

**Diocese of San Diego**

**GUIDELINES FOR THE WEDDING LITURGY**

Pope John Paul II stresses that the nuptial liturgy be valid, fruitful, simple and dignified. He says:

Inasmuch as it is a sacramental action of the church, the liturgical celebration of marriage should involve the Christian community, with the full, active and responsible participation of all those present, according to the place and task of each individual: the bride and bridegroom, the priest, the witnesses, the relatives, the friends, the other members of the faithful, all of them members of an assembly that manifests and lives the mystery of Christ and His church.

*Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II, 1981, n. 67.

The *Code of Canon Law* directs pastors to assist couples to have:

a fruitful liturgical celebration of marriage which is to show that the spouses signify and share in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church.

*Code of Canon Law*, canon 1063, 3°.

To celebrate getting married in the Lord and before the Church means professing that the gift of grace made to the spouses by the presence and love of Christ and his Spirit calls for a practical response, with a life of worship in spirit and truth, in the Christian family, the 'domestic church'.

*Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, Pontifical Council for the Family, 1996, n. 62.

**When**

Although a the wedding liturgy is not prohibited during the seasons of Advent and Lent, these are more subdued seasons and other times of the year are more appropriate for the festive nature of a wedding. Marriage is never allowed on Good Friday or on Holy Saturday.

**Planning the Wedding Liturgy**

The local parish will have the resources to assist in the important task of planning the details of the liturgical celebration.

**Participants**

The celebrant who presides and presents the ecclesial meaning of the marriage commitment for the assembly will try to involve those who are being married, together with their relatives and the witnesses, so that they can comprehend the structure of the rite.

*Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, n. 66.

To achieve a style of celebration at once restrained and noble, whoever presides should be helped by the presence of assistant ministers, of people who will animate and sustain the singing of the faithful, lead the responses and proclaim the Word of God.

*Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, n. 67.

The wedding liturgy is first and foremost a parish celebration, as are all of the Church's sacraments. A goal of the couple's preparation is to encourage the full and active participation of all who will gather to celebrate their marriage. Care should be taken in selecting those who will exercise liturgical ministries in the marriage celebration. These include competent cantors, musicians, readers, eucharistic ministers, greeters, altar servers and others. Well-intentioned family members and friends do not always meet the criteria for competence or experience. Parishioners who serve the various ministries might be invited to participate in this parish celebration. Where needed, guidance and instruction should be provided by the parish.

## **THE RITES**

### **Three Forms of the Wedding Liturgy**

#### **1. The Rite for Celebrating Marriage During Mass**

This form is normally used when two Catholics marry. The wedding Mass is used with the following exceptions. On the days listed in nos. 1-4 of the Table of Liturgical Days (see *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*) the Mass of the day is used with its proper readings; the nuptial blessing is given and the proper formulary of the solemn blessing is used. During the Season of Christmas and in Ordinary Time, when a marriage is celebrated within the Sunday Mass of the parish community, the Mass of the Sunday is used. On such occasions, one of the readings may be taken from the texts provided for the celebration of marriage (second edition of the *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium*, n. 34).

#### **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 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 and current church regulations prohibit non-Catholics from receiving communion at Mass.

#### **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.

The choice of form used should be made in consultation with the priest or deacon who is to officiate.

### **Guidelines for the Reception of Communion in a Eucharistic Liturgy**

The following guidelines on the reception of communion were approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on November 14, 1996. They address the celebration of

marriage within the Eucharistic liturgy which would be attended by fellow Christians and non-Christians as well as by Catholic participants.

**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 not 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.

### **Guidelines for a Communion Service with the Marriage Rite**

It is highly recommended that the faithful receive holy communion during the eucharistic celebration itself. It is to be administered outside the Mass, however, to those who request it for a just cause, with the liturgical rites being observed.

*Code of Canon Law, canon 918.*

A just cause is present when two Catholics request a wedding Mass, but cannot have it because a deacon or lay minister will be presiding at the rite.

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. An exception would be made if the couple is from a priestless parish.
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.

## **ELEMENTS OF THE LITURGY**

### **Environment**

Simplicity is key to any good liturgical celebration. Nothing should ever impede the visibility or movement in and around the ambo, the altar, the presider's chair, or the aisle. The use of anything artificial works against good liturgical celebration. Real candles and natural flowers or plants are traditional signs of celebration and life.

