Fit for Mission?

Marriage

A Preparation Course

Course Presenter’s Book

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With the collaboration of the Diocese of Lancaster’s Marriage and Family Life Commission

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Introduction

Christianity is, first and foremost, a religion of joy. There was so much joy at the birth of the Church at Pentecost that people thought the first Christians were drunk! (Acts 2:15). What is the reason for our joy? There are many – joy at the goodness and pleasure of the created world, including our bodies; joy at the bounty and blessings of God; joy in the person of Jesus, his life, teaching, and resurrection from the dead; joy in our Christian life together, and the promise of eternal fulfilment in heaven; but most of all, joy in the knowledge and experience that God is a God of love.

One of the most important occasions of joy in the life of the Church – which brings all of these other joys together – is the celebration of the sacrament of marriage. Is it any wonder that marriage is one of the most powerful and ancient images of God’s love for humanity in the Bible?

For too long we have forgotten this truth by allowing our discussion and treatment of the institution of marriage in the Church – and wider society – to be dominated by a sense of crisis, verging on panic. This is not to downplay the pain and trauma caused by the high rate of divorce – as high among Catholics as the general population – or by the high incidence of infidelity, or spousal abuse.

However, part of the problem with ‘marriage’ is that most people – deep down – expect it to fail, as if the vows of fidelity and permanence are beyond ‘ordinary’ men and women, requiring super-human commitment and virtues.

The message of this Catholic preparation course for marriage is threefold:

- First and foremost, the Catholic approach to marriage cannot be a list of prohibitions – particularly about sex – but is a celebration of the joy of married love. However, because the Church takes marriage and sexual love so seriously, there must be a clear understanding and observance of Catholic sexual ethics. To be clear, the joy of married love is the fruit of certain conditions being fulfilled which arise from the very nature of marriage. These conditions we call sexual ethics, the moral order written into our very being as humans.
Secondly, men and women are hard-wired by biology, psychology and spiritual nature to thrive in monogamous, faithful, life-long marriages that are open to the new life of children. We must reject as utterly false the ‘urban myth’ current in the media and society that human beings are naturally promiscuous and that adultery is only ‘human’. The degree of suffering and heartache among couples, their extended families and children is proof that this is a lie.

Thirdly, that God the Trinity – the intimate community of divine persons in triune unity – has revealed his optimum plan for marriage in Sacred Scripture and the teaching of the Catholic Church. The sacramental nature of Holy Matrimony is at the heart of God’s plan for wives and husbands. This plan reflects God’s nature as love. It includes the gift of divine love for the couple to realize God’s plan in their lives.

The Marriage Preparation Course

This *Course Presenter’s Book* provides the structure, content and activities for those delivering the course, drawing upon the richness of the Scriptures and the Church’s living teaching. The course content needs setting in the living context of the experience and wisdom of those who live the sacrament of matrimony, but priority must always be given to the doctrine of the Church, which is God’s gift to humanity for its happiness. While the experience of married couples is important to illustrate the Church’s teaching, a couple’s opinions or experience must never take priority over the Church’s teaching.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that marriage preparation courses must be a ‘journey of re-discovery’, that distinguishes between what ‘everyone else is doing, and what our own being intimately tells us’. As stated earlier, men and women are hard-wired to live faithful, life-long, monogamous marriages. The revelation of God about marriage does not contradict the nature of human beings created by him, but further confirms and gives it a deeper meaning. When this marriage preparation course works at its best it will help young couples re-discover truths about love that they already sense and know deep down.

These preparatory courses for marriage must be a journey of re-discovery. They must help us learn anew what our being tells us. They must help couples reach the true decision of marriage in accordance with the Creator and Redeemer. (Benedict XVI, 24 July 2007)

I would like to thank all the members of the Marriage and Family Life Commission – couples and clergy – for the commitment and hard-work that has been so evident in our collaboration in producing *Fit for Mission? Marriage*. One of the strengths of this course is that it has drawn on the practical experience and insight of married couples, clergy and laity experienced in delivering marriage preparation courses. I would also like to thank my own team for their assistance in developing this new addition to the *Fit for Mission?* series.

✠ Patrick O’Donoghue  
Bishop of Lancaster.
Guidelines for leading the course

Before presenting the first session it is important that the Course Presenters have a clear understanding of the overall goals of this Catholic marriage preparation course. The four goals are:

1. The couple will be able to describe – appropriate to their stage of faith development – the Catholic doctrine of marriage and sexual ethics.

2. The couple will be fully prepared to receive the Sacrament of Marriage; this includes two elements:
   - They will be able to describe the significance of the different aspects of the Nuptial Mass or Marriage Service.
   - They will be able to describe how to live out the Sacrament of Marriage in their life together.

3. The couple will begin to feel at ease in the Church and begin to be confident about their roles in the marriage service.

4. The couple will be given the opportunity to develop skills that will help them maintain and deepen their relationship.

In view of these goals, it is important that Course Presenters consider the following two aspects contained in the following sections:

- basic requirements to be Course Presenters, and
- presenting the course to meet the needs of couples according to their faith development.
Basic requirements to be Course Presenters

For the success of this course it is essential that Course Presenters – clergy and laity – accept and are convinced by the full teaching of the Church concerning marriage and sexual ethics. Failure in this regard would be a huge disservice to the Church and to the couples in our pastoral care. The most convincing lesson that these young couples will receive is the enthusiastic and realistic living out of the truth of Catholic faith by experienced husbands and wives.

Observance of the following requirements is expected of Course Presenters, whether clergy or laity:

- Acceptance of the full teaching of the Church concerning marriage and Catholic sexual ethics.

- Full consciousness of the fact that they are teaching the Faith of the Church, in the name of the Church. It is never appropriate or acceptable to present personal opinions that are contrary to doctrine as the teachings of the Church. Neither is it helpful or acceptable to express any personal doubts or criticisms of Church teaching, particularly with regard to contraception.

- Willingness to share experience. Participants on the course will benefit from a realistic account of the difficulties and joys of fully living out the Catholic understanding of married love.

- Sensitivity. It is essential that Course Presenters are not critical or judgmental about the life-style of the couples attending the course. However, we must ourselves be confident and clear about the moral teaching of the Church. If we don’t have the courage of our convictions, why should new couples take them seriously?

In addition, leading a course can be daunting if you have never done anything like this before. Some experience of how to train, perhaps by working alongside an experienced person or through attending a ‘train the trainer’ event, should be completed.

Meeting the needs of couples according to their faith development

The modern identity of Roman Catholics is complex, involving different levels of adherence and involvement in the life of the Church and parish community:

I think the first thing to acknowledge here is that nowadays people use the word ‘Catholic’ in many different ways. Some identify themselves as being Catholic through a grandparent or going to a Catholic school. Others identify themselves as being Catholic because they were baptised in the local Catholic Church and attend family christenings, weddings and funerals. There are also those men and women who occasionally attend Mass at Christmas and/or Easter...
The basic fact of life in the Church’s provision of marriage is that the majority of couples presenting themselves for marriage preparation are non-practising and, more often than not, mixed – that is, the other partner is either a non-practising member of another Christian Church or ecclesial community, or has no religious background.

These couples often have little or no knowledge of the faith or experience of the Church and their motives for wanting a ‘church wedding’ can be varied and complex.

In these cases, the fundamental approach of the *Marriage Preparation Course* is one of evangelisation.

We have therefore developed two different courses: *Marriage Preparation* and *Marriage Preparation Plus*, both of which are contained in this *Course Presenter’s Book*. There are separate *Couple’s Books* for each course.

The *Marriage Preparation Course* is designed to meet the specific needs of those couples with an inactive faith and so assumes little or no knowledge of the Faith.

The *Marriage Preparation Plus Course* has been developed for those couples presenting themselves for marriage preparation who are practising Catholics, and/or where one partner is a practising member of another Christian church or ecclesial community, and they have an active faith and spirituality. The *Marriage Preparation Plus Course*, therefore, assumes knowledge of the faith and a living relationship with Christ. In these cases, the fundamental approach of the course is one of catechesis.

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Evangelisation is the proclamation of the gospel. The evangelist’s purpose is ‘to touch the hearts of the hearers and turn them to God’. Evangelists trust that their word and example will, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, move others to a first act of faith’...First and foremost, evangelisation is motivated by love for those who do not yet know Christ, ‘recognising that such persons are lacking a tremendous benefit in this world: to know the true face of God and the friendship of Jesus Christ, God-with-us’...

*(Fit for Mission? Schools, p. 27)*

... Our fundamental identity as the Catholic Church is to be inclusive not exclusive. This is why we welcome all people who turn up at our presbytery doors, attend our liturgies, or meet the criteria for admission to our schools. However, this does not mean that everyone who has some type of relationship with the Catholic Church fully belongs to the Catholic Church.

*(Bishop Patrick O’Donoghue, Fit for Mission? Church, p.35)*
The descriptions *Marriage Preparation Course* and *Marriage Preparation Plus Course* have been chosen to avoid any sense of judgementalism or inferiority. However, both groups have very different needs which cannot be combined without doing a disservice to both. The language and concepts of the *Marriage Preparation Course* would be too simple and undemanding for couples with an active faith, while the language and concepts of the *Marriage Preparation Plus Course*, could be incomprehensible and alienating for couples with an inactive faith. This is just as it would be unreasonable to expect people who have been learning French for ten years to have the best learning and development experience in a class with beginners.

In order to discern which course would best suit couples attending marriage preparation it is necessary that Course Presenters have individual meetings with each couple to ascertain their needs.

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Catechesis is the process by which the faith of believers is nourished and educated. ...It may be described as ‘a dialogue of believers’. Its purpose is to ‘help them towards a greater maturity of faith, especially in the way of understanding’... To catechise ‘is to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God’s eternal design reaching fulfilment in that Person. It is to seek to understand the meaning of Christ’s actions and words and the signs worked by him’. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 426).

*(Fit for Mission? Schools, p. 27)*
Principles of Evangelisation for Marriage Preparation

Why do we need to evangelise some couples?

