Christ Abundantly Blesses This Love

CELEBRATING THE CATHOLIC WEDDING LITURGY

PART 1: CATHOLIC WEDDINGS PAST AND PRESENT

One Faith Celebrated in Diverse Ways

- As people enter the church for Peter and Sarah’s wedding, they are warmly greeted by the bride and groom who thank them for coming to the wedding and introduce them to their parents. Male and female members of the wedding party then lead the guests to their seats toward the front of the church.

- After meeting with the parish music director, Alison and Ty choose the Trumpet Voluntary by Jeremiah Clarke as the music for the entrance procession at the wedding. The organist plays this majestic piece, the wedding party is dressed in white, and the deacon who will preside at the wedding leads the procession to the front of the church. At the end of the procession are the bride and groom, each proudly escorted by family members.

- Shortly after exchanging their wedding vows and rings, Miguel and Luz present each other with thirteen coins (known in Spanish as arras), signifying their dedication to provide for their family’s needs. In the dialogue that accompanies this exchange, they declare that the coins are also a promise to share their goods with the poor.

- Standing at the door after processing out of the church, Maria and Truong receive the congratulations of parishioners leaving the Sunday 11:00 AM Mass. Holding the hand of her young daughter who is fascinated with Maria’s gown, one woman says, “I’m so glad that you and Truong decided to celebrate your wedding at Sunday Mass so that we could all be here for it!”

- As the guests take their seats at the wedding reception, newlyweds James and Kasandra are called forward by their parents. In a ritual with roots in their African ancestry, the couple jumps over a broom to express their step into marriage, into creating a new family, and into the joys and challenges of making a home.

Depending on where you live and go to church, you may or may not be familiar with some, or even all, of the above accounts. Yet, each of them represents some element of a Roman Catholic wedding celebrated in North America. In these early years of the 21st century, Catholic weddings are drawing on the richness of both the Church’s liturgical tradition and the significant cultural customs associated with marriage in many ethnic communities. Despite what some television shows and wedding planning guides may seem to indicate, not all Catholic weddings are exactly alike.

There are, however, some essential things that unite all celebrations of marriage in the Roman Catholic Church, and these are the Church’s faith concerning the sacrament of marriage and the basic form and texts of the Catholic wedding liturgy. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (#1601-1666), in summarizing Catholic teaching about marriage, says that Christian marriage:
is a covenant ordered to the good of the couple, and to the generation and education of children;
- has been raised by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament;
- is a sign of the union of Christ and the Church;
- is established by the freely given consent of the spouses;
- and is marked by unity, indissolubility, fidelity, and openness to fertility.

During the time leading up to their wedding, engaged couples who will celebrate their marriage in the Catholic Church usually participate in a marriage preparation program that invites them to reflect on these characteristics of Christian marriage and on how they will be lived out in their marriage. The lived experience of faithful Christian couples is one of the primary expressions of the Church’s faith concerning the sacrament of marriage. Another is the Catholic wedding liturgy where this faith is proclaimed and celebrated.

**Christian Marriage through the Centuries**

During the two thousand years of Christian history, Catholics have celebrated marriage in a variety of ways. In the early days of the Church, it was common for Christians to contract marriage according to the civil and family ceremonies of their culture. Even apart from a church ceremony, Christians understood marriage as part of God’s plan for humanity. It was also seen as a contract between two families, usually arranged by the groom and the bride’s father. Eventually, simple marriage blessings for Christian couples led to the celebration of marriage in church. In the 13th century, marriages contracted in private were prohibited (partly to assure that a woman was not forced into marriage against her will), and the Catholic Church declared that marriage is a sacrament. The Council of Trent, in the 16th century, required that Catholics marry in the presence of a priest and two or three witnesses.

The Catholic marriage ritual that was developed following the Council of Trent changed very little over the next four centuries, but attitudes toward marriage did change, especially in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The personal love between a man and a woman came to be recognized as the primary motivation for marriage, replacing contractual arrangements between families. The roles and societal expectations concerning men and women also began to change, and a new image emerged of the couple as two equal and complementary partners, each involved in providing for and caring for the family and the home.

The contemporary experience of Christian marriage and emerging research in scripture and sacramental theology led to a renewed focus on marriage in the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* described marriage as “an intimate community of life and love…established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws” and noted that “God himself is the author of marriage” (#87). The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* called for a revision and enrichment of the Catholic marriage rite to signify more clearly the grace of the sacrament and the equal obligation of both spouses, to provide a form of the rite to be celebrated outside of Mass, and to allow for “praiseworthy customs” from various regions (#77–78). In 1969, a revised Catholic marriage ritual, known in English as the *Rite of Marriage*, was issued to provide the structure and texts for all weddings in the Roman Catholic Church, including the marriage of a Catholic to a spouse who is not Catholic. A further revision, entitled the *Order for Celebrating Marriage*, was issued in 1990, and has been gradually implemented in different countries as local bishops’ conferences have prepared translations and adaptations for their regions.

*Part 2 will present an overview of the Catholic wedding liturgy as it is celebrated today.*

*Part 3 will focus on the wedding liturgy as a celebration of the Church.*

*Part 4 will present various customs that are often incorporated into the Catholic wedding liturgy.*