## Music

The involvement of family and friends is essential to the celebration. While a soloist may perform a worthwhile role, inviting the assembly to sing hymns, songs and acclamations reinforces the communal dimension of the sacrament. Every effort should be made to sing the responsorial psalm and gospel acclamation.

Since many or most couples have a limited awareness of attractive and appropriate sacred wedding music, a critical pastoral step is an early encounter between the parish musician and the engaged pair...The Committee on the Liturgy of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has given us three standards to be used in choosing music for any celebration of liturgy:

1. **The Musical Standard:** Music used in liturgy must be technically correct and of good quality.
2. **The Liturgical Standard:** The sacrament of matrimony is a public act, a sacred sign, an encounter with Christ. The music at weddings should serve to emphasize the sacred event, not distract from it...
3. **The Pastoral Standard:** Each wedding is unique; the music at a particular wedding must be judged on how well it will enable this particular group of people present at this particular wedding to express their faith.

*Faithful to Each Other Forever*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1989, pp. 121-122.

The suitability of texts sung at the wedding liturgy is an important consideration. The Christian concept of “love” is characterized by commitment and fidelity, supported by the love of Christ. Popular love songs often stress only the couple and exclude God and the Church. They often do not say enough about the origin of love and God’s role in a marriage. These songs would be more appropriately performed at the wedding reception.

## Gathering of the Assembly

Many people who attend 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 celebrate the liturgy together. The couple, as well as their parents and families, can effectively serve as ministers of hospitality by introducing friends and relatives before the liturgy.

## Procession

The procession is a liturgical action described in the *Rite of Marriage* as the ritual entrance of the ministers for the liturgy. The couple, as ministers of the sacrament of marriage, is included in the procession. The actual order of the procession may be planned with the presiding priest or deacon, but equal attention should be given to both families. Separation of the men and women in procession is discouraged.

## Selection of Prayers and Readings

The wedding couple is encouraged to use the resource books provided by the parish to choose appropriate liturgical prayers and scripture selections. Scripture readings from the Lectionary for the wedding Mass and marriages celebrated without Mass are to be used. Non-scriptural readings are prohibited during 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 celebrations.

### **Consent and Exchange of Vows**

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 given. One of the two approved forms contained in the *Rite of Marriage* must be used. Elaborations on the consent given may be added only in conjunction with one of the approved forms. The vows should be proclaimed in a posture and place visible and audible to the assembly.

### **Local Rituals**

Local rituals and symbols, including ethnically derived traditions, may be admitted into the wedding liturgy after discussion with the priest or deacon as to their appropriate inclusion. It is important that they truly symbolize the sacramental significance of marriage. While the unity candle, the presentation of a bouquet of flowers to the Blessed Mother, the arras, lazo, veil and other popular customs may be authentic expressions of faith, they are not at this time part of the official *Rite of Marriage* in the United States and are secondary to the central ritual actions of the wedding liturgy.

If used, the unity candle should be displayed on a separate table or stand, but not on the altar. Two small, lighted candles, perhaps the baptismal candles, are symbolic of the separate histories of the bride and groom. They are commonly used to light the central, larger candle that represents their oneness in Christ. It would be more appropriate for the large candle representing Christ (or Paschal Candle) to be burning from the beginning of the wedding liturgy. The light of Christ is shared with the couple and they light their candles from the “Christ candle,” for they are united with each other by being united in Christ. Another option is to use the unity candle as the beginning prayer of the wedding reception.

### **Printed Programs/Orders of Service**

Some couples may wish to prepare an order of service to be distributed to guests assembled for the wedding liturgy. The program might include the assembly’s responses to various parts of the Mass and the music they will be singing. This is a way to invite the participation of all who will gather to celebrate the wedding. When music is printed, necessary copyright permissions should be secured. It is recommended that scripture texts not be printed in their entirety, but merely the citations. A personal message from the wedding couple to their invited guests, the names of liturgical ministers and the names of the wedding party might also be included.

## **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.

Pictures 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 community celebration. Photographers are prohibited in the sanctuary during the wedding liturgy. The use of flash photography anywhere in the church is likewise prohibited during the liturgy.