

## Giving Pre-Marriage Courses to “Candidate Couples” in Japan: A Great Pastoral Responsibility and Missionary Work

*Jerome Padmo Sartano*

### Introduction

In many countries, talking about pastoral and missionary works that are carried out in the parishes would make many people think of the visiting the sick, teaching catechesis to the children, celebrating the Eucharist, organizing Bible classes, accompanying and educating the youth, preparing the Sunday or daily homilies, preparing the children and their parents for baptism, presiding at the baptismal ceremony for children, bringing communion to those who cannot come to Mass on Sundays, doing team ministries in the parishes, teaching religion in public Schools, accompanying and helping in the faith education of the children in Saturday or Sunday schools. In addition, the idea of missionary work might make people think about reaching out to the people who have not yet known Christ, introducing the Church or religion in public Schools, entering into a dialogue with other religions, or carrying out social service.

In Japan, besides those above mentioned responsibilities, there is another very unique and important responsibility which is carrying out the task of preparing and organizing marriage courses for, and blessing the marriage ceremony of, “Japanese couples”. Here, the words “Japanese couples” mean Japanese people who are not yet baptized Catholics, or else ordinary Japanese, but who want to get their marriage blessed in the Catholic Church.

For certain rigid Catholics around the world, especially in the countries in which Catholicism is a majority religion and Catholic ceremonies are exclusively for Catholics, hearing about the Japanese couples who are not yet baptized Catholics but who go through their marriage ceremony and blessing in the Catholic Church might be a scandal, or at least,

something really strange, and they might react violently to this practice.

### 1. Special Permission for the Catholic Church in Japan

The Japanese Catholic Church is indeed very special. Since 1975, the Catholic Church in Japan has been given special permission and approval, by the Vatican, to permit Japanese couples who are not yet baptized to go through their marriage ceremony in the Catholic Church. Two main reasons led the Pope and other Catholic leaders in Vatican to approving this kind of marriage ceremony. Firstly, in doing so, the Catholic Church in Japan takes on the responsibility to pray for the happiness of these new Japanese couples by asking in a special way that God’s abundant grace and blessing be given to them or to families who are not yet baptized Catholic. Secondly, it is through accepting Japanese couples on pre-marriage courses and giving their marriage a blessing in the Catholic church that the Church carries out a very important and meaningful pastoral and evangelizing mission in Japanese society. This important approval that they receive is indeed God’s guidance and special gift to the Japanese couples involved and, at the same time, a pastoral and missionary responsibility of the Catholic Church in Japan to show to the world that the blessing or the grace of God is given for free to all people who are hoping for it.

Since 1975, the number of Japanese couples who are not yet baptized but were permitted to go through their marriage ceremony in the Catholic Church has been greater than the number of marriages between baptized Catholics. Just as an example, according to the report from the office of the Catholic Japanese Bishops Conference, in 1980 there were 1640 Japanese couples who were not yet baptized but married in the Catholic Church, while the

number of Catholic couples was only 1577. In addition, based on the data I have obtained from the parishes to which I was assigned, in my 21 years of missionary work in Japan, I presided over and blessed the wedding ceremonies of 210 couples who were not yet baptized, while I was only able to bless 5 Catholic couples in the Catholic Church. Here we can see that these ordinary Japanese who are not yet baptized have found the Catholic marriage ceremony and the Catholic Church to be one of the best places for a marriage ceremony.

## **2. Why do “Japanese couples” have their marriage blessed in the Catholic Church?**

Based on the information obtained directly from the couples during pre-marriage courses in my missionary work there over 21 years, the following reasons have led most of the Japanese couples to ask if their wedding ceremony could be held in the Catholic Church.

First, either the woman or the man or even both have received a Christian education in a catholic kindergarten, elementary, junior, senior or high school, and this educational history has made them desire to get married in the Catholic Church. They have experienced through their Catholic education that they have been helped to grow into better, happier adults, and they are optimistic that, by having their marriage ceremony in the Catholic form, God will continue to accompany them, blessing their family, guiding them as husband, wife or father, mother and children, and making them happy.

