

A Short Essay on Marriage within the Catholic Church

The first thing to consider, long before you set a date or rent a hall, is how good is your word?

A marriage in the Catholic Church is a sacrament, which means that it is a participation in the life of Christ. As such a sacramental marriage involves making promises and keeping one's word as Jesus did.

What exactly does this mean? Does it mean that if I am not a churchgoer or if I am a sinner I can't get married in the Church? No; Jesus never turns anyone away. He always invites each of us (all of whom are sinners) to a deeper, more intimate relationship with Him. The gospels are full of stories about Jesus seeking out sinners, treating them with compassion and mercy, and forgiving them. Jesus reveals our sins not to humiliate us, but to free us and to offer a way to true happiness. Some people rejected Jesus' offer because they found his way too hard, but many accepted. When we decide to live under Jesus, it means that we are called to continual conversion, which often includes a change of lifestyle, attitude, and/or behavior. It also means learning to love and sacrifice like Jesus, which results in joy unsurpassable.

As the late Bishop Fulton Sheen was fond of saying, in a sacramental marriage it's not two, but three, who get married: the woman, the man, and Jesus. As Catholics (like all Christians), we are baptized in Christ. We promise to follow Him, to listen to His words, to imitate His example in all we do, to talk to Him (i.e., pray) often. Jesus promises to be with us until the end of time by sending His Holy Spirit into our hearts and minds as we yield more and more to God.

This has a number of practical consequences for married couples (and hence those wanting to get married):

ENDURING LOVE

Jesus remains true to us and to His Father's will even unto death: the couple who gets married in the Catholic Church follows in the footsteps of Christ by promising to remain married to each other until death.

FREE TO LOVE

Jesus' commitment is free and total: He gives all of Himself at all times. He did not have any preconditions, no escape clauses, and no trial runs as Messiah. As the evangelist Luke tells us: Jesus set His face toward Jerusalem (in other words, He was determined to do His Father's will). Likewise, the couple who gets married in the Catholic Church cannot have any preconditions, escape clauses, or trial marriages. It is part and parcel of our baptismal promises that we refrain from any sexual activity outside of marriage. This is particularly true for engaged couples who, because of the physical intimacy of sexual intercourse, may *feel* united but in reality may still be divided on important issues. Indeed, if there has been sexual activity before marriage, then the question must be answered: how free are they in their decision? What is the "glue" of their union: does it include more than the physical? Is their commitment free and total?

LIFE-GIVING LOVE

Jesus' commitment is life-giving: the reason Jesus came to us is that we might have life and have it abundantly. His resurrection is the proof that He kept His word. The couple who get married in the Catholic Church promise to be open to the gift of new life, if God decides to bless them in this way. This means placing no barriers between you and God's will--physical, mental, or spiritual. Indeed if a couple is truly united in the love of Jesus Christ, then how could they fail to share this love with children?

A sacramental marriage is very different from many of the living arrangements that are popular in our society nowadays. In society two people can get "married" simply by filling out a form and standing

before a judge (and to get a divorce is equally bureaucratic). In many cases, civil marriage is no more than a contract.

A sacramental marriage, on the other hand, is a covenant. A covenant is a profound and enduring bond between two people based on their word--they will do thus and so, and the guarantee is their promise to each other. Obviously, the worth of the promise depends on the quality of their word.

So before contacting a priest, a couple who are thinking about getting married in the Catholic Church should have several long, searching, honest, and heart-to-heart conversations with each other (and with God, needless to say). The subject matter should include "Are we keeping our word to Jesus?" and "Are we keeping our word to each other?"

The specific points in the conversation should include, but are not limited to, the following: If the man and woman are both Catholic, then they should talk about their fulfillment of their baptismal promises. Are they attending Sunday Mass each week? Are they part of their parish community and the local church through financial support and prayers of petition? Are they deepening their relationship with God by an active prayer life? Are they living chastely, refraining from sexual activity? If they have not fulfilled these or any other baptismal promises, then have they been reconciled to God and the Church through the sacrament of reconciliation (going to confession)? Are they resolved to either continue or to begin fulfilling their baptismal promises?

Christians who are marrying a Catholic should also consider these questions with their fiancé/fiancée, and the couple should decide *before* marriage how they intend to practice two different faith traditions within their family life (the Catholic promises to do all in his/her power to share the Catholic faith with his/her children and to have them baptized and reared as Catholics).

Other important questions to consider before marriage are how to handle finances, how large debts will be paid off (school loans, etc.), the costs of raising a family, the roles and responsibilities of husband and wife, relations with in-laws, etc. Is marriage being considered more for the parents' sake or for the couple's? How steady are other relationships in the couple's lives, with family and friends? Are you experiencing any pressure from any source to marry at this time in your life? Are there any addiction problems with the man or the woman? Has either person experienced any frustration in communicating with his/her fiancé, hoping that this will improve with marriage? Has there been a pattern of promiscuity in the man or the woman's life, and is it hoped that marriage will cure the pattern? What have the couple learned from observing their parents' marriages? Have your family and friends waved any red flags of warning?

