

UNIVERSITATEA BABEȘ BOLYAI CLUJ-NAPOCA  
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# **TEZĂ DE DOCTORAT**

**- rezumat -**

## **PARADIGMA AMERICANĂ ÎN CONSILIEREA PASTORALĂ PREMARITALĂ**

**Coordonator științific:**

**Arhim. Prof. Univ. Dr. Cristian  
(Teofil) TIA**

**Doctorand:**

**Cristina Ana-Maria BĂLDEAN  
(Anechitei-Diacu)**

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## **The AMERICAN PARADIGM IN PREMARITAL PASTORAL COUNSELING**

**Keywords:** premarital pastoral counseling, premarital program, pastoral ministry, family, preparation, finality of marriage, unity, holy matrimony.

### **Summary**

The subject of this doctoral thesis is a very little studied corridor at present in the field of Orthodox pastoral theology. In my research approach, I tried to follow a logic of presentation starting the plea in the area of counseling as a general concept, towards the particular one, that of premarital pastoral counseling.

### **The importance and topicality of the research topic**

Like the American society that has been suffering for a long time due to the decline of family life in today's Romanian society, we are increasingly faced with a decrease in the marriage rate due to the fact that people give a different meaning to marriage. The mentality according to which love can be lived outside of a commitment made for life, hides a culture of egocentrism. The relationship lasts as long as the partner can provide the fulfillment and satisfaction of the other person's needs, without the need for any "legalization in this regard." Even in those cases where people get married, the image of a service provider relationship remains valid. Probably never in human history has there been a time when people had so many expectations from a marriage.

Wanting a fulfilling love relationship and having the sensors activated to find the right person to achieve these aspirations is not a problem in itself. The cognitive fissure that often appears and changes the harmonious course of a relationship is the reason why they start a family life and their little psycho-spiritual preparation for marriage.

The church can regain the heart and mind of young people to understand and live the sacredness of marriage. Through the involvement and organization of priests or designated members of an ecclesial community of premarital counseling programs, young people will find

support, help, and guidance towards building a "small family church," built on the rock, able to withstand all attacks and daily challenges of family life.

God is the inexhaustible source of their love, which remains with them and contributes to their UNITY. The Holy Matrimony is the beginning of family life, it is the birth of a new life to which the whole Church is a part of. Therefore, the role of the "parent - the Church" is to take care of "her child - the fiancés" even before the birth of the "new family". Otherwise we risk what we can find increasingly more often in Western society: the lack of interest in marriage and the misunderstanding of the sacredness of family life.

## **Research objectives**

The major objective of this study focuses on demonstrating the usefulness and need for implementation in Orthodox parishes of pre-marital pastoral counseling and training programs. I tried to elucidate this general objective within the chapters of this paper, each chapter being backed up by other secondary objectives and research questions.

## **Research methodology**

Pastoral counseling can be considered a subdivision of practical theology, which comes to apply theological reflections / interpretations in solving real problems in everyday life. In this research, through the methods and the approach of analysis of the chosen subject, I tried to achieve as well as possible what Cowen emphasizes to be the four fundamental characteristics in the research of practical theology:

1. Correlation - seeks to understand as accurately as possible the world / present situation as it is, but also the ideal / preferred scenario;
2. Hermeneutics - requires the ability to interpret both the world and the tradition. Practitioner theologians use two sets of instruments, one to interpret the world as it is today, and the other to exegesis the Holy Scripture;
3. Criticism - the ability to evaluate inherited understandings that guide our interpretations and actions;
4. Transformation - the production of change. To bring the world to the greatest possible harmony with the Word, with God”.

❖ **The structure of the paper**

❖ **Chapter I – Counseling and Pastoral Psychotherapy**

I conceived this first chapter as a "frame" chapter that comes to delineate and emphasize the uniqueness of pastoral counseling in the great family of those who are concerned with the mental, psychological and spiritual health of man.

Counseling and psychotherapy today are two professional fields that provide psychological assistance to people seeking help for various problems they face, wanting to change psychological processes and dysfunctional behaviors through the use of psychological methods and techniques.

