

The Rite of Marriage as a Theological Foundation for Marriage Ministry Today

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It's a real pleasure to be with all of you at this symposium. For most of my twenty-six years in lay ecclesial ministry, my major area of interest, research, writing and pastoral practice has been the celebration of Christian marriage. Beginning with a wonderful experience of helping to plan and then participating in a parish based marriage preparation program at Holy Trinity Church in Washington, D.C. in the early 1980s, I have worked with countless couples as they prepared for the celebration of their marriage, I've had the privilege of working with colleagues and parishioners throughout North America whose interests and expertise have covered the myriad aspects of ministry to the engaged and newly married, and I have benefited greatly from the insights of theologians whose writings have focused on marriage. Like the group gathered for this symposium with diverse areas of expertise but a common dedication to life-giving marriage ministry in the Catholic Church today, the couples and colleagues that I've encountered in my work relating to marriage have convinced me that effective marriage ministry needs all of us working collaboratively and together: bishops, priests, deacons, family life

ministers, catechists, theologians, musicians and liturgists. I have grown immeasurably from graced opportunities over these years to work with people who have transcended their particular specializations in marriage ministry for a commitment to cohesive pastoral care of engaged, married and separated or divorced members of the Body of Christ, and I sense that same spirit among the group that has gathered here this week.

So, I am here before you today in that spirit of collaboration as we offer input to the U.S. bishops' upcoming pastoral letter on marriage. As I reminded Tim Muldoon when he invited me to participate, I am not a systematic theologian and the focus of my pastoral work has not been on family life ministry *per se*. Rather, my enthusiasm for being part of this symposium is based in my conviction that the liturgical celebration of marriage can, and should, be a vital part of effective Catholic marriage ministry today as well as a source of theological reflection on the sacrament of marriage. Let me begin with a story that I first heard in a class many years ago during my first semester of graduate school at Notre Dame. The story has stuck with me over these years partly because, as the professor was recounting it, a storm was visibly brewing outside and, as a northeasterner unfamiliar with such midwestern storms, I was sure that I was going to be sucked up into a tornado's vortex and deposited miles away in a cornfield, like a bad replay of the storm scene from the "Wizard of Oz." More importantly, this story has stuck with me for what it says about the interplay of theology and liturgy for us Catholics and, for our purposes today, for what it suggests about the value of considering what the wedding liturgy has to contribute to our discussion of marriage.

Many years ago, a bright, young theologian from the west was fascinated with the Eastern Orthodox churches. He applied for, and was granted, a sabbatical from the university where he was teaching, to study the Orthodox faith. Pulling together all the money he had been

saving, he purchased round trip passage to Russia. During his journey there, he designed the focus of his research: he decided not to go to the universities or the monasteries, but to go directly to the people, to learn what they believed. And so, the theologian spent his time among the peasants of the Russian villages. “Tell me,” he would ask, “what is it that you believe in your religion? I’m a theologian from the west and am here to study the Orthodox faith. Can you explain your faith to me?” To his surprise, the answers he received were brief and, to his scholarly mind, incomplete. The days and weeks went by, and he found himself with very few notes, very little information.

Finally, the day of his departure came. The theologian walked disappointedly to the small station in the village where he would catch the train that would take him to the port and the ship back home. As he was walking, an old woman in a horse-drawn cart came along and offered him a ride. It was a Sunday and she, like many others in the town, was on her way to church. “You look so sad, young man,” the woman remarked. He responded, “I have been here for weeks to study your faith. I have talked to many people, but no one has been able to explain what you believe. Now, I have spent all my savings and I have nothing to show for it.” The old woman stopped the cart in front of the church and said to the theologian, “Come into the church with me.” “Oh, I can’t,” he replied. “I’m not a member of your religion and, besides, I’ll miss my train.” The old woman got down from the cart, looked up at the theologian and said, “Young man, it seems to me that you have only two choices: you can get on the train and go home empty-handed, or you can come into this church for our liturgy and see what we believe.”

