

CELEBRATING CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

Gratefully acknowledging Liturgy Brisbane resources.

OUR TRADITION – Marriage is more than a Wedding Ceremony

Marriage has been around a long time – well before the Church itself.

Early Christians entered into marriage according to local customs and culture, just like everyone else. The only difference was really one of attitude as Christians began to appreciate that the loving union of husband and wife was not only about individuals and families but also about the love of God shown in Christ.

As late as the ninth century, Pope Nicholas I proclaimed that marriage by mutual consent was accepted as valid without any civil or church ceremony. From the eleventh century, the Church required all secular weddings to be blessed by a priest and, eventually, to take place in a church building.

It was not until the twelfth century that an established wedding ceremony developed and that marriage took its place among the Church's sacraments. In the same century, Pope Alexander III decreed that the basis for a valid marriage was the couple's mutual consent and that this consent established an unbreakable marriage contract.

The logical conclusion of this understanding is that the **minister of the sacrament of marriage is the couple**, not the priest. The couple administer the sacrament to each other; the role of **the priest is as a witness**.

The love that unites the bride and groom invites all present to reflect on and wonder at the mystery of human love and to perceive that God's love for us is something like this, only much greater. The loving communion that exists between a husband and wife is the clearest sign and indication available to us of the extent to which God loves the human family.

Just as married love is a commitment to grow in intimacy, to permanence and to fidelity in good times and in bad, so God's love for us is all these things. Yet our understanding of marriage as a sacrament goes even further than this. Not only do a couple mirror or reflect God's love, they **embody the presence of Christ in a unique way**.

In Catholic marriage, the wife and husband commit themselves to being a sign of Christ's love to the community of faith. The community, in turn, offers its support to the couple as they journey through life. It is also the responsibility of the community to support and nurture marital vocations and to call all couples to ever-greater heights of faith and love.

The **Rite of Marriage** celebrates the distinctive way in which Christian couples experience Christ's saving love. The Sacrament of Marriage immerses a couple into the mystery of Christ's saving love, which touches and transforms their lives.

The rite, through the rich texts, the words of Scripture, and the symbolic gestures, draws them together as a couple and enables the faith community to be strengthened and nourished and renewed.

The celebration of this rite involves entering into a way of life where the couple grow in love and holiness, and are transformed in the mystery of Christ. They witness to the world that God's love and power are present in the real world, and they share in the mission of Christ to bring the gospel of peace, love and freedom and justice to all people.

It is generally understood that the Sacrament of Marriage is as much a grace-filled experience for the whole Christian community as it is for the couple who come to profess their love for each other. In it, the couple publicly give witness to their love for each other and express their hope-filled desire to share their lives as husband and wife, but it also speaks to the gathered people of Christian love and the relationship of Christ and the Church.

HOW WE CELEBRATE MARRIAGE

The Rite of Marriage belongs to the Church, and so the Church regulates its celebration. Marriage in the Church is **not** the private celebration of the couple or their families and friends; as liturgy, it is the **celebration of the whole faith community**.

The Catholic marriage rite provides for a dignified ceremony that is warm yet solemn and worthy of the occasion. In words, actions and symbols, it encourages reflection on the meaning of Christian marriage by all who participate in the ceremony. It witnesses to an understanding of married love which is much deeper than that often promoted by society.

Cultural ideas of marriage are shaped by popular movies and the televised pageantry of royal weddings. Couples want their marriage ceremony to be unique and personal – it is, they claim, “their / the bride’s day”. Nothing is spared in an effort to make the day special – invitations, dress, photos, transport, reception. The bride and groom often expect to be able to prepare their own marriage ceremony as well – writing their own vows, choosing readings from modern writers and using popular songs that mean something special to them.

However, the celebration of marriage is an action of the whole church, not just the couple. While the couple (where both partners are baptised catholic) minister the sacrament to each other, every effort should be made to encourage all present to participate actively in the ritual that celebrates the dignity of married love, and not to be mere spectators.

The celebration of marriage is an action of the whole Church, people from the parish should be encouraged to assist in preparing the couple for marriage (possibly acting as mentors for them), and helping with the ceremony itself (music, decorating the church, doing readings, etc). Parishes might also consider extending a general invitation to parishioners to attend the marriage liturgy where possible.

While Catholic church ministers (usually priests or deacons) are also registered with the Commonwealth for the purposes of marriage, they can only preside at and witness marriages that accord with the rite of the Catholic Church.

There are a number of considerations when preparing and planning for a marriage, for example, whether:

- both partners are baptised Catholic or only one
- both partners are willing to undertake recognised marriage preparation
- there has been a former marriage
- other permissions might be required
- all evidence, such as of birth or baptism, is readily available
- the wedding be celebrated in a sacred place such as a church building, within or outside the context of Mass, or outside a sacred place, such as a non-denominational chapel
- the couple are able to make a voluntarily financial contribution to assist the local church community.

IMPORTANT NOTE

To ensure that the above considerations, and any others, can be suitably dealt with, it is strongly advised to make contact with the local parish (at least 12 months prior to the preferred date of the wedding ceremony) to first discuss the circumstances of the couple and the requirements / impact of their particular situation.