

THE ROMAN RITE OF MARRIAGE

In March 1969 the Congregation for Divine Worship issued a new Order for the Celebration of Marriage.¹ It is a product of the liturgical reform initiated by the Second Vatican Council. The old rite as set forth in the Ritual and Missal was found in many respects to be inadequate. The Constitution *De Sacra Liturgia* (art. 77) laid down as a principle of reform: 'The marriage rite now found in the Roman Ritual is to be revised and enriched in such a way that the grace of the sacrament is more clearly signified and the duties of the spouses taught.'

This Order of Marriage is proposed as a model rather than as a standard, universally-binding text. The era of rigid uniformity in the Roman rite came to an end with Vatican II. Indeed, even in the centuries following the Council of Trent, Roman authority recognized the legitimacy of local tradition in the marriage rite. The new Order is not intended to do away with existing customs but to provide the substance and structure of national and regional rituals. It is a *rituel-type* which may be freely adapted to meet cultural and pastoral needs. The version this writer has at hand is that approved by the Irish hierarchy for use in this country. While remaining very close to the original, it has a distinctive character of its own.²

The new Order is not a complete departure from that so long in use in the Roman church. Familiar features, such as the blessing and giving of the ring, re-appear, so that one's first impression is that of a re-arrangement of parts rather than a new composition. On closer inspection, however, there appear important changes in structure and content. First, with regard to structure the marriage rite now normally takes place *within* the celebration of the eucharist: marriage and mass are no longer simply juxtaposed but form one coherent whole. Then with regard to content, a considerable enrichment has been achieved. There is now an impressive ensemble of texts, both scriptural and ecclesiastical, with great freedom of choice, which together amount to a very full catechesis of Christian marriage.

Commentary on the Rite

The ceremony may be divided into the following parts:

- (i) Entrance rite and greeting.
- (ii) Ministry of the Word (three readings) includes homily.

- (iii) The rite of marriage itself which includes:—
 - (a) introductory address;
 - (b) interrogation;
 - (c) declaration of consent;
 - (d) blessing and giving of ring.
- (iv) Ministry of Eucharist with solemn nuptial blessing.

Entrance Rite

The priest, standing either at the church door or at entrance to the sanctuary, awaits the bride and groom and greets them on arrival. An entrance hymn may be sung. Mass begins as usual with the act of penance and other prayers leading up to the readings.

Ministry of the Word

The new Roman Lectionary provides a wide selection of readings for the occasion. These are intended to 'show the importance of Christian marriage in the history of salvation and the duties and responsibility of the couple in caring for the holiness of their children' (Introduction to the *Ordo*, No. 6). The readings provide abundant material for the homily: examples of marital fidelity in the Old Testament (e.g. Isaac and Rebekah), The Covenant relationship as exemplar of the marriage covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), the holiness of the body and the proper use of sexuality (I Cor. 6:13-20), charity as the consummation of human love (I Cor. 12:31-13:8), the radiance of Christian love (I Jn. 3:18-24). All in all, these texts provide subject-matter for a full catechesis of Christian marriage and of the true meaning of love in its various forms of expression and at its various levels. After the reading of the gospel the priest will expound in his homily the mystery of Christian marriage, the dignity of conjugal love, the grace of the sacrament and the duties of the spouses.

The Marriage Rite

The essence of the marriage rite consists in the formal exchange of consent between the man and woman which the priest asks for and receives. In the past the role of the contracting partners was a rather passive one. It consisted in repeating phrase by phrase the formula of consent which the priest read out for them. Notwithstanding the generally held theological view that the partners were themselves the 'ministers of the sacrament', to all appearances it was the priest who ministered the sacrament. (Catholics still speak of having been 'married' by such and such a priest.) Now it is apparent that the partners themselves minister the sacrament, or to put it more

correctly perhaps, that they themselves *constitute* the sacrament. The priest appears as the official witness of the Church and it is he who blesses the union.

(a) *Introductory Address*. The priest states briefly, in his own words or following a proposed text, the meaning of the sacrament and the duties it imposes. This corresponds to the Declaration on the Meaning and Purpose of Marriage as found in the Church of Scotland Order.³

(b) *Interrogation*. The priest then questions the partners on their intentions. Have they decided of their own free will to marry? Do they intend to love and honour each other always? Are they prepared to accept the children which God may send them and to give them a good Christian upbringing?

(c) *Declaration of Consent*. The priest now invites the partners to declare their consent. They join their right hands. The declaration of consent is then spoken in turn by each of them. They accept each other according to the time-honoured formula 'for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part'. It is interesting that this formula, traditional in English-speaking countries, has found its way into the Roman *Ordo Matrimonii*. In its Latin form it has been somewhat adapted: the words 'for richer, for poorer' have been omitted and the concluding phrase 'till death do us part' has been softened to 'omnibus diebus vitae meae'. The formula figures in the Church of Scotland Order as an accompaniment to the giving of the ring.

