

Your Meddin



Msgr. James A. Magner



a checklist for YOUR WEDDING

by Msgr. James A. Magner



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Most Rev. Leo A. Pursley, D.D. Bishop of Fort Wayne

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THOUGHTFUL PREPARATION

June might be the traditional month of weddings, but there's no time during the year when young Catholic couples are not thinking of marriage or preparing for it. And although the decision to get married belongs to the couple alone, the wedding itself doesn't. One's family and friends have to be informed of what is taking place and be brought in on the plans. Special arrangements must be made with the Church to make sure that everything is in order and that the ceremony will proceed properly. Various forms have to be filled out to comply with the laws. Invitations, receptions, and gift acknowledgments must all be thought of. Perhaps some instructions should be taken, and possibly some spiritual preparation should be made alone and together for the big day. And-Oh, yes!-there is the ring, the marriage license, the music, the breakfast, the reception. . .

At first glance, this mountain of details may appear confusing and even terrifying. But with just a little system and planning

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ahead, everything will fall into its place. The wedding day will arrive with pleasurable excitement, but the last minute rush will be reduced to a minimum, and the happy couple will approach the altar with assurance and peace.

The importance of timely and thoughtful preparation arises from the special character of Catholic marriage. This is not just a lark, a dare, or an experiment. This is "for keeps" -"until death do us part." The Catholic wedding is an exchange of vows between the prospective husband and wife, calling upon God as their witness. As Christ declared, "Therefore now they are not two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6). When one plans a long journey, time is required to work out the details, make all the necessary reservations, and take all prudent precautions. Catholic marriage is a long journey, at least in hope and prospect. Its success or failure may well depend upon the care with which it is planned in advance.

DON'T RUSH THE ENGAGEMENT

The first step in the formalities leading to marriage is the engagement. Very often, this is announced quite casually by the flashing of an engagement ring on the finger of the

bride-to-be. However, the prudent and considerate thing for the couple to do, is to have a talk with the parents on both sides and ask their consent and advice. In particular, the young man should ask the approval of the prospective bride's father. If they fear that the parents will raise any special difficulties, the pair will do well to ask the counsel of their pastor or of a priest in whom they have confidence. Early consultation with a priest is of vital importance, particularly when there is any doubt as to the freedom of the couple to marry. Indeed, parental objections, while not always well-founded, must be considered in relation to the long road ahead. The time to settle such doubts is before the engagement, not afterwards, and certainly well in advance of preparation for the wedding.

Particularly if one of the couple is a non-Catholic, the whole question of attitude towards religion may become a hot issue and jeopardize all plans for a happy Catholic marriage. In these days when divorce is so frequent, a casual friendship can blossom into love before the Catholic becomes aware of the fact that the other is not free to marry in the eyes of the Church. The time to make sure of this is long before the engagement takes place and certainly not on the eve of the wedding when aroused emotions are likely to over-ride all other considerations.

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CONSULT YOUR PASTOR FIRST

If this preliminary exchange of parental and Church consent clear the way, at least to establish the right of the couple to a Catholic wedding, the couple can go ahead with their plans. The first thing to remember is that the Catholic ceremony of marriage must normally be performed by the pastor of a church or by a priest delegated by him. Any pastor can validly officiate in this capacity; but ordinarily it is the pastor of the bride. Of course, a Bishop has all the powers of a pastor; but even a Bishop will not, unless in extraordinary circumstances, perform a marriage without consulting at least the bride's pastor.

There are several good reasons for this. The pastor exercises jurisdiction over his parishioners and has the responsibility of caring for them spiritually and of recording their marriages. The couple applying for marriage must come prepared with a certificate or at least an affidavit of Baptism and also of Confirmation, if possible. If one of the couple cannot produce satisfactory evidence of valid Baptism or is in fact not a Catholic, the pastor must obtain special dispensation from the Bishop, before he is permitted to perform the ceremony. Other problems may arise which may require a dispensation or may stop the marriage altogether.

If the couple feel strongly that they would like to be married in a church other than that of their parishes, or by a priest other than the pastor or the curates of the parish, they should ask their pastor's permission. He has the right to refuse their request for good and valid reasons; and they should be prepared to abide by his decision in the spirit of obedience and respect for the protecting laws of the Church.

