
CELEBRATING CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE (1)



As the summer season is also the wedding season, I want to extend my best wishes to all the 2001 newlyweds: nearly 200 couples will be celebrating the sacrament of marriage, in the Diocese of Edmundston. May peace and happiness follow them all life through! May they discover more and more the marvellous mission given them by the Church: that their love of one another bring us closer to the heart of God's love for each and everyone of us!

WHAT CHANGES IN 50 YEARS!

If there is one area which has undergone vast changes it is very much that of wedding celebrations. I remember as a young altar boy serving at several weddings. Arriving at church, the future newlyweds would first go to the sacristy to receive the sacrament of penance. That done, the future groom would enter the church with his father and take his place in the pew. A few moments later the future bride would enter the church on her father's arm while the organ played – always the same music. The priest followed by the two altar boys would approach the kneeling couple and read them an exhortation before marriage. He would then ask for their consent, bless the rings and say a few prayers for the couple. The priest would then return to the altar to celebrate a "low Mass" in Latin, while two or three choir members sang a few hymns. At the Our Father, the nuptial blessing would be given in Latin. Because weddings usually took place in the late morning and because, also, of the eucharistic fast, there was hardly any holy communion at these masses. Following the last Gospel, the priest would return to the sacristy, and the newlyweds would leave the church while a wedding march played. This was the usual marriage format, the traditional "ritual". There was room for minor accommodations: celebration very early in the morning, wedding in the rectory or sacristy – or rather, exchange of consent in the pastor's study at the rectory, this being the case especially for widows and widowers.

LITURGICAL RENEWAL

Vatican Council II asked for the revision of all sacramental books, and each bishops' conference set to work. The vernacular language – the language of the people – now being admitted made for quite different celebrations. By 1969 Canada had its own ritual "*ad experimentum*", with minor changes added. Three types of celebrations were recognised: celebration of marriage within the Mass, celebration of marriage outside the Mass, celebration of marriage with a non-baptised person. All three celebrations followed a basic plan: welcome, liturgy of the Word, and celebration of marriage. The celebration of marriage within the Mass was the preferred form as being the ideal Christian way and the more usual form among us. A novelty: a lectionary for weddings which included over two dozen readings for the celebration, where until then there had been but two readings, the text from the epistle to the Ephesians (chapter 5), and that from Matthew's Gospel (chapter 19). There were now general intercessions, and a eucharistic prayer had even been composed. In 1983, a more definitive version was approved. Each change brought about reflected a renewed theological and pastoral vision. In 1990, a new edition of the marriage rite was published, richer in pastoral notes, rites, and prayers. Four possibilities were now given: celebration of marriage within the Mass, marriage outside Mass, marriage between a Catholic and a catechumen or a non-Christian, marriage in the presence of a lay assistant. A look at the history of the ritual shows how the Church was concerned with respecting in truth and simplicity the situation of every couple as well as that of Christian community involved.

How Is It WITH Us?

In the English sector, especially because of its proximity to other Christian denominations, many weddings take place outside Mass, within a liturgy of the Word. In the French sector, most weddings were held with Mass until very recently; however, for a few years now there are more wedding services with Word liturgy only in response to couples as well as to certain delicate situations regarding religious practise. Besides, at marriage preparation sessions facilitators familiarise couples with these different options.

WHAT IS BASIC IN ALL THIS

What is basic to every marriage celebration is the exchange of consent. According to Pierre DeLocht and Thierry Maertens, the celebration of marriage is making official before world and Church a human event in which God is present. If marriage is experienced as an extraordinary event, it is doubtless because it is a unique commitment in a person's life. A person usually marries but once, and the commitment made is life-long. Two individuals have been living a life apart from one another; they now commit themselves to live as a couple. The outward manifestations express the richness of the event. It is the reality of the present moment which will allow the newlyweds to develop, become more human and more fulfilled. Besides, God is present in this reality: He loves each one and calls each one to live on in His love.

WHAT PRESENCE?

It is not always easy to discover with the engaged couple the presence of God in their lives, to see the Christian values within human reality, and to believe in the work of grace in every person. "There is someone among you whom you haven't met." God makes himself known through the other; to discover Him, the engaged couple must listen to one another. What a couple experience and feel is proper to them and intimately theirs. The more mature adult may think "fidelity" where the young engaged have unshakeable confidence. Another adult wonders about possible problems and difficulties, while the couple are so steeped in love that theirs is hope without limit. Beautiful words [from French songs] to express this presence: "You are there at the heart of our lives"; "Finding you in my life": a discreet presence filled with love and hope

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« From A Bishop's Journal » (389) (20 June 2001)