

Why can't we have a Catholic wedding at our favorite inn?

Dear Father Kerper: My fiancé and I want a full Catholic wedding. Both of us grew up near a lake and want to have the wedding at an inn nearby, but we've been told that we can't! A friend of mine, who is Catholic, and her non-religious fiancé had their wedding at a restaurant. This seems unfair.

I understand your frustration about your wedding plans, and I admire your desire to receive the Sacrament of Matrimony rather than a "civil bond." Perhaps what follows will help you and your fiancé to arrange a celebration that harmonizes the Church's requirements with your desire to have a wedding that is truly personal. Tensions like yours often arise because the Church's understanding of what happens at a wedding differs from popular beliefs.

You mentioned your desire to have a wedding that has "personal meaning," particularly the actual location of the event, such as the inn where you and your fiancé first met. While that location has enormous personal significance for you, we must always remember that a Catholic wedding is an act of public worship, not a private ceremony.

Consider what happens at a Catholic



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wedding. Two people, already united with Christ and one another through Baptism, come before a priest or deacon and a community of fellow believers. In the presence of this "miniature Church," they exchange the sacred vows of Matrimony. Through these acts of mutual consent, each spouse bestows on the other the Sacrament of Matrimony.

The exchange of vows is a very holy and powerful event. Moreover, it involves three parties: bride, groom, and Christ. Because Christ is the preeminent partner of the marriage

— the foundation — the principal focus of the ceremony falls on him, not the couple.

In light of the "Christ focus" of the wedding, the Church insists that the ceremony ordinarily happen within a church building. Because Christ is the center of the event, it makes perfect sense to have it happen within his "house," not on a beach or in a ballroom. After all, Christ is the most honored "wedding guest," in the form of his sacramental Presence.

This, of course, does not make the wedding "impersonal." Indeed, the

Church law brings out the "personal" aspect of the wedding by urging couples to celebrate it in their own church. The old *Code of Canon Law* (1917) actually required that weddings happen within the bride's church. Current church law allows the wedding to occur within the groom's church, and, with proper permission, in any Catholic church.

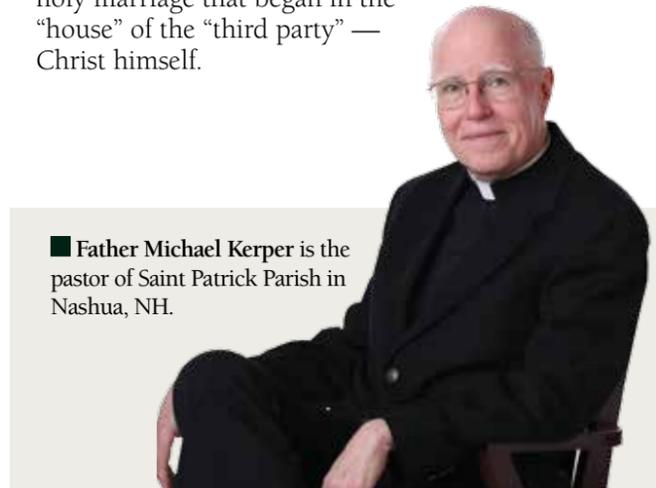
The Church's clear preference for weddings within familiar churches is meant to stress the interconnection among all sacraments. For example, years ago many brides celebrated their weddings in the churches where they had received Baptism, Confirmation, and First Communion. In those cases, the spiritual connection was abundantly clear. Now, of course, the mobility of families makes this somewhat rare. However, it is praiseworthy — and beautiful — to have your wedding in the place where you regularly partake of the Eucharist. After all, your "spiritual home" is your true home and the venue of the most "personal" events of your life: your living relationship with the Lord.

Now, let's consider the "unfairness" of the Church's recognition of your friend's marriage to a non-Catholic, which took place at a restaurant. Such "non-church" weddings do indeed happen, though very rarely. Bishops can grant "dispensations from place" when the non-Catholic party has some genuine aversion to having a ceremony within a Catholic church. At times, these dispensations are granted to accommodate the sensitivities of family members of the non-Catholic party.

In these rare cases, the Church graciously suspends the normal requirements in the interest of the spiritual welfare of the couple. To put it another way, the Church does everything possible to enable the Catholic party to contract a valid marriage. The matter of location, though very important, is less important than the marriage itself. Hence, the requirement that weddings happen in a church is not absolute.

With proper planning and spiritual preparation, I'm confident that you will have a wedding that is both personal and in full accord with Church law. More important, you will have a happy and holy marriage that began in the "house" of the "third party" — Christ himself.

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What is NFP?



One question that comes up in marriage preparation is how a couple will welcome children into their family. The Catholic Church encourages Natural Family Planning (NFP) as the best way to plan when and how many children a couple can responsibly have.

NFP is often confused with the outdated rhythm method of family planning, which was very limiting and unreliable. Today's NFP can be used to achieve or avoid pregnancy with a great deal of accuracy, can help with conditions like PMS, infertility, and repeated miscarriages, and serve to strengthen the communication and bond between a husband and wife.

Natural Family Planning methods...

- are just as effective as any other methods of family planning, including the birth control pill, when taught and used correctly.
- enhance a couple's relationship.
- respect life from the moment of conception.
- are effective in the diagnosis and treatment of infertility, miscarriage, ovarian cysts, and PMS.
- are an effective alternative to artificial reproductive technologies, including IVF, for couples experiencing infertility.
- are an investment in your future because they can be used during your entire procreative life, to plan or avoid pregnancy, when coming off of hormonal contraception, breastfeeding, post-partum, or any other situation.
- track the daily signs of fertility which are a valuable gynecological and health record.
- are an alternative for health-conscious women.

Today's natural methods are highly effective when used to achieve pregnancy — 99% effective and 100% natural. For more information, visit www.catholicnh.org/nfp, or contact Kathy Rivet, NFP Coordinator for the Diocese of Manchester, at 603.232.3141 or MargueriteFertilityCare@gmail.com