

# The Order of Celebrating Matrimony

## Overview

The Roman Catholic wedding rite takes place with the Sacrament of Matrimony, one of the seven sacraments Catholics believe are channels of God's grace. The ceremony consists, at least, of three biblical readings, the exchange of vows, the exchange of rings, the Prayer of the Faithful, the nuptial blessing, prayers and appropriate music. The Roman Catholic wedding is rich in tradition and liturgy. Since a wedding is primarily a worship service, worship and praise of God who calls a man and a woman together in marriage, great care should go into planning the ceremony itself. The Church offers this sacred opportunity to join with family and friends in dedicating the couple's marriage to God, the author of all love.

The marriage ceremony is not a private ceremony, but rather a public ritual. It is celebrated in the community prayer space (the church building, not outdoors) and encourages those who have gathered not only to witness the vows of the couple, but also to participate fully in the liturgy.

The Sacrament usually takes place during a Mass, referred to as a Nuptial Mass, usually celebrated in the morning or early afternoon. The Catholic Church encourages the couple – and other Catholic bridal party members – to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation before receiving the Sacrament of Matrimony. Weddings are not scheduled for Holy Thursday, Good Friday or Holy Saturday, nor are weddings scheduled for those hours when Mass is read for the congregation.

The church is the appropriate setting for a wedding because it is a place sanctified by communal worship and the place where the sacrament of marriage is more significantly symbolized. The wedding usually takes place in the parish church of the bride's family.

Catholics in English-speaking countries are required (as of the feast of the Holy Family, December 30, 2016) to use the second edition of the Order of Celebrating Matrimony. The previous edition was one of the first ritual books published after the Second Vatican Council. The second edition has not only revised the translation, but it also includes new material. This new material has been available in Latin for more than 25 years, but it is only now appearing in English.

The Order of Celebrating Matrimony includes the revised translation for such parts as the couple's words of consent and the giving of rings. The Latin original for these has not changed, but the translation has been freshened and enriched. For example, the revised questions ask the couple if they have come "without coercion." In giving their consent, the couple used to promise that they would be "true," but now they use the word "faithful." The alternate formula now includes the words "to love and to cherish," aligning it more closely with the words in other English-speaking countries.

In giving rings to each other, the couple now say "receive this ring" instead of "take this ring." This slight change emphasizes the freedom with which they enter this union.

These changes will go unnoticed by most who participate in a Catholic wedding. The revision is more tweek than rewrite. And changes to the ceremonies will also be largely unnoticed.

The entrance procession has two different forms. This was true in the first edition, but the second edition better spells out the options. The basic difference is in the location where the priest first greets the couple. In the first version, the priest greets the bridal party by the door of the church before the procession begins. In the second version, he greets the couple after they have arrived at their assigned places. The post-Vatican II wedding ceremony created a moment for the priest to help the couple transition from the secular into the sacred world. It envisioned him greeting them at the door and setting their hearts on the spiritual nature of the ceremony. Then all would enter the church in procession with this purpose in mind. The second option does not explain how the couple arrives at the sanctuary and actually allows the possibility of no formal procession at all. Somehow everyone takes a place, the priest approaches the couple to greet them warmly and then the ceremony begins.

The missal has always included an entrance antiphon for a wedding Mass. Yet it has been broadly ignored not just at wedding Masses but even at many parish Masses that do not include music. Instrumental music traditionally accompanies the wedding procession in the United States. However, it is more

appropriate for the congregation to sing a hymn. If they do not, then the priest, the people, the lector or someone else should recite the entrance antiphon at a wedding Mass. This legislation is not new, but it will get a fresh look in a new book.

Many Catholic churches do not allow the classic wedding march nor the famous recession music which are popularly used. They are considered secular music, and the Roman Catholic church does not allow, in most cases, secular music. Sacred or classical music may be played. The Office of Worship of the Diocese of Belleville has published a statement entitled *Music for weddings*, in which the following observations are made:

The music of the wedding service should assist the assembled believers to express and share the gift of faith. This does not exclude songs from the popular idiom, especially those which can be seen as referring to the human-divine nature of love.

New to the second edition is a suggested script for the celebrant's introduction. Two of these are proposed, but the priest may use these or similar words. In one version he addresses the congregation; in the other he addresses the couple. A priest has always been free to make such an introduction; now the book gives him a model. Many priests already have a few points that they like to make at the beginning of a wedding. These are worth a review to make sure that his remarks are in the proper spirit of this part of the liturgy.

The number of options for the readings was enhanced in the second Latin edition of the marriage ceremony, but the English Lectionary was revised after that, so nearly all of the new suggestions are already familiar. More significantly, some of the readings now carry an asterisk. No other liturgical book has this feature — only the Order of Celebrating Matrimony. The asterisks indicate a subset of the readings from which one must be chosen. This subset defines a collection of readings that specifically speak about marriage. Many of the other readings have to do with the Christian life in general or the command to love. All of these are appropriate for a wedding, but the second edition believes that at least one reading ought to illuminate more specifically the event taking place.

