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Dear Friend in Christ,

Congratulations on your engagement!

I am very happy that the Basilica of St. Mary will have a role in the beginning of your married life. Your life will be a beacon of hope to those who wonder if love is real. The love you share with each other every day will be the expression of your vocation and the manifestation of the love God has for each of us. Marriage is the way God will make you a saint.

To assist you with your marriage and wedding preparation, this booklet has been prepared for you. Hopefully it will answer many of your questions. I would ask you to read the entire packet and see that the following forms (available online) are completed and returned to the Parish Office prior to your first meeting:

[*Adherence to Wedding Guidelines*](#)

[*Marriage Preparation Questionnaire*](#)

[*Format for the Simple Ceremony*](#) (only if your wedding will be a Simple Ceremony)

If you have further questions, please do not hesitate to call the Parish Office for further assistance.

May God who has begun this good work in you bring it to fulfillment. Mary, Our Hope, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Father Edward Hathaway

Very Rev. Edward C. Hathaway, Pastor

Attachments:

Wedding Preparation Booklet

Basilica of St. Mary
Wedding Preparation Booklet



The Betrothal of the Virgin, Pietro Perugino

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MARRIAGE

1. What's the difference between a Catholic marriage and other marriages?
2. What's the difference between a sacramental marriage and a natural marriage?
3. Why does the Church have rules about marriage and weddings?
4. What does it mean to be "married in the Church"?

REGISTRATION

5. How can I sign up to get married?
6. Who may be married at the Basilica of St. Mary?
7. May I marry a non-Catholic?
8. May a member of an Eastern Catholic Church marry here?
9. Must one be in full communion with the current Pope to be married here?

CELEBRANT

10. Who will be the celebrant of my wedding?
11. May I invite another priest to officiate at our wedding here at the Basilica?

LOCATION OF THE WEDDING

12. May I be married at a Catholic church other than the Basilica of St. Mary?
13. May I be married in a non-Catholic church, a synagogue, a mosque, etc.?
14. May our wedding ceremony be celebrated in a home, a garden, a hall, etc.?

SCHEDULING A DATE

15. When can I schedule a date, and why does it seem to take so long?
16. On what days and at what times can I get married at the Basilica?

MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROCESS

17. What is marriage preparation, and why do we have to do it?
18. When should I begin making arrangements for a wedding at the Basilica of St. Mary?
19. What does the six-month marriage preparation process required by the Diocese involve?
20. At what hours of the day are the sessions with the priest scheduled?
21. What do the sessions with the priest involve?
22. What if my fiancé is not a Catholic, or not baptized; how will this affect our preparation?
23. What if we are already "married" according to civil law—how will this affect our preparation?
24. What if my fiancé and I are living together—what effect will that have on our wedding preparation?
25. What is meant by a "simple ceremony"?

REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION

26. What paperwork does the Church require?
27. What should I know about obtaining a Civil License?
28. Do you still do the "Wedding Banns"?
29. What other requirements should we be concerned about during this process?

THE NUPTIAL MASS

30. Who will help us plan our wedding at the Basilica of St. Mary?
31. Should our wedding take place during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass?
32. If our wedding takes place at Mass, may those who are not Catholic receive Holy Communion?
33. Do we still need to go to Mass the next day?

RITUALS

34. How can I personalize my wedding?
35. May I incorporate pious customs into the wedding, such as laying flowers at the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary?
36. May the Unity Candle be used during the wedding?
37. What are some of the Catholic wedding customs that I might not have seen before?
38. May I prepare and distribute a “program” at my wedding?

PARTICIPANTS IN THE WEDDING

39. How many people may I have in my wedding party?
40. How many people may I invite to serve in “liturgical functions” at the wedding?
41. May I invite a non-Catholic minister to participate in my wedding ceremony?
42. May I invite non-Catholic lay people to fulfill liturgical functions in my wedding?
43. May I invite non-Catholics to stand in my wedding party?
44. May children be included in our wedding party?
45. Are there any rules about what the wedding party may wear?
46. Where does the wedding party dress and prepare for the wedding?

