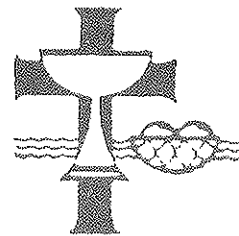


THE CELEBRATION
AND BLESSING
OF A MARRIAGE

A LITURGICAL
AND PASTORAL COMMENTARY



ASSOCIATED PARISHES, INC.

The booklet is one of a series dealing with the life and work of the Parishes of the Episcopal Church.

Prepared by the clergy and laity of the Associated Parishes.

The Associated Parishes is a group of persons belonging to the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Church of Canada, and other Christian Churches, who are committed to the renewal of Christian life and worship. During the quarter-century of its existence, this group has especially concerned itself with providing an articulate expression of the principles of the Liturgical Movement in North America, as these have been experienced and tested within the lives of our congregation.

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THE CELEBRATION AND BLESSING OF A MARRIAGE

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Introduction

A discussion of the liturgical rites for the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage must begin, as in the case of all other aspects of Christian living, with the sacrament of Holy Baptism. It is in Baptism that persons are born into the new life of the People of God and become members of God's family. In Baptism we become participants in the Easter mystery of Christ's dying and rising, and that mystery becomes the means of interpreting the events in our lives as individuals and as community.

Christian marriage starts with the belief that for most people the relationship between man and woman is filled with potential for the full development of their human nature. But for the Christian that fully human and natural state of life is transformed and raised to a new level by the partners' baptism and their life in the community of the baptized, the Church.

In that community, immersed in Word and Sacrament, the husband and wife are enabled to celebrate continually the integration of all aspects of their lives and their marriage into the dying and rising of Christ. The ongoing rhythms of the Church Year, the tension between the world and the Kingdom, the continual process of repentance and forgiveness, feast and fast, rejoicing and sorrowing,

life and death, make of their marriage and their family a laboratory, as it were, of life in Christ and in his Body the Church.

Christian people preparing for marriage need to recognize that their own understandings and feelings about each other and about marriage have been influenced by an accumulated set of ideas, concepts, feelings, and assumptions in Church and society. Many of these are inadequate to a fully biblical concept of human nature, sexuality, and marriage, and at least some of them are diametrically opposed. A number of these misconceptions have been so much a part of our culture that we simply assume them to be Christian.

This commentary on the liturgy of marriage will seek to show how the liturgy expresses these biblical understandings; how the Gospel sheds new light on our human and sexual natures, as well as on the marital relationship.

Some of the more serious obstacles to a fully Christian concept of marriage and the family are:

1. A mistaken identification of sexuality with sin. The biblical testimony is that sexuality is a good and natural gift of the Creator and a primary means of God's self-revelation. Sin is in no way an aspect or result of sexuality, and while sexuality may indeed be used sinfully, that fact reflects not upon the nature of sexuality but upon the pervasiveness of sin in all parts of human life.
2. Various versions of the idea that matter and spirit are unrelated, opposed to each other, or even that matter is evil and spirit good, also hamper our understanding of Christian marriage. Related to this is the notion that people may relate to each other and to God in a purely spiritual, nonmaterial manner. Even in its mildest form this idea leads to such misconceptions as the idea that sexual behavior is a purely physical function, unrelated to the other aspects or parts of human life such as the religious, ethical, or psychic.

3. Another attitude which makes it difficult for us to understand marriage is the elevation of being "in love" to the level of the ultimate human experience and the final criterion for measuring the quality of a relationship. The "in love" experience is fairly new as a primary reason for marriage. It is compounded of a number of factors among which are sexual attraction and emotional dependence.