Second, many of them know that the Catholic Church is set up to serve. It does not have complicated rules. For instance, it will allow friends and relatives to participate in the marriage ceremony for free, not asking for additional charges for chairs, as is the case in Shinto Shrines or Hotels, and, overall, the cost is very cheap.

Third, the European wedding dress is very practical and cheaper compared to Japanese traditional wedding clothes. Wearing the

European wedding dress allows Japanese couples to experience being international or global people, and this gives them a certain feeling of joy and pride.

Fourth, the Catholic liturgy, which combines very alive liturgical songs, sung by Catholic choir groups, with the Gospel message, the homily given by the priest, and the active participation of family members and friends, gives more joys and happiness to the new couples. They really feel that they start their married life with great joy and optimism.

Fifth, Japanese couples believe that pre-marriage courses that are organized systematically by a Catholic team ministry on marriage, and the care they receive from Catholic Church, will strengthen them and make them start, and continue, family life happily. Furthermore, the accompaniment program after marriage, through gatherings of the families and attending special liturgical ceremonies for blessings for the children and the family, gives yet more confirmation that the Japanese couples will always journey through life in this world together with all Catholic families. They feel that they also are part of the Catholic community.

Sixth, Japanese couples know that the Catholic Church is always open to help, support, and pray for them every day, and they are always welcomed by the Catholic Church whenever they come to the Church for help and consultation on family life.

Seventh, the new couples or families believe that in the future their relationship with the Catholic Church will certainly continue and they are free to send their children to the Catholic schools for better education and formation.

Eighth, some candidate couples have witnessed the beauty and the solemnity of the wedding ceremony of their friends in the Catholic Church and for their marriage they also want to receive and experience the same Catholic ceremony.

### 3. Pre-marriage Courses for Japanese couples who are not yet baptized Catholic

In Japan, the committees on marriage in the parishes have various ways of doing preparation for Japanese couples. Despite this variety, one common denominator is that the Japanese candidate couples participate actively in the pre-marriage courses, and the courses are very well organized by the marriage committees in the various parishes. In the what follows, we give a few examples of this.

#### 3.1. Some data from different parishes regarding pre-marriage courses

In the Tokyo Diocese, the priest, assisted by the committee on marriage, organizes eight sessions of the course before having the wedding ceremony in the chapel of a Catholic university. In this place, the couples come together to attend the talks given by the priest in charge. The topics are on the identity of the couple and family life. After listening to the talks, and guided by existing catholic couples, the candidate couples go into small groups to share their thoughts and experiences. This sharing is continued in writing up their reflections at the end of each session, which they then submit to the priest.

In the Hiroshima Diocese, up until the year 2000, certain catholic families and their parish priests held pre-marriage seminars of three sessions in the Cathedral Church of Hiroshima. According to one of the seminar helpers, Shogo Kimura, 62, a parishioner of the Cathedral Church in Hiroshima who, with his wife Kuniko, 59, helped conducting the seminars, they carried out this mission because they believed that, in this way, they could bring to Japanese couples who are not yet baptized catholic the true meaning of the Catholic marriage ceremony.

From the year 2001 onwards in Hiroshima Diocese, other senior catholic couples from another seven parishes inside Hiroshima city, and few missionary and parish priests, came to join in the Marriage Committee of the

World Peace Memorial Cathedral and to hold the pre-marriage seminars at Cathedral Church Hiroshima. Almost every month a new seminar is opened, attended by three to four candidate couples. These seminars are held in a systematic way. There are eight sessions of two hours each, held over a number of weekends. Before attending each session, the candidate couples receive printed material covering the theme, and they are given a lot of time to talk with each other about the topics and exchange opinions at the session. In the year 2012, there were eleven seminars, or eighty eight sessions held, and 45 couples participated, celebrating their wedding ceremony afterwards.

