



Online

Engaged - Sponsor Program

Parish Notes

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A Context for this Initiative

Catholic Marriage Preparation in the 21st century is undergoing a radical re-orientation. Psychological sciences are developing excellent insights into what makes relationships work and the theological advances are equipping Catholics to more clearly and powerfully articulate the role of Matrimony in the mission of the Church. In addition, new technologies provide flexible and more effective ways for parishes to nurture the gift of Matrimony in all its stages within their community.

A Nuptial Ecclesiology

Jesus frequently referred to himself as the bridegroom and many of his parables made reference to the betrothal and nuptial traditions of the day. As a community of believers, we can only fully understand our identity in Christ when we internalize our call to be the bride of Jesus. This **Nuptial Ecclesiology** is more fully explored in St John Paul II's ***Theology of the Body***.

Matrimonied couples (that is married couples properly formed in their vocation and growing throughout their life in faith and in love) are uniquely placed to help the church more fully understand our identity. They are an essential part of, and co-responsible with the clergy for, the mission of the Church.

Renewing and empowering the marriages in your parish brings benefits to the entire community as it helps couples grow more into their identity as prophetic leaders of the nuptial ecclesiology. Empowered couples are radical witnesses and effective workers for any number of apostolates in the parish and beyond.

The Marriage Catechumenate

Preparing for marriage is not just a 'course', it's a **period** of formation that includes relationship skills training, spiritual direction, prayerful discernment and practical support by the community. That's why the Church is moving away from intensives run by diocesan groups towards parish-based formation over several months. Online learning enables couples to access information presented by expert educators without leaving the parish, allowing parishes to manage and support the engaged easily and efficiently.

Providing a married sponsor couple to accompany each engaged couple not only helps the engaged couple forge relationships with active parishioners, it also helps them go deeper into the course content for a more effective formation that is grounded in faith (rather than simply good psychology).

In addition, the sponsor couple's marriage is also renewed and strengthened through participation. Sponsor couples regularly report how much they benefited personally from the course and are grateful they were given the opportunity.

The SmartLoving Engaged -Sponsor program is an opportunity to form and motivate **all** your parishioners. It is not just about the best possible experience for the

engaged. It is also about embedding into Catholic culture a priority for ongoing marriage formation throughout the life cycle.

Experience shows us that Sponsors finish the course with enthusiasm to do more. For many, it is the first concrete experience they have had of their marriage having a sacramental impact on others; they **see** and **feel** the responsiveness of the engaged couple to their stories of struggle and hope. It's profoundly empowering and you should be ready to direct their energy into other parish initiatives.

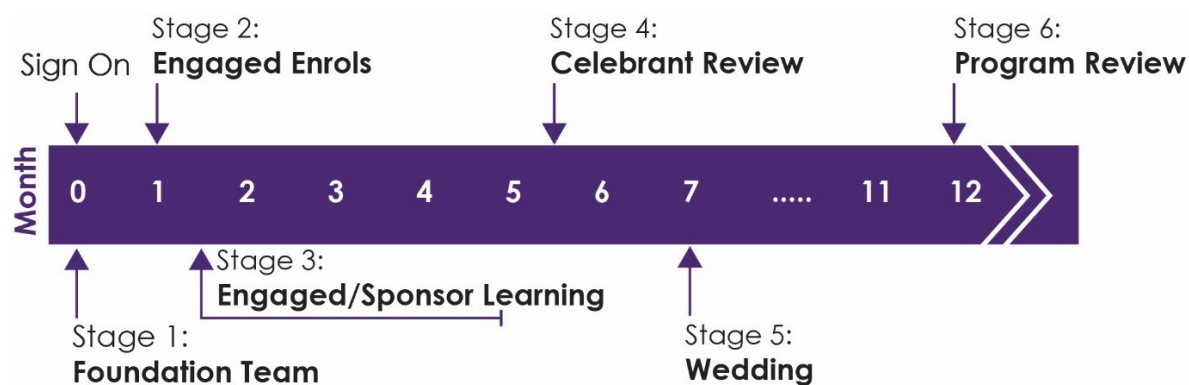
We are looking forward to working with you to establish a new dynamism in your parish.

