

# Fall Marriage

## Here comes the bride — out of St. Peter's Basilica

By Cindy Wooden  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — They want a very, very small, but very special Catholic wedding.

What they end up with isn't exactly no-frills, because frills come with the territory when one marries in St. Peter's Basilica.

American couples who come to Rome to marry in St. Peter's usually invite fewer than 10 guests — and often just their two witnesses. But they hear hundreds of shouts of "Congratulations," "Auguri" and "Omedeto" as they leave the church.

The couples become part of the sightseeing experience of the English-speaking, Italian and Japanese tourists who wish them well and snap their photos with the basilica in the background.

Some of the newlyweds look a bit shocked by the crowd's greeting as they leave the intimacy of the wedding itself, which usually takes place in the Choir Chapel. It's as if they don't expect the tourists to notice the bride's gown and bouquet, the groom's suit and their glowing faces.

One of the hidden duties of the Paulist priests of Santa Susanna Parish, the parish for U.S. Catholics living in Rome, is running a full-service wedding agency for English speakers wanting to marry in St. Peter's or in a Roman church.

Paulist Fathers John Foley and Dennis Hickey don't just officiate at the wedding — they accompany the couple through the bureaucratic paper-maze and even more.

One bride called 45 minutes before her wedding was to start, explaining her gown was too wrinkled to wear.

Their wedding photos include one of her ironing her dress — in the priest's residence.

Father Hickey said.

Although it's rare for the couples to have a rehearsal before they come to Rome, the Paulists have the couple rehearse in the choir chapel ahead of time to make sure they know what to do during the ceremony.

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The marriage license comes from the U.S. Consulate in Rome instead of city hall.

Why would a couple want to come all the way to Rome to be married?

"It's a question I never ask, but they all tell us," Father Hickey said. They talk about St. Peter's being the center of the Catholic Church and about the basilica's beauty — "most brides cry when they go into the chapel."

"Some quite frankly don't want a big wedding," Father Hickey said, and "some think it's romantic."

The couples know most of their family and friends will not be able to travel with them to Rome for the wedding. Brides and grooms willing to do that generally are older than 25 and independent, the priest said.

The basilica has a pool of approved organists if the couple chooses to have music at the wedding, but it's the organist who chooses the songs.

The photographer also must be approved, and most couples go with one the Paulists are used to working with — he gets couples proofs of the photographs on the same day as the wedding.

Usually the bride's bouquet is the only flower purchase, Father Hickey said. "The chapel is so beautiful you wouldn't see the flowers anyway."

Many of the grooms wear a tuxedo, bringing their own or renting one through their hotel.

Almost all of the brides wear white, and most of them wear a traditional gown, he said.

The Paulists' three pages of general information and list of requirements for couples wanting to marry in Rome or the Vatican includes the line: "Great sensitivity is required in choosing dresses for the women in the wedding party — no bare shoulders and hem reaching at least to the knee."

It's serious advice because guards outside the church will bar anyone with bare shoulders, miniskirts or shorts from entering the basilica — even if it's the bride.

A maximum of two weddings a day are celebrated in St. Peter's: there's a 9:30 a.m. mass and another an hour later.

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