In line with their participation in the seminars, the senior couples gave their comments regarding the pre-marriage course as the following.

They said that at the beginning of the courses, the candidate couples mostly felt a little bit uneasy when they talked about the purpose of attending the seminars, but along the way they began to enjoy them and by the end they had a sense of great joy and felt united with the older catholic couples and priests who organized the seminar. The candidate couples said that they were very happy to be prepared so well before pronouncing their marriage vows.

In the *Gion* Catholic parish of the Hiroshima Diocese, a member of one of the Catholic senior couples, Isao Ikezawa, commented that from the beginning they had understood very well their role as catholic senior married couples in working together with the priest to accompany the young candidate couples from the beginning of their married life. As lay people they are responsible and active in the pre-marriage course and the wedding ceremony, and they do their best to establish a deep relationship with the young candidate couples who are not yet baptized catholic.

Shogo Kimura says that in conducting the seminars, the catholic senior couples do not teach the new couples about many mat-

ters; most of time they let the candidate couples speak.

### **3.2 My team ministry experiences in holding pre-marriage course in a few parishes**

During the 21 years of my missionary work in the dioceses of Osaka and Hiroshima, we made the effort to carry out this important mission seriously and systematically. In these two dioceses we organized the pre-marriage sessions in the following way.

#### **3.2.1 Introducing the Catholic Church to the candidate couples**

Since 1994, it is when the candidate couples come for registration and orientation at the parish that the team ministry for the marriage preparation apostolate introduce to them and explain the chapel, altar, candles, the Cross of Jesus, Holy water, the liturgical books, the Holy Bible and other symbols that are used during the marriage ceremony. Through this introduction and explanation the couples get used to these things and start to feel at ease with the mood of the Catholic Church. At that point, we invite them to learn about Jesus and His teaching. At the same time, we give the couples a copy of the Holy Bible which is written in an easy Japanese and ask them to read slowly at home together the biblical passages that are related to all the topics that come up during the group pre-marriage courses and the sharing.

Then we also invite them to attend one of the Catholic liturgical ceremonies and give them pamphlets from a written course on marriage. In most cases we invite the couples to experience and participate in a Saturday or Sunday Eucharistic celebration. Although they do not understand the meaning of the Eucharist, we guide the couples, allowing them just to be and to experience the Eucharistic celebration. This is also the time for them to meet parishioners or members of the parish and we introduce them to the community and let them ask for prayers from Catholic parishioners.

After the candidate couples attend and experience the Eucharistic celebration, we give them small booklets that contain twelve written classes on marriage and an introduction to the Bible. The candidate couples are always very much encouraged to read the small booklets together, answer the questions on each topic, and send their answers to the parish team on marriage. This is the way we encourage the couples to let themselves listen to the Word of God, journeying together with Jesus, preparing themselves through the marriage courses at home.

#### **3.2.2 Actual pre-marriage courses or seminars**

After doing the written classes for one month, the candidate couples come to the parish to start actual pre-marriage classes or seminars which continue over eight sessions. Each meeting lasts 2 hours. The courses are organized by a team in the parish which consists of two catholic senior couples and a priest. The courses are attended by three candidate couples who are preparing their marriage in the Catholic Church.

The methodology we use during pre-marriage courses always prioritizes the active participation of the candidate couples in sharing ideas, experiences and life stories. The priest and the two senior couples make a point of not teaching but of facilitating and listening to what candidate couples share, and of giving them encouragement and making time also to reflect together on the Gospel message and for making positive comments on their answers to the written courses about the Bible and marriage. The whole pre-marriage course and its seminars are carried out as follows.

In the first meeting, in order to evaluate how far the candidate bride and candidate bridegroom have known each other, and to encourage them to care for one another starting from small little things, we begin by giving them questions such as 1. Introduce your partner: nick name, full name, birthday, hobbies, favorite food or drink, how many brothers and sisters he/she has, the food he/she

does not like... 2. Share with the group the first impressions you had when you met each other for the first time. Have you shared that impression yet with your partner? If so, what was your partner's reaction? 3. Share with the group what made you decide to accept one another and to get engaged and married? 4. Share with the group the points you want your partner to improve on. 5. Share also the reasons why you chose to get married in the Catholic Church.

