

# Wedding rituals bespeak marriage's eternal meaning

When I came home from work that early evening Roe asked me how my day had gone. I asked her. We spoke. We laughed. We were preparing dinner together when I finally noticed Roe was wearing an extra ring on her finger.

"I found it," she said as she raised her shoulders a bit and smiled.

"You found it! I can't believe it! I thought it was lost for good!"

Roe took my hands in hers and whispered, "With this ring I thee wed," and then she once again slipped it onto my finger.

Gold touching gold.

From *Only the Heart Knows How to Find Them — Precious Memories for a Faithless Time*, by Christopher de Vinck, New York, 1991, Viking.

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — A writer's tale of a lost wedding ring and his wife's joy in finding it touches on the deep significance couples find in the symbols, customs and rituals of marriage.

In *Together for Life*, Father Joseph M. Champlin's manual for the Catholic rite of marriage, the Syracuse priest noted that the rings exchanged between husband and wife are viewed by most cultures as symbols of eternity — circles with no end.

"An added personal gesture by the man and woman during this exchange of wedding bands can further stress that concept of giving-receiving," Father Champlin observed. "By placing the ring only part way on her finger as he pronounces the formula, he indicates his giving to her. As she draws on it the rest of the way, his bride manifests her acceptance of that gift, of that commitment."

Indeed, many of the gestures that make up a wedding ceremony likewise symbolize the gravity and joy of the event.

Father Robert P. Ring, pastor of Rochester's St. Augustine Church, noted that a number of wedding customs originated in earlier centuries and have evolved along with changing social attitudes on marriage and family. A witness to more than 200 weddings throughout his priestly career, Father Ring explained that today's couples continue to adapt wedding rituals to reflect the values they bring to the altar.

Traditionally, for example, the bride's father escorts her down the aisle of the church to "give" her away to the groom. "To the best of my understanding, it's rather patriarchal," Father Ring said of the age-old custom. The tradition treated grooms as "free agents," whereas brides were, at best, still tied to their families, and in certain periods of history, essentially viewed as property of their fathers being turned over to their husbands, he remarked.

In some cases, however, modern brides are walking up the center aisle on the arms of both parents, Father Ring said.

"In today's society, the relationship between father and daughter and mother and daughter isn't that radically different," he commented. Having both parents "give" their daughter away realistically reflects the state of many of today's families, he said.

On the other hand, many couples opt to follow strict tradition and kneel throughout the ceremony instead of sitting, the pastor said. Kneeling signifies the couples' reverence toward the sacrament of marriage, he said, adding, however, that a practical concern often motivates brides to stick to custom.

"It doesn't wrinkle the dress," he said.

The church offers couples a number of recommended readings for the rite of marriage. Interestingly, Father Ring noted, many couples marrying after annulments of prior marriages choose Matthew 19:3-6, in which Jesus condemned the practice of divorce.

"That's what they really want," he said, expressing some puzzlement. The priest speculated that couples going through the ceremony for the second time may choose such a passage to emphasize the eternity of their new commitment. "It really puts it out there," he said of the reading.

Although couples are encouraged to pick their own readings, Father Ring noted that he prefers they use the traditional vows emphasizing that each party will remain faithful to the other "in good times and in

bad, in sickness and in health, to love and honor ... all the days of your life."

"There is a real power knowing you're using the same words that half the congregation have used themselves," he said. Nonetheless, Father Ring acknowledged, some couples have succeeded in writing their own "effective" vows. He said he advises those who write their own vows to include "the basic principles of marriage — permanence and fidelity."

The exchange of rings follows the exchange of vows. In some cases, however, the bride and groom may also take part in a candle-lighting ceremony, he said. In such a ceremony, the two sets of parents light candles standing at opposite ends of the altar at the beginning of Mass. Then, after they have exchanged vows, the bride and groom together light a third candle from the flames of the first two candles.

This act symbolizes the joining of the couple's respective families, Father Ring said.

After the ring ceremony, the wedding rite continues along the lines of a regular Mass, except that the prayers of the faithful are personalized to meet the occasion, the pastor remarked.

Post-ceremonial traditions sometimes conflict with church needs, the priest said. He noted, for example that throwing rice on the newlyweds is an ancient ritual symbolizing fertility. Yet parishes discourage the practice because of the mess it creates and the risk of lawsuits from joyous wedding guests who may slip on the grains.

Despite ethnic and racial differences, Catholic wedding ceremonies in the United States today vary only slightly, Father Ring observed. Wedding receptions, on the other hand, provide ample opportunity for couples to display their ethnic roots.

Indeed, the 1990 book *Bride's New Ways to Wed*, co-authored by Antonia van der Meer and the editors of *Bride's* magazine, encourages couples to share their ethnic customs at their weddings.

At an Italian wedding, the book explains, friends may decorate the grille of the couple's car with flowers to signify happy travels through life together. Reception goers also may cut up the groom's tie and sell it for honeymoon money.

Lithuanian newlyweds are served meals of wine, salt and bread. The wine signifies joy, the salt stands for tears and the bread evokes work, the authors wrote.

And at Polish weddings, guests pay to dance with the bride, who uses the money for her honeymoon.

"Customs, traditions, dances, music and food from other parts of the world add personality to a wedding," the authors concluded.



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Lord bless these  
rings which you  
give to each other as  
the sign of your  
love and fidelity.

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