In faith and in love

Francine & Byron Pirola

Francine & Byron Pirola | Coauthors, SmartLoving

Timeline



Keeping the Costs Down | 2021 Prices*

Every engaged couple registration includes a 'gift coupon' for a sponsor couple, which means that there is no cost to the Sponsor Couple to access the course. Clergy can access the course free.

Workbooks can be self-printed from the PDF available in the course platform or ordered from our store. Significant savings are available when ordered in bulk.

Individual Price	
Engaged Course – Self-Directed	\$99 AUD ~\$75 USD ~£55 GBP
Engaged Course – Parish Sponsor	\$170 AUD ~\$131 USD ~£96 GBP
Engaged Course – SmartLoving Coach	\$395 AUD ~\$306 USD ~£224 GBP
Sponsor Course (couple)	\$0 with coupon from Engaged enrolment
Sponsor Course (clergy)	Free (sign up via https://smartloving.org/engaged-online-leaders/)
Workbooks (pair) optional	\$65 AUD ~\$50 USD ~£37 GBP

Packages		
Parish Package	10 pack	\$1,225 AUD ~\$946 USD ~£690 GBP
Diocese Package	50 pack	\$3,800 AUD ~\$2,932 USD ~£2,172 GBP
Budget	Set up fee	\$150 AUD ~\$98 USD ~£75 GBP

*Shipping included. Visit www.SmartLoving.org/packages for more info.

Bulk Discounts		
Engaged Course Enrolments	10 pack	\$700 AUD ~\$545 USD ~£395 GBP
	50 pack	\$2,500 AUD ~\$1940 USD ~£1425 GBP
Workbook (pairs) (+ph)	10 pack	\$325 AUD ~\$252 USD ~£185 GBP
	50 pack	\$1,200 AUD ~\$930 USD ~£684 GBP

*Transactions are in Australian Dollars and estimated equivalent costs are subject to currency exchange variations. Prices are subject to change without notice.

Important Web links

Engaged Course	https://smartloving.org/engaged/
Sponsor Course	https://smartloving.org/sponsor/
Information for Parish Leaders	https://smartloving.org/engaged-online-leaders/
Workbooks (individual)	https://members.smartloving.org/product/sl-engaged-online-participant-workbook/
Ordering Coupons, brochures, bulk workbooks	https://smartloving.org/packages

Stage 1: Foundation Team

Establish a foundation team to be your first Sponsor couples. They will then recruit and train second generation sponsors, and help establish a permanent, sustainable marriage ministry.

1. Review the course

- a. If you haven't reviewed the course yet, create a free account (any clergy or parish leader).

Go to <https://smartloving.org/engaged-online-leaders/>

2. Parish marketing - bulletin and pulpit announcements

- a. Bulletin advert (below)
- b. Script for pulpit announcement (below)

3. Recruit 1-5 couples to become the **foundation team** by direct invitation (NB the criteria for foundation team members is different to the sponsor criteria) ...

- Validly married in the church at least **15** years
- Preferably with children
- Regular mass goers, **both** Catholic
- **Leadership presence and able to self-organise**
- **Enthusiasm for the project**

4. Briefing of foundation team by a SL team member, or use the online induction package | <https://smartloving.org/sponsor/>

5. Order Resources <https://smartloving.org/engaged-online-resources/>

- a. **Workbooks** (for use by sponsors and engaged).
 - i. Individual orders can be purchased at the time of buying the course
 - ii. Bulk discounts available (min 10 couples)
 - iii. Or print inhouse using the PDF available in the course
- b. **Brochures:**
 - i. Parish leader information (available from SL, or use digital versions) <https://smartloving.org/engaged-online-leaders/>
 - ii. Sponsor brochure (available from SL)
 - iii. Engaged brochure (available from SL)
- c. **Coupon codes for Engaged couples** (optional)

Parish Bulletin Notice

New Parish Initiative: Starting out in Catholic marriage can be tricky. We want every engaged couple who prepares for marriage through our parish to be accompanied by a Sponsor Couple, a couple who will meet with them throughout their engagement to share their life experience and offer prayerful support. Using **SmartLoving Online**, Engaged and Sponsors simply work their way through the online course material, using the Discussion Questions to review each lesson together. The first stage is to establish a foundation team of married couples who will work with Father to pilot the program. Please keep this initiative in your prayers.

