

The Marriage of Liturgy and Culture

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Introduction

Catholics getting married today inhabit a different world than their parents did on their wedding day. The culture has changed. So has the wedding liturgy.

The English translation of the second edition of *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* came into force in the United States at the end of 2016. It incorporates the changes in content that the Vatican introduced in 1990 (for example, a more theologically rich and intelligently organized introduction, a clarification of some rubrics, the insertion of an epiclesis in each of the nuptial blessings, and a ceremony for a wedding anniversary). It also contains a retranslation of all the earlier portions of the ceremony in accordance with the rules of *Liturgiam authenticam*, promulgated in 2001.

The changes to the liturgy are subtle, but the changes in culture are not: Many couples choose to live together without marriage, children are considered optional, gay marriage has become legal, divorce rates soar, churches are marginalized. The revised wedding ceremony did not explicitly address these issues, making some people wonder if - after all the work on content expansion and retranslation - the ceremony is still relevant.

Liturgy is always in a relationship with culture. When it comes to Catholic weddings, how happy is the marriage?

This article will explore this question through a look at the couple, the liturgy, the cost, and the traditional *bona* of marriage.¹

The couple

A traditional Catholic wedding presumes that two Catholics are marrying each other. The ceremony takes place during a mass at which the two will share sacramental communion. The practice of Catholics marrying Catholics, however, is becoming increasingly rare in the United States, except perhaps in the hispanic community.

Nonetheless, the post-Vatican II marriage ceremony already foresaw that development, offering variations for the circumstances in which a Catholic

¹ I do some work for the International Commission on English in the Liturgy and watched the revised translation of *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* advance through stages. I have already written two books on the revised ceremony and translation, both published by Liturgical Press. *One Love: A Pastoral Guide to The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* surveys the differences between the first and second editions of the Catholic marriage ceremony, whereas *Inseparable Love: A Commentary on The Order of Celebrating Matrimony in the Catholic Church* gives a more detailed analysis of the translation, contents and history of ceremony. This article focuses on other matters.

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marries a baptized non-Catholic or an unbaptized person. These sensitive ceremonies show the fruit of the ecumenical movement of the 1960s.

At first, postconciliar Catholic weddings largely took place at mass, even if one partner was not Catholic. Many parents thought - incorrectly - that a Catholic who marries outside mass is not getting married at all. Although such thinking persists, it has diminished. A wedding without mass pastorally reaches out to all Christians in the congregation, who can worship together on more equal footing.

Even more prescient is the ceremony between a Catholic and an unbaptized person. At first a need in non-Christian areas of the world, this ritual has become even more prevalent in evangelized countries where non-Christian immigration has increased and where baptisms among Christians have decreased. *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* envisions that such ceremonies take place outside of mass (36), partly out of respect for members of non-Christian religions present at a wedding, and partly because of the disputed question about the sacramentality of the ceremony. Although the Catholic Church believes that the wedding of any two baptized Christians is a sacrament, it withholds judgment on marriage with a person who is unbaptized.

In some circumstances, however, the Catholic is marrying an unbaptized believer: a catechumen, or a person who self-identifies as Christian but has never been baptized. In those weddings, the liturgy need not tiptoe around the question of belief. Furthermore, in some cultures the wedding without mass so diminishes the ceremonial content that it seems to devalue marriage. This has caused some couples in non-Christian countries or multicultural urban areas to seek the bishop's permission for a wedding within mass, on the assumption that the law in question is disciplinary, not constitutive.

At the time of the council, the study group redrafting the wedding ceremony had a different concern: the engagement of Catholics who no longer shared the church's beliefs, but who desired a wedding because of cultural pressure. The study group proposed a Catholic wedding without its usual liturgical form.² This never came to pass, but it shows an early concern to preserve the integrity of liturgy and culture.

Today, unchurched couples increasingly choose other options for their wedding. Societal pressure for a church wedding has diminished. Furthermore, in the hispanic community, where people understand the distinction between the civil and church ceremonies, many couples who qualify for a church wedding do not choose one because of other considerations - the expense, their distance from close family members, or the influence of friends who live together without marriage. Although such couples may not communion, many seem not to mind. Many consider themselves unworthy for frequent communion anyway, even after marriage in the church.

The culture recognizes some marriages that the church does not; for example, those who have not yet obtained an annulment on a preceding divorce

² *Inseparable Love*, pp. 18-20.

