

Maintaining the Integrity of the Rite

Over the course of years, there have been practices, additions, and gestures that have become common place at many Catholic weddings in the United States, but have never been part of the Catholic sacramental rite of Matrimony. Handling these requests needs pastoral care, kindness and a willingness to help a couple understand what they are asking for and why they are asking for it. Thus, dialogue about a practice could be an opportunity to broaden the couple's understanding about Catholic worship, to respect their cultural heritage; and to highlight the importance of God's love for them on their wedding day.

In truth, all of the following practices could be called *cultural* in that they reflect certain values about this current time, what it means to be family, what being married means. Some of them are obviously more popular in certain locales than in others. **However, the United States Bishops have chosen to not include any of these in *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony*.**

A Couple's Prayer Before a Statue of the Blessed Mother

There are no provisions given in the revised *Order of Celebrating Matrimony* for this practice. However, in many parts of the country, this procession and prayer by the newly married couple before a statue of the Blessed Mother is requested at weddings.

If this tradition is requested by the bride and groom, simply ask "why?" In reality, if the couple has a devotion to the Blessed Mother, asking her intercession for the sake of the couple's marriage could be appropriate in the couple's private prayer, at the rehearsal or at the reception. However, if no such devotion exists, or the bride or groom is not Catholic, serious questions would need to be raised about the appropriateness of such an addition. Within this *Pastoral Companion** there is a sample prayer service – "A Couple's Prayer before a Statue of the Blessed Mother." It could be used to close a rehearsal.

The Unity Candle

There is a connection between Catholics and candles. Catholics light candles at Mass. They light them as extension of private prayer. The Paschal Candle is a symbol for Christ, the Light of the world; we bless it, and light it to begin the great Easter Vigil. Candles can be carried in procession and are used during ritual prayer.

So why don't we use a so-called "unity candle" at a wedding? This practice is popular in some parts of the United States and not in others. While this could be a laudable practice in itself, a closer look reveals possible problems. Again, ask the question "why?" If the couple has already expressed the words of Consent and has already exchanged wedding rings, what further signs of unity are needed. While the unity candle strives to express the family identity for the engaged couple, their ties with their family histories, and their distinct memories, these expressions have already been made obvious. Both parents accompanying the bride and groom in the Entrance Procession manifests this more eloquently.

The unity candle is simply not found in *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony*. Once again, the placement of this practice should not be included within the wedding ceremony. The addition or removal of parts of the Marriage ritual is not permitted.

The best place for this candle and its ritual would be at the rehearsal dinner or even at the reception after the wedding. Included in this *Pastoral Companion** is a sample prayer service for such an occasion.

The Sands Ceremony

It is very similar to the Unity Candle, only instead of using candles, the bride and groom use two vials of sand representing the “blending of families.” This practice belongs at a rehearsal supper or reception. It is not part of the Catholic ritual for Matrimony. There are already many expressions of the couple’s unique love within the Catholic Ritual. The exchange of vows and the sharing of rings speak of their unique love long after the sand has blown away. If requested, offer the couple the prayer service for the unity candle, included in the *Pastoral Companion** which can be used at the reception.

Jumping the Broom

This wedding practice appears to have its origins with the Romani people, especially in Wales, and has gained some popularity among African Americans. Here is another sign of unity which attempts to repeat what is already within the Marriage rite – the Consent, the rings, and the blessings.

The practice of “jumping the broom” does express, as do other practices, a desire to remember the families of origin while creating a new family through this ritual act. Jumping the Broom also has a history in the African American community in the it carries a memory of slavery, injustices done to slaves, and of escape for those who wished to marry.

What to do? Since this gesture is often done at the end of the marriage ceremony, it could be done after the couple leave the Church. Why does the couple want this to be done? What meaning does it have for them both? What part of their personal history is prompting them to request this at the wedding? Can this gesture better be done at the reception?

In Summary

As pastors of souls, one must exercise great sensitivity when dealing with the varying requests to incorporate practices into the Marriage liturgy. It is good to remember that much of what is currently done within the liturgy grew from someone “adding” something to the basic liturgical rite. While not mentioned here, there may be other common place practices in specific locales now or which may develop over time. Use the same principles given here to determine if and how a requested practice is to be received and how one might respond.

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