Parish Announcement (by pp)

Objectives:

- To alert the parish community of the initiative
- To establish that marriage formation is a life-long endeavor and that this is about enriching all marriages, not just the engaged.

Suggested script – edit as required

One of the priorities of this parish is supporting newly engaged couples to have a strong Catholic marriage. When a couple marries in the Catholic church they are required to do a formation course, the same way that anyone who prepares to receive a sacrament for the first time, participates in a preparation course. The course for engaged couples includes information on the Sacrament of Matrimony as well as relationship skills and spiritual formation activities. These courses are very effective in equipping couples to have stronger marriages. The preparation is not just a course, it's a formation period called the "Marriage Catechumenate".

However, the need for formation, doesn't end with the wedding. Just like we priests undertake regular formation and retraining, it's important for married couples to do the same. We need your marriages to be vibrant and up to date so that you can be a more effective witness of God's love in our community.

But family life is busy. It's hard to get a time together to participate in a marriage retreat. So we are trialing a new system in this parish.

We want every engaged couple to be supported by a parish sponsor couple who will accompany their engaged couple during their Marriage Catechumenate. There is no training required for the Sponsor couples, they simply do the sponsor course in parallel with the engaged, meeting up to discuss what they have learned and offer prayerful support to the engaged.

Both couples benefit and with SmartLoving Online, you can do the course anytime, anywhere and at your own pace.

Over the next few weeks, I will be approaching a number of married couples to join me in establishing a team to make this happen. Eventually I would like to see every married couple participate in some form of enrichment, and the online platform has lots of options, starting with the Engaged-Sponsor system.

It's a very exciting initiative and I am enthused about the possibilities for this course to be a source of nourishment to all the couples and families in our parish. If you think you might be interested in helping me get this started, talk to me after Mass or call me during the week.

Stage 2: Engaged Couple Enrolment

Once you have your foundation team, you are ready to start enrolling engaged couples. We strongly recommend that you don't offer engaged couples options of other courses; simply state "in our parish we use the SmartLoving online course with a sponsor couple".

1. First Contact with the Engaged/booking the church

- a. Explain and complete the required paperwork.
- b. Register the couple for SL Online - Engaged. The couple can use their own credit card to enroll. If you have an all-inclusive fee structure, purchase coupon codes or use a parish credit card at the eStore checkout.
- c. Arrange a Sunday Mass time for them to receive their Betrothal blessing and meet some available sponsor couples.
 - i. The engaged couple can choose from the available sponsor couple – someone with whom they feel a natural rapport. This will facilitate the establishment of the friendship and gives the engaged a sense of ownership in the course.
 - ii. Explain what will happen at the Mass and afterwards.
- d. Make sure that they have Workbooks to be presented to them at the Betrothal blessing. These can either be:
 - i. purchased from the SL estore by the couple
 - ii. purchased in bulk by the parish for use by sponsors and engaged
 - iii. printed from the PDF downloads and bound by the parish or couples

2. Sunday Mass – Betrothal Blessing

- a. Parish Notice (below)
- b. Script for Betrothal Blessing (below)
- c. After Mass, introduce the engaged couple to some sponsors-in-waiting from which the engaged can choose one. These Sponsors should be:
 - Validly married in the church at least 5 years, preferably with children (or open to children if infertile)
 - Regular mass goers, preferably both Catholic, but may include couples with mixed faiths provided that they both support the teachings of the Church.
 - Not a close relative or friend to the engaged.
- d. Make sure that a Sponsor is chosen and they have everything they need to get started (exchange contact details, workbooks, SL account to the Sponsor course)

Bulletin Notice

Betrothal

Congratulations to N. and N. who are engaged to be married in [month 20XX].

They will be participating in SmartLoving Online with a parish sponsor couple. This multimedia course offers dynamic lessons that combine Catholic theology with the science of relationships. Please keep N. and N., and their sponsors, in your prayers.

