfied attendants; secondly, the couples reporting dissatisfaction seem to contradict each other with regard to the cause of their discontent: some find the courses simply "*not Catholic enough*" while others see them as "*the brain-children of pious-folk who feel the need to be 'doing something for the Church'*" (from couples survey). The equal proportion of comments that complain about either "too much

religion” or “not enough religion” will deserve further attention when we analyse the couples’ satisfaction with the course content.

- **Quality of providers**

There is overall evidence that the providers of Marriage Preparation are qualified by the couples as both competent and professional and open, welcoming and friendly.

The course leaders were very professional but fully approachable & really believed in what they were teaching.

All facilitators/instructors were friendly and welcoming. They were open and encouraged discussion.

Although couples do not express it that way, it can be assumed that they experience the friendly and welcoming face of the Church which many providers intend to bring to life. Recent research in Germany among alienated Catholics affirms that when they turn to the Church for the celebration of rites of passage such as the birth of a child, marriage, or death, they find themselves face to face with an interlocutor who no longer corresponds to the image they used to have of a church representative as being authoritarian and demanding (Först & Kügler, 2006). The Church thus presents itself in a new and unexpected way via its current personnel.

- **Anticipated versus real experience of courses**

There is similar evidence with regard to the expectations which couples had before attending Marriage Preparation and what they really experienced during the course. A great majority reports that they were sceptical from the outset but had to revise their view during and after the course.

I was reluctant to attend but I am really glad we did because the day was so informative and enjoyable. I think that all couples should be asked to attend a day like this.

My partner & I were extremely sceptical of the course & its content before attendance. We were both really shocked how relevant it was to us & to our marriage.

Providers largely confirm this when sharing feedbacks from the couples they saw in the course.

Most said they didn't know what to expect but have been pleasantly surprised and have found it a really useful experience.

Generally speaking, they do not want to come to a preparation day, so we have to make their wedding date conditional upon their coming to the preparation day. However, they do find that once they have come it is of great benefit to them.

Although the present Survey does not provide conclusive evidence of it, there is reason to assume that couples experience the same discrepancy between anticipated and real experience when it comes to the specifically religious components of the course. Wonka (2004) reports that couples who rated the topic of marriage as a sacrament has having low value before the course, found it most

interesting and relevant, retrospectively. He concludes that the providers have obviously succeeded in presenting the topic in an appealing way.

- **Course content**

Most couples describe the course using the following adjectives: informative, enlightening, interesting, thought-provoking, supportive, constructive, useful.

When it comes to specify the overall positive experience, couples point to the *relational components* of the courses in particular. Communication, conflict management, and commitment are the fields in which the course has been valuable for many of them as the following responses (from the feedback shared in the provider survey) show.

If I'd known what I've learned today it could have saved my first marriage. It's really made us think about our relationship.

Helped us to explore the potential areas which could cause problems in our marriage and ways in which to deal with them.

...at the end of the course they [couples] believed it was very worthwhile and enhanced the depth of knowledge of their partner and found the topics of communication, commitment and conflict management very useful.

Some responses can be seen as a direct positive feedback on what providers have set as objectives for their courses. This is the case when couples confirm that the courses have helped them make time to reflect on their relationship and commitment. Several of them indicate that the course provided the opportunity to talk about issues which they would not otherwise have discussed with their partner. The following examples are again taken from the provider survey:

Couples are always amazed at the level of discussion they have and no matter how long they have been together there is always something new that appears. They really appreciate the fact that time is devoted to their relationship and so can be very honest in their approach.

The most frequent responses include: 1. Valuable to take time out of busy lives to reflect on their relationships 2. Made couple think about issues they had not sat down & discussed previously.

Another aspect mentioned in the couples' feedback (this time from the couple survey) is that the course has reassured them in their relationship and reaffirmed their decision to get married with their partner.

...while the course did not necessarily affect our relationship, it did reassure us that the steps we already take to work on our relationship are worthwhile and helpful.

The Engaged Encounters weekend was a very valuable weekend re-affirming that we were doing the right thing in getting married and bringing us closer together in that we realised just how well we knew each other.

These responses correspond with the findings that couples rate the perceived effects of Marriage Preparation rather highly when considered in terms of the relationship. 57% perceived that the course had improved their understanding of “Yourself, partner, relationship” (Coleman, 2012, 44f.).

But what then about the **religious components** of the course which do not score so highly in the couples’ perception? As we have mentioned above, only 36% found that their understanding of the Catholic faith had improved after the course while 61% reported that it had not. Furthermore, some couples are clearly less satisfied with the course, the majority area of dissatisfaction being the limited content attached to the Catholic faith. Some examples from the couple survey:

I had hoped that the course would focus more on our Catholic faith, and the strength and comfort we would always feel from God.

God was barely mentioned, which I find very upsetting.

Marriage Care was not Catholic. It was in fact a-religious. That is not the right atmosphere to provide useful information to catholic couples who believe in God and (what they know of) the Church's teaching.

