

Preparing the Wedding Liturgy

All sacraments are actions of Christ and his Church and as such are essentially communal activities. Since this is the case, any appearance of individualism or division among the faithful who are present is to be avoided (cf. *Rite of Marriage*, no. 10). At the same time the nature of this communal action, seen as an expression of the Church, accentuates that everyone in the assembly take his or her proper part so that the Church may be seen as one in its variety of orders and ministries (cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 91). The variety of ministries of the wedding liturgy includes the following:

The Assembly: The sacrament of marriage is an act of public worship; therefore, the people attending the wedding liturgy should not be considered to be there as spectators. The liturgical assembly is called to a role of active participation and any preparations should take this into account. The assembly is called to sing and pray, to be witnesses, and to be signs of Christian love and support for the Church and the bride and groom.

The Bride and Groom: By declaring their consent before the Church community, the bride and groom are the ministers of the sacrament of marriage. Through their mutual commitment, they become a visible sign (or “sacrament”) of Christ’s unconditional love for his Church and the Church’s total commitment to the Lord. Therefore, care should be taken in planning and celebrating the marriage liturgy to ensure that the principal rites of the bride and groom are conducted within the sight and hearing of all who are present.

The Priest/Deacon: The primary role of the priest or deacon is to preside, or officiate, at the wedding liturgy. In the Catholic wedding liturgy, the questions concerning the consent and exchange of vows are reserved to the Catholic priest or deacon. A non-Catholic minister, if present, may not receive the consent; however, they may read a passage from scripture.

Witnesses (Attendants): Church law (canon 1108) requires at least two witnesses to the marriage. Although a minimum age is not mentioned in Church (or Florida) law, witnesses normally are to be above the presumed age of reason (age 7). The witnesses may be of different or the same gender and they need not be Catholic nor baptized, since their sole function is to attest to the fact that the marriage took place. While the witnesses are usually laypersons, clergy or religious may act in this capacity.

Liturgical Ministers: The wedding liturgy should include those ministers needed to serve in the liturgical celebration. Care should be taken in selecting those who will exercise liturgical ministries in the marriage celebration; these include competent cantors, musicians, readers, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, greeters/ushers, altar servers, and others. Well-intentioned family members and friends do not always meet the criteria for competence or experience. Friends, relatives or parishioners who already serve in these ministries at their own parishes are perhaps better suited to serve in that capacity in the wedding celebration. Where needed, the parish should provide guidance and instruction to those serving in liturgical ministries.

Selection of Rites

The Church offers three forms of the wedding liturgy in the *Rite of Marriage*. The decision regarding which rite to select is dependent upon the situation of each couple and should be made in consultation with the priest or deacon who is to officiate at the ceremony.

FORM 1: The Rite for Celebrating Marriage During Mass

This form is normally used *when two Catholics marry*. The Nuptial Mass with its prayers and readings is used with the following exceptions: not during the Triduum; Christmas; Epiphany; Ascension; Pentecost; the Sundays of Advent, Lent and Easter; Ash Wednesday; the weekdays of Holy Week; the octave of Easter; the solemnities of the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and saints listed in the general calendar; All Souls; and proper solemnities (see Table of Liturgical Days in the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*).

If the wedding Mass is celebrated on a solemnity (holy day), a Sunday during the Christmas Season, or on a Sunday in Ordinary Time the proper prayers for the Mass of the day are used. On such occasions, one of the readings may be chosen from the texts provided for the celebration of marriage, the nuptial blessing is given, and the proper formulary of the solemn blessing is used.

FORM 2: The Rite for Celebrating Marriage Outside of Mass

The second form is normally used *when a Catholic marries a baptized non-Catholic*. This form is preferred in such cases since the wedding liturgy is a time to stress the **unity** of two families. The wedding liturgy outside of Mass might be more familiar to non-Catholic families and guests. This second form is more ecumenically sensitive because current Church regulations prohibit non-Catholics from receiving Communion at Mass.

FORM 3: The Rite for Celebrating Marriage Between a Catholic and an Unbaptized Person

The third form is used *when a Catholic marries someone who is not baptized*, either a catechumen or a non-Christian.