In a profoundly simple way, the woman taught the theologian something quite basic and essential not only to Orthodox Christianity, but also to Roman Catholicism and other religious traditions with a strong liturgical identity: if you want to know what the Church believes, then

come worship with the Church. It's a maxim attributed to Prosper of Aquitaine in the fifth century: *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, or in its more common abbreviated form *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which has been translated to mean that the law of prayer is the law of faith, the Church believes as she prays, the liturgy expresses the belief of the Church and shapes the faith of the assembly. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* cites this maxim and explains it this way: "The meaning and grace of the sacrament...are clearly seen in the rites of its celebration. By following the gestures and words of this celebration with attentive participation, the faithful are initiated into the riches this sacrament signifies and actually brings about."¹ Approaching the liturgy as a primary source of our theology, the *Catechism* devotes several paragraphs in the chapter on each sacrament to describing how the faith of the Church is expressed in the signs and symbols of that particular sacramental celebration.

All of this suggests that the liturgy itself is a form of *primary theology*, that is, an unfolding of the Church's faith in the very experience of the texts, rituals and symbols of the liturgical celebration.² The same could be said about the married life. The experience of married couples is another form of *primary theology* insofar as we see the Church's faith about marriage broken open in the lived reality of the marriage covenant. *Secondary theology*, which has its own unique and equally important contribution, is the more systematic reflection on the Church's faith contained in catechisms and the writings of theologians. I want to suggest that the text and symbolic actions of the Church's *Rite of Marriage* (and the revised *Order for Celebrating Marriage* which was published in Latin in 1990 but has not yet been approved for

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC) §1234.

² My graduate school mentor Mark Searle reviewed the texts of marriage rites from various eras in Christian history and noted that they "show, more than the writings of the theologians, and more than those who romanticize the erotic, a balanced and forward-looking vision of how the mystery of marriage can be understood and lived." See "Marriage Rites as Documents of Faith: Notes for a Theology of Marriage" in Mark Searle and Kenneth W. Stevenson, *Documents of the Marriage Liturgy* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 262.

use in the United States) and the actual use of these texts and celebration of these symbolic actions in wedding liturgies represent a *primary theology* of the sacrament, that is, an understanding of marriage drawn from the liturgical rite itself. At the same time, the first section of the introduction to the ritual text entitled the “Importance and Dignity of the Sacrament of Marriage”³ provides a *secondary theology* of marriage, a summary of the Church’s doctrine on the sacrament. These points are considered “the fundamental elements of Christian doctrine” that form the foundation for catechesis with people preparing for marriage.⁴

Before proceeding, let me acknowledge a caution that some have raised to this line of thinking. In our not too distant past, Catholic marriage theology and ministry were heavily focused on the wedding whereas less attention was devoted to the unfolding of the sacrament in the lived experience of marriage. Movements such as Marriage Encounter have helped to broaden our focus with their reminders that “a wedding is a day, a marriage is a lifetime,” and our marriage theology and ministry have benefited from the wide variety of perspectives and insights that are represented here at this symposium. What I am advocating here is simply that, given our sacramental and liturgical tradition, the wedding liturgy needs to have a fundamental place at the table when it comes to our conversations about marriage ministry in the Church today. This, I believe, is what the bishops at the Second Vatican Council meant when they said that “liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church...(but) nevertheless the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows.”⁵ In the years since the Council, we’ve seen this vision enfolded most profoundly in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*. As with Christian initiation, our marriage

³ #1-7 in the *Rite of Marriage*, hereafter RM; #1-11 in the Latin edition of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage*, hereafter OCM.

⁴ OCM #17.

⁵ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #9-10.

ministry is most effective when theology and catechesis, marriage preparation and enrichment, and the wedding liturgy are experienced as inseparable components in a cohesive whole.