Betrothal Blessing

[Invite engaged couple to the sanctuary.]

N. and N. are preparing for marriage in our SmartLoving program. After Mass, I will be introducing them to some of our married parishioners who have signed up to become sponsor couples.

All of us need God's blessing throughout our life. When we are in formation to receive a Sacrament the first time, we are in particular need of grace. Today, N. and N. begin their marriage catechumenate. Entering into Matrimony is a life-long commitment to die to self and to live for the other. We pray this blessing as they prepare to give themselves totally to each other in Matrimony.

Blessing

Let us pray, then, for God's blessing to come upon this couple:
that as they await the day of their wedding,
they will grow in love and in mutual respect for one another;
that through prayer and the support of we, their faith community,
they will prepare themselves in mind and heart,
to freely vow their permanent, total and faithful self-gift on their wedding day.

Heavenly Father, you call N. and N. to the communion of life and love
that binds the Christian family together.

We ask for your blessing to come down upon them.

Fill them with your grace as they begin their formation for Matrimony.

[Present the workbooks]

Bless these workbooks that will become a precious record of their journey
together as N. and N. prepare themselves wholeheartedly for Matrimony.

May they serve as a reminder of their intention
to fully explore all that the Lord calls them to be
between now and their wedding day.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Stage 3: Engaged - Sponsor Learning

The course generally takes around 3 months to complete when lessons are spaced at 1 per week.

1. First Contact (usually after Mass after the Betrothal blessing)

- a. Sponsor & Engaged exchange contact details
- b. Arrange a meeting time to discuss their insights from Lesson 1.
- c. Sponsor & Engaged do Lesson 1 at home before this meeting.

2. Engaged – Sponsor Meetings

- a. Below is the 'ideal' format for these meetings. However, parishes may decide to adjust these for pragmatic reasons.
 - **Frequency:** Ideally after each lesson (9 meetings) but if the engaged couple is not local, or the sponsors are especially busy, fewer meetings may be advised.
 - **Location:** Ideally in the sponsor's home (domestic church) but may be in a parish facility, park or café.
 - **Mode:** Ideally face to face but may be by phone or VOIP such as Skype/Facetime/Hangouts, if the engaged couple lives remotely from the parish, or there are child care issues for the engaged.
 - **Size:** Ideally couple to couple but may be in groups (eg several engaged with one sponsor and/or with the priest)
 - **Sponsor:** Ideally a parish couple but could be a couple from a neighbouring parish, a member of the parish staff (eg sacraments minister, deacon) or a 'half' couple (husband or wife).

3. First Meeting:

- a. Refer to the Sponsor Guide notes for tips on what to do during the meetings, also available at the end of this document_
<https://smartloving.org/sponsor/>
- b. The first meeting needs to include a discussion on confidentiality, the role of the sponsor and a plan for the remaining meetings.

4. Last Meeting:

- a. At end of the course, the Engaged couple completes the Assessment for the celebrant.

5. Sponsor Resources:

- a. SmartLoving is available for any support the sponsor couple might need via the online hub, email or phone.
- b. Refer to the Sponsor Guide resources for additional tips and documentation.

Stage 4: Celebrant Review

1. Certificate and Report

- a. At the end of the course, the engaged couple completes an online 'assessment' of short answer questions. Their answers are formatted into a PDF document with their completion certificate on the front.
- b. A copy is emailed to each of them and, if they provide the email address, a copy is also emailed to the celebrant/supervisor.
- c. Make sure you also have a copy of the Celebrant Guide which:
 - i. outlines the key content of each lesson
 - ii. provides an 'ideal' answer to each question
 - iii. provides the learning objectives for each lesson
 - iv. additional questions if the celebrant wishes to unpack it further
- d. Review their report before the meeting so that you can identify:
 - i. any areas where they seem confused or in error
 - ii. their openness to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, learning Natural Fertility or becoming a Catholic
 - iii. any potential issues with their ability to enter into Matrimony

2. Sponsor - Celebrant Meeting

- a. The sponsor couple debriefs with the celebrant on their experience.
- b. Celebrant notes any relevant items in the engaged couple's case file.
- c. The Celebrant may request the Sponsor couple to provide additional support to the couple such as wedding liturgy assistance.

