

The State of Marriage and the Family in the United States

A briefing on the five themes for *Ten Years after Amoris Laetitia*

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Briefing prepared by Communio, a national apostolate equipping churches to evangelize through the renewal of healthy relationships, marriage, and the family. Findings drawn from Communio's 2023 Nationwide Study on Faith and Relationships (19,000 worshippers, 112 congregations, 13 states), its 2024 Nationwide Survey (16,103 weekly Mass and worship attendees), research conducted with the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University and the Institute for Family Studies, the 2019 Barna and Communio survey, and parish results from partnerships in more than forty dioceses.

The State of Marriage and the Family in the United States

A summary of the briefing on the five themes proposed for *Ten Years after AL*

The Core Finding

The family crisis preceded the faith crisis and continues to drive it. Marriage has ceased to be a normal expectation of American adult life, and the Church is absorbing the consequences. Young people still want to marry; what has gone missing are the pathways, the models, and the encouragement. No renewal of faith can outrun the loss of Christian anthropology beneath it. Where American parishes have made marriage a deliberate priority, both marriages and Mass attendance have recovered, which suggests the decline reflects neglect rather than inevitability.

83%	of those at Mass on Sunday were raised by married parents
75%	decline in sacramental Catholic marriages since 1970, despite 20 million more Catholics
18%	share of married households in the U.S. with children, down from 40% in 1970
20%	1 in 5 married people in the pews report a struggling marriage
88%	88% of 2026 and 89% of 2025 priestly ordinations were raised by intact married parents

1. Families Today: Reality, Beauty, and Challenges

Distress in the pews is far more common than pastors can see. Between one in five and one in four married parishioners report struggling, wives 62 percent more often than husbands, and the loneliest people at Mass are the unmarried in their thirties. The decline is not chiefly economic: it has persisted through booms and recessions and reaches the college-educated. What changed is the material threshold Americans believe must be cleared before marrying. The desire itself survives.

2. Young People and the Discovery of the Vocation to Marriage

Only 31 percent of adults aged 22 to 35 date actively. Marriage has been recast as the reward for security rather than a means of building it, a shift from a cornerstone to capstone mentality. Parents reinforce it: nine in ten rate their children's financial independence as important against one in five for marriage. Children are doing what is expected of them. Fatigue with dating technology is an opening, since parishes remain among the few places young people can meet in person.

3. Married Life and the First Years: A Decisive Time

This is the widest structural gap in American pastoral practice. Parishes accompany couples closely to the altar and then release them. Two findings make a remedy achievable: eight to twelve hours a year of skills-based formation measurably improves marital health, and couples who pray and worship together report higher satisfaction and divorce 30 to 50 percent less often. Teaching alone is insufficient. The teaching of virtue must be aided by the practice of spiritual and human skills.

4. In the Difficulties of Life: Accompanying and Supporting

Two obstacles are primary. Stigma keeps the struggling away, since attending marriage ministry often creates the impression that a couple is failing; the remedy is to invite healthy couples first so all feel comfortable participating. And clergy lack training: 88 percent of priests counsel couples while 64 percent feel unqualified. The parish should act as the first responder rather than the surgeon, triaging with care and referring well.

5. Christian Families as Subjects of the Church's Mission

Couples who have been served become those who serve, and parish capacity grows without new staff. Parental practice, a warm parent-child bond, and a stable marriage outweigh every institutional program in transmitting faith. Marriage ministry does not compete with schools, catechesis, or youth ministry. It is the condition under which they bear lasting fruit.

Four Things the American Experience Suggests

- 1. Measure first.** A brief anonymous survey tells a pastor the true condition of the marriages in his care. Almost no American pastor has ever had this information.
- 2. Build after the wedding.** Ongoing formation, not better preparation, is the gap. Roughly 8 hours a year is an attainable norm.
- 3. Remove the stigma.** Until formation is understood as the mark of a healthy marriage rather than the symptom of a failing one, participation will stay low whatever is offered.
- 4. Preach and communicate the right vision.** Most young people are very likely called to a married vocation, and this requires hearing from the Church and their parents about the great good of marriage. Marriage has never been reserved for those who already have everything in order. It's a cornerstone, not a capstone.



