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Premarital Counseling within the Catholic Church of Sri Lanka: Integrating Faith, Psychology, and Cultural Healing

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Abstract

This article evaluates the Pre-Cana programme within the Roman Catholic Church of Sri Lanka as an institutionalised model of premarital pastoral counselling and psychoeducation. Pre-Cana is a premarital counselling service within the traditional counselling framework associated with the religious background. Apart from other religions, the Catholic Church is significantly involved in premarital counselling, mastering Pre-Cana in a well-organized manner. Administered through diocesan Family Apostolates, most notably in the Archdiocese of Colombo, Pre-Cana is a mandatory prerequisite for the Sacrament of Matrimony. This study unpacks the Pre-Cana framework by integrating Pastoral Counselling and Developmental, Preventive, and Psychoeducational Interventions. Primarily delivered as an intensive, multi-day seminar retreat, the programme brings Western therapeutic frameworks, such as Active Listening, Cognitive Reframing, and Financial Resource Management and psychoeducation to couples who are willing to get married. By analysing its preventive, educational, and clinical functions, this paper demonstrates that Pre-Cana provides a foundational therapeutic space for addressing communication pathology, intergenerational trauma, and relational adjustment within Sri Lanka's distinct socio-cultural fabric.

Keywords – Pre-Cana, Pre-marital counselling, Sacrament of Matrimony

Introduction

Premarital counselling functions as a critical preventive mechanism designed to mitigate relational distress and promote long-term marital stability (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Stanley

et al., 2006). Within the socio-religious ecosystem of Sri Lanka, the formalization of premarital interventions has uniquely occurred through ecclesiastical channels rather than secular state frameworks (Abeysinghe & Ekanayake, 2021; Sabri, 2023). The most prominent and structurally institutionalised of these systems is Pre-Cana, the official marriage preparation curriculum of the Roman Catholic Church.

Coordinated under the auspices of diocesan Family Apostolates across the island's metropolitan and provincial regions, Pre-Cana is a mandatory requirement for any couple seeking the Sacrament of Matrimony. The Sacrament of Matrimony is one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. It is the sacred covenant through which a man and a woman freely commit themselves to a lifelong partnership of love, fidelity, and mutual support, and in which God grants them special grace to live out their married vocation. According to the Catholic Church, marriage is not merely a legal contract or social arrangement but a sacrament, meaning an outward sign instituted by Christ to give divine grace. Through the Sacrament of Matrimony, the love between husband and wife is understood to reflect the faithful and enduring love of Christ for His Church.

Key Characteristics of the Sacrament of Matrimony

1. **Lifelong Union**

   Marriage is intended to be permanent and enduring.

   The spouses commit themselves to one another "until death do us part."

2. **Faithfulness**

   The husband and wife promise exclusive fidelity to each other.

3. **Free Consent**

   Both parties must freely and willingly consent to the marriage.
   No one can be forced into marriage.

4. **Openness to Children**

Marriage is naturally ordered toward the procreation and upbringing of children. Couples are called to be responsible parents and educators of their children.

5. **Mutual Love and Support**

Spouses help one another grow emotionally, morally, spiritually, and socially.

In Catholic theology, the Sacrament of Matrimony serves several purposes. These include the unity of the spouses (strengthening their bond of love), the procreation and education of children, the sanctification of the couple (helping them grow in holiness), and a witness to Christian love within society. From a counselling perspective, the Sacrament of Matrimony emphasizes commitment and trust, communication and mutual understanding, conflict resolution and forgiveness, emotional and spiritual intimacy, and family stability and well-being. This is why the Catholic Church requires programmes such as Pre-Cana before marriage. These programmes help couples understand the sacramental nature of marriage and prepare them psychologically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually for married life.

Pre-Cana is not merely a formal administrative checkpoint but an integrated psycho-spiritual retreat that engages couples emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, and practically. The clinical perspective, Pre-Cana can be understood as a localized variant of pastoral counselling and relationship education. It purposefully synthesizes normative Catholic theology with evidence-based psychological paradigms. In a country where public discussions surrounding marital conflict, human sexuality, and mental health remain bound by deep cultural taboos, Pre-Cana serves as an essential, culturally sanctioned entry point for relationship interventions.

This paper critically examines the Pre-Cana programme in Sri Lanka. It discusses its theoretical foundations, programme structure, key counselling modules, and its contribution to strengthening marriages and families amid social transformation, cultural expectations, and economic challenges.

Theoretical Foundations of Pre-Cana Counselling

Pastoral Counselling Theory

Pastoral counselling theory holds that psychological healing and human development are most effective when integrated with a client's intrinsic spiritual and religious worldview. In Catholic theological anthropology, marriage is defined neither as a standard civil contract nor as a transient emotional partnership, but as a lifelong vocation and an indissoluble covenant (Catholic Church, 1997; John Paul II, 1981).

Pre-Cana applies this theoretical framework by utilizing theological concepts such as sacrificial love (*agape*), grace, mutual sanctification, and radical forgiveness as active psychological resources to facilitate relational restructuring. The pastoral counsellor assists couples in exploring how their shared or distinct spiritual beliefs will inform their resilience when facing future stressors. Relational vulnerability is framed as a reflection of their covenantal commitment before God.