The bride and groom should not request that a priest other than those assigned to the parish, say the nuptial Mass unless there are exceptional circumstances. For example, if a brother of either is a priest, this would usually be an acceptable reason. Otherwise priests who are friends and acquaintances should be invited to witness the nuptial Mass in the sanctuary.

When Catholic couples apply to their parish priest to arrange for marriage, they must present the baptismal and confirmation records from the Church where they received these Sacraments. It is regularly assumed that Catholics have been instructed in the fundamentals of their faith and the obligations of Catholic married life. In many places, however, all applicants are required to take at least one or two instructions, to make sure that they know what they are undertaking and to direct them in the procedures of the wedding ceremony itself.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE NON-CATHOLIC

If one of the couple is not a Catholic, these instructions become all the more important. The non-Catholic should understand his or her basic obligations as the partner of a Catholic, about the religious education of the children and the sacredness of marriage. For some, this involves no problem at all. In fact, many non-Catholics embrace the Catholic faith after this course of instructions. In other cases, an understanding and acceptance of the Church's laws on this and other matters come hard; and in some instances, non-Catholics positively refuse to cooperate and to abide by the regulations of the Church even regarding the ceremony.

The time to solve these problems, if they can be solved amicably, is well in advance of the wedding ceremony. The Church is uncompromising on its principles which are the teachings of Christ, upon Whom it bases its authority. It will not recognize the marriage of a Catholic as valid if performed by a Justice of the Peace, or by a non-Catholic minister. It insists that Catholic marriage is a sacrament and that the offspring of the marriage as well as the Catholic partner must live up faithfully to the laws of the Church. If there is the prospect of a life filled with bickering about religion, broken promises, and shattered faith, the time to face it and make the appropriate decision is before the ceremony ever takes place.

THE CIVIL MARRIAGE LAW

But besides the laws of the Church, the laws of the state regarding marriage must be obeyed. In this country, the priest is regarded as qualified to perform the marriage ceremony in all its civil effects; but by the same token, the Church insists that its priests must follow carefully the civil requirements of the state in which they are officiating. The priest must receive the marriage license before he may officiate. He then records the ceremony in the parish records and forwards the license with authentication of the marriage to the civil authorities.

Different states have different laws regulating the freedom to marry. All states prohibit marriage within the direct line of blood relationship, as does the Catholic Church. But there is considerable divergence

as regards the other kinds of relationship. Some states require a waiting period between the date of application for the marriage license and its issuance. Most also set a time limit within which the license is valid. Practically every state sets a minimum age for male and female as a requisite for valid marriage, usually 18 for men and 16 for women. A medical certificate from both parties is now generally required to show freedom from communicable diseases. In some instances, a marriage license will not be issued to persons of different races. To be on the safe side, the couple contemplating marriage should acquaint themselves with the laws of their state, and make sure that they conform to these requirements for a license.

WHEN CAN YOU GET MARRIED?

Strictly speaking, a Catholic marriage can take place at any time of the day or night, including Advent and Lent, and with or without Mass. However, the special Nuptial Mass and Nuptial Blessing, which is given during Mass, are not permitted during Advent and Lent without a dispensation from the Bishop. During these two times, wedding ceremonies should be kept simple in accordance with the penitential character of the season.

This does not mean that a couple can rush to the priest of a church and be married immediately at any time they wish. In addition to the documents and instructions required, ordinarily they must give the pastor notice quite a bit ahead of time so that he can find a time for the wedding which will be convenient for them and which will not disrupt regular parish functions. Church law requires that an announcement of intended marriage between Catholics be published at the principal Mass on three successive Sundays or holydays, in the parishes of both parties. These banns of marriage, as they are called, are intended as a joyous social announcement and also as an opportunity for anyone who knows a serious reason why the marriage should not take place to speak up and tell the pastor.