MUSIC

47. May we choose our favorite songs for our wedding?
48. Who may serve as musicians?
49. Is there a fee for the music?

WEDDING DECORATIONS

50. Are there any norms regarding flowers and decorations?
51. May we use rice, birdseed, flower petals, etc.?

PHOTOGRAPHS

52. Are there any norms regarding photographs at the wedding?
53. May we take pictures in the church after the wedding?
54. Are there any rules for guests with cameras?

OTHER CONCERNS AFTER THE WEDDING

55. How long may we stay in the church after the wedding?
56. May we have a “receiving line” after the wedding?
57. Who is responsible for cleaning up after the wedding?

WEDDING FEE

58. Is there a fee for our wedding?
59. If a priest at the Basilica of St. Mary prepares us, but the wedding is in another city or state, is there a fee for his assistance?

MARRIAGE

1. What’s the difference between a Catholic marriage and other marriages?

A Catholic marriage encompasses everything involved in any marriage: the irrevocable union of a man and a woman in exclusive, intimate love. Jesus restored the original nature of marriage, and the Church alone continues to hold the same standard for all marriages, that they be permanent and naturally ordered to the procreation of children.

Our Lord also raised the marriages of Christians to the dignity of a sacrament. As a sacrament, marriage communicates sanctifying grace and the indwelling of the Holy Trinity. Whereas in a natural marriage the husband and wife contract a marriage with each other, in a sacramental marriage the husband and wife are the ministers of the sacrament of marriage to each other.

2. What’s the difference between a sacramental marriage and a natural marriage?

A marriage between two baptized Christians is a sacrament. Otherwise, when two non-Christians marry each other or when a Christian marries a non-Christian it is a natural marriage.

3. Why does the Church have rules about marriage and weddings?

Marriage is a vocation, the most important lifework for those who embark upon it. For Christians, it is the way their public life of belonging to the Lord is made specific and concrete. It is the primary way they will care for the sick and evangelize the world.

At first, since only Christians insist on the permanence of marriage and believe that marriage is a path to heaven, Christians were allowed only to marry Christians. Originally that’s about all the Church insisted upon. Weddings took place in private or publicly, at Mass and outside of Mass. Marrying a non-Christian did require the special permission of the Church. As long as both husband and wife exchanged vows with each other, that’s all that mattered.

By the end of the first millennium, the Church faced the problem of secret marriages that would later be abandoned. Over the objection of family and Church, the spouse who was abandoning the marriage could claim that if nobody witnessed the exchange of vows, nobody could hold them accountable. Over the course of the next few centuries the Church made it mandatory for members of the Church to be married in a manner that was witnessed by the Church. Even though that law makes life a little difficult sometimes, you can understand why it exists.

4. What does it mean to be “married in the Church”?

It simply means that the Catholic(s) is (are) married with the permission of the Church. It doesn’t refer to the fact that the wedding physically took place inside a Catholic Church.

REGISTRATION

5. How can I sign up to get married?

Contact the Parish Office once you are sure that you are free to marry and well-suited for marriage *and* after you have found someone of the opposite sex who is so similarly disposed *and* when you both are ready to marry each other.

6. Who may be married at the Basilica of St. Mary?

- 1) **Parishioners:** any Catholic not otherwise impeded by Divine law or Church law, who lives within the territorial boundaries of the Basilica of St. Mary is a parishioner and may be married at this church. It is not necessary that both the bride and the groom be parishioners, but at least one of them must be. A parishioner who does not actually live within the parish boundaries, but who is a registered parishioner still needs the permission of the pastor of the parish in which he/she resides. That pastor's written permission needs to be submitted **prior to any arrangements being made.**
- 2) **Children of parishioners:** any Catholic, whose parents are actively participating members of St. Mary, **IF** the pastor of the parish in which they reside will give his **written permission prior to any wedding arrangements being made.**

7. May I marry a non-Catholic?

Yes, if you make a firm commitment to continue to practice your faith, which includes baptizing your children and doing your best to raise them Catholic, presuming there is good reason to believe that the other party will not interfere with your exercise of religious freedom.