9 in 10

Say it's important their children are financially independent and have a fulfilling career



1 in 5

Say it's important their children marry and have kids



Together, the United States, and other developed nations, are living through **the collapse of marriage as a normal expectation of adult life.**

The Church is absorbing the consequences. Recent Pew Research shows that 9 in 10 American parents say it's important their children are financially independent and have a fulfilling career, but just 1 in 5 say it's important their children marry and have kids.¹ Those preferences are largely reflected in the behavior of their adult children, though parental preference is only part of the story. Rising material expectations, the absence of credible models, a failure to help young people to vocationally discern and prioritize marriage, the decoupling of marriage from children, and a Church that largely stopped forming couples after the wedding have combined to displace historic Christian anthropology.

The consequences are legion. Author and cultural critic Mary Eberstadt showed in her 2013 book *How the West Really Lost God*, that this marriage and family crisis in the Western world chronologically preceded and caused the faith crisis. The numbers of those in Mass on Sunday support Eberstadt's thesis. According to a 2024 survey of 7,440 weekly Mass attendees, 83 percent of those in Mass on any given Sunday in the United States were raised by their married parents.² Lower but still similar trends are present among weekly church-attending Protestant Christians.³ This reality exists in a country where the intact family has been a minority structure for most of this century.

The New Springtime will not arrive as a renewal of faith that somehow outruns the loss of Christian anthropology. No such renewal is possible. Restoring an anthropology in which parents and children both desire marriage and know how to seek it is part of making that Springtime real. Efforts to promote priestly vocations in America above recent downward trends have proven successful in many dioceses. It suggests concerted work by the diocesan church and local parish can have similar success in marriage. Indeed, there is a great need for the church to equip parents to live the vocation of marriage well and in turn promote the vocation of married life to their children. Where American parishes have made marriage a deliberate pastoral priority, however, both marriages and Mass attendance have measurably recovered, which suggests the decline is a matter of neglect and not inevitable.

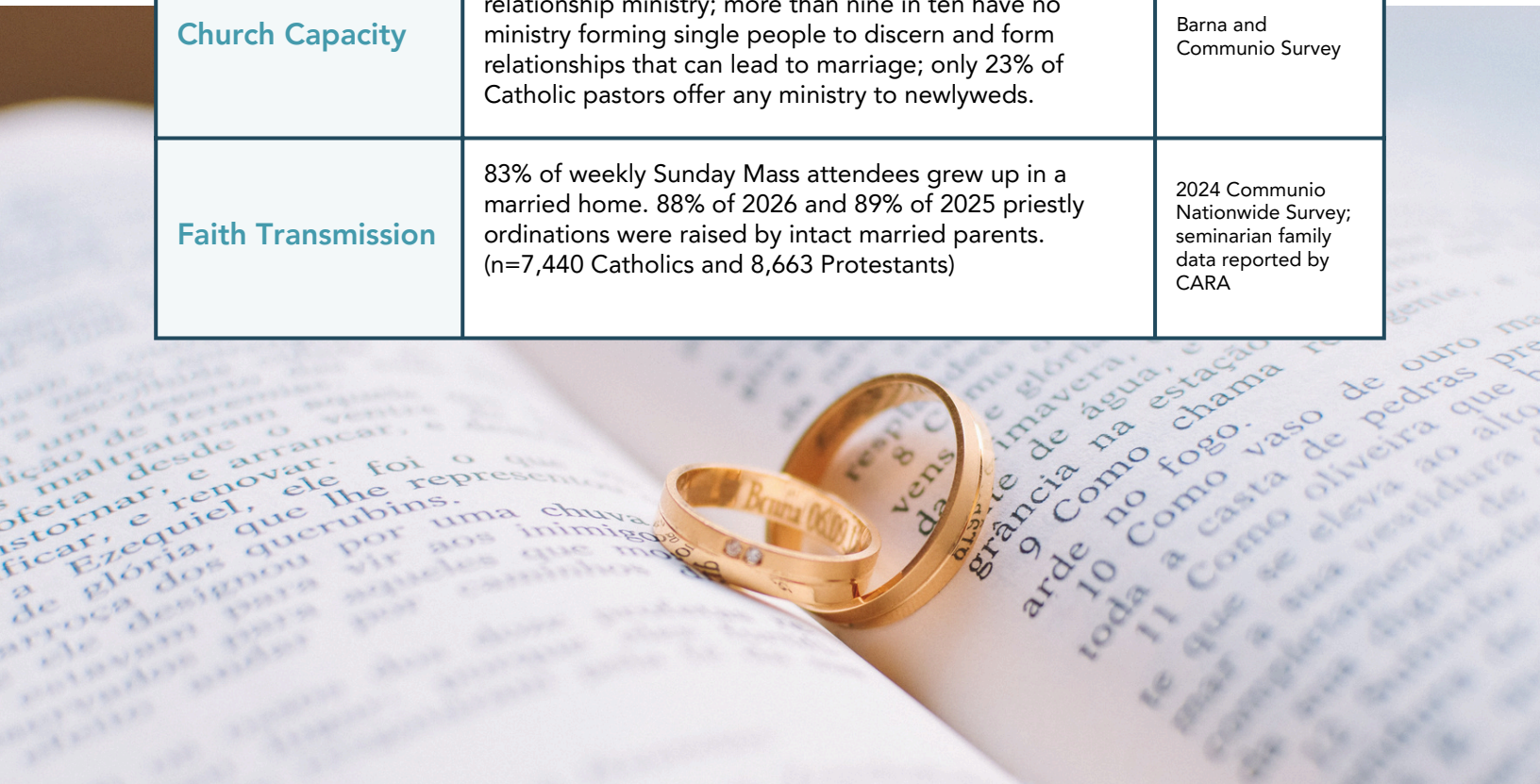
¹ Pew Research Center, "Parenting in America Today," January 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/01/24/parenting-in-america-today>.