Persons seeking marriage in the context of the Gospel need to evaluate carefully the factors which have led to their being in love in order to determine those which are primarily the result of psychic and emotional dependence. It would be helpful to do this evaluation in consultation with a person who is trained in the analysis of human relationships from a psychological as well as an ethical and biblical point of view. Such a counselor can be of immense aid to persons as they seek to define the basis of their relationship and to discover factors and motives of which they are only partially, if at all, aware. This counselor may be the priest who will be the celebrant of the service or another person to whom the couple is referred by their priest.

4. As a result of the emphasis on experience and feeling which first developed in our society in the last century, all of the liturgical actions of the Church have been sentimentalized and none more so than the rite of marriage. The liturgy of marriage has been trivialized by music, decorations, and ceremonies which seek to build a "mood" rather than to express the reality of marriage between persons who are baptized into Jesus Christ's dying and rising. This "mood" seeks to perpetuate the myth that being "in love" is a permanent and lasting experience, and that "love" will overcome all adversity.

The Church speaks of love also. The love it acknowledges includes both friendship and erotic attraction (called *philia* and *eros* in the scriptures), but is chiefly expressed as *agape* or self-giving love. *Agape* is not dependent on feeling or emotion, but is an act of faith and trust involving the whole person. It is filled with risk, vulnerable to pain and hurt, the opposite of

self-satisfaction, and gives up all even to the point of dying for the beloved (see 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13). Indeed, agape involves us in a life of continual dying and rising within all our relationships. Its model is the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, not flower petals and romance.

This commentary, then, will take each section of the marriage rite and discuss what happens and what we mean by it. Throughout the commentary, "BCP" refers to *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church (USA), and "BAS" refers to the *Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada*.

ADDRESS AND DECLARATION OF CONSENT

This is what we do.

The congregation gathers in the church. In the BAS this Gathering begins with a greeting. Regardless of the number of visitors who are not regular communicants, this is a gathering of the local congregation for the liturgy. People should be seated as near the front as possible, not being relegated to a 'bride's side' or 'groom's side', except for the parents and other close family members and friends for whom seating may be reserved: bride's family on the left. The bride and groom may be seated with their families rather than making a formal entrance.

If there is a formal entrance, the wedding party and ministers enter in a procession with the cross or a banner. During this entrance instrumental music may be used or a hymn of praise may be sung by the congregation. (For suggestions about appropriate sung and instrumental music we recommend *A Guide to the Practice of Church Music*, Marion Hatchett, Church Hymnal Corporation, New York, 1989.)

If it is desired that the bride be accompanied by her father or other escort, he gives his right arm to her and walks beside her.

When the bride and groom are in place he returns to his seat unless he is to give the bride away. If the bride and groom are seated with their families they may remain where they are until the consents are completed.

The celebrant addresses the congregation concerning the meaning and purpose of Christian marriage. Then the celebrant asks if any in the congregation know of any reason why the marriage may not take place, then asks the same of the couple.

In the BCP the bride and then the groom is asked to consent to marriage and then the congregation is asked to affirm its support of the couple in their marriage. In the BAS the groom is asked first, and these questions occur after the Liturgy of the Word, followed immediately by the wedding vows.

After the congregational consent the bride may be given or presented for marriage. The BAS does not include this ritual. The father may answer for himself or the bride and groom may be presented jointly by their parents, who answer together. If the father is giving the bride, he may give her hand to the groom or to the celebrant who gives it to the groom. At this point, if he has not already done so, the bride's father or other escort steps away to a place in the congregation.

It should be noted that the giving or presentation is not required and in many cases is not appropriate. Consequently the ritual for the presentation of the bride is found not in the main order of service, but in the supplementary material which follows.

If the bride and groom were seated with their families before the service, they and their witnesses now step forward before the celebrant. A hymn or psalm may be sung during this movement.

This is what we mean.

Marriage takes place in the context of the Body of Christ celebrating the liturgy. Our gathering must indicate that, rather than

implying that this is a purely social occasion. The use of a hymn during the entrance of the ministers and the wedding party is appropriate because it will underscore the people's role as a worshipping congregation.