The priest, having witnessed the mutual exchange of consent, now declares the couple to be validly married with the words: 'What God joins together man must not separate. May the Lord confirm the consent you have given and enrich you with his blessings.' This formula is significantly different from that which it has replaced and which began 'I join you in holy matrimony . . .'. There is now no question of a sacramental formula spoken by the priest such as that used in baptism. What we have is a simple declaration of marriage such as that found in the Church of Scotland Order which also repeats the Lord's solemn words, 'Those whom God hath joined together let not man put asunder'.

(d) *Blessing and Giving of the Ring*. The giving of a ring by the bridegroom to his spouse is a traditional feature of the marriage rite. It is pre-Christian in origin, witnessed to in ancient Rome as part of the ceremony of engagement. It is an effective symbol of the unity and permanence of married life. With us there is a special blessing of the ring. There are three blessings from which to choose: each of them explains the ring as a symbol of mutual fidelity and love.

Hitherto, according to the old Roman Ritual, it was the bridegroom alone who gave a ring, placing it on the third finger of the

bride's left hand. Now a reciprocal giving of rings is envisaged; the bride may also give a ring to her husband in the same manner and with the same formula: 'Wear this ring as a sign of our love and fidelity. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' It had already been the custom in Germany and elsewhere to employ two rings in the ceremony, and now the Roman Congregation has seen fit to extend this local practice. It should help to dispel the impression that the nuptial rite is weighed all in favour of the male partner. Clearly rights and obligations must be shared out equally on both sides.

Here in Ireland it has been the custom for the bridegroom to place some coins in the hand of his bride after he has given her the ring, symbolizing his intention to provide for all her material and financial needs. While there is no mention of this in the official Order, the custom has been retained in the Irish version of the rite. The bridegroom, in making this token gift of money, says: 'I give you this gold and silver, tokens of all I possess.' Certainly this little rite has its value, even if it strikes a rather archaic note in an age when so many young housewives must work to supplement their husbands' incomes!

General intercessions conclude this part of the ceremony. Prayers for the church and world are followed by petitions of a more immediate and personal kind – for the newly-weds themselves, for their parents and families and for the congregation. While a proposed formula is given, there is considerable scope for improvising these 'prayers of the faithful'.

(iv) *Ministry of Eucharist with Solemn Nuptial Blessing*

The ministry of the word and marriage rite proper lead quite naturally into the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Here as elsewhere the newly-weds have a place of honour. Rubrical directives aim at achieving their fullest participation in the eucharistic celebration and communion. It is they who present to the priest-celebrant the bread and wine to be consecrated at the mass and received back in communion. To mark the solemnity of this first mass of their married life they may receive the sacrament of the Lord's body and blood under both forms. (Communion from the chalice is still with us a privilege reserved for special and solemn occasions.)

It has from ancient times been the tradition of the Roman church to associate marriage with the eucharist. Current legislation seeks to reinforce this traditional link while at the same time allowing pastors on occasion to omit the celebration of mass for a just cause.⁴ In the texts of the new Order we see theological reflection at work expounding the relationship of the two sacraments and pointing out

its consequences. What these liturgical texts have to say may be synthesized as follows. The eucharist is both the sign and the source of Christian unity and love. It is from this source that married couples must draw if their love is to deepen and mature and attain spiritual fulness. If it is to withstand the stress and strain of life together, it must show itself a self-sacrificing love such as the love Christ showed his Church. The covenant which Christ made on our behalf with the Father and sealed with his blood is reflected in the marriage covenant. At every celebration of the eucharist that covenant is recalled and renewed, and the faithful, associating themselves with it, are drawn into the love of Christ; for those joined in matrimony each mass is an occasion for them to renew their marriage vows. Finally, this love which Christ communicates to us through the sacrament is an *outgoing* love. Married couples must be witnesses to the loving presence of Christ in the world by their mutual fidelity, the care they bestow on their children and by a concern for the less fortunate of their fellow-men which has something of the universal character of Christ's love.

The Eucharistic Prayer

The God-given institution of marriage provides the eucharistic prayer with its special motif of thanksgiving. The Church's concern for the holiness and happiness of the partners finds a resonance at the centre of the eucharistic liturgy. This is especially noticeable in the old Roman Canon (now known as Eucharistic Prayer 1) which has a special *Hanc igitur*: 'Father, accept this offering from your whole family and from (John) and (Mary) for whom we now pray. You have brought them to their wedding day: grant them the gift of children and a long and happy life together.' A choice of three special prefaces is provided. The first formula praises God for the gift of fecundity, both natural and spiritual, which he has bestowed on the world through marriage. The second assimilates the marriage covenant with God's covenant with his people. According to the third formula it is God who consecrates human love in the sacrament of marriage; his love is mirrored forth in the love of husband and wife.

The Nuptial Blessing

Having said the Lord's prayer, and omitting the prayer known as the 'embolism', the priest now invites the congregation to join him in prayer for the newly-weds. After some moments of silent prayer he extends his hands and begins the solemn prayer of blessing.

We have now reached a climactic moment in the celebration. The nuptial blessing belongs to the oldest stratum of the marriage liturgy,

being attested in the early Roman sacramentaries. As a literary prayer-genre it may be classed with the great prayers of blessing or consecration such as those spoken at ordinations. A similar prayer accompanied the rite for the consecration of virgins: in both instances there was the giving of a veil by the bishop – the virgin's veil or the married woman's veil.

