

Christian Matrimony: A Marriage of Many Cultures with Faith

The approval of an English translation of the *Order of Celebrating Matrimony*, second edition, is a reminder of how the Catholic sacramental celebration of marriage is both a blend of rituals from many cultures and a strong call to go beyond the expectation of those cultures to find a deeper meaning in this commitment of one person to another.

Certainly, many of the rituals we use are ancient and are found in one form or another in most world cultures. Chief among them are the joining of hands, the exchange of rings, joining the couple with ribbon or some other symbolic bond, the public profession of acceptance of each other, and community acclaim. These have all, in one way or another, become part of Christian celebrations of marriage.

But as they have come into the Christian sphere, many of these ritual gestures have taken on new, richer meaning, and sometimes they have come to mean nearly the opposite of what they meant in the culture that developed and promoted them.

Consider the joining of hands or the giving of a ring. These were originally signs of possession, usually indicating that the groom had taken possession of his bride and would take her into his household. But in a Christian context, they gradually came to mean a commitment of the partners to each other, a mutual recognition of equals joined in covenant in Christ.

In a similar way, the “bride price” or dowry, initially paid to the bride’s family in recognition that they had lost an able worker, gradually became a sign of the groom’s willingness to share everything with his bride. The giving of the *arras* in Spanish wedding ceremonies echoes this tradition that originated in Rome and came to be expressed in medieval wedding rites with words like these: “With this ring I wed you; I give you this gold and silver; I worship you with my body; and I endow you with all my worldly goods, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Singing at weddings has ancient roots as well. The song to the Greek goddess of marriage, sung while the bride processed to the groom’s house for the wedding, was followed after the ceremony by the *epithalamion*, which was sung to escort the bride and groom to their bedroom. As Christian wedding rites developed, they focused more on

singing within the ceremony, incorporating psalms and canticles that spoke of human and divine love. The procession to and from the ceremony, originally one of the highlights of a wedding, came to be accompanied more by instruments than by singing. In many places, though, these processions—especially the procession of the bride to the church—remained important aspects of marriage celebrations (as the entrance procession remains to this day).

The idea that marriage, like the Church’s other sacraments, should involve singing by the whole assembly has been growing in the years since Vatican II. As people became accustomed to the idea that parts of any Catholic ceremony would be sung (e.g., the responsorial psalm, Gospel acclamation, responses and acclamations of the Eucharistic Prayer, processional hymns and songs), they came to expect that those same parts of the rite would be sung during a wedding. People are also getting used to the idea that certain rites have their own special parts for singing; the most familiar of these is probably the “Song of Farewell” during the Final Commendation at a funeral. The second edition of the rite for matrimony now calls for such special songs that may be sung as part of this ceremony—the *Gloria*, which is now part of every wedding, as well as an acclamation by the people after the statement of consent by the couple and a hymn or canticle of praise after the exchange of rings.

A Catholic wedding draws from surrounding cultures for some of its rites, ceremonies, and vestments (e.g., the clothing of the bride and groom). But it also challenges what the surrounding culture understands marriage to be. Because a Catholic wedding, in many ways, looks and sounds like any other wedding ceremony, it may take a special effort to help a couple understand how it is different and why the Church finds in marriage—and specifically in the commitment made by the couple—the sacramental presence of Christ and what being Church is all about. That effort has to be made seriously by clergy, catechists, liturgists, pastoral musicians, and the whole community of believers, who have to work to form couples willing to make the commitment that Christian marriage entails and to celebrate matrimony as a ritual step into a new kind of discipleship for their own conversion and for the salvation of the world.