

When Is a Sacrament Not a Sacrament? The Puzzle of a Catholic Marrying an Unbaptized Person

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The Catholic Church numbers marriage among its seven sacraments. The Catechism of the Catholic Church presents this definition of sacraments in general: “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions.”¹ To describe how marriage is a sacrament the catechism cites the code of canon law and the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: “The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament.”²

The Catholic Church makes several adjustments to the wedding liturgy when one or both of the spouses have never been baptized. For example, the unbaptized person may be a non-Christian or a catechumen; or a catechumen may marry a person who is a non-Christian or another catechumen. This paper treats the historical development of the ceremony, concessions made to the words and actions of the liturgy, as well as the question of sacramentality. An analysis of the ceremony reveals a carefully crafted liturgy, yet one in which some questions remain.

The historical development of the ceremony

For most of Christian history, Catholic weddings all took place outside of mass. A nuptial mass became common, but in the centuries preceding the Second Vatican Council, the wedding normally took place inside the church first, and then the nuptial mass followed. A priest could bestow the nuptial blessing only during mass, unless he had obtained special permission. However, the couple had already wed before the mass began. (This partly explains why the nuptial blessing still takes place apart from the rest of the ceremony, even when the wedding takes place within mass.)

Historically, the wedding of a Catholic with an unbaptized person took place outside of mass because every Catholic wedding did. The only questions that arose for this particular circumstance therefore did not concern the ceremony itself, but rather its location and the possibility of a nuptial blessing. With regard to location, the preconciliar Roman Ritual required any marriage

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1131.

² Catechism 1601, citing canon 1055 §1 and *Gaudium et spes* 48 §1.

between a Catholic and a non-Catholic to take place outside the church.³ This pertained to baptized and unbaptized non-Catholics alike. The marriage was conducted “outside the church without sacred vestments and without any ritual ceremony.”⁴ Many such couples were married in the parish rectory, for example. The Ordinary could dispense from these requirements. With regard to the nuptial blessing, the priest could only bestow it if he had obtained permission from the Apostolic See.⁵ One can only imagine how rare this would have been.

Questions arose during the first year of the Second Vatican Council when a draft of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy circulated among the bishops. It provoked a plea from Bishop Benedict Tomizawa of Sapporo, Japan, where Catholics were a minority, and where many of them therefore married non-Christians. Bishop Tomizawa hoped that the liturgy constitution itself would call for the development of a liturgical rite for such weddings. The people of Japan generally celebrated marriages with great ceremony, but when a Catholic married a non-Christian, the ceremony was breathtakingly simple. This was causing scandal in Japan, so Bishop Tomizawa requested “that the commission on the sacred liturgy prepare an article from the outset concerning the liturgical celebration of matrimony between a Christian and a non-Christian, in which is also contained the celebration of mass.”⁶ The final version of the liturgy constitution did not heed his request to set the wedding of a non-Christian within mass. Nonetheless, the group of specialists preparing the postconciliar wedding liturgy developed a non-eucharistic ceremony, even without a direct appeal from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

Of their work, no drafts exist. The group prepared several drafts for the service within mass,⁷ but the ceremony between a Catholic and an unbaptized person appears for the first time in the first edition of the 1969 *Ordo celebrandi matrimonium* (OCM). The second edition (Latin 1990, English 2016) made a few enhancements. Still, it is expected that such a wedding take place without mass. Presumably, a bishop could permit a celebration within mass because the law is disciplinary, not constitutive. Yet the OCM states without variance that a Catholic

³ *The Roman Ritual in Latin and English with Rubrics and Plainchant Notation: The Sacraments and Processions*, trans. and ed. Philip T. Weller, volume I (Boonville: Preserving Christian publications, Inc., 2007), p. 460.

⁴ Innocentius Wapelhorst, *Compendium Sacrae Liturgiae juxta Ritum Romanum* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1925), p. 659.

⁵ *Roman Ritual*, p. 470.

⁶ Francisco Gil Hellín, *Concilii Vaticani II synopsis in ordinem redigens schemata cum relationibus necnon Patrum orationes atque animadversiones: Constitutio de Sacra Liturgia Sacrosanctum concilium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003), pp. 699-700.

