

Some of the Most-Frequently Asked Questions

About the Catholic Wedding

(Source reference used (along with local parish-level practices included):

ML Answers the 101 Most-Asked Questions: The Catholic Wedding Answer Book,
by Paul Turner, @2001, Resource Publications, San Jose, CA)

1. ***May I be married outdoors or in a home, or does a Catholic wedding have to be in a Catholic Church?***

It depends from diocese-to-diocese, but probably not. The answer comes to us from the Code of Canon Law (#1118), which contains the established norms for the Roman Catholic Church. In many dioceses, the bishop has ruled outdoors is not suitable for any weddings. Even when one partner is unbaptized, the pastor is not permitted to officiate/witness an outdoor wedding. Please ask your Pastor, if you have any questions.

For Catholics, the church building itself is a sacred space, symbolizing the people who worship there. We celebrate the most sacred events there—our sacraments, rituals in which we believe we encounter Christ most intimately. Because marriage is one of our sacraments, it deserves to be undertaken in a sacred space. When we celebrate your wedding inside a church, you do so in a space where God most frequently, directly, and powerfully interacts with His community of faith believers.

2. ***We're living together. May we still be married in the Catholic Church?***

It depends. The issue, of course, is pre-marital sex. The Catholic Church does not approve, promote or condone sex outside a valid marriage. We believe that sexual intercourse is a physical and spiritual express of love that finds purpose within a committed relationship. Most people today sadly assume that sex is a natural part of cohabitation. It's not.

While there is no universal Catholic law prohibited a wedding for couples cohabitating before marriage nor for any couples having premarital sex, a typical Pastor is going to counsel the engaged couple who cohabit, on the sinfulness of such behavior and lifestyle, and the appearance, at best, of their lack of moral understanding of their Catholic faith. If the pastor however, judges that the couple's cohabitation does not constitute the proper preparation for the sacred state of marriage, he may opt to delay the marriage in his parish.

As we may recall, the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that sexual intercourse between unmarried persons “*is gravely contrary to the dignity of the persons and of human sexuality, which is naturally ordered to the good of spouses and the generation and education of children*” (CCC #2353).

If you’re living together in a sexual relationship that differs from the values held by the Catholic Church, you should expect some questions and counseling from the Pastor and those facilitating your marriage preparation process, about how you can and intend, to reconcile your desire for a Catholic marriage in light of your current, living arrangements.

3. ***I’m pregnant. May I have a Catholic wedding?***

While there is no law prohibiting the Catholic marriage of someone expecting a child, there are some things to carefully consider. (Please also refer to the information provided in #2 above.)

It is important to note that our diocese’s Marriage Preparation process cannot be circumvented, abbreviated, or quickened to afford you a “quick marriage” before the bride-to-be begins to show or before the baby is born. Why? If there is any danger that your decision to marry is being forced by your pregnancy, it could jeopardize your freedom to marry and cast doubt upon the desire, openness, and validity of your union.

4. ***My fiancé was married before. May we be married in the Catholic Church?***

Yes, you may, but only after the previous marriage has been declared null or invalid by the Catholic Church, or if the former spouse is deceased. The Church prohibits the marriage of anyone (Catholic and non-Catholic) still bound by a prior matrimonial union (Code of Canon Law #1085). If both of those parties are still alive, a civilly issued divorce decree is **not** enough. Such a document settles civil matters for the state, but the church also needs assurance that no one asking for a marriage is already in one! All prior unions, except those in which the former spouse has died, need a Declaration of Nullity from the Catholic Church before they can have a Catholic wedding. (Please also refer to #5 below)

5. ***What is an annulment?***

An annulment establishes a divorced person’s freedom to marry in the Catholic Church. Catholics believe that marriage is forever. If a marriage does not last, then it may not have been “marriage”; as we understand marriage to be: a permanent union of love, freely chosen by responsible spouses, open to the gift of children, etc. The annulment process determines through a formal judicial examination, whether the previous marriage was indeed a Sacrament of Marriage. If the annulment is granted, the Church declares that the previous marriage was not binding, and that enables the person to contract a Catholic wedding.

Contact your parish priest for further details and to begin the annulment process.

Additionally, it is not advised to confirm or set a wedding date on the church's calendar or book a reception hall for the post-wedding festivities until after the annulment is received. Annulments are not 100% guaranteed to be granted.

