

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Can You Marry Us on a Beach?

Since next Sunday, February 11, is World Marriage Day, I thought it might be useful to look at one aspect of marriage that comes up again and again: the choice of a place for the marriage to begin. I get several calls a year from people who ask if I can do a wedding for them in some unusual location—on a beach, or in a catering hall, or in a nearby park. My answer is always the same: “No.” Unfortunately, that’s not what couples like to hear. They’ll often accuse the church of being too rigid or inflexible.

That, in fact, was the gist of an essay by writer Cara McDonough once posted on the *Huffington Post* website. McDonough wrote:

Why can't a Catholic ceremony take place outside? Catholics marrying non-Catholics can get a special dispensation allowing marriage someplace other than a Catholic church. But if you're both Catholic, the church wedding is important. The answer, as I've interpreted it, mostly concerns the fact that the church is the true "House of God," and marriage, being a sacrament, should be celebrated there.

But really, the best explanation I've heard was from that priest. "You just can't."

Well. It’s a little more complicated than that. It is the tradition of the church that—with some rare and specific exceptions—sacraments are received in a Catholic church. Which means, among other things, the ritual takes place in the presence of Jesus Christ, in the Blessed Sacrament. It unfolds before the people of God, the community of faith.

But there is also this: Being married in a church *says something*. It says, “We take this seriously and are making this commitment in a sacred space, in the presence of God, before His people, forever.” It says, “We are beginning our life together in a way that signifies to the world our commitment to each other and to our faith. And let’s face it: We know we’re going to need all the graces we can get.” It also says, “We know that this is something more than just a party.”

Another take, and a very good one, comes from the website “Busted Halo”:

The popular notion that a wedding is primarily the business of the bride and groom is romantic, but not true in the sacramental sense.

The church and all the people of God who witness the marriage have a stake in the sacrament of marriage. It makes a difference to the community of believers and to society that marriages are freely entered and strong. As Pope John Paul II said, “The future of humanity passes by way of the family.” (Familiaris Consortio, #86)

What's all this got to do with having a wedding in God's beautiful outdoors? Since sacraments belong to the entire church—not just the bride and groom—they are normally celebrated in the place that the church gathers. This unites the couple with the universal church throughout the ages and puts the ceremony in the common gathering place where other sacred celebrations occur.

Although as Christians we believe that God is everywhere, we also have set aside special places for community worship—church buildings. It makes sense that baptized Christians would celebrate the vocational sacrament of marriage in the building where the community usually worships and that is dedicated to such special sacred commitments.

Some *Huffington Post* readers noted that priests say Mass outside of a church all the time. What’s wrong with doing a wedding outside? Isn’t that showing a double standard? The fact is, saying Mass outside of a church brings Christ to the people. Marriage, on the other hand, is altogether different.

By bringing themselves into a church, and bearing witness in that sacred setting, a couple performs a public act of humility, faith and belief. They don’t expect God to come to them. *They go to Him.*

It is a deeper sign of how they are beginning their lives together, and a sign of what will be important in their marriage.

Pastoral considerations might call for making some adjustments, owing to different faiths or special circumstances. But it seems to me that two Catholics who grasp the commitment they are making, and who understand what is at stake, and who believe in the faith into which they were baptized, would not want to be married anywhere else but in the House of God.

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