

Getting Married in the Catholic Church

Welcome!

This booklet is intended to give basic information on marriage preparation in the Catholic Church. It cannot substitute for a conversation with a priest or deacon about your specific situation and needs, but it can provide you with a sense of the normal requirements and procedures in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston. For more information on particular questions, check with your parish, or with the Archdiocesan Tribunal or Office of Family Life Ministry.

In their pastoral plan on ministry with young adults, *Sons and Daughters of the Light*, the US Bishops said,

“Young adults approach the Church to be married for a number of reasons, including parental pressure, the desire to have a church wedding, or to reunite themselves with the Church. Regardless of why they come, the Church and its ministers need to welcome them as Christ welcomes them, with understanding, love, and acceptance, challenging them with the gospel message, and giving them hope that a lifelong commitment is possible.”

We hope you experience this hospitality and welcoming throughout your marriage preparation process. It is in this spirit that we offer you this guide to *Getting Married in the Catholic Church*.

Catholic teaching about marriage

For most people marriage is one of the most important decisions and realities of their life; in it they form a community of love. For Catholics, marriage is not merely a civil contract but is a covenant between a man and a woman before God. If both are baptized, the marriage is a sacrament, a symbol of the unity of Christ and the Church. A sacramental marriage is a means of grace, giving strength to the husband and wife to live out their commitment, and to help each on the path to holiness.

As you prepare for marriage, you'll be asked to reflect carefully and prayerfully on the nature of this sacrament. Before we look at some of the steps of that preparation process, consider some of the points made in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (references * are to paragraph number):

***1660** The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love, has been founded and endowed with its own special laws by the Creator. By its very nature it is ordered to the good of the couple, as well as to the generation and education of children. Christ the Lord raised marriage between the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament...

***1661** The sacrament of Matrimony signifies the union of Christ and the Church. It gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved his Church; the grace of the sacrament thus perfects the human love of the spouses, strengthens their indissoluble unity, and sanctifies them on the way to eternal life.

***1662** Marriage is based on the consent of the contracting parties, that is, on their will to give themselves, each to the other, mutually and definitively, in order to live a covenant of faithful and fruitful love.

Any marriage involving a Catholic is subject to Church norms known as "canon law." Catholics are obliged to marry in the Catholic Church, following the marriage rite of the Catholic Church. Their exchange of vows must be witnessed by either a priest or deacon and two other witnesses. A Catholic can receive permission to marry a non-Catholic and they may be married in the church of the non-Catholic party, but if their exchange of vows will be witnessed by a minister of that denomination, the Catholic must seek a written dispensation from the local Catholic Bishop. Any priest or deacon in one of our local parishes can assist in this matter.

Cultural adaptations

The Church allows cultural adaptations within the ceremony as long as they are in keeping with the nature and spirit of the liturgy. Such adaptations should not be overpowering, though. Be careful not to duplicate symbols that might have similar meanings; for example, the *lazo* and the *unity candle* are both cultural adaptations which emphasize the union of two persons into a new life in Christ.

The wedding rehearsal

This may be conducted by the priest or deacon witnessing the marriage, or by a parish wedding rehearsal coordinator. The rehearsal is part of the preparation process, and offers an excellent opportunity for the wedding party to join together in prayer. The *Catechism* notes (para.1622), "It is ... appropriate for the bride and groom to prepare themselves for the celebration of their marriage by receiving the sacrament of penance"; many priests will offer this at the rehearsal for the couple and for members of the wedding party who may desire it.

After the wedding ...

In the months of marriage preparation, you're not simply preparing for an hour long wedding, but for a lifetime together—a lifetime of joy and happiness, we hope, but also of surprises and challenges. The best marriage preparation can never anticipate all that will happen in your life together, but it can help you to uncover some areas you'll want to give thought to, and it can also point you to resources available for marriage enrichment and healing.

Questions?

Throughout this guide, we've referred to other resources, many of which are available on the WebPages of the Archdiocesan Tribunal and the Office of Family Life Ministry, at <http://www.archgh.org>.

The rite

The Church provides three different rites for marriage:

- a. sacramental rite during the Eucharist, which is the usual (but not mandatory) form when both parties are Catholic;
- b. a sacramental rite outside Eucharist, which is the usual (but not mandatory) form when one party is baptized, but not Catholic;
- c. a non-sacramental rite between a Catholic and an unbaptized person.

The *Entrance Procession* may include the liturgical ministers and presider, as well as the bride and groom, family members, and attendants. There are many ways to plan it—a liturgical procession (as at a Sunday mass) followed by procession of the wedding party; attendants entering as couples rather than the bridesmaids alone; bride and groom accompanied by all parents or relatives in the procession; or the bride escorted by her father.

The *Liturgy of the Word* follows the format as at any mass. The readings may be selected from the many options given in the lectionary, or may be other appropriate Scriptures. Non-scriptural readings are not used. The psalm is preferably sung, as is the gospel acclamation. The general intercessions should address the needs of the world and the universal Church as well as the needs of the couple.

For the *Rite of Marriage*, the couple should be clearly visible to the entire assembly as they exchange vows, because they are the focus of the rite. There are various options provided for the wording of the vows.

Music

Parishes may have their own policies about music. Be sure to ask. In general, when deciding what music to use, consider the following questions:

- a. Is this a well-written piece of music?
- b. Are the text and music in keeping with the nature of the liturgy?
- c. Can the music be used to help the assembly to pray?