We cannot afford to be under any illusions about the faith background of many of the couples who present themselves for marriage preparation. If we fail to understand where they are coming from religiously, intellectually and emotionally, our Marriage Preparation Course will contain assumptions, concepts and language that will be unintelligible, easily misunderstood and alienating. To pretend that some couples are Catholics fully in communion with the Church when they are obviously not, is a disservice to the couple and a disservice to the truth entrusted to us by God.

The reality is that many of the couples who seek marriage in the Church are non-believers or are religiously indifferent. The General Directory for Catechesis [GDC] describes the situation as follows:

...entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel...[they] live in a religious context in which Christian points of reference are perceived purely exteriorly.

(GDC 58)

Though couples present themselves for marriage in the Catholic Church this does not mean we can presume that they believe the Faith of the Church or have a living relationship with Jesus Christ. In situations where the faith is inactive, what is needed is the much heralded New Evangelisation, which is, simply put, missionary activity aimed at non-believers and the religiously indifferent. New Evangelisation in the context of marriage preparation means proclaiming the Gospel about God’s meaning and purpose for marriage, and to call the couple to conversion.

This makes the Marriage Preparation Course a missionary encounter. What, in practise, does this mean?

...the primordial mission of the Church is to proclaim God and to be his witness before the world. This involves making known the true face of God and his loving plan of salvation for man, as it has been revealed in Jesus Christ.

(GDC 23)
Therefore, for our *Marriage Preparation Course* to be missionary it needs:

- To proclaim God and for us to be his witnesses before the couples.

- To make known the true face of God in love and marriage, and challenge any false notions couples may have about God, love and marriage, including domestic abuse, contraception and divorce.

- To help couples see that God’s plan for marriage – deeply personal union, indissolubility, faithfulness and openness to fertility – is not something imposed from outside but is already implicit in their love for each other. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1643).

**How do we evangelise couples?**

Jesus set out what he expects from his disciples in all types of evangelisation in what is known as Jesus’ missionary mandate (*GDC* 34). A mandate is a command given by someone in authority which has the force of law. Jesus’ missionary mandate to us as evangelists on the marriage preparation course is, therefore, not optional or open to re-interpretation but is mandatory for clergy and laity, no matter how challenging or difficult.

Non-practicing couples have the right to learn what God has revealed about the meaning and purpose of their marriage. We do not have the right to deny them the full truth, including the Church’s teaching on openness to life and the wrongfulness of contraception because we may find it difficult or embarrassing to talk about such things.

We must be clear here: we don’t insist on teaching the full truth about marriage out of a motive to enforce blind obedience to Church teaching, but because we believe that God’s meaning and purpose for marriage gives couples the best chance of being loving husbands and wives, and for their love to grow and flourish.

First, let’s see what Jesus tells us about evangelisation:

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Go into all the world; and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. (Mark 16:15)
Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20)
You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:48)
But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses... to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)
Love one another. (John 15:12)
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The goals of evangelisation

From these New Testament passages we can draw the following principles of evangelisation (cf. GDC 46):

**Proclamation and witness:** We must seek to proclaim the full meaning God has given to marriage (CCC 1602), as revealed in Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. As Jesus commands us, we must be witnesses to the truth of marriage in how we live our own marriage and the way we talk about marriage.

**Teaching the Word and Sacrament:** We must seek to teach couples about marriage in ways that respect the Word of God and the sacrament of marriage; and that also respect the couple, their intellectual, emotional and religious background, and their personal needs.

**Personal change and love of neighbour:** We must seek to encourage conversion in both the couples and ourselves to the full meaning God has given marriage. The ultimate purpose of the Marriage Preparation Course is to foster a deeper awareness and commitment to love between husband and wife, which can only be fully realised through participation in the life and love of the Holy Trinity through the grace of Jesus.

These three principles of evangelisation must inform the content and structure of the Marriage Preparation Course.

The process of evangelisation

We do not need to invent a methodology for evangelisation in our Marriage Preparation Course, but rather discover in Scripture the methodology used by God to evangelise and catechise his people. The Old Testament shows us that God is understood as the creative and insightful teacher of Israel, who transforms the events in the life of his people into lessons of wisdom. (Fit for Mission? Schools, p.22).

Our role as evangelists and catechists is to enable couples to encounter the God of love in a way that invites them to respond to that love.

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise.

(Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

Simply put, our goal for a couple participating in the Marriage Preparation Course is for them to be able to make a whole-hearted response of love to God and to his commands. However, if that is not possible, at the very least we should hope that the couple will begin to see the connection between their experience of love and the God of love, and have a deeper appreciation of the meaning and purpose of marriage, including sexual love.
How do we enable couples to encounter the God of love in a way that invites them to make the whole-hearted response of love, love of God and love of the commands of God?

First, if we think that such a goal is unrealistic, too ambitious, or impossible because of the depth of non-belief or religious indifference we have found in many couples, then we are defeated before we start! It is essential that the Presenters of the course are convinced about the truth of God’s plan for marriage and the joys it brings – and are confident that God can bring about conversion in the most unexpected ways.

Once we are convinced that this is a realistic goal, then we can begin to apply the following methods used by God to invite the response of love:

1. Reach out and welcome

The Old Testament and New Testament give testimony to God’s method of going out to people and welcoming them into a relationship with him. God adapts himself to the culture and stage of development of Israel, based on knowing and understanding the conditions in which he finds individuals. Therefore, in the Marriage Preparation Course:

• We must adapt the style of teaching and language of the Faith to the culture and stage of faith development of the couple.

2. Proclaim and educate

The Lord teaches Israel through words and deeds, symbols and liturgy, about the meaning and purpose of a fully human life. He expects Israel to adopt his ways and model her behaviour on the divine attitude of love, kindness and faithfulness. Therefore, in the Marriage Preparation Course:

• We must proclaim the fullness the Church’s teaching on marriage in a way that conveys the fact that receiving the sacrament of marriage also carries the expectation that the couple will adopt the meaning and purpose God has given marriage.

3. Call and invite to belong

The Gospels make clear that at the heart of Jesus’ method of teaching was his personal call to each individual to repentance, conversion and membership of his community, the Church. Dialogue and questioning were his preferred way of calling each person, exemplified by his common question, ‘What do you think?’ This question shows a real interest and concern for the other person.

But Jesus didn’t leave it there at the level of eliciting a personal opinion or judgment; he went to the next level of challenge and gave an explanation of the truth through the Word of God. Jesus did not follow the modern misguided approach that everyone’s opinion was equally valid or equally truthful. He spoke with authority, with the expectation that everyone who listened to him with good will would achieve insight and recognise who he was.
Therefore, in the *Marriage Preparation Course*:

- We must encourage an atmosphere of dialogue and questioning that asks couples what they genuinely think or feel. But we must not be afraid respectfully and politely to challenge any opinion that contradicts the teaching of the Church. The goal of our explanations, based on Scripture and the teaching of the Church, must not be to win an argument but to help the couple open their eyes to the truth. Every session of the course is an opportunity for the couple to hear the personal call of Christ and become members of his community, the Church.

Before each session with non-believing or religiously indifferent couples it is important to refresh yourselves about the method of evangelisation we are using in marriage preparation:

- Reach out and welcome,
- Proclaim and educate,
- Call and invite to belong.

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*(Fit for Mission? Schools, p.24)*
Principles of Catechesis for Marriage Preparation Plus

Couples we do not need to evangelise, but to catechise

For those couples who present themselves for marriage preparation who have faith and participate in the Church, our joyful task is to help deepen their knowledge of the Church’s Faith about the sacrament of marriage, and their relationship with Jesus.

However, one challenge facing Presenters working with practising Catholics may be that, due to poor catechesis, the couple have a confused or erroneous understanding of the Church’s teaching, particularly regarding sexual morality, including contraception, sterilisation and IVF. Presenters must never convey any sense of blame because, in most cases, couples haven’t been clearly taught the Church’s teaching, at home, at school or from the pulpit. Again, it is only recently that the Church has begun to develop a positive and rich theology of the body to explain in greater depth and meaning why contraception and IVF undermine the dignity and purpose of marriage.

Pope John Paul II has given guidance about the purpose of marriage preparation for practising couples:

Among the elements to be instilled in this journey of faith, which is similar to the Catechumenate, there must also be a deeper knowledge of the mystery of Christ and the Church, of the meaning of grace and of the responsibility of Christian marriage, as well as preparation for taking an active and conscious part in the rites of the marriage liturgy.

(Pope John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio, 66)

The whole of Christian life is a process of continuing catechesis, and significant moments in the life of the Christian, such as marriage, baptism of children, first confession and holy communion, confirmation, and funerals, are ‘peak experiences’ when we can gain a deeper knowledge of the Faith and a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. (cf. GDC 51).

How do we catechise couples?

The purpose of this Marriage Preparation Plus Course is to help practising couples to deepen their relationship with each other through seeing marriage as their path to holiness, through learning to share their relationship with Jesus together. The following passages from Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict convey the purpose of catechesis:
The fundamental task of catechesis with couples is to help them to know, to celebrate and to contemplate the mystery of Christ together, as husband and wife.

The goals of catechesis

The General Directory for Catechesis identifies six goals of catechesis that must be part of our Marriage Preparation Plus Course. (GDC, 85)

1. Promoting knowledge of the Faith: For couples who have a living faith, often the experience of love and the expectation of celebrating the Sacrament of Marriage cause them to want to know the God of love all the more. ‘Who has encountered Christ desires to know him as much as possible, as well as to know the plan of the Father which he revealed’. (GDC, 84). Catechesis through the Marriage Preparation Plus Course must lead the couple to gradually grasp the whole of God’s meaning and purpose for marriage, through Scripture and the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

2. Liturgical education: Hopefully a practicing Catholic couple will already be participating in the celebration of the Eucharist together. One of the goals of the course is to help the couple to share their Eucharistic faith together and to prepare for meeting Christ, the bridegroom of the Church, in the Sacrament of Marriage. The course will promote greater knowledge of the meaning of the liturgy and the sacraments and educate the couple ‘for prayer, for thanksgiving, for repentance, for praying with confidence, for community spirit, for understanding correctly the meaning of the creeds...as all of this is necessary for a true liturgical life’. (GDC 85).

