

Preparing the Wedding Liturgy

"I'd rather do a funeral than a wedding." I've heard many of my brother priests make that statement. I think it's scandalous. Priests are not alone. Many musicians and other parish workers say it too.

I understand where the sentiment comes from. Weddings are hard work. They often involve one or both fiancés who are not very connected to the parish in particular or the Church in general. They drag ministers into a social industry that drains the financial resources of families, raises irrational emotions, and assumes that liturgical choices can be made as freely as those over the color of dresses and boutonnieres. Weddings take place during prime time - weekends, when we are summoning our strength to celebrate the liturgy well with those who do make an effort to participate in the parish liturgy Sunday after Sunday. When it comes to weddings, many priests and parish ministers feel used.

You need a stiff spine to prepare for weddings. You face not only an enormously powerful machine of social expectations, but also liturgical rules. If you've studied the rite of marriage, you know that what happens in the church rarely

matches what the liturgical book describes - especially with regard to the procession.

Still, because of all this, Catholic weddings need priests, musicians and ministers who care about the couple and the Church. They need parish leaders who will pour heart and soul into preparation and celebration. Rather than feeling pushed around by weddings, we need to be on top of our game. They are opportunities for evangelization, catechesis, and holy joy. A lot of us are missing the opportunity.

I have long suspected that we celibate priests especially struggle with weddings because we have never been a groom. We never went through the drama of finding a loved one, deciding to commit, stressing over preparations, and standing in front of God, the Church, family and friends to say the words "I take you. . . all the days of my life." It would be natural to find within us some resentment that we are being called to preside over a moment of joy that we have freely chosen to exclude from our own lives in order to serve as a priest.

I have suspected this, but not everyone agrees with me. Some priests insistently tell me they feel no resentment in this regard. Besides, the reluctance to assist at weddings is shared by others - some ministers of other denominations, musicians, and florists.

Weddings may require an attitude adjustment. They are hard work, and they demand as much love from us as the bride and groom have toward each other.

What It's All About

Before planning or celebrating a marriage, get focused. Remember what this is all about. The bride and groom are about to make a covenant of love with each other. They are choosing to enter a relationship that God ordained from the creation of the world. They are expressing their readiness to receive and care for any children who come into their family. And because they are making this commitment through the Catholic Church, they recognize the holiness of this undertaking. Marriage is a symbol of the way Christ loves the Church. Christian marriage assures the couple that the Holy Spirit will dwell with them and guide their love.

Marriage is a beautiful thing. It is a holy thing. Couples realize this to varying degrees, but those who arrange a Church wedding grasp it at least minimally. Otherwise, they'd be marrying each other at the court house or the beach. There are plenty of couples who marry without giving a thought to the sacredness of the commitment. We usually don't see them. They're getting married somewhere else.

Give credit to the couple asking for a church wedding. Cynics will claim they just want it for show, that even a church wedding merely fulfills a societal expectation. But if the Church didn't mean something to the bride and groom at some level, they wouldn't be here. Upon this religious instinct, we build a broader case for planning the wedding.

When I first meet an engaged couple, I always hope for the best. I hope to meet people in love with each other and with God, folks whose decision to marry will inspire me to be faithful to my commitments. I hope that the privilege of celebrating their wedding will be a highlight for my ministry this year.

The first words I say are "Congratulations to you both." I ask the parish office staff to be prepared with the same greeting. If one of them fields a phone call from a newly engaged person, I want the caller to hear a human response. "Congratulations!" is the most important thing to say.

When the bride and groom come to see me, I make small talk. How did you meet? Where do you work? Are you in school? Tell me about the engagement. (I love engagement stories.) How did your family react when they got the news you were engaged? All this tells me a lot, and I hope it reassures the couple that I want to know them and support them.

Then I ask spiritual questions. Tell me about your background with a church. Have you been a believer all your life? Do you pray? Who are some people who influenced your faith? Have you two done any religious activities together? Why would you like a wedding in the Catholic Church? What do you hope to experience during the wedding ceremony?

This forms a context for some of the other pastoral questions that need to be asked: Are you living together? Do you have children? Are you planning to have children and raise them in the Catholic Church? Are you planning on a lifetime commitment? When is it right and wrong for two people to have sex?