⁷ *Consilium ad exsequendam Constitutionem de Sacra Liturgia. Coetus a Studiis 22-23: De Sacramentis et Sacramentalibus*. Schemata 32, 157, 157 add, 182a, 182 add, 182b, 204, 221, 248, and 280.

and an unbaptized person marry “according to the following rite.”⁸ The resultant ceremony does not measure up to what Bishop Tomizawa wanted, but it gives more expression to the wedding of an unbaptized person than the Catholic Church has ever before offered.

The balance between concessions to the unbaptized person and the proclamation of Christian faith

The ceremony strives to balance interreligious sensitivity and Christian fidelity. The Church does not wish to offend the unbaptized person, but does wish to honor the faith of the Catholic party.

One concession pertains to location. In the past, the prohibition of celebrating such a wedding in church may have caused offense to the non-Catholic party. The revised ceremony and law of the church now expect that the ceremony will take place inside a church. However, as a concession to the unbaptized person, the wedding may be celebrated either in a church or “in another suitable place.”⁹ The same concession is not so forthrightly given to two Catholics who marry, although the local ordinary may permit it.¹⁰ In the past and still in certain cultures today, having the wedding outside a Catholic church seemed punitive, but in the United States, many Catholic couples desire an outdoor ceremony and feel that the prohibition punishes them. The pertinent canon does not say who has the authority to choose the place for a wedding between a Catholic and an unbaptized person. Because it is not restricted to the bishop, one presumes that the minister may make the choice. However, in practice, many bishops have restricted such weddings to sacred buildings within their diocese, and since he grants the canonical dispensation from disparity of cult before the priest or deacon may perform the ceremony, the bishop effectively maintains control over location.

Some bishops have made broader exceptions. For example, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference notes that a bishop may permit weddings outdoors.¹¹ In the United States the Diocese of Helena recently permitted outdoor weddings after Bishop George Thomas expressed his concern “that we have a

⁸ *Order of Celebrating Matrimony* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 118. Numbers for this edition refer to paragraphs, not pages. Hereafter OCM.

⁹ Code of Canon Law 1118 §3.

¹⁰ Code of Canon Law 1118 §2.

¹¹ “Getting Married in the Catholic Church: Frequently Asked Questions,” (Canberra: 2011), p. 19. <http://www.acmfc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Catholic-Weddings-Q-A-on-Getting-Married-in-the-Catholic-Church.pdf>.

serious number of young people leaving” the Church over the issue.¹² Far more common is for Catholic weddings to take place inside Catholic churches. However, the Church exercises flexibility on behalf of the unbaptized person. It is theoretically more possible for an unbaptized person to have a Catholic wedding outside a Catholic church than it is when a Catholic marries another Catholic.

Among the non-negotiables, however, is reading from Sacred Scripture. The Catholic Church permits great abridgment in the celebration of marriage with an unbaptized person. However, regardless of that person’s faith or lack thereof, the Word of God will be proclaimed at the wedding. The position is especially strong when one considers that prior to the Second Vatican Council, there were no scripture readings at a wedding ceremony. The readings took place afterwards during the nuptial mass. And Catholics marrying non-Catholics rarely had a nuptial mass.

The ceremony is designed to begin like the one for two baptized Catholic spouses. In that case, whether the wedding takes place within or without mass, the minister vests, goes to the couple, and greets them warmly.¹³ New to the second edition of the OCM is the insertion of the word “warmly” also in the ceremony between a Catholic and an unbaptized person. The first edition had omitted it in this circumstance. Perhaps it was an oversight. Now the priest or deacon is expected to greet the couple warmly, no matter their baptismal status.

The wedding between a Catholic and an unbaptized person begins without the sign of the cross or the liturgical greeting (“The Lord be with you,” for example).¹⁴ The omission of the sign of the cross is clearer to understand: Not only the unbaptized person, but others present for the ceremony may not share faith in the Trinity. It would be inappropriate to begin the ceremony that way if all are expected to participate. In fact, the word that is potentially most offensive is “Amen.” It is one thing for the minister to make the sign of the cross; it is another for the people to affirm it. Non-Christians are not expected to affirm something that they do not believe.