3. Moral formation: Most importantly, the goal of Marriage Preparation Plus is to transmit the attitude of God to the morality of marriage. We aim to encourage the couple to undertake a journey of ‘interior transformation’ together, as they learn to give themselves to each other totally. The course not only seeks to communicate the Word, but also the force of the Word lived by experienced married couples.

At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son from the Father ...To catechise is “to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God’s eternal design reaching fulfilment in that Person”... Catechesis aims at putting “people ...in communion... with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity”.

(Pope John Paul II, Catechesi tradendae, 5)

Catechesis is about making available to minds and hearts the word of him who gave his life for us. In this way, catechesis causes to resound within the heart of every human being a unique call that is ceaselessly renewed: “Follow me”.

(Pope Benedict XVI, Address to French Bishops, September 2008)
4. **Deepening prayer life:** For the sake of the couple, and any future children, it is vital that they learn to pray together, so that their family becomes a ‘domestic Church’. Also, it is important that the course is conducted in an atmosphere of prayer:

> When catechesis is permeated by a climate of prayer, the assimilation of the entire Christian life reaches its summit. This climate is especially necessary when the catechumen and those to be catechized are confronted with the more demanding aspects of the Gospel and when they feel weak or when they discover the mysterious action of God in their lives. *(GDC 85)*

5. **Education for community life:** *Marriage Preparation Plus* also aims to show the couple the role and responsibility of married couples within the life of the parish community and wider Church. For example, how they make sacramentally present Jesus’ faithfulness and self-giving love for the Church, his bride. It will also encourage them to have a place in their life together for single people, the poor and the elderly with openness and humility, so that they welcome others into the home they have built with their love.

6. **Missionary initiation:** The Presenters of the course must also seek to convince the couple of the importance of being present as married Christians in society through their professional, cultural and social lives. Now more than ever, society needs the witness of couples committed to unity, indissolubility, fidelity and openness to life. The Church needs Catholic couples to witness to the Gospel of life and, particularly, to show the world that there are realistic alternatives to contraception, abortion, IVF and divorce.

**The process of catechesis**

In the same way that we base our method of evangelisation on that used by God, we will also base our process of catechesis on God’s method, as revealed by Christ and the Church.

**Personal and sensitive**

Jesus taught and challenged people in order to deepen their relationship with him and the Father, in the Holy Spirit. His teaching was never abstract but always personal, sensitive to the particular needs of the person he was with. Therefore, in *Marriage Preparation Plus*:

- We must be sensitive to the fact that God has a unique relationship with each individual and that his grace is working in their lives. We must be discerning about the stage of the faith journey they are on.

**Jesus first and last**

The whole purpose of salvation history is fulfilled in the revelation of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Nothing must put Jesus and his Gospel into second place in *Marriage Preparation Plus* – not our opinions, nor the opinions of the couple. Jesus must never be an afterthought, tagged on at the end. Therefore, in *Marriage Preparation Plus*:
• We must make sure that the teaching and person of Jesus is uppermost in each session, through Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and prayer, so that everyone has the opportunity – Presenters and couples – to deepen their relationship with Christ.

**Love of the Church**

The Old Testament and New Testament show us that the purpose of God’s words and deeds was to shape a people to share in his life and love, and bring his justice, kindness and mercy to the world. The divine expression of God’s love is the Holy Spirit, who is the life and guide of the Church, the People of God. Therefore, in *Marriage Preparation Plus*:

• We will encourage and foster love for the Church through our reverence for her teaching, liturgy, history and art, and cultivate respect and obedience to the Pope, the successor of Peter, and those Bishops in communion with him. At times you may be on the receiving end of criticism and anger aimed at the Church. It’s best not to take this personally, but instead try to answer any misunderstanding with kindness and patience.

**Seeing the holy**

The Old Testament and New Testament witness to the transformation that is brought about in individuals through encountering the presence and power of God. The Father gives us his Word in nature and Scripture, Jesus has given the Church the sacraments to enable us to encounter his presence and power, and the Holy Spirit gives each one of us charisms. Therefore, in *Marriage Preparation Plus*:

• We will promote understanding and sensitivity to the words and signs that convey the power and presence of God through the sacraments, and deepen the couple’s awareness of our need for grace, the virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit to live the vocation to married life.

Before each session with practising couples it is important to refresh yourselves about the method of catechesis we are using in *Marriage Preparation Plus*:

• Personal and sensitive

• Jesus first and last

• Love of the Church

• Seeing the holy
Tools for Evangelisation and Catechesis

The tools for evangelisation and catechesis are the same for Marriage Preparation and Marriage Preparation Plus, but are used differently, according to the two distinct processes for non-believing and believing couples.

The sessions for both marriage preparation courses will provide you with all the materials that you need, but it is necessary to understand why the principal sources of teaching material is the Word of God contained in Scripture and the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Too often courses for couples have given over-emphasis to the personal experience and opinions of the Presenters and couples, and not enough attention to the doctrinal and moral teaching of the Church.

The danger in focusing on experience out of a concern to be ‘interesting’ and ‘relevant’ is that it ignores the fact that experience is not something ‘neutral’. As Pope Benedict XVI puts it, ‘experience detached from any consideration of what is good or true, can lead, not to genuine freedom, but to moral or intellectual confusion, to a lowering of standards, to a loss of self-respect, and even to despair’. (World Youth Day, 2008).

The major threats to marriage come from immoral behaviour, such as contraception or divorce, that have become accepted by most people as normal and acceptable, often due to their unquestioned promotion by the media and government agencies.

• It is not right to say “sex before marriage is recommended because it is essential that the couple learn if they’re sexually ‘compatible’”.
• It is not right to say “the use of contraception or IVF is up to the conscience of the couple” because people forget or ignore the fact that conscience can be ill-informed or erroneous.
• It is not right to say “when discussing long-term problems and difficulties in marriage sometimes divorce is in the best interests of the children”.
• It is not right to say “any type of sexual behaviour is permissible in a marriage if both partners consent”.

The premise underpinning this course is that the Church’s teaching is not just one opinion among many equally valid opinions, but the absolute and liberating Word of God about marriage.

Presenters of both marriage preparation courses are involved in a vital aspect of the ministry of the Word in the Church. As such, it is encouraging to remember that the Holy Spirit is, in fact, the principal agent of the ministry of the Word, the one through whom “the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the Church—and through her in the world”. (GDC 50).
Some practical considerations

The *Marriage Preparation Course* and *Marriage Preparation Plus Course* have 6 sessions each and each session has been designed to last about one and a half hours. However, this is just a standard recommendation that should not constrain you from running your course to a different time scale, and adapting the material to the needs of your couples. Furthermore, once you are familiar with both courses you may want to ‘pick and mix’ the contents depending on the level of engagement of the group.

Initial pre-course meeting with couples

When couples present themselves for marriage preparation there should first be a preliminary meeting between the couple and the priest and/or deacon to conduct the pre-nuptial enquiry. During this meeting the priest and/or deacon can make a judgement on which course would best suit the couple depending on their inactivity or activity in the faith. It is important to determine which is the most appropriate course for them – *Marriage Preparation* or *Marriage Preparation Plus* – and agree the dates on which they will attend.

Materials

This *Course Presenter’s Book* contains both courses, with guidance about presenting the sessions. There are separate *Couple’s Books* for those attending either of the courses. These contain the session aim, objectives, key features, activities and a summary of the key points. Also, in the material for couples there is an introductory message to couples and course overview. You may want to give them this material prior to starting the course, perhaps at the pre-nuptial enquiry meeting mentioned above.

Activities

The activities included in each session have been designed to encourage the couples to engage with the material and apply the more formal input to their personal experience. It is important that the Presenters adapt these sessions to suit the couples where necessary – for example some may not be comfortable with reading from the handouts and jotting down ideas, in which case your approach would need to include less individual work by couples.
Role of the Presenter

It is also important that as Presenters you familiarize yourself with the content and activities and think what you can add from your understanding of Church teaching and personal experiences to bring the sessions to life. The idea is not to hold yourselves up as a model of perfection, but rather to show that your marriage is a “work in progress” and that success is possible (and joyful and wonderful) but that it requires a continual renewal of effort and commitment.

Preparing the room

Think about the surroundings.

- Is the room temperature comfortable?
- Is the atmosphere suitable for prayer? – e.g.: presence of Cross, icon, candle.
- Are there sufficient chairs?
- Do you have/want to use a table? – This can make the setting more formal. Table or not, couples may need means to take notes
- Is the furniture arranged in the best way? – Subject to the constraints of your room a circular arrangement, so that couples can sit together and see other couples, is often recommended.
- How will you limit distractions and noise? – Putting up a simple sign on the door and turning off any phone in the room can be helpful.
- How will you ensure you meet the special needs, if any, of the couples – e.g. access; requirement for larger print?
- Have you available pens and/or pencils in case couples wish to make notes?
- Do you have a flipchart? – This can be helpful to capture key ideas where couples are sharing or to illustrate points during your input. Occasionally, use of a flipchart will be specifically mentioned. If you do not have a flipchart consider alternatives.
- Occasionally one of the couple may not attend or be late. Think about how you will approach activities in this situation. Normally it will be fine for the individual to work alone; however, for certain activities you may like to ask the individual if they would like to work with you.
Overview of sessions

The aim, objectives and key features for each session are set out below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session 1. Two become one</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aim:</strong> To introduce the course and make connections between the couple’s experience of love and the Church’s teaching on love.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Objectives:</strong> By the end of this session couples will be able to:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Describe the connection between their love and the God of love.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Explain God’s meaning and purpose for marriage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Start to implement a plan to deepen the foundations of their love for each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Features:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Your experience: How did you fall in love? What is it like being in love? How is love changing your lives?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- God is love: God’s love for humanity in the Old Testament.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What is marriage? Consent to total, unconditional self-giving which needs personal unity, indissolubility, fidelity and openness to life.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session 2. Love is...?</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Aim:</strong> To deepen the couples’ understanding of love and how to increase their love.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Objectives:</strong> By the end of this session couples will be able to:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- State the Christian understanding of love.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Discuss the opportunities and challenges of marriage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Accept the benefits to marriage of leading a virtuous life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Describe how the deadly sins endanger marriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Apply practical strategies for leading a virtuous life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Features:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What is love? Jesus and love. Affection, erotic love, friendship, self-giving love.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- St Paul’s ‘Love is never...’ and its mirror, ‘Love is....’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The secrets to a happy marriage: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity, gentleness and generousity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The threats to a happy marriage: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Session 3. Respect the differences**

**Aim:** To establish practical ways of positively engaging with the differences between man and woman and explore how these can be the source of marriage’s strength and richness, but also a source of misunderstanding, conflict and hurt.

