



Wedding Guidelines at Old St. Joseph's Church

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2. THE CEREMONY

Your wedding ceremony will be one of the most memorable events of your life. You want the ceremony to be celebrated with great dignity and to express fully your own dreams and hopes for the future. You also want the ceremony to be a memorable and meaningful experience for your families and friends who witness your vows. You will want a friend to say many years from now, “Your wedding is the one that stands out as the most touching and personally meaningful weddings I ever attended.”

At Old St. Joseph's we can guide you in celebrating your wedding to achieve these goals. But to do so we need your cooperation and active collaboration. Most of all, we need your prayerfulness and your dedication to spiritual preparation in the months leading up to your wedding.

THE CEREMONY AND THE RECEPTION

It is very important to distinguish the wedding liturgy from the wedding reception. They are very different events and confusing the distinct character of each will undermine the true meaning of this important day.

The wedding **reception** is a party at which your family and friends congratulate and honor you. You will be seated on a dais or at the center table so that you will be in full view of everyone because you are the center of the celebration. Appropriately, you want to put your own personal stamp on your reception and hire people who do your bidding because the reception is your personal statement, reflecting your style, tastes and family traditions.

The wedding **ceremony** is something else. It reflects the deeper meaning of marriage.

People cry tears of joy at weddings because two human beings pledging to love one another remind us how much everyone needs to be loved and—if we are people of faith—how much Christ has poured God's love into our hearts. Your wedding vows are your pledge to love and honor one another. Your vows also send a message to your family and friends that they, too, are recipients of God's love. Catholic teaching expresses this divine gift of love by affirming that marriage is a sacrament, that is, a sign of God's love for his people.

Your wedding ceremony is a liturgical celebration. Liturgical means that it is a public act of worship offered to God by the community of the Church. It celebrates

the profound sacramental meaning of your marriage. The wedding ceremony, therefore, is not simply a private family function or social affair. The manner of celebration goes beyond your individual preferences and self-expression. It is not all about you, but about what God is doing for all of us through your loving commitment to one another.

Following the Church's guidelines for the wedding liturgy will insure that this deeper, communal and religious significance of your marriage will be clearly expressed to your families and friends, and most importantly, to each of you. In this way the wedding liturgy is an expression of what is the deepest part of you—your loving relationship with God and the way God is blessing you through this sacrament of marriage.

In this spirit of the Church's prayer and worship, there are numerous and important ways in which you will be invited to “personalize” your wedding liturgy, but those opportunities have been carefully selected for your benefit. Other interventions that alter the liturgical practices of the parish are not appropriate.

A fundamental guiding principle is that there are three focal points in the ceremony, and every gesture, every word and every note of music must direct attention to one of these focal points: the proclaimed Word of God, the marriage vows, and the Eucharist (in the case of a Nuptial Mass). A clear understanding of these three focal points will make your wedding ceremony especially meaningful and help you plan a truly beautiful and spiritually uplifting wedding ceremony.

A very important Catholic teaching about marriage is that the bride and groom are the “ministers” of the sacrament of marriage. This means that the priest does not “marry” you. Rather, you “marry each other.” The priest does not say, “I pronounce you husband and wife,” because you make that pronouncement yourselves, as baptized members of the Church exercising your Christian freedom and the powers conferred upon you at your baptism. The priest along with the best man and maid of honor are official witnesses, not active agents.

A NUPTIAL MASS OR ‘SIMPLE CEREMONY’?

The wedding ceremony can take two forms. One form is to pronounce your vows as part of a Nuptial Mass. In this case, the vows are exchanged after the proclamation of the readings (the Liturgy of the Word) and before the gifts are presented for the celebration of the Eucharist and the Communion Rite.

The other form of wedding celebration is similar, but does not include the presentation of the gifts, the eucharistic prayer and the communion rite. Hence, this liturgical form, which celebrates the vows with only the Liturgy of the Word, is informally referred to as a “Simple Ceremony.”

The first question to be resolved in this regard is whether to celebrate your wedding at a Liturgy of the Word (Simple Ceremony) or at a Nuptial Mass.

If one of you is not Roman Catholic, or if the celebration of a Catholic Mass could be in any way divisive for the assembled congregation, or if you judge your families and friends are ill-prepared to participate in a Catholic Mass, or if the Eucharist is not a regular part of your life, or if other relevant circumstances are present, it may be advisable to select a simple ceremony. The length of a simple ceremony is normally between 40 and 50 minutes and the full Nuptial Mass extends the celebration by approximately 15 minutes. So time alone should not usually enter in as a significant factor.