After we listen to the honest sharing of the three couples, we let the catholic senior couples share their life experiences and give words of appreciation and encouragement. Then the priest explains the biblical message that human beings are created in the image of God, and encourages the candidate couples to accept and care for one another as the greatest gift of God. To finish, we sing a religious song together and give a final blessing.

In the second meeting, the methodology is the same as it is in the first, but we move on to the next topic, which is LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

To create the same kind of active and participative sharing we had in the first session, we ask the couples to tell us their ideas and thoughts, as Japanese, about the words "LOVE ONE ANOTHER". From my experience in guiding the sharing of ideas by young Japanese couples on the topic "Love one another", most of them immediately relate it with making love or having sex. This is the way most young Japanese people explain what LOVE means in the present era.

For comparison, after the candidate couples have shared their opinions, we ask the Catholic senior couples to share theirs on the same topic. Because of their Catholic education and of their being senior, while they say some of the same things, they add to them some Catholic teaching. From the senior couples we can hear that a sexual relationship for couples is the best way to express the genuine love that comes from God. From this sharing

we can see that the Catholic senior couples have deepened their understanding of the sexual relationship as one of the best gifts from God.

After listening to their sharing, the priest asks the candidate couples to read some Gospel passages together, alternately and slowly. We usually choose the Gospel of John 13:2-35. In his explanation, the priest should concentrate more on John 13:34-35. Then he asks for the reaction of the candidate couples to Jesus' love in giving his whole life for the happiness of others.

Most of the candidate couples admire very much Jesus' love for all people, especially the suffering. They also have a dream to learn from Jesus' example.

Then, after sharing about this, we return to the second topic in our course by asking the candidate couples why they have chosen to get married.

In their responses to this question, they usually mention ideas related to Catholic teaching, such as to build a family life, create a community of living together, or for procreation. Many candidate couples also say that their reasons for marriage are to live together, care for each other, and to live a happy life as a couple.

In the third meeting, we share on the topic of forgiveness.

In line with this topic, we always give the candidate couples the following guide questions. 1. Kindly share with the group how you see the importance of forgiving one another in family life. 2. Do you have the courage and commitment to admit your mistakes and ask forgiveness of your partner? 3. Are you happy and willing to forgive your partner despite the mistakes he/she has committed? 4. Could you share your feelings when your partner asks for forgiveness? 5. Could you share with the group your feelings when you are forgiven?

From the sharing of the candidate couples, it emerges that forgiveness is very important to keep a family moving forward and to keep everybody experiencing the healing of heart and enjoying happiness together. For the harmony and happiness of all family members, although at certain moments it is difficult to forgive, there is need for extra effort and to take the initiative in forgiving one another in the family.

Most of the Catholic senior families say that forgiveness is also a great gift to the family. In order to be able to forgive there is a need to ask for the guidance and encouragement of the Holy Spirit.

In line with this topic, the priest takes, reads and explains the message of Matthew's Gospel in chapter 18:21-22, concerning Jesus' answer to Peter's question on forgiveness, where he says that we have to forgive "seventy seven times", meaning that in forgiving one another, there is no limit.

In the fourth meeting we concentrate on the topic of family planning and the methods for family planning.

In Japan, most couples expect to have no more than two children or three at most. Until now, most couples use contraceptives for family planning. It is very rare to hear of Japanese couples using natural family planning methods, as suggested by Pope John Paul II. The best technology in Japan has helped most Japanese couples to choose contraceptive methods rather than natural family planning as part of a family planning program. Besides, daily life and the education of children in Japan, which are very expensive, have made most couples keep to smaller families.