A similar argument can be made for the liturgical greeting, “The Lord be with you,” followed by, “And with your spirit.” When this greeting is exchanged, both the minister and the people pray for the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in each person of the gathered assembly. On one hand, the omission of the minister’s greeting accounts for the uncomfortable realization that the Lord may not be with those who are unbaptized in the same way that the Lord may be with the baptized. On the other hand, this liturgical greeting is used at mass twice

¹² Peter Jesserer Smith, “Can an Outdoor Catholic Wedding by a Powerful Evangelization Tool?” *National Catholic Register*, (October 16, 2016). <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/can-an-outdoor-catholic-wedding-be-a-powerful-evangelization-tool>. See also Renata Birkenbuel, “It’s Official: Outdoor Catholic Weddings a Go in Butte,” (June 12, 2016) http://mtstandard.com/news/local/it-s-official-outdoor-catholic-weddings-a-go-in-butte/article_d844fecb-0b4c-5e6d-95a6-1832b8740d9a.html.

¹³ OCM 119.

¹⁴ OCM 119.

during the Liturgy of the Word: in the introductory rites and just before the proclamation of the gospel.¹⁵ Catechumens are expected to be present for this part of the mass, even if they are dismissed before the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Yet the liturgy does not blush to have the priest address the entire assembly - baptized and unbaptized alike - with the same greeting.

New to the second edition of the marriage ceremony is a scripted address that the minister may use as introductory remarks for the wedding. He may use these or similar words, but these words will guide the minister who wishes to exercise more freedom. Without a greeting, this introduction establishes the connection between the minister and the congregation. A similar dynamic was at work in the early editions of *The Roman Missal*, where the celebration of Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion omitted the greeting and replaced it with an exhortation from the priest to the people about entering into the full meaning of Holy Week. The third edition of the missal has both elements together in the Palm Sunday liturgy: the greeting and the opening address, but this was not the original design.¹⁶

The introduction is based on one proposed for the ceremony between two baptized spouses. However, in that ceremony one finds these words: "today, in the presence of God our Father, you establish between yourselves a lifelong partnership. May the Lord hear you on this your joyful day. May he send you help from heaven and protect you. May he grant you your hearts' desire and fulfill every one of your prayers."¹⁷ When a Catholic marries an unbaptized person, the minister says this: "today you establish between yourselves a lifelong partnership. For believers God is the source of love and fidelity, because God is love. So let us listen attentively to his word, and let us humbly pray to him, that he may grant you your hearts' desire and fulfill every one of your prayers."¹⁸ The rewrite removes the words "in the presence of God our Father," and does not ask God to hear the couple; one of them may not be praying at all. This is replaced with a catechetical instruction so that those in attendance understand who is this God to whom the ceremony will refer: the source of love and fidelity. On this common ground, people of different faiths and those without belief may stand together.

Normally at a Catholic wedding the minister blesses the rings of the bride and the groom. Prior to the liturgical reforms of the 1960s, only the bride received a ring, but now each spouse gives a ring to the other. The minister says a prayer of blessing over the rings. He may sprinkle them with blessed water to symbolize his words. Then each spouse presents a ring to the other, calls them by name and

¹⁵ *The Roman Missal* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), The Order of Mass 2 and 15.

¹⁶ Paul Turner, *Glory in the Cross: Holy Week in the Third Edition of The Roman Missal* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), p. 5.

¹⁷ OCM 53 and 88.

¹⁸ OCM 120.

says, “receive this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹

However, when one partner has not been baptized, the ritual is flexible. The blessing and giving of rings may be omitted if circumstances so suggest.²⁰ If the couple exchange rings, the trinitarian formula is omitted; however, the Christian may add it. It is optional.

In the United States, customs familiar to those in Mexico and the Philippines are now acceptable, including the giving of the arras and the bestowal of the lazo or veil. The arras are ten coins that the groom pours into the hands of the bride, and that she then pours back into his. Each asks the other to receive them “as a pledge of God’s blessing, and a sign of the good gifts we will share.”²¹ This is included in the ceremony between a Catholic and an unbaptized person as an option. If the option is taken, it includes the phrase “of God’s blessing.” No alternate formula for non-Christians is supplied - probably because this symbol may be entirely omitted.

