

ON CATHOLIC MARRIAGE

*The earthly love between you has been overlaid
by the supernatural love of Christ for the church.
Your new fellowship is a spectacle pleasing to God and to the angels,
for it is union which surpasses all others,
destined as it is to populate the church of God in heaven and on earth.*

-Roman Liturgy-

One of the most important things for any couple to realize when preparing to enter into marriage is that the priest, deacon, minister, etc. does not marry you: *you marry each other.*

In the Catholic tradition, the priest or deacon is said to assist at a marriage, i.e., he acts on behalf of the community of the Church as the official witness and spokesperson. But the ministers of marriage are the couple themselves, and it is their love, proclaimed in the presence of God and the community, that creates the sacrament of marriage.

*Who is the minister
of the sacrament of
marriage?*

For this reason, it is important that the wedding – the public beginning of marriage – reflect honestly the faith, the hope, and the love of the couple, and not simply the fashion desires or pressure of parents, friends, or society. To start your marriage saying or doing things you don't believe is to begin on a very slippery slope. Thus, couples should think seriously about what type of wedding they want, including before whom they want to declare themselves as husband and wife.

This last point is particularly important.

1. CHOOSING A CATHOLIC WEDDING

In entering into marriage, more happens than the signing of a contract between two individuals. Marriage is a *public* act, to which people are invited not just as guests, but as witnesses. Thus, a couple should first decide the community in which they hope to live this commitment. Who is it, in the long run, who will offer support and nourishment for the couple's love? Whose recognition and blessing do they want? Who, in effect, is their *community of faith*?

*Catholic wedding
or civil service?*

Certainly, part of the answer comes in who is invited to the wedding, but it also comes in how the couple chooses to celebrate this event. In deciding upon a Catholic wedding, the couple declares their hope and intention to find in the Catholic community some of the support they want and need. It is, they declare, where their faith and life takes root.

*A community of
support.*

This implicit declaration is the reason many parishes require couples to participate

in the life the community for some time before their marriage. But even if it is not required, couples should decide if they see in the Church not just a nostalgic or pretty locale, but one of the important supports that they hope to have for their love.

A community of faith.

And if the Church is not somewhere they look for support, if it does not speak of their faith, they should seriously consider a different celebration, perhaps with a judge or non-denominational minister.

Be honest with yourselves, no matter what others say, because only then can the vows you make mean all you want them to mean.

But if, after reflecting together, a couple decides to be married in a Catholic ceremony, they ought to look first to their local parish community. If they do not belong to a parish (*which often happens, since many people set up their first permanent residence through marriage*), it is a good idea to register in one – i.e., to find a community that will support them and in which they would like to pray, grow, and become a family. Ordinarily, this is where a couple would be married, though sometimes couples marry elsewhere because of another connection – e.g., in the chapel at their alma mater or the church where one of them grew up.

Where to go to be married.

On marrying outside of a church, see Chapter Four, page 139.

2. MARRIAGE PREPARATION

The Catholic Church – as part of its pastoral care for those who are to be married – requires couples to undergo premarital counseling. Such counseling is meant to help the engaged enter into this significant moment with both full freedom and a mature knowledge of one another. Often couples come to marriage with much love and attraction, but without having really talked about things such as finances, children, or even how decisions are to be made. Taking things for granted in these and other areas can lead to heartache and even divorce when the parties have no strategy for problem solving.

Why the Church requires marriage preparation.

Counseling tries to help future spouses see each other more fully and teach them how to work through differences without being overwhelmed. Thus, preparation differs from planning the wedding itself, and may be done either in individual or group settings.

Marriage preparation not just wedding planning.

3. THE CELEBRATION OF MARRIAGE: INSIDE OF MASS OR OUTSIDE?

One issue each couple must decide is whether they will celebrate a *Rite of Marriage* – which includes a Liturgy of the Word, exchange of vows, prayers, and a nuptial blessing – or a *Nuptial Mass* – which includes all that is in the Rite of Marriage, plus a celebration of Eucharist.

For couples entering into a *mixed marriage* – where only one of them is Catholic – the *ordinary* choice for the ceremony would be the Rite of Marriage, since the Eucharist could be a sign of disunity if one person in the couple (and often the

Why a rite of

members of his/her family) could not receive communion. Furthermore, since this rite is complete in itself, no one should think of a Rite of Marriage as somehow a “cut-down” wedding. (For more on mixed marriages, see Chapter Four, pages 137-138.)

marriage is normal in mixed marriages.

On the other hand, when two Catholics marry, the wedding would *ordinarily* include Eucharist, since joining at the table of the Lord acts to emphasize the union that the couple shares, with Christ at its center. Thus, though a Nuptial Mass is not mandatory even for two Catholics, it is a rich expression of the sacramental life into which the couple is entering.

Why a nuptial mass is normal in the marriage of two Catholics.

4. PARTICIPATION IN THE LITURGY: ALL GUESTS ARE WITNESSES

One of the goals in any Catholic liturgy is the “*full, active, and conscious participation*” of the gathered community. A wedding liturgy is no different. A marriage in the Catholic tradition should involve the community’s participation, both as individuals – e.g., as readers, as liturgical ministers, and in other appropriate places – and as a group – e.g., through active sharing in the prayers and music, as appropriate. Far from being passive audience members, guests at a Catholic wedding should witness, celebrate, and pray for the couple.

“Full, active, and conscious participation.”

One way to assist such participation is to provide an **Order of Worship** in which appropriate music and responses are given to the assembly. More than a mere program, such an order provides a guide for the assembly to the structure and action in which they are asked to participate. Especially when many members of the congregation are not Catholic, such an order of worship can help all to feel welcome and part of the celebration.

Printing an Order of Worship.

5. THE SACRAMENTAL NATURE OF CATHOLIC MARRIAGE

In the Catholic tradition, marriage is spoken of as one of the *sacraments*, a term many people think means magic – with special pixie dust that a priest sprinkles on the couple to make them *really* married.

But sacramentality does not mean magic. Rather, when we look at the old catechism definition of sacrament, “*a visible sign instituted by Christ to give grace,*” we can see that what the sacramentality of marriage really means is that the love of husband and wife is how God loves the world. In marriage, a couple *becomes* the sacrament, accepting the call to love each other in the tug and tussle of real life and so becoming a living sign to all who know them of God’s love alive in the world.

The couple becomes the sacrament; i.e., the sign of God’s love alive in the world.

Each couple who live the Christian vocation of married love reveal God by their love for each other and by the way their love gives life – both literally (for those who have children), and symbolically (for all those whose love becomes a gift to others). Thus, marriage is sacramental because it gives flesh to God’s grace by the living and the loving of two of God’s people.

6. THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This is a work in progress, meant to help couples, Presiders, and others plan a wedding in the Catholic tradition. It is not exhaustive, even in its selection of Scripture (though it seeks to offer many more possibilities than are ordinarily considered), and it is not authoritative. The theological interpretations are my own; though insofar as they offer any insight, they are probably borrowed from my many mentors.

In the suggestions for the liturgy, one may notice recommendations that sometimes deviate from the traditional rite, e.g., the placement of the nuptial blessing in a Nuptial Mass. Such changes, like everything else in this guide, are meant as suggestions, based on pastoral experience, and should be treated as such. Please use this as a resource, adding to it if you can. I will be doing the same.

Blessings,

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