3. Engaged – Celebrant Meeting

- a. The Engaged couple meets with the celebrant (or supervisor if marrying overseas) to discuss their report
- b. The Celebrant makes any additional arrangements such as:
 - Reconciliation for the couple
 - Wedding liturgy planning & rehearsal
 - Referral to other professional services such as Natural Fertility instruction, counselling, spiritual direction etc
 - Referral for RCIA if appropriate

Celebrant Guide is available at

<https://smartloving.org/engaged-online-leaders/>

Stage 5:

Immediate Pre-Wedding & Wedding

1. 1-2 Weeks Before the Wedding:

- a) Parish invites Engaged and Sponsors to Sunday Mass to be blessed by the community. (see below)
- b) Sponsors (and possibly Engaged) give a short testimonial of their experience, inviting potential sponsors to make contact. (see below)
- c) Bulletin Notice announcing the wedding. (see below)

2. Wedding Rehearsal

- a) If the couple is receptive to Reconciliation or it has been some months since their last Reconciliation, it could be offered at the Wedding Rehearsal, or in the week before the wedding.

3. Wedding Day

- a) While Sponsor couples should not feel obliged to attend the wedding, a parish presence at the church ceremony is a wonderful opportunity to extend the welcome to the extended family and friends.

4. Sponsor next steps

- a) Sponsors may sponsor another couple, but ideally, a new sponsor couple will be sourced for each engaged couple. This helps renew the marriages of more couples in the parish and frees sponsor couples to take up other related ministries.
- b) Sponsors can continue contact with their engaged couple to encourage connection with the parish and to be available should the newlyweds wish to revisit any of the material from the course.

Bulletin Notices

Wedding

Today we pray for N. and N. who will be married at NAME OF CHURCH on DATE at TIME. Special thanks to N. and N. who were their Sponsor couple. Please keep them in your prayers over the coming weeks as they prepare to commit their lives to each other in Matrimony.

Become a Sponsor to an Engaged Couple

Starting out in Catholic marriage can be tricky. We want every engaged couple who prepares for marriage through our parish to be accompanied by a Sponsor Couple, a couple who will meet with them several times throughout their engagement to share their life experience and offer prayerful support. Using SmartLoving Online, Engaged and Sponsors simply work their way through the online course material at home, then use the Discussion Questions to review each lesson together. No training required. Sponsors should be validly married in the Catholic Church at least 5 years and regular church goers. For more info, visit www.smartloving.org/sponsor

Announcement & Prayer

[Invite the engaged and sponsor couples to the sanctuary.]

Next week N. and N. will marry at [Name of Church]. They have been part of our SmartLoving formation course and have spent the time of their engagement faithfully preparing themselves in mind and heart to commit themselves to each other for life. They have been accompanied by N. and N. who are their sponsor couple, sharing their wisdom and encouraging each other to grow deeper in their love and in their faith.

Weddings give our community hope. It reminds us of the great promise of God: that he loves us with greater intensity and urgency than even the most passionately in-love couple.

Today, we invite N. and N. (sponsors) to pray over N. and N. (engaged). The Response is: **Lord help us to remain in your love.**

Prayer

Sponsors: Heavenly Father, you call us into love and make us your beloved sons and daughters. We call upon you now with confidence.

R/. Lord, help us to remain in your love.

Sponsors: You sent us your divine son, Jesus, to be our bridegroom, and to call us into communion.

R/. Lord, help us to remain in your love.

Sponsors: You pour out your grace on us that we might grow in faith and in love.

R/. Lord, help us to remain in your love.

Sponsors: You call N. and N. to the communion of life and love that binds the Christian family together, mind and heart.

R/. Lord, help us to remain in your love.

Sponsors: Lord God, be with N. and N. over the coming weeks as they walk towards their wedding day and in the weeks that follow. May they know your love and draw strength from your grace. Bless them with deep faith that in their joys and sorrows they might always remain in your love. Amen.

