



By Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers

Deacons and the Weddings Outside of Mass

When a deacon may celebrate the marriage rite

I recently received an email from a brother deacon lamenting that, in his experience with marriages outside of Mass, deacons are able to receive the wedding vows and preach, but are prohibited by pastors from offering the nuptial blessing. Ideally, the order of marriage should be celebrated during Mass where a priest presides at both sacraments. However, circumstances may arise where Mass is not celebrated during a wedding. For example, in a situation in which a Catholic marries a baptized non-Catholic, a catechumen, or someone who is not a Christian — all conditions where at least one of the spouses cannot receive the Eucharist (canonical exceptions excluded) — a pastoral decision may be made not to have the wedding during Mass.

In such cases, a deacon, with faculties granted by his bishop and with the permission of the pastor, may preside at the wedding.

The rubrics found in The Order of Celebrating Matrimony makes this clear: “It also pertains to the deacon ... to preside at the celebration of the sacrament, without omitting the nuptial blessing” (No. 24). This makes sense, especially if the deacon is the one preparing the engaged couple for marriage and giving the homily at the wedding. Additionally, even though Mass is not said, holy Communion may still be distributed (cf. No. 108).

In 20 years of serving as a deacon, I have only presided at two weddings. The first was for a couple I had known since they were teenagers and whom I prepared for marriage. The pastor was brand new and did not know the couple at all. The Sacrament of Matrimony occurred within Mass, but Father allowed me to give the homily and receive the vows.

The second was for a couple who went through both the RCIA and marriage preparation programs I taught at the parish. Prior to attending RCIA, the woman was away from the Church for 30 years and her fiancé was an atheist. Since the vast majority of

those attending the wedding could not receive holy Communion (some had never been inside of a church before!) and since the pastor would be away, Father decided to have me preside at their wedding outside of Mass.

In the Order of Celebrating Matrimony without Mass, the rubrics assume the priest is still the main celebrant but that the sacrament may be celebrated “even by a deacon” (No. 79) wearing a dalmatic (cf. Nos. 80 and 83).

This begs the question: If there is no Mass during the wedding, shouldn't the priest allow the deacon to preside? Bishops and priests are shepherds of the Church and, as such, are called to lead the sheep entrusted to their care into the heart of Christ's love and mercy. Ordained deacons, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, assist and support the shepherds in their work.

Recently, a Vatican instruction on “the pastoral conversion of the parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church” reiterated that “there are many ecclesial tasks ... that can be entrusted to a deacon, namely, all those that do not involve the full care of souls” (No. 81). Presiding at marriages where Mass is not celebrated is certainly among these. Deacons bring a wealth of personal experience and practical knowledge about marriage and family life that can greatly benefit married couples.

Celebrating matrimony outside of Mass provides an opportunity for priests to be bold and creative in utilizing deacons, while observing their proper rank among the hierarchy, with the goal of bringing souls to Christ by effectively witnessing to the Gospel through the covenant of marriage that, as St. Paul says in Ephesians, symbolizes the relationship between Christ and his Church (cf. Eph 5:25). **TD**

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