The old ceremony of the entrance of the bride is from past ages when the bride and groom were strangers until the wedding and the bride was being transferred from her father's keeping to that of her husband. Many people now prefer to enter with the ministers, signifying their role in the marriage liturgy as ministers. Others may choose to sit with their families and friends as worshiper. This last might well underscore the biblical statement about leaving one's parents and becoming one flesh, as, after the consents, the two leave the seats with their families and move to the place where the Ministry of the Word will be done.

The opening address of the celebrant states the Church's doctrine of marriage so that the consent may be made with understanding and the whole congregation may be put in mind of the meaning of marriage.

A marriage is not simply a private matter for Christians or even just a family matter. It brings into being a new family which is to be an integral part of the Christian community. Therefore the people's consent and promise of support are required if it is to proceed. Likewise the people receive assurance of the rightness of their consent by hearing the man and woman state publicly their commitment to marriage as it is defined by the Church.

As the community is built up by marriages based on commitment to Christ and his Church, so it is hurt when persons enter marriage without adequate commitment and understanding of what the relationship involves and of what their marriage will mean for good or ill for the Body of Christ.

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

This is what we do.

The bride and groom now stand together before the celebrant. It would be good for them to join hands for the first time at this point. The celebrant leads the people in prayer and the people are then seated. The bride and groom with their witnesses may be seated in seats placed before the congregation, in a front pew, or in the chancel. This is determined by the need to have those who do the readings face them and the people.

Scriptures chosen beforehand by the couple in consultation with the celebrant are now read. There are normally two readings, a psalm, and a Gospel reading. This may be reduced to only one reading and no psalm, but if Communion is to follow, there must always be a reading from a Gospel. The readings should be done by lay persons, and it is especially appropriate that these include family members or members of the wedding party. The people remain seated for the psalm (which may be done in any of the ways normally used at a celebration of the Eucharist) and "Glory to the Father..." is not said at its conclusion. A deacon reads the Gospel, or if there is no deacon, it is read by an assisting priest or by the celebrant.

The Prayer Book provides for a homily, or other response to the readings, following the Gospel. This is normally not omitted. A sermon ties together the themes of the readings with the place of marriage within the Christian community. Discussion of the sermon by the celebrant and couple during counseling can also aid in making it particularly applicable to them.

The couple may wish there to be a reading from a non-biblical source as well (but the celebrant should see that such a reading expresses the biblical meaning of marriage rather than an unrealistic or sentimentalized concept). They may also choose a hymn or anthem

which clearly expresses the meaning of marriage in the context of the Gospel. A hymn, psalm, or anthem may also be used before the Gospel.

This is what we mean.

As in all other sacramental and liturgical actions of the Church, it is the reading of the Word of God which defines the meaning of what is to take place, and which reveals God's presence in the action.

We need the rather tough and pointed statements contained in the suggested readings to counter the large number of "romantic" associations our society has with marriage. Even some of the scriptural passages are easily misunderstood, especially the passage from 1 Corinthians. When it is used the other readings, hymns, and psalms as well as the homily need to be chosen to aid in saving that passage from being sentimentalized.

The response to the readings, whether a sermon or some other form, needs to recall that Christian marriage is a relationship in and with the mystery of Christ's dying and rising, into which the couple's relationship is being incorporated. It should also point toward the celebration of Eucharist in this liturgy and to the couple's on-going life within the community of the faithful. It also affords the celebrant an opportunity to stress once more those concerns which were dealt with during the pre-marital counseling and to remind all present of the responsibility laid upon them, as members of the Body, to support all married persons in their life in Christ.

THE MARRIAGE

This is what we do.