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and homosexual couples in general. Still, for many others who have dropped a far-flung pin on the broad map of faith and belief, *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* creates a route to marriage.

The liturgy

Elements of a Catholic wedding risk charges of sexism. The three nuptial blessings in particular presume that the groom is the breadwinner and the bride the housekeeper. Two options were composed for the postconciliar ceremony, and the other was reworked because its medieval original was even more sexist and pertained only to the bride. Still, the postconciliar ceremony strove to balance the roles of husband and wife. Some of the revisers wanted to retain the long tradition of the bridal blessing, but in the end approved a blessing of the couple. In the past, the Catholic ceremony required a single ring, the one that the groom placed on the finger of the bride. Here too, after much disagreement, the postconciliar ceremony called for two rings. Today it seems plainly appropriate, but these changes seemed dramatic in 1969.

Surprisingly, the culture retains certain sexist practices that the liturgy spurns. For example, at the time of the engagement, the groom customarily places a ring on the bride's finger, but he wears no equivalent ring. He has claimed her, yet she has no such visible claim on his hand.

Nothing demonstrates the Catholic liturgy's sometimes surprisingly enlightened abandonment of cultural sexism than the entrance procession. Both Latin editions of the ceremony offer two options for the opening of the celebration. In the first the presider goes to the door of the church to greet the entire wedding party, informally helping them transition from the secular to the sacred world. He then processes toward the sanctuary, preceded by the usual liturgical ministers. Then the couple follow him, accompanied if they wish by their witnesses and parents. In the second option of the opening the priest greets the couple in the sanctuary; no details explain how they all got there.

The first option honors the Catholic belief that the bride and groom confer the sacrament upon each other. They follow the presider in the procession because they are the principal ministers of marriage. Such a procession rarely takes place. The cultural preference that the bride enter escorted by her father has trumped liturgical efforts at sexual equality.

The English translation of the second edition has completely obscured the original Latin description of the procession, waving a white flag before culture's advance. The Spanish translation for the United States carries an accurate translation of the rubric in question. People may justly complain about the sexism of some prayers, but some of the ritual actions meet the culture better than the culture meets itself.

In other dissensions, cultural preferences prevail. For example, many couples request an outdoor wedding. The boundless beauty of nature resonates with the unsheltered limits of love and the lure to unite in the act of creating. Although these yearnings are not foreign to Catholic theology, the church offers something more; namely, a church. As to the location of the wedding, the

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Catholic church sometimes conflicts with the culture, causing some couples to forsake the church and marry elsewhere. In some parts of the world bishops more commonly permit outdoor weddings, but rarely in the United States.

Wedding music shows the contrasting values of liturgy and culture. Many couples hear lyrics that successfully name what they feel, clothed in music that moves them. They sense the emotional link between the transcendence of human love and the art of song. Some couples are surprised to learn that this union of words, music and love are not always welcome at the wedding. The Catholic Church believes that music should serve the liturgical words; secular music intrudes on the purposes of worship. Couples have other venues to hear meaningful popular songs, especially at the reception. But some wish that these could resound in the ceremony.

Some couples request recorded music for their wedding. After all, that is how most people encounter music in the culture today. One of the few places that people can hear live music every week is at church. Or in a local bar. Otherwise, they most frequently hear recordings on various electronic devices. For many people, music is prerecorded and portable. Yet Catholic liturgical music is live and local.

Liturgical wedding music succeeds more generally in the hispanic culture, which enjoys a more common repertoire and religious sensibilities. Some anglos planning music in the United States panicked upon realizing that the revised missal calls for the Gloria at a wedding mass. But many hispanic assemblies can sing several versions of the Gloria, so adding one to the list of wedding music poses little problem.

Because the culture supports the preferences of the individual - "Have it your way" - some couples ask if they can write their own vows. They are inviting disaster. In the Catholic tradition the words of consent are intimately yoked to the conferral of the sacrament. If the couple change the words, they risk the charge of invalidity. However, the liturgy gives them other opportunities for creativity; notably, the universal prayer (or prayer of the faithful). These petitions should be composed locally, yet many parishes copy print and internet publications written by someone else far away. Catholic parishes have had nearly fifty years to develop the skills for writing local petitions, but few have achieved this, and fewer have achieved it well. At a wedding, though, a couple may invite the community to pray for concerns that matter to them. Do they have a favorite charity or cause? Have they chosen an educational or career path that feels vocational? Do they have a heart for certain groups in the local or global community? A couple could personalize their wedding through the universal prayer, which would supremely fit the cultural value of individuality. But weddings are complicated. They happen on busy weekends. Parish workers are already stressed. Few people guide the couple in composing prayers of their own.