Many couples have not reflected on their spiritual lives, and they may not be very skilled at it. They may need help to discern what they believe in, and what is right and wrong in their conduct. Other couples are quite articulate. They have a lively faith and happily share it. They have strong values, and they want you to know about them.

We owe it to couples to guide them on this spiritual journey. It is our task to help them see where God has been in their lives so far, and how God is now summoning them to a new level of faith through their forthcoming marriage.

Planning the Ceremony

It will be easier to plan the wedding liturgy if the bride and groom have reflected with you on the big picture. They are asking for a church wedding; they deserve our guidance. Once we have talked about spirituality and morals, we have a context to talk about liturgy.

Mass

A key decision to make is whether or not this wedding will include mass. According to the rite, marriage is usually held during mass (*Rite of Marriage* 6), but the marriage between a Catholic and a baptized person who is not a Catholic is performed outside of mass (8); the same paragraph indicates that the local Ordinary may permit mass for this circumstance. The marriage between a Catholic and one who is not baptized does not allow that exception; it takes place outside of mass.

A wedding outside of mass has many advantages, especially when those in attendance will come from a variety of faiths. If most of those present do not know when to stand, sit or kneel, and how to make the responses, then celebrating mass will not achieve full, conscious and active participation. A wedding outside of mass gives everyone more equal footing. The ceremony focuses on the scriptures, the consent, the prayers and the blessings. It is easier for people of a variety of faiths to pray as one in the liturgy.

Sometimes the Catholic family members need reassurance that a wedding without mass is still a Catholic wedding. But in general I find that many couples are relieved to learn about this possibility. In addition, the priest who already has a full weekend usually finds that a wedding without mass demands less of his energy.

In either case, help the couple approach the wedding liturgy with the same mindset we use for Sunday mass. The same rules for processions, decoration, music, and ritual apply. Their wedding fits into a subcategory of liturgies that are celebrated in this parish church throughout the year. Their wedding will be beautiful. It will be joyful. And it will fit the spirit of the other events that take place in this church.

Readings

The selection of the scriptures provides an occasion for spiritual conversation. Have the bride and groom reflect on their own spiritual journey, but also about the people who are coming to this wedding. Who are they? What do they believe? How do they need to be challenged or affirmed? The couple should think about everyone who will hear the scriptures before selecting the texts for the wedding.

Once they have decided, ask them about the readings they've chosen. Why these? What struck you about them? If they can't answer, try reading the text out loud with them. Ask what they

hear. Do it to lead them, not to embarrass them. Help them meet God in the divine word.

The Procession

The procession is a formidable issue. When people think about a wedding, they often imagine the procession. Of course, it's not the most important part, but for many it is. It will showcase the bride's dress more than anything else. The traditional procession has been imprinted on the psyche of the nation, and the wedding industry is built upon it.

You know how this goes. Traditionally the bride and her attendants come up the main aisle. The groom and his attendants come out a side sacristy door into the sanctuary. This symbolizes that the bride and the groom come from two different circles. The priest comes out of another door. I guess this symbolizes that nobody knows where he comes from - he just lives here. These three processions converge at the altar and the wedding begins.

One other person plays a key role in the traditional procession: the father of the bride. He walks her down the aisle, kisses her, and gives her to the groom, who escorts her along the final few steps. This symbolizes that the groom and the father of the bride have agreed to the arrangement that the woman who used to live with one family will now be living

elsewhere. In reality, the decision to marry is more intricate than that, but the procession still symbolizes something else.

"Who gives this woman to this man?" is a question many couples expect to hear in the wedding. It doesn't exist in the Catholic rite. When a bride recently insisted that I ask this question, I found myself unwilling to do so. In our culture, men do not pass women between them. And besides, the decision to marry has to be free. The bride has to give her consent, not her father's consent. When I explained all this to the couple in question, the groom asked if there was some other question I could ask to which the bride's father could answer, "Her mother and I." I suggested this question: "Who's paying for this wedding?"

Seriously, there are other questions that could be asked. "Who has prepared this woman for this day?" "Who has taught this bride the meaning of love?" "Who has set an example of married love for this bride?" But if the question is going to the bride's parents, shouldn't it also go to the groom's?

