

BEING CATHOLIC....GETTING MARRIED

Some time ago I wrote about marriage in the Catholic Church in relation to the baptism of infants. It's a rather complicated subject, but so many situations arise almost every month these days that I'd thought I'd try to simplify things a bit by just focusing on the issue of valid marriage for Catholics – and a few other things along the way.

I'm not quite sure how or why Catholics grow up without knowing all the dimensions of living their lives in the Church. When it comes to marriage – specifically the Sacrament of Matrimony – it's not really something that an 8th grader in CCD is thinking about, and I don't know how much the issue is addressed in theology classes in any Catholic high school. Perhaps, in an age when fewer Catholic children are attending a Catholic school, it becomes the job of parents as "the first teachers" of their children "in the ways of faith" (from the *Rite of Baptism*) to help their children understand all that "being Catholic" involves. And it's also the responsibility of pastors to help parishioners become aware of all that comes under the umbrella of living a faithful Catholic life. But since teenagers or college students might not be reading this, I'll leave it to parents to share it with them.

Beginning very briefly at the front end of life in Baptism.....When a child is baptized into the Church, their parents (and godparents) are "accepting the responsibility of training them in the **practice** of the faith." Catholic schools or CCD programs can't do it all. Among the many things parents need to help their children understand as they grow up is that the Church, like any family, has expectations and rules that everyone needs to observe and live by. Sometimes in a culture where children are given the subliminal or explicit message that they should be able to do anything and everything they want to do in life, the place of "family rules" can take a back seat, especially when those children have grown up.

To put it simply: one of our family rules is that a Catholic can only enter into a **valid** marriage if it takes place in a Catholic Church – with only one exception which I'll address shortly. "Valid" means that the marriage exists in the eyes of God; a marriage license from the state isn't enough. A Catholic cannot be **validly** married in a park or a golf course, on a roller coaster or a beach, in a hotel or banquet hall, and a priest cannot validly – or even legally – marry a Catholic anywhere except in a Catholic church (again with that one exception which is coming up!). The reason for this is really quite simple but also probably hard to understand in our me-first culture. For Catholics, marriage is a sacrament, and sacraments are actions of the Church which take place almost always in the place where Catholics gather for prayer – a church, or more correctly, the place of worship where the People of God come together and are formed as the Church. When Catholics marry, they do so in the context of a worshipping community and with the witness, not only of family and friends, but at least symbolically, of the entire Church.

But now we come to some of those “exceptions” which also involve other sacraments. There are, indeed, sacraments which can take place outside of a church building. Hospital patients are regularly anointed in their beds and the sick often receive the Sacrament of the Sick in their homes; for obvious reasons, they don’t have to drag themselves into church to be offered the strength and hope of the Anointing, even though the church is the ideal place for those sacramental gifts to be celebrated. The Sacrament of Penance sometimes takes place in a hospital room or even in a rectory office—again to make the grace of the sacrament available outside of a “scheduled” time. Premature infants are often baptized in the neonatal unit, again for a perfectly good reason, but the “ceremony” has to be supplied later **in** a church. When I was first ordained, I baptized a number of children in their parents’ homes because families wanted a more intimate setting for the baptism, but that is no longer permitted—and for good reason: entrance into the Church should be celebrated in the place where we gather **as** the Church. And the Eucharist can be celebrated on occasion and for extraordinary reasons outside of a church building. For decades now, Popes have been celebrating Mass in stadiums and parks to accommodate the large crowds and even parishes are permitted to schedule an outdoor Mass in the summer as part of a parish picnic or block party.

And finally, we come to what is generally the only exception for the Sacrament of Matrimony....When a Catholic is marrying a non-Catholic, particularly one whose family is very actively involved in their own church community, a *dispensation from form* allowing a Catholic to be validly married in a non-Catholic **church** can be requested and is almost always granted; there is no dispensation for a park or banquet hall or golf course! And in those cases, a priest can validly participate in the ceremony in a non-Catholic church and even witness the exchange of vows. But even then, the engaged couple approach their wedding day through the Catholic Church: meeting with a parish priest, attending a marriage preparation class, obtaining all the necessary documents and filling out the paperwork necessary to ensure the validity—not just the legality—of their union. Again, marriage in the Church isn’t just about a bride and groom; it’s about their union in the context of the community into which at least one of them has been baptized; it’s about the Church family implicitly supporting them and guiding them in one of the most important decisions they will ever make in life.

None of this is meant to be burdensome or merely legalistic. The day we’re baptized we become part of a larger family who accept the responsibility of embracing us and supporting us as we grow in faith. And we accept the responsibility, through the words and actions of parents and godparents, to live faithful lives in a Church which does indeed have some rules and expectations to help ensure that we all remain on the path that leads us—together, not alone—to eternal life in God’s Kingdom.

Fr. Bob

