**Sustaining and Strengthening Marriages**

The Sacrament of Matrimony is a challenging and demanding vocation. But often, once the wedding ceremony is complete, we have little contact with the newly married (perhaps until they seek baptism for their children.) The feeling of "independence" once they have "left father and mother" can sometimes lead to isolation from the church community, and the gifts it can provide. For this reason, we as clergy need to participate in ways of assisting married couples, from the newly married to the well-seasoned, to strengthen in their relationship and vocation. The purpose of this paper is to encourage and offer suggestions on ways in which this may be accomplished.

* **Retain contact with newly married couples**

St. John Paul II exhorted pastoral ministers to help (married) couples “to discover and live their new vocation” (*Familiaris Consortio*, #69). This help can only be possible if parishes establish a means through which continued contact with couples can be maintained for the purpose of fostering stronger marital relationships. Deacons are uniquely qualified for this responsibility as many of them are engaged in the Marriage Sacrament themselves.

* **Encourage participation in the faith community**

The way Marriages are portrayed through media and popular culture can cloud one’s expectations of Marriage. Developing strong relationships within a faith community can have a positive impact on marital relationships and foster true friendships with the help of God.

* **Provide programs offering newlyweds the opportunity to interact with veteran married couples, re-emphasizing the covenantal Marriage aspects and building practical skills**

**Communication:** Canon Law requires pastors and faith communities to provide assistance to all married people so that "the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection" (c. 1063).

**Financial:** Money is a sensitive topic and a couple's attitudes towards household finances need to be aligned. If couples don't define their core values, money may end up being spent carelessly and irresponsibly leading to couples blaming each other for financial woes.

**Parenting:** Parenting is hard work, but with a focus on virtue and love for God combined with practical advice on ways to raise children parent’s can be assured that their children will be happy, healthy and independent.

* **Contact the parish for couples visiting the parish to get married**

If the couple is moving to another location or is getting married away from their parish, the Deacon should contact the parish and let a clergyman know about the wedding. The Deacon should also let the couple know that he will be contacting them and that they should set an appointment up to meet with the Priest or Deacon.

**Suggestions for the Deacon to Help Strengthen Married Couple Relationships**

When the Deacon witnesses a Marriage, he invokes a special responsibility to the couple and their relationship with God which should not end on the wedding day. Indeed, there are many things the Deacon can do to help keep couples involved in the faith community, such as:

* + Call couple 6 months to a year after wedding to visit with them
  + Offer to conduct a house blessing for the family, inviting others for the celebration
  + Select a mentor couple to help newlyweds build community
  + Bless their first child when they announce they are expectant parents
  + Provide a Special Mass for celebrating parishioner milestone anniversaries
  + Invite the couple to participate individually or as a couple in a parish ministry
  + Develop a study group for young married couples to build relationships with each other and to learn the faith as it applies to their state in life
  + Take young married couples on retreat
  + Ask Pastor to recognize anniversaries during Sunday Mass
  + Take couple to dinner or coffee to update you on their married life
  + Call them on their anniversary; offer special prayers
  + Ask them to visit you for a special blessing during 1st  and subsequent years
  + Make a pilgrimage to local areas with focus on married life
  + Encourage them to pray to their patron saints; guardian angels and to the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph for intercession in their relationship
  + If the couple moves out of the parish, contact the local priest or deacon to let them know of the couple’s location and ask the clergyman to look for them. Provide the couple with contact information for their new parish.
  + Begin a novena with newlywed couples
  + Bring in special speakers on Marriage and family life; personally call your couples
  + Have a Daily Mass said for their Marriage and invite them to be there