**Objectives:** By the end of this session couples will be able to:

- Explain that God made males and females to complement and complete each other.
- Use effective strategies for speaking and listening.
- Indicate ways of resolving conflicts.
- Accept the importance of forgiveness and what this means.

**Key Features:**

- The theology of the body about masculinity and femininity.
- How to listen effectively.
- How to speak positively.
- How to resolve conflicts.
- How to forgive.

**Session 4. God’s body talk**

**Aim:** To appreciate that, being created by the God of love, our bodies reflect their origin in his loving purpose. This purpose informs what is the right and wrong use of our bodies.

**Objectives:** By the end of this session couples will be able to:

- Explain the meaning and purpose God has given sexual love.
- State why contraception and IVF contradict the meaning of marital love.
- State why the marriage vows of unity, indissolubility, faithfulness and openness to life are vital to the success of a marriage.
- Explain why the Church advocates Natural Fertility Awareness.

**Key Features:**

- The ‘nuptial significance’ of maleness and femaleness.
- The law of self-gift and the necessary conditions for self-giving.
- How contraception and IVF are a lie.
- Why it is important that sexual love is open to life.
- Natural Fertility Awareness.
### Session 5. Jesus’ helping hand

**Aim:** To see how a proper understanding of who Jesus is helps us understand what happens when we receive the sacrament of marriage. To appreciate the importance of this sacrament in helping us face the difficult times in marriage.

**Objectives:** By the end of this session couples will be able to:
- Explain what a sacrament is and how sacraments help and support us through life.
- Highlight why marriage is a sacrament.
- Indicate their approaches to dealing with change.
- Discuss how they deal with suffering.
- Apply some practical actions to help with change and suffering.

**Key Features:**
- Who is Jesus? Bad, mad or God.
- Sacraments: Jesus’ power to heal and teach has been passed on through the sacraments.
- The nature of grace. Sharing the life and energy of God.
- Why do we need a sacrament to be married?
- Dealing with change.
- Coping with suffering.

### Session 6. Loving each other in Christ

**Aim:** To appreciate the significance and meaning of the different parts of the wedding service and that marriage is made in prayer.

**Objectives:** By the end of this session couples will be able to:
- Explain that they confer the sacrament of marriage on each other, before the Church and sealed by God.
- State the significance of the different elements of the marriage liturgy.
- Explain the meaning of the symbols of marriage.
- Prepare for their own marriage service.
- Describe the importance of prayer.

**Key Features:**
- Liturgy as participation in the life of God.
- The different parts of the marriage liturgy.
- The marriage vows.
- The exact point at which they are married.
- Praying together.
Session 4 - God’s body talk

Preparation before the session

Prayer to the Holy Spirit for evangelisers
Give me the gifts I need in my labour,
A mind that is eager to seek for the truth,
Keen to perceive it and strong to embrace it.
A will that is eager and valiant to do.

Come to my aid when you hear me calling,
Light up the dark, make the rough places plain.
Bring to my mind the unknown and forgotten.
Give me the words that I seek for in vain.
Amen. (St Thomas Aquinas)

Remember our goal is evangelisation
(cf. Introduction to Marriage Preparation Course):
• Reach out and welcome.
• Proclaim and educate.
• Call and invite to belong.

Read through the Presenter’s material
• Be clear about the goal and objectives of the session.
• Understand and prayerfully read the sections.
• Prepare your own answers to the activities to share with the couples.
Aim: To appreciate that, being created by the God of love, our bodies reflect their origin in his loving purpose. This purpose informs what is the right and wrong use of our bodies.

Objectives: By the end of this session couples will be able to:

- Explain the meaning and purpose God has given sexual love.
- State why contraception and IVF contradict the meaning of marital love.
- State why the marriage vows: unity, indissolubility, faithfulness and openness to life are vital to the success of a marriage.
- Explain why the Church advocates Natural Fertility Awareness.

Key Features:

- The ‘nuptial significance’ of maleness and femaleness.
- The Law of Self-gift and the necessary conditions for self giving.
- How contraception and IVF are a lie.
- Why it is important that sex is open to life.
- Natural Fertility Awareness.

### Session 4 God’s body talk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outline of Session</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section and timing</strong></td>
<td><strong>Brief overview</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Welcome and recap from last session</td>
<td>Welcome back, ask if any questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10 mins)</td>
<td>Activity: Recap ‘highlights’ from last session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Made in the image of God</td>
<td>Activity: Quick ‘opinion quiz’. Couples review statements followed by group discussion covering input on what the Catholic Church teaches about the dignity and value of having bodies created by God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(30 mins)</td>
<td>Input: Brief overview of session</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. What’s wrong with contraception and IVF</td>
<td>Activity: True or false. Couples decide if statements are true or false followed by group discussion covering input on what the Church teaches about contraception and IVF</td>
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<tr>
<td>(20 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God?</td>
<td>Activity: Couples discuss their attitude to having children with each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Closing words and homework</td>
<td>Activity: Session recap quiz, Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15 mins)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
1. Welcome and recap of the last session

The purpose of this section is to re-engage with the course and prepare for what this session will cover.

Welcome couples back to the course. Ask if anyone has any questions arising since you last met. Explain that to start you are going to complete a quick recap.

Key points: You will want to make the following points:

• During the last session we discussed the important differences between men and women, and the fact that these differences are not accidental or life-style choices, but have their origin in God’s purpose for us.

• Let’s start with some of the ‘highlights’ which you remember from the last session about these differences. Spend a few minutes discussing what you remember and then we’ll discuss them as a group.

Objectives of today’s session

• Last time we talked about the differences between men and women. This session will look more deeply at the purpose behind God creating us with bodies – either masculine or feminine.

• Then we’re going to look at the meaning God has written into sexual love that allows us to speak God’s language of love as husband and wife.

• We’re also going to look at the reasons why using contraception and IVF contradict and harm the purpose and meaning God has given sexual love.

• Finally, we’ll examine why Natural Fertility Awareness is in tune with the God-given meaning of sexual love.

2. Made in the image of God

The purpose of this session is to get the couples thinking about the dignity and value of having bodies created by God. This is to counter the fashionable idea that we are the products of random chance, and can therefore do whatever we like to our own bodies and other bodies, with their consent. Once couples accept their bodies have an inherent meaning and purpose, they will be more open to the argument that it is reasonable to reject the misguided notion that it is a ‘good’ thing to use contraception and IVF.

Key points: Make the following points:

• Now we’re going to look at what the Catholic Church teaches about the inherent meaning and purpose God has given our bodies as male and female, and how this meaning and purpose is expressed in marriage.
Made in the image of God

- As couples, turn to the material on ‘Made in the image of God’ (Couple’s Book, p.17) and take 10 minutes to fill in the questionnaire together. As a group we will then go through the answers.

After about 10 minutes come together into the group, and invite couples to share their answers.

**Key points:** You will want to make the following points when discussing the couples’ answers. Spend approximately 5 minutes on each statement. The model answers draw on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

1. Humans are just like the other animals, nothing more.

- **God created human beings to be a union of body and soul.** This question is about human beings being created by God as a union of body and soul.

  - The answer is ‘Strongly disagree’. The fact that human beings are created as a union of body and soul means the body is never ‘something’ but always ‘someone’ who shares in the dignity of the ‘image of God’. (*CCC* 362-368).

  - Nowadays it’s common in wildlife documentaries to refer to human beings as just being another type of animal. Now, there are certainly things we have in common with animals – our need to eat, sleep, excrete, and reproduce. However, there are such striking dissimilarities, that we must consider human beings a completely different order of being on this planet; – for example, only human beings make promises; only human beings have a sense of self and give themselves in love to another; only human beings give their lives for strangers.

  - In an earlier session, we mentioned that human beings are made in the image of God, which conveys the fact that we are very different from animals; we are a union of body and soul, we are persons.

  - Nowadays the only time we hear about ‘soul’ is ‘soul’ music; this captures one of the realities of the ‘soul’, which concerns profound personal feelings, most especially love, including sexual love.

  - The ‘soul’ signifies the spiritual dimension of our existence, the unique, inner-life of each one of us. In Christianity, the image of the soul is the ‘heart’, not as the muscle that pumps blood around the body, but as a symbol of the inner depths of the person. The image of the heart expresses the reality of us being a unity of body and soul.

  - Our language of love is full of the images of the heart, which we see especially on Valentine’s Day. Can you think of any uses of the word ‘heart’ in relation to the theme ‘love’? (‘Heart-broken’, ‘heart-ache’, ‘talking heart-to-heart’, ‘heavy-heart’, heart-felt etc.)
• All these ‘heart’ images convey an essential truth about why we have souls, why we are persons – so we can enter into relationships with others, so we can love others. The most intense experience of being a ‘person’ is the love you have for each other.

• God also gave us a spiritual nature so we could be capable of knowing and loving him.

• One of the reasons why God made us a union of body and soul is so we could form loving relationships with each other, create children to love, and love him.

2. The order and beauty of the world and the universe shows us everything has been created by God.

• We can see signs of God’s design and purpose in nature. This question is about seeing signs of God’s design and purpose in nature and our personal lives.

• The answer is ‘Strongly agree’. The Church teaches that we can come to know God in two ways: through our reason observing nature and ourselves, and through God’s Word in the Bible and the life of the Church. (CCC 31-38).