8. May a member of an Eastern Catholic Church marry here?

Only with explicit written permission from their proper Church authority.

9. Must one be in full communion with the current Pope to be married here?

Yes. However, a Catholic in good standing may marry a schismatic or apostate with written permission from the Bishop.

CELEBRANT

10. Who will be the celebrant of my wedding?

Technically, you and your fiancé will be the celebrants of the wedding (see No.1) since your exchange of vows brings the marriage into existence. Your vows will be witnessed by one of

the clerics of the parish. You may ask one of the priests to prepare you for marriage and officiate at your wedding. If you will have a Nuptial Mass (wedding Mass) the same priest or another priest of your choosing will offer the Mass.

For the sake of simplicity, let it be clear that any further reference to “priest” or “celebrant” applies equally to a deacon except for contexts that refer to the offering of Holy Mass.

11. May I invite another priest to officiate at our wedding at the Basilica of St. Mary?

Ordinarily, one of the parish priests would officiate at your wedding. You may choose to invite any relative or close friend who is a Catholic priest in good standing to officiate, in which case he is to request permission from the pastor of the Basilica as soon as a date has been set. Should the priest you choose be stationed in the Diocese of Arlington, he must assume full responsibility for all marriage preparation and submit the completed wedding folder to the Basilica of St. Mary at least one month prior to your wedding. It is expected that any visiting priest will abide by universal liturgical law, as well as local parish custom.

If your visiting priest is not a priest of the Diocese of Arlington, please note that any priest performing a wedding in the Commonwealth of Virginia **must** be properly “bonded” by the Commonwealth of Virginia. Virginia does not have a reciprocity agreement with any other State in this matter, and this “bonding” is **never automatic**. Please check with your visiting priest to make sure he can and does comply with this law—**do not assume** that he will comply on his own. **Failure to comply with this STATE LAW will render your wedding void and you will not be legally married.**

LOCATION OF THE WEDDING

12. May I be married at a Catholic church other than the Basilica?

Any Catholic living within our parish boundaries who wishes to be married at another Catholic Church or military chapel will be given a letter of permission. However, in such cases, it usually becomes the responsibility of the priest in that parish who will officiate at the wedding to see that all requirements for preparation and documentation are fulfilled unless he resides at too great a distance from you. **The priests of the parish usually do not officiate at marriages outside of the Basilica of St. Mary.**

13. May I be married in a non-Catholic church, a synagogue, a mosque, etc.?

Since marriage begins with a promise to God and before God, Church law requires that marriages are normally celebrated within a Catholic church in the presence of a priest or deacon, and two witnesses. When a Catholic has permission to marry a non-Catholic (see No. 7), the Bishop may dispense from the obligation to marry per the Catholic ritual, especially if

the couple's wedding would be conducted per the religious custom of the non-Catholic. The priest who prepares the couple requests this permission.

It is never allowed to perform two wedding ceremonies (e.g. Catholic and non-Catholic) since it is the exchange of vows that marks the definite beginning of the marriage. When permission is granted for a non-Catholic wedding ceremony, your deacon or priest is not allowed to perform a Catholic wedding ceremony.

14. May our wedding ceremony be celebrated in a home, a garden, a hall, etc.?

Not typically, for the reasons stated above. Permission to do so must come from the Bishop of the Diocese where the wedding will take place. Even when a Catholic marries a non-Christian it is not common that permission is granted for the wedding not to take place in a sacred space.

SCHEDULING A DATE

15. When can I schedule a date, and why does it seem to take so long?

As soon as the priest preparing you knows that you are free to marry and is convinced that you understand the wedding vows and are ready to commit to them, you can set a wedding date. That sometimes takes a little bit of time. (See No. 18).

