

# Marriage in the Catholic Church

**A** commitment in any relationship is a challenging task. But to surrender oneself to the intimacy and the constant day-to-day demands of married life is perhaps one of the greatest opportunities for fulfilment and growth that a person can face. Is it any wonder, then, that over the centuries of Christian reflection, the Church has come to see marriage as a sign of the unconditional love Christ has for us, and a sign of the unity in which we as Christians are called to live?

## What's special about marriage?

When a couple marry in the Catholic Church, the ceremony speaks of love, permanent commitment, fidelity, openness to children, and

perseverance in good times and bad. It is these qualities which make marriage a unique relationship. There is no other human relationship which requires so total a commitment between two people.

In fact, marriage is more than a relationship. It is a union, a communion, between husband and wife. Their life together is now very different from their lives as two separate individuals. Once married, everything they do is done with the other in mind. They do not lose their individual identity, but that identity is enriched by sharing life with the other partner. Their marriage holds out an extraordinary challenge: to become so completely united that everything they do, big or small, is geared towards strengthening and deepening their union. There is no development unless both

develop, no happiness unless both are happy. And so their communion grows through their years together. It can never remain static.

Day-by-day husband and wife seek a greater knowledge and understanding of one another. They celebrate and deepen their communion through the most intimate form of communication possible between two people: through sexual intimacy. In the union of sexual intercourse, the couple are also opened to the possibility of children. As the fruit of their love, children expand the marital circle of love and challenge it to achieve new depths.

## The sacredness of marriage

If this is the ideal to be sought, it can be seen that marriage is different from other human relationships. There is something sacred about it. That it is possible for a couple to love each other in this way is a gift from God. In their acceptance of this gift, a couple not only experience a communion with each other, they experience a sustaining love which is bigger than their own individual efforts. They are drawn into a communion with God who assists and empowers them in their efforts to strengthen and deepen their married life.

For the baptised there is an even more profound dimension to this sacredness. For the baptised, marriage is a sacrament. A sacrament is a sign. This loving communion that exists between a husband and wife is the clearest sign and indication available of the extent to which

God loves the human family. That's why the scriptures use so many marital images to describe God's relationship between God and God's people. Just as married love is a commitment to grow in intimacy, to permanence and to fidelity in good times and in bad, so God's love for us is all these things.

Yet, our understanding of marriage as a sacrament goes even further than this. Not only do a couple mirror or reflect God's love, they embody the presence of Christ in a unique way. They are tangible signs of what it means to be a Christian. In short, the sacrament of marriage reveals to us the intimate relationship we share with Jesus. We are his beloved.

In St Paul's letter to the Christian community at Ephesus, he urges husbands and wives (in terms appropriate to his day) to mutually surrender to one another in love. He then continues:

Because of this a man shall leave his father and mother to be united with his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a very great mystery, and I refer to Christ and the Church. (Ephesians 5.31-32)

So, when a couple marries in the Catholic Church, they are not simply saying 'yes' to each other. They are saying 'yes' to the Christian community:

- 'Yes, we commit ourselves to being a sign of Christ's love to you'.

- ‘Yes, we will strive to love one another so totally and unconditionally that you will see in us the love Jesus has for you.’
- ‘Yes, we will love each other forever, because that is the way Christ has promised to love his Church and, by the witness of our lives, we will make his extraordinary promise believable.’

In turn, the community of faith offers its support to the couple as they journey through life. It also undertakes a responsibility, not just to support and nurture marital vocations, but to call its couples to ever-greater heights of faith and love.

## Preparation for marriage

The Church believes in the sacredness of marriage and urges couples to prepare well for this special day and married life. The aims of marriage preparation courses are several: to support you in recognising the need for good communication and constant love; to help you to examine the level of commitment that is required for married life; to assist you in understanding the Church’s teaching on the sacrament of marriage and the vocation to married life; and to explain the Church’s teaching on sexual morality. In addition, the course provides an opportunity to prepare for your marriage ceremony.

## Celebration of marriage

What is involved in a celebration of marriage in the Catholic Church?

The Rite of Marriage comprises four parts:

- The Introduction and Welcome
- Liturgy of the Word
- Liturgy of Marriage
- Concluding Rite.

