

**CATHOLIC ETIQUETTE**

# Weddings



**"Almighty and eternal God, you have so exalted the unbreakable bond of marriage that it has become the sacramental sign of your Son's union with the Church as his spouse."**

*— Book of Blessings*

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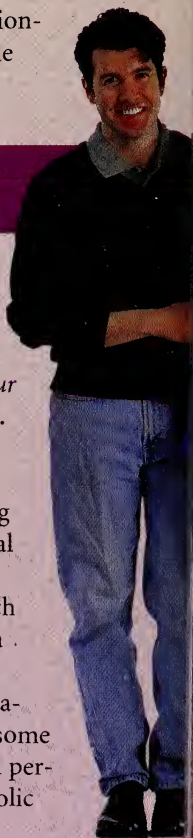
For many, their wedding day is forever remembered as one of the most significant, joyous, and sacred occasions in their lives. Most people also find it a pleasure to be a guest at a well-planned wedding — to witness a couple's pledge before God to live the rest of their lives as one. Tradition and sacrament are observed, with love and promise. Beautiful music and flowers and happiness simply spill out all over the celebration. It is a privilege to be part of such a significant event, and all who attend rejoice in the graces of the day.

Not every wedding day, however, lives up to this harmonious ideal. Those that do are a tribute to many hours of planning and behind-the-scenes preparation and compromise. No matter how well-matched a bride and groom may be, marriage still involves two families that may have very different ideas about what such a ceremony and the accompanying celebration(s) should include.

Catholic families attending or planning a wedding frequently face additional etiquette concerns that stem from a collision between the mainstream American culture and fundamental Catholic teachings. How well these etiquette challenges are negotiated can affect not only the occasion itself, but also relationships with parents, in-laws, the spouse, the priest, or even the Church.

## What are the Church's teachings?

According to Catholic marriage law, "A valid and consummated marriage of baptized persons cannot be dissolved by any human authority or any cause other than the death of one of the persons" (*Our Sunday Visitor's 2004 Catholic Almanac*, p. 196). This firm Church teaching on the permanence of marriage accounts for many of the policies and practices relating to weddings. Despite the sometimes casual way that contemporary Americans treat marriage and divorce, the Catholic Church maintains that entering into marriage is a serious lifetime commitment — one that requires careful consideration and preparation. And, although civil authorities and some non-Catholic ministers consider divorced persons legally free to marry again, the Catholic



Church still considers them married until a recognized Church authority declares otherwise.

A second basic teaching that underlies many Catholic marital rules is that “the Catholic Church claims jurisdiction over its members in matters pertaining to marriage” (*Our Sunday Visitor’s 2004 Catholic Almanac*, p. 195). This issue especially comes into play when one of the marriage partners is Catholic and the other is not. Unless the couple seeks special permission and fulfills certain conditions, the Catholic Church will not regard as valid wedding ceremonies involving Catholics that take place before non-Catholic ministers or civil authorities. Taking the time to learn the Church’s requirements and understand how we can work within them can often solve this potentially explosive problem.

## **After the engagement, what sacramental preparations are required?**

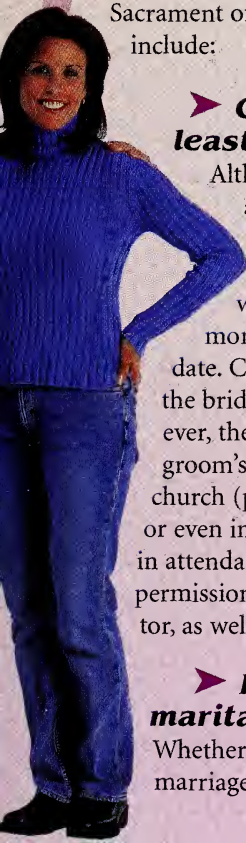
The Church has certain laws and guidelines which a couple must follow in order to prepare for the Sacrament of Matrimony. These generally include:

➤ **Contact the pastor at least six months in advance.**

Although policy varies somewhat among dioceses, an engaged couple is usually expected to contact the pastor of the Catholic church where they plan to be wed at least six months before their anticipated wedding date. Customarily, the couple is married at the bride’s home parish. In some cases, however, the wedding may be celebrated in the groom’s parish, in a different Catholic church (perhaps the parents’ home parish), or even in a non-Catholic church with a priest in attendance. These special options require permission from the bride and/or groom’s pastor, as well as the pastor of the other church.