This means that normally the future bride and groom should call on the pastor to give at least one and preferably two months' notice of their intentions. Under special circumstances, a dispensation from the banns may be requested. If a sudden emergency develops, so that plans for the wedding have to be made on short notice, the priest will hasten the wedding in every way possible, within the limits of the law and prudence. Even though the banns are omitted in the case of mixed marriages, the pastor still has the obligation of satisfying himself that the couple are free to marry according to the laws of the Church.

WHERE WILL YOU BE MARRIED?

Where will the marriage take place? If both bride and groom are Catholics, the marriage takes place in the church within the sanctuary. Any exception to this must be by special permission of the Bishop. Usually, the parish church of the bride is the one selected, but if this involves any special problems, the prospective groom may consult his own pastor. Sometimes, a couple prefer to be married in another church, perhaps their college chapel or a special shrine or a church which they regard as more beautiful than their own. Normally, despite these considerations, it is preferable to be married in one's own church. The pastor is quite within his rights if he refuses to grant such permission.

In the case of mixed marriages, it has been the practice to have the ceremony performed in the sacristy of the church or one of the parlors of the rectory or in some other place regarded as suitable by the pastor. In recent years, however, many Bishops have given permission for mixed marriages to take place in the Church, but outside the sanctuary. The reason for this is that, although the Church does not favor or give an unqualified blessing to mixed marriages, a more spiritual and favorable Catholic impression is conveyed within the dignity of the church setting.

In some countries, the government requires a civil ceremony for legal effects. Where this is the law, Catholics may abide by it, but they understand that the sacrament of Matrimony and indeed the true contract of marriage for them is not effective until the Church wedding takes place. Sometimes in mixed marriages, the Catholic party is asked to repeat the ceremony in the church of the non-Catholic, as a gesture of "broadmindedness" and good will. This is absolutely forbidden, and the Catholic who goes through such ceremony is guilty of grievous sin and is excommunicated.

In this connection, it may be noted that the current laws of the Catholic Church do not stipulate any requirements for the wedding ceremony of non-Catholics when marrying non-Catholics. The Catholic Church regards such marriages as valid so long as they are given legal status by their own churches or by the civil government. The reason for this is that the marriage contract is essentially of the natural law and is performed essentially by the man and woman who exchange vows. As a matter of fact, in two extraordinary conditions the Church does not require the Catholic ceremony even for Catholics. These are (1) when a couple desirous of marriage are unable to secure a duly qualified priest for at least one month, and (2) when there is danger of death before a qualified priest can be reached, and marriage is necessary for peace of conscience or legitimacy of children. Even in these cases, two witnesses to the contract are necessary for its validity, and Church authorities should be notified.

It should be further noted that the Church does not recognize civil divorce as nullifying marriage, even of non-Catholics. Therefore, Catholics should be extremely cautious in contemplating, even remotely, marriage with divorced persons. If there is any possibility of this, the divorced person's freedom to remarry should be carefully investigated by the Church authorities, through one's pastor or the chancery office, long before there is any talk about an engagement or wedding ceremony.

PLANNING FOR THE CEREMONY

Considerable serious thought should be given to the nature of the Church wedding. It can be as simple or as elaborate as one's finances and the regulations of the parish permit. It may consist of the simple marriage contract, with an officiating priest and two witnesses and nothing else. There may be good and ample reasons for such simplicity. Whenever possible, however, it is strongly advised that the ceremony take place at Mass, when the bride and groom and their attendants may receive Holy Communion. With the exceptions of Advent and Lent, the nuptial blessing is also given with the Mass, and no couple should forego the privilege if at all possible.

In arranging for the ceremony, the couple may request special arrangements for the music, flowers, seating, ushers, procession, carpeting, and the like. Good taste should be the rule rather than too much display, and in all cases the priest in charge should be consulted well in advance. Moreover, those requesting these favors should be prepared to carry the additional expense, and in all cases provision should be made for a reasonable offering, at least to the parish priest, whether he personally officiates or graciously permits an outside priest to function in his place.

Two witnesses, usually the bridesmaid and the best man, are required for a valid Catholic marriage. It should be noted that non-Catholics may not serve as official witnesses except by permission of the Bishop for special reasons. If either the bride or groom wants a close non-Catholic friend to be a member of the wedding party, this should be discussed with the priest before the invitation is given. All of this should be carefully cleared with the Church authorities to avoid possible embarrassment and problems during the ceremony.