In suggesting implications for us and for the bishops' pastoral letter, I envision theologians and catechists drawing on the wedding liturgy itself, as well as the lived experience of married and formerly married Christians, as sources of theological reflection and catechesis. I'm suggesting an approach in which marriage ministers would see the wedding liturgy as a culminating moment in the marriage preparation process and would be concerned about the careful preparation and life-giving celebration of every wedding liturgy celebrated in the parish. And I'm imagining musicians and liturgists who understand their role with engaged couples as part of an overall marriage ministry and are, therefore, more concerned with the unique journey that has brought these two people to this point in their lives and less with simply enforcing a blacklist of prohibited music.

Returning to the story of the theologian and the old woman, then, the question I want to pose is: what contribution does the liturgical celebration of marriage make to the theological foundations for marriage ministry today? What understanding of marriage is reflected in our current rites of marriage, as celebrated in American parishes? What would the theologian have learned about American Catholic attitudes toward marriage if he had been present at the 10:00 AM wedding at the local parish? Or, closer to home, what message about Christian marriage in 2007 will be left with the millions of worshippers at the thousands of weddings to be celebrated this year in the Roman Catholic parishes and chapels in the United States? Will they find a hope-filled alternative to society's despair about committed relationships in the Church's proclamation of marriage as "an intimate partnership of life and love,"⁶ or will they exit the

⁶ *Gaudium et spes* #48.

church, like the groom in a poignant Jack Ziegler cartoon, saying “not bad for a ceremony steeped in meaningless symbolism.”⁷

As a sacramental Church, we Catholics know that every word, gesture, symbol and ritual action in liturgy convey meaning. There is no such thing as a meaningless symbol, no such thing as a neutral ritual. The question is: are the messages and the values conveyed in our liturgies consistent with what we believe about what is taking place? More importantly, the nature of symbol and ritual is such that they shape our impressions and form our understanding of what is taking place. The question is: are they forming an understanding that is consistent with what the Church believes about what is taking place? These are important questions because it is commonly acknowledged that weddings are great opportunities for evangelization.

If we were to ask these questions honestly of our current rites of marriage, I think we’d have to give a mixed response. I say mixed because the answer would vary if we were talking about the “rite in print” or the “rite in action.” By the “rite in print,” I mean simply the texts and rubrics of the ritual book. The “rite in action” is the actual liturgical celebration. There is often quite a difference between the two. Part of that difference is due to inculturation, the manner in which Catholics of a particular culture en flesh and ritualize the faith. Thanks to the work of scholars like Anscar Chupungco, we have come to understand how natural and necessary the process of liturgical inculturation is, and the *Rite of Marriage* makes generous provision for adaptation.⁸ At the same time, there is a difference between faithful inculturation and subsuming the Church’s faith to prevailing cultural norms. The liturgy, at its best, not only dons the garments of each culture, but also challenges cultural norms that may be contrary to the Gospel and the faith of the Church. Part of our task as marriage ministers serving the Church in the

⁷ Jack Ziegler, *Marital Biltz* (New York NY: Warner Books, 1987), p. 23.

⁸ RM #17-18.

United States is to ask how the rites of marriage might find expression in the wonderful diversity of American culture while, at the same time, challenging American customs surrounding marriage that obscure and even contradict the Church's faith concerning this sacrament.

We turn first to the "rite in print." The *Rite of Marriage* has served the Church in the United States since its promulgation in 1969, and we await the U.S. edition of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage*. The introduction in the Latin edition of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* weighs in at 44 paragraphs, more than double the size of the 18 paragraph introduction to the *Rite of Marriage*. The eleven paragraphs which outline the fundamental elements of Christian doctrine concerning marriage in the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* also more than double their counterpart in the current rite. As in the *Rite of Marriage*, this section in the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* draws heavily from the chapter on "The Dignity of Marriage and the Family" from the Second Vatican Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, along with references to the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* and the scriptures. New references in this section of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* are to Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, the *Code of Canon Law*, Tertullian's *Ad uxorem*, and the text of the nuptial blessing, the last of which is particularly noteworthy since it represents the kind of primary theology I mentioned earlier.