• Have you ever gone for a walk in the countryside, maybe somewhere remote and wild, and been struck by an overwhelming feeling of awe and wonder at its beauty and goodness? Or have you ever looked up at the stars in the night sky or at photographs of stars and galaxies in space and thought, ‘This is so beautiful and complex it must have been made somehow by God’?

• The signs of purpose and order in the universe are positive indications that God is the origin and end of everything.

• You might be surprised to hear that the Catholic Church doesn’t teach that the world was created in six days; and that the Church accepts some versions of evolution as a scientific explanation of our world. The Church doesn’t accept extreme theories of evolution that believe that human beings are the random products of chance and accidents. We hold that there is a purpose and direction to evolution, which is the emergence of self-conscious beings capable of reason and love.

• The Church also sees evidence for the existence of God as our creator in our experience of being human persons: ‘The human person: with our openness to truth and beauty, our sense of moral goodness, our freedom and the voice of our conscience, with our longings for the infinite and for happiness, we question ourselves about God’s existence. In all this we discern signs of our spiritual soul. The soul, the “seed of eternity we bear in ourselves, irreducible to the merely material” can have its origin only in God. (CCC 33).
3. Sex is primarily for pleasure.

- **God created masculinity and femininity to reveal our spiritual nature and share in his creation of new life.** This question looks at the fact that God created masculinity and femininity to reveal our spiritual nature and share in his creation of new life.

- The answer is ‘Strongly disagree’. The Church teaches that sexual love expresses in a profound way our nature as beings created to be a union of body and soul, made in the image of God. (CCC 2331-2336; 2360-2363).

- Yes, sex is pleasurable and that’s good, and is supposed to be fun. But is sex just about achieving our own pleasure? Is sex just about pleasuring each other?

- Have you come across the term, body language? This refers to the fact that our facial expressions, the movements of our body, the gestures we make communicate signals and information about our moods, our feelings, even our thoughts. Our bodies give other people an insight into the inner depths of our personality.

- Sexual love in marriage is an intense and powerful type of body language between husband and wife.

- What does this ‘body language’ of married sexual love communicate? It says, ‘You’re the most important person in my life’; ‘I love you so much I give you my body’; ‘Your happiness and pleasure are as important to me as my own’; ‘I want to give you a moment of pleasure and joy after a day of hard work and problems’. The most important and special thing that the body language between wife and husband says is, “I love every aspect of you so much that I want to make a baby with you, who will be part of you and part of me’.

- As we discovered in the first session, ‘God is love’ and he created maleness and femaleness as a special way of sharing in his love.

- The naked bodies of husband and wife show that they have been created to communicate the body language of love in a way that intimately expresses the total gift of oneself. Marriage is written into the structure and shape of our bodies.

- This openness of ourselves, physically, psychologically and spiritually, to self-giving is so important it’s called the ‘Law of the Gift’, expressed in this sentence, ‘We can fully discover our true self only in a sincere giving of ourselves.’ (Gaudium et Spes)

- The ultimate expression of our self-gift in marriage is the pro-creation of children. This is because it is not only a share in God’s creative power, but also expresses the inner life of God, which is a communion of persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. When a husband and wife conceive a child they too become a communion of persons. This is one of the reasons why marriage must be a deeply personal union, that is indissoluble, faithful and open to life.
4. People can do selfless things for love of others.

- **Jesus reveals and heals our capacity for self-giving love.** This question looks at the truth that Jesus reveals and heals our capacity for self-giving love.

- The answer to this is ‘Strongly agree’. The Church teaches that we can only know our true dignity and the depth of our ability to love through Jesus Christ. *(CCC 359, 1701)*.

- When we hear about husbands or wives committing adultery, or about the latest incident of alcohol-fuelled domestic abuse, or a wife finding out her husband is addicted to internet pornography, people tend to make the excuse, ‘It’s only human’.

- The truth of the matter is that such behaviour is ‘less than human’, and in fact every time we commit a sin we are being ‘less than human’.

- For the past 2000 years Christians have known that only one person truly shows us what it means to be fully human and that person is Jesus Christ.

- Jesus is important to all our lives, and to our marriages, because ‘he fully reveals man to man himself’. Only in the mystery of God becoming a human being in Jesus Christ do we learn what it means to be human, what we are really capable of doing in the name of love.

- Jesus shows us the truth of the Law of the Gift and its importance in our lives, we only find ourselves by giving ourselves away in acts of love. The Cross, or Crucifix, is so important to Christians because it is the sign, or logo, of this love.

- This saying of Jesus tells us the truth about love: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”. *(John 15:13)*.

  - Now most likely we won’t ever be in situation where we have to give our lives to save others, but every day we are called to make sacrifices for the good of others.

  - Because of our inclination, or tendency, to be selfish and commit sins we need Jesus’ help to love like him; this is why he gave us the sacraments, including the sacrament of marriage, and why it’s important to pray to him.

**3. What’s wrong with contraception and IVF?**

The purpose of this activity is for couples to find out for themselves why the Church teaches that contraception and In Vitro Fertilization are wrong and harm marriage. Simply put, there are two reasons: both artificially break the inseparable bond between the act of sexual love and openness to fertility. Further, contraception makes the act of love a ‘lie’ by withholding one of the essential qualities of marriage: openness to fertility.
**Key points:** Make the following points:

- Now we’re going to undertake an activity to explore why the Church teaches that contraception and IVF are wrong and have no place in a Catholic marriage.

- If you turn to your *Couple’s Book* (p.17) you’ll see a number of statements giving reasons why the Church teaches that contraception and IVF are wrong. Some of these reasons are false and some are true. We’d like you to sort out the true reasons from the false ones.

After about 5 minutes go through the reasons the couples have chosen as being true and false and why. Spend a couple of minutes on each statement. Make sure that couples correct their answers if necessary in their material.

**Why contraception and IVF are wrong? True or false**

(This activity is based on Dr C O’Donnell’s *Questions & Answers on Sex and Marriage*)

1. **The Church is against contraception because sex is something bad and dirty.**
   - This is false. As we’ve discussed throughout the course, God made erotic love because he considers sex to be not only very good, and to be enjoyed but also one of the most powerful and intimate ways of giving and receiving love between a husband and wife.

2. **The Church is against contraception because it wants every act of sexual love to result in a baby.**
   - This is false. The Church understands that ‘new life is not the result of each and every act of sexual intercourse’ due to the woman’s God-given, natural cycle of monthly fertility and infertility.

   - Furthermore, the Church also teaches that where there are ‘well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances’ (Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*), married couples may then take advantage of Natural Fertility Awareness to abstain from sexual relations during the woman’s fertile period, and have sexual intercourse during the infertile period. This does not go against God’s will for our fertility because the couple are using the natural, God-given cycles for their correct purpose.

   - God, in his wisdom, has given us a natural, simple way of being responsible parents that involves our intelligence, self-control and loving consideration. However, the couple must ensure that their motivation is the good of the family and not some selfish desire.
3. The Church is against contraception because it makes a lie out of God’s language of love.

- This is true. As we’ve seen in this session, God created masculinity and femininity to enable husbands and wives to express mutual self-giving and receiving in love. Fertility is not an optional extra but a fundamental dimension of maleness and femaleness. Recognising this, the essential signs of love in marriage are deeply personal union, indissolubility, faithfulness, and openness to fertility. The problem with artificial contraception – sheath, pill, coil, implant, injection – is that they withhold fertility. It makes the act of sexual love a lie, because the body language is saying, ‘I love everything about you except your natural fertility.’

4. The Church is for couples spacing the number of children using Natural Fertility Awareness.

- This is true. The Church actively supports scientists and doctors discovering more about the natural periods of fertility and infertility that God has given women in their monthly cycle. This is not to be confused with older, less reliable methods such as the Rhythm Method, but is based on observations of natural changes to the woman’s body. A detailed exposition of this falls outside the scope of this course, but practitioner teachers of the ovulation method or multiple-indicators can be found on the web.

5. The Church allows couples to use Natural Fertility Awareness to permanently avoid further pregnancies once a couple decides they have the number of children they want.

- This is false. The Church beseeches couples to avoid having a ‘contraceptive mentality’ which means using the awareness of the fertile and infertile periods in a woman’s cycle to avoid having any further children. This would be an abuse of God’s will in creating this natural monthly cycle. The basic purpose of sexual love is the procreation of children, and this should be honoured in marriage. The difference between contraception and Natural Fertility Awareness is that contraception is unnatural and artificially suppresses a good and natural function – the couple’s fertility.

6. The Church is against IVF because children conceived in a test tube are not really human.

- This is false. Every child born through IVF is fully and truly a human being, with a soul created by God. However, the Church believes that every child has the right to be conceived from within the intimate act of self-giving love between wife and husband.
7. The Church is against IVF because she doesn’t want the marriage bed to be replaced by the laboratory

- This is true. There is a natural security that comes from reserving conception of human beings within the woman’s body. Once this natural security is broken, as it is with IVF, all kinds of gravely immoral acts become possible. For example, experimentation on embryonic human beings, gender selection, eugenics of embryonic human beings with disabilities, and the creation of animal/human hybrids.

8. The Church is against IVF because she doesn’t care about the suffering of infertile couples.

This is false. The Church continues to express her deep sympathy, care and recognition of the suffering caused by infertility. The *Catechism* states: ‘Spouses to whom God has not granted children can nevertheless have a conjugal life full of meaning, in both human and Christian terms. Their marriage can radiate a fruitfulness of charity, of hospitality, and of sacrifice.’ (*CCC* 1654). Also, the Church promotes the use of medicine, surgery, and Natural Fertility Awareness for couples suffering from infertility and sub-fertility, that is, medically unexplained problems conceiving.

4. Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God?

The purpose of this section is to help couples talk about what it means to be open to life, – open to share their lives with children. After talking about the tragedy and sadness of contraception, it’s good to end this session on the promising note of having children.

**Key points:** Make the following points:

- When you make your marriage vows, you will make the following promise: I am ready to accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church.