The man and woman now stand before the altar, facing each other. There may be music as they move to that position. The celebrant is near but it seems better that the "traditional" position between the two not be used. The Book of Common Prayer, Episcopal Church, 1979 (BCP) specifies that the man takes the woman's right hand in his right hand and says the marriage vow, then they loose hands and the woman takes the man's right hand in her right hand and says the marriage vow. The BAS specifies that the couple join hands during the reciting of the vows. (The celebrant may lead each person in saying the vows, or may hold the book up so that each may read them. It is usually best that the two not attempt to memorize them.)

One or two rings are given as tangible symbols of the vows. Other suitable symbols may be used instead. (The BCP calls rings both signs and symbols. A sign, of course, is tangible and to signify the importance and permanence of the vows it should itself have some obvious permanence and value.) The ring(s) or other symbol may be blessed by the priest before being given.

The couple, again facing each other with the celebrant nearby, gives the ring(s) [or some other suitable symbol (BCP)]." The BCP allows either person to give the ring first. If each gives a ring then each says the full sentence (again, reading from the book or prompted by the celebrant).



The celebrant then steps before them and, joining their hands, pronounces them husband and wife. (A traditional symbolic action is for the celebrant to wrap the stole around their joined hands. The people respond with "Amen")

This is what we mean.

The man and woman rather than the celebrant are the ministers of the marriage. By standing in front of and near the altar they emphasize the sacramental nature of what they do. Having the celebrant near enough to prompt them, but to one side, further underscores the ministry of the couple.

The vows are the public acceptance by each person of the other. They state the unconditional quality of Christian marriage. There are no "escape clauses," and the two promise to keep these vows as long as they both live. This promise is sometimes disturbing to people during the highly romanticized courtship and pre-marriage period because it seems to limit their covenant to this life alone. Being parted by death, however, does not describe an end to the relationship when one partner dies, but simply states that a widowed person is no longer bound by the exclusive nature of the relationship. A widowed person may remarry.

Others may be disturbed by this statement of life-long commitment because it seems to bind them to an exclusive relationship which they might not be able to keep or which seems to limit their freedom. It is, however, only in the context of this unlimited commitment that two persons may find the freedom to explore and discover the depth of their relationship. When there are no limits to the quality or duration of the marriage the opportunities for growth of the two as individuals and as a couple are likewise unlimited. Far from taking away freedom, only in such a total commitment can there be total freedom to grow in knowledge, love, and ministry to each other.

The exchange of vows is accompanied in the BCP by taking and loosing hands, and in the BAS by joining hands. This is perhaps the simplest and yet most significant way of expressing physically the union which takes place in marriage. In order to take the bride's hand, the groom reaches out to her and physically takes her as his own beloved (and the bride does the same).

The BCP provides that the woman is first to give consent, the man is first to take in marriage, and either may act first in the giving of rings. Thus, it is possible to avoid old stereotypes of male/female relationships. BAS has the man act first in all cases, but provides for a mutual joining of hands.

The giving of rings (or other symbols of the vows) affirms the "earthiness" of human nature. As sacramental beings our physical, mental, and spiritual natures are inseparably bound up together. It is always necessary for human beings to express the intangible aspects of their lives with tangible symbols. The statement which accompanies the giving of the symbol itself expresses this total giving, "... with all that I am, and all that I have..." Human beings can never express themselves without using symbols which are accessible to the senses. Certainly in an action like marriage outward and visible signs deepen and strengthen our commitment and understanding.

At this point the celebrant acts in a ministerial function by pronouncing in the name of the Church that the two are now husband and wife. The people also express their ministry, as in all liturgical actions, by affirming what has been pronounced with their "Amen."

THE PRAYERS AND THE BLESSING OF THE MARRIAGE

This is what we do.

If the Eucharist will not be celebrated, the rite continues with Lord's Prayer. It may be used at this point even if there is to be a Eucharist, but that would require its use in the service twice. This confusion is avoided in the BAS by providing two distinct rites, one with and one without the Eucharist. Immediately after the celebrant pronounces the couple husband and wife, or after the Lord's Prayer when it is used, the person(s) appointed by the celebrant continues with the prayers. This person may be the celebrant, but it would be better that it be done by a deacon, an assisting priest, or members of the congregation or of the wedding party.