Given the overall positive responses corroborated by the general findings of the survey, the One Plus One assessment concludes that this striking difference “could be due to the different approach and experience of the course providers, or indicative of the varied content and ways in which the course is delivered” (Coleman, 2012, 47). An additional explanation, however, could be that couples do have different expectations with regard to Marriage Preparation. A pertinent observation by some of the providers is that couples have even contradicting views about the religious course contents.

...common responses include: ‘too much religion’ and ‘not enough religion’ in about equal proportion.

Apart from mostly very positive feedback, there may be comments such as: ‘I would have liked to have more church teaching, less church teaching, a longer/shorter day, I loved the Mass, why did we have to have a Mass - it makes me feel uncomfortable’. Negative comments, such as ‘feeling uncomfortable with Mass’, ‘too long a day’, ‘too much Church’, ‘not enough Church’ usually come from one person or couple, very seldom two (on a total of 10 or 11 couples).

Such “extreme” expectations on both sides of the spectrum may indeed be the exception rather than the norm among couples attending the courses as the following observation of a provider also confirms:

There are always a few couples each year that wish to be told about fertility and the teachings of the church about sexuality. We do not cover these subjects in detail as the feedback we have had over the years has expressly asked us to remove it. We try to strike a balance between the practicing Catholics and those partners who are not Catholic or who are other/no faiths.

Confronted with such heterogeneity of couples and their diverging expectations, the pastoral practice should indeed look for viable options along the lines the aforementioned provider suggests. As a consequence of the current development in the field of religion and its impact on the composition of the Catholic community in most countries in Western Europe, Marriage Preparation

courses also in the future will have to address a diverse audience representing a broad spectrum ranging from fundamentalist Catholics to nominal Christians who have only sporadic or no contact at all with the Church and its faith life. In this situation, a middle way between doctrinal instruction on the one side and a purely secular, immanent discourse on the other side seems to impose itself. The intuition of Marriage Preparation providers to offer a “good mix” of both relational and religious components is therefore a recommendable pastoral strategy which is already appreciated by many couples:

I liked the practical nature of the course & thought it was a very good balance of religious & non-religious information.

We liked the mix of religion and relationship stuff. The balance was about right.

There is, however, also some risk here in that Marriage Preparation courses could degenerate into an assemblage of modules which couples may freely choose from according to their personal interest or preference – a malaise which Marriage Preparation courses have suffered from already in the past when offering largely unconnected components of doctrinal, pedagogical, legal and medical instruction. What would be needed instead is a theological and pastoral rationale which works towards an integration of both relational and religious components. In this respect, the 2010 Survey reveals a certain discrepancy between the intention and the actual practice of Marriage Preparation providers which could be accountable for the impression of some couples that the courses do not sufficiently deal with God and faith issues. We will address this in the last section.

VI. What about the religious component in Marriage Preparation? A theological note and some pastoral recommendations

A major result of the Survey has been to clarify that the overall focus of Marriage Preparation courses is towards equipping couples with the coping skills to sustain and preserve relationship harmony, with the five topics of “interpersonal communication”, “conflict management”, “factors that sustain and protect relationships”, “pressures that can occur during the stages and changes”, and “commitment and work-like balance” on top of the list of areas that are discussed with strong emphasis (ranging from 98.2% to 92.5%; Coleman, 2012, Tab. 4, 69). Compared to the relational topics, the religious components are less present in the courses, but still dealt with by the majority of providers: marriage as a sacrament (discussed by 85.3%), marital spirituality (84.4%), rite of marriage (75.6%), Christian life and service as a couple/family (65.7%). One may add to these two further topics with at least an implicit religious significance: the meaning of the marriage vows (an item that scores rather high with 92.0% of the courses taking it up) and – due to the Catholic Church’s particular stance and focus on it – fertility awareness and family planning (with only 53.1% of the courses discussing it).

A point of particular interest here is the “referral to others for support” column in Table 4 (Coleman, 2012, 69). While the relational topics get, in general, very low scores here (ranging from 0.0% for commitment and work-life balance to 1.4% for conflict management), the picture changes when it comes to the religious issues. The highest score here is for 16.9% of the providers referring fertility and family planning items to others. This may not be surprising though, since some groups and

organizations (mostly within the Catholic Church) have taken on the ministry to instruct couples on the different methods of Natural Family Planning and may also offer their services within the context of Marriage Preparation (no further information could be found on this in the Survey). More strikingly, however, 12.9% of the courses do not deal with the rite of marriage and another 10.6% refer to “others” for the issue of the marital sacrament. Lower, but still significant scores are for marital spirituality which by 7.1% of the providers is “outsourced” and Christian life and service as a couple/family being referred to others by 6.5%. As far as the meaning of the marriage vows is concerned, still 4.2% say that they rely on external support which is a higher score than for any of the other non-religious topics.