There are several doctrinal principles that appear in the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* that are not addressed directly in the *Rite of Marriage*. Before reviewing these, let us look at the points that are common to both editions of the rite.

(1) The marriage of Christians is a symbol of the unity and love between Christ and the Church.⁹ While the *Rite of Marriage* states as a matter of fact, the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* provides several concrete examples of this self-sacrificing love: eg, "Just as Christ

⁹ RM #1-2, OCM #5-9, 11.

loved the Church and gave himself up for it, so Christian partners work to nurture and foster their union in equal dignity, mutual dedication, and an undivided affection that has its source in divine love.”¹⁰

(2) Christian marriage is established by the covenant that the partners freely give to and receive from each other.¹¹ The two editions speak of the marriage covenant in similar terms, but the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* amplifies the significance of this covenant by referring to God’s “covenant of love and fidelity”¹² and “Christ’s covenant with the Church.”¹³

(3) Christian married couples cooperate with their creator in the procreation and education of children.¹⁴ This aspect of Christian marriage is emphasized much more strongly in the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* which echoes the *Rite of Marriage* in stating that children are the couple’s “crowning reward” and “the most outstanding gift of marriage.”¹⁵ The revised rite goes on to add that, in raising children, spouses “help each other toward sanctity,” cultivate “a spirit of sacrifice” and “fulfill their human and Christian responsibility.”¹⁶

(4) There are several purposes of marriage.¹⁷ Like the *Rite of Marriage*, the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* does not limit the purpose of marriage to the procreation and education of children. Noting that its emphasis on children is “not to disparage the other purposes of matrimony,”¹⁸ the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* specifies in much more detail than the *Rite of Marriage* those other purposes: “an intimacy of life and community of love,”¹⁹ helping “each

¹⁰ OCM #9.

¹¹ RM #2, OCM #2, 6-7.

¹² OCM #6.

¹³ OCM #7.

¹⁴ RM #4, OCM #2-3, 8, 10.

¹⁵ OCM #3.

¹⁶ OCM #8, 10.

¹⁷ RM #3-4, OCM #4, 8-11.

¹⁸ OCM #10.

¹⁹ OCM #4.

other toward sanctity,”²⁰ nurturing and fostering “equal dignity, mutual dedication and an undivided affection”²¹ and “public witness before everyone.”²²

Several additional principles appear in the *Order for Celebrating Marriage*. Consistent with the introductions to the *Order of Christian Funerals*, the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* and the *Pastoral Care of the Sick*, the first eleven paragraphs of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* display a more comprehensive understanding of sacrament than appears in the *Rite of Marriage* and other texts from the first round of postconciliar revision of rites. These additional principles paint a much richer and more complete picture of Christian marriage.

(1) Marriage is part of the order of creation taken up and renewed in Christ.²³ The “intimacy of life and community of love”²⁴ that are the basis of marriage are portrayed as part of God’s plan in creation. Far beyond the Pauline begrudging tolerance of marriage,²⁵ the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* speaks of marriage as divinely ordered,²⁶ renewed in Christ, and raised by Christ to the dignity of a sacrament “so that it could signify more clearly and be an easier example of his marriage with the Church.”²⁷

(2) The sacramental nature of marriage is rooted in baptism.²⁸ Through baptism, the spouses are already “inserted permanently into Christ’s covenant with the Church...so that their conjugal community is taken up into Christ’s love and is endowed with the power of his sacrifice.”²⁹ Marriage is a graced way in which the spouses live out their baptismal commitment, and, in doing so, serve as icons (or sacraments) of Christ. The sacrament has as

²⁰ OCM #8.

²¹ OCM #9.

²² OCM #11.

²³ OCM #1, 4-6.

²⁴ OCM #4.

²⁵ “It is better to be married than to burn with passion.” (I Corinthians 7:9).