Equally, if an annulment is granted within the Church, it does not undo or nullify the fact that there was a previous lawful, civil marriage nor does an annulment make the children of that lawful, civil marriage suddenly "illegitimate". They remain the blessed fruits of the previous lawful, civil matrimony.

6. ***I'm a Catholic. Does my fiancé have to become a Catholic to be married in the Church?***

No. While it is admirable if your fiancé would like to become a Catholic or to learn more about our Catholic faith, it is not a prerequisite for marriage to occur within the Roman Catholic Church.

7. ***My fiancé has never been baptized. May we still get married in the Church?***

Yes. The Catholic Church has a special ceremony for the marriage between a baptized, Catholic and an unbaptized person. It differs only slightly from the wedding between a Catholic and another baptized person.

It is important to note at this point, that the Rite of Marriage between a Catholic and an unbaptized person rightfully excludes references to "the sacrament of marriage". While this marriage is considered valid (a valid civil marriage in the Church), it is not a "sacrament" (e.g., since the Sacrament of Marriage occurs between two, baptized parties).

If at any point in the marriage, your spouse becomes baptized, the action makes your marriage a sacrament automatically. Your marriage to an unbaptized person is still a Catholic wedding and still a union that lasts forever. It just does not have the requisite quality of the sacrament that exists when Christ is made present in the marriage of two, baptized persons.

8. ***We want our marriage to last forever, but we are signing a legal agreement (i.e., a prenuptial agreement) concerning our property just in case it doesn't. Will this be a problem?***

Yes. By consenting to a prenuptial or other pre-marital agreement regarding the disposition of property, funds and other personal or communal resources before the marriage, overtly you are saying not "if", but "when" our marriage ends in divorce, "these are my toys and these are yours'." It shows hesitation on the

couple's part and presupposes that the marriage will not be permanent, and may invalidate the Sacrament of Marriage.

9. ***Do we have to agree to raise our kids Catholic before we get married—even though I'm Catholic and my fiancé isn't.***

Catholic parents are asked to do “*all in their power*” to baptize and raise their children in the matters of the Catholic faith (Code of Canon Law #1136). A Catholic marrying a person of another faith will make this promise (in writing on the diocese's Application for Marriage) and the non-Catholic will be asked to sign the same form, acknowledging their understanding of the Catholic's requirements and the expressed desires of the Church regarding their children.

There are circumstances in which the Catholic party meets opposition from the spouse. It is for those reasons that the Church asks and understands, Catholics will do “*all in their power*” to fulfill this responsibility.

10. ***My fiancé and I don't want kids. Is that going to be a problem?***

Yes. Marriage is “*ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring*” (Code of Canon Law #1055). If you are designing your marriage to be childless, you are choosing a relationship that is different from what the Catholic Church understands marriage to be: a union ordered toward offspring. A Catholic pastor will not be able to authorize or witness a wedding for a couple who are intentionally excluding children in their marriage.

11. ***We are too old to have children. May we still get married in the Church?***

Yes. “Sterility neither prohibits nor invalidates marriage” (Code of Canon Law #1084). Childless spouses can have a meaningful married life.

12. ***I don't like my parish church. May I get married at some other one?***

It depends. The bishop or priest may permit, for just cause, the marriage to take place somewhere else, under certain circumstances. Ordinarily however, the wedding is to take place in the Catholic Church of the bride or groom.

Please speak with your Pastor for further details.

13. ***I don't like my pastor. May someone else do the wedding?***

Yes, however, only with your pastor's written permission. In the Canon Laws of the church, your pastor has jurisdiction over your wedding. Even if you have never met him, he is responsible for the event, by the mere fact that you reside within the established canonical boundaries of the pastor's parish.

If some other priest or deacon is permitted to preside over the wedding, your pastor will have to delegate that authority to him in writing (Code of Canon Law #1111) and receive written, canonical proofs of ordination, possession of necessary facilities, etc.

14. ***A deacon can perform a wedding ceremony?***

Yes. An ordained deacon in the Catholic Church may witness weddings also. He simply requires the pastor's delegated permission to officiate the ceremony. Obviously, the wedding will be a church service without Mass, since deacons are unable to preside at the Eucharist. It would however, be a bona fide Catholic wedding.

15. ***I'm Catholic, but I haven't been confirmed yet. May I still get married in the Church?***

Theoretically, yes, but practically it will depend. Catholics should be confirmed before marriage "*if they can do so without serious inconvenience*" (Code of Canon Law #1065). If you have not yet been confirmed, please ask the Pastor as soon as possible, how you might prepare yourself for the reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation before the marriage, if possible.