While an unofficial date for the wedding may be tentatively set at the first meeting with the priest, it is not official or binding until the priest has made his determination. This is generally not possible until after the FOCCUS Test (see No. 21) has been reviewed and the Pre-Nuptial Investigation is completed. Therefore, **arrangements for a reception hall must not be finalized until the priest confirms the official date.** Couples should therefore seek to fulfill all these requirements as soon as possible.

16. On what days and at what times can I get married at the Basilica of St. Mary?

Weddings are normally scheduled for Saturdays at 10:30 a.m., 12:30p.m., and 2:30 p.m. so as to fit comfortably between morning confessions and afternoon confessions.

Rehearsals for Saturday weddings take place on the preceding Friday evening at 4:00p.m., 5:00 p.m., or 6:00pm depending on Church and priest availability.

Weddings and rehearsals must always start on time, since the church may be scheduled for other events and the priest, coordinator, and musicians may have other obligations. Thus, the wedding party should arrive at the church well before the time scheduled for the beginning of the rehearsal or wedding. When a wedding is delayed for any reason, the priest might have to modify the planned ritual to make up for the delay. For example, depending on the length of the delay, certain songs or Scripture readings may be eliminated, or in some cases a Nuptial Mass might have to be replaced with a wedding ceremony outside of Mass.

Wedding Masses are **not** celebrated at the Basilica on **SUNDAYS or HOLY DAYS** of OBLIGATION.

Weddings on weekdays may be permitted **IF** they do not conflict with other parish activities, and if a priest is available.

For weddings that are to take place during the penitential seasons of ADVENT (four weeks before Christmas) and LENT (six weeks before Easter), the solemn nature of these seasons is to be observed in the externals (e.g., flowers, music, decorations, etc.) by stark simplicity reflecting the penitential mood of these days. Thus, you may prefer to celebrate your wedding outside of these liturgical seasons.

*Please note for Lent specifically, although weddings are permitted there will be no flowers, and the statues and crucifix will be covered in a deep purple cloth. Accommodations will not be made to alter this penitential state. Be aware when choosing your date that this is something you ascent to should you choose a wedding date in Lent.

MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROCESS

17. What is marriage preparation, and why do we have to do it?

Marriage preparation is less like counseling and more like spiritual direction. Someone once said that marriage will either break you or make you a saint. Since nobody ever became a saint by accident, it would be good to have some guidance.

18. When should I begin planning for a wedding at the Basilica?

Try to begin planning as soon as you get engaged. The Diocese of Arlington requires a **MINIMUM** of six months of preparation for marriage.

19. What does the six-month marriage preparation process required by the Diocese involve?

- 1) Meet with the priest with whom arrangements are being made **AT LEAST** four times. We urge you to be punctual for your sessions with the priest. Due to subsequent appointments being scheduled, we cannot assure you a priest will be able to meet with you if you are late. Please call if you foresee any difficulty or if you need to reschedule.
- 2) Attend an additional weekend program sponsored by the Diocese; you may choose from:
 - i) **Conferences for the Engaged** (these options will be explained in brochures you will receive at your first session with the priest),
 - ii) **Engaged Encounter**
- 3) You must also enroll in a course in **Natural Family Planning** (NFP), the only method of family planning compatible with the Catholic Faith, as all practice of contraception is gravely sinful. A schedule of dates for these classes is provided in a brochure you should receive at your first session with the priest. Be sure to ask for it in case the priest forgets. You also can look online for a schedule of classes at www.ccli.org.

The non-Catholic party in an inter-faith marriage should be aware of the Catholic spouse's obligation to refrain from all contraception and be willing to be supportive and cooperative in this resolve.