² Communio Nationwide Survey, May to December 2024.

³ 2024 Communio Nationwide Study on Faith and Relationships found that 66 percent of weekly-attending Protestant Christians grew up in a married, intact family.

American **Marriage** at a Glance

Indicator	Finding	Source
Marriage Rate	Down 65% since 1970 and 31% since 2000. America is at the first point in its history where a majority of adults are not married.	U.S. Census; Institute for Family Studies
Sacramental Marriages	Down nearly 75% in roughly fifty years. In 2023: 401,654 Catholic funerals, 111,245 Catholic marriages. Over this same time frame, the Catholic population of the U.S. grew from 54 million to 75 million.	Official Catholic Directory/ CARA
Fertility	1.57 births per woman (2025), down from 2.12 in 2007. Roughly 157 people in the next generation for every 200 in this one.	CDC Provisional Data for 2025
Intact Homes	The share of U.S. households with married parents and children under age 18 fell from about 40% of all households in 1970 to roughly 18% today. Just over half of all children now reach seventeen without a married mother and father in the home.	U.S. Census; MARRI, Catholic University
Happiness	Marriage is the single greatest differentiator between happy and unhappy Americans, and its retreat statistically explains most of the recent national decline in happiness.	Peltzman, University of Chicago
Church Capacity	85% of churches spend nothing on marriage or relationship ministry; more than nine in ten have no ministry forming single people to discern and form relationships that can lead to marriage; only 23% of Catholic pastors offer any ministry to newlyweds.	Barna and Communio Survey
Faith Transmission	83% of weekly Sunday Mass attendees grew up in a married home. 88% of 2026 and 89% of 2025 priestly ordinations were raised by intact married parents. (n=7,440 Catholics and 8,663 Protestants)	2024 Communio Nationwide Survey; seminarian family data reported by CARA





1. Families Today: Reality, Beauty, and Challenges

A fragility largely invisible from the sanctuary, and signs of hope amongst the young

The understanding that man and woman are made in the *Imago Dei* with complementary gifts realized in fruitful conjugal love continues to vanish from American life, bringing with it an increase in human suffering. This shift in worldview coincides with a class divide, which may be the most striking feature of the American picture.