For the couple's exchange of consent, there has been no change in the rubrics describing how this is done. Interestingly, the liturgy never envisions what commonly takes place: the groom and then the bride repeat the words of consent phrase by phrase after the priest, who gives them their cue. The second edition of the ritual book provides an opportunity to evaluate this practice. The revisions of the Second Vatican Council underscored the role that the couple has in offering the sacrament to each other. The priest is the official witness. Prior to the council, the priest said the words: "I join you together in matrimony. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." The priest no longer makes this statement, yet by reciting the consent phrase by phrase for the couple, he has performatively done a similar thing. Another solution is to have the couple read the words directly out of the ritual book, or to give them pre-printed cards from which they may read their words. They may, of course, recite the words from memory, and it is riveting when they do, but few will trust themselves to do it flawlessly when the wedding day arrives.

New to the second edition is an acclamation of the people after the consent. The priest may introduce a dialogue, to which the people respond, "Thanks be to God." Other acclamations may be used. They may sing an alleluia, for example, or a familiar musical refrain that gives God thanks.

New also is the addition of *las arras* and the use of a *lazo* or of a veil. *Las arras* can include coins that the groom pours from a box into the hands of the bride, and which she pours back into his, while they each make a statement about the blessings they have received from God. The *lazo* is a double loop, sometimes a large rosary, that a sponsor couple places over the shoulders of the bride and groom for the nuptial blessing. Or they may take part of the bride's veil and pin it to the shoulder of the groom, or hold a veil over them both.

For the ring ceremony, many priests have already been sprinkling the rings with blessed water. They may be surprised to learn that this procedure never appeared in the previous ritual. Now it does, as an option. There is no sprinkling in the ritual for *las arras* or the *lazo*, so if sprinkling does occur over the rings, it helps establish a hierarchy of symbols in the wedding. After the words of consent, the rings are the most important symbol.

Wedding Masses have long included the prayer of the faithful, but now the second edition gives samples. One set is based on petitions drafted right after the Second Vatican Council but never made available in English until now. These particular petitions are not obligatory, but they may inspire the composition of petitions that a couple may undertake.

During the Eucharistic prayer, the priest includes an intercession for the couple. The words can be found in the missal under the ritual Mass For the Celebration of Marriage. These commemorations bring the names of the couple into the Eucharistic prayer. Rarely do people ever hear the names of anyone besides the pope and the local bishop, so the inclusion of the bride and groom by name lends them a special dignity in the heart of the Church's most important prayer.

There has been no change to the location of the nuptial blessing. Some priests were hoping that the blessing would move either forward into the wedding ceremony or later with the final blessing. However, the nuptial blessing has its own history dating to a time when the wedding took place in church before Mass and the nuptial blessing happened during Mass. The structure of the Mass connects the Lord's Prayer to the Eucharistic prayer. Once the community stands in the real presence of Christ, the only logical prayer to say is the one that Jesus taught. Consequently, the slot after the Lord's Prayer was the first opportunity to offer a blessing of the couple (originally just of the bride) after the consecration of the bread and wine. It also introduced a link between the nuptial blessing and the couple's communion. That is why the priest's introduction to the nuptial blessing today makes a reference to the Communion that is about to follow.

Apart from these ritual notes, the priest should be aware of a thorny question: When is a wedding Mass not a wedding Mass? There are certain days on the calendar when a wedding may take place, but the presidential prayers do not come from the ritual Mass For the Celebration of Marriage. For example, if a wedding Mass takes place on Saturday night, Jan. 7, the liturgy for the Epiphany takes precedence. The priest may have a wedding during Mass that night, but the prayers and readings are drawn from the Epiphany. The nuances are explained in paragraph 34 of the Introduction.

The second edition has also revised the ceremonies that take place without Mass, over which a deacon may preside. When either the bride or groom is not Catholic, these ceremonies keep everyone on a more equal footing of prayer.

Resources to help Plan your Wedding:

[www.foryourwedding.org](http://www.foryourwedding.org)

[www.catholicweddinghelp.com](http://www.catholicweddinghelp.com)

## **Catholic Unity Candle Ceremony for use at the Reception**

No one seems really clear about the origin of the Unity Candle. Some claim it was popularized by the 1981 wedding of television's Luke and Laura on General Hospital, although there's evidence of its use in the mid-1970s. Some sources claim it was developed as a way to sell couples three pounds of wax for \$50 dollars.

Many couples like the simple ritual of lighting a unity candle, a practice that is not part of the Rite of Marriage in the Catholic Church and is, in fact, prohibited in many parishes.

The unity candle symbolizes two lives now joined together in marriage and can be easily and elegantly incorporated into a meal prayer at your wedding reception.

Below you will find two Catholic unity candle ceremony options that you can adapt to fit your particular setting. The first option calls for your parents to offer a blessing and the second option calls for the two of you to do so.