These are just some of the important issues every engaged couple should have discussed thoroughly as their thoughts turned more and more to a possible marriage. If you have discussed these issues already, then please call the priest or deacon at your parish six months before your intended marriage date. Be prepared to discuss these issues with him. If you have not discussed these issues, then please do not plan anything yet. Sit down together, pray, go out to dinner, take several long walks--do whatever you can to talk seriously and honestly and fully about all of these issues.

Remember: a sacramental marriage is not the same as a civil marriage. If you do go on to get married in the Catholic Church, then you will be giving your word to God and to each other to live by God's will. God is always faithful. He created marriage to be a sign of His commitment to life and love. He promises you participation in the sufferings and joys of His Son in this life, and in life everlasting in Heaven when you surrender to Him. Now is the time to take God at His word and give Him yours.

Celebrating Marriage at Our Lady of Victory Parish

Marriage is a covenant of love between husband and wife, a sacrament of the Church, and a public institution. Marriage is not just a private relationship between two people; it involves obligations to God, to Church, and to society.

When a couple asks for marriage in the Church, two things are presumed: (1) that the couple shares the Church's convictions about marriage and are ready and willing to live according to the Church's teaching; (2) that the couple understands the marriage ceremony must be celebrated according to the policies and regulations of the Church in general and Our Lady of Victory Parish in particular. The Church regulates marriage in order to preserve the religious character of matrimony and to keep order in the household of the Faith.

Since marriage is also a social institution civil law imposes certain conditions upon a couple when a marriage takes place. The State regulates marriage in order to protect the rights of the parties to the marriage and to promote the common good.

The policy and regulations that follow are aimed at ensuring a proper Christian celebration of marriage. Some of the rules are those of the universal Church; some are Archdiocesan regulations; others pertain to this particular parish. All of them are requirements for marriage in Our Lady of Victory Church. While not everyone may understand the reason for some of the rules, the parish staff after years of celebrating marriages have found the regulations both helpful and necessary for the proper Christian celebration of marriage. All couples are asked to abide by these regulations.

A. Prerequisites for Marriage

1. Archdiocesan regulations require that a couple contact the parish priest *at least six months* before their desired wedding date.
2. The marriage may not take place if either party has a previous bond. In the case that one or both have been previously married, an annulment, or declaration of nullity must be obtained before a date for a Church wedding can be given.
3. When both parties are Catholic, the wedding usually takes place in the bride's parish. In a wedding between a Catholic and non-Catholic, the couple normally marry in the Catholic Church, unless the couple obtain a dispensation to have the wedding in a non-Catholic setting. These dispensations are granted by the Archbishop. Without the dispensation, the marriage of a Catholic outside the Church is invalid in the eyes of the Church.
4. Normally, only parishioners may be married at Our Lady of Victory Church. For a good reason, some exceptions may be made to this rule. For example, if a person grew up in the parish or has family ties going back many years, consideration will be given to granting an exception. Nevertheless, if one is not currently a parishioner, permission for the marriage must be obtained from one's own pastor and the pastor of Our Lady of Victory.
5. If the couple would like a specific priest or deacon of the parish to conduct their marriage, they should contact him directly. The celebrant of the marriage ought to be one of the priests or deacons assigned to the parish. Exceptions can be made only for *a priest who is a close relative of the bride or groom*. Any other priest friends are welcome to concelebrate the wedding. *Please receive permission from the pastor of Our Lady of Victory before contacting an outside priest*. The priest must have a license from the District of Columbia to witness marriages, a *celebrity* from his own diocese, and will be responsible for preparing the couple and doing all necessary paperwork.
6. The bride and groom should make all the arrangements for their wedding directly with the priest and should not ask relatives or friends to do this for them. The priest will make plans only with the couple.

7. The couple should not arrange a reception, print their invitations, or make any other plans until they have confirmed a date and time with the parish priest.

B. Preparation for Marriage

1. Once the priest has agreed to witness a marriage and the date has been fixed, the couple is asked to go through a program of preparation to help them reach a deeper understanding of Christian marriage.

2. The couple must meet with the priest several times. The priest conducts the pre-nuptial investigation, obtains baptismal certificates and letters of freedom from the couple, and fills out dispensations as required. He will also instruct the couple in the Church's teachings on marriage. Often the priest will use a standardized questionnaire to facilitate discussions with the couple. Finally the priest will help the couple plan their ceremony.

