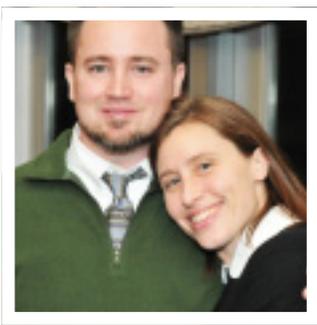


Greek Orthodox Church,
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EVANGELIZING WITH A BEAUTIFUL, PERSUASIVE INVITATION

BY JOSH AND STACEY NOEM



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The most common question we receive when people learn that we have been doing marriage preparation for 14 years is: "Have you ever recommended that a couple not get married?" Admittedly, it would be an extreme move to suggest that a couple might want to reconsider their decision to bind themselves together for life. For us to make that suggestion would necessitate a commensurately extreme situation.

Have we ever recommended a couple not get married? The short answer is, "almost."

Several years ago while sitting with a couple during a marriage preparation session, it came to light that one of them consistently used marijuana.

It was not news to the bride-to-be, nor did it seem like a taboo subject when brought up in our presence. Our strategy in the moment was not to pass judgment on the situation ourselves, but to help the couple talk through the issue so that they could align their views and be of one mind.

The user was not abashed, ashamed or private about his drug use. He said that he used marijuana recreationally, as a way to blow off steam. He said lots of people drink beer to relax, and he was just using a different means to the same end. He said that he could quit whenever he wanted to, but that he had not yet found a compelling reason to stop using. He was committed to not progressing to harder drugs.

His partner was not self-conscious in the conversation, and was not surprised by what he said. However, she did seem to experience his drug use as a source of tension in the relationship and it appeared as though she had not yet asserted those feelings. We created space for her to articulate her feelings clearly. When he was high, she said, he was not himself, and she didn't like being around him. She did not want to use drugs herself, and so she felt left out of that part of their life together.

After opening up the conversation with them as much as possible, making sure they both had room to listen to their beloved's concerns and be heard by them, they were at a standoff. Each of them had their say, but there was no clear way forward. For us to demand a resolution would have rung false—they needed to find a way through this for themselves.

What should a minister do in that situation? We opted to step out of the way and make room for the Holy Spirit. We strongly suggested they make time and space to intentionally work through the issue. We gave them some communication tools on how to sort out their feelings and reflect deeply as individuals and then come back as a couple to discuss it candidly.

Sadly, we did not leave this meeting optimistic. Typically, during our debriefing following a marriage preparation meeting, we find that our conversation is uplifting, a fun exchange appreciating what makes them “tick.” We recognized the magnitude of the situation before us and realized that, especially given her feelings, if he did not come to a decision to stop using, this marriage likely could not work. If they remained divided on this issue, especially after fully hearing each other out, resentment would build on both ends, which is the seed of a failed marriage.

Further, in our role with them, the responsibility rested squarely on us to let them know what was at stake. So we decided that at our next meeting, if he was firm in his conviction to keep using, we needed to lay out the consequences they would likely face as a couple.

In the intervening weeks, we prayed for the couple and prepared ourselves for the conversation that potentially needed to happen. The next time they sat on our couch, we made a brief bit of small talk and then asked, “So how did your conversation go?”

She responded, “Great! He's given it up.” Both of our heads pivoted as though watching a tennis match to look at him. He nodded profusely and said, “I figured she is much more important than using that stuff.”

We managed to cover our astonishment fairly well in the moment and did some good ministerial affirmation of their choices. But internally, we were a bit awed. We had witnessed a moment of grace active in the lives of these two people. In a seemingly insurmountable situation, the Holy Spirit had found a way through for this couple. It was unexpected and seemingly unlikely. And we were in a privileged position to witness it.

Preparing couples for marriage is privileged work. We have the opportunity to speak with men and women at a pivotal point in their formation for vocation. Often, ministers refer to marriages and baptisms as “moments of return,” touchstone moments when those who may not be fully practicing their faith return to the Church for the landmark events of life. The question is if that return will be a short visit, lasting only as long as the six months leading up to their wedding date, or if it will be a deeper encounter in which they recognize that our faith can speak to the deepest longing in their lives.

We as ministers must offer these couples an invitation that is both beautiful and persuasive.

How couples come . . .

The couples coming to us for marriage preparation fall into three general categories of faith practice: about 25% are committed to their faith. These are the couples where one or both of them may have been heavily involved in retreats, small faith groups, liturgy or the like in college. If they have been out of school for a while, they have become involved in their parish and are likely leading some kind of ministry there. These couples come to us excited and eager to engage the marriage preparation process and whatever it may hold.