In 1962, more than nine in ten Americans aged thirty to thirty-five had ever married; today fewer than fifty-five percent have and the collapse has been far steeper among the working class than among the college-educated. It would be natural to attribute this decline in marriage exclusively to economic headwinds facing young people.

Research from the Institute for Family Studies shows that a community's number of employed single men is associated with higher rates of marriage.⁴ However, the downward trend in marriage is still present among the college-educated with marriage dropping from 76 percent to 58 percent among college-educated women from 1960 to 2022 while the average age of marriage climbed.⁵

The declining trend has persisted during both economic recessions and during economic boom periods. What has changed more than economic hardship has been expectations, primarily the material threshold Americans believe must be achieved before marrying.

Parents and children today simply expect and value a much higher level of financial stability before entering marriage than prior generations, as evidenced by the emphasis on financial independence over marriage and parenthood in the previously shared Pew data.

Inside our parishes, relationship and marriage distress is far more common than pastors can see. Anonymous surveying in American congregations finds that between one in five and one in four married people in the pews on Sunday report struggling in their marriage.

Wives are 62 percent more likely to report struggling in their marriages than husbands, and roughly seventy percent of divorces are initiated by women, suggesting many husbands are often unaware their marriage is in danger.⁶

The gap in marital satisfaction is widest among churchgoing wives in their thirties. Women in this group are 109 percent more likely than churchgoing men to report struggling in their marriages. Loneliness follows the same hidden pattern.

We expect to find it most severe among the elderly and the widowed. In fact, the loneliest people in an American church on Sunday are the unmarried in their thirties, a group that in any earlier generation would have been small.⁷

A decoupling of marriage and children (and a general contraceptive mentality) remove too many from the *communio personarum*, both causing and exacerbating the contagion of loneliness.

In 1993, 83 percent of high school senior girls in the United States said they wanted to get married someday. As of 2023, that number dropped to 61 percent. For high school senior boys, that number remains nearly unchanged during that period.⁸ This means a strong majority of young people still desire and want to seek out marriage.

For now, the natural inclination toward marriage remains. Less clear is the urgency, and the way to get there. Among younger married people involved in the church, we see a growing openness to life and fidelity to church teaching on birth control. This does not hold for those who self-identify as Catholic but are not regular Mass attendees.

⁴Institute for Family Studies, "Mapping Marriage in America: Where Young Adults Marry Most." <https://ifstudies.org/report-brief/mapping-marriage-in-america-where-young-adults-marry-most>.

⁵Jaden Loo, "Marriage: More than a Century of Change, 1900–2022," National Center for Family and Marriage Research, FP-24-10, <https://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr/resources/data/family-profiles/FP-24-10.html>.

⁶Michael J. Rosenfeld, Stanford University, presented to the American Sociological Association, 2015.

⁷Communio, 2023 Nationwide Study on Faith and Relationships.

⁸Pew Research Center analysis of Monitoring the Future data, University of Michigan, November 2025.

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Americans have not wholly rejected marriage. Through a blend of de-emphasis and lack of good models, they have lost the means and the confidence to reach it. The Church is the last institution in American life still able to supply both.



2.Young People: Discovering the Vocation of Marriage

A dating recession, a demoralized generation of men, and a false sequence

Living out our vocation is the normative pathway to grow in holiness. Most are called to marriage, yet fewer and fewer prioritize or take steps to enter the path of holiness that God desires for them.

This starts young. Most people in their prime dating years are not moving toward marriage in any deliberate way. For example, of those ages 22 to 35, only 31 percent were active daters while 74 percent of women and 64 percent of men said they had not dated or only dated a few times in the last year.⁹ Besides a lack of positive vision and examples for married life, compounding problems stemming from a lack of confidence, increasing male and female ideological polarization, access to digital distraction and pornography, and injury from earlier relationships delay serious courtship.

Dating technology too often turns relationships into consumer goods as Gen Z users swipe through an average of thirty-four profiles per match.¹⁰ American college students have largely withdrawn from the apps, with

nearly four in five no longer using them even monthly.¹¹ In a certain way, this fatigue with dating technology offers the Church an opportunity. Parishes are among the few places left where young people can meet in person, inside a community that encourages healthy, purposeful relationships.