Before making this important decision, you should, together as a couple, reflect on and pray over the issues related to your own life of faith. And then consult with the priest who will be presiding at your wedding to finalize this important decision.

BASIC OUTLINE OF THE WEDDING CEREMONY

1. ENTRANCE

The Church strongly recommends that your role as ministers of the sacrament should be symbolized by the way you approach the altar. That is, it is recommended that bride and groom process in together, breaking with the custom of the bride being escorted down the aisle by her father to be “given away” to her husband-to-be. But this tradition is hard to break, which is surprising,

given the rather out-of-date symbolism which is its basis. Needless to say, at Old St. Joseph’s we are willing to bow to convention and follow the usual custom rather than cause upset to brides, their fathers and their families. But if your circumstances permit, you may want to give some serious thought to this more appropriate entrance that the Church recommends.

The wedding ceremony begins with the bridesmaids, maid of honor and bride (with the groom or her father) processing down the main aisle. The priest, best man (and groom) enter from the front sacristy. The details of the entrance procession will be reviewed at the wedding rehearsal. During the ceremony, the bride and groom will stand and sit in front of the communion rail facing the altar.

The liturgical celebration begins with the sign of the cross, a greeting by the priest and a few brief moments of private prayer and spiritual recollection. Then the priest leads the Opening Prayer, after which everyone is asked to be seated for the readings from Scripture.

2. THE READINGS FROM THE BIBLE

Selecting the Scripture readings is one of the major decisions you will make about your wedding ceremony. It is a decision you should make together as a couple after careful prayer and reflection and after consulting with the priest who will preside at your wedding. The readings must be taken from the Bible.

There are usually three readings. The first is usually taken from the Old Testament. Then the Responsorial Psalm is sung, followed by the second reading. This second reading is taken from one of the New Testament epistles. After the sung acclamation, the third reading is proclaimed from one of the four Gospels in the New Testament. Your chosen readings must follow the overall pattern: 1) Old Testament reading, 2) New Testament epistle, 3) Gospel. (A variation of this pattern may be appropriate, especially during the Easter season.)

There are suggested readings to guide your choices. They do not prohibit you from choosing other appropriate readings from the Bible. But most people follow the suggestions. A good place to find suggested readings is www.foryourmarriage.org/readings/. This website is sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and includes short commentaries on each of the readings.

The Bible does not offer a contemporary, twenty-first century exposition of the psychological aspects of marriage. Begin your reflections instead with your belief in God, your dependence on God’s grace, your trust in God’s love and your Christian vocations as a married couple. You may be surprised how you can discover new, personal and profound insights into your spiritual life by sharing these biblical readings with each other.

The priest can guide you through this exercise and assist you in making a final choice of readings. Sometimes the priest may want to incorporate in the homily at your wedding the reflections you share with him during the discussion of the different readings. You can always introduce this suggestion to him if he fails to mention it.

It is appropriate for lay readers to read the first two readings. The priest always reads the gospel. Lay readers are called lectors. They should be people of faith who believe they are proclaiming the word of God. They should also be people who can manage the assignment of public speaking without undue anxiety and properly project their voices to adequately communicate the text to the congregation. They should be available to practice their assigned reading at the wedding rehearsal.

After the reading, the priest preaches the homily. The priest's remarks are not supposed to center on you, but rather to expound the message of the readings and invite the congregation to a fuller understanding and appreciation of the sacrament of matrimony. The Christian faith is always the center of preaching. Yet the homily can also make appropriate personal references to you and the witness your love and commitment offer to the entire Christian community.

3. THE VOWS AND EXCHANGE OF RINGS

After the homily, the bride and groom are asked to come forward and stand facing the congregation. Holding hands, they repeat the vow formula, phrase by phrase, following the prompting of the priest. The bride and groom recite the exact same formula (except for obvious substitutions like "wife" and "husband," etc.). The words used in the vows express the Catholic understanding that marriage is a total, unqualified commitment of faithful love and mutual affection. After the recitation of the vows, the rings are blessed and the bride and groom present the rings to each other.

After the vow and ring ceremonies, the bride and groom are seated. Up to this point there is no difference between a simple ceremony and a Nuptial Mass.

