

On the Marriage Ceremony II

A. It is traditional for the bride to walk down the aisle of the parish church escorted by her father. This used to be done at the church door in the Middle Ages – but for that matter the whole wedding was done there. As Chaucer wrote of the Wife of Bath:

She was a worthy woman all hir live
Housebondes at the chirche dore had she had five.

Or in more modern English:

She was a worthy woman all her life
Husbands at the church door had she five.

Quite a lady, to be sure! But why should the Church be concerned about this at all? The answer is that her concern is that the bride be protected. This is not some exchange of property as modernists argue. Rather, this is a solemn act by the father of the bride to entrust the groom to defend and provide for his beloved daughter. So the meaning of the ceremony is first of all the passing of the obligation of service from one man to another. The groom must now see to her needs so that she is free to do her work – the most important work in society which is the rearing of children. Some might say the work of the military or the police or the hospital is the most important in society. But those institutions exist for the home, and not vice-versa. “Women and children first!” cried the stewards on the Titanic. Those Edwardians were wrong about the capability of the machines they built, especially regarding icebergs, but they were right about the role of a real man.

So the Church wants an official witness to this exchange of trust and duty, and to make sure that the exchange is according to the free will of the bride.

I can hear the objections from secularists (if there are any who read this). “No, the custom came from the Roman Empire, and which was continued in Europe after the fall of the Empire, when the father went before the magistrate and exchanged his property (the bride) for a sum of money called a dowry. If the groom did not have enough cash to buy her, then the father ‘gave’ the bride away. This is why we still speak of the father giving the bride away, and why we should never do this ceremony.”

Besides this being a cheap shot against pagan Romans, I’ve never met a Catholic that thinks this way. Granted, many Catholics have not given much thought to the wedding ceremony, and do it simply trusting in their parents, and their parent’s parents, and their priest. But this thought of buying and selling definitely does not have anything to do with the brides at OLMC. The women here are too strong, too educated and well informed to accept such tripe.

Instead, there is amongst Catholics who attend the traditional Mass, a deep sense that the source of these ceremonies goes clear back to the Temple of Solomon or the Book of Leviticus. And if in our Catholic history we saw some practice that was entrenched in a society, then we sanctified it, and changed its meaning around, and directed the practice of it to God. Just so, when you hear a fundamentalist Protestant lambasting the Church for the use of incense because the Babylonians used it in their worship of dung beetles or what-

ever, then you’ll know that is nonsense by just looking at the prayers said by the priest at the altar when he blesses the incense.

Just so, if the father giving the bride away was a Teutonic practice before the time of St. Boniface that had to do with property, then the Church *keeping* the practice had nothing to do with our kowtowing to pagan thought, and everything to do with protecting the sacrament of Matrimony, and leading the faithful to holiness.

B. When the bride and groom arrive at their place, they exchange their vows before the Nuptial Mass begins (if there is to be one). But what is their place?

Our ancient tradition teaches that only clerics can hear Holy Mass in the sanctuary. There are three notable exceptions:

1. Since in the early Church only a priest could serve Mass, this was changed with the growth of the Church, and the discipline was relaxed to include those in the minor orders. Eventually it had to boys, who were dressed like a priest (minus the collar, like a cadet or an apprentice). The boys were not clerics, and had not received tonsure, like our own boys who serve the altar.
2. A “straw” subdeacon, which is a layman and not a cleric. He functions at a Solemn High Mass just like an ordained subdeacon, but does not wear the stole.
3. A couple on the day of their wedding at a Nuptial Mass. This is a great privilege, that they should hear Mass in the sanctuary. Two kneelers are placed in the sanctuary just in front of the altar, as if the couple has drawn closer to our Lord by their sacrament. The communion rail gates are drawn aside for them, as if marriage is a gate to heaven.

We don’t do this at OLMC, because our sanctuary is too small, especially with the two large angel statues on the floor. So you might as well know it now that since those angel statues are in the way for the High Masses, and for Holy Week, and for marriages, I think they should be put somewhere else.