

Fit vows and readings to rite

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

After "John Smith" and "Sally Jones" decided to get married, they developed elaborate plans to personalize their wedding ceremony.

As part of those plans, they decided to include their "special song" and love letters to each other among the Mass's readings. They also chose to write their own vows, producing pages full of praise and promises to each other.

But when John and Mary approached "Father Padre" to discuss their wedding day, they were surprised when the priest told them they could not do everything they had planned.

In this fictional scenario, Father Padre was not being arbitrary. He was simply holding to the Catholic Church's position when it comes to readings and vows during the wedding ceremony.

"There was a time in the late 60s and early 70s when it was popular to use (non-Scripture texts)," noted Father Thomas Mull, priest consultant to the Diocese of Rochester's Office of Liturgy. "That was an age of experiment, but it was never officially allowed."

Since those experimental days — while the church was reexamining its sacramental liturgies in light of the Second Vatican Council — the church has grown more strict in enforcing the rules governing its rites, Father Mull observed.

"The guidelines say you cannot substitute non-Scripture texts for Scripture," Father Mull said.

That statement was echoed by

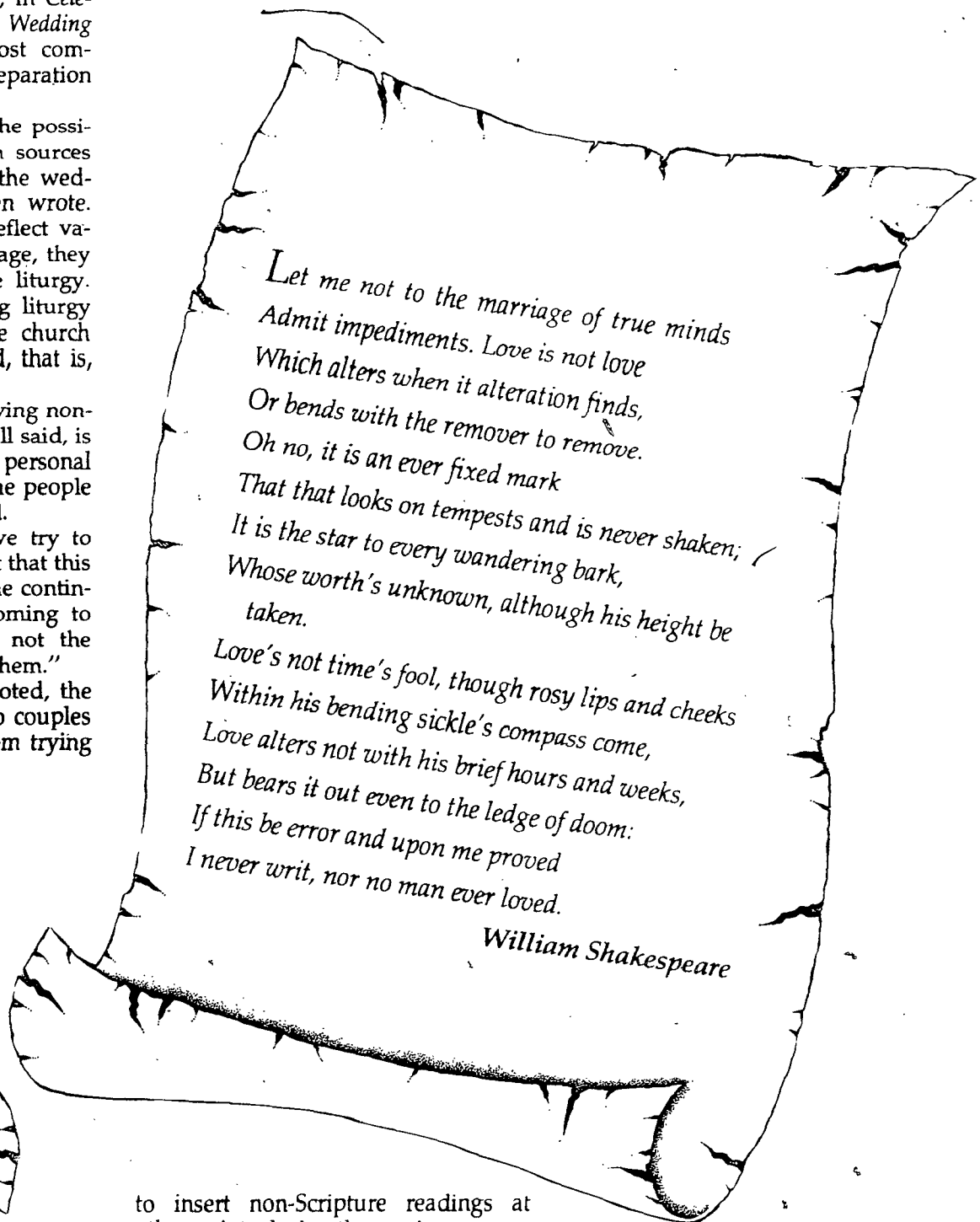
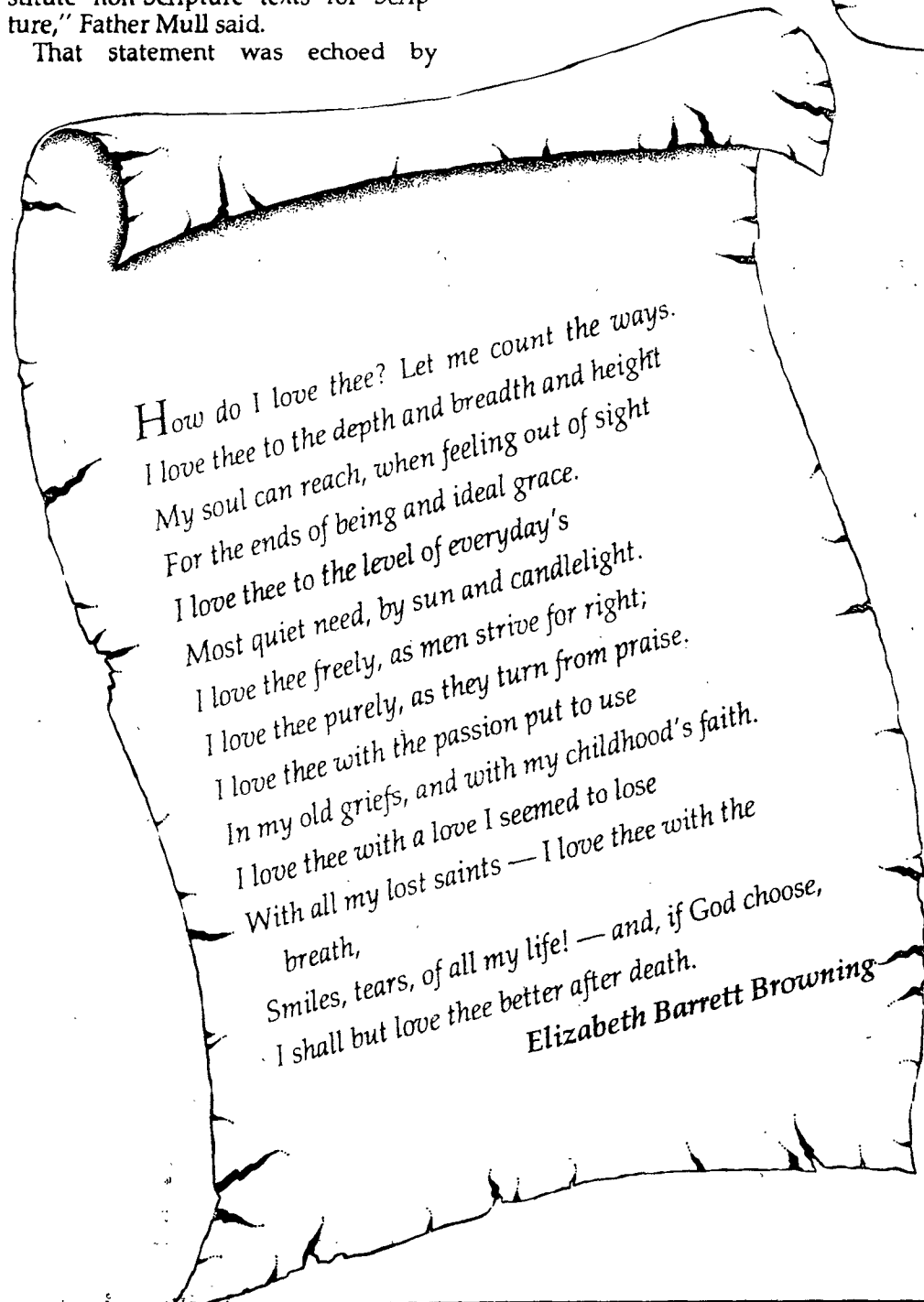
Father Lawrence Madden, SJ, in *Celebrating Marriage: Preparing the Wedding Liturgy*, one of the texts most commonly used in marriage-preparation programs.