To my shame, even though I don't want to ask the question, "Who's giving this bride away?" I admit that I've stood by quietly while families act it out time and time again. Whenever the father walks the bride up the aisle and hands her to the groom, I may not be asking the question, but they are providing the answer. The father is giving away this bride.

Amazingly, this quaint custom has endured in a society that has valued more equality between the sexes. Women want equality in the workplace and shared responsibilities in the household. But there is virtually no groundswell to change the wedding procession. Who will advocate for a change?

Believe it or not, the Catholic Church advocates a change. The Rite of Marriage has a very different wedding procession in mind. Most people can't believe it when they see it in print. But it's there. It's in two paragraphs. The first one describes a welcome that the priest gives to the couple; the second describes the procession. Note that the priest meets both the bride and the groom, and that they are standing together either by the front door of the church or at the altar. When the procession forms, the priest and the ministers go first, and the bride walks in not with her father, but with the groom. Here's the actual quote from the Rite of Marriage that has been in effect ever since 1969:

19. At the appointed time, the priest, vested for Mass, goes with the ministers to the door of the church or, if more suitable, to the altar. There he meets the bride and bridegroom in a friendly manner, showing that the Church shares their joy. Where it is desirable that the rite of welcome be omitted, the celebration of marriage begins at once with the Mass.

20. If there is a procession to the altar, the ministers go first, followed by the priest, and then the bride and the bridegroom. According to local custom, they may be escorted by at least their parents and the two witnesses. Meanwhile, the entrance song is sung.

Imagine it this way: There is one procession, not three. Everybody walks up the middle aisle. The servers lead the way. The lector follows. The priest enters along with a deacon, if one is assisting. Then the witnesses process in as couples. After that, all the parents process in. Finally, the bride and the groom come up the aisle, arm in arm.

It's beautiful, isn't it? At a Catholic liturgy, the last one in the procession is the primary minister. At the eucharist, that would be the priest. But at a wedding, that would be the couple. The bride and the groom are the ministers of this marriage. The rest of us are witnesses to what they do.

Why on earth doesn't this catch on? Well, it's up against a lot of opposition from society's marriage machine. The bride has been dreaming all her life that she would walk down the aisle one day with her father. The groom doesn't want to see the bride until he's at the sanctuary and she's at the door. There is a lot of resistance. What can we do?

I think there are several strategies that might work. But be realistic. Changing the wedding procession is a huge task

because in the secular psyche, the procession is pretty much what the wedding is about. Still, try this:

- Get cooperation at the diocesan level. No pastor who takes on the challenge is going to succeed if the bride and groom know they can get the wedding procession they want at a neighboring parish, or if the pastor who comes next has a more lax approach to weddings. Changing the procession is going to take diocesan-wide catechesis, and it will be very difficult to do. Still, success will depend on that kind of support, and it will be more convincing if married couples do the catechesis, not celibate priests.
- Offer this procession to every couple. I don't force couples to do it, but I want them to know it's an option. I want them to think through what the procession means, what it is symbolizing. Once they put words on it, they will understand the situation all the more. You could ask what role the parents have played in preparing the couple for this day, and what role they should therefore have in the procession. Is the father of the bride really different from the other parents? My goal is catechesis; that's all. If this generation won't change the procession, maybe the next one will.

- Remember that some couples are really looking for a different procession. Couples in second marriages, for example, don't connect with the tradition of the father walking the bride down the aisle. When the bride and groom learn they can enter the church together, many of them are delighted with the idea. You may also have a situation in which the bride has become estranged from her father. She may be relieved to know the Church recommends a different solution to the wedding procession.
- At the very least, strive for putting everyone into one procession. I pretty much insist on this, and I find little resistance. If the bride and groom don't want to walk up together, I still request that the groom and the groomsmen come up the main aisle with everyone else. I explain that this is how we execute processions in the Catholic Church. It's a liturgy. Think of how Sunday mass begins. This should begin in the same way - with one procession.
- One procession can also be achieved if the ministers go first, the attendants follow, and then the groom enters with his parents, followed by the bride with hers. Sometimes the groom wants to enter behind the priest and ahead of the attendants, and he could do that, but that

makes the attendants a true "bridal party" - having nothing to do with the groom.