The middle set of couples comprises about 50% of the couples we see. Generally they might be termed “definitively faithful,” meaning both of them are committed to having some faith in their lives. How they engage their faith could vary broadly—as could their denominational background, if any—but usually includes regular attendance at church. These couples come to us with curiosity about what the process may hold and a general apprehension toward the possibility of questions regarding sex.

The final set of couples we see makes up the remaining 25%. One or both of them may not appear to have any discernable personal faith life. They often prompt the question, “Why do you want a Catholic wedding?” When they come, one of the partners might seem a bit defensive and wary of the process. Sometimes these couples are the most exciting to work with and often they exhibit the greatest movement from one meeting to the next.

Regardless of the nuances in their faith background and practice, though, the preponderance of couples come sharing a significant amount in common. Namely, in the midst of their busy lives they have all added an extensive “to-do” list of wedding planning logistics.

A Beautiful, Persuasive Invitation . . .

What does it mean to offer a beautiful, persuasive invitation to couples such as these?

For an invitation to be *beautiful*, it must be life-giving. The first thing to account for is context. When couples enter an office for a marriage preparation meeting, it has to be a space that is different from every other “wedding planning” meeting. Couples meet with photographers, caterers, cake designers, dress makers, videographers, musicians, tuxedo renters, building managers, gift registry clerks, and wedding coordinators. All of these meetings take on a very specific transactional tone. The minister must differentiate a marriage preparation meeting from the myriad of other logistical meetings a couple has to engage in order to plan the wedding day.

The marriage preparation meeting should be a space where there is plenty of time. No one can feel rushed or the weight of an agenda to get through. We make a practice of assuring couples of this soon after they arrive and their relief is palpable, if not conscious. Often they involuntarily exhale. We observe their shoulders and overall posture relax. There is a peacefulness to our gathering, our sitting and sharing. This is a space for real dialogue with substance that touches on the depths of their personalities and relationship. We want to begin a conversation that will endure well beyond our time together. The marriage preparation meeting is not a space where a sequence of decisions needs to be made in a limited amount of time. As ministers, we have no more important place to be than right here in this moment and we invite them into that same disposition.

Marriage preparation programs can take on any number of incarnations from one day “Pre-Cana” experiences to weekend-long Engaged Encounter

retreats, from individual meetings with a host couple to group Evenings for the Engaged. We know that the quality of any given approach varies broadly from one program to the next. Our experience tells us that the greater the individual attention a couple receives the greater their sense of connectedness to the Church.

The reason for this has to do with relationship. Those preparing for marriage are invited as a couple, together as a unit, into personal relationship with the Body of Christ. Regardless of their faith background, be they Catholic, Christian or other people of good will, we have an opportunity as a Church to put our best selves forward. That hospitality is easier to extend by giving a couple our full personal attention in a comfortable, private space, than it is when speaking from a podium to 10 or 20 couples sitting at tables in a church hall.

For an invitation to be *persuasive*, it needs to carry the weight of witness value. We cannot speak with integrity into the lives of couples something that is foreign to us. To ask a couple to share their reality and then to name the grace that we see in that reality, we must have already seen, experienced and named grace in our own relationships. To be compelling, we must know, love and serve God in and through our relationships in order to call others to the beauty of making God known, loved and served in theirs. Priests or single lay ministers are not at a disadvantage here because they, too, can have insight into marriage dynamics if they attend to integrity and candor in their own personal relationships.

We must also be mindful of our tone. If we have experienced the grace we are naming for those we serve, we need to communicate the fullness of that experience: the life, peace and joy present therein. We need to avoid any tone that sounds as though



Marc Chagall,
Song of Songs V,
1954-66

we are evaluating or judging a couple. We have an extraordinarily compelling message, but if those we serve cannot hear it, it does not matter. We have all been in a classroom, a lecture or a meeting where a speaker is absolutely convicted about what they are saying but communicates it in a heavy manner, devoid of life. The weight of their tone suppresses the beauty and persuasion inherent in their message. Essentially, they are allowing themselves to get in the way of the Spirit. All that their interlocutors hear is the person in front of them speaking, not the Spirit speaking a word of life *through* that person.

For our message to be hearable we have to communicate it with the fullness of joy and life that it carries. This is not to suggest that individual ministers act outside of their natural dispositions in favor of appearing artificially happy. To the contrary, we must act and speak with integrity. That is equally true if our personalities are naturally introverted and sober, or if we are more extroverted and exuberant. Regardless of our individual personality types, if we are speaking a word of grace that has given us life, we

must allow that word to be spoken in the fullness of life. Couples can tell the difference.

