

Something Old, Something New: Music in the Order of Celebrating Matrimony

Paul Turner

Pastoral Music

The revised Order of Celebrating Matrimony (OCM) has been available in English since 2016. Now is a good time to review the ritual through the eyes of a musician. A familiar saying calls for weddings to have something old and something new. A review of the ritual will uncover the best practices of the past and best opportunities for the future.

Sacred Music

Many couples ask church musicians for repertoire that fits the reception hall more than the church. Dedicated liturgical musicians have rejoiced to read this principle in the introduction to the revised book: The music “to be sung during the Rite of Marriage should be appropriate and should express the faith of the Church” (OCM 30). It even underscores the importance of singing the responsorial psalm. The selection of “other music works,” such as instrumentals, is to follow the same principle.

The application of this principle varies from parish to parish. Savvy couples know that if one liturgical musician won’t play the music they want, another one may. For members of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians, their local chapters can speak with a common voice about what is acceptable at weddings and what is not.

It helps many couples if the musician invites them to think about their wedding music the way they think about music at a parish Mass. The same principles even govern weddings without Mass.

Some wonder if the preludes to the wedding could be secular. However, once the community is gathering inside the church, their preparation for liturgical prayer has already begun. The very building invites sacred music. The complete wedding celebration usually takes place across more than one day and in more than one place. Other occasions and places better suit secular music.

Participation Aid

Many couples want to provide a participation aid listing the names of the wedding party and the various ministers in the celebration. Some want to include great detail, including when the assembly should change postures.

Something Old, Something New

Some will want to add music onto the same sheet. In some cases, this may be a simple listing of titles and composers, or a reference to the pertinent numbers from the hymnal in the pew. Some others will want the congregation to see the complete musical notation for anything they are to sing. This provides a convenience for the people, but it also demands careful preliminary work to secure permissions. Competent parish musicians are familiar enough with copyright laws to guide couples through this process. Many parishes have a licensing agreement that will permit such aids. It takes time to prepare, but printed aids offer rewards: enhanced participation of the congregation and a keepsake after the wedding.

Calendar

The Table of Liturgical Days may have a significant impact on the wedding music. Many musicians and ministers have ignored these rules, but they are worth noting.

The Table can be found online or in the front of the missal. It ranks thirteen categories of days on the liturgical calendar. Those in the first four groups take precedence over the ritual Mass of marriage. For example, a wedding that takes place during Mass on a Saturday evening of Advent, Lent or Easter Time is supposed to use the readings and presidential prayers of the Sunday Mass. The wedding ceremony takes place as usual within that Mass, but the texts—including the music—pay homage to the liturgical time of year.

This applies only to weddings within Mass. If the wedding takes place without Mass, then the readings from the wedding lectionary apply.

The same rules help understand when the Gloria is to be sung at a wedding. The Gloria is associated with the ritual Mass of marriage. If a wedding Mass takes place on a Lent weekday such as a Saturday morning, then the ritual Mass is used, and the Gloria is sung. The same applies to the solemnities of St. Joseph on March 19 and of the Annunciation of the Lord on March 25. When those dates fall during Lent, they are still celebrated as solemnities, complete with the Gloria and the creed. At a Saturday night wedding in Lent, the Gloria is omitted in favor of the Lent liturgy with its readings and presidential prayers.

The Procession

Instrumental music usually accompanies a wedding procession in the United States—at least within the anglo community. The hispanic community often begins a wedding with an opening hymn for which all are invited to sing. The same may take place at the start of any wedding. A hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God may gather the hearts and voices of those who have come to worship.

Every Mass has a recommended entrance antiphon, though a hymn may replace it. If there is no singing at the entrance, then the antiphon is to be recited. Or the priest may incorporate it into his introduction to the celebration (GIRM 48).

Something Old, Something New

If the music for a wedding Mass does not include a sung processional, the antiphon still needs to be accounted for. For example, all the people may recite the antiphon together, which could work if it is in their participation aid. Or the priest may allude to it in his opening remarks. The OCM offers the presider two sample introductions (52-53), and the second of these especially alludes to biblical passages that may replace the entrance antiphon. If the presider is using his own words, he may incorporate the entrance antiphon of the day to invite people into a spirit of prayer.

The Liturgy of the Word

At the ritual Mass, at least one reading must explicitly contain a reference to marriage. The OCM marks these readings with an asterisk.

Musicians note that one of those options is the responsorial Psalm 128, which speaks of the fruitfulness of married life. Couples have the option of selecting readings without an asterisk if they have chosen a setting of Psalm 128 for the responsorial.

Some people wrongly think that weddings may not take place during Lent. They may. They just need to keep the spirit of the season. The OCM even provides a special gospel acclamation for weddings in Lent.

