

“The Holy Spirit is with you: He dwells within you
by virtue of the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Marriage!
He will sustain you in the fulfillment of your mission!”

Pope John Paul II, 2/7/1998

more than a wedding: Why Get Married in the Church?

When Joel and Marie decided to get married, they were graduate students making little money. They had a choice: a “church wedding,” with all the expenses that the wedding industry in all those wedding magazines says are necessary, or just a simple civil ceremony before a justice of the peace?

Sometimes we are given the impression that the reason to get married in the Church is primarily aesthetic: we can find a beautiful church and have the picture-perfect wedding. Opposing this idea, for many people, are often significant financial constraints. It is reasonable not to want to drain the savings account just for nice pictures and memories.

But the wedding isn’t the real reason to get married in the Church. The real reason is the marriage. A Christian marriage is a sacrament that makes God’s grace present. And nothing about the sacrament requires emptying the bank account.

Inviting Jesus

Think of all the difficulties that marriages face these days. God wants to empower us to have a happy and holy marriage. He wants us to be delivered from the evils of divorce, to raise our children well, and to flourish



as a family. God gives us his grace to do all these things in the sacrament of Matrimony (marriage). By grace, God transforms us so that we are able to love as He loves.

In fact, in the sacrament of Matrimony a groom starts off marriage by ministering God’s grace to his bride, as she ministers to him. That is because “the spouses as ministers of Christ’s grace mutually confer upon each other the sacrament of Matrimony by expressing their consent before the Church.”¹ The priest is the witness; the spouses are the ministers of the sacrament.

That moment is the beginning of

a flood of grace that Jesus wants to pour out upon the spouses. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* spells out these graces: “Christ dwells with them, gives them the strength to take up their crosses and so follow him, to rise again after they have fallen, to forgive one another, to bear one another’s burdens, to ‘be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ’ (Eph 5:21), and to love one another with supernatural, tender, and fruitful love.”²

By having a “church wedding,” Catholics have more than a beautiful wedding. They have God’s sacramental power for a beautiful marriage!

Marriage: Natural and Supernatural

Not every wedding held in a church is a sacrament, however. In order to receive sacramental grace, a person has to be baptized. Baptism initiates a person into the Christian life and prepares him or her to receive other sacraments. If one or both of the spouses is unbaptized, then the marriage is not a sacrament. It is, however, a real marriage, what the Church calls a “good and natural marriage.” As Jesus said, “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’” (Mt 19:4-5).

Marriage has been designed by the Creator “from the beginning” to be the place where lifelong and life-giving love forms a family. Marriages involving non-Christians have this natural value, and thus they are valid (“good and natural”) marriages. The sacrament of Matrimony bathes this naturally good thing in God’s grace and blesses it even more.

What if a Catholic marries a non-Catholic? If the non-Catholic spouse is a baptized Christian (a “mixed marriage”), then both husband and wife receive the sacrament of Matrimony, as long as the Catholic gets permission from the diocese to marry and follows the requirements for a Catholic wedding.

What if a Catholic marries a non-Christian (someone not baptized)? Then more caution is required, which is expressed in the dispensation needed in these cases (called “disparity of cult”). The marriage will not be sacramental but a “good and

“In the joys of their love and family life,
Christ gives them here on earth a foretaste
of the wedding feast of the Lamb.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1642

natural” marriage.

Why does the Church care what faith someone has? Because she has a realistic understanding of the possible difficulties entailed in mixed marriages and marriages with disparity of cult. They can lead to tension in the marriage and to indifference to religion. And, above all, the fate of the children to be born is at stake. God wants them to have all the graces of His goodness—which can only be found in their fullness in the Catholic Church. But the Church affirms that different religions do not constitute “an insurmountable obstacle for marriage” when both spouses are open to God’s grace working in their lives.³

Putting the Mass First

When Joel and Marie were contemplating marriage, they did not have any hesitations: they would be married in the Church. “For us, the wedding wasn’t about the reception, the dress, or the honeymoon,” says Marie. “It was about the sacrament,

which would unite us as one flesh in God’s eyes.”

But how could they afford a “church wedding”? “Easy,” says Joel. “We kept the focus on the Mass.” The reception was held in the parish hall, and it was catered by a bunch of friends who volunteered. The decorations were simple, and Marie’s mother did the wedding cake. A friend took pictures. The honeymoon lasted a few days.

Joel and Marie’s student days are behind them, and they celebrate their tenth anniversary this year. Do they have any regrets about having such a simple wedding?

“No, none!” says Marie. “Why start off married life buried in debt from a lavish wedding?” Joel confirms, “We loved our wedding, and we have great memories from it. But we have more than memories—we have a great marriage that draws us closer to God, which is what the sacrament is all about. Christ was at the center of our wedding then, and He is at the center of our marriage today.”

¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1623.* ²*ibid., #1642.* ³*ibid., #1634.*