

The Sacrament of Matrimony

Matrimony or marriage? Matrimony is the sacrament or the sacramental rite of marriage; marriage is the legal union of a man and woman as husband and wife. From the Church's point of view marriage is, in the words of the Catechism, "The matrimonial covenant by which a man and woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life [and which has been] raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament". A wedding is the act of being married, whether in church or at the registry office. So many words, but each a little different in meaning.

When a couple first approaches their priest to ask about being married, it is usually to book a specific date so that their other plans can then go ahead - and that is the proper sequence, not telling the priest when the wedding has to be because other arrangements are already in place! He will then want, at some point, to complete the pre-nuptial paperwork with them as required by the Church. (And there's yet another word – nuptial – meaning "having to do with marriage") That process, and how the sacramental rite is celebrated, is, in my personal opinion, possibly all a priest is generally qualified to talk about on the particular subject of marriage. Quite rightly many dioceses and parishes now have marriage preparation courses (participation in which should be required) and which tend to be organised by individuals or couples who are already married and who are therefore far better qualified, by training and experience, to present the content of such a course. Even the sometimes thorny subject of the Church's teaching on birth control is probably better dealt with as part of the course.

My involvement in such courses has always been as an invited speaker, but then leaving again after my talk to let them get on with what they do without the inhibiting presence of "the priest". And so what do I generally say?

You have asked to be married in church – you could simply have gone to the registry office but instead you elected to be married in church and, while we are delighted that you have, your choice has got to make a difference.

So my first question for you to think about is, therefore, *why are* you asking to be married in church? If it's just because it will look nice in your wedding photos, that's not what it's all about. It's about the celebration of a sacrament. It's about standing before God and making sacramental promises - and the Church takes that very seriously (even if only one of you is Catholic) and so should you. What you are doing is bringing what is on the one hand a legal civil ceremony into church, and sacramentalising it – making it holy – by exchanging your vows before God.

But that raises another question (at least for the Catholics amongst you): how strong is the practice of your faith? If you are not going to Mass regularly, why would you suddenly decide to approach the Church for this particular sacrament? This decision, this choice, should be a further step on your sacramental journey, a further commitment in your spiritual life and your

relationship with God, not a one-off appearance in church. Your answer is very important.

Why a preparation course? Such courses are now required prior to the celebration of most of the sacraments – or should be. The vowed commitment involved in marriage is just as solemn, just as binding, as that of ordination. The Church requires students for the priesthood to complete 6 years of full-time preparation, why then do people typically expect much less when it comes to the sacrament of matrimony? This course is the Church's way of trying to ensure that you are entering into marriage with your eyes open and, just as importantly, that, come the day of your wedding, you will be standing before God fully informed and fully aware of the commitment that you are making, the vows you will be exchanging, and the responsibilities you are taking on. The Church has no business putting you in a position of making such a commitment, and making such promises, if it hasn't done all it can to ensure that you are there by choice and, just as importantly, by an *informed* choice.

What we are doing in our sacramental celebrations is serious business and we need to make that clear. If there is any doubt about a couple's approach to the sacrament in that respect, then, as with any of the sacraments, it would be better to defer it than to celebrate it lightly or inappropriately.

I won't be talking about the actual logistics of how the sacrament is celebrated. The priest who is marrying you will explain all of that to you himself. The unique aspect of the sacrament of matrimony (compared to other sacraments where the priest or bishop is the minister) is that you are the ministers of the sacrament – you are marrying one another, ministering the sacrament to one another as you make your vows and give your consent to one another. The priest is there to ensure that the sacrament is celebrated lawfully and validly.

Civil law requires the vows to be made before a properly authorised official – the registrar or an Authorised Person – in the presence of two witnesses. Church law (“canonical form”) requires that consent be given in church before the representative of the Church (usually a priest or deacon) in the presence of two witnesses (usually the best man and the chief bridesmaid).

I usually explain that because ours isn't the established Church, Catholic priests are required by law to follow certain aspects of the civil ceremony, and that this is why the various formulas sometimes require full names to be used (to fulfil civil law) while others only use first names (those that are part of the Church's sacramental rite and therefore less formal). I also mention the need for a marriage licence (given how many couples don't seem to realise that they need one) and that it is their responsibility, not the priest's, to make contact with the registrar's office *at the earliest possible opportunity* and make sure that all the requirements of civil law are in place and that the registrar (or the Authorised Person where a parish has one) is available on the proposed date of the wedding.