- Turn to the final activity of this session, ‘Accepting Children’, (*Couple’s Book*, p.18) and spend a few minutes in couples thinking about the following questions:
  - What do we mean when we say that children are a gift from God?
  - Would you want your children to be brought up in the Catholic faith? Why?

After 5 minutes, when the couples come back to the group, invite them to share any thoughts.
**Key points:** Make the following points:

- One of the original blessings God gave human beings was the command: ‘Be fruitful and multiply’.

- Children are one of the great gifts of life, along with the gift of our own existence and the wonderful gift of love between man and woman. This whole cluster of gifts from God goes together, usually.

- This is what the Church tells us about children: “A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfilment... called to give life, spouses share in the creative power and fatherhood of God... they are co-operating with the love of God the Creator”. (CCC 2366-7).

- Having children is taking part in God’s creative work; it is the fruitfulness of God’s original blessing. Parents become co-operators with the love of God the Creator, and in a sense make that love present.

- This is shown in a couple’s openness to life, the gift of their whole being – the gift of their fertility – through which they share in God’s life-giving love.

- In this way marriage opens up the wonderful and demanding vocation to parenthood, one of the most powerful experiences of our capacity for self-giving love.

5. **Closing words and homework**

The purpose of this section is to recap the session and to continue to encourage the couples in prayer.

**Key points:** To explain this section, make the following points:

- Some of the things which we have talked about today can be difficult because they go against current ‘popular public opinion’. It is important that you appreciate the arguments being made because you may face great pressure to use contraception and/or IVF. In these circumstances you will really be called upon to practice self-giving love.

- To help us reflect on what we have learnt today, can each of you individually jot down the key points you would make in response to the following questions (*have some paper ready – pause between the questions*):
  - What would you explain as being the meaning and purpose God has given sexual love?
  - Why would you say that contraception contradicts the meaning of marital love?
• Why would you say that IVF contradicts the meaning of marital love?

• Why are the marriage vows (unity, indissolubility, faithfulness and openness to life) vital to the success of a marriage?

• Why does the Church advocate Natural Fertility Awareness?

• This exercise that we have done is not easy! You will probably need more time to reflect on what we have covered.

• For ‘homework’ read the summary material (Couple’s Book, p. 17-19) and think about ‘What will we do as a result of this session?’

• Remember to keep praying the prayer on the summary sheet from the first session.

Check if there are any other questions. Confirm the date, time and location of the next meeting. Thank everyone for coming.
AIM
To appreciate that being created by the God of love our bodies reflect their origin in his loving purpose. This purpose informs what is the right and wrong use of our bodies

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- Explain the meaning and purpose God has given sexual love
- State why contraception and IVF contradict the meaning of marital love
- State why the marriage vows of unity, indissolubility, faithfulness and openness to life are vital to the success of a marriage
- Explain why the Church advocates natural fertility awareness

“The human person: with our openness to truth and beauty, our sense of moral goodness, our freedom and the voice of our conscience, with our longings for the infinite and for happiness, we question ourselves about God’s existence. In all this we discern signs of our spiritual soul. The soul, the “seed of eternity we bear in ourselves, irreducible to the merely material” can have its origin only in God.”

(CCC 33)

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your cries are continually before me.

(Isaiah 49:13, 15-16)
Made in the image of God

Read the statements below and decide as a couple whether or not you agree with them and why. (Take about 10 minutes). We will then discuss the questions as a group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Depends</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humans are just like the other animals, nothing more.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The order and beauty of the world and the universe show us everything has been created by God.</td>
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<td>Sex is primarily for pleasure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>People can do selfless things for love of others.</td>
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Why contraception and IVF are wrong? True or false

Read the statements below and decide as a couple whether they are true or false, giving reasons. (Take about 5 minutes).¹

We will then discuss the questions as a group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The Church is against contraception because sex is something bad and dirty.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The Church is against contraception because it wants every act of sexual love to result in a baby.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. The Church is for couples spacing the number of children using Natural Fertility Awareness.</td>
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<td>5. The Church allows couples to use Natural Fertility Awareness to permanently avoid pregnancy.</td>
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<td>6. The Church is against IVF because children conceived in a test tube are not really human.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. The Church is against IVF because she doesn’t want the marriage bed to be replaced by the laboratory.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. The Church is against IVF because she doesn’t care about the suffering of infertile couples.</td>
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</table>

Natural Fertility Awareness is a method of working out the natural periods of fertility and infertility that are present in every woman’s monthly cycle. This is not to be confused with older, less reliable methods such as the Rhythm Method, but is based on observations of natural changes to the woman’s body.

¹ This activity is based on Dr C O’Donnell’s Questions & Answers on Sex and Marriage.
God created human beings to be a union of body and soul. The fact that human beings are created as a union of body and soul means the body is never ‘something’ but always ‘someone’ who shares in the dignity of the ‘image of God’.

One of the reasons why God made us a union of body and soul is so we could form loving relationships with each other, create children to love, and could be capable of knowing and loving him.

We can see signs of God’s design and purpose in nature. The Church teaches that we can come to know God in two ways:

• through our reason observing nature and ourselves, and

• through God’s Word in the Bible and the life of the Church.

The signs of purpose and order in the universe are positive indications that God is the origin and end of everything. The Church doesn’t accept extreme theories of evolution that believe that human beings are the random products of chance and accidents. Instead, it holds that there is a purpose and direction to evolution, which is the emergence of self-conscious beings capable of reason and love.

God created masculinity and femininity to reveal our spiritual nature and share in his creation of new life. The Church teaches that sexual love expresses in a profound way our nature as beings created to be a union of body and soul, made in the image of God. The ‘body language’ of sexual love in marriage says, ‘You’re the most important person in my life’; ‘I love you so much I give you my body’. ‘I love every aspect of you so much that I want to have a child with you, who will be part of both of us’.

Jesus reveals and heals our capacity for self-giving love. The Church teaches that we can only know our true dignity and the depth of our ability to love through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ in his perfect love shows us what it means to be fully human.

**Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God?**

As a couple take a few minutes to discuss the following questions: (say 5 mins)

• What do we mean when we say that children are a gift from God?

• Would you want your children to be brought up in the Catholic faith? Why?
• The Church understands that ‘new life is not the result of each and every act of sexual intercourse’ due to the woman’s God-given, natural cycle of monthly fertility and infertility. Furthermore, the Church also teaches that were there are ‘well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances’ (Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*), married couples may then take advantage of Natural Fertility Awareness to abstain from sexual relations during the woman’s fertile period, and have sexual intercourse during the infertile period. This does not go against God’s will for our fertility because the couple are using the natural, God-given cycles for their correct purpose.

• God, in his wisdom, has given us a natural, simple way of being responsible parents that involves our intelligence, self-control and loving consideration. However, the couple must ensure that their motivation is the good of the family and not some selfish desire.

However, the Church is against both contraception and IVF as they artificially break the inseparable bond between the act of sexual love and openness to fertility. In addition, contraception also makes the act of love a ‘lie’ by withholding one of the essential qualities of marriage: openness to fertility. The most important and special message that the body language between wife and husband communicates is, “I love every aspect of you so much” – it does not add “except for your fertility”.

**Action Planning**

As a couple consider what you will do as a result of this session. You might like to consider the following:

• Discuss together God’s meaning and purpose for sexual love and your approach to having children.

• Find out about Natural Fertility Awareness. Practitioner teachers of the ‘ovulation method’ or ‘multiple-indicators’ can be found on the web.
Session 4 - God’s body talk

Preparation before the session

Prayer to Holy Spirit for catechists

Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy.
Act in me, O Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy.
Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit, that I love only what is holy.
Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit, to defend all that is holy.
Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit, that I always may be holy.
Amen.
(St Augustine).

Remember our goal is catechesis

(cf. Introduction to Marriage Preparation Course):

• Personal and sensitive
• Jesus first and last
• Love the Church
• Seeing the holy

Read through the Presenter’s material

• Be clear about the goal and objectives of the session
• Understand and prayerfully read the sections
• Prepare your own answers to the activities to share with the couples.
Aim: To appreciate that, being created by the God of love, our bodies reflect their origin in his loving purpose. This purpose informs what is the right and wrong use of our bodies.

Objectives: By the end of this session couples will be able to:

- Explain the meaning and purpose God has given sexual love.
- State why contraception and IVF contradict the meaning of marital love.
- State why the marriage vows: unity, indissolubility, faithfulness and openness to life are vital to the success of a marriage.
- Explain why the Church advocates Natural Fertility Awareness

Key Features:
- The ‘nuptial significance’ of maleness and femaleness.
- The Law of Self-gift and the necessary conditions for self-giving.
- How contraception and IVF are a lie.
- Why it is important that sex is open to life.
- Natural Fertility Awareness

### Session 4 God’s body talk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outline of Session</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section and timing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Welcome and recap from last session (10 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Input: Brief overview of session</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Made in the image of God (30 mins)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What’s wrong with contraception and IVF (20 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God? (15 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Closing words and homework (15 mins)</td>
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1. Welcome and recap of the last session

The purpose of this section is to re-engage with the course and prepare for what this session will cover.

Welcome couples back to the course. Ask if anyone has any questions arising since you last met. Explain that to start you are going to complete a quick recap.

**Key points:** You will want to make the following points:

- During the last session we discussed the important differences between men and women, and the fact that these differences are not accidental or life-style choices, but have their origin in God’s purpose for us.

- For the start of this session I’d like you to tell us what you remember about:
  - The importance of these differences to us being made in the image of God. And
  - What marriage has got to do with us being made in the image of God.

- Spend a few minutes discussing what you remember and then we’ll discuss them as a group.

The answers to these questions are found at the end of the first activity of session 3, ‘Respect the differences between men and women’ (See above pp.127-129).

**Objectives of today’s session**

- Last time we talked about the differences between men and women, this session we’re going to look more deeply at the purpose behind God creating us either masculine or feminine.

- Then we’re going to look at the meaning God has written into sexual love that allows us to speak God’s language of love as husband and wife.

- We’re also going to look at the reasons why using contraception and IVF contradict and harm the purpose and meaning God has given sexual love.

