



WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT?

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If you, or someone close to you, have planned a wedding in the Catholic Church recently, you may have been surprised about what could, or could not, be done in the wedding liturgy. The purpose of this article is to clarify some misconceptions and shed light on why the Church recommends certain practices.

Most dioceses have norms that flow from the “Order for Celebrating Marriage” approved by the Vatican and follow common liturgical norms. Parishes, however, are free to develop their own policies within current norms. This means a given parish may decide to have a more detailed policy of its own.

Most importantly, all this “fuss,” and what may seem to be unnecessary changes, is not meant to make life harder on engaged couples, but rather to preserve the dignity and reverence of the wedding ceremony and to insure that the focus is on the marriage vows and a faith context. Now to the “hot buttons.”

Having listened to many engaged couples and parents over the years, I have noticed that there are probably five issues that elicit the most emotionally charged reactions. Of these, the one that tops the list is the entrance procession.

1. Entrance Procession

Most people are familiar with the format of the father walking his daughter down the aisle and “giving her away” to the groom at the altar. Although this practice is regarded as traditional and commonly seen on TV and movies, it is not the best symbolism of what the Catholic Church believes about marriage. What many do *not* realize is that the root of this custom is in a society that viewed the bride as property to be “given” to a new owner. Today, of course, it is merely seen as an honor given to the father of the bride.

Because the church takes her symbols very seriously, however, and believes in the equality and mutuality of the marriage commitment, this practice is discouraged. Not only does it contradict the nature of the sacrament, it leaves out the mother of the bride and the groom’s parents.

Contrary to the media image of weddings, today, both parents of the bride and groom commonly are part of the entrance procession. Of course, if parents are divorced or deceased other variations of the entrance procession are worked out. Some brides and grooms may prefer to process in unescorted, witnessing to their independent adult status and then honor their parents in some other way.

Although the above is the preferred form for the entrance, most parishes allow for the historical “giving away” if the alternatives would create great family discord.

2. The Unity Candle

Many Catholics think that the recent custom of the unity candle is an official part of the marriage rite. In fact, it is an optional add-on. Indeed, this symbolic action is a beautiful reflection of the coming together of two families. The dilemma is that when too many ritual actions are put on top of one another, the service can lose focus. The central focus of the wedding ceremony should be the exchange of vows. This is the heart of the sacrament. Since many Catholic weddings are celebrated in the context of a Eucharistic liturgy which adds the communion ritual, the unity candle can be a distraction from the main focus. Some couples are choosing to include the unity candle ritual as part of the reception. Most parishes are not forbidding use of the unity candle but rather helping couples to clarify the meaning of the ritual and to be sensitive to not letting it overshadow the exchange of vows.

3. Size of the Wedding Party.

The entrance procession should be a reverent procession of those who have important roles in the wedding liturgy. It is not meant to be an ostentatious spectacle. In keeping with this spirit, excessive wedding parties (perhaps exceeding four or five attendants each) are discouraged. Indeed, only the maid of honor and best man are necessary as the official witnesses together with the priest, deacon, or minister. Certainly exceptions could be made for couples who have many siblings, but even in these cases there are other ways to honor family and friends. It is nice when the attendants can be functional rather than purely decorative. For instance, ushers might carry the altar cloth or a banner. Bridesmaids may carry candles or flowers for placement near the altar.

4. Flowers placed before a shrine of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Like the unity candle, this devotion is not an official part of the Marriage Rite. It may be appropriate, however, if:

- the newly married couple have a practice of Marian devotion in their life, and
- a suitable shrine to the Blessed Virgin is already in place within view of the assembly.

5. Ecumenical and Interfaith weddings

Although this does not apply to all couples, at least one-third of the couples marrying in the Catholic Church are of mixed religions. Marriage, by its nature, speaks of unity. It is important, therefore, that the wedding ceremony itself support this unity. An ecumenical or interfaith couple may share many common elements of faith and have a deep spirituality, but since the non-Catholic partner would not be able to fully participate in a Mass by receiving communion, attention is drawn to this disunity. In respect for the spouse of another faith tradition, therefore, it is strongly recommended that the wedding ceremony take place in the context the more inclusive *Rite for Celebrating Marriage Outside Mass*. This format also has the advantage of helping the family and friends of the non-Catholic partner feel more comfortable and included since many of them may be unfamiliar with the ritual of the Catholic Mass.

Although this background is meant to help couples understand and develop a beautiful and faith-filled wedding ceremony, liturgy is not the end in itself. It celebrates our deepest values and commitments. Focus on the spirit of love and faith that is central to the sacrament of Matrimony and the rest should follow.