Underneath all of this lies a reversal Americans have accepted without noticing, a “cornerstone” to “capstone” mentality. For generations marriage was understood as one of the ordinary means by which two people built security and a life together. In 1970 the median American groom was twenty-three; only about a quarter of men his age owned a home, and those homes averaged four rooms and were more crowded than homes today. He married with little and built the rest afterward. Today the median groom is thirty and sixty percent are homeowners.¹² We now tell the young to finish school, establish a career, clear their debts, buy the house, and only then to consider marriage. Marriage has been recast as the reward for security rather than a means of achieving it.

This has been devastating as a lack of sexual chastity has become normative, and many people do not have the purpose and motivation that are fruits of the sacrificial love of married life. Working and living independently without marriage or children described 6 percent of young adults in 1975. Today it describes 28 percent.¹³

Perhaps most surprising is what children are hearing at home. Parents consistently rank marriage far below career among the things they feel are important for their children. In a 2023 Pew survey, 88% of parents said it was very important to them that their children be financially independent as adults, while only 21% said the same of their children marrying. In many ways, our children are doing exactly what we expect of them.

⁹Alan Hawkins and Jason Carroll, *The Dating Recession: How Bad Is It and What Can We Do?* State of Our Unions 2026, Institute for Family Studies and the Wheatley Institute, February 2026.

¹⁰Tawfik Matchmaking, “How Much Time Are You Wasting on Dating Apps? A Look at Dating’s Hidden Time Costs,” January 5, 2026.

¹¹Axios and Generation Lab Student Poll, November 2023.

¹²Rachel Sheffield, “Beyond the Paycheck: What’s Behind America’s Marriage Divide?” Institute for Family Studies, June 2026.

¹³U.S. Census Bureau, “Significant Drop in Share of Young Adults Achieving Four Milestones,” August 2025, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2025/08/milestones-to-adulthood.html>.

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Young people need to see marriages they can imitate, and to be told that one does not have to have everything in order first (both from their parents and the pulpit). They need to have the practical skills to date properly, the vision to understand the Church’s beautiful teaching on nuptial love, and the communities to meet people their age with similar worldviews.

A wide structural gap in American pastoral practice

In the United States, if a marriage separates, the most common time for it to happen is within five years after the wedding.¹⁴ Public data modeling also suggests that couples with young children are the most likely to be struggling in their marriage.

For an average parish, little parish support follows the wedding. Only twenty-three percent of Catholic pastors report offering any ministry or mentorship to newlyweds.¹⁵ A typical parish will accompany couples closely to the altar and then release them at the

precise moment the thematic framework for these days of reflection rightly calls decisive.

¹⁴Pew Research Center, “8 Facts About Divorce in the United States,” October 2025.

¹⁵2019 Barna Relationship Ministries Study.



3. Married Life and the First Years: A Decisive Time

A wide structural gap in American pastoral practice (cont'd)

Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life states this principle in saying marriage is not a point of arrival.¹⁶ Its final stage, Living Marriage, will remain aspirational in the United States unless parishes build something for couples to enter.

Two findings make this practicable for any parish. The first concerns how much. Multiple peer-reviewed studies and meta-analysis show that couples who pray together tend to report higher marital satisfaction along with a greater likelihood of expressing trust, forgiveness, and less infidelity. Regular worship as a couple is also associated with being very happy or extremely happy.¹⁷

Additionally, research in couple relationship education indicates that roughly 8 to 12 hours a year of skills-based formation produces measurable improvement in marital health regardless of a couple's starting condition.¹⁸ Practicing both the human skills and spiritual skills of prayer in Christian marriage, along with having them modeled in Christian community, are examples of how to turn accompaniment from a disposition into something a parish can schedule and measure. The second concerns what kind. We know from the spiritual life, sound teaching alone is insufficient.

