

Are there liturgical norms or requirements for a valid Catholic wedding?

There are three basic requirements for a valid Catholic wedding:

- The couple must be capable of being married—that is, they must be a woman and a man who are free of any impediment that would prevent marriage. *
- The couple must give their consent to be married—that is, by an act of their own free will, without any coercion or pressure—they irrevocably give and accept one another in order to establish the life-long covenant of marriage.
- They must follow the canonical form for marriage—that is, they must be married according to the liturgical practices, laws, and norms of the Catholic Church.

* An “*impediment*” is any obstacle which prevents a person from validly receiving a sacrament. The most common impediment experienced within the U.S., relates to a previous marriage that unfortunately ended in a civil divorce. The Catholic Church follows Christ's teaching that marriage is a covenant that cannot be dissolved officiously by man, and therefore does not recognize a civil divorce decree as “dissolving” a marital bond. The Church does however, have an established legal process for determining whether a previous marriage was indeed sacramentally valid.

Regardless of where or by whom the previous marriage occurred (i.e., by a Las Vegas Justice of the Peace; by a minister of a non-Catholic Church; or in a Judge’s chambers, etc.), without an annulment, the Catholic Church believes that the bond of the previous marriage remains intact and thereby prevents any subsequent marriage. If, after careful examination, the Church determines that the marriage was not valid from the very beginning however, it formally declares the marriage *null* and therefore, removes the impediment of the previous marriage.

The Catholic Church has certain norms about how a valid Sacrament of Marriage is to take place. Basically, a valid marriage must (when *at least* one person is Catholic): (a) Occur within a Catholic Church (unless dispensed by the local bishop) and after required marriage preparation has been completed; (b) Be witnessed by an authorized representative of the Church (usually a priest or deacon) and two other witnesses (normally the best man and brides maid); and (c) Follow the Church’s prescribed ritual and when possible, within the Liturgy of the Mass.

While for decades, much financial expense and effort has been invested to facilitate a grand ceremony, the Rite of Marriage is meant to be simple, dignified, and memorable. Additionally, close planning coordination with the Celebrant (a priest or deacon) is vitaly essential throughout the planning process, to clarify what may be permissible or prohibited in the wedding ceremony. While the ritual does afford some areas for flexibility and local custom, please never assume.

For example, during the Entrance Rite (Rite for Celebrating Marriage during Mass): “*If there is a procession to the altar, the ministers [e.g., altar servers, etc.] go first, followed by the priest, and [the bridegroom and bride].*” Regarding the procession: “*According to local custom, they may be escorted by at least their parents and the two witnesses. ... (Rite of Marriage, #20).*”

Please check and consult with the celebrant (priest or deacon) in advance, as often as necessary, if you have any questions or requests. While a large wedding party of groomsmen, bridesmaids, and child flower or ring bearers, good wedding planning helps to maintain a healthy balance between the ritual’s norms and the couple’s desires. Overall, the Celebrant is the Church’s designated primary liturgical authority for the proper conduct of the Sacrament of Marriage.