

Why can't the priest marry me at the reception hall?

Weddings have become so complicated, haven't they? The couple decides on a date; well, actually, they decide on a number of dates, check out the availability of certain reception halls, narrow the choice of halls to the ones that are more affordable, and finally contact the church to see if that date is available at the Church. If the couple is lucky enough to find the "perfect date" where all these universes intersect, now they have to plan how the day can unfold in as seamless a way as possible. A number of guests are coming in from out of town and there is a three hour interval between the end of the Church ceremony and the beginning of the reception. What do we do with all these out-of-town guests? Maybe we have put them up in a local hotel, but even there we need to bus them to the Church, back to the hotel, and then on to the reception (if we don't want them to drive at all that day). Finally, we have to worry about the little ones in the bridal party being able to sit through the ceremony, and the pictures, and the reception while not crinkling their special dresses and tuxedos. It is so complicated.

It would be so much simpler if we can just have the ceremony in the reception hall. We don't have to manage to make all the dates and times coincide. We don't have to worry about transportation issues, lags of time between events or keeping everyone looking pretty for the event. Why can't the priest just marry us in the hall?

To say simply that it is against the Church's code of canon law doesn't wash it for most. It's like the parent saying to the petulant child, "Because I said so." So, in just a few sentences, let me make an attempt to explain why it is fitting to have the celebration of the sacrament of marriage in the Church.

I personally love to listen to the stories of couples when they describe the moment of their engagement. The bride-to-be describes in great detail the loving care by which her future spouse selected the right place and the right time to propose. Usually the place of engagement is special – maybe where the couple first met or vacationed together, or maybe where they have traditionally gone to be together at special times of the year. The place has meaning.

Of course, I would like to say that the Church space has meaning as well. It is the place where hopefully the couple has encountered God. More importantly, it is the place where Jesus renews and indeed consummates His love with His spouse, the Church every single day. It is where we hear the sacred words that give flesh and meaning to every other expression of human love: "This is my body, given for you."

The Church is the place where all human love receives its true meaning. If married love is total and faithful and life-giving (expressed in the beautiful vows that a husband and wife say to one another), then where have we experienced that expression of love in its most sublime form? The divine love of a God who becomes real, who becomes flesh, who actually becomes food in Eucharist is experienced in no other place on earth other than in the Church. That is the love we aspire to live. That is the love a married couple would want to reflect. That is the love a husband and wife would want to give and receive from now into eternity.

Is a catering hall the place where we have experienced divine love? Is the catering place going to

be that sacred space where we will be inspired to love in that same total, faithful and sacrificial way? Just some food for thought. . .