Guidelines for the Marriage Rite with a Communion Service

Generally speaking, the Marriage Rite with a Communion Service is discouraged within the Diocese of St. Petersburg. The Marriage Rite with a Communion Service is **not permitted** when:

1. The wedding outside of Mass is celebrated on a Sunday or holy day of obligation, when it should be presumed that the couple has already been to Mass and received Communion.
2. It is a mixed marriage of a Catholic and a non-Catholic.
3. Two Catholics who could have a wedding Mass request a Communion Service instead.

Pastorally, it would be permissible to celebrate the Rite of Marriage with a Communion Service if two Catholics are requesting a wedding Mass, but cannot have it because there is no priest available to celebrate the Mass.

Elements of the Liturgy

✦ THE ENTRANCE PROCESSION

The entrance procession is a liturgical action described in the *Rite of Marriage* as the ritual entrance of the ministers for the liturgy. It has the character of beginning, introduction and preparation. The bride and groom, as the ministers of the sacrament of marriage, are included in the entrance procession.

The actual order of the procession may be planned with the presiding priest or deacon and should give equal attention to both families. It also may be adapted to suit particular needs and local customs.

✦ THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

The proclamation of the Word of God and the homily are integral to the wedding liturgy. Through these elements the gathered assembly and the couple are invited to respond personally and communally to the proclamation of God's love in Christ. The couple may choose readings for the marriage rite from the *Lectionary for Mass* (Vol. 4). For particular reasons, other Scripture texts may be substituted provided the priest or deacon gives their approval.

Non-scriptural readings may not replace the readings of the Liturgy of the Word. A significant reading that celebrates the sacramental nature of married love might be used at some other point during the celebration, e.g. as an introduction to the ceremony before the entrance procession or as a meditation after Communion.

The responsorial psalm is an integral part of the proclamation of the Word of God. As a rule, the responsorial psalm is sung to help all who are present understand and meditate on the psalm's spiritual meaning in the wedding celebration (cf. *Lectionary for Mass*, nos. 20-21).

The homily (during the Nuptial Mass) is given by a priest or deacon.

✦ THE RITE OF MARRIAGE

- **The Vows and Declaration of Consent.** The central symbol of the marriage celebration and the ministers of the sacrament are the bride and groom. This reality is made manifest as the vows are solemnly proclaimed and the rings are exchanged. The vows declare the acceptance of one another as husband and wife, mutual fidelity, and the permanence of marriage. **A form of the approved vows contained in the *Rite of Marriage* must be used.**

The vows are to be proclaimed in a posture and place that is visible and audible to the community.

- **The General Intercessions.** The general intercessions or prayers of the faithful conclude the marriage rite. These are prayers for the Church, the world, for all married couples, for the bride and groom, and for deceased family members. Resource books provide models and the couple is encouraged to personalize them by writing their own. The reading of the intercessions provides an opportunity to involve family members or members of the wedding party.

✦ THE LORD'S PRAYER

The Lord's Prayer is the one prayer in which all Christian believers share. While it is common in other Christian traditions to have a soloist sing the Lord's Prayer, it is the tradition and practice in the Catholic liturgy that the Lord's Prayer is sung or spoken by all the faithful.

✦ SHARING THE EUCHARIST

If the marriage takes place in the Eucharistic liturgy, care should be taken to explain the reception of the sacrament. Since the Eucharist is a privilege of membership and the highest expression of Catholic unity, non-Catholic participants would not receive Communion.

The guidelines listed below were approved by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on November 14, 1996.

For Catholics: Catholics fully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist when they receive Holy Communion in fulfillment of Christ's command to eat His Body and drink His Blood. In order to be properly disposed to receive Communion, communicants should be conscious of grave sin, have fasted for one hour, and seek to live in charity and love with their neighbors. Persons conscious of grave sin must first be reconciled with God and the Church through the sacrament of Penance. A frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance is encouraged for all.