During the Introduction, the couple declare their intention to marry and the assembly pray an opening prayer.

- The Liturgy of the Word consists of two or three Readings from Scripture and a homily.
- The Liturgy of Marriage includes the exchange and reception of consent, the nuptial blessing, the blessing and exchange of rings, the Prayer of the Faithful, the Lord’s Prayer.
- During the concluding rite the civil documents are signed and the parents or family pray over the couple. This is followed by the blessing.

What is the difference between a Catholic marriage with a Nuptial Mass and one without it?

- With a nuptial Mass you celebrate Mass and receive the Eucharist. If Nuptial Mass is not celebrated, usually Holy Communion is not distributed.

If both the bride and groom are Catholic and most of the congregation are likely to be Catholic the nuptial mass would be customary. If one person is not a Catholic, and a large number of the guests are not Catholics, then the couple may choose not to have a Nuptial Mass.

## The marriage rite

### gathering together

#### What this is about

- Establishing a welcoming or homely atmosphere
- Making people feel welcome and at home
- Introducing strangers.

#### Ways of doing it

- Four or five people who know the guests warmly greet people at the door of the church, welcome them, and show them to seats at the front of the church. They should keep an eye open for people who are strangers or who appear ill at ease.
- Two or three people hand out the wedding booklets.
- The priest mixes with the guests as they arrive.
- The priest leads in the bride and groom, escorted by their parents and attendants.
- The musicians begin playing 10-15 minutes before the wedding is due to begin.

- You do not keep people waiting by arriving late. If the bride arrives several minutes early this will allow time for photographers.
- Reserve the front two seats for family but not segregating the rest of the guests into 'his' and 'hers' by filling from the front of the church on both sides, as people arrive.
- Encourage people to introduce themselves to one another.
- Arrange for the attendants to sit in the body of the church and to come forward only as required.
- Arrange the chairs for the bride and groom facing the congregation or at an angle so they can be clearly seen.
- Bride and groom sit with their families until after the Homily. They then come forward for the giving of consent.

### entrance rites

- Entrance Song
- Greeting and words of welcome
- Opening Prayer (Collect)

#### What this is about

- Setting the atmosphere
- Welcoming people officially, putting them at ease, and making them feel welcome
- Preparing to listen to the word of God

#### Ways of doing it

- It is usually difficult to have congregational singing when the bride is coming down the aisle. Consider having just the soloist singing, or instrumental music. The entrance song could start when everyone is in position.
- The priest warmly welcomes the guests in his own way and invites them to enter fully into the action rather than just watching it.
- Consult samples and choose one. If none of these says what you want to say, talk it over with your priest. You may be able to adapt one or compose your own prayer.

## liturgy of the word

- Old Testament and/or New Testament Reading
- Responsorial Psalm
- Gospel Acclamation
- Gospel & Homily

### What this is about

- Listening to the scriptures and responding. When the scriptures are read, God speaks to us his people.
- You also speak to your guests through the choices you make.

### Ways of doing it

- Spend time deciding which of the scripture readings are most appropriate for your marriage. It is usual to have a Gospel reading and either one or two others, from the Old and/or the New Testament.

- You may decide that all the readings should have the same focus or theme; or you may allow each of the selections to focus on a different aspect of marriage that you wish to be part of your own.
- Avoid undue haste while reading, and from one reading to the next.
- Make sure the readers can read well, and have had time to practise beforehand in the church with the microphone. Have them pause before saying, “The Word of the Lord” in order to call forth the response, “Thanks be to God”.
- Have a short period of silence after each reading to allow the reading to sink in. The reader may invite this silence after “Thanks be to God” by saying, “let us reflect in silence on the word of God”.
- Responsorial Psalm. The Psalm after the first reading is for reflection on the word of God. The singer can select something with a simple refrain or sing the psalm alone. Some have found it very effective instead to have instrumental music after the reading. The Gospel acclamation (Alleluia) should be omitted if it is not sung.
- Non-scriptural readings may not replace the scriptural readings. They may be used, however, in addition to the scriptural readings (e.g. as part of the introductory comments, or before the scriptural readings).