In order to offer an invitation that is both beautiful and persuasive, our framework is no different from that of Christ himself: personal relationship. This invitation is perfectly depicted in the Emmaus story. Joining the traveling disciples on their journey, Jesus listened to them, and discovered what was going on in their lives in order to share it with them. Jesus then interpreted the content of their experience in light of sacred text, and the exchange led them to a personal encounter with Christ in the breaking of the bread. There are three key actions here: listening, breaking open sacred text, and encountering Christ.

Our framework when we sit down with a couple looks similar. We listen to the content of their lives, we break open the sacred text of their relationship through the use of an inventory, and we point them to an encounter with Christ through their marriage by exploring sacramental theology.

We Listen...

Most often our time with a couple takes place over the course of three to five meetings. We avoid arbitrarily scheduling a fixed number of meetings in order to leave room for the unique incarnation that is each couple's relationship to unfold.

The content of our meetings is determined by the couple's response to a relationship inventory. The inventory is a series of questions that a couple answers in multiple-choice format to report on the state of their relationship and how much they have discussed and agree on major themes such as finances, parenting, extended families, roles and household duties, communication styles, etc. There are several types of inventory—we use the version supplied by FOCCUS, Inc., which shapes questions and chooses themes based on research on marriages.

The inventory is not a test—there is no evaluation attached to their responses. A couple who agrees on less than half of the inventory simply needs more assistance in initiating those conversations. A couple who agrees on the majority of the inventory has more experience with discussing these in-depth themes, but can always benefit from refining their approach.

All of these factors and more determine the number of meetings we use to work through the inventory responses in which they are not in agreement. The couple's communication dynamic may be quick and concise or it may be more deliberative and gradual. The couple may be highly extroverted and talk a great deal or they may be more introverted and reserved in their comments. Whatever and however they are, we make a space where they are invited and welcome to be fully themselves.

Our initial meeting with a couple is all about establishing relationship and process. We try to be as welcoming as possible and set them at ease (this often involves the offer of hot beverages and small talk). We frame their expectations by sharing briefly about how the process will unfold. We offer some printed resources, introduce ourselves and say a word about confidentiality. All of this takes no more than five minutes. Then it is their turn—we invite them to share their experience with us by talking about the love, joy, and grace that is active in their lives through their relationship.

To encourage a couple to dive in to sharing about themselves on a fairly personal level we ask questions that capitalize on story-telling: How did you first meet? Do you remember initial impressions of your beloved? What was your first “date” like? How did you get engaged? How did your families react to the news? It is usually easy for a couple to share the story of their relationship—everyone has a narrative of how things went.

Our questioning serves multiple purposes at the same time. In addition to getting them used to personal sharing, it helps for them to hear their own voices in the space before we get into anything too intimate. The narrative style of communication assists us in learning and retaining details about them. Finally, in listening to their story, we discover how this couple works together and what values figure prominently in their experience. We also can usually get a feel for the “personality” of the couple—how they use humor, how deeply reflective they are about their experience and how they express and receive affection. Just as on the road to Emmaus, when we listen to a couple open up about their experience, we discover what makes their hearts burn.

We Break Open Sacred Texts . . .

Couples coming for Catholic marriage preparation, no matter what their faith background or practice, are not blank slates. They have already met grace in their lives. Additionally, they are adults making an adult commitment. They are agents in their own salvation. It behooves us to treat them as such lest they feel like children coming to a religious education class.

The sacred text we seek to break open with them is the text of their lives. Whether they have the eyes to see and the words to name the grace that is present varies broadly from couple to couple and individual to individual. We rely on the stories they have shared and the inventory they have completed to shape the content of our shared “exegesis.”

Here we transition to a more explicitly ministerial role. Up until this moment we have not done, said, or nor invited reflection in our meetings that differs significantly from what might take place with a secular counselor. In some ways that is appropriate. As Edward Schillebeeckx once said of preaching: “Speak the name of God neither too soon, nor too late.”

Just like Jesus on the road to Emmaus, in order to communicate God’s presence in human activity, we need to know our couple’s story, being especially attentive to the way they tell it. Then, as we begin working through the product of their inventory, we can begin to acknowledge and name the grace present and active in their lives. We do not hold up an overtly religious theme to conform their experience to it. Rather we invite them to dig more deeply into their experience and see for themselves if they recognize Christ active within it.

At this stage of the process, that may look like a conversation about struggling with communication,

reconciling disparate hobbies or deciding how to deal with challenging family members. As we unfold their experience, hearing how they broke through their struggle, we listen for specific movements. Generally, we find one person dying to self for the good of the couple, which resulted in new life in their relationship. This is Christ present. We may or may not choose to name it so explicitly at this point. It all depends on the couple.