20. At what hours of the day are the sessions with the priest scheduled?

The priests are eager to cooperate with the busy schedules of couples. However, please remember that priests also have busy schedules with confessions, Mass, meetings, and classes scheduled in the evenings. Just as you are willing to meet with florists, dressmakers, caterers, etc., during their regular, “9 to 5” business hours, please be willing to try to meet with the priest during his regular office hours, if possible. A limited number of evening and Saturday morning appointments may be available, which you can arrange with the priest who is preparing you.

21. What do the sessions with the priest involve?

The sessions with the priest will deal with:

- 1) the required paperwork and documentation which will help the priest determine that the couple is free to marry and capable of marriage,
- 2) the administration of the FOCCUS test (an indicator of the depth of your communication) and point-by-point consideration of the areas of disagreement,
- 3) the Church's understanding and appreciation of marriage as a vocation along with its challenges and blessings, and
- 4) the actual planning of the wedding ritual.

22. What if my fiancé is not a Catholic, or not baptized; how will this affect our preparation?

Many happy marriages begin with one spouse who is not Catholic. It can't be denied, though, that there are some struggles that accompany differences of religion. There may be another meeting and some additional reading to address the matter.

In addition, because of the importance of this issue, the priest must apply to obtain special permission or dispensation from the Bishop of Arlington for the wedding to take place (see No. 7). This application is very seldom denied. To obtain this permission or dispensation, the **Catholic party** must make two promises (and the non-Catholic party must be informed of these promises):

- 1) That he/she is prepared to remove dangers of falling away from the practice of the Catholic faith, and
- 2) Will do all in his/her power to have all the children born of the marriage baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church.

Finally, certain adaptations are made to the wedding ritual (see No. 31) to reflect the religious faith that the two do have in common.

23. What if we are already “married” according to civil law—how will this affect our preparation?

We are very happy to assist couples who come to us to have their civil marriages “blessed by the Church”—or what we call a “**convalidation**”. It must be understood, however, that a merely “civil marriage” involving a Catholic is not recognized by the Catholic Church as a

marriage in the eyes of God (see No. 3). Thus, when such a couple comes to us, their Catholic ceremony will be considered as though it is a new marriage and the preparation involved will largely parallel the preparation of other unmarried couples. However, since many of these couples will come to us with long term “natural bonds” between them, we can often allow some flexibility in both the time and process of preparation, based on the situation of the couple involved.

Nevertheless, since a couple in this type of marriage is, objectively speaking, *publicly* living in a relationship which is directly contrary to the teachings of Christ and His Church, the *public* celebration of marriage for such couples *must* be of a more subdued nature; that is, their Catholic wedding will involve only a “simple ceremony” (see No. 25).

24. What if my fiancé and I are living together—what effect will that have on our wedding preparation?

Living together before marriage, “cohabiting”, is one of the worst ways to prepare for marriage. Current statistics bear out the high divorce rate among those who marry after having lived together. Not only does it involve the morally grave sin of fornication and directly mislead others to think that it is acceptable behavior (the sin of scandal), but the social sciences clearly show that it also seriously damages their relationship emotionally, psychologically, and practically. In addition, in many cases the ability to clearly discern and freely choose to give themselves in marriage is severely impaired. Out of sincere love and concern for the cohabiting couple, the priest preparing them for marriage will try to help them to understand the seriousness of this problem and encourage them to find alternative living arrangements during the engagement.

Unfortunately, some cohabiting couples try to avoid facing this issue by misleading the priest, e.g., giving a false address. Since any such deception seriously undermines the whole preparation and evaluation process, if it is discovered, **the wedding in question may be postponed or even cancelled.** (see No. 29).