²⁶ OCM #4.

²⁷ OCM #5.

²⁸ OCM #7-9.

²⁹ OCM #7.

much to do with who the spouses are (ie, human beings taken up in Christ and joined to Christ's covenant with the Church through baptism) as with what they do (ie, freely and mutually give and accept each other, help each other toward sanctity).

(3) The sacrament of marriage unfolds over time.³⁰ Although not as explicitly as the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* seems to suggest a view of the sacrament as more than a specific, definable moment. While the consent and vows are proclaimed at a given time thus establishing the marriage, the purposes and characteristics of Christian marriage only become evident over time. Drawing on Tertullian and Pope John Paul II, the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* speaks of marriage as “a binding of two believers in one hope, one discipline, and the same kind of service,” a public witness lived day by day, a continuous call from “the same God who calls spouses to matrimony” in the first place.³¹

Proceeding beyond the introduction, we can list the theological themes in the scriptural and prayer texts of the rite. Since the U.S. edition of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* is not yet available, I will limit myself to the texts in the current *Rite of Marriage*. Beginning with the scripture readings, we see the following motifs:

In the Old Testament: marriage as part of the order of creation; husband and wife become one body in marriage; the place of prayer in marriage and family life; the goodness of the sensuality of love; marriage as a covenant.

In the New Testament: the love of God in Christ; the reflection of love in the married couple's concerns for the needs of others and in their hospitality to others; the body as a temple of God's Spirit; the countercultural nature of love exemplified in its attributes of patience,

³⁰ OCM #11.

³¹ OCM #11.

kindness and humility; the deference that spouses are to show one another; love and the various other virtues of the Christian life.

In the Gospels: the beatitudes as guiding principles for married life; the married couple as salt of the earth and light to the world; the practice of the Gospel in married life; love as the greatest commandment; the inseparable nature of what God has joined in marriage; Christ's concern for married couples as exemplified in the wedding feast at Cana; marriage as symbolic of Christ's union with God and the Church.

Turning to the prayer texts in the current rite, we see an equally rich portrait of marriage. Like the scripture readings, these texts are primary theology, the engagement by the worshipping assembly in proclaiming the Church's faith concerning marriage. Among the theological motifs that are found in the prayer texts are the following:

(1) Love as fundamental to Christian marriage. God is praised for the love that has brought these two people to this point, and God is asked to bless their love.

(2) Covenant as a pattern for the marriage relationship. Just as God entered into a covenant with the people, so husband and wife are enjoined to undertake marriage as a covenant.

(3) Faithfulness as a hallmark of the marriage covenant. God's covenant with the people and Christ's union with God and the Church are marked by fidelity. The marriage covenant mirrors these relationships by the life-long fidelity of spouses.

(4) The couple serves as co-creators with God as they develop this new family in the Church and as they bring children into that family.

(5) Husband and wife help each other to grow in faith. The family that this couple begins is, in this sense, the "domestic church."

(6) The equality and complementarity of wife and husband in the marriage relationship.

(7) Service to others and simplicity of lifestyle as characteristic of the Christian family created by marriage.

(8) The Christian community as the context for celebrating marriage.

(9) The unfolding of the grace of the sacrament throughout married life, not just limited to the wedding celebration.

The scripture readings and prayer texts of the rite are fruitful sources of theological insight into the sacrament. Just as importantly, they can serve as a rich source of reflection on the Christian married life for engaged couples as they prepare to enter into the marriage covenant and for married people as they discover, through good times and bad, the graces and challenges of marriage. As we have learned from the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, the mystagogical unpacking of texts and ritual actions after the liturgical event can yield entirely new insights. Married couples can see more and more of the wisdom in the texts and ritual actions of the *Rite of Marriage* as their marriages develop over the years.