Caring for the mental and inner well-being of people is an old concern that existed long before it was institutionalized in a profession. First, the Christ the Savior is prophesied by the Prophet Isaiah as the "Angel of Great Counsel, the Wonderful Counselor," which gives Him the primacy of the "counselor" status. Christ, the good Shepherd, is the One who counsels, cares for and guides the man – without nullifying his freedom – towards attaining Heaven. The model of the Christ the Shepherd, who "takes care of His sheep," is thus taken up by the priest in his pastoral ministry.

On the one hand, pastoral ministry is part of the Church's mission to provide care, support, guidance, healing and reconciliation of man with God, with himself and with others through the totality of pastoral actions carried out in a parish. The priest is responsible and takes care of his parish so that in addition to the service at the Altar, he is able to organize and undertake various activities for the community. In the multitude of roles he plays in the community, the most requested and desirable role on the part of the people is that of advisor / counselor. The wide range of issues that people face and that are revealed in confession or individual conversations with a priest, has made, on the other hand, the need to specialize the sub-branch of pastoral ministry - pastoral counseling.

Currently in our country, pastoral counseling is not a profession in itself, but it is studied and delimited by counseling and secular psychotherapy. In the first chapter of this paper you will find some definitions of pastoral counseling, principles, characteristics and elements of uniqueness that distinguish this branch from any other psychological approach, but also a plea for the



relationship of complementarity that can be established between theology and psychology, between counseling/ pastoral psychotherapy and secular psychology.

This general chapter of the thesis makes the transition to one of the corridors of relational counseling, namely premarital counseling approached at large, followed by the third chapter which addresses the issue of premarital pastoral counseling (specific approach).

## ❖ **Chapter II – Premarital Counseling in the American territory**

Prior to the development and organization of formal pre-marital counseling programs, in the United States, this activity was conducted by priests and designated members of a religious community as part of the mission and pastoral care of the family<sup>1</sup>. Subsequently, in the 70's, due to the increase in the number of divorces among Americans through the number of negative effects produced by divorce, the activity of prevention and premarital education begins to gain increasingly more interest from psychologists and secular counselors, leading to the development of more formal programs for counseling and education of young people for marriage.

Chapter II of this thesis presents four of the most recognized and studied premarital programs in the USA: Prepare / Enrich; Prep; Relate and Foccus. The purpose of researching these programs was to analyze the effectiveness and impact of premarital programs on divorce prevention and the contribution to enriching couple relationships in families, by reducing the factors that contribute to stress and marital unhappiness.

The research results of the four premarital programs offer us some perspectives towards the development of our own formats of premarital pastoral counseling in Romania, also strengthening the important role that priests and pastoral counselors have in preparing young people before marriage.

## ❖ **Chapter III – Premarital pastoral counseling**

This chapter can be considered a plea for:

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<sup>1</sup> Premarital counseling today continues to be the main activity of the American Church, the only difference being that the sessions for marriage preparation are elaborated more systematically and are solidly based on scientific and theological research, using notions from various premarital programs.

- a) *The importance of preparing for marriage within the Church and by specialized members of the Church.* The space in which the two young people form the true unity of the family is in the Church, through the Holy Matrimony. Therefore, the role of the priest in spiritually advising and guiding couples before this great Sacrament is essential. Along with the priest, premarital pastoral counseling can be done in collaboration with various members of the parish community (psychologists, counselors, or even some families in the Church who can teach other young people about family life);
- b) *The uniqueness of premarital pastoral counseling.* The effectiveness of non-denominational premarital counseling in the Western area is evident in increasing levels of harmony in family life and in reducing marital conflicts. Although many of the goals of pre-marital education and counseling are common to both theologians and mental health professionals, this chapter presents the unique goals and aspects by which pastoral counseling differs from other approaches.

The need for early preparation of young people before marriage arises for psychologists and other professionals as a result of the increasing number of divorces and as a desire to contribute to the harmonization of family life. But for religious ministers, marriage is a Mystery that unites the two in the Spirit of God and lasts forever. Therefore, the focus of Christian priests and counselors in preparing young people for marriage focuses on the directions given first by God Himself, in the Holy Scriptures, then on the advice and wisdom of the Holy Fathers and on the Holy Tradition.

