

## Teaching On Marriage Permanence Aids Couples, Say Focus Groups

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WASHINGTON (June 12, 2006)— As many people struggle to make and keep commitments, Catholic married couples say that Church teaching on the permanence of marriage helps them to live out their marital commitment.

This is one finding from nearly 200 focus groups sponsored by the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family Life. The focus groups, held in late 2005 and early 2006, involved over 1,500 participants in 64 dioceses and one eparchy. Participants discussed their personal experience of marriage, church teaching about marriage, and parish and diocesan support for married couples.

Focus groups are a widely-used qualitative research method. They are intended to identify and explore issues of concern to the focus group participants, but generalizations to a larger population are not made.

The focus groups are part of the National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage. The U.S. Catholic bishops launched the Initiative in 2004 to call attention to the meaning and value of marriage. The Committee will use the focus group results to develop a pastoral letter on marriage, which is a key element in the Initiative.

Focus groups were held with newly married, middle years and older couples; Spanish-speaking couples; and remarried couples. In addition, several focus groups were held with divorced and separated persons and single young adults. Other key findings are:

--Church teaching on marriage as a sacrament and a vocation is very helpful. Some focus group participants see the teaching on contraception as a challenge. Some couples spoke

positively about the value of Natural Family Planning (NFP) and others were open to learning more about it.

--Some divorced participants said that the annulment process brought healing and closure, but others did not begin the process, sometimes because of incorrect information about what the process involves.

--In general, participants did not see their parish as a source of direct support for marriage; however, they found that involvement in parish ministries often strengthened their marriage.

--People asked for more opportunities for adult faith formation, small groups and support groups, retreats and days of reflection for married couples, mentoring, and resources and referrals for couples with marital difficulties.

--The pastor plays a key role in supporting marriage. Focus group participants want pastors to raise awareness about marriage, especially through preaching. They suggested training for clergy and parish staff so that they can better respond to couples in trouble.

Bishop Joseph Kurtz, chairman of the Marriage and Family Committee, noted: "We pastors need to find fresh, bold ways to promote the rich teachings of the Church. Hearing from the focus groups is one step toward that goal. The findings will be a great guide. They show that Church teachings have found a good hearing in the lives of participants. They highlight the challenges of those truths that are not easily received and lived in our culture. I express gratitude to those who took part in the focus groups and those who served as leaders."

The National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage is a multi-year effort on the part of the bishops to call attention to the meaning and value of marriage. It invites parishes to become local communities of hope and help for marriages. The Initiative draws on the Catholic faith tradition and its pastoral practice, the data of social science, and the experience of married couples. In addition to the pastoral letter, the Initiative will offer leadership resources, public messages and advocacy, and assistance to parish ministries.