4. CONCLUSION OF THE SIMPLE CEREMONY

In a simple ceremony a Mass is not celebrated, and so the ceremony draws to a close. Prayers of petition may be offered. The priest can assist the couple in composing personal petitions which should ordinarily be read by one of the lectors. Frequently there is a brief period of silent reflection or musical interlude, after which the Lord's Prayer is recited. The ceremony closes with the Nuptial Blessing. This beautiful blessing is usually conferred separately first on the bride, and then on the groom, and then on both together as a couple. Finally, the entire congregation is blessed and "dismissed" or "sent forth" by the priest.

5. NUPTIAL MASS: CELEBRATION OF THE EUCHARIST

When the wedding ceremony is a Nuptial Mass, the Liturgy of the Eucharist is celebrated after the vow and ring ceremony. This means that the table (altar) must be prepared, the eucharistic prayer proclaimed and Communion ministered to the congregation.

The period immediately following the vows and ring ceremony is especially reflective. Sometimes a quiet musical interlude leads without interruption into the presentation of the gifts of bread and wine and the preparation of the altar. Another option at this point is to offer prayers of petition (as described above).

At the appropriate time, the gifts of bread and wine are brought to the altar from the table in the back of the main aisle. Usually, two members of the congregation are assigned beforehand to present the gifts to the priest. The priest prepares the gifts on the altar (the offertory of the Mass) and then invites everyone to stand for the preface of the eucharistic prayer, "Holy, Holy,...," At the conclusion it is then custom for the congregation to kneel during the eucharistic prayer.

The eucharistic prayer is the great prayer of the Church. The prayer is addressed directly to God the Father (not to the person of Jesus) and always begins with a note of praise. The prayer asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine to change them into the body and blood of Christ. The story of Jesus' action at the Last Supper is told, a story that centers on the words of consecration. There is always some mention that this offering is made in memory of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. We pray for the Church, for the world, for the congregation and for the dead. The eucharistic prayer concludes with the great statement of praise as the priest holds up the body and blood of the Lord with the words, "Through him (Christ), with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father, forever and ever. AMEN."

The communion rite follows the eucharistic prayer and this is the time when Communion is distributed. In order for Communion to be distributed at a wedding ceremony, the entire liturgy of the Mass (especially the proclamation of the eucharistic prayer as described above) must be celebrated. The communion rite always begins with the recitation of the Lord's Prayer (the "Our Father") and the peace prayer followed by the breaking of the bread with the "Lamb of God" litany.

After Communion, the Nuptial Blessing (described previously at the end of the simple ceremony) is offered and the congregation is blessed and dismissed. The conclusion is also similar to that in the simple ceremony.

GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE CEREMONY

A natural temptation in planning a liturgy is to add more and more embellishments. But in a ceremony, remember that “less is more” is a good rule to follow. Introducing extraneous elements or additions into the Church’s liturgy distracts from the coherence and focus of the ceremony. As mentioned, keep the attention focused on the Liturgy of the Word, the Exchange of Vows and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

For example, at Old St. Joseph’s we do not allow the use of a unity candle during the wedding liturgy. This ritual is not part of our liturgical practice because light is a symbol of Christ and the life of grace, not a sign of married unity. Better to incorporate a unity candle, if you wish, in the festivities at the wedding reception where it can be quite touching.

Another extraneous practice commonly observed at weddings is the floral presentation to the Blessed Mother at the end of the service. Devotion to the Blessed Mother plays a major role in Catholic piety and so a show of reverence for Mary is entirely fitting at the celebration of a marriage. However, if devotion to Mary plays a major role in your spiritual life, there are better ways to express that devotion at your wedding than what can appear as merely a sentimental gesture that is largely out of character with contemporary culture. For example, choosing readings with a Marian theme may be especially meaningful.

The reading of secular poetry is not appropriate at the wedding liturgy, although it may be a highly effective part of the wedding reception festivities.

Reflect prayerfully on the selection of readings and choose only good lectors. Practice reciting your vows in a clear, dignified and distinct voice. Pray reverently with the Church at the Eucharist. That’s the formula for a truly reverent and touching wedding ceremony that everyone—especially you and your spouse—will remember with great fondness for years to come.

