

Marriage in the Catholic Church – What You Need to Know

“All the Christian virtues should flourish in the family, unity should thrive, and the example of its virtuous living should shine brightly. We earnestly pray God to prevent any damage to this valuable, beneficial, and necessary union. The Christian family is a sacred institution. If it totters, if the norms which the divine Redeemer laid down for it are rejected or ignored, then the very foundations of the state tremble; civil society stands betrayed and in peril. Everyone suffers.” Pope Saint John XXIII, Ad Petri Cathedram, 29 June 1959

To help Catholics who are resident in this Archdiocese we provide couples with the following information and instructions which will prove useful for planning their marriage in the Catholic Church.

What is marriage?

The Church understands that marriage is the establishment of a covenant between a man and a woman for the whole of their lives and is ordered to the well-being of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children. Marriage is clearly a natural human reality although, when a marriage is between two baptized persons, the Church also understands that Christ has raised it to the level of a Sacrament¹. So marriage is an intimate partnership of life and love in which the spouses, by their irrevocable personal consent, bring about a covenant which echoes God’s relationship with His people and Christ’s relationship with His Church².

Marriage: part of the natural order

We can understand the natural order as God’s plan for creation. Marriage is a part of the natural order and as such is not defined by the Church or by civil authorities. As a part of the natural order, marriage has been established by God. Consequently, the consent of a couple who marry is irrevocable since, from that moment, their union depends on God’s will and not on human will. This being the case we understand unity and indissolubility as essential properties of any marriage as God has designed it. Moreover, when a marriage is sacramental, these properties have a special seal and firmness³.

A second consequence of marriage being a part of the natural order is that every person enjoys the natural right to marry. This right is something which must be respected in the Church and states. However, since marriage is a societal institution which contributes to the common good, it is never a merely private matter that concerns only the spouses themselves. This is why the Church and civil authorities, whilst not defining what marriage is, have the right to regulate the way that it is contracted as well as its civil and ecclesial effects in the interest of the common good.

Marriage in the Catholic Church

Whilst the Church defers to the state for the merely civil effects of marriage, all marriages, whether they involve a Catholic or not, are subject to Divine Law. These are the properties and ends of marriage which God has written into nature: that marriage made by the mutual and free

¹ Can. 1055.

² Gaudium et Spes 48.

³ Can. 1056.

exchange of consent between a man and a woman, lasts until death, is for the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children.

Catholics, however, are subject not only to Divine Law but also to the Law of the Church or Canon Law if they wish to contract a valid marriage⁴. These stipulations are included in some of the practical considerations below:

Marriage in the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh

Useful information to help you plan your wedding correctly.

1. You must give at least 6 months notice of your intention to marry to your parish priest. The obligations of marriage are serious and the Church wishes to help you to prepare properly. At your initial meeting with the parish priest, he will determine firstly whether you are free or not to marry.
2. Your parish priest is responsible for preparing you for marriage⁵. This is also the case if you intend to marry outside your parish. If one party is not a Catholic, it is the parish priest in the place where the Catholic party lives who is responsible. Your parish priest, at his discretion, may make a special arrangement for another priest to do your marriage preparation.
3. It is the sole responsibility of the couple to organize the civil requirements for their wedding in accordance with Scots' Law (or the law of the country in which you plan to marry, if not in Scotland). To be married, you must have a valid 'schedule' from the local registry office. The priest will be unable to marry you without this schedule since this would be a criminal offence. It is also the couple's responsibility to make sure that the marriage is registered within three days of the wedding.
4. If you intend to have a wedding reception, do not book or pay deposits for venues until you have spoken to your parish priest and (if the intended venue of your wedding is not your parish church) the parish priest of the church in which you wish to be married. You should confirm permissions, availability of clergy and the church building before proceeding to make any other arrangements.
5. The normal place for a wedding is the parish church of the bride or groom⁶.
6. If you wish to be married outside of your parish, your parish priest must give permission for this⁷. You should not make any arrangements until he has given permission.
7. In this Archdiocese permission is not granted for marriages to take place in, for example, hotels, castles, convents, school chapels or similar places. There are no exceptions to this rule⁸. This is also the agreement between all the bishops of Scotland.

⁴ Canm. 1; 1059.

⁵ Can. 1063.

⁶ Can. 1115.

⁷ Can. 1115.

⁸ Cf. Archdiocesan Newsletter, 9 June 1997.

8. A Catholic who intends to marry someone who is not a Catholic must ask the Archbishop for a dispensation. The priest who is helping you to prepare for marriage will explain to you the conditions under which this is granted and help you to submit the request.
9. A Catholic who wishes to marry in the ceremonies of another Christian communion or another religion must ask the Archbishop for a dispensation. The priest who is helping you to prepare for marriage will help you to submit this request. Couples should be aware that this is only given for serious reasons and should not make any arrangements until the dispensation has been granted.
10. If you wish to have music at your wedding, consult with the parish priest to find out if there is a parish organist or musicians who are used regularly at the church. You should not arrange for musicians to come from outside of the parish until you have the permission of the parish priest.
11. The priest will help you to prepare for the celebration of your wedding. He will help you to choose hymns and readings. If you wish to produce an order of service, this should be approved by the priest before the final printing.
12. There are different types of nuptial celebration which have been approved by the bishops of Scotland. The priest who is preparing you will help you to decide which is the most suitable.
13. Please be aware that, if one of the spouses is not baptised, the wedding is not celebrated within the context of a Nuptial Mass.
14. It is the responsibility of the couple to obtain and supply certain documents during the time of preparation:
 - a. If you are a Catholic you should provide an extract from the baptismal register of the parish where you were baptised that is not older than six months. You should also have a signed declaration from your next of kin that states that you have not at any point attempted marriage in any type of civil or religious ceremony and that you are free to marry.
 - b. If you are baptised but not a Catholic you should provide a baptismal certificate from the church of your baptism. You should also have a signed declaration from your next of kin that states that you have not at any point attempted marriage in any type of civil or religious ceremony and that you are free to marry.
 - c. If you are not baptised you should have a signed declaration from your next of kin that states that you have not at any point attempted marriage in any type of civil or religious ceremony and that you are free to marry.
15. Often couples ask about fees: there is no charge to be married in the Church. However, couples should give consideration to the following:

- a. an offering to the priest: this is part of the priest's upkeep from the parish. When deciding how much this should be, perhaps consider how much you are spending on your celebrations in total. The priest's offering could be relative to this.
- b. an offering for the parish: this is particularly appropriate if you do not live, practice your faith or give to the weekly collection in the parish where you are being married. This helps to offset the cost of heating, lighting and maintenance of the church building.
- c. an offering for altar servers
- d. an offering for the organist/cantors/musicians: you should enquire how much this is as there is often a set fee. Normally it is around £60 but this can vary.

16. If you have any questions or concerns, the priest who is preparing you for marriage should be able to help you.

The Church rejoices in the fruitful love of men and women. Please be assured of the hard work and prayers of the clergy of the Archdiocese to support you as you journey towards your wedding day.