- We’ll also examine why Natural Fertility Awareness is in tune with the God-given meaning of sexual love.

2. Made in the image of God

The purpose of this session is to help the couples think more deeply about God’s revelation that our bodies are made in the image of divine love, which is the source of the dignity and value of masculinity and femininity. Once couples accept their bodies have an inherent meaning and purpose they will be more open to the argument that it is reasonable to reject the misguided notion that it is acceptable to use contraception and IVF.
Key points: Make the following points:

• Now we’re going to look further at what God has revealed about our bodies inherent meaning and purpose as male and female, and how this meaning and purpose is expressed in marriage.

• First, we’re going to read together a selection of extracts from the Book of Genesis about the creation of the first man and the first woman. Then you’ll split into couples and discuss questions about the texts, and finally we’ll come together to share our thoughts.

• Before reading the extracts from the Book of Genesis it may help to recap the approach the Catholic Church takes to this section of the Bible.

• The first things to realise is that the authors of Genesis, inspired by God, didn’t intend to write a work of history or science as we understand those disciplines today. So when Genesis says God created the world in six days, formed Adam from clay, and made Eve from one of his ribs, the authors are not relating literal historical or scientific facts.

• The Catechism makes it clear that the Old Testament accounts of creation go beyond the questions of the natural sciences into the realm of meaning. The purpose of Old Testament accounts of creation is to make profound realities graspable to human beings.

Thus Scripture would not wish to inform us about how the different species of plant life gradually appeared or how the sun and moon and the stars were established. Its purpose ultimately would be to say one thing: God created the world...all of this comes from one power, from God’s eternal Reason, which became – in the Word – the power of creation.

(Cardinal Ratzinger, ‘In the Beginning’, p.5)

• So when we read Genesis today we must ask the questions, ‘what profound reality about being men and women is God trying to tell us? What is the divine meaning he has given masculinity and femininity?’

Extracts from the Book of Genesis

• In your pairs, turn to the material on Creation and take 10 minutes to answer the questions together. As a group we will then go through the answers (Couple’s Book p. 18).

After about 10 minutes come together into the group, and invite couples to share their answers.

You will want to make the following points when discussing the couples’ answers. Spend approximately 5 minutes on each question.
First account of creation

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it. (Genesis 1:26-28)

Second account of creation

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed...

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”

So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.”

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2: 7-8, 18-25)

1. What do these extracts tell us about human beings being different from animals?

• The references to being made ‘in the image of God’ and God breathing the ‘spirit of life’ into Adam’s nostrils helps us grasp that we are a union of body and soul.

• The body isn’t a machine inhabited by a soul, but an inseparable union of physical body and spiritual soul.

• Our image and likeness to God resides in this spiritual reality, our soul, but our body also shares in the dignity of the ‘image of God’. We have human bodies, and not animal bodies, because they are animated by a spiritual soul created by God.
• Nowadays we don’t hear much talk about the soul being the seat of our identity; it’s all been reduced to brains and brain chemistry. But the reality of each person having a soul conveys the truth revealed by God that we’re made in his image and that he breathes his spirit into us.

• What is a soul? It refers to our interior life, the inner-most aspect of a human being, our self-possession, self-awareness, and self-knowledge. (CCC 362-368).

• In Christianity, the image of the soul is the ‘heart’, not as the muscle that pumps blood around the body, but as a symbol of the inner depths of the person. The image of the heart expresses the reality of us being a unity of body and soul.

• The importance of the ‘heart’ in Catholic spirituality is seen in devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the wounded heart of Mary. The total, self-giving love of Jesus for sinful human beings is conveyed by the iconography of his divine heart exposed to our gaze and suffering the wounds of our sins not in condemnation or retribution but in the humility of love.

• All these ‘heart’ images convey an essential truth about why we have souls, why we are persons – so we can enter into relationships with others, so we can love others. The most intense experience of being a ‘person’, of being a ‘soul’ is the love you have for each other.

• Also, because we are made in the image and likeness of God, we have been given the capacity to receive God’s self-communication, his revelation and his grace. This capacity to have communion with God involves our whole being, body and soul united. This means we cannot treat our bodies in ways that are contrary to God’s will, as if they were ‘no go’ areas for God.

2. What do these extracts tell us about the relationship between men and women?

• One thing it doesn’t tell us is that man is superior to woman. The image of Eve being formed from Adam’s rib is not about woman’s dependence of man but about complementarity, about completing each other through a natural union.

• Genesis says God saw that man was lonely without a helpmate, that he needed another. None of the animals could fill this gap of loneliness. We cannot exist in isolation, we are not self-sufficient. Love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.

• In creating human beings, male and female, God gives man and woman an equal personal dignity, though in a different and complementary way. And as we discussed in the last session, it is that personal union of masculine and feminine differences in marriage that fully conveys the image of God.
• The phrase, ‘I shall make a helper for man, as a partner for him’, can also be translated as an ‘opposite to him’. This means that God has created men and women to be opposites turned in each other’s direction and specifically made to encounter each other and fit together.

• This personal reality of being created as opposites made to fit together is reflected in the biological structures of male and female bodies. The physical reflects the spiritual, and vice versa.

3. What do these extracts tell us about the purpose and meaning of sexual love?

• God created masculinity and femininity to reveal our spiritual nature and share in his creation of new life.

• Reflecting on Genesis, the Church teaches that sexual love expresses in a profound way our nature as beings created to be a union of body and soul, made in the image of God. (CCC 2331-2336; 2360-2363).

• The phrases, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh’ and ‘and they become one flesh’ mean three important things in the Bible:

  (1) The sexual act between husband and wife creates a bond as close as a blood relationship between members of a family, with the obligation of living together in peace.

  (2) That husband and wife are complementary and complete each other.

  (3) The physical, marital union between man and woman forms one shared life as if they are one person.

• Another sentence that’s important to look at is, ‘And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed’. It is this freedom from shame about our nakedness that makes the sincere gift of self possible through the bodiliness of sexual love.

• We came across the term, body language in the last session. You will remember it refers to the fact that our facial expressions, the movements of our body, the gestures we make communicate signals and information about our moods, our feelings, even our thoughts. Our bodies give other people an insight into the inner depths of our personality.

• Sexual love in marriage is an intense and powerful type of body language between husband and wife.

• What does this ‘body language’ of the marital act communicate? It says, ‘You’re the most important person in my life’, ‘I love you so much I give you my body’, ‘Your happiness and pleasure are as important to me as my own’, ‘I want to give you a moment of pleasure and joy after a day of hard work and problems’. The most important and special statement that the body language between wife and
husband makes is, ‘I love every aspect of you so much that I am open to giving life to a child with you, who will be part of you and part of me’,

• As we discovered in the first session, ‘God is love’ and he created maleness and femaleness as a special way of sharing in his love.

• The naked bodies of husband and wife show that they have been created to communicate the body language of love in a way that intimately expresses the total gift of oneself. Marriage is written into the structure and shape of our bodies.

• This openness of ourselves, physically, psychologically and spiritually, to self-giving is so important it’s called the ‘Law of the Gift’, expressed in this sentence: ‘We can fully discover our true self only in a sincere giving of ourselves.’ (*Gaudium et Spes*)

• The ultimate expression of our self-gift in marriage is the procreation of children, because it is not only a share in God’s creative power, but also expresses the inner life of God, which is a communion of persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. When a husband and wife conceive a child they, too, become a communion of persons. This is one of the reasons why marriage must be a deeply held personal union, that is indissoluble, faithful and open to life.

3. What’s wrong with contraception and IVF?

The purpose of this activity is for couples to find out for themselves why the Church teaches that contraception and IVF are wrong and harm marriage. Simply put, there are two reasons: both artificially break the inseparable bond between the act of sexual love and openness to fertility. Further, contraception makes the act of love a ‘lie’ by withholding one of the essential qualities of marriage: openness to fertility.

**Key points:** Make the following points:

• Now we’re going to undertake an activity to explore why the Church teaches that contraception and IVF are wrong and have no place in a Catholic marriage.

• If you turn to your *Couple’s Book* (p.19) you’ll see a number of statements giving reasons why the Church teaches that contraception and IVF are wrong. Some of these reasons are false and some are true. We’d like you to sort out the true reasons from the false ones.

After about 5 minutes come back into the group and go through the reasons they have chosen as being true and false and why. Spend a couple of minutes on each statement. Make sure that couples correct their answers if necessary in their material.
Why contraception and IVF are wrong? True or false

(This activity is based on Dr C O’Donnell’s Questions & Answers on Sex and Marriage)

1. The Church is against contraception because sex is something bad and dirty
   • This is false. As we’ve discussed throughout the Course, God made erotic love because he considers sexual love not only very good, and to be enjoyed, but also because it is one of the most powerful and intimate ways of giving and receiving love between husbands and wives.

2. The Church is against contraception because it wants every act of sexual love to result in a baby
   • This is false. The Church understands that ‘new life is not the result of each and every act of sexual intercourse’ due to the woman’s God-given, natural cycle of monthly fertility and infertility.
   • Furthermore, the Church also teaches that where there are ‘well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances’ (Pope Paul VI, Humanae Vitae), married couples may then take advantage of Natural Fertility Awareness to abstain from sexual relations during the woman’s fertile period, and have sexual intercourse during the infertile period. This does not go against God’s will for our fertility because the couple are using the natural, God-given cycles for their correct purpose.
   • God, in his wisdom, has given us a natural, simple way of being responsible parents that involves our intelligence, self-control and loving consideration. However, the couple must ensure that their motivation is the good of the family and not some selfish desire.

