



# UNDERSTANDING THE PRIORITY OF MARRIAGE AS SACRAMENT

Bishop's Column ~ Apr. 2011 ~ by Bishop George Leo Thomas

Every spring, the pastors of the diocese encounter a sensitive pastoral challenge that frequently ends up on my desk.

Sometimes the issue is accompanied by a flood of emotions, expression of bitter disappointment, strident letters, tears and appeals for reconsideration.

One parent even suggested that the Church is in the business of alienating young adults through backward, hardline policies. "You'd better get with the times before you drive away all of the young people from the Church," one parent opined.

The issue is this: Can engaged couples celebrate their wedding at the family cabin, a hotel ballroom, a park lodge, the family farmhouse, a home chapel, a ski resort or the host of other splendid settings Montana offers?

The short answer is no.

In the Diocese of Helena, the proper venue for the celebration of marriage is the parish or mission church.

How did my predecessors, the Priests' Council, pastoral leaders and I arrive at this policy? Why has it been reaffirmed several times in recent years? What is the rationale for this longstanding pastoral practice in the Diocese of Helena?

## From Wedding to Marriage

In the Diocese of Helena, the priests, deacons and laity charged with the responsibility to prepare engaged couples focus first on quality preparation for marriage, and then on quality planning for the liturgical celebration of marriage. After all, the wedding is but for a day. Marriage is for life.

The months leading up to the wedding ceremony are intended to be a time for rich and prayerful preparation, an opportunity for "setting out into the deep." These should be days for deep spiritual discernment, and a time for setting a firm foundation for the years to come.

Sound marriage preparation includes a rich theology of marriage, a time for building communication skills, addressing tensions and differences and an opportunity to think deeply about such matters as the raising of children, the management of money, conflict resolution, relations with in-laws, religion, chastity, natural family planning and the host of other issues that will emerge in married life.

It also is a time for those cohabitating prior to marriage to restore their lives to the standard of the Gospel, especially through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

## **The Role of Faith**

The new Catechism of the Catholic Church states definitively that “marriage presupposes and demands faith.” At the same time, the leaders of the Church are well aware that couples sometimes are influenced more by secular customs, bridal magazines, destination wedding programs and societal pressures than by the rich spiritual meaning of the sacrament. The months prior to the wedding ceremony can provide the couple with an opportunity to deepen their relationship with the Church and welcome Christ anew into their hearts. This reordering of priorities gives secondary attention to venue, attire, receptions, wedding cakes and the host of other items that so consume time and resources.

The late Lawrence Boadt, a Paulist scholar, said it well when he wrote that the Church “encourages couples to develop their relationship with Christ in order to turn difficulties into opportunities of loving concern and reject any indulgent self-love as the basis of their union.” We would fall short in our leadership responsibilities if we allowed this encounter with Christ and the Church to be eclipsed by lesser values.

## **The Role of Liturgy**

As the time arrives to prepare for the wedding ceremony, the couple can discover the deep meaning of the wedding liturgy. The celebration of marriage between two Catholics normally takes place during Eucharistic

Liturgy, emphasizing the deep connection of all the sacraments with the paschal mystery of Christ. In the Eucharist, Christ unites Himself with the Church, His beloved bride.

The celebration of marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic usually follows a rite that does not include the Eucharistic Liturgy, in recognition of the traditions of the faith community of the non-Catholic. If the spouse is not baptized, the marriage ritual provides a specific rite acknowledging this reality.

In all Catholic marriage ceremonies, the Liturgy of the Word serves as a foundation for Christian marriage, and the music selected is an opportunity for sung prayer and praise. Liturgy done well enriches not only the couple, but helps the entire assembly prayerfully participate in the action of the Liturgy. Many couples in attendance at a well-celebrated and prayed Marriage Liturgy find their own hearts and commitment renewed as the couple marrying exchange consent before Christ and the Church.

The spirit of the liturgical celebration continues in the reception, which can properly be held in the many beautiful settings described above.

## **Assuming Their Place in the Church**

Marriage has been described as a personal relationship with public significance. While it is true that the wedding ceremony itself often draws primarily family and intimate friends, it

also is a public celebration for the entire Church. Marriage is a state of life within the Church and helps the married couple assume their rightful role as baptized members of the assembly. In due season, the Church will have a special responsibility to assist younger couples as parents in their new role as teachers of the faith committed to introducing their children to the life of the Church.

### **Conclusion**

When an engaged couple approaches the priest or deacon requesting that their wedding be celebrated in a non-Church venue, I ask the priest or deacon to say no grace-fully, to open wide the doors of the Church and lead the engaged couple into a spirit-filled adventure that will deepen their own relationship with Christ and the whole Church. In short, I ask our clergy and lay leaders to put out the red carpet and help turn tears into joy.

I also challenge the engaged couple and their families to seek a deeper understanding of the special nature of the commitment they are making and the role of the Church witnessing that commitment in the sacred space of their parish or mission church.

I want you to know that we will begin a renewal of the quality and consistency of marriage preparation across the whole diocese, marked by the quality of preparation, and a deepened understanding of marriage that will help create a firm foundation that will last a lifetime.

