



**RITE OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE  
LITURGICAL AND CATECHETICAL GUIDELINE**  
Diocese of Great Falls-Billings

**I. General introduction:**

One of the first rites to be revised after Vatican II was the *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium* (*Order of Celebrating Matrimony*). The first edition was issued in Latin on March 19, 1969 and the English translation has been in effect since November 28, 1971 in the United States. A revised Latin edition was issued in late 1990. The International Committee on English in the Liturgy has done a provisional translation and a Task Force has suggested adaptations for the United States. However, the text has been put on the back burner in light of more pressing translation needs and is not yet approved for use.

Despite the above and pending possible changes in the near [we hope] future, the following guidelines are given based on the first English edition from 1971.

The introduction to the Rite is only eighteen paragraphs and contains many valuable insights into the Catholic beliefs concerning marriage. It may be a good idea for the pastor and/or the person in charge of preparing couples for marriage to read this over several times during the year to absorb the spirit and values they portray.

Sacramental theology is sometimes not understood or incorporated into the lives of our Catholic people. A goodly amount of time during the preparation may be needed to help both the Catholic and/or non-Catholic party to understand what is meant by sacrament, the meaning of an encounter with Christ in the sacraments and the central place sacraments, especially the Eucharistic liturgy, hold in our lives. Without this understanding of sacraments it is hard to see how anyone is able to enter a marriage covenant with responsibility for all it entails. The understanding of marriage as a sacrament, as well as the commitment to that understanding, would seem essential in order to make an informed decision regarding marriage.

Helping the couple understand that they confer the sacrament upon one another and that the Church is there as witness is a major point. Assisting them to see the celebration as important for the whole community and to consider making it a public (all invited) celebration, perhaps even on Sunday, may deepen their understanding. We must help them to view sacraments as belonging to the church (the people of God) and not to ourselves. The community is there to support them, not just to enhance the celebration. They promise by their presence a commitment to help make the marriage grow and last.

Often marriage preparation programs concentrate on communication, financial matters, the sharing of family responsibilities and the raising of children. All this is important, but is superseded by the need to understand the core of marriage as a covenant between the couple themselves and God. It is bigger than the two of them. Their preparation for



**RITE OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE**  
**LITURGICAL AND CATECHETICAL GUIDELINE**  
Diocese of Great Falls-Billings

the liturgy of celebrating the marriage is an opportunity to deepen this understanding by reflection on the options for readings, prayers and blessings. Even the manner of the entrance procession models the understanding of the sacrament in the life of the church.

## **II. Canonical requirements:**

There are over one hundred canons relating to Marriage addressing various perspectives of validity, preparation and dissolution. Canons relating specifically to the ritual celebration of the Sacrament itself are few. Numbers 1066-72 regard matters of licity, validity, and age, plus those celebrations requiring special permission of the Bishop.

The Canons referring directly to the celebration of marriage and the form it is to take are # 1108 – 1123. Mixed marriages are addressed in canons # 1124 – 1129.

### **A. Minister of marriage**

Regarding the ordinary and valid minister to witness the vows in the name of the Church, the following canons are explicit.

#### **Canon 1108 --**

§.1 *Only those marriages are valid which are contracted before the local ordinary, pastor, or a priest or deacon delegated by either of them, who assist, and before two witnesses according to the rules expressed in the following canons and without prejudice to the exceptions mentioned in canon. 144, 1112.1, 1116 and 1127.1 and 1127.2.*

§.2 *The person who assists at a marriage is understood to be only that person who is present, asks for the manifestation of the consent of the contracting parties, and receives it in the name of the Church.*

**Canon 1109 --** *Unless the local ordinary and pastor have been excommunicated, interdicted, or suspended from office or declared such through a sentence or decree, by virtue of their office and within the confines of their territory they assist validly at the marriages not only of their subjects but also of those who are not their subjects provided that one of them is of the Latin rite.*

**Canon 1110 --** *By virtue of office, a personal ordinary and a personal pastor assist validly only at marriages where at least one of the parties is a subject within the confines of their jurisdiction.*