3. The Church is against contraception because it makes a lie out of God’s language of love
   • This is true. As we’ve seen in this session God created masculinity and femininity to enable husbands and wives to express mutual self-giving and receiving in love. Fertility is not an optional extra but a fundamental dimension of maleness and femaleness. Recognising this, the essential signs of love in marriage are deeply personal union, indissolubility, faithfulness, and openness to fertility. The problem with artificial contraception – sheath, pill, coil, implant, injection – is that they withhold fertility. It makes the act of sexual love a lie, because the body language is saying, ‘I love everything about you except your natural fertility.’
4. **The Church is for couples spacing the number of children using Natural Fertility Awareness**

- This is true. The Church actively supports scientists and doctors discovering more about the natural periods of fertility and infertility that God has given women in their monthly cycle. This is not to be confused with older, less reliable methods such as the Rhythm Method, but is based on observations of natural changes to the woman’s body. The exact details of this technique are outside the scope of this course, but practitioner teachers of the ovulation method or multiple-indicators can be found on the web.

5. **The Church allows couples to use Natural Fertility Awareness to permanently avoid pregnancy**

- This is false. The Church beseeches couples to avoid having a ‘contraceptive mentality’ which means using the awareness of the fertile and infertile periods in a woman’s cycle to avoid having any further children. This would be an abuse of God’s will in creating this natural monthly cycle. The basic purpose of sexual love is the procreation of children, and this should be honoured in marriage. The difference between Natural Fertility Awareness and contraception is that contraception is unnatural and intervenes to artificially suppresses a good and natural function, the couple’s fertility.

6. **The Church is against IVF because children conceived in a test tube are not really human**

- This is false. Every child born through IVF is fully and truly a human being, with a soul created by God. However, the Church believes that every child has the right to be conceived from within the intimate act of self-giving love between wife and husband.

7. **The Church is against IVF because she doesn’t want the marriage bed to be replaced by the laboratory**

- This is true. There is a natural security that comes from reserving conception of human beings within the woman’s body. Once this natural security is broken, as it has been with IVF, all kinds of gravely immoral acts follow. For example, experimentation on embryonic human beings, sex selection, eugenics of embryonic human beings with disabilities, and the creation of animal/human hybrids.

8. **The Church is against IVF because she doesn’t care about the suffering of infertile couples**

- This is false. The Church continues to express her deep sympathy, care and recognition of the suffering caused by infertility. In the *Catechism* it states, ‘Spouses to whom God has not granted children can nevertheless have a conjugal life full of meaning, in both human and Christian terms. Their marriage can radiate a fruitfulness of charity, of hospitality, and of sacrifice.’ (CCC 1654). Also, the Church promotes the use of medicine, surgery, and Natural Fertility Awareness for couples suffering from infertility, and sub-fertility, that is, medically unexplained problems conceiving.
4. Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God?

The purpose of this section is to help couples talk about what it means to be open to life, open to share their lives with children. After talking about the tragedy and sadness of contraception, it’s good to end this session on the high note of having children.

**Key points:** Make the following points:

- When you make your marriage vows during your wedding you will make the following promise: Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?

- Turn to the final activity of this session, ‘Accepting Children’ (*Couple’s Book*, p.20), and spend a few minutes, in couples, thinking about the following questions.
  - What do we mean when we say that children are a gift from God?
  - Would you want your children to be brought up in the Catholic faith? Why?

After 5 minutes, when the couples come back to the group, invite them to share any thoughts.

**Key points:** Make the following points:

- One of the original blessings God gave human beings was the command, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’.

- Children are one of the great gifts of life, along with the gift of our own existence and the wonderful gift of love between man and woman. This whole cluster of gifts from God goes together, usually.

- This is what the Church tells us about children: ‘A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfilment... called to give life, spouses share in the creative power and fatherhood of God... they are co-operating with the love of God the Creator’. (*CCC* 2366-7).

- Having children is taking part in God’s creative work; it is the fruitfulness of God’s original blessing. Parents become co-operators with the love of God the Creator and in a sense make that love present.

- This is shown in a couple’s openness to life, the gift of their whole being – the gift of their fertility – through which they share in God’s life-giving love.

- In this way marriage opens up the wonderful and demanding vocation to parenthood, one of the most powerful experiences of our capacity for self-giving love.
5. Closing words and homework

The purpose of this section is to recap the session and to continue to encourage the couples in prayer.

**Key points:** To explain this section, make the following points:

- Some of the things which we have talked about today can be difficult because they go against current ‘popular public opinion’. It is important that you appreciate the arguments being made because you may face great pressure to use contraception and/or IVF. In these circumstances you will really be called upon to practice self-giving love.

- To help us reflect on what we have learnt today can each of you individually jot down the key points you would make in response to the following questions (*have some paper ready – pause between the questions)*:
  
  - What would you explain as being the meaning and purpose God has given sexual love?
  - Why would you say that contraception contradicts the meaning of marital love?
  - Why would you say that IVF contradicts the meaning of marital love?
  - Why are the marriage vows (unity, indissolubility, faithfulness and openness to life) vital to the success of a marriage?
  - Why does the Church advocate Natural Fertility Awareness?

- This exercise that we have done is not at all easy! You will probably need more time to reflect on what we have covered.

- For ‘homework’ read the summary in the *Couple’s Book* (pp.19-20); reflect on the bible passages we have read today and think about “What will we do as a result of this session?”

Check if there are any other questions. Confirm the date, time and location of the next meeting. Thank everyone for coming.
AIM
To appreciate that being created by the God of love, our bodies reflect their origin in his loving purpose. This purpose informs what is the right and wrong use of our bodies.

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this session, you will be able to:

- Explain the meaning and purpose God has given sexual love
- State why contraception and IVF contradict the meaning of marital love
- State why the marriage vows of unity, indissolubility, faithfulness and openness to life are vital to the success of a marriage
- Explain why the Church advocates natural fertility awareness

‘The human person: with our openness to truth and beauty, our sense of moral goodness, our freedom and the voice of our conscience, with our longings for the infinite and for happiness, we question ourselves about God’s existence. In all this we discern signs of our spiritual soul. The soul, the ‘seed of eternity we bear in ourselves, irreducible to the merely material’ can have its origin only in God.’

(CCC 33)

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your cries are continually before me.

(Isaiah 49:13, 15-16)
Made in the image of God

As a couple, read the accounts of creation below and answer the three questions. (Take about 10 minutes). We will then discuss the questions as a group.

• What do these extracts tell us about human beings being different from animals?
• What do these extracts tell us about the relationship between men and women?
• What do these extracts tell us about the purpose and meaning of sexual love?

First account of creation

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth”.

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.

(Genesis 1:26-28)

Second account of creation

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed...

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”

So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.”

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

(Genesis 2:7-8, 18-25)
Why contraception and IVF are wrong?

True or false

Read the statements below and decide as a couple whether they are true or false, giving reasons. (Take about 5 minutes).¹

We will then discuss the questions as a group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The Church is against contraception because sex is something bad and dirty.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The Church is against contraception because it wants every act of sexual love to result in a baby.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. The Church is against contraception because it makes a lie out of God’s language of love.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. The Church is for couples spacing the number of children using Natural Fertility Awareness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. The Church allows couples to use Natural Fertility Awareness to permanently avoid pregnancy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. The Church is against IVF because children conceived in a test tube are not really human.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. The Church is against IVF because she doesn’t want the marriage bed to be replaced by the laboratory.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. The Church is against IVF because she doesn’t care about the suffering of infertile couples.</td>
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Natural Fertility Awareness is a method of working out the natural periods of fertility and infertility that are present in every woman’s monthly cycle. This is not to be confused with older, less reliable methods such as the Rhythm Method, but is based on observations of natural changes to the woman’s body.

God created human beings to be a union of body and soul. The fact that human beings are created as a union of body and soul means the body is never ‘something’ but always ‘someone’ who shares in the dignity of the ‘image of God’. One of the reasons why God made us a union of body and soul is so we could form loving relationships with each other, create children to love, and could be capable of knowing and loving him.

We can see signs of God’s design and purpose in nature. The Church teaches that we can come to know God in two ways:

- through our reason observing nature and ourselves, and
- through God’s Word in the Bible and the life of the Church

¹ This activity is based on Dr C O’Donnell’s Questions & Answers on Sex and Marriage.

Scripture would not wish to inform us about how the different species of plant life gradually appeared or how the sun and moon and the stars were established. Its purpose ultimately would be to say one thing: God created the world... all of this comes from one power, from God’s eternal Reason, which became – in the Word – the power of creation. (Cardinal Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*, p.5)
God created masculinity and femininity to reveal our spiritual nature and share in his creation of new life. The Church teaches that sexual love expresses in a profound way our nature as beings created to be a union of body and soul, made in the image of God. Jesus reveals and heals our capacity for self-giving love. We can only know our true dignity and the depth of our ability to love through Jesus Christ.

Are you ready to accept children lovingly from God?

As a couple take some time to discuss the following questions: (5 mins).

- What do we mean when we say that children are a gift from God?
- Would you want your children to be brought up in the Catholic faith? Why?
- The Church understands that ‘new life is not the result of each and every act of sexual intercourse’ due to the woman’s God-given, natural cycle of monthly fertility and infertility. Furthermore, the Church also teaches that were there are ‘well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances’ (Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*), married couples may then take advantage of Natural Fertility Awareness to abstain from sexual relations during the woman’s fertile period, and have sexual intercourse during the infertile period. This does not go against God’s will for our fertility because the couple are using the natural, God-given cycles for their correct purpose.
- God, in his wisdom, has given us a natural, simple way of being responsible parents that involves our intelligence, self-control and loving consideration. However, the couple must ensure that their motivation is the good of the family and not some selfish desire.

However, the Church is against both contraception and IVF as they artificially break the inseparable bond between the act of sexual love and openness to fertility. In addition, contraception also makes the act of love a ‘lie’ by withholding one of the essential qualities of marriage: openness to fertility. The most important and special message that the body language between wife and husband communicates is, “I love every aspect of you so much” – it does not add “except for your fertility”.

**Action Planning**

As a couple consider what you will do as a result of this session. You might like to consider the following:

- Discuss together God’s meaning and purpose for sexual love and your approach to having children.
- Find out about Natural Fertility Awareness. Practitioner teachers of the ‘ovulation method’ or ‘multiple-indicators’ can be found on the web.

A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfilment... called to give life, spouses share in the creative power and fatherhood of God... they are co-operating with the love of God the Creator. (CCC 2366-7)