Priest: And may Almighty God bless you etc

[Invite couples to give a short testimonial max 1 min each]

[Couples return to seats, and priest makes invites any couples interested in learning more to approach them after Mass]

Testimonial Notes

Your testimonial should focus on how you have personally benefited from the course. Keep your words under 200 (~1 minute) and simply answer the question:

What is one insight from the course that you have found particularly relevant. How has it impacted your relationship?

Stage 6: Review/Consolidation

1. End of Review Period

- a) At the end of a suitable period (eg 1 year), all couples (sponsors, newlyweds/engaged) and clergy gather to celebrate and share fellowship.
- b) Hospitality is important for building community so always include food and drink of some kind (eg wine & cheese, supper, coffee/tea & cake, pot luck dinner etc).
- c) Open and close with a simple prayer.
- d) Invite couples to share on the question: **What is one insight from the course that you have found particularly relevant. How has it impacted your relationship?**
- e) Review the experience of couples: What worked well? What could be improved?
- f) If the group is large (eg more than ten couples) it might be better to break into smaller groups for sharing, then have a spokesperson report to the large group.

2. Sustainability – the M-Team

- a) Establish a coordinating team of 2-3 couples (the M-Team) to plan and execute initiatives for marriage and family in the parish.
 - Marriage Prep: Engaged-Sponsors program (help recruit, induct & support sponsor couples)
 - Celebration of milestone anniversaries
 - Special gatherings (eg St Valentine's day)
 - Regular gatherings of couples to continue the growth
 - Promoting marriage enrichment initiatives in the diocese
 - Building a support network with counselling referrals
- b) Put a time frame for commitment, eg 2 years, and plan for a staged rollover so that the M-Team does not stagnate.

Sponsor Couple Information

1: Welcome!

- a. Wondering what do you need to do? Relax! We promise you, the course is will do all the heavy lifting: it's designed to facilitate itself for the engaged couple and for you.
- b. Each of the nine Lessons take approx 1.5 hours to complete. They include video explanation, summary notes, individual reflection and couple activities.
- c. Additional audio instructions are available if needed, and each lesson includes reading and couple activities in the member hub for those who want to dive deeper into the topic.
- d. Quizzes at the end of each lesson are designed to ensure that participants have understood the key concepts and have completed the activities.
- e. You can get access to the course by going to <https://smartloving.org/sponsor/> and following the links to the shop. If you have a coupon code, use it at the checkout.

2: Sponsor Course vs the Engaged Course – what's the difference?

- a. The two courses are identical in content and structure
- b. The Sponsor course however has no time locks or progression locks and no assessment at the end of the course. Nor do Sponsors need to gain 80% to pass the lesson quizzes - phew!

3: Your role as Sponsor

- a. **Your role is to accompany the engaged couple** on their journey to Matrimony, to provide:
 - i. Hospitality and welcome. Make sure your meeting space is welcoming and always include food and drink of some kind (Jesus did most of his teaching around a meal!).
 - ii. Practical support, meeting with them and being available to them to discuss issues and answer questions about your relationship.
 - iii. Spiritual support, praying **for** them and **with** them.
- b. **To be a role model** - model for them a couple who is growing in their relationship and in their faith.
 - i. It's important that you do the course yourselves. Watch the videos, answer the questions and inventories, do the activities - this is where you as a couple will experience great blessing.
 - ii. You can't really be a Sponsor couple unless you both, husband and wife, participate in this. If your spouse is unwilling, there are other ways you can be involved.
- c. **What you are not...**
 - i. ... a theological expert or relationship guru - so you don't need to have all the answers.

- ii. ... counsellors - you do not need to fix them or make moral judgements about their choices.
- iii. ... course examiners - you are not there to pass or fail the couple in the course.

4: Your First Contact with the Engaged

- a. This will probably take place by either phone or after Mass at church.
- b. Check that they have an account on the SmartLoving Online platform.
- c. Make sure that they have print copies of the workbook. They (and you) cannot effectively participate in the course without it. Each person needs their own copy (2 per couple) which can be printed from the PDFs available on the course platform or purchased through the eStore.
- d. Set a date and place for your first meeting. Allow enough time for you and they to complete Lesson 1 beforehand.

