

Proximate Formation

Introduction

Proximate marriage preparation for young adults is aimed at individuals who are now legally able to marry. But are they emotionally ready? Do they understand Catholic teaching about marriage? Are they able to have healthy relationships? Are they able to make real commitments?

The young adult years (which we will define as 18-35) are a period in which young adults make significant decisions about their future, including education, career, relationships and faith. They are beginning to define their identity *as* an adult, which includes learning to exercise responsibility for their own decisions and integrating the faith and values that they have received through childhood and adolescence.

Those young adults who have come of age in the 1980s and later (primarily the cohort known as “Generation X”) have tended to delay decisions that prior generations made in late adolescence and the early 20s—in some cases, into their mid-30s. Young adulthood has become an extended period of experimentation and insecurity. Career and educational decisions are made and remade. Relationships are entered into with trepidation, and broken up easily. Often, they speak of a desire to find their “soul mate,” believing that there is one person out there who is the “one” for them. Half of the young adults who will come to the Church for marriage preparation are cohabiting, often thinking that this will help them ensure that they will be able to enter into a permanent marriage — which they tell us they want. But they don’t realize that cohabitation is actually a predictor of instability.

These are the sort of issues that need to be addressed in proximate preparation.

Developmental Tasks of Young Adults

The young adult years can be better understood by looking at the developmental tasks that need to be accomplished in the transition to full adult responsibility and maturity. These are dealt with at length in a number of resources listed in the bibliography (especially *Young Adult Works*), and can be simply summarized here.

1. Develop personal identity
2. Develop relationships
 - a. Making friends and developing intimacy
 - b. Developing multicultural relationships
 - c. Reordering of relationships within family of origin
 - d. Integrating sexuality into life
 - e. Choosing to marry
 - f. The single life
3. Develop a meaning of work
 - a. Work as functional

- b. Work as meaningful
4. Develop a spiritual life.
 - a. Grappling with questions about the purpose of life
 - b. Appropriating and internalizing the gift of faith and a religious tradition
 - c. Finding a faith community
 - d. Developing an ‘inner life’ to correspond to an ‘outer life’

Goals for Proximate Formation with Young Adults

The primary goals for proximate formation are described by *Faithful to One Another Forever* as “process and integration.” Adult sacramental formation can be seen as a process analogous to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults; it is not simply a matter of passing on information in a classroom setting, but is a journey of faith which takes place within a community. Along this journey, with the support of peers and older adults, young adults are not only able to learn new things, but are assisted in integrating religious education with faith development and preparation for life.

This doesn’t mean that proximate formation can or should take place primarily in a structured format. We don’t want to impose more “hoops” to jump through. Rather, while providing formal formation opportunities, catechists will also take advantage of “catechetical moments.” These could include the Sunday liturgy and homily, wedding ceremonies and rehearsals (think of the bridesmaids and groomsmen, and family members who may not have been attending mass), anniversaries and funerals (where a homily or reflection could address the nature of Christian marriage), confirmation preparation, young adult ministry, and campus ministry at colleges and universities.

We need, in short, to take advantage of every opportunity where young adults are present to introduce and to reinforce formation on both human and spiritual aspects of marriage. Areas to keep in mind would include:

- basics of healthy relationships,
- what is needed for family life: work, finances, etc.
- family of origin issues,
- alienation and reconciliation,
- cohabitation
- vocational discernment — making decisions as a person of faith in community.
- the nature of Christian marriage,
- marital sexuality, moral and medical,
- chastity,
- Natural Family Planning,
- responsible parenthood,
- resources of the Church

Sample Session on Marriage for Young Adults

The Office of Young Adult and Campus Ministry in the Diocese of Galveston-Houston sponsors an annual coffee house for young adults called *Café Catholica*. As many as 350 young adults from throughout the Houston area come together for a four week series each summer. Each series has at least two sessions on proximate marriage preparation. When we've done surveys of the topics that young adults are looking for, they've consistently rated relationships and integration of faith with daily life at the top.

We chose for the location St. Michael's Church in the Galleria area of Houston, which has a high young adult population. We begin with the regular 6:30 p.m. mass, followed by an informal gathering time at 7:00 in the parish hall. We provide food (everything from pizza or subs to a full tapas bar donated by a local Central American restaurant), for which we ask a \$5 donation. A band or solo musician provides background music. The program begins at 7:30 with ten minutes of structured table talk, to get the conversation going. Out of this, some questions may surface for the discussion period. The presenter is asked to keep their presentation short — about 20 minutes. This guarantees a full hour of discussion, which is moderated. Questions can be asked on your feet or anonymously, on cards. We try to have a mix, to ensure that those areas of concern to the greatest number of people are addressed.