"Some couples ask about the possibility of using readings from sources other than the Scriptures in the wedding liturgy," Father Madden wrote. "While such readings may reflect valuable insights into the marriage, they are best used outside of the liturgy. The readings in the wedding liturgy are limited to those that the church holds to be the Word of God, that is, the Scriptures."

A major reason for disallowing non-Scripture readings, Father Mull said, is that "many times, there is a personal meaning there that most of the people present would not understand."

"One of the things that we try to stress over and over is the fact that this is a communal celebration," he continued. "It's the community coming to celebrate with (the couple), not the community coming to watch them."

In addition, Father Mull noted, the rite has a certain flow to it so couples are generally discouraged from trying



to insert non-Scripture readings at other points during the service.

When couples come to him as pastor of Sacred Heart Cathedral, he advises those who want special readings to consider printing them on the wedding program. If they still want to include such readings in the service, he suggests that they place them at the beginning to help provide a focus or at the end to serve as a final comment.

A little more leeway is allowed with the vows than with the readings, Father Mull noted. The basic criteria is that the vows have to include three essential components: a statement that the person is entering freely into the marriage; a commitment to faithfulness; and a vow to permanence.

"You can take these basic things and accentuate them," Father Mull observed. He explained, for example, that the couple can word the vow of permanence with such a phrase as "until the sun and moon are no more."

The vows must, however, be in line with Catholic beliefs about the importance of marriage, Father Mull observed. He added that the one couple he helped prepare "wanted to promise that they would be each other's best friends. Well, you want to vow to be more than that. You're vowing to be husband and wife."

At the same time, however, the couple has to be careful about making the vows too elaborate, Father Mull remarked.

"I had one couple come in with a

full-page vow," Father Mull recalled. "I said, 'Think about how you're going to feel at the moment. Think about what you can say at that moment.' It's a time of emotion, and getting through something that long might be too hard."

Father Mull acknowledged that couples are concerned with personalizing the ceremony. But, he said, the readings and the vows are not appropriate times to do so.

"What is often misunderstood is that this is the Catholic Church celebrating the wedding," Father Mull explained. "We can't separate it from Roman Catholic tradition to make it individual."

The couple can personalize the celebration through the people who are invited and by the people whom they choose to participate directly in the liturgy, Father Mull remarked. Couples can also opt to include personal touches and readings on the program or at the reception, he said.

For the most part, Father Mull observed, most couples tend to select traditional readings and vows. He advised those who want to do something different to meet with the presiding priest or deacon to discuss what they would like to do before making any special plans.