➤ **Participate in a pre-marital counseling program.**

Whether just one or both of the prospective marriage partners are Catholic, almost every





parish asks that the couple participate in some type of diocesan-sponsored or parish-sponsored premarital program. Formats and times vary (half-day, one-day, weekend, or several weekly sessions), but all include basic instruction about Catholic teaching on marriage. In addition, leaders focus on key issues in a marriage relationship, such as child-rearing, finances, and decision-making. Couples are encouraged to begin a dialogue on these topics before serious conflicts arise.

➤ ***Comply with consent formalities.*** The prospective bride and groom will be asked to give the pastor copies of baptismal, First Communion, and confirmation certificates when applicable. If neither person is well-known to the priest, both may also be asked to submit two affidavits — obtained from either the parents, close relatives, or friends — attesting to the couple's freedom to enter into marriage.

➤ ***Obtain an annulment, if necessary.*** Except for widows and widowers, if one or both of the prospective spouses has been previously married, an annulment must be procured before a Catholic wedding can take place. This can be a lengthy process. The local pastor should be able to offer advice specific to individual situations.

➤ ***Make a declaration and promise.*** If a Catholic is marrying a non-Catholic, the Catholic partner is required to declare his or her intention to continue practicing the Catholic faith and to promise to do all in his or her power to share that faith with children born of the marriage by having them baptized and raised as Catholics. The non-Catholic partner is not required to make a declaration or promise, but he or she must be informed of the declaration and promise made by the Catholic.

## How is the ceremony planned?

The pastor or parish staff will help guide the couple through the planning process. They will be asked to:

➤ **Choose a Nuptial Mass or Nuptial Liturgy.** One of the first decisions the engaged couple must make, with the help of the priest, is whether or not their wedding ceremony will be a

Mass. Weddings taking place in a Catholic church may either be celebrated as part of a Nuptial Mass, or as a separate rite outside the context of a Mass. Generally, a Nuptial Mass is reserved for marriages where both bride and groom are Catholic, and the Rite

of Marriage outside of Mass is used when one of the parties is non-Catholic.

➤ **Personalize the Rite.** There are booklets and pamphlets available that assist in personalizing the rite, while remaining within the specified guidelines. Such booklets typically encourage the bride and groom to select Scripture readings, prayers, and the wording of the vows from among several acceptable choices. Check with the parish priest or wedding planner about the possibility of a program/worship aid that is written specifically for the individual wedding.

➤ **Select music.** Catholic churches customarily impose strict limits on the type of musical selections that accompany the wedding ceremony. Sacred music alone, either classical or contemporary, is considered appropriate to the occasion. If someone has his or her heart set on hearing a favorite popular love song, arrangements can be made for it to be performed at the reception.

➤ **Select liturgical participants.** In addition to the standard wedding party attendants, Catholic weddings usually involve several other liturgical participants. These include:



**Readers.** The bride and groom customarily invite one or two honored guests to read Scripture during the ceremony. Readers may be family members, godparents, or close friends who have a clear and pleasant speaking voice. They need not be Catholic.

**Altar Servers.** Younger family members or friends may be asked to assist the priest during various parts of the ceremony. These boys or girls should be Catholic and already trained to carry out the altar-server duties.

**Gift Presenters.** During a Nuptial Mass, gift presenters carry the wine and bread to the priest prior to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. These honored guests may be family members or friends, adolescents or adults, but they should be Catholics who have already made their First Communion.