For Other Christians: We welcome to the celebration of the Eucharist those Christians who are not fully united with us. It is a consequence of the sad divisions in Christianity that we cannot extend to them a general invitation to receive Communion. Catholics believe that the Eucharist is an action of the celebrating community signifying a oneness in faith, life, and worship of the

community. Reception of the Eucharist by Christians not fully united with us would imply a oneness which does not yet exist, and for which we must all pray.

For Non-Christians: We also welcome to the celebration those who do not share our faith in Jesus. While we cannot extend to them an invitation to receive Communion, we do invite them to be united with us in prayer.

The bride and groom are to receive Holy Communion after the priest celebrant or deacon. They are to have Holy Communion ministered to them by the priest or deacon and are *not* to give Holy Communion to one another (cf. *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, no. 94).

NOTE: As with all other Masses celebrated within the Diocese of St. Petersburg, Holy Communion should be offered under both species (bread and wine). Each parish is to keep in mind the number of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion that will be needed for the Eucharist offered under both species.

Music Guidelines

In 1972, the bishops of the United States set forth guidelines regarding music in any liturgical celebration in their document, *Music in Catholic Worship*. According to this document, music choices should be evaluated according to three critical judgments: liturgical, pastoral, musical.

Liturgical Judgment: Is the music appropriate to the liturgy and celebration? Does a particular piece of music carry out the role assigned to it? *Liturgical judgment presupposes a sensitivity to the meaning of worship as well as to the function and relative importance of the various parts of the total celebration.*

- While the songs themselves ought to be as musically attractive as possible, it is the text that matters the most. Songs which are appropriate to the reception or dance, or songs which have their origin in movie soundtracks, the Broadway stage, or top-40 radio are rarely appropriate for the liturgy.
- Texts to songs must be sacred in nature, and conform to Catholic doctrine and should be drawn chiefly from Holy Scripture and liturgical sources. The lyrics of songs should express the Christian concept of life, rather than one which is purely secular.
- Since the liturgy of marriage celebrates not only the human love between two persons but also their relation to God who is love, songs reflecting this divine dimension of love are most suitable. Entirely appropriate are songs which express trust in, thanksgiving to, or praise of God. Lyrics which negate the divine-religious dimension of love, either explicitly or implicitly are unsuitable for the marriage rite.

- When in doubt, the best criterion may be, “Can you pray the words of the text?”

Pastoral Judgment: Does the music allow and promote congregational participation where called for and is it appropriate for those who are present? Does the music selected enable the people to express their faith within their cultural setting? Is it an integral part of a liturgical service whose primary concern is the worship of God? *Pastoral judgment presupposes a special sensitivity to the specific nature of the assembly gathered for the wedding liturgy.*

- The involvement of family and friends is essential to the celebration. While a soloist may have a role in the liturgy, the assembly’s participation through the singing of hymns, songs and acclamations reinforces the communal dimension of the sacrament.
- Some texts by their very nature should always be sung by the whole assembly, such as the joyful *Alleluia* before the Gospel and acclamations within the Eucharistic Prayer. Every effort should be made to sing the responsorial psalm.
- At other points in the liturgy, such as the entrance procession, the preparation of the gifts, and the procession out of church, the congregation, a soloist, or a choir may sing. Instrumental music is also suitable in these places.
- If the Lord’s Prayer is to be sung, the setting should be one that is familiar and easily sung by the congregation, since this prayer belongs to the assembly. It is not appropriate to have the Lord’s Prayer sung by a soloist.
- Congregational singing should be promoted during the communion procession because it gives expression to unity in the Body of Christ. A communion hymn with a repeated refrain for the congregation would enable the most participation.

Musical Judgment: Is the music of quality and will it be competently performed? Or does it cheapen the liturgical celebration with triteness or musical cliché? *Musical judgment must be two-fold. It presupposes a special sensitivity to the components of technically, aesthetically and expressively good music, while at the same time having the ability to discern whether music, although deemed of quality, is suitable for the liturgical celebration.*

- Not all good music is suitable to the liturgy, yet good music of any style can be used in worship. A wide variety of styles and instruments may be employed.
- The richness of the celebration can be enhanced with creative instrumental combinations and new creations as well as time-honored compositions.
- The importance of communication between the celebrant and the musician cannot be overstated, and they should always adhere to the same guidelines.