The Acclamation after the Consent

After the couple exchange their consent, the congregation may sing an acclamation of thanksgiving and praise. This is new to the second edition, and it invites the full, conscious, active participation of the people at a most significant moment of the celebration.

The part of the ceremony traditionally called “the vows” is more accurately entitled “the consent.” The couple are consenting to the marriage covenant. They are the ministers of this sacrament to each other. As soon as they make their commitment, the minister asks that no one put asunder what God has joined. Then he invites the people, “Let us bless the Lord.” All answer, “Thanks be to God.” Even the couple may join in the response. Their first words as a married couple are “Thanks be to God.”

Imagine if their first words as a married couple were sung—their hearts so full of joy that mere speech cannot proclaim it. Musicians may lead this or another acclamation of the people. In Spanish, many know the joyful refrain, “*Demos gracias al Señor!*” How wonderful it would be to have everyone sing a refrain that the couple would come to recognize in future days as their own first words together.

The Acclamations of the Eucharistic Prayer

In a wedding within Mass, the musicians may lead the singing of the familiar acclamations of the people throughout the eucharistic prayer: the *Sanctus*, the memorial acclamation, and the great amen. These will probably

Something Old, Something New

succeed best if they are settings that the members of the congregation have heard and sung many times.

Many engaged couples are not thinking about congregational music. They are thinking about solos and instrumentals. However, the acclamations, especially those of the eucharistic prayer, can help them engage the voice of their guests and stand everyone on familiar ground.

The eucharistic prayer may feel anticlimactic without music. Everyone has come in order to witness the couple's exchange of consent, which has already happened. Now all join the priest silently as he offers the lengthy prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification. The acclamations engage the full, conscious, active participation of the people. This music articulates the praise they give God.

Although those who participate at wedding liturgies are commonly called "the guests" of the couple, the Church sees their role differently. They are witnesses. They are, in another sense, guests of Christ, especially when they have gathered for a wedding within Mass. He has laid his eucharistic table, and he asks those who share his meal to do it in memory of him. On the surface, it may seem that the highlight of the ceremony is the uncommon wedding, not the common eucharist. However, the eucharist is always a high point of the spiritual life, every single time it takes place. Music accents the significance of the moment.

The Communion Antiphon

During a wedding at Mass, the musicians may lead singing at communion. As is true of the entrance antiphon, every Mass has a communion antiphon. In those circumstances when it is not sung, it is to be recited by all, by an individual such as a reader, or even by the priest. The participation aid could include the text of the communion antiphon of the Mass, and everyone could be invited to recite it. Ideally, though, the community sings its joy in this communion.

One of the options in the missal's ritual Mass comes from Jesus' instructions to his disciples at the Last Supper (John 13:34): "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you, says the Lord." When worshipers sing a setting of this at communion, they personalize the significance of this wedding. They have come to witness the consent of husband and wife. In doing so, they have encountered not only the mystery of human love, but also of divine love. In this wedding, all worshipers may realize how much God loves them. After all, this couple's love for each other began with God's love for each of them. God loves all the worshipers, and God calls them to love others. This is the new commandment of Christ. He loves first. He expects his followers to love one another next. The faithful have just witnessed how sublime love can be. They have witnessed the love of God overflowing in the hearts of husband and wife. Now they hear the same call. They sing the command of Christ to love one another.

They sing Jesus's words during communion, a time when they are experiencing the love of Christ in its most profound way. God has found them

Something Old, Something New

worthy to be members of the body of Christ and to eat and drink his body and blood. As they participate in this mystery, filled with the awareness of God's love for them, they realize that this communion does not stop here. Christ is calling them from communion in his body and blood into love of neighbor and service of others.

One little communion song aims to achieve all those lofty goals. People are touched by these mysteries. Through congregational song, musicians bring humans into the presence of the divine.

The Recessional

Traditionally, weddings in the United States end with an instrumental recessional on the organ. Traditionally, Sunday Mass in the United States ends with a sung hymn by the people. The custom at weddings is more faithful to the rubrics.

Neither the Order of Mass nor the General Instruction of the Roman Missal envisions that Mass ends with people singing. The last words are the deacon's dismissal and the people's response of thanks to God. In practice, many congregations sing a final hymn. It brings closure to their celebration. But weddings usually end with an instrumental that brings its own closure—a sound bigger than human voices alone can raise.

Sometimes this music takes place under a peal of bells celebrating the union within the church and announcing to those outside the good news of this wedding. The joy of this day may literally ring out through the neighborhood.

Inside the church, hearts have been raised in praise of God, in gratitude for signs of God's love, and in acceptance of the commission of Jesus Christ. Worshipers go forth from this place full of song and full of love for one another—love that is old, and love that is new.

“Something Old, Something New: Music in the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*.”
Pastoral Music 46:3 (June-July 2022):10-15.