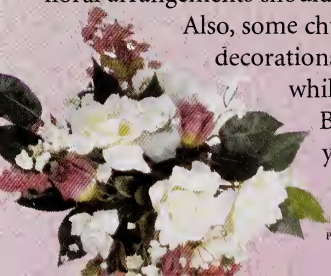
**Eucharistic Ministers.** Usually, qualified guests are asked to help the priest distribute communion for a Nuptial Mass. If not enough guests have undergone the necessary training, and are not authorized in the parish, the priest may suggest the names of parishioners who could assist, also.

## What other issues should be anticipated?

In some parishes, basic wedding questions are covered by specific policies and spelled out clearly to wedding planners. In others, the bride will want to ask the parish staff about local preferences and restrictions prior to the wedding day so arrangements can be made accordingly. Such topics include:

➤ **Flowers.** To avoid any disappointment or conflicts when decorating the church, it is best to find out well in advance if there are any particular restrictions on floral decorations. During Lent, for example, many Catholic churches do not permit any flowers in the sanctuary. Other liturgical seasons have certain colors and decorations associated with them, and wedding floral arrangements should be planned around them.

Also, some churches allow flowers or other decorations to be fastened to pews while others have strict limits. Before making plans with your florist, check with your pastor or church secretary.



➤ **Photography.** Expect to encounter some restrictions on photography and videography during the liturgy, although specific policies vary from parish to parish. The pastoral concern is that flashes and scurrying photographers detract from the reverential mood of the wedding ceremony. In some churches, a professional photographer may be given more freedom than random guests. Whatever the policy, considerate couples will respect it and convey the restrictions clearly to their designated photographer, and to any guests with cameras.

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➤ **Attire.** Before making any final decisions on a bridal dress or attendants' dresses, check parish policies. In some places, pastors ask that bridal participants cover their shoulders during the ceremony, to ensure more modesty in dress. If strapless gowns have already been chosen, shawls or jackets may need to be added.

➤ **Stipends.** Wedding stipends, or donations, are properly given to the presiding clergy and to others who assist in the liturgy, also. Sometimes, parishes have fixed fees established for their musicians and altar servers, but often it is up to the discretion of the ceremony sponsors. Ideally, stipends are commensurate with the size and scale of the wedding, and the amount of time the various individuals have contributed to the event. These stipends are separate from any fee or donation paid for the use of the facility. For those who serve as gift bearers, lectors, or Eucharistic ministers, no stipends are necessary if they are selected from among the wedding guests.

Navigating through all the various phases of Catholic wedding etiquette may not be an easy task. Thankfully, parishes usually recognize this fact and make sure they do all they can to assist couples in preparing for, planning, and participating in the Sacrament of Matrimony. In the Catholic Church, the focus of this sacrament is the commitment that bride and groom “give themselves, each to the other, mutually and definitively, in order to live a covenant of faithful and fruitful love” (CCC, 1662). A Catholic wedding truly can be one of the most beautiful and meaningful celebrations that life has to offer.

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**Almighty and eternal God,  
Look with favor on N. and N.,  
whom you have united in marriage.  
They pray that in good times and in bad  
they will grow in love for each other;  
that they will resolve to be of one heart  
in the bond of peace.  
Amen.**

— *Book of Blessings*

## **Where to go for more information**

*Code of Canon Law, Book IV*  
(Canon Law Society of America)

### **From Our Sunday Visitor**

*Catholic Etiquette: What You Need to Know about  
Catholic Rites and Wrongs*, Kay Lynn Isca

*Catholic Etiquette for Weddings*, Kay Lynn Isca

*Our Sunday Visitor's 2004 Catholic Almanac*,  
Edited by Matthew Bunson, D.Min.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition*,  
Part Two

*Christian Married Love*, Fred and Lisa Everett

*For Better ... Forever! A Catholic Guide to  
Lifelong Marriage*, Gregory Popcak, MSW, LCSW

Also see

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for additional Catholic resources  
or to order bulk copies of this pamphlet.

## **Our Sunday Visitor**

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