#### ❖ **Chapter IV – The uniqueness of Orthodoxy in the preparation for marriage**

The Orthodox Church and its teaching have always shown us the importance and the great primordial Sacrament instituted by God from the "beginning" - marriage. The history of the family begins with the history of humanity, and the icon after which the first family in Eden was created is the one that reflects the spiritual union between Christ the Bridegroom and His Bride, the Church. Thus the origin of the Holy Matrimony is a completely divine one, being for the bride and groom a holy, sanctifying and abundant act in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the new family founded through the service of Marriage.

Metropolitan Anthony of Suroj draws attention to the fact that the Holy Matrimony is not a "religious form of making documents", but is the Church's deep and instructive means of

revealing to people what love is and how deep the relationship within marriage is, especially in the divine plan.

In the fourth chapter, I plead for a deeply orthodox knowledge of the Holy Matrimony, especially of the meaningful service of engagement and of the Wedding for the future bride and groom. Unlike any other approach that secular or even Christian counselors may have, Orthodox teaching is special through the liturgical order and symbolism of the Sacrament, through the dogmatic meanings of marriage, through the urge to extend preparation for marriage in relation to a clergyman. The Sacrament of Confession, in which the bride and groom continue to work their conjugal harmony by repenting their sins; through the important role of the godparents as spiritual fathers of the "little newborn Church" and through the prayers and the deep spiritual relationship of the family with the patron Saints.

Thus, by preparing the fiancés before marriage, the Orthodox Church becomes a participant in the permanent ascent in love of the future spouses towards each other and in God. Love also triumphs in this life, but it continues in eternity, where it reaches an even greater depth and freshness:

*"For this is only a bodily union, but that will be an bonding of souls, which will be more perfect and of a much more wonderful and noble essence [than this],"* says St. John Chrysostom.

#### **❖ Chapter V – Let's build a saving marriage together. Main themes in premarital pastoral counseling**

From the theoretical research of some premarital programs and from the pleadings for the uniqueness of the premarital pastoral counseling, in the fifth chapter I suggested some important practical topics to be approached in Christian counseling.

This is the largest chapter of the thesis, the main objective being to provide a small map to guide future counselors on important topics to be discussed in preparation for marriage. The speech is one that sketches out some Christian landmarks for these topics. Although many of the topics addressed by secular counseling and psychotherapy are found in premarital pastoral counseling, the methodology, techniques, and approach may differ greatly. In pastoral counseling, the main instrument used and without which a Christian marriage relationship cannot

be built is given by the authority of the Holy Scripture. The priest or pastoral counselor is to argue each theme through the Word of God, clarifying the deep meanings of the Christian marriage as He designed it and traveling with the betrothed to the true knowledge between them so that the "crown of their marriage" can reflect the image of The Trinity.

## **Conclusions**

Counseling young people in the Church before starting a family is not only an important aspect of pastoral ministry and a duty of the priest to travel with them towards knowing the Holy Matrimony, but it is especially an effort to mature and increase the love between the two, leading to a lifelong commitment and to their conscious union in a family unit with God. No one can teach them better about family life, about the purpose of marriage, about roles and responsibilities, about intimate relationships, or about maintaining unity in the family than its Founder, God Himself. Pastoral counseling contributes to the conjugal union of a couple in the Spirit of God and guides them to a marriage rooted in the precepts of the Gospel.

Furthermore, his research is but a small introduction to the great field of premarital pastoral counseling. The personal contribution of this paper is the detailed analysis of studies in the American context that addresses the topic of premarital counseling and the effectiveness of counseling and premarital education programs in order to map out future directions of our own in pastoral counseling within the Romanian Orthodox space. Learning from the experience of other practitioners, we can undertake in our own pastoral practice an effective program of premarital pastoral counseling. The last chapter of this thesis thus addresses in detail and with a theological imprint the most important topics for premarital counseling, which helps young people build a realistic, mature and fighting vision of what it means truly an edifying marriage together with the pastoral counselor and especially with God.

The purpose of Christian counseling before marriage is not only to prevent divorce and to contribute to the formation of appropriate skills for the partners' struggle to maintain happiness in family life, but it is much greater. Young people are prepared for the great Holy Matrimony as a journey to eternal communion in Christ and towards salvation.

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