The process reaches a culmination when we connect their experience to sacramental theology. Just as the disciples at Emmaus knew Jesus in the breaking of the bread, we seek to invite couples to a personal Encounter with Christ through contemplating and appropriating the Sacrament of their Marriage.

We point them to an encounter with Christ . . .

To impart sacramental theology to a young couple with a thousand tasks on their wedding planning “to-do” list is not an easy charge. We have been tempted to give it up altogether, and rest in the knowledge that we have simply tried to offer a fully human preparation: we gave them the best communication tools and we talked through the topics that usually cause the most trouble in marriages.

On the other hand, like any minister, we have also made the mistake of revealing the divine dimensions of marriage in theological terms that are too distant from a couple’s experience for them to choose to reach for it, let alone grasp it and own it for themselves.

In the one case, we err by omitting an invitation to the fullness of beauty in marriage; in the other we offer nothing the couple finds personally persuasive.

It is a balance to strike an incarnational course that is at the same time fully human and fully divine. We find this balance most beautifully struck in the wedding liturgy itself.

Beginning with a question about who celebrates the sacrament of marriage, we walk couples through the “real life” implications of the shape of the ritual (*lex orandi lex credendi*). We explain that the celebrants of this sacrament are the couple themselves. The priest or deacon is there to stand as a representative of the Church community to witness the vows that the couple professes. Marriage is a profoundly public act—no couple gets married alone. Even if the only other person present is a priest, someone is there to witness the vows.

Further, the relationship between the wedding couple and the congregation is mutual. The congregation offers the couple support, a good example, and the confidence that they are not alone on this adventure. The couple offers the congregation a tangible reminder of the profound commitment of marriage. They are the very definition of sacrament: a visible sign of an invisible reality. Seeing a couple set out on a journey through life together reminds anyone witnessing their vows that this commitment takes courage and hope, and that it is joyful. Witnessing courage and hope embodied in joy rekindles those virtues in the congregation.

This is why, we explain, couples are not allowed to get married on the beach or in a Redwood forest as they may have wanted. Weddings take place within a church structure because the building itself stands for the community. It is the gathering place for a community of faith that spans generations. What we do in that space connects us to people who have done these things in past generations. Marriage is a profoundly public act, and requires an appropriately structured public setting.

This position differs widely from the whole paradigm of wedding planning in our culture today. The multi-billion dollar wedding industry is predicated on the notion that one’s wedding should be an intensely personal experience, the fulfillment of one’s lifelong romantic hopes and dreams. We try to remind couples that this moment is just as much about the community they are gathering together as it is about them. And thank God for that. They are going to need the love, support and example of those gathered around them in the years and decades to come. Depending on the theological acumen of the couple, we might go so far as to suggest that the cosmic reality of liturgy implies that the “community gathered around them” transcends time and space to include all holy men and women, and that they could rely on their love, support, and example as well.

Additionally, there is a deeper significance to the fact that it is the couple themselves who serve as the ministers of the sacrament of marriage. Not only do they minister the sacrament of marriage to one another on the wedding day, but they also minister the sacrament of marriage to one another on the day after the wedding. And the day after that. And every day of their lives.

In fact, every action and every behavior of their married life together will now reflect the reality that they are bound to another person. When they take out the trash, they are ministering the sacrament of marriage to their spouse. When the husband avoids cooking onions for his pregnant wife with her weak stomach, he is ministering the sacrament of marriage to her. When the wife parses the week’s medications into daily segments for her aged husband, she is ministering the sacrament of marriage to him.

From the moment they exchange vows, every action of their lives, public or private, takes on a different meaning. They will henceforth eat, sleep, drive a car, talk with friends, exercise, work, pray, raise children, brush their teeth, buy cereal, plan a household budget, play, grieve, buy a house, sell a house, laugh and cry as someone profoundly connected to another person. Exploring that lived connection with a couple is precisely where ministers can incarnationally evangelize because it is within that connection that the couple experiences Christ in one another. It is within that connection that the couple becomes Christ for one another.

Any fool can tell that marriage is about love. Marriage preparation is an opportunity to precisely define that love. If the couple identifies themselves as Christian, then their standard of love is the example of Jesus.

Christ's life, ministry, teaching, suffering, death and resurrection all flowed from the deepest reality of love: self-gift. Christ's life, death and resurrection proclaim once and for all, for everyone, that dying to self for others—self-giving love—leads to new and abundant life.

