

Thinking of marriage?

The Catholic Church is here to support you in making that decision, in planning a wedding and in your preparations for married life. Here's an FAQ:

How can I have a happy marriage?

In a happy marriage, each spouse is committed to loving the other in ways that put their relationship above his or her individual desires and concerns. The love, strength and patience required to do this comes by the grace of God, who is at the center of a happy marriage. The role of the Church in marriage preparation, in the wedding ceremony and in continuing support after the vows, is to assist the couple in creating a loving home in which Jesus guides them in all their decisions.

What is marriage?

Marriage is a commitment between a woman and a man to love and support each other in good times and in bad, until they are parted by death. For those who are able to conceive naturally, marriage is also a commitment to be open to the gift of children, and to cooperate with God in raising a family. The couple's commitment is blessed by God, in part through the prayers and support of the Christian community. God is present in a marriage between two baptized persons, giving them the love and the strength to live up to their vows. That is why marriage is a Catholic sacrament. However, marriage between a Catholic and a non-Christian – someone who has never been baptized – can also be recognized by the Catholic Church.

What should we do when we decide we want to marry in the Catholic Church?

Before you make any other arrangements, and at least six months before the proposed date of the wedding, contact your parish and make an appointment to talk with the priest, deacon, or staff person responsible for preparing couples for marriage. The priest, deacon, or staff person will explain the process of marriage preparation. It's important to have that conversation before you make other wedding arrangements, such as renting a hall or hiring musicians.

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

We want you to have a happy marriage. That takes more than being in love and good intentions. These sessions help prepare you for a lifetime commitment, so that you will have the knowledge and skills to build a loving home and to forgive when you disappoint each other. It's an opportunity to assess your relationship, so you understand each other better. The time and love that you put into this program is a crucial investment in your life together.

What marriage preparation programs are available?

The Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh has several options, and every couple must choose one.

The Diocesan Pre-marriage Program consists of four evening classes held four times each year at St. Paul Cathedral Parish in Oakland.

Engaged Encounter Weekends [hyperlink] are offered several times a year. The Engaged Encounter Diocesan Reservation Couple, Brian & Nancy Stevens, may be reached at 412-861-0262 or eweekends@verizon.net.

Some parishes offer marriage preparation groups and marriage mentoring with an experienced married couple. For further information about any of these programs, please call 412-456-3112.

What issues are covered in marriage preparation?

Marriage preparation programs help couples to understand the practical and spiritual realities of married life. Typical topics include the meaning of marriage; faith, prayer and the Church; communication and conflict resolution; children, parenthood, and Natural Family Planning; finances; and relationships with the extended family. As part of their preparation, many couples complete a premarital questionnaire to identify issues for discussion.

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. Ask your priest or deacon about such assistance.

Why does the Church teach that marriage is a sacrament?

You probably learned in catechism that “A sacrament is an outward sign that inwardly communicates God’s grace.” Jesus elevated marriage, a natural relationship between a man and a woman, to the status of a sacrament because it is a sign of his gentle, generous and sacrificial love for his Church. This teaching from St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians echoes the Hebrew prophets, who saw the marriage of a man and a woman as a symbol of the covenant relationship between God and his people. Christian marriage embodies the love of Jesus for his Church – the people of God -- and makes him present in our midst. As with all of the other sacraments, marriage is not just for the good of the individuals or the couple, but for the community as a whole. Through marriage, Jesus, the author of all love, is present in their relationship, their family their community and all of society. God’s grace sustains the couple throughout their marriage. That is why marriage, which symbolizes Christ’s love for all of us, is a powerful outward sign that inwardly communicates God’s grace. That’s why marriage is a sacrament.

Does one of us have to belong to the parish we get married in?

No. You may marry in any church in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, but you will have to arrange for a priest or deacon to officiate if the parish clergy are not available. While couples sometimes choose a church that is especially pretty, it is good to consider the spiritual value of marrying in the place where you regularly worship. Every Mass can be an opportunity to remember your vows and your commitment to love one another.

Does it cost a lot of money to get married in the Catholic Church?

Only if you want it to. If you are marrying in your own parish church, there is usually no cost for the building and modest fees for musicians. If you choose another parish, some will charge little or nothing and others have significant costs. In cases of financial need, the couple should speak with the pastor, who can reduce or waive the fees. The clothing worn by the bride, groom and wedding party is a matter of personal choice, as is any reception afterward. The Church encourages each couple to invest far more in their future life together than in the events of a single day. One way to do that is to avoid the financial strain of paying for expensive clothes or a fancy celebration. No couple should delay marriage solely due to the cost of a reception. They can marry in a simple Church ceremony, and wait for a future anniversary to throw a party.

Can we have a Catholic wedding outside a church building?

Catholic weddings take place in church because marriage is a sacrament and because the Church –the people of God – is making a commitment to support the couple. A marriage ceremony is a Church celebration, not a private event. The travel and bridal industries work hard to persuade couples to marry in secular settings. But God calls couples to exchange vows in a place of prayer to which they will return to seek His help and strength. On a practical level, churches are usually beautiful, generally inexpensive and you needn't worry about rain soaking the bridal party or guests. You can, of course, hold the reception in your favorite romantic spot. In certain circumstances where there are pressing reasons to have a wedding some place other than in a Catholic church, the local Catholic bishop must give permission.