The lazo is a double cord draped around the shoulders of the couple; alternatively or additionally, a veil may be held above their heads, or someone may pin the bride’s veil onto the shoulder of the groom. These ceremonies, all optional, may also be included when a Catholic weds a non-Christian. The lazo is worn for the nuptial blessing; however, that blessing may be omitted and replaced with a shorter prayer.²² In it the minister asks God to uphold the bond, “so that the union you have created may be kept safe by your assistance.” The prayer is much briefer than a nuptial blessing. Still, the ceremony does not compromise on this point: The minister will pray for the protection of the union of the newly-married couple.

Normally the couple kneel for the nuptial blessing, but here they may remain standing.²³ If they elected to wear the lazo, however, they knelt to receive it.²⁴ Apparently if the non-Christian finds the kneeling posture inexpressive of personal beliefs, the lazo may be omitted, and no change in posture is required while the minister bestows the nuptial blessing.

A bit earlier, between the exchange of consent and the nuptial blessing, comes the universal prayer.²⁵ This constitutes a listing of intentions for which the community prays. After each intention is named, the people usually answer,

¹⁹ OCM 132.

²⁰ OCM 131.

²¹ OCM 133. The words are different in Mexico.

²² OCM 138, 140.

²³ OCM 138.

²⁴ OCM 137.

²⁵ OCM 135.

“Lord, hear our prayer,” or a similar response. The universal prayer is a feature of the postconciliar mass. It has precedents in the middle ages; however, it had not been included in the Catholic liturgy for many centuries. Its restoration underscored the responsibilities of the people of God to pray for the needs of the church and the world. This prayer expresses their shared priestly responsibility: Through their baptism they have become “a royal priesthood,” as indicated in 1 Peter 2:9. The universal prayer occurs in the second half of mass, the liturgy of the eucharist. It takes place after the potential dismissal of catechumens. Catechumens, who have not yet been baptized, do not have the spiritual tools to engage fully in the universal prayer. Its appearance here in this wedding ceremony, therefore, surprises. It perhaps was carried over from the versions of the ceremony for baptized spouses without much thought. Many parts of this wedding respect the differences of beliefs in the room, but this part assigns to everyone the responsibility of praying as the baptized do.

Not so the Lord’s Prayer, which follows. Here the minister offers a carefully worded introduction that recognizes the difficulty of asking everyone to recite this particular prayer. Like the universal prayer, the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer takes place during the liturgy of the eucharist at a Catholic mass; if a dismissal has happened, catechumens are not present. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has a special ceremony for handing on the Lord’s Prayer to the uninitiated. In practice, most of them have learned the words and have recited this prayer frequently. However, the word “Father” carries considerable theological weight. Jesus Christ is the only-begotten Son of God, but all who are baptized become children of God by adoption. Because of baptism the followers of Jesus today call upon God as their Father too. For this reason, the presider gives this introduction: “God the Father wills that his children be of one heart in charity; let those who are Christian call upon him in the prayer of God’s family, which our Lord Jesus Christ has taught us.”²⁶ Non-Christians are not expected to participate; however, because Christians are present, they recite the prayer that unites them with one another and with God. The first edition of the postconciliar marriage ceremony permitted the minister to omit the Lord’s Prayer.²⁷ Now it is always included, though prayed only by Christians.

At the conclusion of the ceremony the priest or deacon blesses the people. The solemn blessing, a threefold invocation over the couple, is omitted, whereas it is required at the wedding between two Catholics within mass.²⁸ As at the beginning of the service, there is no indication here that the minister offers the people the liturgical greeting, “The Lord be with you.” However, he does bestow

²⁶ OCM 136.

²⁷ *The Rite of Marriage* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1969), 66.

²⁸ OCM 77.

the trinitarian blessing upon all present.²⁹ And all, surprisingly, are expected to answer, “Amen.”

In general, the adjustments to the ceremony strive to respect the state of belief in the unbaptized spouse and in the members of the community gathered for the wedding. As one might expect from a ceremony relatively new to liturgical history, some inconsistencies appear.

