



Sacraments 19/35: Essentials of the Rite of Matrimony

The essentials of the ritual of a Sacrament are the basic matter and form necessary so that the Sacrament is given validly. In Matrimony, the essential Matter is one single man and one single female. This man has a natural love for this woman, and this woman has a natural love for this man. They want the help of God to join them in a permanent bond assisted by grace. When I say “single,” it means that the person wanting to be married is not already bound to another in a previous marriage (without an annulment), they were not previously a priest or nun (without a dispensation), that they are acting out of their own free will, that they are free from any force or fear (already pregnant, old maid, parental force), and that there are no future conditions (as long as you are pretty). These are all possibilities for a future annulment. The most often used basis for annulment in the US is “lack of due discretion”: “I had no sense of forever” or “I ignored all of the red flags.”

The Form of the ritual at its most essential is the Vows that the man and woman pronounce to each other. Rings help to understand the permanency of these vows, but are not the essential aspect. The Form that must be followed in the Catholic Church is: 1) priest or deacon as a witness, 2) physically inside a Catholic Church, 3) Vows proclaimed as written, 4) 2 witnesses. If any of these are missing from the ritual, we would call it a “Lack of Form” and this would be grounds for an annulment.

1. The ministers (Who can perform?) of the Sacrament of Matrimony are the bride and the groom. They give the Sacrament to each other. The ordained minister is the witness of the Church that receives the vows and ensures the proper Form is being followed. This is why in a Catholic ceremony, I do not “pronounce you husband and wife.” My pronouncement does not make it so; their vows to each other made it happen. I may “introduce you as husband and wife.”
2. “Why can’t we get married on the beach? I’m really in tune with nature.” One, the wedding is not about you, it is about God blessing your union. Two, there are no “private” Sacraments. All Sacraments, other than Confession, should be in a public setting so that the parish can participate in the blessing. Beaches and destination weddings can be hard for some people to get to, which limits the parish’s participation. Plus, the US bishops have said “no”. I cannot do a wedding on the beach. If the couple ignores this rule, they would be barred from receiving the Eucharist until their marriage was normalized in the Church.
3. The Bride and the Groom are not allowed to write their own vows. We need to ensure that they are professing and vowing what we believe in the Catholic Church. Some things may be left out that are necessary if they write their own vows.
4. 2 Witnesses are easy to get at a wedding. Again, there cannot be a private ceremony. The parents or anyone on the wedding party can be the witnesses. The witnesses do not have to be Catholic themselves.

There are some things that we see so often on TV that we think we can do at a wedding but we actually don’t in a Catholic Service.

1. Flowers to Mary: not in the ritual book but yes allowed
2. Kiss the Bride: not in the ritual book but I encourage it immediately after rings given.
3. Unity Candle, Colored sand, etc: No, never. The Eucharist is a better symbol of unity.

Just because you saw it in a movie doesn’t mean you can have it at your wedding.

-Fr. Kopp

Next Week: Tri-Partite Theology of the Sacrament of Matrimony