Now the formula in use until the appearance of the new Order was substantially that of the Gregorian Sacramentary. It deserved to be retained both on account of its antiquity and theological depth. This posed a problem for the revision committee. While the blessing presented a splendid biblical vision of marriage, it spoke almost exclusively of the bride. There was clearly an imbalance here. On the other hand, some liturgical purists maintained that this was in keeping with the character of the ancient Roman liturgy according to which it was the bride who was singled out for the Church's special blessing: no doubt this was because she was seen as a symbol of the Church, the Bride of Christ. And so a kind of compromise was arrived at: in its adapted form the bride is still indeed in the foreground but the husband too is included in the church's blessing and exhortation.

Briefly, the nuptial blessing describes the fruitfulness of marriage as an endowment of God, deriving from his blessing at creation. It then shows how marriage symbolizes the bond of love between Christ and his Church. It implores God to bestow on the bride all the graces of her new state, especially that of fidelity, so that she may present a true image of the Church. The husband, for his part, must trust, honour and love his wife as an equal partner of grace.

Two new blessings have been introduced as alternative formulas. One of these evokes the theme of the Covenant. The marriage union and conjugal love is the living symbol of God's covenant with his people. In its concluding part the prayer requests that God may bestow not only physical fecundity but also spiritual fecundity on the partners: that they may mediate to one another the gifts of divine love; that from their loving union a true home may be formed in which their offspring will be formed in the spirit of Christ and his gospel. A third formula of blessing is of a simpler kind. It gives an intimation of the inevitable stresses and strains of married life and it prays that God may be with these partners both in times of joy and of sorrow to guide and strengthen them.

It should be noted that the position of the nuptial blessing in close proximity to the Communion of the Mass gives a marked eucharistic character to this prayer. This is intentional and is underlined by a direct reference in the introductory formula to the sacrament of Christ's body and blood which perfects and puts the seal to married love.

The Communion

Among the preparatory rites of communion is the kiss of peace. What had been reserved to the clergy and ministers has now been restored, at least in principle, to the whole congregation, as in ancient times. In the marriage rite a rubric directs: 'At the words Let us offer each other the sign of peace, the married couple and all present show their peace and love for one another in an appropriate way.' Among the relatives and friends this may take the form of a simple handshake; between the newly-weds it can be a quite natural and spontaneous expression of their love.

As already mentioned, on the occasion of their nuptial mass bridegroom and bride may receive under both species. If a second priest or deacon is present, he may assist the celebrant by administering the chalice to each partner with the formula 'The blood of Christ', to which they reply Amen. They thus share more fully in the eucharistic mystery and enter more deeply into the covenant sealed once for all in the blood of Christ and renewed at each mass. During the distribution of communion the antiphon (recited or sung) is taken from Ephes. 5:25, 27: 'Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might present to himself a bride holy and without blemish.'

There is a choice of three postcommunion prayers. The first makes allusion to the sacrament received under its two forms: 'As you have made (John) and (Mary) one in this sacrament of marriage and in the sharing of the one bread and the one cup, so make them now one in love for each other.' The eucharist is the sign of unity and love; it sustains and constantly renews conjugal love.

Concluding Blessing

The nuptial mass is endowed with a solemn final blessing which resembles the type of blessing used in the Old Spanish and Gallican liturgies: that is, it is made up of successive phrases to which the people respond Amen. The first formula is especially fine and would seem to merit quotation here. It will be noted that the first three phrases refer to the married couple and the final blessing englobes the whole assembly. It runs:

May God, the eternal Father, keep you steadfast in your love.

R/ Amen.

May you have children to bless you,
friends to console you,
and may you live in peace with all men.

R/ Amen

May you be witnesses among men to the love of God.

May the suffering and the poor find you generous
and welcome you one day into our Father's kingdom.

R7 Amen

May the peace of Christ dwell in your home.

May the angels of God protect it,

and may the holy family of Nazareth be its model and inspiration.

R7 Amen

And may almighty God bless you all,

the Father, and the Son, † and the Holy Spirit.

R7 Amen

NOTES

1. *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium* (editio typica), Vatican Press, 1969. In preparing this article I have made full use of a commentary by Rev. Pierre-Marie Gy: 'Le nouveau rituel romain du mariage' in *La Maison-Dieu*, 99 (1969), pp. 124-43. Father Gy, a French Dominican, was leader of the study-group which drew up the new marriage ritual.
2. The publishers G. Chapman (Ireland) Ltd. have brought out an attractive edition in English and Gaelic: *The Celebration of Marriage – Gnás an Phósta*. The text is the copyright of the Catholic Communications Institute of Ireland.
3. *Marriage and the Church* (Revised Edition), issued by the General Assembly's Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion (1971).
4. In the case of a marriage between a Roman Catholic and a Christian of another Church, the form of celebration preferred is that without mass; the reason being that this raises the problem of inter-communion – under present legislation the non-Catholic partner could not communicate at the nuptial mass. (See *Praenotanda* to the new Order, No. 8.)

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