The question of the sacrament

It is commonly understood among Catholics that the wedding between a baptized and an unbaptized person is not a sacrament. For example, one commentary on the Code of Canon Law states, “A sacramental marriage means that both parties are baptized. Consequently, a marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person is not a sacrament.”³⁰ A Catholic internet site makes the same point: “All valid marriages between Catholics are sacramental because you can’t be Catholic without being baptized. However, a valid marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic is sacramental, while a valid marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person is not.”³¹

However, neither the Code of Canon Law nor the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony* is so confident. Canon 1055 §2 states, “a valid matrimonial contract cannot exist between the baptized without it being by that fact a sacrament.” Citing the same canon, the ritual book states “a valid Marriage between the baptized is always a Sacrament.”³² Neither of these sources expresses an opinion about the sacramentality of a marriage between a baptized and an unbaptized person.

While the postconciliar marriage ceremony was under development, the study group preparing the revisions composed this note:

Among Catholic theologians for a long time now has been debated whether or not the matrimony between a Catholic party and an unbaptized party is a sacrament for the Catholic. But a negative response to this question seems to be implied in this, that in more recent times marriages of this kind had to be dissolved by the Apostolic See. Since this matter is of great importance for the preparation of the Rite, the secretary of our

²⁹ OCM 141.

³⁰ *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary*, ed. James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, and Donald E. Heintschel (New York/Mahway: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 767.

³¹ Jim Blackburn, “When Is Marriage a Sacrament?” *Catholic Answers*, <http://www.catholic.com/quickquestions/when-is-marriage-a-sacrament>.

³² OCM 7.

committee has proposed a *dubium* concerning the sacramentality of these marriages to the Sacred Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith.³³

The argument in support of non-sacramentality is based on the Catholic distinction between an annulment and a dissolution of marriage. The Catholic Church does not recognize the possibility of the divorce or dissolution of a sacramental marriage; the annulment process attempts to establish that from the beginning of the union the entire sacramental bond was null because of factors that only came to light later. However, if there was no sacrament, as in the case of two unbaptized persons marrying, then the divorced couple could apply for a dissolution of the marriage; no presumed sacrament required nullification. As the study group noted, the Apostolic See was granting dissolutions for cases of failed marriages between a Catholic and an unbaptized person. Those dissolutions presumed that the marriage was not sacramental, even for the Catholic party.

In 1966 the study group proposing the *dubium* received this response from the Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith:

This Sacred Congregation has taken the delicate question into study, but it maintains that in working out the texts of the Ritual for marriages contracted between a Catholic party and a non-Christian party, it may not be necessary nor opportune to involve the question of the sacramentality of such marriages. The committee of this Consilium, charged with the preparation of such texts, should therefore carefully avoid every expression that may be interpreted in one or the other sense concerning this point of doctrine.³⁴

Consequently, the postconciliar OCM never takes a stand on the question of sacramentality. It even changed the title of the entire preconciliar ritual from “The Sacrament of Matrimony” to “The Order of Celebrating Matrimony.” This ensured a safer description of all the valid celebrations contained within the liturgical book.

This unresolved question of sacramentality caused some changes in the wording in order to distinguish this celebration from the ceremony for two baptized spouses. The description of a homily given to the baptized says that the minister “uses the sacred text to expound the mystery of Christian Marriage, the dignity of conjugal love, the grace of the Sacrament, and the responsibilities of married people, keeping in mind, however, the various circumstances of individuals.”³⁵ However, the same description for a marriage involving an unbaptized person merely says that “there should be a homily on the sacred text,

³³ Schemata 221, p. 2. Bugnini includes the complete text of the *dubium*; see Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy, 1948–1975*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 706.

³⁴ Schemata 221, p. 2.

³⁵ OCM 57 and 91.

which should be adapted to the responsibilities and situation of the couple and other circumstances.”³⁶ Catechesis on the sacrament of marriage is not recommended.