Under what circumstances can a Catholic validly marry in a venue other than a Catholic church?

The local bishop may permit a wedding in a non-Catholic church or in another suitable place if there is a sufficient reason to do so. One example would be if 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. This is called "dispensation from canonical form." As long as the couple follows proper church procedures and requests the appropriate dispensations, the Church will recognize this as a valid catholic marriage. A priest or deacon will help the couple to obtain the necessary permissions and dispensations prior to the wedding. *[Hyperlinks to questions about marrying a non-Catholic or a non-Christian.]*

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

The Catholic spouse must promise to do everything possible to have the children baptized and raised in the Catholic faith. The non-Catholic spouse does not have to make this promise, but he or she is made aware of the promise.

Can we choose our music?

Yes, as long as it is music that celebrates the presence of God in your lives. The reception after the ceremony is the place for your favorite pop song that celebrates your love for each other. But the music at a wedding is part of the prayer for Jesus to be at the center of your life together and it must reflect that relationship. The music minister at the parish can help you select appropriate sacred music.

Can we have a Mass at our wedding?

The Ritual Mass “For the Celebration of Marriage” has special readings and prayers that focus on love and marriage. Normally, the Ritual Mass is celebrated at a marriage between two baptized Catholics. If the situation warrants, and the local bishop gives permission, the Ritual Mass may be celebrated for a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized person who is not a Catholic. In such cases, Holy Communion is not given to the non-Catholic spouse or the non-Catholic guests. For a wedding between a Catholic and another kind of Christian, you should talk with the priest about whether it may be wiser to use “The Order of Celebrating Matrimony Without Mass,” in order to avoid any sense of division or hurt feelings. The celebration of a marriage without Mass is always the case in a marriage between a baptized Catholic and a non-baptized person.

Does the Church offer any programs to help couples sustain and improve their marriage?

Yes. Peer ministry for married couples is widespread. Many couples participate in Marriage Encounter (www.wwme.org), which offers a weekend experience and ongoing support. Couples also meet in parish-based small groups, and in small groups sponsored by ministries such as Teams of Our Lady, and the Christian Family Movement. 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. Retrouvaille offers a lifeline for troubled marriages, including those broken by divorce but where the former spouses wish to reunite. For information about any of these programs, please call 412-456-3112.

One or both of us are divorced. Can we marry in the Catholic Church?

Divorced persons may marry in the Church if a Church court has determined that the prior marriage wasn't valid according to Church law. Many factors can render the marriage invalid and the procedure to try to discover them is called the “annulment process.” The annulment process is free of charge in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. You can find out more about it, and begin the paperwork here <http://diopitt.org/annulments/welcome>. In order to make arrangements for a Catholic wedding you will first need the written declaration from the Church that the prior marriage wasn't valid. This can take many months, which is one reason why it's important to speak with a priest before you make other arrangements for the wedding.

What does it mean to have a “valid marriage”? [Other mentions of validity should hyperlink to this]

Just as governments have requirements for recognition of a civil marriage, such as a marriage license and a minimum age, the Catholic Church has requirements for validity. A valid Catholic marriage requires four elements: (1) the spouses are free to marry in the eyes of both the Church and the state; (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 a properly authorized Church minister. Exceptions to the last requirement must be approved by Church authority.

What limitations do Catholics face if their marriage isn't valid?

Couples in an invalid marriage are invited and welcomed to participate in the community of the parish. However, they are unable to serve in leadership or volunteer roles related to catechesis, sacramental preparation, as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion or as readers. Those in invalid marriages

are also required to refrain from receiving Holy Communion, but are strongly encouraged to attend Mass each week. Catholics who are in this situation should speak with a priest or deacon, as there are often ways to remedy the situation.

If a Catholic wants to marry a non-Catholic, how can they ensure that the marriage is recognized by the Church?

In addition to meeting the four criteria [hyperlink] for a valid Catholic marriage, 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 can assist with this permission process.

If I marry a non-Christian, is it a valid marriage in the eyes of the Church?

Yes. The Church may recognize the validity of a marriage between a Catholic and a non-Christian (someone who has never been baptized). Such marriages are blessed by God, and may be witnessed by a priest or deacon who has been given permission to do so. However, they are not considered sacramental because only one spouse has received the sacrament of baptism.

If I hire an officiant – such as a man who left the Catholic priesthood to marry – to conduct a marriage ceremony according to the Catholic liturgy, will that be a valid marriage?

No, because the clergyman is no longer in good standing and the bishop hasn't given permission for the wedding. The couple will be limited [hyperlink] in their ability to participate fully in the life of the Church.

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. Sometimes the solution is easy and fast, other times it isn't. But in all circumstances, the clergy want to help you live a fully Catholic life, and to accompany you through whatever challenges you face in doing so.