Similarly, becoming holy and healthy in marriage requires more than preaching on marriage. Good homilies can leave couples knowing what God asks of them while lacking the skills to get there. Effective formation joins virtue to learnable competences: learning how to build a prayer life and sacramental life together, communication, resolution of conflict, emotional intimacy, shared responsibility, discernment, appreciation, self-control, realistic expectations, and commitment.

To state that second finding in the language of priestly formation, human formation must accompany the spiritual and the intellectual. The same holds for spouses. Marriages seldom fail over belief. They tend to fail over communication, over misaligned expectations, over conflict badly handled, over ordinary competences no one thought to teach.

A shared spiritual life can be a tremendous aid in marriage. The parish is already the right setting for this work. Couples who worship together are thirty to fifty percent less likely to divorce, and wives who attend regularly with their husbands are far likelier to report a very happy marriage, an effect larger still among husbands.¹⁹ What the American evidence now adds is what happens when a diocese acts deliberately. From 2022 to 2025, the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas (with *Communio*) undertook what is likely the largest diocesan marriage initiative in the United States.

Roughly thirty thousand people passed through some level of relationship ministry, and participating parishes saw average Sunday attendance rise twenty-three percent.

Of the married participants who began by saying they lacked the skills to communicate well, 81 percent said they had them by the end.²⁰

Two conditions govern whether any of this reaches the people who need it. It must carry a genuinely evangelistic character to draw more than the already committed or the minority of struggling couples who would have sought help on their own. And it must be a normal, public, unremarkable part of parish life, or the stigma attached to a marriage in difficulty keeps the struggling away. Finally, much like other peer-mentoring and discipleship initiatives in the Church, the more authentic friendships can be built into any formation or mentoring, the more these helpful relationships outlast the wedding. Parishes can create the network of families envisioned by the framework by focusing not only on communicating doctrine but also on building natural community.

¹⁶ Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life* (2022), n. 7.

¹⁷ Cornelius-White and Kanmori, meta-analysis of 37 studies; Ellison et al., *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2010).

¹⁸ Alan Hawkins, Scott Stanley, Victoria Blanchard and Michael Albright, "Exploring Programmatic Moderators of the Effectiveness of Marriage and Relationship Education Programs: A Meta-Analytic Study," *Behavior Therapy* 43 (2012): 77–87.

¹⁹ W. Bradford Wilcox and James Lynch, "Can Churches Renew the 'Pursuit of Happiness'?" *Institute for Family Studies*, June 2026.

²⁰ *Communio* program data, Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas, 2022 to 2025.

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The Church in America has generally built a bridge to the altar and nothing on the far side. Ongoing Christian community where 8 hours a year of formation and practice, offered in several formats, is the highest yield change available to any parish. This needs to be intrinsically connected to evangelization while lived in community to reach the right people and normalize a healthy marriage culture. Disembodied content or catechesis alone will not solve the problem.



4. Difficulties of Life: Accompanying and Supporting

Hidden crisis, pastoral difficulties, and the limits of the pastor's office

The annual divorce rate runs at 14.2 per thousand married people. Couples who pray and who are regular Mass attendees have a lower incidence of divorce. So, a typical parish with 500 married adults would expect to see few total divorces annually. This can badly understate how many marriages are in trouble at any given moment. According to Communion's 2023 survey data, between one in five and one in four couples at Mass on Sunday report a low level of marriage satisfaction placing them at increased risk of divorce. Few parishes offer any ongoing ministry that is proportionate to that level of need. Most of those who participate are the self-motivated few, the couples who would have found help on their own. There are two pastoral impediments that need to be overcome for effective growth in this area. The first is stigma, in our judgement, the single greatest obstacle to ministry participation in American parishes.

Where people assume that a couple attending a marriage class or retreat must be in trouble, the couples who most need help stay away rather than risk public embarrassment. Counter-intuitively, the remedy is to make an entirely positive case around the universal call to holiness and invite those with good marriages first, so the struggling can come unmarked.

Every priest makes a retreat each year to nurture his primary relationship, and not just when things are hard. Same idea.

The second is a lack of expertise in our clergy and staff. When a troubled marriage does present itself, is the parish equipped to respond well?