As Catholics, though, we are well aware that texts are only one component of the liturgy. As powerfully -- and often more powerfully -- than the texts, the symbols and ritual actions of the liturgy tell the story of what the Church celebrates and believes. When we get beyond scripture and prayer texts, we also begin to see how the “rite in action” often diverges from the “rite in print.” Here, in the actual celebration of marriage is where the basic form of marriage catechesis and evangelization take place. Here, in the weddings celebrated week in and week out at parishes all over the country, is the privileged opportunity for us to proclaim and celebrate what we believe about marriage. Here, in this particular church with this particular couple, the pastoral decision is made as to how much of our Catholic story of marriage we will tell, how much we will share with this assembly. When we make these pastoral decisions, more is at stake

than “How can I make it through this wedding with the least hassle and the fewest calls from an angry mother of the bride?” What is at stake is whether the Church’s faith concerning marriage is going to have a life beyond books on our shelves and whether we will take advantage of the opportunity that the wedding liturgy presents for evangelization about Christian marriage.

Let us turn, then, to some of the non-verbal ritual elements of the wedding liturgy to see what theological message is conveyed in them.

(1) The texts of the *Rite of Marriage* present hospitality as one of the hallmarks of the Christian couple. The wedding liturgy presents a unique opportunity for the couple to practice hospitality, especially considering the mix of people who often make up the assembly at weddings. Yet, the potential for offering hospitality is often lost as it is reduced to the task of seating people, a task delegated more often than not to a group of guys who may have been out way too late the night before the wedding, that is, the ushers. The potential is that this could be a true act of hospitality by the couple and their parents to the people who have supported the couple throughout their engagement and their lives and who now gather to witness and celebrate their marriage. In a growing number of places, this is happening as the couple and their parents are at the door of the church before the wedding to greet arriving worshippers while their male and female attendants cordially seat people. For this practice to become more common, we have to proclaim boldly that our faith simply does not admit of any superstition that would keep the bride and groom from seeing one another in the time leading up to the start of the wedding liturgy.

(2) For almost 40 years, the *Rite of Marriage* has presented a single instruction for the entrance procession at Catholic weddings: “The ministers go first, followed by the priest, and then the bride and the bridegroom. According to local custom, they may be escorted by at least

their parents and the two witnesses.”³² There is no mention of the custom whereby the bride enters with her father and the bridesmaids and meets the groom who appears out of the blue at the head of the aisle. Unlike the common American form of the procession which suggests that the bride is given away by one man to another man, the faith of the Church holds that the bride and groom enter marriage mutually and as equal, complementary partners. This is why the tune known as “Here Comes the Bride” is not recommended for the procession: its focus on the bride alone contradicts the Church’s emphasis on the couple.

In addition to both bride and groom, the *Rite of Marriage* includes the parents of the bride and groom in the entrance procession. Once again, the ritual action enfleshes the Church’s faith: mothers *and* fathers contribute to the formation of their sons and daughters. In their document *A Family Perspective in Church and Society*, the U.S. bishops remind us that marriage creates a new family from two existing families. The wedding liturgy marks not only the new union between husband and wife, but in a very real way, their taking leave of their parents and family of origin. The entrance procession as outlined in the *Rite of Marriage* gives ritual expression to our Catholic reverence for our families of origin and to the need for leave-taking.

In this scenario, the father of the bride is not left out; he is simply joined in his happy role by the bride’s mother and the groom’s parents, the latter of whom are often overlooked in the common American approach to weddings where, as one commentator remarked, they are expected to “wear beige and be unobtrusive.” The entrance procession, in the vision of the Church, is not intended to reflect who is footing the bill for the reception; it is intended to be a ritual movement into a new state in life and a new order within the Church, a movement supported by the parents who have helped their son or daughter on the journey to this day.

³² RM #20.

(3) The Second Vatican Council challenged us to understand and experience sacraments as “celebrations of the Church.”³³ Quoting the Council, the catechism reaffirms that “Liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church. They manifest it, and have effects upon it...Rites which are meant to be celebrated in common with the faithful present and actively participating, should as far as possible, be celebrated in that way rather than by an individual and quasi-privately.”³⁴ Nowhere has this been a more elusive goal than at weddings.