**RITE OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE  
LITURGICAL AND CATECHETICAL GUIDELINE**  
Diocese of Great Falls-Billings

**Canon 1111§1.** *As long as they hold office validly, the local ordinary and the pastor can delegate to priests and deacons the faculty, even a general one, of assisting at marriages within the limits of their territory.*

§2. *To be valid, the delegation of the faculty to assist at marriages must be given to specific persons expressly. If it concerns special delegation, it must be given for a specific marriage; if it concerns general delegation, it must be given in writing.*

**Canon 1112§1.** *Where there is a lack of priests and deacons, the diocesan bishop can delegate lay persons to assist at marriages, with the previous favorable vote of the conference of bishops and after he has obtained the permission of the Holy See.*

§2. *A suitable lay person is to be selected, who is capable of giving instruction to those preparing to be married and able to perform the matrimonial liturgy properly.*

**Canon 1113 --** *Before special delegation is granted, all those things which the law has established to prove free status are to be fulfilled.*

**Canon 1114 --** *The person assisting at marriage acts illicitly unless the person has made certain of the free status of the contracting parties according to the norm of law and, if possible, of the permission of the pastor whenever the person assists in virtue of general delegation.*

**Canon 1116§1.** *If a person competent to assist according to the norm of law cannot be present or approached without grave inconvenience, those who intend to enter into a true marriage can contract it validly and licitly before witnesses only:*

1° *in danger of death;*

2° *outside the danger of death provided that it is prudently foreseen that the situation will continue for a month.*

§2. *In either case, if some other priest or deacon who can be present is available, he must be called and be present at the celebration of the marriage together with the witnesses, without prejudice to the validity of the marriage before witnesses only.*

**Canon 1117 --** *The form established above must be observed if at least one of the parties contracting marriage was baptized in the Catholic Church or received into it and has not defected from it by a formal act, without prejudice to the prescripts of can.*

1127.2

## **B. Place of Marriage and its ritual**

The place of the celebration of Marriage is usually in the parish of the place where one or both of the spouses live. The Diocese of Great Falls-Billings directs that it be celebrated in the parish worship space, that is, in the church building.



**RITE OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE  
LITURGICAL AND CATECHETICAL GUIDELINE**  
Diocese of Great Falls-Billings

**Canon 1115 --** *Marriages are to be celebrated in a parish where either of the contracting parties has a domicile, quasi-domicile, or month-long residence or, if it concerns transients, in the parish where they actually reside. With the permission of the proper ordinary or proper pastor, marriages can be celebrated elsewhere.*

In the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, a Catholic is to be considered to have a domicile in a parish in which they are registered, even if they reside outside the parish boundaries.

**Canon 1118§1.** *A marriage between Catholics or between a Catholic party and a non-Catholic baptized party is to be celebrated in a parish. It can be celebrated in another church or oratory with the permission of the local ordinary or pastor.*

§2. *The local ordinary can permit a marriage to be celebrated in another suitable place.*

§3. *A marriage between a Catholic party and a non-baptized party can be celebrated in a church or in another suitable place.*

The ritual of celebrating a marriage was prepared after Vatican II and surmises that national conferences of bishops will adapt it to the peoples and customs of their particular geographic region. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has not yet completed the work of adaptation.

**Canon 1119 --** *Outside the case of necessity, the rites prescribed in the liturgical books approved by the Church or received by legitimate customs are to be observed in the celebration of a marriage.*

**Canon 1120 --** *The conference of bishops can produce its own rite of marriage, to be reviewed by the Holy See, in keeping with the usages of places and peoples which are adapted to the Christian spirit; nevertheless, the law remains in effect that the person who assists at the marriage is present, asks for the manifestation of consent of the contracting parties, and receives it.*

### **C. Registration of the marriage**

It is of utmost importance that the registration of Marriage be completed as soon as possible after the celebration. This is a matter of justice to the couple who may need the proof of Marriage in the future and also to the Church who must safeguard the sanctity of Marriage by carefully ascertaining whether or not a person is free to marry. This record is kept in the parish of baptism of each Catholic spouse as well as in the parish of the celebration if these are different places. The registration is also required at the time of a convalidation as noted in canon 1123.