Self-sacrifice always leads to new and abundant life. We have found this proclamation to be the deepest pattern alive in our marriage. In minute ways, when we die to ourselves by cleaning the toilet, getting up with sick children, or folding laundry with love we minister the sacrament of marriage to one another. It is a small action of self-giving love for the good of another, and it leads to new life. Single lay ministers and priests also experience this self-giving love as the deepest pattern in their own lives, and can speak about this reality from relationships in which others have a claim on them.

At times, the new life that follows dying to self is as simple as a grateful comment that feels good. In our experience, more significant actions of self-gift lead to deeper experiences of new life peacefully expressed with a sigh and a smile, jokingly expressed with a self-deprecating jibe, or passionately expressed physically.

We saw this in the couple described in the introduction, when we were able to learn a bit more about the conversation in which they worked through his drug use. Self-delusional or not, he held his drug use close to his heart. When confronted with how this behavior separated him from his fiancée, he made the decision to give that up. We talked about how that gesture was an example of dying to self—being willing to sacrifice a part of himself for the good of another out of self-giving love.

And then we proclaimed the resurrection. We talked with his fiancée about what that decision meant for her. She described her gratitude and how much more comfortable she felt around him because he is not high for part of the day. She felt like they shared much more of a life together.

This new status was clearly evident in the couple's body language. They did not seem depressed at the earlier meeting, but now they seemed distinctly light-hearted and playful. They were marked by joy.

This is new life; this is the resurrection; this is the paschal mystery alive in the experience of marriage. It is this pattern of dying to self in love for another, and the promise of new and abundant life, that sets the foundation for the sacrament of marriage. Indeed, it is the foundation of all the sacraments and of Christian life as a whole.

Invitation to community and communion...

Connecting couples to this kind of theological language is important not because it conforms them to orthodoxy. Most couples are not concerned about “church talk” and easily bore if we impose it upon them without any context that relates to their lives.

Describing their experience in ways that introduce them to theological language is important because this is the language of our tradition. Often, this language seems old and dusty, but ministers preparing couples for marriage have an opportunity to reveal the living reality behind this language by using it to describe experiences of grace in which they experience new life in their own relationship.

Introducing them to theological language also offers them a key to liturgy, transforming it from something seemingly boring and obligatory to an essential source of deep spiritual nourishment.

The Eucharist, for example, is brimming with this language of self-sacrificial love and new and abundant life—both in word and gesture. In the Eucharist, Jesus offers himself to us. Receiving the body and blood of Jesus, fully human and fully divine, transforms us because it conforms us to this act of love. We participate in God’s love in the Eucharist, and become Christ-like.



**Greek Orthodox Church, Village of Cana,
Mary and the Cross**

Shaped by the Eucharist, our participation in God’s love is then extended to daily life when we act like Christ. The wife who, with love, gets up early to walk the dog and let her husband sleep late loves with Eucharistic love. The husband who, with love, packs a lunch for his wife before she leaves for work extends the reality of Christ’s love in the Eucharist to their weekday. Further, receiving these acts of love is also Eucharistic. The Eucharist invites us to receive Christ and to become Christ. The husband who recognizes the sacrifice of his wife in walking the dog receives Christ and is encouraged to become more like Christ in his love for his wife.

Marriage preparation that connects to the Eucharist gives couples a source of nourishment for a life’s journey. Contextualizing self-giving love within the Eucharist also further identifies the couple with the body of Christ in the world. Couples who unlock the spirituality of recognizing their lives in the words and gestures of the Mass realize that they are not alone, that they are part of a great tradition of self-giving lovers who find life in Christ.

Concluding thoughts...

Marriage is only one touchstone moment in a person's life. The birth of a child, loss of a parent, or loved one are others. These moments constitute a distinctive opportunity for us as Church to put our best selves forward. These are opportunities for evangelization. Many Catholics struggle with what it means to be called to evangelization, fearing perhaps that it asks us to be street preachers or include "God talk" in every conversation. The reality is that we are constantly evangelizing with our witness in the world. The way we speak and act, no matter the topic or context, testifies to our most deeply held values and beliefs. We could stand to be more intentional about what we are communicating with our witness in the world just as we could be more intentional with what we communicate to those returning to the Church.

To evangelize couples presenting themselves for marriage with beauty and persuasion, we must proclaim the resurrection, the promise of new life. We might choose to offer some examples from our own relationships. But the best proclamations of the resurrection are those that we can uncover within the couple's own experience. It is simply a matter of putting theological language to their experiences of love. Ministers who do this for themselves gain the capacity to invite others to witness ancient truths alive in their experience and to deepen those sources of meaning. Living with hope and joy of the resurrection is a beautiful and persuasive example of the gospel incarnate.

