



LITURGICAL CATECHESIS

LITURGICAL CATECHESIS ON THE RITE OF MARRIAGE: WHOSE RITE IS IT?

When it comes to looking at liturgical catechesis for the rite of marriage, we need to ask, “Who is doing the catechesis?” Is it the media, which promotes images of the wedding liturgy that invite couples to replicate what they see? Is it the professional wedding planner who brings his or her own ideas of what a beautiful ceremony should look like? Is it from other ecclesial communities that couples want to borrow unique and creative ideas for their own ceremony? Talk to any priest or parish musician about some of their wedding experiences and you will know what I am talking about. The question of whether we are forming the rite or the rite is forming us comes to the forefront.

The new *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC) devotes three pages (143–45) to the major points of catechesis for the sacrament of matrimony. The first emphasizes the ecclesial nature of the sacrament: catechesis “encourages the care and concern of the whole Christian community for married couples by public recognition of couples planning marriage, modeling by couples in successful marriages, and support of couples in challenged marriages.”

The NDC also directs that there should be instruction on the rite of the sacrament. This instruction should be more than a rehearsal or review of what happens during the wedding celebration; it should go beyond pointing out the ritual options that are open to the couple. Catechesis on the rite should unfold how the ritual realizes the Catholic understanding of marriage. Catechesis on the rite needs to overcome a disconnect that sometimes exists between catechesis “on” marriage and the celebration of the sacrament or the rite.

The liturgical celebration of marriage should lift up the sacramental or sacred commitment for the entire community. One of the weakest aspects of liturgical catechesis on the rite of marriage concerns its ecclesial nature and the role of the community. The *Constitution on the Sacred*

Liturgy (CSL) reminds us that “Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations belonging to the Church.... Therefore liturgical services involve the whole Body of the Church; they manifest it and have effects upon it” (26).

How well has our catechesis emphasized this principle with the celebration of marriage? The goal is not to take anything away from the couple and their family and friends. It is indeed a special day for all of them, but it is also a special occasion for the entire community. It is not without reason that the first directive in the NDC begins with catechesis and “encourages the care and concern of the whole Christian community” (143).

The privatization of marriage is oftentimes the result of the consumerism associated with wedding preparations. Couples become quickly and deeply involved with decisions about renting a hall for the reception, choosing and buying the bridal gown, picking the colors and dresses for the bridesmaids, sending out invitations, selecting food for the reception, buying rings, scheduling fittings for tuxedos, selecting flowers, etc. The cost and details of the preparations on the part of the families only serve to heighten the feeling that this wedding belongs to them.

The introduction to the 1969 *Rite of Marriage* is brief. The first section of the introduction is “Importance and Dignity of the Sacrament of Marriage.” It is followed by three more sections: “Choice of Rite,” “Preparation of Local Rituals,” and “Rite to prepare a Completely New Rite.” Very little mention is given to the role the larger community plays. In contrast, the second typical edition (issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments on March 19, 1990) has an expanded general introduction that includes sections titled “Office and Ministries” and “Celebration of Marriage.” (Note that the English translation has yet to be approved.)

Citing *Familiaris consortio*, the second edition points out that the liturgical care for spouses and

their families concerns the bishop, the pastor and his assistants, and the entire ecclesial community. It stresses the communal character of marriage, which is meant to increase and sanctify the people of God and, thus, calls for the participation of the parish community. Finally, it suggests that the sacrament or rite may take place during the Sunday assembly. The astonishment of people when I mention this latter statement only shows how far we have to go in our catechesis.

Liturgical catechesis should promote the ecclesial dimension of the sacrament or rite while, at the same time, unfold for couples the Catholic understanding of marriage as a vocation, bond, covenant, sacred relationship, etc. (See the catechetical principles listed in the *NDC* on pages 143–145.) We already have at our disposal the means for accomplishing these tasks.

If liturgy is the privileged place for catechizing the people of God, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says (1074), then we need to look at the ritual opportunities we have for promoting the ecclesial context of marriage in the life of the parish. Do we take time to regularly celebrate peak moments that relate to married life within the context of the parish community? The *Book of Blessings* provides us with the orders for blessing engaged couples, married couples celebrating a major wedding anniversary, parents before childbirth, and a mother before and after childbirth. It also contains blessings that celebrate “the special needs of their lives.” Public and communal celebrations of these events enable people to see that the Church does more than offer a sacramental celebration of marriage; it also journeys with people before and after marriage.

It’s useful to examine the liturgical catechesis we provide on the actual rite for celebrating marriage. The entrance

rite, for example, is designed to reveal that the Church shares the joy of the couple celebrating marriage (*Rite of Marriage [RM]* 19). It provides the following options: the priest can go, with the ministers, to the door of the church and meet the bride and bridegroom or, “If there is a procession to the altar, 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. Meanwhile, the entrance song is sung” (*RM* 20). In other words, the entrance rite is a liturgical action; it is more than an opportunity to display the wedding party. Preparing the entrance rite with the couple provides an opportunity to speak to them about the way the Church gathers as the body of Christ and begins its prayer in song, which unites us.

The *Rite of Marriage* points out that the Liturgy of the Word is one of the elements that should be stressed. The Liturgy of the Word “brings out the importance of Christian marriage in the history of salvation and the duties and responsibilities it involves in the sanctification of the couple and their children” (*RM* 6). Catechesis on the Scripture readings for marriage should go beyond simply giving the couple a list of readings they may choose from. A wonderful opportunity is created to discuss with the couple the meaning of the different readings and how they speak to the Christian understanding of marriage and their own sanctification. An in-depth catechesis of this nature enables the couple to select readings that have helped them to better understand the sacramental nature of their commitment, or the sacred nature, if both are not baptized.

Finally, liturgical catechesis on the rite gives us an exceptional opportunity to explore with couples the meaning of marriage as a sacrament or sacred bond. Catechesis on the sacramental nature of marriage remains weak. This,

sadly, becomes apparent in the lack of understanding of the annulment process of the Church. A sacramental marriage is more than a wedding to be celebrated or an attitude that we are getting married in church; it is more than a legal bond giving people legal rights.

The *Rite of Marriage* is a fundamental source for developing a catechesis on the sacramental nature of marriage. It involves more than walking the couple through the ritual at a rehearsal. Examine the catechesis that is done in your parish on the consent, exchange of rings, and nuptial blessing. Do couples understand the consent as more than “this is where you say your vows to one another”? How well have they been led to explore the religious depth of the meaning of the covenant, not only for their life together, but within the context of their mutual covenant to Christ? When they profess their love and fidelity in the exchange of rings, are they aware that they reveal and celebrate Christ’s love and fidelity with the Church? And when we pray in the nuptial blessing that they be given “strength which comes from the Gospel so that they may be witnesses of Christ to others” (*RM* 33), do they understand their call to discipleship? And when they celebrate the sacrament of matrimony, do they know that they do not do this just for themselves but that their sacramental celebration speaks to all of us? It reveals who God is for us.

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