**RITE OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE  
LITURGICAL AND CATECHETICAL GUIDELINE**  
Diocese of Great Falls-Billings

**Canon 1121§1.** *After a marriage has been celebrated, the pastor of the place of the celebration or the person who takes his place, even if neither assisted at the marriage, is to note as soon as possible in the marriage register the names of the spouses, the person who assisted, and the witnesses, and the place and date of the celebration of the marriage according to the method prescribed by the conference of bishops or the diocesan bishop.*

§2. *Whenever a marriage is contracted according to the norm of ca. 1116, a priest or deacon, if he was present at the celebration, or otherwise the witnesses in solidum with the contracting parties are bound to inform as soon as possible the pastor or local ordinary about the marriage entered into.*

§3. *For a marriage contracted with a dispensation from canonical form, the local ordinary who granted the dispensation is to take care that the dispensation and celebration are inscribed in the marriage registers of both the curia and the proper parish of the Catholic party whose pastor conducted the investigation about the marriage celebrated and also to indicate the place of the celebration and the public form observed.*

**Canon 1122§1.** *The contracted marriage is to be noted also in the baptismal registers in which the baptism of the spouses has been recorded.*

§2. *If a spouse did not contract marriage in the parish in which the person was baptized the pastor of the place of the celebration is to send notice of the marriage which has been entered into as soon as possible to the pastor of the place of the conferral of baptism.*

**Canon 1123 --** *Whenever a marriage is either convalidated in the external forum, declared null, or legitimately dissolved other than by death, the pastor of the place of the celebration of the marriage must be informed so that a notation is properly made in the marriage and baptismal registers.*

#### **D. Mixed Marriages**

Canons regulating Mixed Marriages are the following.

**Canon 1124 --** *Without express permission of the competent authority, a marriage is prohibited between two baptized persons of whom one is baptized in the Catholic Church or received into it after baptism and has not defected from it by a formal act and the other of whom is enrolled in a Church or ecclesial community not in full communion with the Catholic Church.*

**Canon 1125 --** *The local ordinary can grant a permission of this kind if there is a just and reasonable cause. He is not to grant it unless the following conditions have been fulfilled:*



**RITE OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE  
LITURGICAL AND CATECHETICAL GUIDELINE**  
Diocese of Great Falls-Billings

- 1° *the Catholic party is to declare that he or she is prepared to remove dangers of defecting from the faith and is to make a sincere promise to do all in his or her power so that all offspring are baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church;*
- 2° *the other party is to be informed at an appropriate time about the promises which the Catholic party is to make, in such a way that it is certain that he or she is truly aware of the promise and obligation of the Catholic party;*
- 3° *both parties are to be instructed about the purposes and essential properties of marriage which neither of the contracting parties is to exclude.*

**Canon 1126 --** *It is for the conference of bishops to establish the method in which these declarations and promises, which are always required, must be made and to define the manner in which they are to be established in the external forum and the non-Catholic party informed about them.*

**Canon 1127§1.** *The prescripts of can. 1108 are to be observed for the form to be used in a mixed marriage. Nevertheless, if a Catholic party contracts marriage with a non-Catholic party of an Eastern rite, the canonical form of the celebration must be observed for licity only; for validity, however, the presence of a sacred minister is required and the other requirements of law are to be observed.*

§2. *If grave difficulties hinder the observance of canonical form, the local ordinary of the Catholic party has the right of dispensing from the form in individual cases, after having consulted the ordinary of the place in which the marriage celebrated and with some public form of celebration for validity. It is for the conference of bishops to establish norms by which the aforementioned dispensation is to be granted in a uniform manner.*

§3. *It is forbidden to have another religious celebration of the same marriage to give or renew matrimonial consent before or after the canonical celebration according to the norm of §1. Likewise, there is not to be a religious celebration in which the Catholic who is assisting and a non-Catholic minister together, using their own rites, ask for the consent of the parties.*

