

Planning Your Catholic Wedding: Ten Tips

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Marriage is a Sacrament!

The celebration of Marriage is not just a religious ceremony. A marriage between two Christians is a sacrament, which means it is an encounter with Jesus Christ. In a particular way, the bride and the groom, in offering their lives to each other (symbolized in their vows), pledge their selfless love for each other. This selfless love embodies and makes present the love of Jesus, who gave himself in love for his people. All who are present at a wedding can look at the bride and groom and see Jesus. More importantly, the bride and the groom look at each other and see Jesus' love.

The Bride and the Groom are the Ministers of the Sacrament

In some ways, marriage is less about the ceremony or the sacramental celebration than it is about the daily living of marital life. The priest (or deacon) is not the minister of the sacrament. He merely acts as the official witness of the church and the state (of course if the wedding takes place at Mass, the priest is the celebrant of the Mass). The bride and the groom marry each other, and as such, they are the ministers of the sacrament. The celebration of marriage, then, ought to be a reflection of the couple's faith and love.

Marriage is a matter of faith

As a sacrament and an action of the Church, marriage both presupposes faith and renews and strengthens faith. The process of preparation for marriage invites couples to reflect on God's presence in their lives. In the Sacrament of Marriage, God "enriches and strengthens" the husband and wife by giving them his special gifts of grace to enable their daily living in marriage "in mutual and lasting fidelity."

The Scriptures: God's Word to you, and your word to the world

Couples are invited to choose the readings from the Bible that will be proclaimed at the wedding Liturgy. Normally three readings (one from the Old Testament, one from the New Testament letters, and one from the Gospels) are proclaimed. The Church provides many choices for each, and most parishes provide resources with background on each possible choice. The Scripture is the very Word of God speaking to the Church. Couples should reflect on what they believe God is speaking to them as they enter into Marriage, and they should also consider what they want to communicate about their own faith to those who will gather to celebrate with them on their wedding day.

Vows: what you say, what you promise, what you live

The heart of the Rite of Marriage is the exchange of consent between the bride and the groom. In this moment, they, as ministers of the sacrament, express their lifelong commitment to love and honor each other, as the priest (or deacon) acts as a witness. It is often suggested that couples memorize their vows not only to experience the exchange of consent in a more powerful way, by speaking them from the heart, rather than repeating them phrase by phrase after the priest. In this they will also spend time pondering what the vows mean, and hopefully remember the words for years to come, as the words take on more and more meaning in their day-to-day love and care for each other.

Music: To stir the soul and lift the mind

Music for the celebration of Marriage not only adds beauty and dignity to the ceremony, but it has a more important liturgical function. In addition to music to accompany the procession of the ministers and the bridal party, music is an integral part of the Liturgy itself: the singing of the acclamations and responses by the assembly, hymns and songs at the entrance (gathering) and communion procession are prescribed in the Rite of Marriage. Music should reflect and communicate, above all, the mystery of God's love in Jesus, especially as it pertains to the couple joined together in marriage.

Procession: Here comes the bride... and the groom!

What the movies depict isn't necessarily what the Church envisions. The bride and the groom enter freely and equally into marriage, and the entrance procession symbolizes that, as the couple approach the altar to stand before the Lord. The Rite of Marriage suggests that the liturgical ministers (priest, deacon, reader, servers) lead the procession, followed by the bride and bridegroom, each escorted by "at least their parents and the witnesses." Perhaps the groom goes first, led by his attendants and escorted by his parents, followed by the bride, led by her attendants and escorted by her parents.

Ministries: More than just the bridal party

One of the important tasks couples undertake in planning their wedding is the selection of the bridal party. Couples invite siblings, cousins, and close friends to stand by them as attendants, who show their support by their close presence. They also perform a liturgical function as official witnesses of the marriage rite. There are other liturgical ministries to consider as well: readers to proclaim the readings from Scripture and announce the intentions of the general intercessions, family or friends to present the offertory gifts of bread and wine, or perhaps even servers to assist at the altar and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. All of this preparation takes place as couples work with the officiating priest (or deacon), who provides guidance throughout the process.

Family + Friends = Liturgical Assembly

Couples invite their closest friends and members of their families to be part of their wedding day. That gathering also represents the community of the Church, as they surround the couple with their encouragement and their prayers. Above all, it is an occasion for worship: in celebrating the sacrament, the couple, together with their family and friends, forms a liturgical assembly, who stand before the Lord with hearts open to his loving power.

Above all, pray!

The wedding liturgy (whether celebrated at Mass or apart from it) is an act of worship. As such, it is a time to offer praise and thanks to God for his gifts, and to seek his continued blessings and help in your lives. In particular, thank God for the gift of your spouse, and pray to the Lord to bless you and guide you together as you become witnesses of his love for each other and for the world.