In looking for presenters, we've looked to our diocesan Family Life Office, campus ministers, counselors from Catholic Charities, moral theologians, and Marriage Encounter presenters. Competency in the area is of vital importance in addressing young adults, but it's not the only thing. We look for people who can present clearly and accurately (and persuasively) Catholic teaching to a crowd that is lively and diverse. They need to have a sense of humor, and must be able to show young adults that they will continue the conversation no matter what is said. We cultivate the awareness that this is to be a "safe place" where all questions will be dealt with.

Topics have included:

- Who Are We? — Issues faced by young adults in developing their adult identity.
- The Relationship Riddle — Ways to improve relationships with friends, family, co-workers, and the opposite sex.
- Then There's Sex... — An overview of Catholic teaching on sexuality.
- Spirituality for Young Adults.
- Why the Church?
- Life in the World — Connecting faith with daily life.
- Where is God Leading Me? — Panel discussion on how to discern your vocation in life.
- The Dating Game — How do we form healthy relationships? Is chastity possible?
- Should we live together?
- Let's Get Intimate (or, It's not just about sex).
- For Better or Worse — Growing in Christ through all of life's ups and downs.
- Survivor — Dealing with family of origin issues.
- Temptation Island — How to do the right thing.
- Will & Grace — Discerning your vocation in life.

Practical Tips for Parents

The main issue that parents need to deal with is how to redefine their relationship with their children as adults. A couple of good resources include Anne Grizzle, *Going Home Grown Up* and Herbert Anderson & Kenneth Mitchell, *Leaving Home* (listed in the resources).

Parents and young adults should take time to discuss the changes in the relationship that adulthood brings, whether the young adult will be moving out or will continue to live in the family home. If the young adult will be staying (or will be moving back in after a time away), family rules and responsibilities need to be carefully negotiated. Topics for discussion may include curfews, payment of rent, contributions to family chores, etc.

The family needs to prepare carefully for the time when the young adult leaves home. This process, say Anderson and Mitchell, takes time. It “is a complex process that happens over and over again.” The question they ask is, “How do we know when the process is working right?”—and they suggest seven marks of an effective process:

1. The leaver makes plans without depending on parental approval.
2. The leaver may consult parents about decisions but does not feel obligated to follow their advice.
3. The leaver does not respond to parental attempts to evoke guilt as a way of maintaining control.
4. The leaver does not determine his or her behavior on the basis of the expectations of future rewards or punishments from the primary family.
5. The leaver is able to retain rich and satisfying relationships with his or her original family.
6. The leaver is able to say of the place where he or she now resides “I am home.”
7. The leaver is free to grieve the losses that accompany leaving home.¹

Practical Tips for Parish Staff

Parish young adult ministry should provide not merely a social outlet for young adults, but should provide a balance of social, spiritual, service, and formational activities. And it can’t stop there—the US Bishops’ pastoral plan on ministry with young adults, *Sons and Daughters of the Light*, calls us to ensure that young adults are connected with the parish at all levels, as full adult members of the parish. Are young adults represented in parish ministries and committees? Do homilies address issues facing young adults? Do young adults feel welcome? Is the parish wedding policy stated in the bulletin, and does it reflect an evangelizing and welcoming attitude toward young adults?

Consider providing periodic general sessions on what it is to be married in the Church. Be sure to cover both the theology of matrimony, and the practical steps that need to be taken. Have information available on annulments and ministry to the grieving, as young adults may be divorced or widowed.

¹Herbert Anderson & Kenneth R. Mitchell, *Leaving Home*, Family Living in Pastoral Perspective (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 82-86.

Know the resources provided by your diocesan Family Life, Young Adult, and Campus Ministry offices, and by Catholic Charities. Is there a Newman Center or Catholic college that would also have resources?

Resources

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- Holtz, Geoffrey T. *Welcome to the Jungle: The Why Behind "Generation X."* New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995.
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National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Empowered by the Spirit: Campus Ministry Faces the Future*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1986.

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Young Adult Works. Five Volumes. Naugatuck, CT: Center for Ministry Development, 1997.