The petition for children is used only if appropriate to the couple. If one or both of them have children, this petition might be modified to express that fact. The remainder of the form is used in full if there is to be a Eucharist, as it serves as the Prayers of the People. If there is not be a Eucharist one or more of the petitions may be omitted.

Then the husband and wife kneel and the priest says one of the two prayers. If there will not be a Eucharist the first prayer is to be preferred because the mystery of Christ's dying and rising will not otherwise be mentioned in the rite. When the Eucharist does follow, either prayer is appropriate.

Then the priest says the blessing. A sign of the cross may be made over the couple or the priest may lay hands upon them.

The wife and husband then stand and the Peace is initiated by the priest. The couple greet each other, usually with a kiss. Then they may greet their families and others in the wedding party.

This is what we mean.

The clergy and people are gathered in this liturgy as the Body of Christ. Our membership in the Body is expressed in a special way when we carry out Christ's ministry of intercession for the Church and the World. The corporate prayer of the gathered Church is the most solemn form of prayer we have. In this part of the rite, the Church gathers up all its concerns, and especially those in relation to this couple, and carries them to God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. No other part of the marriage rite is more strongly expressive of the congregation's function, in contrast to secular notions about the function of wedding congregations, than this.

These prayers emphasize the corporate nature of Christian marriage and its relationship to the couple's entire life together. The petitions include both concern for the joyful aspects of marriage and the difficult ones. They deal with the couple as a neophyte family. Marriage is seen as a ministry to others and as a sign expressive of

the unity between all people which is God's will. We pray for the marriage to be a ministry to others and that its love may exist not only for itself but for other people.

This part of the liturgy clearly delineates the meaning of Christian marriage and can be very effective in correcting the misconceptions about marriage we mentioned earlier. These prayers will be good material for the couple's preparation for marriage and can be used as a guide for the contents of pre-marital instruction.

The first of the two prayers in the Blessing of the Marriage is new to the Book of Common Prayer. Theologically it places marriage in the context of Christ's incarnate humanity, the Easter mystery, and the Christian hope of everlasting life as the eternal marriage feast. It images love as the mark of the couple's lives, as their shelter, and as the crowning feature of their relationship. Finally, it describes the total involvement of all aspects of their lives.

The second prayer comes from earlier Prayer Books. It emphasizes Paul's teaching that marriage is an image of the relationship between Christ and the Church and prays for grace for the two to keep their vows and keep a Christian home.

The Blessing itself expresses the Church's role as the community in which God acts to bless us.

The traditional "kissing of the bride" was derived from the ancient Christian Kiss of Peace. In the exchange of the Peace carried by the couple to others in the congregation, their ministry through marriage to the larger community is acted out.

(The rite may end at this point. The departure from the church in this case is the same as that which will be described at the conclusion of the section that follows).

THE HOLY EUCHARIST

This is what we do.

The deacon (or if there is no deacon, an assisting priest or the celebrant) now prepares the altar. This offertory action involves the husband and wife as they bring to the person preparing the altar the people's offerings of bread and wine. These elements may be provided by the couple with evidence from the priest as to the size of the loaf and the quantity of wine.

The singing of a hymn is particularly appropriate during this action, bringing the congregation into a united activity. Instrumental music might be used here instead.

During the Great Thanksgiving the wife and husband remain near the altar so that their role as ministers in this liturgy is visibly expressed. The celebrant uses the Proper Preface for Marriage if either Prayer A or Prayer B is used. The couple receives communion after the celebrant. In some places it is customary for them to administer the chalice to each other. It might also be desirable in some places for them to assist in the administration of communion to the congregation.

All the baptized members of the congregation are clearly invited to receive the Sacrament and opportunity is given for that to take place. Singing by the congregation or a choir is appropriate during communion.

