

FEATURE

Weddings are about faith, not theater

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

Have you ever attended a Catholic wedding at which:

• The groom made his entrance by climbing down a rope from the choir loft?

• The mothers of the couple sang a duet from "Grease"?

• The priest, at the couple's request, intentionally fumbled his lines, à la the Rowan Atkinson character in "Four Weddings and a Funeral"?

• Each guest was given a helium balloon to hold during Mass and then release heavenward as the couple exited the church?

Hollywood might be hard-pressed to top the theatrical elements diocesan priests say they're asked to permit at weddings. On the one hand, they say that most ideas to personalize a wedding, such as choosing special music or readings, are readily welcomed.

But they also have nixed plans like those listed at the top of this story — all of which were actual requests.

"The ritual of marriage is actually very simple — an exchange of vows, and the blessing and exchange of rings. And the Mass certainly helps to provide a fuller setting," said Father Robert Kennedy, pastor of Rochester's Blessed Sacrament Church. "But the 'event' of couples marrying is obviously a very big thing in their lives."

Father Kennedy once presided at a wedding where the ring-bearer pulled the flower-girl down the aisle in a lace-covered wagon. Since he hadn't learned about this innovation until the night before, he grudgingly permitted it. "You tolerate that, what can you do?" he remarked.

But Father Kennedy is less tolerant of other ideas. "In our wedding guidelines in the parish, we say no confetti, birdseed, balloons, butterflies or soap bubbles. My only concern would be, who's going to clean it up? Those kinds of things you can do at the reception," he commented.

He implemented the ban on soap bubbles after someone dropped a bottle of bubbles near the church entrance after one wedding, and an elderly woman slid on the liquid and fell down the steps.

Father Kennedy, longtime professor of liturgy at St. Bernard's Institute and a former diocesan director of liturgy, said an elaborate wedding is "more of a cultural thing. I remind couples that this is a religious event; you're not creating some kind of pageant."

The priest noted, for example, that the Rochester Diocese doesn't favor outdoor weddings because a church setting keeps

the focus on the sacrament. Canon 1118 in the Code of Canon Law does allow for a marriage to be celebrated in a "suitable place" other than a church, but Joan Workmaster, diocesan director of liturgy, said this would mean a chapel or shrine rather than a park. Permission for outdoor weddings are routinely denied by diocesan officials, she said, even though many non-Catholic weddings take place outdoors.

Two years ago, Father Lee Chase, pastor of St. Thomas More in Brighton, noted in a bulletin article that he'd been asked to marry people while they were scuba diving, jumping out of a plane, or in Eastview Mall. These types of requests, he wrote, illustrate how "marriages have gotten out of hand," where in reality "Christian marriage is a very serious matter."

And Father John Hayes, pastor of St. Joseph's/St. William in Livonia and Conesus, said he learned early his 15-year priesthood how wide the range of personalization can extend. Once, he recalled, a couple planned to place candelabras all over the church, without flame covers or any items to catch the dripping wax. Another wedding party wanted to appear in 1800s-style clothing, complete with top hats for men. The ceremony was to be followed by a balloon release outside the church.

"Shortly after this happened, I started to make up a few rules of my own," Father Hayes remarked.

Father Hayes said he now empha-

sizes to couples that "first and foremost, they should be reverent." A good example, he said, came when he presided at a wedding that coincided with the bride's parents' 50th wedding anniversary: During the ceremony, the parents renewed their own marriage vows.

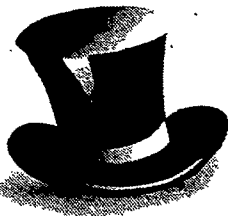
Father Chase says he tries to steer couples toward personalizing their wedding by "really looking for (relevant) readings and finding good readers," he said. He also encourages couples to select their own prayers of the faithful. Joanne Doebrich, St. Thomas More's wedding coordinator, agreed that including prayers "for grandparents who have died, people who couldn't come, people who were sick" adds a nice touch. Other pleasant additions to weddings at St. Thomas More have been presenting flowers to parents during the sign of peace, and musicians playing bagpipes or a harp, she said.

"I encourage them to think about music because it really does touch people's souls," Doebrich said.

Fathers Hayes and Chase said they don't especially care for top-40 tunes being worked into the liturgy, although Doebrich said such love songs do fit in nicely as guests are being seated. Workmaster said that in diocesan sacramental guidelines, "The encouragement is always for sacred music to be used during the liturgy." However, she did agree that popular music is permissible before the wedding — or, as Father Kennedy said, at the reception.

At one recent wedding, Doebrich recalled, a difference of opinion arose over the Our Father: The bride felt very strongly about having it sung, but the cantor was not accustomed to singing it. Only at the last moment did the cantor consent.

"I just said 'This is something they really want, and I like it when they request spiritual things,'" Doebrich said. "When he sang it, the whole church sang with him, and the bride had tears rolling down her cheeks. I later told the cantor, 'I'm so glad you decided to do that, it meant so much to her.'"



Engaged Encounter seeks couples to present retreats

Engaged Encounter in the Rochester Diocese is seeking couples who have been married five years or more to train as retreat presenters.

These couples should be willing to share their gift of a solid Christian (Catholic or non-Catholic) marriage with the couples who attend Engaged Encounter retreats, which intensively address topics concerning engaged couples' lives together.

Dates and locations for upcoming Engaged Encounter retreats are March 22-24 and May 24-26 at Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua, and Oct. 18-20 at Borromeo Prayer Center in Greece.

Married couples interested in becoming presenters, and engaged couples wishing to register as participants, should contact Mike and Chris Donnelly at 585/924-4750.

Fasting takes many forms

WASHINGTON (CNS) — This Lent, Catholics should fast not only from food but from violence, apathy and sin, said Father James P. Moroney, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Liturgy.

In a reflection for Ash Wednesday, Feb. 13, he said the cross of ashes Catholics receive on their forehead may remind them of the "ashes" before our eyes and of the past six months' "fast" from the grim destruction at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

While ashes "conjure up death and darkness and the end of things," he said, Catholics are inspired with ashes at the start of Lent "so that each of us might turn from all that is earthly, dark and sinful and return to the Gospel of life."

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops posted Father Moroney's reflections Jan. 15, along with other Lenten resources on its Web site, www.usccb.org.

He described Lenten fasting as more than just eating less.

"By letting go of the food and pleasures we do not really need, we participate in Christ's self-emptying in becoming man and in dying upon the cross... An empty stomach makes room for God, room for prayer," he said.

Father Moroney called Lent a time for letting go of bad habits and regaining good habits. He suggested fasting in a more comprehensive sense, fasting from sin, from ignorance, from selfishness, from anger and verbal abuse, and from apathy which refuses to use the good God has given us.

"The 40-day Lenten cross preaches to a world which hungers for peace, for truth and for freedom from fear," he said.

"The cross," he added, "proclaims that only by fasting from injustice and superfluous bounty can we find true peace. That only by fasting from violence and sin can we find real truth. That only by fasting from apathy and dark selfishness can we be freed from fear."

Catholics 14 and older must abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and the Fridays of Lent. Healthy Catholics aged 18 through 59 are obliged to observe penitential days of fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. They are expected to refrain from eating between meals, and to have no more than one main meal and two smaller meals per day.

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Wedding Guide