PREPARING FOR THE SACRAMENT

Amid all these preparations, the young couple will do well to consider their spiritual preparation for the great day. A Catholic marriage is a sacrament. It should be approached reverently and in the state of grace. Catholics should go to confession before the ceremony and if possible receive Holy Communion at their wedding Mass. The same recommendation is offered to the other members of the wedding party. No better investment can be made to secure God's help and blessing. If it is possible for the prospective bride and groom to make a short retreat or day of recollection, so much the better. In all events, the night before the ceremony should be spent quietly without any kind of excess which would get the marriage off to a bad start.

In preparation for the honeymoon and marital life, a good Catholic doctor may be consulted by the couple. Friendly but competent medical advice will be of great value in helping them understand better what to expect and how to conduct themselves in the great intimacy of marital love and its responsibilities.

It is customary for the parish priest to hold one or two rehearsals of the ceremony, the last one usually on the night before the wedding, so that all will know how to conduct themselves. At this time, if he has not already done so, the pastor or the assistant pastor will require certain information which he must enter into the official Marriage Record Book. This includes the full names of the contracting couple, as well as their ages, and also the names of the parents and the two official witnesses. If a dispensation was required, this also is recorded. He must also make a notation of the marriage on the official Parish Baptismal Records of the bride and groom, and send this information to the pastor or pastors if the Baptism of one or both took place elsewhere. This information must be available, so that it can be transcribed into the official records promptly after the ceremony has taken place.

In many dioceses an integral part of preparation for marriage is the Pre-Cana Conference — a happy blending of guidance to the prospective bride and groom on the forces that will shape their marriage. Varying somewhat from diocese to diocese, such conferences are generally the most thorough and intensive preparation available for a prospective husband and wife.

In the Archdiocese of Chicago for example, which was a pioneer in the field, engaged couples hear a priest, a married couple and a doctor. All facets of the husband-wife relationship are covered — psychological, spiritual, physical, social, emotional and economic—when a couple "makes a Pre-Cana." They are concerned with establishing long term Christian values that will make for a happy marriage. An engaged couple may come away from such a conference with a deeper understanding of the psychological differences between husband and wife that will last them a lifetime.

The engaged couple do not come to be congratulated; they come to learn. The Pre-Cana Conference is a graphic reiteration of the Church's teaching that marriage and parenthood is a privilege that carries serious obligations — and that entry into marriage is entry into a vocation.

WEDDING INVITATIONS

The invitation is the first formal notice of this great event. It is fitting that the design and wording of your invitations should express the religious significance of the occasion.

Some sample wordings are shown:

MR. and MRS. JOHN ADAMS and

MR. and MRS. SYLVESTER ROBISON invite you to the

NUPTIAL MASS and MARRIAGE CEREMONY of their children

MARGARET and BRIAN on the feast of St. Catherine of Siena APRIL 30, 1959, 9:30 A.M.

ST. AUGUSTINE'S CHURCH

1501 West Washington RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

BUFFET LUNCHEON and RECEPTION 1:00 P.M. 409 N. Michigan St.

All who wish are invited to receive Holy Communion with the bridal party

Mrs. Joseph Hurley requests the honor of your presence at the Marriage in Christ of her daughter Mary Ellen

of ten thirty o' of a in the morning

Mr. Joseph A. Delaney and your participation in the offering of the Nuptial Mass at ten o'clock on Saturday the twenty-ninth of May nineteen hundred and fifty-nine St. Mary of the Assumption Church Dallas, Texas Mr. and Mrs. John F. McCarthy invite you to participate in the offering of the Nuptial Mass at the marriage of their daughter Susan Margaret

to

Mr. Stanley Stillman on Saturday, the tenth of April at ten thirty o'clock in the morning nineteen hundred and fifty-nine Notre Dame des Victoires Church Palo Alto, California

The prospective bride and groom are wise if they begin the invitation list early and work on it together so that the mailing can take place three weeks before the ceremony. A reputable stationery store can give appropriate advice on the format. If for some reason they decide not to send out invitations, the announcements of the marriage should be ready for mailing immediately after the ceremony. Contact your Catholic bookstore or the following sources for more information.