16. ***My spouse and I weren't married in a Catholic Church, but we now realize that we should have. What do we do?***

Visit with your pastor. He will help you prepare and celebrate a marriage in the Catholic Church.

If you are a Catholic, the law of the Church binds you to the Catholic form of marriage (Code of Canon Law #1117). If you got married, but did not have a Church service and did not obtain a dispensation (e.g., a permission) from your bishop, the Catholic Church does not recognize your marriage.

You are therefore asked to abstain from the Eucharist (e.g., no reception of Holy Communion), while you are in this situation. Why? Because, you are not in communion with the Catholic Church at this time. If you are not in communion with the Catholic Church, you cannot therefore receive Holy Communion—or other sacraments within the Church for that matter.

If one of you has a previous marriage, you will need to obtain an annulment first. (Please refer to #5 above regarding an annulment). Your pastor should be able to help you begin the process, if needed.

Additionally, it is not advised to confirm or set a wedding date on the church's calendar or book a reception hall for the post-wedding festivities until after the annulment is received. Annulments are not 100% guaranteed to be granted.

17. ***Is there a waiting period to get married?***

There is usually a waiting period. In our diocese, the Marriage Preparation process generally takes a period of 12 months—however, it can be completed in less time, depending on the financial resources, time, and dedication of the preparing couple.

If one of you has a previous marriage, you will need to obtain an annulment first. (Please refer to #5 above regarding an annulment). Your pastor should be able to help you begin the process, if needed.

Additionally, it is not advised to confirm or set a wedding date on the church's calendar or book a reception hall for the post-wedding festivities until after the annulment is received. Annulments are not 100% guaranteed to be granted.

18. ***Why do we have to go to classes before we can get married? What are they all about? How long do they last?***

The classes are intended to help you make a thoughtful preparation for marriage. The sessions usually include topics such as: communication, conflict resolution, financial management, sexuality, and spirituality. Be assured that the Church has your best interests at heart and sincerely wants to help you make your best possible preparation for a life-long marriage. The length of the preparation varies from diocese-to-diocese, depending on the couple's needs, financial resources, time availability, etc.

(Please refer to:

<http://www.diocs.org/DepartmentsMinistries/MarriageandFamilyLife.aspx>

for further details on our diocese's policy on Marriage Preparation Process.

19. ***My fiancé and I live in two different cities/states/countries. How can we possibly participate in the Marriage Preparation process together?***

There are arrangements relating to the different stages/components of the Marriage Preparation process in our diocese that can be taken on-line to accommodate this situation. Please speak with your Pastor for more details.

20. ***Why do Catholics get married at Mass anyways?***

Marriage is one of the seven (7) sacraments of the Catholic Church. All of the sacraments lead the faithful to the core of our faith: the Holy Eucharist. The permanent love of husband and wife signifies the love that God has for the Church. Marriage is a covenant in which two parties agree to go out of their way to be with the other, just as God does in His divine covenant with us. We celebrate the Sacrament of Marriage at Mass, to demonstrate the connection

between this loving relationship of partners and the loving relationship we all share with God. This divine love reaches its most beautiful expression in our celebration of the Holy Eucharist—God’s gift to us!

21. ***If a Catholic marries someone from another faith, are they forbidden to receive the Sacrament of Marriage in the Mass?***

If the Catholic marries someone who is unbaptized, the ceremony takes place apart from (outside) the Mass. Please consult with your Pastor for more information.

22. ***Is the wedding still a sacrament if there is no Mass?***

Yes. The wedding is still a sacrament, as long as both parties are baptized; the marriage is witnessed by a lawfully ordained deacon or priest in the Catholic Church; it occurs in a Catholic Church (or other approved location by the governing bishop); the church’s prescribed rituals are used (e.g., the couple cannot simply write their own vows, etc.), and there is no impediment (e.g., obstacle) that would prevent either party from entering into the bond of marriage (e.g., there is no previous marriage that has not yet been annulled, etc.). The Holy Mass does not make the marriage a sacrament—the married couple does.

23. ***May we have two ceremonies—one Catholic and the other non-Catholic?***

You may not have two ceremonies (Code of Canon Law #1127). While it is true that this is required in some countries, where the Church’s minister is not recognized by the state, in the U.S., your civil union and your spiritual union happens at the same time and event. There is to be no distinction and no question about whether or not you are married when the ceremony is over.

