1. Why does the Church teach that marriage is a sacrament?
Because it is sacred. Marriage is to be a union of love, and the sacraments make Christ, the author of all love, present in our midst. For this reason, marriage between two baptized persons is a sacrament. Like the other sacraments, marriage is not just for the good of individuals or the couple but also for the community as a whole. The Old Testament prophets saw the marriage of a man and woman as a symbol of the covenant relationship between God and his people. The permanent and exclusive union between husband and wife mirrors the mutual commitment between God and his people. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians says that this union is a symbol of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

2. Do Catholics ever validly enter into non-sacramental marriages?
Yes. Marriages between Catholics and non-Christians, while they may still be valid in the eyes of the Church, are non-sacramental. They are still blessed by God, and with permission a priest or deacon may witness such marriages.

3. What constitutes a valid Catholic marriage?
Just as individual governments have certain requirements for civil marriage (e.g., a marriage license, blood tests), the Catholic Church also has requirements before Catholics can be considered validly married in the eyes of the Church. A valid Catholic marriage results from four elements: (1) the spouses are free to marry; (2) they freely exchange their consent; (3) in consenting to marry, they have the intention to marry for life, to be faithful to one another, and to be open to children; and (4) their consent is given in the presence of two witnesses and before a properly authorized Church minister. Exceptions to the last requirement must be approved by Church authority.

4. If a Catholic wants to marry a non-Catholic, how can he or she assure that the marriage is recognized by the Church?
In addition to meeting the criteria for a valid Catholic marriage (see question #3), the Catholic must seek permission from the local bishop to marry a non-Catholic. If the person is a non-Catholic Christian, this permission is called “permission to enter into a mixed marriage.” If the person is a non-Christian, the permission is called “dispensation from disparity of cult.” The priest or deacon helping to prepare the couple for marriage will assist with this permission process.

5. Why does a Catholic wedding have to take place in a church?
Marriage is not just a private or family event but also a Church event. For this reason, the Church teaches that marriage should be celebrated in the midst of the community, like in the parish church of one of the spouses. Only the local bishop can permit a marriage to be celebrated in another suitable place.

6. If a Catholic wishes to marry in a place outside a Catholic Church, how can he or she be sure that the marriage is recognized by the Catholic Church as valid?
The local bishop can permit a wedding to take place in another church or in another suitable place for a sufficient reason. For example, a Catholic seeks to marry a Baptist whose father is the pastor of the local Baptist church, and the father wants to officiate at the wedding. In these circumstances the bishop could permit the couple to marry in the Baptist church. The permission in these instances is called "dispensation from canonical form." As long as the couple follows the proper protocol in completing the prenuptial requirements with the parish priest or deacon and the dispensation is granted by the local diocese, the marriage will be recognized as valid by the Catholic Church. In such cases,
readings and prayers suitable to the celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage. It has special

A Nuptial Mass is a Mass that includes the celebration of a marriage. If the couple and presiding priest agree, a Nuptial Mass may also be celebrated for a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized person who is not a Catholic. Holy Communion is not offered to the non-Catholic spouse and non-Catholic guests. In some instances, it is better to use the appropriate ritual for marriage outside of Mass. The celebration of a marriage without a Nuptial Mass is always the case in a marriage between a baptized Catholic and a non-baptized person.

What should a couple do when they decide that they want to marry in the Catholic Church?

They should contact their parish as soon as possible and make an appointment to talk with the priest, deacon, or staff person responsible for preparing couples for marriage. It is important that this be done before any of the wedding arrangements are made, e.g., renting a hall, hiring a disc jockey, etc., and this must be done at least six months prior to the proposed wedding date. The priest, deacon, or staff person will explain the process of marriage preparation and the various preparation programs that are available.

13. Why does the Church require engaged couples to participate in a marriage preparation program?

You can only love something that you know, and as your knowledge increases so can your love deepen. As part of its pastoral responsibility the Church requires every couple to participate in a marriage prep program in order that they be properly prepared to be married. Marriage preparation offers couples the opportunity to develop a better understanding of Christian marriage; to evaluate and deepen their readiness to live married life; and to gain insights into themselves as individuals and as a couple. It is especially effective in helping couples to deal with the challenges of the early years of marriage.

14. What kinds of marriage preparation programs does our local church offer?

In the Diocese of Pittsburgh there are several options, and every couple is required to attend one. Weekend programs such as Engaged Encounter and Joy Filled Marriage are offered several times a year. Also, some parishes offer marriage preparation programs, including Sponsor Couple programs where engaged couples meet with experienced married couples. For further information about any of these programs, see www.diopitt.org/marriage-preparation

15. What key issues are covered in marriage preparation?

Marriage preparation programs help couples to understand both the practical and spiritual realities of married life. Typical topics include the meaning of marriage as a sacrament; faith, prayer and the Church; roles in marriage; communication and conflict resolution; children, parenthood, and Natural Family Planning; finances; and family of origin.

16. Is there a cost for marriage preparation programs?

Most programs charge a modest fee to cover the cost of materials. Programs that require an overnight stay include an additional cost for rooms and meals. Assistance is frequently available for couples who would otherwise be unable to participate.

17. Does the Church offer any programs to help couples to improve their marriage?

Yes. Peer ministry for married couples is widespread. Many couples participate in Marriage Encounter (www.mwme.org), which offers a weekend experience and ongoing community support. Many couples in the Pittsburgh area also take advantage of the Renew The I Do foundation and its many ongoing programs that support marriage. In addition to parish-based marriage enrichment ministries, programs such as Teams of Our Lady and Christian Family Movement are also active in the area. Some parishes sponsor a retreat day or evening of reflection for married couples. Others offer a mentoring system that matches older couples with younger ones.

For more information about any of these programs, please got to: www.diopitt.org/marriage-and-family-ministries

non-Catholic minister officiates. It is not necessary for the priest or deacon to be present.

7. If two Catholics, or a Catholic and non-Catholic, are married invalidly in the eyes of the Church, what should they do?

They should approach a priest or deacon to resolve the situation.

8. When a Catholic marries a non-Catholic, must the couple promise to raise the children in the Catholic faith?

The non-Catholic spouse does not have to promise to have the children raised Catholic. However, the Catholic spouse must promise to do all that he or she can do to have the children baptized and raised in the Catholic faith.

9. Is it required that a wedding celebration have expensive flowers, clothes, and other accompaniments?

The Rite of Marriage makes no reference to any of these cultural elements. The focus of the couple should be on the celebration of the sacrament. Many priests and deacons repeatedly emphasize that a couple does not have to postpone celebrating the Sacrament of Marriage because they cannot afford such things.

10. How much does it cost to get married in the Catholic Church?

Individual parishes regulate the stipend, or offering to the church, that is customary on the occasion of a wedding. This might also include a fee for the organist and vocalist if they are a part of the ceremony. In a situation of true financial difficulty, however, couples can come to an agreement with the pastor so that true financial hardship would never prevent a marriage from taking place.

11. What is a Nuptial Mass and when can a couple have one?

A Nuptial Mass is a Mass that includes the celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage. It has special readings and prayers suitable to the celebration of the sacrament. The Sacrament of Marriage between two baptized Catholics must be celebrated with a Nuptial Mass. If the couple and presiding priest agree, a Nuptial Mass may also be celebrated for a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized person who is not a Catholic. Holy Communion is not offered to the non-Catholic spouse and non-Catholic guests. In some instances, it is better to use the appropriate ritual for marriage outside of Mass. The celebration of a marriage without a Nuptial Mass is always the case in a marriage between a baptized Catholic and a non-baptized person.

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This brochure was adapted from materials provided by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Marriage and Family.