Berliner & McGinnis Nevada City, California

Conception Abbey Press Conception, Missouri

Liturgical Press Collegeville, Minnesota

WHAT TO DO AT THE ALTAR

On the assumption that everything is now in readiness for the wedding ceremony, all members of the wedding party should proceed to the church so as to arrive at the agreed hour. The groom should make sure that he has brought the marriage license. The best man is held responsible for the ring. There is nothing more awkward and distressing for all concerned than the tension of waiting for a tardy bride or groom. The groom proceeds immediately with his best man and other attendants to the sacristy, where he awaits the arrival of the bride. She is brought to the church by her father, or by another who acts in his place, and is escorted on his arm up the center aisle to the sanctuary, where she is joined by the groom.

The latter escorts her to the foot of the altar and remains at her right side throughout the ceremony. The correct order of the procession is first the ushers, two at a time, then the bridesmaids, then the maid of honor, followed by the bride and her father, as already stated. During the ceremony, the officiating clergyman will signal the couple at the proper moment, so that there need be no concern or nervousness. In general, however, it may be noted that the wedding proper or exchange of vows and placing of the ring or rings (if the double ring ceremony is used) takes place after the Gospel of the Mass at which the couple are being wed. They then return to their respective kneelers. If the Nuptial Blessing is conferred, they again ascend the altar steps immediately after the Pater Noster or Lord's Prayer. They receive Holy Communion at their kneelers and are again signalled to the altar for a special prayer just before the final blessing.

At the outset of the ceremony, the bride removes her gloves for the ring ceremony and transfers her bouquet to the maid of honor. The best man stays on the side with the groom and hands the ring to the priest at the right moment. At the conclusion of the Mass, the bride again receives her bouquet. The priest then descends to the foot of the altar, where he congratulates the happy pair and returns to the sacristy. At this point, the bride may deposit her bouquet at the statue of the Blessed Virgin on the side altar or she may proceed directly with the groom for the recessional march, followed by their attendants in reverse order to the processional. During the entire ceremony, the couple should be as natural as possible, joyful but reverent in this sacred hour.

It is customary to reserve the front pew at the left side center for the family of the bride, and the front pew at the right for that of the groom. At the conclusion of the ceremony, they follow out next in order, then the rest of the congregation. Without delay, the bride and groom leave the church first and ride together in a car furnished by the groom or his best man, followed by other cars provided by the bride's parents or by the other guests who have been invited, to the assembly place for the breakfast or later reception.

THE WEDDING RECEPTION

The size and place of the breakfast and reception are matters for the family of the bride to determine, as they must foot the bill. The breakfast is an appropriate time for photographs of the wedding party to be taken, but this ought not to be prolonged. The newly wedded couple then lead the way to the breakfast, followed by the bride's mother and the groom's father, then the groom's mother and the bride's father, then the maid of honor and the best man, the bridesmaids and ushers, and guests. At the end of the breakfast, the bride cuts the first slice of the wedding cake.

The reception may be held in the home of the bride's parents, or in any other suitable home, including that of the groom's parents, or in a hotel. In the receiving line, it is correct for the bride's mother and father to stand first, then the bride and groom, welcoming the guests. The groom's parents and the wedding attendants may stand in line or mingle with the guests.

The matter of displaying the wedding gifts, whether in the home or wherever the reception is held, is entirely a matter of choice. However, it is of the utmost importance that the bride keep an exact list of all gifts and make a written acknowledgment at the earliest convenience.

At an appropriate time after the guests have been received, the couple retire to their respective rooms to change into traveling clothes. On her way, the bride may wish to toss her bouquet for one of the more hopeful girls to catch. Before leaving, the bride and groom should spend a moment for an affectionate farewell with their parents and then try to slip away as quietly as possible.

Sometimes, this escape may require considerable strategy to elude the tricks that friends and practical jokers may have thought up to delay their departure or give it the proportion of a comedy of errors. Fun is fun up to a certain point, however, and all involved should take care not to carry their tricks too far, lest they spoil a day that should be one of unmarred joy.