After finishing this sharing, we spend time in watching a video on newly born babies and of the couples who have become mothers and fathers of children. This is also to invite the candidate couples to have the feeling of becoming a happy father and a happy mother. After watching the video we let them

give comments and express their feelings, followed by the comments of the catholic senior couples regarding their first experiences of becoming fathers and mothers as well.

In the fifth meeting we continue with a topic on the role of a father and a mother in the family. In relation to this topic, the priest asks the candidate couples and senior couples to read together and alternately the second letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 13:1-13. This biblical text encourages the couples to reflect and to compare their life as fathers and mothers with God as the Father. It is also an invitation and encouragement to live like a loving father and to keep to the following points after becoming a husband/wife and father/mother.

In order to be able to understand the following points and evaluate their own life, the priest asks both the Catholic senior couples and the candidate couples to read seven verses from the passage while changing the word "Love" to "I". For example, "Love is patient" is changed to "I am patient", but they have to put it into a question form, "Am I patient?" Similarly, "Love is kind" is changed into "I am kind" and then put it into the question form, "Am I kind?"

Then all the members can continue the same style with the other chapters. (Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres).

This methodology of reading the Bible is really effective in challenging the candidate couples and the Catholic senior couples to evaluate their lives in a moment of prayer. At the same time we ask the candidate couples and the Catholic senior couples to know their own feelings and make comments freely.

In the sixth meeting, we take the topic of the role of the father and the mother in the family and the role of the family in society.

We guide the candidate couples with the following questions. 1. Please, share with the group your roles in the family as a father and a mother. 2. Please, share your roles as a family in society.

In answering these guide questions, almost all the couples would say that the main task of a father is to make money to support the family, and the task of the mother is to educate the children at home. Some candidate couples also say that both as father and mother, they have the task to make money to support the family and they educate the children together. These two answers are very common now in young families in Japanese society. The priorities are both for work and family. In the present Japanese society the young couples make positive efforts to create balance between working in the company to make money and time to be together in the family.

When they come to answer the question about the role of the family for society, most of them think that paying taxes is their greatest responsibility. Many candidate couples do not realize that in their efforts to create a better family is indeed their responsibility to create a better society.

When we ask the Catholic senior families about the role of the family in the Church or society, it is easy for them to say that building a good Catholic family is their concrete participation in creating a better Church and society. It is very obvious that the call of Pope John Paul II to make the family a domestic Church is really well understood.

In this part the Catholic senior couples also share the three main roles of families in society as prophetic, that is, to preach the Gospel, the Good News of the Lord, as priestly, that is, to offer their time and good things for the happiness of other people, and as kingly,

that is, to give service to the sick, old and lonely people in society. Through sharing these main points, the Catholic Church is inviting the candidate couples in their ways to do good things for the sake of other people in society.

In the seventh meeting we concentrate on communication in the family. For this topic we always use the following guide questions. 1. How many times a week do the couples send short messages via cellular phone to one another? 2. Since the start of their engagement until the present time, how much time do they spend in a week to sit together and talk with one another? 3. Up to now, in your communication, are you the listening side or the talking side or in a balance position? 4. When your ideas are different or you are having a debate or quarrel, how do you face and solve this problem? 5. After becoming a husband and a wife, are you going to keep and develop the communication among you? 6. When you have children, are you going to prioritize communication with you children? Are you going to listen to the children or talk a lot to the children? 7. What are the most important subjects of your communication? 8. Are you at ease, and do you enjoy, talking to one another about your sexual life or sexual relations?

In answering these guide questions, all the candidate couples express clearly that communication in the family between husband and wife, children and parents, children and father, children and mother, children and children must be prioritized. They keep the communication going well because it is an expression of love and care, and will be one of the best ways to keep happy and pleasant relations in the family.

In the same way, the Catholic senior couples say that communication in the family is precious and it is the responsibility of all members to keep communication going well. They say that whatever happens, whether good and joyful or unpleasant and challenging, it should be communicated between them.