The Kneeler

Another potential issue for catechesis is the kneeler. In the popular imagination, a wedding takes place in a church with a bride and groom kneeling together in front of the altar.

The Catholic Rite of Marriage never mentions a kneeler. The revised marriage rite (not yet available in English) does give the couple the option of kneeling at their place for the nuptial blessing. Alternatively, they may approach the altar and stand for the blessing.

The kneeler accommodates the bride who may have difficulty sitting in her dress. Otherwise, the kneeler really doesn't fit what is going on. The bride and groom are members of the assembly, and they should take the posture everyone else does. That means they should be able to sit for most of the liturgy of the word. If the wedding includes mass, they should kneel when others kneel. They disrupt the unity of the assembly if they kneel while others sit.

Many couples take their place at a kneeler facing the back wall. But they could take seats in the sanctuary facing out. During the exchange of consent, some priests position themselves between the couple and the rest of the assembly. When the bride and groom turn to him, everyone else sees their faces too.

If the wedding takes place apart from mass, the liturgy never requires anyone to kneel. But there are times for standing and sitting. Some brides don't want to sit because of their dress. Let them know early on that they will be invited to sit for part of the ceremony. The dress should accommodate itself to the liturgy; the liturgy need not accommodate itself to the dress.

Once again, though, this is a difficult message to get through. Some couples will be fine with it; others will not. The struggle for more liturgical weddings will be long and concentrated. If we give clear and charitable catechesis, we can make some headway.

Other matters

There are many other details to every wedding. They will be easier to discuss if the couple have reflected about the meaning of this celebration, and what they hope the liturgy will achieve.

Music. In general, the same rules that apply to Sunday mass should apply to weddings. We don't sing secular songs at Sunday worship; we don't use them at weddings either. There will be a reception. There will be plenty of opportunity to hear secular music there. The music for weddings should serve the liturgy.

Consent. Most couples exchange their consent by reciting it a phrase at a time after the priest or deacon. But that option never appears in the Rite of Marriage. It assumes that they will either recite the words right out of the book, from a cue card, or from memory. Most couples will be too nervous to do it any other way, and the "repeat after me" format can be quite beautiful. The consent - not the procession - is what the wedding is all about. Couples should talk over how they want it to go, and how to make it stand out as the central feature of the celebration.

Other rituals. There are many other rituals that have found their way into wedding ceremonies - lighting candleabra before the service, the unity candle during it, singing Ave Maria near the end. None of these appears in the Rite of Marriage. They are not foreign to Catholic sensibilities, so they can be integrated with meaning. But some parishes have well-reasoned rules governing these and other customs. It's fine - but just have a reason behind what you do and do not permit.

A final word

Finally, beware of being punitive. Every parish has rules governing weddings. And most priests and parish ministers have

internal rules - certain additions to the ceremony they will accept or reject.

But I find that some of us take perverse delight in telling couples "No." We hide in the thicket of our rules, while avoiding the hard task of listening and dialoguing. What is the couple asking for? Why do they want this? Is what they are asking forbidden by the Church? Are they seeking something that is within their rights? Is there no canonical or liturgical law against this request?

I don't advocate giving couples everything they want. I do advocate listening to them and catechizing them. But if they make a request that is within their rights, I become pro-couple. If it's a small matter that makes a big difference to them, I may let them have their request.

"Can we ring the bells after the wedding?" You bet. "Can we light a candle for my deceased grandmother?" No problem. "Can I wear a cowboy hat?" Well, tell me why that's important. "Do our readings have to come from the bible?" Um, yes, they do.

But in every case, I try to get behind the question. I want to learn why this matters to this couple. The conversation usually tells me about their values. It helps me minister to them. But it also gives me a chance to catechize, to say something more about how the Church approaches this marriage.

In that conversation, we all discover common ground. We have ideals. High ideals. No one walks down the aisle without them.

And no one should walk alone. When you plan the wedding liturgy, plan to know the couple. Plan to love them. Then celebrate the wedding with joy.

Pastoral Liturgy 40/3 (May/June 2009):4-8.