Marriage is a covenant, a sacred promise. The Church uses the word *covenant* (rather than contract) quite deliberately because marriage involves a solemn exchange of vows made before God. It isn't just a legal contract (contracts can be torn up), nor just a promise (which can be broken) but a *solemn covenant*, one that, in the eyes of God, can never be dissolved.

The marriage covenant is expressed in the exchange of consent and it is consent that makes the marriage. The Code of Canon Law states that *matrimonial consent is an act of will by which a man and a woman by an irrevocable covenant mutually give and accept one another for the purpose of establishing a marriage. The essential properties of marriage are unity and indissolubility.* The vows you make and the consent that you exchange are of fidelity to one another (only), for the rest of your lives, and an openness to children. Consent must be given with the intention of establishing a marriage and that means being aware of, and being willing to take on, everything that that involves.

Possible defects to consent (which could invalidate the marriage) include: not intending to fulfil any one of the promises involved in the consent you have given; putting any sort of condition on your consent (not intending to fulfil aspects of it)(divorce is not an option – and neither is the possibility of an annulment); in any way not understanding or accepting the responsibilities involved; not being psychologically or emotionally mature enough (this might also include not being in full command of your faculties on the day! I therefore warn couples to get their parties out of the way days before and that if they arrive on the day clearly under the influence, I will not be able to marry them).

When you complete the pre-nuptial interview with the priest you will be asked for the details of any other marriage, any reason why this marriage shouldn't be taking place, and whether you are entering into the marriage freely. (I explain each of these points.)

I then allow time for questions (hoping that I'll be able to answer them!)

*

I was preparing a homily on marriage and began, as I sometimes do, with a trip through the dictionary and looked up the word *matrimony*. I had never thought about it before but one of the meanings that the dictionary gave was “motherhood” - the beginning of the word (*matri*) coming from the French and Latin words for “mother”. But if matrimony, as a sacrament, is the marriage of a man and a woman, why does the word appear to imply only motherhood and not fatherhood?

If you look up the word fatherhood in the dictionary you don't get very far. All it means is “the condition of being a father” - nothing deeper, nothing more symbolic - whereas when you look up the word motherhood, you suddenly realise why the Church uses the word matrimony.

As a noun it means “derived from as if from one’s mother” and as a verb means “to care for or to protect like a mother”. That prompted me to see what it said about the word mother itself, where I found, in addition to the obvious meanings, that if you use it as verb (“to mother”) it means “to show qualities attributed to a mother such as her capacity to love selflessly” and also “to give birth to, to watch over, nourish, protect”.

By definition, it is saying that matrimony establishes a sacramental union between husband and wife of a sort that can be symbolised by motherhood. Its purpose is to create and sustain a vowed joining of lives that will be loving, nurturing, caring and protective, one that will sustain and nourish - and not just for the spouses in that relationship, but also for any children with which their union may be blessed. For all who are part of it, the sacramental union is to be life-giving and love-sustaining, nurturing and nourishing, and therefore in that sense symbolised by motherhood. It is, if you will, a womb for the family.

And why does the Church place the importance it does on marriage - or, more specifically, on matrimony? Because matrimony also symbolizes God’s vowed commitment to his people. We could speak at some length about the permanence of marriage vows reflecting the infinite commitment of the covenant God has made with his people - and all of that would be true. But just to refer once again to our understanding of the word matrimony, that if this word describes the relationship that Christ has entered into with his bride the Church (and with us who are the Church), then we can find in that covenanted union which Christ has sealed with his blood, motherhood also. It is our spiritual womb. In Christ and in his Church we are spiritually nurtured, nourished and cared for. The Church is for us the source of life - our sacramental life in Christ and, through him, our hope for eternal life. Therefore, in the Church as in marriage, what God has joined together we should make sure nothing and no one divides.

*

Canon Law reminds us that, as a faith community and a parish family, we have an obligation to provide social and spiritual support and assistance to all married couples. However, if a couple – or just the Catholic spouse in a mixed marriage – is not practising their faith, then there is already an essential link missing not only in their sacramental life, but also in their full participation in the spiritual life of the parish. Requesting the sacrament of matrimony in isolation, in that sense, is difficult to understand or to justify – sacraments can’t be one-off celebrations nor are they celebrated in a spiritual/faith vacuum. This is why the Church would want to encourage the couple, both before and after their wedding, to be practising their faith, attending Mass, and participating in the sacramental life of the Church as fully as they are able. Even if only one is Catholic, both would be welcome of course.

* * *

Fr Neil McNicholas