After the homily, the celebration of matrimony begins with the celebrant’s opening remarks. He may use similar words to those that are proposed, but he should be aware that the OCM has already changed the words to accommodate an unbaptized spouse. When both parties have been baptized, the celebrant says, “you have come together into the house of the Church.” But when one is unbaptized, he says, “you have come together here,” which accounts for the possibility that the ceremony is taking place outside a church building. The minister addressing two baptized spouses says, “Christ abundantly blesses the love that binds you. Through a special Sacrament, he enriches and strengthens those he has already consecrated by Holy Baptism, that they may be faithful to each other for ever and assume all the responsibilities of married life.” However, when one is unbaptized, the minister says that the reason for coming together is that “your love be enriched with [the Lord’s] blessing, so that you may have strength to be faithful to each other for ever and to assume all the responsibilities of married life.”³⁷ References to the sacraments have been struck.

To introduce the nuptial blessing over two baptized spouses, the minister may choose from several options. However, one of these has been emended in the case of an unbaptized spouse. In the original version, the minister says, “Now let us humbly invoke God’s blessing upon this bride and groom, that in his kindness he may favor with his help those on whom he has bestowed the Sacrament of Matrimony.”³⁸ When one is unbaptized, the word “Sacrament” changes to “bond.”³⁹

The nuptial blessing is based on one of the options for a wedding of two baptized Christians. As indicated above, this blessing may be replaced with a shorter prayer, but if the full blessing is used, the minister is making several adjustments to its content.⁴⁰ The version for Christians prays for those who are joined “in the Sacrament of Matrimony,” whereas this version prays for those joined “in the Marriage covenant.” For Christians, the minister prays that “they may (adorn their family with children and) enrich the Church.” The words in parentheses may be removed if appropriate; for example, if the couple is beyond childbearing years. When one spouse is unbaptized, these are replaced with a prayer that “they be known for the integrity of their conduct (and be recognized as virtuous parents).” The version for Christians prays “let them pray to you in

³⁶ OCM 123.

³⁷ Compare OCM 59 and 124.

³⁸ OCM 104.

³⁹ OCM 138.

⁴⁰ Compare OCM 209 with 139.

the holy assembly and bear witness to you in the world.” These lines are omitted from the prayer that includes an unbaptized person.

These changes have led many Catholics to presume that the liturgy affirms the belief that the marriage between a baptized and unbaptized person is not sacramental. However, the liturgy does not say that. It just does not know. So, it removes the parts that would affirm the contrary, without denying the possibility that even when marrying an unbaptized person, the Catholic party enters a sacrament.

Many Catholics are not aware of this debate over sacramentality. A Catholic who marries an unbaptized person may be surprised to hear an opinion that the marriage is valid, but not sacramental. A frequent presumption among Catholic laity is that it is both. Here is the puzzle: Seen from the perspective of the bond of marriage, a sacrament happens for one only if it happens for the other; but seen from the perspective of baptism, a baptized person entering marriage qualifies for the sacrament.

The question of unbaptized believers

Although the title of this ceremony takes catechumens into account, the liturgy does not. The ritual in several places presumes that nonbelievers are present for the wedding. However, being unbaptized does not mean that one does not believe, and catechumens are a perfect example. In addition, some adults especially from Christian traditions that practice believers' baptism believe in Christ, but have never presented themselves for baptism. They consider themselves Christian. They believe in God. They may read the bible, attend church, say prayers, and live a life in keeping with Christian values. They just have not yet been baptized.

Neither the liturgy nor the law of the church adequately addresses this circumstance. The ceremony is designed to take place without mass and may even be situated outside a church building. The minister will address those present as if many do not believe in Christ. Although the revised liturgy gains praise for remembering the status of catechumens and their right to a Catholic wedding, the ceremony was designed for a different category of the unbaptized.

A skilled minister should be able to make the mental and vocal adjustments to the texts in order to bring greater integrity to such a celebration. However, an order of service that tried hard to accommodate the situation of a Catholic marrying a Jew or a Muslim seems less aware of the Catholic who marries an unbaptized self-described Christian.

Still, the marriage of a Catholic and an unbaptized person provides ministers, faithful and guests a sensitive way to celebrate together the love of the spouses in a ceremony that expresses a mystery beyond the reach of any faith. Whether or not it is a sacrament, in all its wisdom, the Catholic Church does not know.