### **III. Catechetical and Liturgical preparation:**

The sessions devoted to the preparation for the ceremony of the ritual of Marriage are a key time to address catechesis on the sacrament. Most of the other type of preparation for Marriage is addressed in *Marriage Policy* Diocese of Great Falls-Billings (visit [www.dioceseofgfb.org](http://www.dioceseofgfb.org)). The catechetical preparation can be well done by using the actual Marriage ritual, reflecting on the introductory paragraphs and drawing out the couples understanding of what is being conveyed. Reading of the prayers, choices of





**RITE OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE  
LITURGICAL AND CATECHETICAL GUIDELINE**  
Diocese of Great Falls-Billings

readings and blessings offer opportunities to expand on Church teaching regarding marriage as well as how we gain our insights from the words of Scripture.

Each parish needs to address the specific guidelines they wish to put forth for their people. These will reflect:

- The parish attitude toward marriage
- The affirmation of the sacrament
- A willingness to help the new couple journey through their new life with a promise to assist them in the years ahead as they begin building a family
  
- The expectations for attending classes
- Presenting the documentation required
- Arrangements with the parish ministers need to be spelled out and with whom.

They also need to address the more mundane issues of:

- Rehearsal
- Seating arrangements
- Wedding party placement – determined by the worship space
- Music resources
- Payment of ministers
- Fees for hall use
- Stipends
- Other matters that require attention before the day of the celebration

The actual preparation of the Marriage liturgy or ritual can be facilitated by talking with the couple about the purpose of celebrating publicly within the community, the value of choosing the readings and prayers, the importance of selecting liturgical ministers from among their family, and members of the community. Cooperation with the parish personnel, hired or volunteer (liturgist, music director, marriage coordinator, etc.) is essential. They need to meet the couple early on and clarify the type of help they provide and any expectations they have of the preparation process, as well as timelines for it.

Taking the time upfront to explore the couples understanding of sacrament, of community and public worship, will alleviate undue stress later on in the process. Clarifying the Church's expectations of participation is also important. For example, explaining that the entrance procession is a liturgical act which has as its purpose gathering the diverse assembly into a community ready to celebrate together. Therefore, the ministers and presider lead the procession and the couple may be accompanied by their parents and a few attendants. The music needs to reflect the idea of gathering, or if it is instrumental it needs to reflect a respectful, joyful and serious entrance into the celebration. We must help them to avoid the trap of adopting the latest entertainment world fads and music.



**RITE OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE  
LITURGICAL AND CATECHETICAL GUIDELINE**  
Diocese of Great Falls-Billings

It is a day to join in prayer with their family and friends as they embark on a new and wonderful journey together.

In thinking of the placement of the wedding party, couples need to realize that they are a part of the assembly. It is important for them to see and be seen by the members of the praying community. Having backs to the assembly would counter that focus. Any additions to the ritual, such as local customs or traditions need to be clarified. It is helpful to ask the “why” questions, to help the couple see what is appropriate and what is not in terms of a liturgical celebration.

When mixed marriages are involved, care is needed to lead the couple to a decision regarding Mass or a Service of the Word and to address the question of reception of Communion at the celebration.

The ritual is outlined below according to three possible celebrations. The numbers in parentheses indicate the options given in the ritual. Going through the possibilities at one of the preparation sessions could be a prayerful and moving experience for all. It will help to move beyond the legalities and practicalities of preparation to a place of resting in the presence of God, knowing that the grace needed for the future is freely given.

To assist the couple to prepare for their celebration of Marriage there are dozens of helps available on the market. Some are quite good and the Office of Worship will be happy to make some recommendations.

The Pastors may also wish to **discuss guidelines with other parishes in the diocese.** There are very good models available and perhaps you can address common expectations, especially in parishes closely associated with one another. This type of cooperation among parishes will aid the couple in seeing the celebration as a Church event rather than a strictly personal event to be negotiated on a local level.

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By Bishop Michael W. Warfel  
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