MUSIC AT THE CEREMONY

Music is important because it touches the emotions that we feel so strongly but sometimes cannot put into words. Music, therefore, is intimately connected to the prayer and worship that we offer to God in every religious ceremony. At Old St. Joseph’s we are blessed with a highly talented music staff that offers numerous options to make your wedding truly dignified and prayerful. Hence, we do not allow the employment of musicians other than those provided and approved by the parish Director of Music.

Our Director of Music has procedures to help you select the most suitable music for your wedding. More information is contained in Section 3: MUSIC PLANNING.

PRACTICAL POINTS ABOUT THE CEREMONY

THE ROLE OF THE WEDDING PARTY

Both Church and civil law require an official witness (officiant) and two other witnesses. For a Catholic marriage, the officiant is the priest presider (or another clergy person officially recognized by the Church). The two other witnesses are usually the best man and the maid of honor. Frequently, for social reasons, the engaged couple may wish to select more than one best man or maid of honor. This can be done, but only two people can play the legal role as official witnesses.

In recognition of their official status, the best man and maid of honor are invited to stand with the wedding couple as they profess their vows.

The ushers or groomsmen are first and foremost the ministers of hospitality. As soon as your guests arrive at the Church, they are to be welcomed by the ushers. The ushers distribute your programs and seat your guests. They may escort parents of the bridal couple or other special family members down the aisle as appropriate.

Ushers take their places in the Church just before the ceremony begins. Usually, they make their way up the side aisle and sit in the front pew on the “groom’s side” of the Church (the right side as one faces the altar). Alternatively, if so desired, ushers may escort the bridesmaids up the aisle as part of the wedding procession. At the end of the ceremony, the ushers escort the bridesmaids down the center aisle. Therefore, the number of ushers usually corresponds to the number of bridesmaids.

But bridesmaids and groomsmen are not liturgical ministers and therefore do not take an active part in the ceremony. Your wedding party beyond the best man and maid of honor plays an important social role on your wedding day, but their role at the liturgy is to participate with the congregation in communal prayer and worship.

CHILDREN IN THE WEDDING PARTY

Children are a gift from God. But including very young children in the bridal procession is something to be discouraged as much as possible. Small children can frequently be quite overwhelmed or even frightened by all the activity of the wedding ceremony, especially the opening procession. Avoid subjecting a young child to such an unwelcome ordeal. Furthermore, children can distract attention from what is meant to be a solemn moment in your life. Welcome children into the celebration at the reception, but be very careful when imposing on them a ceremonial role in the liturgy.

Children in the wedding party, therefore, should be old enough to have a sense of the event and the importance and execution of the procession. Children

must be able to walk the length of the aisle. In all cases, young children should enter first before other members of the bridal party and should be accompanied by an adult who is familiar to the child so that the adult can comfort and assist the child as needed.

THE WEDDING REHEARSAL

The rehearsal is generally held on Thursday or Friday evening at 5:00 PM or 7:00 PM for a maximum period of one hour. The rehearsal allows the immediate wedding party to become familiar with our Church and with the public roles they will assume as part of the liturgy.

A few points about the rehearsal:

- The rehearsal is not the time for discussion and decision-making. Any issues should be resolved prior to the rehearsal in discussions with the presiding priest or by consulting these guidelines.
- Musicians are not present for the wedding rehearsal.
- Only those directly involved in the ceremony should be invited to the rehearsal. Others should be directed to meet with you at the rehearsal dinner. Those who should be present include the bride and groom, bridesmaids, groomsmen (ushers), readers, any Eucharistic ministers and gift bearers. By custom, parents of the bride and groom usually wish to attend, though their presence is neither necessary nor required.
- Everyone attending the rehearsal should arrive on time so that the rehearsal can begin promptly according to schedule.

DRESSING AT THE CHURCH

Changing facilities are not available, so all participants must arrive dressed in wedding attire. The bride and bridesmaids gather in the rectory parlor 25 minutes before the wedding.

The groom and best man should go to the sacristy and wait there with the priest until the beginning of the ceremony. They should arrive at least 20 minutes before the scheduled start of the ceremony.

Groomsmen (ushers) gather in the Church 45 minutes before the scheduled wedding time. Groomsmen are expected to serve as ushers (greeters) at the Church entrances welcoming and assisting guests, distributing the wedding program and directing guests to their seats.