There may be a plausible explanation for the fact that providers (80% of whom are lay persons) refer the discussion of the rite of marriage to the priest (or deacon) who will normally preside over the marriage celebration and therefore is also supposed to prepare the liturgy together with the individual couple. However, it remains striking that a considerable number of providers do not directly tackle the issues of sacrament, spirituality, Christian life, and marriage vows which undoubtedly belong to the core issues of a Catholic Marriage Preparation. This evidence is all the more surprising if one confronts it with the motives which providers themselves gave for their involvement and among which featured: to profile marriage as a sacrament within the Church; to give witness of Christian life to couples, to nourish the couples’ journey of faith and uncover the spiritual resources of Christian marriage; and to help couples understand the meaning of commitment.

The survey reveals a certain inconsistency here which could be indicative of the fact that some providers feel some reluctance to enter into the fields of theology, spirituality, and liturgy which they possibly do not find themselves sufficiently competent in and/or which are still claimed by the clergy. This may also explain why 61% of the attending couples felt that the course had not advanced their understanding of the Catholic faith and a minority showed themselves dissatisfied with the low spiritual profile of the course.

From a theological point of view, there are good reasons to work towards an integration of relational and religious dimensions of the couple relationship. If Marriage Preparation is not to fall apart into a religious module with a narrow focus on abstract faith instruction on the one side and a relational segment irrespective of the spiritual depth of committed love on the other, both components should be made mutually permeable. To achieve this, providers should be formed in both fields and treat religious and spiritual aspects with the same attention and concern they dedicate to relationship enhancement. The following recommendations are meant to support this objective:

- As mentioned earlier, a promising strategy to sharpen the religious profile of Marriage Preparation in general would be to systematically incorporate *inter-church issues* into the course content. This would not only accommodate the needs of individual couples in a country where almost half of the marriages are between a Catholic and a non-Catholic partner. It would also help to familiarize the Catholic couples with specific religious beliefs and practices in their own tradition, to look at them in light of the factual religious pluralism, and to adopt a dialogical way of dealing with differences.
- Marriage Preparation providers should be encouraged and enabled to discuss the issue of the *sacrament of marriage* starting from their own faith experiences rather than from sophisticated theological expertise. There are examples of good practices in other countries in which providers

have brought up the issue and succeeded in communicating its relevance for the couple relationship. Inviting couples to engage in a joint search for the meaning of the sacrament seems to be a more promising approach here than teaching prefixed doctrinal truths.

- Providers in the present Survey have given proof of a sound intuition when highlighting the relevance of the *marital vow*. They invite the couples to realize that the sense of commitment is what gives real significance to the church wedding far beyond a good venue for family and friends. The meaning of the promise and the nature of the vow should have a central place in all Marriage Preparation programmes. It is here that relational and spiritual dimensions of the conjugal union interpenetrate and interact with each other. To make couples understand this nodal point of their relationship is probably the best way to help couples work on their relationship and (re)discover its transcendent dimension.

- Equal priority should be given to talking about the *rite of marriage* which the couples are going to celebrate as completion of the Marriage Preparation. It is astonishing that the marital rite does not find any relevant mention in the provider survey and is absent also from the couples' responses. Recent research though increasingly highlights the significance of the ritual, particularly for couples who have little contact with the Church and its practices (Först & Kügler, 2006; Robinson, 2007; Fopp, 2007; Merzyn, 2011). An earlier study on Marriage Preparation from the Netherlands and Flanders confirmed a strong desire on the side of the couples to talk about the marriage celebration which made the researcher conclude that discussing the liturgy provides an excellent opportunity to draw attention to the religious dimension of marriage (Pieper, 1988; 2003). The question here is whether current Marriage Preparation in the UK is sufficiently aware of the catechetical and pastoral potential of the wedding celebration. If it is true that contemporary couples put their hope in some kind of "transformative power" to support their longing and engagement for a stable and happy marriage (Chappell, 2009), the marital rite with its complementary elements of human promise and divine blessing is the right place to raise the issue of divine provision for the human endeavour of lifelong loving (Fuchs, 2009).

These suggestions are related to the religious contents. We do, however, concur with the conclusion in the One Plus One report that given the couples' overall satisfaction and – to be added here – the providers' overall qualified vision and experience in this field, future action to improve Marriage Preparation should focus on the delivery rather than on the course contents itself (Coleman, 2012, 116). With the exception of including inter-church issues more systematically, the recommendation here is not to substantially enlarge or modify the existing religious and spiritual component, but to enhance its status and sharpen its contours next to and in connection with the relational issues. On a more practical level, this would possibly imply a stronger focus on theological, spiritual, and pastoral formation of the providers. More importantly, however, awareness has to be created among the clergy and lay providers alike that the sacramental, spiritual, and liturgical aspects are an integral part of any Catholic Marriage Preparation and should therefore not be left over to the prenuptial inquiry or the discussion of the liturgy between the individual couple and the priest. Clergy should therefore be encouraged to take advantage of the wealth of experience, competence, and enthusiasm of qualified (married) lay providers in their congregations and to determine in close consultation and cooperation with them how they fit into this common endeavour of the Catholic community to provide couples the best possible support for their marriages.

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