Family Systems Theory

A core pillar of Pre-Cana's curriculum is Bowenian Family Systems Theory, which holds that an individual's behavioural patterns cannot be analysed in isolation from their complex web of family relationships. In the Sri Lankan context, marriage is fundamentally an alliance between two extended family networks rather than a purely individualist union between two isolated partners.

Pre-Cana helps couples understand how their family backgrounds may influence their future marriage. Couples are encouraged to reflect on family relationships, communication patterns, values, gender role expectations, and ways of dealing with conflict. The programme also addresses challenges that are common in South Asian families, such as parental involvement and relationships with in-laws, which can sometimes contribute to marital difficulties. Many diocesan Pre-Cana programmes include sessions for parents. These sessions help parents and couples discuss expectations, establish healthy boundaries, and support the transition from parental guidance to the independence of the new marital relationship. This process can promote stronger family relationships and reduce potential sources of conflict after marriage.

Developmental and Preventive Counselling

Pre-Cana is explicitly designed as a primary preventive and developmental intervention rather than a secondary remedial therapy (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). It is based on the idea that helping couples improve their communication skills and develop realistic expectations before marriage can reduce future conflicts and contribute to healthier and more successful relationships in the long term.

The developmental component views marriage as a major life-cycle transition that requires a high degree of emotional differentiation, cognitive flexibility, and the acquisition of practical skills. By developing skills such as negotiation, communication, and emotional regulation before couples encounter major life challenges such as living together in a family and parenthood, the programme aims to strengthen relationship resilience and promote long-term marital stability.

Major Counselling Functions of Pre-Cana

The operational framework of Pre-Cana relies on three distinct, interconnected interactive functions. They are preventive function, developmental function and psycho-educational function.

The primary objective of the preventive function is the early identification of relational risk zones. Through structured worksheets, diagnostic inventories, and private dialogue, couples are guided to systematically uncover hidden discrepancies in their expectations of married life. Counsellors help couples discuss important issues such as religious differences, especially in interfaith marriages, approaches to child discipline, and expectations about household responsibilities. Addressing these topics before marriage helps couples identify potential areas of disagreement, develop a better understanding of each other's views, and build more realistic expectations about married life.

The Developmental Function focuses directly on the growth of individual emotional maturity and dyadic empathy. **Dyadic empathy** refers to the ability of two people in a relationship to understand, share, and respond to each other’s emotions in a mutual, interactive way, and is an essential need for a successful marriage. Pre-Cana includes activities in which couples practice being open about their feelings, managing their emotions, and understanding each other’s

perspectives. Couples are taught to trace their individual anger triggers back to childhood experiences, helping them understand how emotional dysregulation impacts their partner. By cultivating self-soothing techniques and collaborative problem-solving skills, the program transforms the relationship into a safe container for mutual emotional development.

The psychoeducational component provides clear, evidence-based information about the physical, financial, and legal aspects of marriage. It helps correct common cultural misconceptions by offering accurate guidance on:

- Human Anatomy and Reproductive Health**:** Covering natural family planning methods (NFP) alongside general sexual health, aligning with Catholic doctrine while addressing a massive gap in formal sexual education in Sri Lanka.
- Financial Management**:** Providing practical guidance on family budgeting, savings strategies, debt management, and navigating current economic stressors.
- Ecclesiastical (Church) and Civil Law**:** Clarifying the legal obligations, rights, and indissolubility of marriage within both the Church and Sri Lankan statutory systems.

Structure of Pre-Cana in Sri Lanka

The Archdiocese of Colombo and surrounding dioceses offer Pre-Cana as an intensive, weekend seminar-retreat. This structural format is highly intentional; by removing couples from their routine domestic, professional, and wedding-planning stressors, it creates a focused "therapeutic vacuum" that deepens the reflective experience.

Session Component	Facilitator Group	Primary Therapeutic / Pedagogical Focus
Theological Foundations	Roman Catholic Clergy	Covenantal theology, sacramental grace, marital ethics, and the spiritual dimensions of a lifelong vocation (*Amoris Laetitia*).
Systemic & Relational Dynamics	Senior Married Couples / Licensed Professional Counsellors	Family-of-origin exploration, navigating in-law dynamics, balancing collectivist duties with marital autonomy, and healthy boundary maintenance.

Clinical Communication Modules	Mental Health Professionals / Trained Facilitators	Active listening exercises, utilizing "I" statements, cognitive reframing, and structured conflict-resolution strategies.
Psycho-Sexual & Medical Seminars	Catholic Physicians / Healthcare Educators	Reproductive biology, marital intimacy, addressing sexual taboos, and the mechanics of Natural Family Planning (NFP).
Socio-Economic & Financial Planning	Financial Advisors / Experienced Couples	Joint asset management, managing systemic inflation, navigating economic crises, and long-term family budgeting.
Intergenerational Integration	Couples and Parents	Structural alignment between extended families, mutual reconciliation, and formal boundary adjustments.