ALTAR SERVERS

Our parish ordinarily does not employ altar servers at wedding ceremonies. For liturgical purposes it is unnecessary to do so. If a young boy or girl in your family or circle of friends is an altar server, you may wish to request that he or she be included in the wedding liturgy. This is only appropriate if the youngster is truly knowledgeable and experienced in serving at the altar. Remember that for a visitor to Old St. Joseph's,

the sanctuary space is unfamiliar and indeed the wedding liturgy may be entirely unknown to such a young person. Altar servers, not properly prepared, can unintentionally detract from the beauty of the ceremony and reverence for the liturgy.

CULTURAL WEDDING TRADITIONS

These traditions refer to such customs as the "arras," "lazo" and similar elements. Many of these practices are a great gift of different cultures. In celebrating our diversity, we recognize their value as an integral part of your heritage. However, in the spirit of good order and noble simplicity which has always characterized the Church's liturgy, we ask that the couple carefully consider the number of primary and secondary sponsors they invite to participate in the liturgy if these cultural options are included.

THROWING RICE OR ROSE PEDALS

Please instruct your guests not to do this.

A RECEIVING LINE

You do not want your guests to wait for a long time to greet you before they can exit the Church. The Church interior is not a suitable space for people to stand in line. Therefore, you cannot form a formal "receiving line" at the doors of the Church. This belongs more at the reception hall where your guests will be far more comfortable waiting to take their turn to greet and congratulate you as a married couple.

However, you may wish to stand at the doors of the Church to briefly greet your guests as they depart, without delaying for a more formal greeting. (This is the practice that most priests follow when greeting parishioners after Sunday Mass.) The ushers should help to move people along so no one is "trapped" waiting to exit the Church.

Of course, if you wish, you may leave the vicinity of the Church immediately after the ceremony. Or you may return to the front of the Church, by means of the side aisle, if you want to pose for photographs.

AFTER THE CEREMONY

Weddings are scheduled at Old St. Joseph's to provide some time between Church events. If the wedding ceremony begins on time, therefore, there usually is 20 to 30 minutes available on the schedule to allow for picture taking inside the Church or visiting with guests in the courtyard.

All activities, however, must respect Church decorum and other events that may have been scheduled after your wedding. In particular, photographers should be carefully monitored so that they do not abuse decorum or unduly prolong the time for picture taking.

Detailed directives for photographers and florists are included in Section 5 and 6 of these guidelines. Please give copies to your photographer and florist.

PREPARING A WEDDING PROGRAM

Printing a wedding program is entirely optional. If a printed program is to be provided, that is solely the responsibility of the wedding couple. With regard to listing members of the bridal party or including personal statements, you may follow any appropriate style. But there are rules to observe if you wish to list the elements of the wedding ceremony. As always, the presiding priest will be happy to assist you by reviewing the program before it is printed.

The first principle is to keep the description of the ceremony as brief as possible. Don't try to provide a verbatim transcript of the ceremony because people will then tend to focus more on reading than on experiencing, first-hand, the action of the liturgy.

Note: If you prepare a program, please give the presiding priest or the Director of Music the opportunity to check the accuracy of your musical listing. Otherwise, your printed program may vary from the actual music played.

Here is a model to follow:

FOR A NUPTIAL MASS

Opening Procession
[list music selection]
Greeting and Opening Prayer
First Reading: *[give biblical reference]*
Lector: *[give name of lector]*
Responsorial Psalm
[list music selection]
Second Reading: *[give biblical reference]*
Lector: *[give name of lector]*
Gospel Acclamation
Gospel Reading: *[give biblical reference]*
Homily
[give name of priest]
Exchange of Vows and Blessing of Rings
Prayer of the Faithful
Offered by *[give name of reader]*
Presentation of Gifts
[give name of presenters]
Offertory Music
[list music selection]
Preparation of the Altar
Proclamation of the Eucharistic Prayer
Communion Rite
[list music selections]
Nuptial Blessing and Dismissal
Recessional
[list music selection]

FOR A SIMPLE CEREMONY

Opening Procession
[list music selection]
Greeting and Opening Prayer
First Reading: *[give biblical reference]*
Lector: *[give name of lector]*
Responsorial Psalm
[list music selection]
Second Reading: *[give biblical reference]*
Lector: *[give name of lector]*
Gospel Acclamation
Gospel Reading: *[give biblical reference]*
Homily
[give name of priest]
Exchange of Vows and Blessing of Rings
Prayer of the Faithful
Offered by *[give name of reader]*
Musical Meditation
[list music selection]
Nuptial Blessing and Dismissal
Recessional
[list music selection]