## giving of consent

- A short introduction by the priest

- followed by questions leads to the
- giving of consent and
- an acknowledgment of the consent.

### What this is about

- You marry each other
- You make the promise to each other

### Ways of doing it

- Position yourselves in such a way that it is clear that you marry each other rather than in a way that seems to say that the priest is marrying you: e.g. face the congregation, or stand side-on, rather than with your backs to the congregation.
- Choose, adapt or compose an introduction.
- The questions the priest will ask you are the same ones you signed on your Pre-marriage Inquiry Form.
- The declarative form - "I, [Name], take you [Name] ..." - is strong and places the emphasis on the couple who promise each other.
- The question form - "N, do you take N. to be your ..." looks as though you are promising the priest something.
- Memorise what you are to say, or read them from a book held by one of the attendants. Repeat the words after the priest only if you feel unable to say them on your own.
- Everyone may applaud after the priest receives your consent, or you may wait until after the next section.

## blessing and exchange of rings

### What this is about

- A richly symbolic action that seals your commitment to one another.

### Ways of doing it

- For the Blessing: Choose or adapt a blessing from the samples.
- For the Exchange: Choose or adapt a blessing from the samples.
- Memorise what you are to say, or read them from a book held by an attendant; repeat the words after the priest only if you are unable to say them yourselves.
- Have one partner place the ring halfway on the other's finger; the other partner then slides the ring to its proper place, symbolising 'yes'.

## general intercessions

### What this is about

- Praying for the people and the issues that are important to you.

### Ways of doing it

- The structure of the prayer is:
  - Priest introduces it.
  - Someone announces the petition, ending with: "Lord, hear us".
  - Everyone prays silently and/or with a common response, "Lord, hear our prayer".

- Priest concludes the prayer (with the Nuptial Blessing).
- The bride and groom, or parents, or several friends may do it.
- This is a particularly apt time for you to pray for each other and for your parents. Your parents may also wish to pray especially for you both.

## nuptial blessing

### What this is about

- The Church asks God to bless your marriage.

### Ways of doing it

- Choices are available. With a little creativity you may be able to compose part of the prayer to fit more closely with your choice of scriptural readings.

## solemn blessing

### What this is about

- A blessing-prayer by the community for the newly-married couple. Also a prayer that the couple may become blessings for the community.

### Ways of doing it

- Priest places his hands on the head of the couple and prays the blessing over them.

- The couple stand facing the congregation, as all present pray the blessing.
- Parents of the couple join the priest in praying the blessing prayer over the couple.

## signing the register

### What this is about

- Required by law.
- Points to the broader social dimension of your marriage.

### Ways of doing it

- Bring a small table (and chair) to a central point.
- Bring the table to the aisle in the body of the church.
- Photographs may be taken during the signing provided the photographer does not dominate or disrupt the action.
- This is a good time for everyone to sing or to listen to an appropriate song.
- The significance of this action might be enhanced by your decision to make a gift to some worthy cause. This would more appropriately be a private gesture.

## leaving the church

### Ways of doing it

- Bride and groom leave first, followed by the attendants.

- Bride and groom stand at the altar facing the guests. All come to congratulate the couple and then mingle and walk out informally.
- Guests leave the church first and welcome the bride and groom as they come to the front door.

## Questions about marriage

### Who may marry?

Can a divorced non-Catholic person remarry in the Catholic Church?

- The non-Catholic would have to have an annulment or a dissolution of the marriage. The process depends on the situation of the earlier marriage.
- If he/she married a Catholic in a civil ceremony without permission the annulment process will be straight forward.
- If both people were baptised non-Catholics there would be a formal annulment process.
- Whichever the situation, the couple would be advised to speak with either their parish priest or the personnel of the local diocesan marriage tribunal as soon as possible. It can be complicated so it best to get advice first hand from your local diocesan marriage tribunal.
- It is also best to make inquiries sooner rather than later to avoid upsetting marriage plans.

Can first cousins marry in the Catholic Church?

- The law of the Catholic Church determined that marriage between first cousins is invalid. However, it is possible for the diocesan bishop to relax this church law, that is, to grant a dispensation from the law in a particular circumstance.
- Therefore, it is best for the couple to speak with their parish priest as soon as possible.