The music used before or during the liturgy should be clearly identifiable as prayer by all present. Secular love songs and ballads that have personal meaning to the couple are best played or sung at the reception.

Preparing for Marriage

First, notify the parish!

Most couples reserve a reception location as much as a year in advance. Before you do that, or contract with a photographer, or think about invitations, make any other agreements, you need to talk to your parish. Archdiocesan guidelines say you should do so at least 6 to 9 months before the time you'd like to get married; some parishes may require even more advance notice, because of the number of weddings they celebrate. Be sure to allow extra time if either of you have a previous marriage.

Once you speak with your parish, you'll begin a formal process of marriage preparation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains:

1632 So that the "I do" of the spouses may be a free and responsible act and so that the marriage covenant may have solid and lasting human and Christian foundations, preparation for marriage is of prime importance.

Preparation for marriage involves a process of discernment, which is meant to be an affirming experience as you become more aware of your readiness to enter Christian married life. This process is meant to help *you* assess your personal faith and your relational readiness, not to make those judgments for or about you.

The pastor of the parish in which you live or in which you are registered has the responsibility for your marriage preparation (if both are Catholics, most couples will go to the bride's parish, but it is your choice). If you want another priest or deacon to witness the marriage (for instance, a campus minister or relative), your pastor can give him permission to also coordinate your marriage preparation.

Initial interview

The process begins when you sit down for an initial conversation with the priest or deacon who will be responsible for your marriage preparation, or some other person appointed for this by the pastor of your parish. This shouldn't be done over the phone or with the parish secretary. This is an opportunity for you to get to know one another, to explain the marriage preparation process, to determine that you are free to marry (according to Church law and civil law), and to identify any special needs or requests you may have regarding the wedding (place, long-distance preparation, etc.). You'll be told about the different documents you'll need to provide (recent copies of your baptismal certificates, pre-nuptial investigation form, any necessary permissions or dispensations, and, if necessary, affidavit of free status, annulment papers, or death certificate of previous spouse).

Faith readiness

One of the most important aspects of the discernment process is the assessment of your faith readiness. Because the marriage of two baptized Christians is a sacrament, it requires the presence of faith in those who receive it. No two people are at the same place in their journey of faith, however. Through the marriage preparation process, you should be able to better identify and deepen your faith, both as individuals and as a couple.

Marriage readiness

Another aspect of the discernment process looks at your readiness to marry. While there is no possible way to determine this definitively, there are clear indicators that can predict potential problems or even the eventual failure of the marriage. You'll be asked to complete a premarital inventory such as the PMI Profile or FOCCUS, which will give both of you an opportunity to reflect on your attitudes and your relationship. This isn't a test, but is an aid for you and the priest or deacon to use in highlighting important areas for discussion.

Formational programs

This part of the marriage preparation process is intended to help you understand better both the human and Christian aspects of marriage, and to introduce you to persons and resources that are available to help strengthen your marriage. Any formational program should include discussion of the following "key elements":

- The context of marriage today
- Communication and conflict resolution
- The meaning of permanence and ongoing forgiveness
- The requirements of a sacramental marriage
- The role of faith, prayer, and Church in marriage
- The roles, expectations, and responsibilities within marriage
- Self-awareness, personal healing and individual growth
- Sex and sexuality
- The value of children and responsible parenthood.

The priest or deacon will work with you in selecting a formational program that best suits your needs. There are a number of options available in this archdiocese, including *Engaged Encounter*, *Sponsor Couple Program*, *Unitas and Married in the Catholic Church: What Difference Does It Make?* When you've completed one of these programs, the priest or deacon will meet with you to discuss the results.

In addition, couples of child-bearing age will be asked to attend either an introductory session or a series of classes on Natural Family Planning.

The Wedding Ceremony

Where will the wedding take place?

To highlight the sacredness of the celebration, and to underscore the relationship between your marriage and the Christian community, the Catholic Church stipulates that Catholic weddings take place in Catholic churches. In this archdiocese, permission will not be given for outdoor weddings or unusual locations. Normally, the wedding will be celebrated in the parish where either of the Catholic parties resides. Your pastor may give permission for it to be celebrated in another Catholic church or chapel (for example, a Newman Center). If you are marrying a non-Catholic Christian or non-baptized person, you may request permission to have the wedding take place elsewhere (e.g., in another Christian church or synagogue or in another suitable place).

Preparing the liturgy

The wedding liturgy, like all other sacramental celebrations, is by its very nature communal—a celebration of the whole Church. Yet it is unique in being the only sacrament where it is the couple themselves who are the ministers of the sacrament; the priest or deacon is a witness.

Catholic weddings follow the general norms for liturgical celebrations, but there are a number of options available for you to choose that will enable you to enrich the celebration with expressions of your own faith. The priest or deacon will assist you in understanding the nature of the liturgy, and the various options and choices available regarding music, readings, and the ritual. Reflecting prayerfully on these together can be an important part of your spiritual preparation for the sacrament.

The wedding liturgy should be planned to encourage the participation of the assembly through song and prayer. It should express both your faith and commitment and that of the gathered community. It provides an opportunity for the community to pray for you, and to promise you their support in your married life. Your parish may provide you with a workbook for planning the liturgy, but here is a summary of some of the options you may consider:

Ministries of the liturgy

There are a variety of ministries in each liturgical celebration. Some roles can only be filled by a Roman Catholic (for example, an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion); other ministries, like that of reader, can be done by qualified persons of other faith traditions. Take care in selecting and preparing people to fill these roles, making sure they have the skills and gifts necessary.