Both the candidate couples and the senior couples say that because Japanese society is very fast-moving and work-oriented, there are always temptations to neglect communication in the family. Taking the initiative to talk, creating occasions to be together, using their time together wisely for spontaneous communication, are all very urgent and important.

Then a priest also shares his communication experiences in his experience of religious community life and of his team ministry with other priests.

In the eighth meeting we concentrate on the topic of prayer life in the family.

In this part we first ask the Catholic senior couples to share their community prayer life with the candidate couples. Since they are all baptized Catholic, they usually present their experiences honestly to the candidate couples.

Regarding this topic, most of the Catholic senior couples say that, as Catholic couples, ideally speaking they participate in the Sunday Eucharist as a family, listen to the Gospel Reading, participate in Bible reading sessions and in community prayers in the family. But, as Japanese, they also go to Shinto Shrines to pray. They also say that most of their prayers are requesting or asking something from God, rather than giving thanks to God. At the end of the year, New Year's Day, and during special days or events, they pray personally at the Shrines. These prayers help them to be stronger in their family life.

We usually ask the candidate couples, who are mostly not yet baptized, whether they have heard about belief in God or whether they feel that God is protecting them. In addition, for those who are Catholic school graduates, we ask them to tell us about their experiences of participating in the Catholic school prayer, or, at least, their feeling when making the sign of the cross.

Most candidate couples do not speak clearly about the importance of prayer, but they

realize that praying to God is needed. In this sharing, they also say that they feel that there is someone who is higher than them, or even higher than their parents or grandparents, that is God. But they are honest enough to say that they do not know how to pray. Seeing this reality, most of them say that, hopefully, after reading more of the Catholic Bible, listening to the sharing of the Catholic senior couples and living a family life, they will have the heart and learn slowly how to pray like the Catholic senior families.

In this part, the priest usually shares his concrete experiences of his prayer life or habits, and about reading the Bible. In addition, he presents some simple, concrete ways in which he prays: thanksgiving, prayer of gratitude to God in the Church together with the parishioners, personal prayer in his room, and common prayer with fellow priests.

Finally, in this last gathering, we also spend the time for an additional hour on their comments or evaluation of the whole pre-marriage course. Their comments will be used by the Catholic senior couples and the priest to improve the methodology and topics of the pre-marriage courses in the future. Then we practice together Catholic songs for the marriage ceremony. Furthermore, we also arrange a special day for practices or rehearsing before the marriage ceremony in the big Chapel. Finally, we end the course by praying together the Our Father and the Prayer for Peace created by Saint Francis of Assisi, followed by blessing of the priest.

### **Final comments**

For a missionary priest like me, participating actively in holding pre-marriage courses given to candidate couples in Japan has indeed been a great moment of grace, a moment of journeying together with the couples. Although the candidate couples are not yet baptized into the Catholic Church, it has been clear to me that they believe very much that God's blessing, grace and God's guidance, with support from the Catholic Church, will help them to live a happy family also. Besides, the candi-



date couples are very fervent and serious in preparing their married life together and they trust very much in the Catholic Church.

In addition, through these pre-marriage courses, I have learned a lot about working in a team with the Catholic senior couples, lay people who have great experiences in family life and society. These couples have indeed helped me to grow into a better, more mature missionary priest.

Furthermore, through these pre-marriage courses, I have had the great opportunity to have a friendly and religious dialogue with Japanese people, and to carry out the task of evangelization, the work of a missionary to bring to those who are expecting it the Good News from God.

Finally, giving pre-marriage courses for “candidate couples” in Japan is really a great pastoral responsibility and a true missionary activity.

### **References and Reading Materials**

- 1- My personal missionary, priestly experiences in Japan from 1993-2014
- 2- <http://www.cbcj.or.jp/eng/jcn/jul2006.htm> “Church Weddings for Non-Christians provide opportunity for couples to reflect on marriage”
- 3- <http://www.a-to-z-of-manners-and-etiquette.com/catholic-wedding.html> “Wedding Ceremony- Roman catholic”.