

The Order of Celebrating Matrimony for Priests

Catholic priests in English-speaking countries are getting their first look at 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 over 25 years, but it is only now appearing in English. Although an English translation had been drafted earlier, the Vatican's revised rules for translations put that work back to the drawing board. The final product is now available and is to be implemented by the Feast of the Holy Family, 2016.

Some of the revised translation is already available in the Roman Missal. The section called "Ritual Masses" includes several pages of the Mass "For the Celebration of Marriage." There can be found the complete selection of antiphons, collects, prayers over the offerings, prefaces, commemorations, nuptial blessings, communion antiphons, prayers after communion and solemn blessings.

The parts that pertain to the celebration of the sacrament appear in a separate book, *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony*. It 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 tweak than rewrite. Changes to the ceremonies will also be largely unnoticed. However, experienced priests will spot a number of differences.

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 get to the sanctuary and actually allows the possibility of no formal procession at all.

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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 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.

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 have 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, 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,

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“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 hispanic and filipino customs, the *arras* and the use of a *lazo* or of a veil. The *arras* are coins that the groom pours from a box into the hands of the bride, and that 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 place 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 that never appeared in the previous ritual. Now it does, as an option. There is no sprinkling in the ritual for the *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 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, January 7, the liturgy for the

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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. Every priest should become familiar with these rules.

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.

The ritual book remains vague about issues that interest many couples: the role of the father of the bride, the unity candle, pouring sand, and bringing flowers to an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, for example. Paragraph 29 of the Introduction gives permission to observe local customs, but what is “local” and what are “customs” will be debated from one parish to another. In general, priests may permit whatever is not contrary to the liturgy, but the couple should be reminded to let nothing overshadow the giving of their consent and rings.

With regard to music, paragraph 30 of the same Introduction says that it should reflect the faith of the Church. This should help priests and couples plan for the sacred music that deserves a home in every wedding.

Some priests exercising hispanic ministry may be wondering when the Spanish version of the second edition will be published. It already has been. It has been available since 2010, and it should be used for every Spanish-language wedding in the United States.

The second edition brings new life to the planning and celebrations of matrimony in the Catholic Church in the United States. It will help the entire Church affirm the gift and joy of love.

Sidebar 1:

A blessing of an engaged couple also appears in the second edition of *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony*. This is based on the ceremony that has already been available in the *Book of Blessings*. Although a priest may preside, he may not do so during mass. That could leave the mistaken impression upon some people that the wedding itself is taking place.

A lay person may lead the ceremony - whether a member of the family of the bride or groom, or even someone from the parish marriage preparation team. It may be held in church or in the home of the family of the bride or groom. It could fittingly occur during or at the conclusion of parish marriage preparation sessions, in whatever location the group has been meeting.

The ceremony includes the proclamation of scripture, the offering of prayers, and may even feature an exchange of gifts. The highlight, of course, is the blessing of the couple, which concludes the event. *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* permits great flexibility in organizing this ceremony. For example, it never even indicates the postures that people assume. They could remain standing or sit throughout.

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Such a ceremony may give the community an occasion to pray for the couple as they continue the preparation for their wedding day. Both bride and groom will be distracted by many details pertaining to their wedding, so the more opportunity they have for ritual prayer, the more spiritually centered they can become when the wedding day finally arrives.

Sidebar 2:

On a significant anniversary of marriage, the couple may wish to celebrate the event with a special mass. A priest should keep in mind both the nature of this celebration and the impact that the liturgical year may have upon it.

Many people think of this anniversary as a “renewal of vows,” but the Catholic Church has never formally adopted this terminology or promoted the idea. First of all, the precise word for what a couple makes at a wedding is “consent,” not “vows.” They do not make a vow to God; they give their consent to each other.

Second, once this consent has been given, it is permanent. It does not need renewal. However, the Catholic Church has never had an elaborate anniversary ceremony, so it has been common to see couples restating their consent to each other on the 25th or 50th anniversary.

Now there is a different and better option. The couple may pray in silence, and then say words of thanksgiving to God for the partner that they received, and for the blessings that they have enjoyed. The revised ceremony is much more pertinent to the actual event underway.

When planning the mass, the priest should remember that this is a votive mass, not a ritual mass. That means that he will meet some restrictions pertaining to the readings and presidential prayers. For example, on December 12, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the priest may normally celebrate a wedding mass that replaces all the prayers and readings of the feast. However, if he celebrates a wedding anniversary mass on the same day, he may still conduct the proposed ceremony during the mass, but he takes the readings and prayers from the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

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