3. In addition to the meetings with the celebrant (priest or deacon), it is required that the couple do the following:

a. attend an Engaged Encounter Weekend (www.dcengagedencounter.org) or some other premarital counseling session outside the parish such as the Archdiocese of Washington's program (www.adw.org/news/) or the Center for Family Development (www.bethesdaofd.org). *(It is recommended strongly that the engaged couple also meet with a mentor couple from the parish if this can be arranged.)*

b. attend a class or meet with a couple regarding Natural Family Planning (www.adw.org).

4. If the priest has some doubts about a couple's readiness or willingness to enter marriage as the Church sees it, he may ask them to delay their marriage or seek evaluation from a competent authority.

5. Marriage, as a sacrament, is a participation in the life of Christ and, therefore, is also a celebration of the community who make up the body of Christ. The couple should demonstrate some connection to Our Lady of Victory Parish and some involvement in the parish life is presumed. The priest acts as the witness of the community. Also since marriage is a religious vocation, the couple should prepare themselves to receive the sacrament through regular participation in the Eucharist and Reconciliation in addition to their normal habits of prayer and charitable works.

C. The Wedding Ceremony

1. The priest will give the couple a copy of Joseph Champlin's *Together for Life*, which contains the complete wedding ritual with all its options. Using an accompanying planning sheet, the couple plan their ceremony with the priest. Our Lady of Victory wants couples to be involved in choosing scripture readings under the guidance of the priest or deacon. It is not permitted for a couple to write their own ceremony. As for the wording of the vows, the Church has so carefully composed them that Our Lady of Victory allows only the two options to be used.

2. Music:

a. The couple should contact the parish organist and Music Director, Dr. John Warman by telephoning him or by seeing him after the weekend Masses, in order to arrange for the music for their wedding (202-234-4458). He will discuss his fee with the couple. If the couple wish to have an organist other than Dr. Warman, they must receive Dr. Warman's permission. Arrangements for vocalists and other instrumentalists can also be made with Dr. Warman.

b. The couple must choose sacred music which is appropriate for the religious ceremony taking place in the Church. Dr. Warman is skilled at helping to choose the appropriate music.

3. Family and friends of the bride and groom are encouraged to participate in the wedding ceremony as readers. The parish can provide two servers for a Nuptial Mass. Normally the couple gives them a donation.
4. Two Catholics are usually married in the context of a Nuptial Mass. The Eucharist is the wedding banquet between Christ and His Church, and marriage is a sacrament because it is a symbol of this union between Christ and the Church. It is recommended that marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics be celebrated outside the context of a Nuptial Mass since non-Catholics may not receive Communion.
5. At Our Lady of Victory, "sacrificial giving" is encouraged. Therefore it is expected that a couple give a certain percentage of the total cost of the wedding to the Church. At any rate the donation should be commensurate with the cost of the wedding. Please note that the donation to the Church is not to the priest. If you wish to thank the priest for his work in your preparation and in the celebration of your wedding, you may do so with a separate gift.
6. Weddings ordinarily are scheduled only on Saturdays between 11am and 3pm. We do not permit weddings on Saturday night.
7. If the couple wishes to have flowers, they should contact a florist who can deliver them to the Church on the day of the wedding. Aisle runners are available through the florists if they are desired (the length of the aisle is 75 feet).
8. Photographers may take pictures or make videos during the ceremony, but they must be discreet and unobtrusive. The photographer is asked to check with the priest before the wedding. They may not enter the sanctuary or put recording equipment in it. After the ceremony pictures may be taken. Flash pictures may be taken from the rear of the Church during the processions but *not* during the ceremony. After the wedding there will be a limited time for pictures.
9. The rehearsal usually takes place the evening before the wedding. It is *imperative* that the wedding party be on time. The rehearsal will be limited to one hour. It is desirable that only the wedding party come to the Church. *Only* the priest will conduct the rehearsal; there should be no directions from parents, friends, or bridal planners. If others are present in the Church besides the wedding party, they are asked to remain silent and seated.
10. The couple must obtain a civil license from the District of Columbia and present this to the priest no later than the night before the rehearsal. The license may be obtained from the D.C. Marriage License Bureau, (<http://www.dccourts.gov/dccourts/superior/family/marriage.jsp>).
11. There are no dressing rooms or telephones in the Church. The rectory is not available to the wedding party or guests. A rest room is located in the parking-lot-side entrance hall.
12. Ushers should be present in the Church thirty minutes before the wedding to seat guests and should remain after the ceremony to see if they can be of help to the priest in restoring the Church to good order. For example, they should be available to remove the runner and/or empty boxes and ribbons and personal articles left by guests in the pews.
13. Candlelight services are not permitted inasmuch as the focus of the ceremony should be on the readings and prayers of the liturgy. Candles are not permitted at the end of pews or in elaborate candle holders in compliance with insurance regulations.
14. The use of confetti or rice on Church property is prohibited for safety reasons.