5: Sponsor- Engaged Meetings (30min - 1 hour)

a. Before the couple arrives

- i. Make sure you've completed the lesson including the activities. This will give you fresh examples to share from your own relationship.
- ii. Hospitality - any practical things, like tidying up the space, settling the kids, preparing a snack etc.
- iii. Spend a few minutes in prayer, place yourselves into the presence of God and invite God into your meeting.

b. Greeting the couple

- i. Start with a social catch up - wedding plans, work in the past week etc.
- ii. Offer refreshments

c. In the First Meeting: Establish the guidelines for the meetings.

- i. Confidentiality - everything said here, by either couple is confidential. You won't be repeating details of conversations to others and you'd like them not to share details of your private relationship with others too.
- ii. Your role: clarify that you are not counsellors. You're not there to fix them or to pass or fail them in the course. Your role is to accompany them on their journey to Matrimony.

d. Transition from social to deeper conversation.

- i. How are things going for the two of you? How's your relationship travelling?
- ii. How do you feel about what we talked about last session? Do you want to revisit anything from there?

e. Review the Current Lesson

- i. Use the Discussion Questions at the end of each Lesson to begin your conversation, but don't be limited by them. Let the conversation develop naturally.

- ii. You don't need to answer all the Discussion Questions, but if you find the conversation drifting off topic to superficial things, use the guide to bring it back on focus.
- iii. Equally, if the couple has something that's impacting their relationship that they want to discuss with you, don't be constrained by trying to complete the full list of questions.
- iv. If something comes up to which you don't know how to respond, just ask if you can get back to them with an answer or refer them to an appropriate person like a counsellor, your parish priest, or the local SL coordinator.
- v. For a summary of the learning objectives of each lesson, refer to the celebrant guide available in the member hub or the leader's info page <https://smartloving.org/engaged-online-leaders/>

f. Wrap up

- i. Plan your next meeting allowing sufficient time to complete the lesson activities. For notes on how many meetings to have, and where to have them, see the FAQs below, or refer to the SL Parish Sponsor program notes.
- ii. Say a prayer together (eg, the Lesson Prayer, The Lord's Prayer, or Hail Mary etc)

6: At the Conclusion of the course

- a. Make sure that the couple completes the final assessment and includes the celebrant/supervisor's name and email address. This will send a copy directly to him, along with a link to the Celebrant's guide.
- b. The celebrant may want to debrief with you about your experience.
- c. Remember to respect the privacy of the engaged couple in any discussions you have with other sponsors or parishioners.

7: Some FAQs

- a. **How often should we meet?** Ideally, meetings will take place once a week or once every two weeks until all lessons are complete. This allows sufficient time to do the course work, including the couple activities and practice the relationship tools. For most couples, sickness or family/work commitments will disrupt the routine at least once in this time, so it's fine to reschedule to accommodate your availability.
- b. **We're really busy and can't meet up for all nine lessons - can we still be Sponsors?** We get it - busyness is a fact of modern family life. It's not ideal, but you can reduce the number of meetings by covering more than one session at a time. However, we would recommend a minimum of three meetings in total. Obviously, you'll need a little more time during the meeting to cover the discussion questions, and more time in between to allow both you and the engaged couple to complete the online content.
- c. **Where should we meet?** Ideally, meetings will take place in your home, the native setting of your domestic church. This is the environment in which your

sacramental relationship is based and is the most potent way for the engaged couple to experience you as a couple with all your sacramental gifts and charisms. While you should tidy up to make your meeting space hospitable for your guests, you shouldn't feel that you have to put on a grand display. Just be yourselves!