After the communion the Post-communion Prayer is said. BAS specifies that it is said by the celebrant. BCP does not specify this, but indicates it by not having the prayer lined out for congregational use.

The priest may add a blessing of the people and then the deacon says the dismissal (said by the celebrant if there is not a deacon present). A final hymn may be sung before the blessing,

before the dismissal, or as the wedding party and clergy leave the church. Instrumental music may be used instead to accompany their departure.

This is what we mean.

The celebration of the Eucharist is normally a part of every wedding. Only when one of the two persons is not baptized is it appropriately omitted. With adequate preparation (see the section on the rehearsal below) it can be done without awkwardness. (For a full description of the eucharistic liturgy and its meaning see the Associated Parishes brochures, *The Parish Eucharist* and *The Holy Eucharist: Rite II*)

The Prayer Book requires that members of the lay order be the presenters of the eucharistic elements. As the most significant members of the congregation at this service, the couple present the elements as a sign of their self-offering and of their ministry to the People of God in marriage.

The Proper Preface for Marriage brings yet another biblical image into our remembrance: the final consummation of the Christian hope as the marriage of Christ to his people.

The sharing in Holy Communion by bride and groom and congregation expresses the unity of God's People in Christ. It recalls the eating and drinking found in the marriage rites of most religions and cultures. But here it transforms those ceremonial meals and toasts into the eucharistic meal in which God's people again are made into the Church, the Body of Christ.

As in all gatherings of the Church, the Dismissal is more than a practical announcement that the liturgy is completed. It is the sending forth of the Church to be the Body of Christ in the world; to minister through the living of our lives to all people in the name of God.

A Note Concerning Marriages at the Sunday Eucharist

It has become the custom in some places to have marriages at a regular Sunday service. When this is done, it would seem best that there be some period of careful preparation of the congregation so that they may understand the marriage rite as an action of the entire community of faith rather than a personal and social rite for the couple alone.

The issue of the readings to be used is not precisely covered in Prayer Book. It would appear that those Sundays of the year when Sunday readings may not be replaced by other readings should be used for weddings (Last Sunday after Pentecost through I Epiphany and Last Sunday after Epiphany through Trinity Sunday). On the remaining Sundays, one or more of the marriage readings could replace those normally used. The Prayers of the People could be composed such a way that the primary petitions for marriage are used along

Care should be taken to see that the liturgy on such occasions reflects the life of the entire parish community. It should also be noted that if such celebrations were to become common the danger would arise of obscuring the plan and shape of the Sunday Lectionary.

A Note about Rehearsals

Wedding rehearsals are often no more than a social occasion designed to help people get through the service. The rehearsal, however, should be used to meet a more important need. It is a kind of catechesis for all who will participate in what is being done. It should not only cover the actions which those in the service will perform so that they can take part comfortably, it should also enable the bride and groom and those others attending to understand the meaning of the rite and the importance of witnesses and family as ministers of the liturgy.

The celebrant should include discussion of each portion of the rite and its meaning. The congregation's role should be stressed and each place they are called upon to respond should be pointed out and rehearsed.

The celebrant should recognize that in most cases members of the couple's family and friends will include people of other or no religious traditions. They need to be helped during the rehearsal to feel comfortable and to know that they are welcome to participate as fully as they wish.

Finally, all the decisions about the service should have been determined by the celebrant and the couple well before the time of the rehearsal.

THE BLESSING OF A CIVIL MARRIAGE

The Book of Common Prayer provides a rite to be used for a man and a woman who were married in a civil ceremony. It should be noted that this rite is not for persons married in another ecclesiastical or religious tradition's rites. It should also be noted that the rite makes it clear the marriage is already established. For these reasons this rite should not look like a marriage service. It would best be done as a simple celebration of the Eucharist in which at the appropriate point the couple comes forward for this rite. The couple might read the lessons and they should present the bread and wine.