The retreat ends with a guided personal reflection session, a shared religious service, and the awarding of an official Pre-Cana Certificate. This certificate is required by Church rules, and without it, a Catholic marriage cannot take place in a parish in Sri Lanka

Review of counselling themes addressed in Pre-Cana

- **Communication Pathology and Restructuring**

Decades of empirical data show that communication deficits are highly predictive of marital dissolution (Stanley et al., 2006). Pre-Cana directly addresses this by confronting what John Gottman terms the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse": criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. During the retreat, couples engage in structured communication exercises. They are taught to replace ambiguous, accusatory language with precise "I" statements that communicate vulnerable internal needs rather than defensive external blame.

- **Clinical Intervention Example: The Speaker-Listener Technique**

Participants are guided to follow structured communication rules during the exercise. The speaker is encouraged to use “I” statements, speak briefly, and pause regularly to allow the partner to paraphrase. The listener’s role is to carefully repeat or restate what they have heard without interrupting, disagreeing, or immediately offering solutions. The main goal of this approach is to reduce the negative “demand withdraw” interaction pattern often seen in high-conflict couples and to ensure that both partners feel heard and understood before moving into problem-solving.

- **Constructive Conflict Management**

Pre-Cana helps couples see conflict not as a serious threat to their relationship, but as something normal that can be managed and used for growth. Facilitators teach practical ways to handle disagreements by separating the problem from the person, so couples can address issues without damaging each other's self-worth. A strong focus is placed on understanding forgiveness and reconciliation. Couples are taught, based on both religious teaching and psychological approaches to healing, that forgiveness is a deliberate choice rather than just a feeling. They also learn practical steps to rebuild trust, heal relationship wounds, and manage anger in healthy ways rather than withdrawing emotionally or using hurtful words.

- **Intimacy, Sexuality, and Theological Alignment**

In Sri Lanka's conservative cultural landscape, formal education regarding marital sexuality is highly scarce. Pre-Cana fills this void by offering a sex-positive, healthy framework that views sexual intimacy as a vital, unitive, and procreative expression of covenantal love (Francis, 2016; John Paul II, 1981). The curriculum explains how emotional openness is linked to sexual satisfaction in marriage. Health professionals and experienced married couples help teach about sexual health, reduce shame around sexual topics, and explain common sexual concerns. They also discuss the Church's teaching on responsible parenthood and natural family planning. This helps couples develop a healthy and respectful understanding of intimacy based on consent, trust, and emotional closeness.

- **Financial Cohesion under Economic Distress**

Financial problems are among the most common causes of marital conflict and can be difficult to resolve through normal counselling. In Sri Lanka, this issue is often made worse by inflation and the rising cost of living. Pre-Cana addresses this by providing couples with practical guidance on managing money together. Couples are asked to develop a shared financial plan and to discuss issues such as spending habits, debts, and expectations about whether money should be managed individually or jointly. By encouraging couples to view financial management as a shared responsibility rather than a source of power struggles, the programme helps reduce stress and prepares them to handle economic challenges together.

Pre- Cana in the Sri Lankan cultural context

Evaluating Pre-Cana from a culturally sensitive perspective shows that it combines Western psychological approaches with South Asian family and cultural values. Traditional Western

premarital counselling is often based on individualism, where personal growth and independent couple decision-making are emphasized more strongly than family or community influences. However, Sri Lankan society is profoundly collectivist; individual identities are deeply embedded within family networks, religious communities, and broader ethnic expectations (Abeysinghe & Ekanayake, 2021). Pre-Cana in Sri Lanka is adapted to fit the country's collectivist culture. Instead of viewing extended family involvement as a problem to be reduced, the programme recognises the important role of the wider family network. It highlights how extended family can provide support such as childcare, financial assistance, and emotional care. At the same time, the programme introduces healthy modern boundaries. It provides a structured, safe space where couples can openly discuss sensitive topics such as birth control, financial independence, and mental health struggles that are frequently suppressed in day-to-day Sri Lankan life due to cultural shame. Furthermore, the Catholic community in Sri Lanka carries deep, complex historical trauma stemming from decades of ethnic civil war and the devastating 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, which heavily targeted Catholic parishes (Abeysinghe & Ekanayake, 2021). This shared trauma often manifests as hyper-vigilance, somatic depression, and heightened relational anxiety across young couples. Pre-Cana can also serve as a general means of identifying potential emotional or psychological difficulties. Because the retreat setting encourages open discussion, some underlying stress or mental health concerns may become more visible to facilitators. When serious issues are noticed, couples may be gently referred to specialised services, such as the Family Counselling Centre or mental health clinics, so they can receive further professional support before getting married.

Conclusion

The Pre-Cana programme in Sri Lanka effectively brings together pastoral care, psychological knowledge, and local cultural understanding. It uses prevention, skill development, and education to prepare couples for marriage and to strengthen relationships within the Catholic community. The programme also respects the importance of extended family while encouraging open discussion of sensitive issues such as sex, finances, and mental health. In this way, it supports healthier communication and reduces silence around difficult topics. As Sri Lanka continues to experience social and economic change, Pre-Cana offers a useful example of how religious institutions and psychological approaches can work together to support and strengthen families.

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