- d. **Our home really isn't suitable for hosting meetings... can we still participate?** We understand that some families may find home-based meetings unworkable and so meetings could alternatively happen in parish facilities or at a local park or café.
- e. **Do we need to get babysitters for our children?** Absolutely not! Your children are part of your sacramental witness. While it's appropriate for the engaged to have some interaction with your children such as when they arrive and leave, it's not appropriate to have children constantly interrupting your discussion. If they are very young, schedule the meetings for a time when you can give your attention to the engaged such as after bedtime.
- f. **What if there are not enough weeks until the wedding to complete all the lessons?** While we don't recommend doing more than one lesson per week, we appreciate that in some cases a compacted format might be the only option. This is fine as an exception, but we wouldn't encourage this as a routine. Alternatively, you could continue the sessions after the wedding, but in general we find couples often lack the motivation once married so it is generally preferable to do as much as possible before the wedding.
- g. **What if one or both of the fiances do not live in the parish?** Meetings don't have to be done face to face, although obviously, it's preferable. You can use video conferencing such as Skype, FaceTime or Google Hangouts, or even telephone, to have your meetings.
- h. **Does my spouse need to be involved?** To be a **Sponsor COUPLE**, yes! To effectively model an actively growing couple, you need to participate in the course, and you can only really do that with your spouse. If your spouse doesn't want to be involved, you can contribute to the Sponsor mission as a prayer support or administrative volunteer.
- i. **Does my spouse need to be Catholic?** Ideally, both spouses would be baptised, committed Catholics. At the very minimum, your spouse needs to be supportive of the teachings of the church and a participant in parish life. If you are unsure whether you can fulfil the obligations, we recommend that you first do the course together as a couple for enrichment, without an engaged couple. While it is not the goal of the course, many couples of mixed faith find participation in the course helps to clarify their faith commitment and many non-catholic spouses subsequently take steps to become fully accepted into the Catholic faith.
- j. **What happens if the engaged couple refuses to participate or comes to meetings without having done the activities?** You should make a reasonable attempt to encourage the couple to participate while keeping it amicable. Remember, you don't know what is going on behind the scenes. If the couple persists in evading the course, you should speak to your priest about it, or

contact your local SmartLoving coordinator for advice. One possible solution is to have them do the course at your place when they first arrive (allow 90 minutes for this), and then join them for 30 minutes to discuss the questions together before they do the Quiz.

- k. **What happens if the engaged couple has serious issues that we believe will possibly lead them to later divorce?** It's not the role of the mentor couple to 'pass or fail' their engaged couple, however if you have serious concerns, you should encourage the couple to get some professional advice. It also would be appropriate to privately alert the celebrant without divulging details of your discussions or breaching your commitment to confidentiality. Sometimes, a celebrant will lodge a file note with the wedding records that can be retrieved should annulment proceedings be subsequently initiated.
- l. **What happens if the couple breaks up or if the course stimulates conflict?** The course is designed to flush out any taboo topics or unresolved issues. It can sometimes be painful for the couple, and awkward for the Sponsors. A small proportion of couples discover that they are not well suited to marry and break up. Be at peace with that – this is a good outcome! We count these as success stories because in all probability they would have broken up anyway - better to do so before the wedding and before they begin a family, than afterwards. Your pastoral care of the fiances in the following months is even more important. Make sure that they know that you are praying for them and that you are available if either one would like to talk.
- m. **What do we do if the couple needs help on something and we don't know what to do?** You are not expected to have all the answers. It's fine to tell them you'll check and get back to them at the next meeting. Your parish priest or diocesan counselling agency can also be consulted for suitable support services if needed.
- n. **Our couple has invited us to their wedding...should we go?** This is not unusual and you should feel free to attend if you would like or to decline. As their sponsor you have already given generously of your time, so you should not feel obligated to spend a lot on a gift: usually something small like a wedding crucifix or religious ornament is appropriate. It would also be appropriate to decline the reception but to attend the church service, in fact, it's nice to attend the church even if you are not formally invited.
- o. **Can we sponsor another couple?** Ideally, each engaged couple will get a new sponsor couple. This facilitates more married couples experiencing the benefits of SmartLoving and creates the opportunity for sponsors to continue contact with their now newlywed couple. However, if new sponsors are hard to find, by all means take on another engaged couple.
- p. **What happens after the course is finished and the couple is married?** There are lots of options for you to continue your growth as a couple. Visit the SmartLoving website for other online courses. You might also be interested in some of the leadership development opportunities. And you can always get involved with supporting additional parish events like couple gathering nights, significant anniversary celebrations and support for spouses in distress.