Can I marry a non-Catholic in the Catholic Church?

- Provided that both persons are free to marry, it is permissible to marry in the Catholic Church. All that is expected is that the Catholic party will undertake to do what is possible to bring children up as Catholics and the non-Catholic is informed of this undertaking. The priest who is going to do the wedding will arrange the necessary paperwork for permissions and help you to plan a suitable ceremony.
- The priest celebrant will give some direction about marriage preparation programmes.

Can a Catholic marry a non-Christian in the Catholic Church?

- Assuming that both persons are free to marry, it is possible for a Catholic to marry a non-Christian (a person who is not baptised) in the Catholic Church.
- It will be necessary for the Catholic to speak with the parish priest and obtain a dispensation to marry a non-Christian. This dispensation is readily given.



- The Catholic person will be asked to make a promise to do all in his or her power in order that any children are baptised and brought up in the Catholic faith. The non-Christian person must be informed of this promise

## Place of marriage

*The Church is the place where the Community gathers for Eucharist, and where she welcomes new members in the sacraments of initiation. It is most fitting that it is also the place where the Church witnesses the sacrament of marriage. The celebration of marriage in a Catholic Church is a reminder that this is the celebration of a sacrament, that your life as husband and wife is blessed and sustained throughout the marriage by the presence and love of God.*

Will a marriage in the Anglican Church be recognised by the Catholic Church?

- With permission, marriage in the Anglican Church will be valid and recognised by the Catholic Church. Before celebrating a marriage, the Catholic person should speak to his or her parish priest, who will assist the Catholic in requesting permission for a marriage to be celebrated in the Anglican Church. There is a form he has to fill in and send to the Bishop's office. What is required of the Catholic person is a promise to do your best to bring up any children as Catholics.

Is it possible to have two celebrations of marriage, one in the Catholic Church and one in the Orthodox Church?

- It is not possible to have two marriage ceremonies, one in the Orthodox Church and one in the Catholic Church, because the sacrament can be received only once.
- In a situation where one person is Catholic and the other is Orthodox, the appropriate course of action is to decide in which Church you will have the ceremony.
- If you decide to have it in the Orthodox Church, then the Catholic person should speak with the parish priest and explain the situation. The priest will assist the couple in obtaining permission for the marriage to be celebrated in the Orthodox Church.
- Sometimes, but not always, the Orthodox priest may allow a Catholic priest to participate in the Orthodox service.

Can I have my wedding in the gardens?

- For a long time, the practice in most of Australia is that Catholic weddings take place in the Catholic Church and not in secular surroundings such as gardens and parks or reception halls. The reason is to minimise the devaluation of the religious dimension of marriage. In some circumstances, (e.g. to meet the sensitivities of non-Christians) the bishop may give permission for the wedding to take place in suitable settings.

## Timing of marriage

My fiancé and I want to get married on Holy Saturday (the day before Easter Sunday). Is that possible?

- The Ordo, or official calendar of the Church, says all Masses are prohibited on Holy Saturday (before the Easter Vigil) and all celebration of the sacraments, other than penance and anointing of the sick, is strictly prohibited, which rules out the sacrament of marriage.
- Ritual Masses (of which marriage is one) are also prohibited on Easter Sunday. This is because Easter is the pinnacle of the Church year, when Christians focus on celebrating the Resurrection of Christ and renewing their baptismal promises. Ritual Masses are also prohibited on Easter Monday. However there is no explicit rule about the rite of marriage (outside of Mass) being celebrated on that day. Having said that, it will often be hard to find a church that can accommodate a marriage on Easter Monday, due to the pressure of Easter and since it is a public holiday many will not have staff available.

## Sustaining marriage

While you celebrate the sacrament of marriage in a very special way on your wedding day, the sacrament of marriage is a source of grace, of God's presence and blessing, every day of your marriage.

This does not mean that there are not times that can be very difficult. Some parishes and dioceses may have supports for married couples

and families. Some organisations or movements have as their particular focus the support of married couples.

## Marriage breakdown

Where can I find out information about the annulment process?