Other couples want to personalize the ceremony with ritual. Although *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* has incorporated the hispanic and filipino traditions of the *arras*, *velación*, and *lazo*, it remains silent about the bride

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carrying flowers to an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or the couple lighting a unity candle or pouring colored sand. It is impossible to legislate a single marriage ceremony that completely embraces global cultural variety. Even the preconciliar ceremony admitted the need for regional variations. The revised introduction to the postconciliar rite allows for the observance of “local customs” (29). But great controversy will ensue over what is “local” and what are “customs”. Some presiders permit more than others. Especially in the United States, ritual variations continue to evolve.

Sometimes the ritual confronts complicated family structures. The parents of the bride and groom may number more than four due to ex-spouses and step-parents, and siblings may expand to steps- and halves-. The Catholic liturgy is silent about these familial relationships apart from letting parents join in the wedding procession. But the sequence and pairing of family members is probably best left to the bride and groom to determine. No Vatican document dare offer advice.

The cost

One of the greatest cultural factors affecting Catholic weddings is economics. Weddings are big business and outrageously expensive. One of the most common reasons couples give for cohabiting before marriage is economical: “It will save money.” The art of the deal has become so ingrained in American society that any terms that save money are considered morally upright. Couples who may have learned about Catholic sexual mores in their younger days frequently set them aside under the guise that they have attained a nobler virtue: thrift.

Parishes are not immune to this cultural sway. Many presiders feel cheated by couples who spend tens of thousands of dollars on the wedding and offer a small sum to the church. But the same cultural barometer may be creating indignant clergy: Small financial gifts feel unjust. Never mind that clergy are witnessing the outpouring of divine grace upon an image of the union of Christ and the church. Many of them succumb to society’s powerful vacuum of greed.

There are exceptions, notably in rural America. Rural weddings can be expensive, but many are not. In fact, the entire economy of rural America works on a smaller scale than urban neighbors. Rural couples are frequently content with local venues and affordable honeymoons.

Another exception is the second wedding. Most of the expense lavished upon a couple happens at the first wedding of the bride and groom. If they divorce and later find new partners, they probably spend less for the second wedding. They seem less focused on appearance and more on meaning.

The *bona*

Traditionally Christians speak of three *bona* (“goods”) of marriage: permanence, fidelity and children. The couple are making a permanent commitment to each other. They promise to remain faithful to one partner only. They open their love to the gift of children.

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Permanence confronts the ease of divorce. Couples realize that they can always divorce if things don't work out the way they were hoping. Still, they enter marriage with the best intentions. Permanence is one of the forces drawing them to church for a wedding. The strength of their love convinces them that it will last for ever. At church the timelessness and permanence of God's covenant mirrors the love they feel. Although many couples will divorce, the Catholic marriage liturgy meets couples where they want to be: They proclaim their permanent love for each other publicly.

A married person promises sexual fidelity, and expects the same of the partner. The culture permits and encourages libertine practices among those who are not yet married. But afterwards the expectations shift. Once a relationship is permanent, it should also be unique. Some couples struggle to be faithful because of their premarital practice. Nonetheless, they realize that these expectations exist not only within the church but within society as well. Many couples who defend multiple sex partners prior to marriage believe that all that comes to an end with the wedding.

Children are the greatest gift of marriage, and they are another reason why couples couple. Children receive great hope of protection when their parents have made a permanent, exclusive promise. However, many engaged couples are approaching the church with children already in tow. Others do not wish to have children, a desire they dare not manifest because it will exclude them from having a Catholic wedding.

During the Catholic wedding liturgy the couple express their intent to fulfill these *bona*. Their existence still resonates with the best intentions of the culture.

Conclusion

Catholic weddings can and do marry well with the culture, which probably explains their persistence. Other denominations can adjust to some areas of the culture in ways that Catholics cannot; for example by offering marriage ceremonies to homosexual couples, or by introducing words of consent or newly composed prayers that articulate the spiritual experience of each particular couple.

But on the whole, the Catholic wedding ceremony embraces a certain flexibility that accommodates some cultural values, art, and terms of celebration that lift the human yearning for love into an experience of the divine. The marriage will never be perfect. It will always need work. But weddings still give the church a unique opportunity to wed not only bride and groom, but liturgy and culture.

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