- Pre-recorded music should be avoided.
- The “traditional wedding marches” by Wagner and Mendelssohn should be discouraged. Both are theater pieces having nothing to do with sacred liturgy. They conjure images in the minds of the assembly that have much to do with sentimentality and very little to do with worship. Sound catechesis about these pieces of music will assist the bride and groom to understand the liturgical significance of their music selections.

Prior copyright permission is needed for reproduction of music. If the bride and groom plan to prepare a wedding booklet to facilitate participation by the assembly, it is important to remind them (as early as possible) to obtain permission to reproduce copyrighted words and music. The parish musician will normally be asked to assist the couple in facilitating this request for permission.

Environment

The marriage ceremony is an act of worship which seeks to involve the community through the use of all the senses; therefore, the visual forms used for this celebration are extremely important. Careful preparation on the part of the couple is needed to create an environment which along with other elements (i.e., proclamation of the Word, music, etc.) enriches the sacred celebration for the couple, their family, and friends.

All visual forms, whether permanent (i.e., the Church building with its altar, ambo and statuary) or temporary (i.e., flowers, candles), should be planned to enhance the celebration as seen through the eyes of the church with noble simplicity being of utmost importance.

Flowers should be genuine and simple and not obscure the altar or interfere with the liturgical action and are *never* placed upon the altar. It is a welcomed gesture of the couple to the parish to leave the flowers for use in the liturgical celebrations that follow.

Candles are usually provided by the church and have liturgical meaning. The use of additional candles create a fire hazard and often a maintenance issue and should be discussed with the parish before assuming that candles, especially elaborate candelabra are appropriate or permitted.

Out of respect for the Church’s seasons and as a sign of the conviction of the couple that God is present in this celebration, the seasonal nature of the liturgical calendar is to be respected. Simply stated, when a marriage is celebrated during Advent, Lent, Easter or other days of special significance, planning is to take the special nature of these liturgical seasons into consideration.

Actions, Gestures & Traditions

✦ ACTIONS

Liturgy (“the work of the people”) is an action that communicates on many levels and in many different ways. It is only when all these various modes of communication (i.e., hearing, feeling, seeing, smelling, tasting, movement) are integrated and work together that the liturgy reaches its full effect.

✦ GESTURE

One of the most effective modes of communication is the art of movement or gesture. A gesture speaks more quickly and often more effectively than a word. A gesture communicates immediately and with full impact. If ritual actions and gestures are done properly, people cannot fail to be attentive and be affected by what they see and feel. In all aspects of the liturgy it is important to avoid minimalism.

Gathering the Assembly/Hospitality: Many people attending the wedding liturgy may not know one another. Every effort should be made to make them feel welcome as they arrive so they are ready to participate in the liturgy. The couple, as well as their parents and family, can effectively serve as ministers of hospitality by greeting and welcoming friends and relatives before the wedding liturgy begins.

Processions: Within the wedding ceremony a great deal of attention is often given to the various forms of procession: the entrance procession, the procession of gifts, the Communion procession, and the concluding procession (or recessional).

- **Entrance Procession:** Symbolically, but simply, the entrance procession should manifest the communal dimension of the marriage celebration – the new family being created through this marriage is a mingling of two different families and also involves the parish community and indeed the whole Church, all of whom pledge their support to the couple.

The *Rite of Marriage* provides more than one form for the entrance procession:

- a. The procession symbolizing the uniting of two families is lead by the priest or deacon and other ministers. They are followed by the attendants (ushers & bridesmaids, as couples). The final portion of the procession includes the bride and groom who are accompanied by their parents. The bridal party enters the sanctuary area and given seats that do not obstruct the ritual actions that will take place.

- b. The procession familiar to most people consists of the bridal party (i.e., bridesmaids or bridesmaids accompanied by ushers/groomsmen), the maid of honor immediately preceding the bride, and the bride who is escorted down the aisle by her father. The bridal party may be met by the ushers/groomsmen and the best man may escort the maid of honor into the sanctuary. The bride is met by the groom standing next to the priest or deacon at the sanctuary.