24. ***Are their restrictions on the marriage ceremony’s musical or scriptural selections, decorations, etc.?***

Please check with your local parish where the ceremony is to occur. Many parishes have established policies and procedures set-forth regarding the prescribed musical selections; scriptural readings; use of photography equipment; use and emplacement of decorations and other devices within the church’s worship space, etc.

25. ***Do the best man and maid of honor have to be Catholic?***

No. You simply need two (2) witnesses (besides the Presider) (Code of Canon Law #1108) (e.g., male/female, male/male, or female/female). They are witnesses to the event and must therefore be of sufficient age (of reason) to be able to comprehend that is going on. If their comprehension is otherwise impaired, for example, by intoxication, they may not serve in the capacity of “witness”.

Likewise, if the wedding is to occur within the conduct of the Holy Mass, caution and sensitivity should be exercised when the two witnesses are non-Catholics, since they will not be able to come forward to receive Holy Communion. Will undue attention be drawn to them or make them feel unnecessarily uncomfortable or embarrassed?

26. ***Should I participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation before I get married?***

Yes. The Church strongly recommends participation in the Sacrament of Reconciliation for Catholics getting married prior to the ceremony (Code of Canon Law #1065).

27. ***How is the procession supposed to go? I want the works: all the bridesmaids, groomsmen, flower girl, and a ring bearer (rolled down the center aisle in a little, red wagon) to be part of the procession.***

First and foremost, we need to recall at the location of the wedding ceremony: the Church. The physical Church is “God’s House” and we therefore are asked to express the utmost of our respect, humility, and reverence within it.

Second, the Catholic Church’s *Rite of Marriage* is very specific on “who” participates in the “procession”:

“At the appointed time, the priest, vested for Mass, goes with the ministers [altar servers] to the door of the church, or if more suitable, to the altar. There he meets the bride and bridegroom in a friendly manner, showing that the Church shares their joy.

If there is a procession to the altar, the ministers [altar servers] 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. Meanwhile, the entrance song is sung(19-20).”

- a. There is no mention of the bridesmaids; groomsmen; flower girl; or ring bearer in the procession.
- b. Therefore, early and coordination is imperative with the presiding Priest.
- c. Local parish-level “tradition” does not override the universal Church’s “Tradition”. The priest or deacon (as the Presider and Church’s witness) is the sole representative and source of approval regarding liturgical matters.

28. ***Can we use a Unity Candle and candelabras in our wedding ceremony?***

Within our parishes, because of their confusing and contradictory symbology with our faith and liturgical practices, the use of a unity candle is prohibited. Likewise, candelabras are also discouraged.

29. ***Do we have to have rings?***

Yes, the rings are important. There may be regions of the world where the exchange of rings is not customary in the society. In the U.S. however, we use two rings. Just as the rings symbolize God's unending / unbroken love for us, the couple's exchange of rings indicates a similar commitment and degree of love for each other in the matrimonial bond they seek before God and the witnesses of the Catholic Church.

30. ***May Communion ever be shared with those who aren't Catholics at a Catholic wedding?***

No. Communion at the liturgy of the Catholic Mass is to be shared by Catholics only. (cf. *Directory for the Application on Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*).

That is why the marriage ceremony between a Catholic and someone of another religious may more suitably be celebrated without a Mass. Catholics who wish to share communion on the wedding day, may participate at Mass at some other time of day before the wedding.

31. ***May people throw rice after the wedding ceremony?***

Please refer to the parish's policies and procedures for weddings. Rice is not part of the Catholic Rite of Marriage. Many churches (including ours') expressly forbid throwing rice, birdseed, etc. Rice can be slippery and dangerous to guests. If they may slip and fall, you could face liability issues.

32. ***How much money are we supposed to give the priest and the Church for a wedding?***

A typical parish church incurs expenses in the preparation and celebration of your wedding (e.g., heating, electricity, communion hosts and wine, etc.). A suitable gift from you will be greatly appreciated. A gift to the priest or deacon is a free-will donation.

Likewise, parishes often assign a fixed-fee to specialized ministries that assist in the wedding ceremony (i.e., musical instrumentalist; cantor; etc). Please check with your parish Priest and parish's policies and procedures for weddings about this matter.