

“Inasmuch as it is a sacramental action of the Church, the liturgical celebration of marriage should involve the Christian community, with the full, active and responsible participation of all those present, according to the place and task of each individual: the bride and bridegroom, the priest, the witnesses, the relatives, the friends, the other members of the faithful, all of them members of an assembly that manifests and lives the mystery of Christ and His Church.” – *Familiaris consortio* (exhortation of Pope John Paul II on role of Christian family in the modern world), 67.

The Catholic Marriage Liturgy

Once the freedom to marry has been established and the date and form have been set, it is time to look towards the preparation of and for the Marriage liturgy itself. This can serve as a very prayerful time for the couple, with an opportunity to reflect on the various options for readings, prayers, music and rituals found in the *Rite of Marriage*.

While in any liturgy of the Church the visual aspects, the beauty, and the decorations, are important, couples must work to avoid getting fixated on the externals of the celebration only. Priests, deacons, and parish staffs should work to help the couples celebrate a wedding that will be a “pathway to holiness,” not only for the couple but all who stand witness to the event.

Readings from Scripture

“In the hearing of God’s word the Church is built up and grows...”¹ Readings from sacred Scripture are a key component of the celebration of the sacraments. The *Rite of Marriage* provides many options from which the couple may choose (see appendix A).

All readings at a Marriage liturgy must be from sacred Scripture as found in an approved *Lectionary*. For weddings celebrated in the context of the Mass of the day (see “When to Marry”), the designated readings of the day are used (with the option to change one reading). For other Masses and for weddings celebrated outside of Mass, the list of readings in the appendix can be used. One may select two readings and a psalm (Old/New Testament, Psalm and Gospel) or three readings and a psalm (Old Testament, Psalm, New Testament, Gospel). Ideally, the Responsorial Psalm should be sung (see “Music”). The priest/deacon or other parish staff member should help the couple in the selection of the readings and other texts of the liturgy.

Music

Music is often a very influential and important part of people’s lives both in and out of worship, which can make it a contentious subject in terms of planning. While the music for the Marriage liturgy is one of the places that afford the most options, at the same time there are some guidelines that need to be followed in selecting liturgical music.

A good description of the intention of music can be found in the recent U.S. bishops’ document on liturgical music:

¹ *Lectionary for Mass: Introduction*, 7.

“The role of music is to serve the needs of the Liturgy and not to dominate it, seek to entertain, or draw attention to itself or the musicians. However, there are instances when the praise and adoration of God leads to music taking on a far greater dimension. At other times, simplicity is the most appropriate response. The primary role of music in the Liturgy is to help the members of the gathered assembly to join themselves with the action of Christ and to give voice to the gift of faith.”²

The music used before or during the liturgy should be clearly identifiable as prayer by all present. In general, when deciding what music to use, here are some questions to consider:

- Is it a well-written, quality piece of music?
- Are the text and music in keeping with the nature and needs of the liturgy?
- Can the music be used to help the assembly to pray?
- Does it draw the assembly closer to the mysteries of Christ being celebrated?
- Is this particular piece of music appropriate for this use in this particular liturgy?

The music must express a Catholic view of love and Marriage. Many current popular songs on the radio may sing about love and romance, but this is often contrary to what the Church holds as true and beautiful regarding the love between a man and a woman. Secular love songs and “pop” ballads that have personal meaning to the couple are best played or sung at the reception.

Many “traditional” wedding songs have no foundation in the Catholic Marriage liturgy. For example, the traditional wedding march (“Here Comes the Bride”) has its origins in the opera. The scene in which this piece is used takes place not during the wedding processional but in the bridal chamber. This is the difficulty in using music not originally composed for use in the liturgy.

The music must also serve its proper purpose in its place in the liturgy. There is room for both a well-done musical solo and for full congregational pieces in the liturgy. However, solos should never take the place of those parts of the liturgy intended for the full assembly. The music must also be in accord with the liturgical season, as well as its placement in the liturgy.

The music may be led by a solitary cantor or by a full choir. More importantly, it should be done well. Often a couple would like to have a relative/friend sing or play as a way of having more participation. While the sentiment is well intentioned, poorly executed (or selected) music can often be more distracting to liturgy than no music at all. Please allow those responsible for liturgical music at the parish to be of service throughout the whole process and celebration.

The music should also be done live. There is no place for recorded music in the Catholic Marriage liturgy. Just as one would not think of having the priest play a recording of his homily or the readings proclaimed via CD, the role of the live, present human person is of the utmost importance in liturgical music. Liturgical ministry presumes two people – a person doing the ministering, and someone to whom they minister. CDs and mp3s are not ministers.

² *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship*, 125.

In short, the music for the Marriage liturgy in or out of Mass should follow the same guidelines for the music found in a parish's weekend Masses. To assemble an exhaustive list of appropriate music for the Marriage liturgy would be a monumental task. Either the priest/deacon assisting with the preparation or someone on the parish staff responsible for liturgical music should help the couple in making appropriate choices. Parishes should feel free to set their own guidelines and lists of suggested music to help guide couples.

Here is an outline of the places in the Marriage liturgies which may call for music:

- Prelude – Any music taking place before the start of the liturgy, be it merely prelude or accompanying specific movements (seating of the mothers, for example), should also stay away from the secular or popular music. The prayer is already beginning.
- Entrance Procession – This may take the form of a hymn/song, the sung antiphon for the day/celebration, or an appropriate instrumental piece. The instrumental piece may be followed by a song once all are in their places.
- Penitential Rite – The priest/deacon may wish to sing this to a simple tone. When celebrating with a diverse group, one must be selective with their options. At the same time, it is important to not sell the assembly short or think them unable to participate.
- *Gloria* – Depending on the day, the *Gloria* may be sung. If it is used, it is preferably sung.
- Responsorial Psalm – This is preferably sung.
- Gospel Acclamation and Greeting – The acclamation is preferably sung with an appropriate verse, but the whole acclamation may be omitted if not sung. The dialog greeting at the opening of the Gospel could be sung using a simple tone.
- Preparation of the Gifts – A song by the assembly, the choir, or a solo piece may be appropriate here. Instrumental music would also work, as would silence. Never underestimate the power of silence.
- Eucharistic Prayer – The opening dialog of the Prayer may be sung or said. The people's parts in the Prayer (Holy, Holy, Holy; Memorial Acclamation, Amen) are also preferably sung. The priest may sing the Eucharistic Prayer according to his own abilities.
- Lord's Prayer – This may be sung by the people, or it may be recited.
- Fraction Rite – The "Lamb of God" is ordinarily sung during the breaking of the consecrated bread. If it is not sung, it should be recited.
- Communion Procession – A congregational song or a mix of choir and assembly should accompany the Communion procession. Another song or reflective silence may follow Communion.
- Recessional – Instrumental music, a hymn or silence may accompany this procession.

Other Roles in the Liturgy

When the Church gathers to celebrate the liturgy, the different members fill the various roles and ministries needed. The same goes for a Marriage liturgy. At the same time, one should not make up roles for people to play in the liturgy in order to involve as many people as possible. Most of the roles and ministries found in the Marriage liturgy are the same as those at Sunday Mass.