Eighty-eight percent of Catholic priests report that they counsel married couples.²¹ Sixty-four percent also report feeling not very qualified or only somewhat qualified to offer that guidance. Practically, parishes should embrace a posture of the emergency responder rather than the surgeon: a small team of trained lay couples who receive the distressed with compassion, ask careful questions, do no harm, and refer to appropriate skilled coaching (in most cases) or counseling (in a minority of cases).

That triage matters pastorally as much as clinically, because it identifies domestic violence, substance abuse, addiction, infidelity, and untreated mental illness. These situations require specialists and must never be met with generic marital advice. Where none of these pathologies are present, which is in the majority of cases, coaching or an intensive retreat is the right first step.

The encouraging news is that marriage health content and coaching work, provided couples actually take part.

What determines whether that intervention reaches anyone is parish culture.

Where enrichment is offered to all marriages as ordinary upkeep, couples in difficulty are far more likely to identify themselves. And where staff and clergy know what to do next, the ones who would otherwise suffer in silence get help. Cracks repaired early do not bring the house down.

²¹ 2019 Barna-Communion Relationships Ministry Survey.
Below: Fr. James Mason, pastor of Holy Spirit Catholic Church, Sioux Falls, SD.



SUMMARY

The parish should be the first responder, not the surgeon. Most marriages in crisis can be saved by skilled help the parish need only know how to find. A culture change where all marriages seek holiness and continuous improvement, like regular oil changes, allows peak performance and prevents severe breakdowns.

5. Christian Families: Subjects of the Church's Mission

Why investment in marriage is the condition of every other apostolate's success

Saint Paul VI observed that married couples “become apostles to other married couples” (*Humanae Vitae*, 26). In American practice this is the working mechanism. Every sustainable ministry we have seen is run by couples who were first served by it: a parish hosts a retreat led by a certified facilitator; the retreat strengthens those who attend and surfaces two or three leader couples; those couples are trained and thereafter run it themselves, year after year. Formation received becomes formation given, and parish capacity grows without new staff. Recent American research confirms what *Amoris Laetitia* affirms at n. 287. Parental religious practice, a warm parent-child relationship, and a stable marriage are among the most powerful engines of faith transmission, more powerful than youth ministry, catechetical programs, or any other institutional factor. Children who reported a very good relationship with both parents were seventy-six percent more likely to attend church weekly as adults, sixty-six percent more likely to pray daily, and ninety-seven percent more likely to believe in God.²²

This reframes the American debate about resources. Marriage ministry is not one apostolate competing with schools, catechesis, and youth ministry. Rather, it is the condition under which those apostolates bear lasting fruit. As those working in Catholic education know, even excellent schools struggle to leave a lasting mark on children not raised in a healthy family. It's helpful to name some of the main barriers to this work being fruitful: the absence of a positive vision of marriage; stigma; the silo that makes this one person's work rather than the parish's; the fear that speaking of marriage will wound the divorced; the false opposition between spiritual growth and practical skill; the assumption that such ministry is only for the married; and simple lack of training.

Centrally, our parishes need to provide:

- A Catholic vision for vocation and family that treats marriage as a cornerstone, not a capstone
- A community which engages couples first through natural friendships and outreach
- Human and spiritual skill-based formation to practically add to the theological beauty the Church teaches

²² Institute for Family Studies and Communio, *Passing the Torch: How Faith Moves Across Generations*, June 2026.

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Family decline drives faith decline. The centrality of the domestic church is not one among many pastoral options, but the subject and engine for continued apostolic fruitfulness.

Four Things the American Experience Suggests

- **Measure first.** A brief anonymous survey tells a pastor the condition of the marriages and singles in his care. Almost no American pastor has ever had this information.
- **Build after the wedding.** Ongoing formation, not simply better preparation, is the gap. Roughly eight hours a year is an attainable norm.
- **Remove the stigma.** Until formation is understood as the mark of a healthy marriage rather than the symptom of a failing one, participation will stay low whatever is offered.
- **Preach and communicate the right vision.** Most young people are very likely called to a married vocation, and this requires hearing from the Church and their parents about the great good of marriage. Marriage has never been reserved for those who already have everything in order. It's a cornerstone, not a capstone.