The celebration begins with a greeting and the opening prayer.

- **Procession of the Gifts** (assuming a Nuptial Mass): The function of this procession is to present the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine. This procession may include gifts for the poor as well. It would be appropriate for both the bride's and groom's families to take part in this procession.
- **The Communion Procession** (assuming a Nuptial Mass): Since this Eucharistic celebration is the center of Catholic belief, all Catholics present who are properly disposed should receive the Eucharistic elements (Holy Communion) in accord with the Lord's command: "Take this all of you and eat it: this is my body" and "Take this all of you and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood". The guidance of ushers will assist in creating a Communion procession that proceeds with ease.

***Note 1:** It is not permitted for the couple to minister Holy Communion to one another; the ministering of Holy Communion is to be by a priest or deacon.*

***Note 2:** Under most circumstances, the wedding celebration between a Catholic and non-Catholic would best take place outside of Mass and reception of Communion should not occur. The sign given by only one half of the guests being welcomed to table is contrary to the celebration of unity which the marriage ritual seals.*

- **The Concluding Procession (Recessional):** This taking leave of the church marks the transition from liturgical celebration to social celebration. It is less formal than the entrance procession and is a time for a festive joyous march. The custom of the couple greeting guests should take place at the site of the reception rather than in the confines of the liturgical space.

The Exchange of Rings: In the wedding ceremony the exchange of vows is the central element in which the couple seals their pledge to one another. Exchanging rings is a visible sign of the exchange of vows.

The Sign of Peace (assumes a Nuptial Mass): Before those who are present share in the Eucharistic elements ("The Body and Blood of Christ") they express their love for one

another and pray for peace and unity in the Church and with all people. Therefore, the sign of peace should be shared as a visible sign of the kingdom to come. The bride and groom may wish to first extend this sign to each other and then to their immediate family. This is done best when the bride and groom extends this sign to their family and friends as a couple, not as individuals going to their particular families.

✦ CULTURAL & ETHNIC TRADITIONS

While cultural and ethnic customs can certainly be used in the marriage liturgy they should be evaluated to determine if they are appropriate for communal worship. Important in this evaluation is that the custom is understood by those attending, that it is a meaningful symbol or action, and that it includes those who are present. Such traditions may include:

1. **The Triple Candle (Unity Candle)** – usually lighted after the exchange of rings and accompanied by an appropriate liturgical song. This is a popular custom but has no official standing in the wedding liturgy and as such the candles should never be placed on the altar but rather on a separate table off to the side.
2. **The placing of flowers at the statue of Mary** – is not part of the wedding liturgy. This is more an expression of personal piety and should not be the focus of attention during public worship. This might be done at the rehearsal or by having flowers placed before the statue of Mary before the wedding ceremony begins. It could perhaps best be accomplished as part of the concluding procession on the way out of church.
3. **The presentation of the couple to the community** - if this occurs, it is usually done just before the recessional begins.

✦ WEDDING BOOKLETS OR PROGRAMS

Couples may wish to prepare a wedding booklet to be distributed to the guests assembled for the wedding ceremony. They vary in detail, but often contain an outline of the order of service and the assembly's responses to the various parts of the Mass. For the sake of convenience, it is not necessary to include the liturgical texts or the readings in their entirety. When copyrighted music or words are printed in a booklet or program, necessary permission must be secured from the company that holds the copyright.

Photography and Videotaping

Videotaping of the wedding liturgy affords an active remembrance of this important moment in the life of the bride and groom, but should never become a distraction to the participants or interfere with the movement and dignity of the liturgy. Local parish policy should be followed.

Photographs are also important remembrances and most parishes allow them to be taken immediately before, during and after the liturgy as long as it is done in good taste and does not interfere with the liturgical celebration. Photographers should not be in the sanctuary during the wedding liturgy. The use of flash photography likewise is not allowed during the wedding liturgy.

There should be a limited number of formal portraits after the service. Because the church is a sacred place where a sacred action has just occurred, the arrangement of the sanctuary should be left undisturbed: the church is not a photography studio.