- Information about the annulment process is available in several books that are available in catholic bookstores. Bishop Geoffrey Robinson has written a very good one, *Marriage, Divorce and Nullity*. Alternatively, you could contact your parish priest or else the Tribunal Office in your diocese.
- There are two different processes for the declaration of nullity of a marriage.
- The simpler process is used when a marriage is invalid because the marriage took place contrary to the laws of the church. For example, a Catholic may have married in a civil ceremony or in another church without a dispensation from the diocesan bishop. A Catholic may have married a non-Christian without a dispensation. In both of these cases, the marriage would be considered invalid.
- The second process is more detailed and lengthy. It is used when at the time of the marriage there were issues that affected the consent of either or both of the spouses. If the spouses did not consent to marriage, as the church understands it, then it is possible that the marriage could be judged to be invalid.

On what basis can the Church judge that a husband or wife did not consent to a marriage?

- There are a number of reasons why the church judges that a marriage is invalid, based on the lack of consent.
- We could think about consent in any situation. True consent involves acting freely - without force or fear. It involves knowing to what one is consenting. In the case of marriage, this involves consenting to give oneself to the other person, and giving consent to the church's understanding of marriage. This means consenting to fidelity to one person for ever. and being open to having children.
- To make a promise means that one must have the capacity to fulfil the promise.

A couple of examples may be helpful:

- If a person marries knowing that if the marriage does not work out, then they will obtain a divorce, it would seem that the person is not committing forever.
- If one spouse is unfaithful during the courtship and again shortly after the wedding, there is a strong possibility that the person did not have the capacity to commit to fidelity.

What happens in a formal annulment process?

- The annulment process aims to examine a marriage to determine whether or not - at the time of the marriage - the marriage was valid. Therefore, the process involves an initial interview with the spouse requesting the annulment, the result of which will be the

tribunal interviewer leading the person to formulate a petition whereby he requests that the tribunal examine his marriage for validity, based on particular reasons.

- During this interview, the person (the petitioner) will be asked to nominate several people who would be willing to be interviewed concerning the marriage. These people should be people who knew the couple at the time of their marriage, preferably before and after the marriage.
- The other spouse (the respondent) will be asked to participate in the process. So, if possible, the petitioner should provide contact details. The respondent also will be asked to provide the names of several people who will act as witnesses to their marriage. Usually three witnesses for each of the former spouses is sufficient.
- They may be interviewed again. A written record of all the interviews is kept.
- When all the documentation, including the statements of the witnesses, is complete, the documents will be examined by personnel of the Tribunal - people appointed by the Bishop to carry out specific roles. After a first decision is made, a second examination of the documentation takes place - by different people. If the second decision agrees with the first decision, then that is the end of the process.
- Not all marriages that are examined in the tribunal are declared null.

Can a divorced person be an Extraordinary Minister of the Eucharist?

- There are two separate issues here. The first situation is that people may divorce. The second situation is that some divorced people may remarry.
- The church understands that some marriages end in divorce. The church has a process, usually called an annulment process for people who have divorced and wish to remarry. The annulment process is not like a divorce. It is a process whereby the Church looks at the situation of the first marriage and after careful examination and procedures in keeping with church law, recognizing that the marriage was never a valid marriage, declares it null. The church does not make a valid marriage null, it merely passes judgement on whether or not at the time of the marriage, the couple actually gave their consent to marriage and did so in accordance with the laws of the church.
- If a marriage is declared null, then the people are free to remarry.

So either a person has been divorced and chooses not to remarry *or* a person, whose first marriage is declared null, chooses to remarry, may both hold a position in the church.

On the other hand, a person who is divorced and remarries without the first marriage being declared null, is not free to receive the Eucharist and so cannot be a Eucharistic minister.

At the same time, the church does have concern for such a person, (that is, divorced and remarried without an annulment). The person should be encouraged to attend Mass, to participate in Church events, so that he or she is part of the community of the parish.

A person in this situation should be encouraged to speak to their parish priest. He might be able to suggest that he or she make an appointment with the tribunal and hopefully, their situation can be rectified.

Alternatively, the person should be encouraged to contact their diocesan tribunal office.

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