Weddings are parish celebrations, as Fr. Austin Fleming reminds us in his book *Parish Weddings*.³⁵ Just as we invite engaged couples into more active participation in the life of the parish, we also invite parishioners to support engaged couples through prayer. The *Book of Blessings* provides an order for blessing engaged couples at a parish gathering.³⁶ Parishioners should always feel welcome to participate in weddings in the parish, with or without a formal invitation. Why couldn't parishes list upcoming weddings in the bulletin, with an invitation to parishioners to keep these couples in their prayers and to participate in the wedding liturgy? The *Order for Celebrating Marriage* goes so far as to offer the possibility of celebrating marriage within Sunday Eucharist as a visible sign of the ecclesial context of marriage.³⁷

(4) The long standing teaching of the Church in the West is that the bride and groom are the ministers of the sacrament of marriage. They marry each other; the priest or deacon is the Church's chief witness. The very positioning and posture of the couple and the priest or deacon during the marriage rite should reflect their unique roles. This theological insight is lost when the bride and groom turn their backs to the assembly during the marriage rite. In no other postconciliar sacramental rite does the minister of the sacrament do this. It is more appropriate

³³ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #26.

³⁴ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #26-27; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §1140.

³⁵ Chicago IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1987.

³⁶ #195-214.

³⁷ #28.

to their role as minister of the sacrament for the couple to stand in such a way that the entire assembly can see and hear them exchange their vows and exchange their rings. In many places now, the couple stands to the front of the sanctuary for the marriage rite while the priest or deacon stands in the aisle at the front of the assembly. Since the proclamation of the vows is part of the sacramental action with which the bride and groom marry each other, it is better for the bride and groom to say their vows directly to each other rather than repeating phrases after the priest or deacon or simply responding “I do” to the question form of the vows.

In some of what I have discussed above, we confront the tension that exists between dominant social and cultural norms for weddings and the vision of the wedding liturgy that is contained in the Church’s rite. This is no small challenge, and it points out how easily the “rite in print” can get overwhelmed by peripheral items. Twenty years ago, Fr. Bob Hovda made this point in speaking about baptism: “I remember a pamphlet on baptism which contained innumerable suggestions for the celebration of that rite but did not once mention the actual bathing in water. To miss the point of a thing – that totally takes some doing. Immersion in baptism, conviction and reaching out to the hearers in the proclamation of the word, eating from the common plate and drinking from the common cup – these are essentials. Start with them! Don’t heave the shriveled and neglected essential elements untouched while concentrating on the periphery!”³⁸ There are many wedding resources that do the same disservice to weddings that the pamphlet that Fr. Hovda mentions did to the baptismal rite. The result is that some of the most important insights into Christian marriage and some of the most basic principles of good liturgy are obscured by well-intentioned, but peripheral, social customs. When that happens, the “rite in action” does not proclaim or celebrate the fullness of the Church’s faith concerning

³⁸ “The Amen Corner,” *Worship*, vol. 61, no. 1, January 1987, p. 79.

marriage. When that happens, the great opportunity for evangelization that weddings present is either lost or greatly diluted.

Recommendations

Since this symposium is designed to provide input into the U.S. bishops' proposed pastoral letter on marriage and the ongoing National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage, let me end with five recommendations that flow from what I have presented above.

(1) Encourage theological reflection on the Church's marriage rite and the celebration of the wedding liturgy. As we continue to prepare for the revised *Order for Celebrating Marriage*, the Church could benefit from the reflections of systematic theologians who explore the theological riches and shortcomings of the revised rite. In particular, theological reflection on the proposed order for the celebration of marriage in the presence of a lay presider³⁹ will be needed if this option is to receive serious consideration for the U.S. edition of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* and if pastoral ministers and engaged couples are going to understand the rationale for this form of the rite. The insights of theologians could also be a tremendous help to our bishops in the preparation and review of the translation of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* for use in the United States.

