

How a Catholic is to marry

In my ten years of priestly ministry I have realized that many Catholics are unaware of how a baptized Catholic is to get married. The *Code of Canon Law*, the book that contains the Catholic Church's laws governing life in the Church, sets out a specific form that is required for a man and a woman to validly marry. This is called "**canonical form.**" Canonical form requires that a man and woman **marry before at least two witnesses and an official representative of the Catholic Church** (usually a priest or deacon *who has official faculties to witness marriages from their bishop*). Since it is important to enter into a sacred covenant in a sacred space such a ceremony usually occurs in a Catholic church. Everyone who is baptized Catholic (regardless of whether or not they still practice their faith) is bound by the obligation to observe this canonical form when they attempt to marry. **If a baptized Catholic fails to marry in this way** (unless they request a dispensation from the Bishop) **their marriage is invalid.** While a couple would be considered to be married according to civil law, they would not be in a real and true marriage in the eyes of God and the Church. The Church has the authority to govern the way Catholics enter into marriage.

WHY marry in a Catholic Church

Many people fail to observe canonical form when they marry for various reasons. Maybe they wanted to get married on a beach or at a reception venue. Maybe their fiancé did not wish to marry in a Catholic Church so they just went before the justice of the peace or Protestant minister. Maybe one or both individuals were not free to marry in the Church because of a prior marriage (I will address this in a future bulletin article). Either way, in many cases, such couples CAN arrange to exchange vows in the Catholic Church and enter into a valid marriage. Sometimes this is called "validation" or "convalidation." Why should anyone want to do that? Here are a few reasons:

1. **Grace:** When two baptized Christians validly marry they enter into the sacrament of Holy Matrimony. God gives them special grace—the assistance of his life, love, and power—to strengthen them to live out the responsibilities associated with a lifelong commitment. Marriage and parenting are not easy. A person needs all the help they can get! I want my people to have as much grace as possible!
2. **Access to the other sacraments:** It is a grave sin to live in a sexual relationship with someone outside of a valid marriage (the proper place for sex is within a valid marriage). Therefore, being in an invalid marriage normally precludes a person from being able to partake of the sacraments of confession and Holy Communion. This situation can also be a barrier for someone who wishes to receive the sacrament of Confirmation.
3. **To be able to be a godparent or Confirmation sponsor:** According to Canon Law, to be a godparent for someone who is receiving Baptism or a sponsor for someone who is to be Confirmed, one must be living a life that is in accord with the Church's teaching regarding faith and morals.

Before anyone becomes upset with me, please know that I do not tell you these things in order to judge you or shame you. Like a doctor of the soul, I am obligated to tell you EVERYTHING that you need to know in order to have good spiritual health (otherwise, I would be guilty of "malpractice"). I love you and want you to receive as much grace as possible!

HOW a civilly married couple can marry in the Catholic Church

Let's say that you married civilly outside the Church. You are in an invalid marriage. How can you be validly married in the Catholic Church? In most cases, it is NOT a difficult or long process.

Please call our office or email me (frditomo@stmaryhuntley.org) and just let us know that you would like to have your marriage validated. One of the priests (or perhaps one of our fine deacons) will get in touch with you to start the process. There is some **paperwork** that must be collected (baptismal certificates, civil marriage certificate, etc.). You may have to do some **brief preparation** for the sacrament of Matrimony. Then you **choose a day** for the **brief ceremony** and invite at least two friends or family to serve as witnesses. You can have a lot of people present or just two! No need to buy a fancy dress or plan a big party. Besides some small potential cost for a marriage preparation program, there is NO COST. You can then renew your commitment before God and his Church and receive new grace to live out your life as disciples of Jesus Christ! It's a win-win-win! You can validly marry in the Church even if your spouse is a non-Catholic or not baptized.

I do these services all of the time (I have done three since I have been here at St. Mary). If you want to do this but are worried that your spouse will be resistant I can talk you through how you can address that.