WEDDING MUSIC

With respect to music, it should be remembered that this is a sacred ceremony and must be governed by the regulations of the Church. It is important to decide in advance whether one wishes a high or a low Mass, and to consult the parish priest in the engagement of a choir, an organist, and soloists. If outside musical talent is desired, this should be cleared with the priest, by the prospective bride and groom. In the selection of music, many places have special rules as to what is proper, including the processional and recessional music and the offertory solos. It is now generally recognized that only approved hymns or liturgical music are appropriate for the Catholic marriage ceremony. Familiar

love songs, however beautiful, are not regarded as acceptable; and this should be definitely understood, so as to avoid possible embarrassment during the service. Of course, the family of the bride should be prepared to pay the fees or expense of the musicians.

PHOTOGRAPHS

In the matter of photographs, it is also advisable to enquire in advance from the pastor as to what is permitted. Usually, this can be handled quite satisfactorily within reasonable limits. Indiscriminate flashing of cameras from every angle and throughout the ceremony, however, can become quite annoying and offensive.

WHO PAYS FOR IT ALL?

Once it's certain that the wedding can take place, consideration should be given to the social details of the event. Two and even three months before the wedding is not too early to begin to order what is necessary, to make the necessary reservations, and to plan the schedule of events. Much will depend upon how elaborate a ceremony is desired and how much one is prepared to spend on the wedding. It may be advisable to check on the cost of various arrangements before a decision is made.

The wedding expenses are generally shared between the bride's family and the groom. Thus, the latter provides the marriage license, the wedding ring, the clergyman's stipend, (don't forget the altar boys) and gifts to the best man and ushers. He should have a gift for his bride. He also pays for her bouquet as well as for the flowers for his own mother and the bride's mother. He also should provide boutonnieres for the best man and ushers. He is expected to pay all expenses of the honeymoon.

The bride's family usually pays all expenses connected with the church, including flowers and other decorations for the church or home and the music. They also pay for the engraving, addressing, and mailing of all invitations and announcements, as well as for the wedding breakfast and reception. Gifts to the bridesmaids and maid of honor and the transportation of the bride and her attendants to the church are the responsibility of the bride's family.

BRIDE

VERY FORMAL

Gown: traditional, with cathedral or chapel length train.

Veil: full, fingertip, or elbow length.

Gloves: elbow length or longer gloves required with short sleeves.

BRIDESMAIDS

Gown: floor or ballerina length. Headdress: hats, garlands or veils.

Gloves: elbow length or longer gloves required with short sleeves.

FORMAL

Gown: floor length, with or without chapel train.

Veil: fingertip or shoulder length.

Gloves: required with short sleeves.

INFORMAL

Gown: ballerina or street length in white or pastel.

Veil: short or bridal hat.

Gloves: required with short sleeves.

Gown: ballerina length customary. Headdress: hats, garlands, or veils.

Gloves: required with short sleeves.

Gown: same length as bride's.

Headdress: hat or simple headdress less elaborate than bride's.

Gloves: required with short sleeves.

MOTHERS

Gown: street or ballerina length. Headdress: hat required. Gloves: long gloves required with short sleeves. Gown: street length.

Hat: required.

Gloves: required.

GROOM AND ATTENDANTS

Cutaway, striped trousers, waistcoat, and appropriate accessories. Summer: linen instead of flannel waistcoat. Black or gray coat, light vest, striped trousers. Summer: white suit.

Same as for very formal.

Dark blue or dark gray suit, white shirt, conservative tie. Summer: dark suit, or white jacket with dark trousers, or white suit.

"What shall I wear?" A dozen rules conflict and confuse the bride. This chart is not designed to regulate but will help in coordinating the wedding. Use it that way. (Publisher)

CONCLUSION

If the couple have prepared themselves by instruction and prayer, the honeymoon should be a time of the greatest happiness, the growth in love, and the beginning of a married life together, with the assurance of God's blessing. If they have made the necessary arrangements to occupy their own house or apartment upon their return, and prepare for the children which they normally can expect, they can look forward to the security and happiness of a home which will grow richer with affectionate memories as the years roll by.