(2) Include the wedding liturgy as an essential consideration in the upcoming pastoral letter on marriage from the U.S. bishops and in marriage preparation programs and resources. Present the wedding liturgy as the summit toward which the activity of marriage preparation is directed and the fount from which the grace of the sacrament flows for the lived experience of the marriage covenant. Draw on the texts and ritual actions of the marriage rite to illustrate the Church's understanding of marriage, and encourage couples to pray with and reflect on the texts of the wedding liturgy during their period of engagement. Most couples only peruse the

³⁹ OCM Ch. 4.

scripture and prayer texts of the *Rite of Marriage* to decide which of these texts will be used at their wedding liturgy. Long before decisions have to be made about which texts will be used in the liturgy, give couples these texts and encourage them to pray with them together. This would be a particularly pertinent way to encourage couples to develop a habit of prayer together. After the wedding, these texts can be used mystagogically to help the couple reflect on the lived experience of marriage in light of the Church's understanding of marriage.

(3) Let the energy surrounding the bishops' pastoral letter on marriage be an opportunity to reinvigorate the process of translating and adapting the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* for use in the United States. The Latin *editio typica* of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage* was published in 1990, and a couple of committees have contributed time and energy toward the bishops' efforts to produce a U.S. edition of the *Order for Celebrating Marriage*, but seventeen years after the revised *editio typica*, we are still using the *Rite of Marriage* from 1969. In the production of this revised rite for use in the U.S., let us take our inspiration from the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, the *Pastoral Care of the Sick* and the *Order of Christian Funerals* which give us models for how catechesis, pastoral care and liturgy can be integrated. We can certainly do the same with marriage.

(4) Offer additional rites for marking the movement from the single life to engagement through the various stages of marriage. I'm not suggesting a formal catechumenate-like structure for marriage preparation, although others have presented excellent models for this,⁴⁰ but I do believe that the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, the *Pastoral Care of the Sick* and the *Order of Christian Funerals* show us how prayers and rites of varying solemnity can celebrate the grace present in various moments along the way and call on God's blessing for the next stages. In

⁴⁰ See, for example, *Unitas: Preparing for Sacramental Marriage* by Joann Heaney-Hunter and Louis Primavera (New York NY: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1998).

particular, I would encourage the U.S. bishops to seek more generous provisions for the public celebration of “The Order for the Blessing of an Engaged Couple” that is already contained in the *Book of Blessings*. Rubrical directives currently prohibit celebrating this blessing within Mass, yet engaged couples could benefit from the grace and support that comes from the prayer of the gathered community, and it would benefit the public character of Christian marriage if the local community were more aware of who is preparing for marriage.

(5) Let the wedding liturgy be an opportunity for evangelization about Christian marriage. Encourage couples to resist the consumerism evident in much of the wedding industry and to choose options for the wedding liturgy that encourage the participation of the entire assembly and that reflect an authentically Christian understanding of marriage. There is tremendous pressure on engaged couples to spend beyond their means in order to have “the perfect day.” Pastoral ministers, feeling helpless in the face of such societal pressure, sometimes bracket the wedding liturgy as “just one hour” that doesn’t make or break a marriage and so unwittingly give tacit approval for a consumerist extravaganza that is clearly at odds with most of what the texts and ritual actions of the wedding liturgy actually proclaim and celebrate. Wedding liturgies can be festive celebrations that joyfully proclaim the Church’s faith regarding marriage, while not buying into the commercialism that pervades many current American assumptions about weddings. In particular, give attention to those current, but largely ignored, provisions in the *Rite of Marriage* for texts and rituals that most clearly reflect the Church’s faith regarding marriage, such as the entrance of the bride and groom together with their parents and the encouragement of active participation in the liturgy by the assembly which acts as witness to the marriage.

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