25. What is meant by a “simple ceremony”?

A “simple ceremony” refers to a special manner of conducting a Catholic wedding ritual in the case of couples who already are civilly married. Some couples may have had a wedding ceremony already but without permission of the Church (see No. 3, 13). The simple ceremony provides for a simple and dignified exchange of vows in a manner that allows everyone to avoid any awkwardness. Nobody is put in the position of celebrating the purported beginning of something that for all intents and purposes has already begun. Practically speaking, a simple ceremony is generally *less* elaborate and *more* subdued in tone and appearance than the usual wedding ceremony. Appropriate dress for a simple ceremony is semi-formal. Modest flowers, music, and decorations are permitted. If your wedding will be a simple ceremony, please take a moment now to find the Format for the Simple Ceremony in the back of this booklet, because the guidelines for a simple ceremony differ from the guidelines that follow. Please read through the policy, sign it, and submit it to the Wedding Coordinator prior to your first meeting with the priest.

REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION

26. What paperwork does the Church require?

- 1) A Catholic party must provide a **recent copy** (not more than 6 months old) of his/her Baptismal Certificate that has been issued by the church in which he/she was baptized. Write to or call the church of baptism, tell them you are planning to marry, give them your name and the date of your baptism, and ask for a copy of your **Baptismal Certificate “with notations”**. A recent copy is required because the notations include records of any sacrament (except for Confession) having been received since Baptism. Our first step in establishing your freedom to marry is making sure that there is no record in the Catholic Church of your having been married. Then submit the original certificate you receive (NOT a photocopy of it) to your priest. A Catholic party is also required to provide copies of his/her Confirmation Certificate, unless noted on back of the Baptismal Certificate.
- 2) A baptized non-Catholic is to provide a photocopy of his/her **Baptismal Certificate**, or a letter from his/her church indicating that the Baptism has taken place.
- 3) Each party will be given two copies (a total of four) of an **Affidavit of Freedom**. These also serve as proof of each party’s freedom to marry. They roughly equate to a minister’s request at the wedding: “If anyone knows why these two should not marry, speak now or forever hold your peace.” The forms may be completed by your parents, other close relatives, or those who can vouch for your readiness as well as your parents’ approval. In order to be an official document for your marriage file, **each affidavit must be signed in front of a notary, whether it be a notary public or a Catholic priest or deacon**.
- 4) The priest with whom arrangements are being made will fill out a questionnaire (**Pre-Nuptial Investigation**) by asking the parties to testify, under oath, that there are no impediments to their proposed marriage.
- 5) The priest will ask the parties to fill out a pre-marital inventory (**FOCCUS test**), the purpose of which is to assist the couple to evaluate their communication.
- 6) When you attend the **Conference for the Engaged or equivalent program**, you will be given a certificate that your priest will add to your file.
- 7) When you finish attending the required course in **Natural Family Planning**, you will be given a certificate that your priest will add to your file.
- 8) If either the bride or groom (whether they are Catholic or not) has *ever* been married before in *any* type of ceremony (Protestant, Jewish, civil, etc.) or under “common law”, proof must be submitted regarding the annulment of that prior bond (i.e., a **decree of nullity** from the competent Catholic tribunal) or the death of the prior

spouse (i.e., a **death certificate**). A **copy of the original divorce decree and marriage license/certificate** must also be provided.

- 9) If the couple has previously entered a merely civil marriage and now wish to enter a marriage before God by “having their marriage blessed by the Church” (convalidation) they must also provide a **certified copy of their marriage certificate**.
- 10) The parties must provide to the priest who will officiate at their wedding a Civil License issued by the Circuit Court of the Commonwealth of Virginia. This is to be done **prior to the wedding rehearsal. No wedding can take place unless the Civil License has been secured and been given to the priest who will officiate.**

27. What should I know about obtaining a Civil License?

Residents of Virginia may obtain a Civil License from the Clerk of the Circuit Court at any county courthouse in the Commonwealth. Non-residents of Virginia **MUST** obtain a Civil License from the Clerk of the Circuit Court at the courthouse of the county in which the marriage is to take place. For St. Mary Parish, this means the CITY OF ALEXANDRIA COURTHOUSE. Also, please note:

- 1) County courthouses are not open on Saturdays or Sundays.
- 2) The Civil License is good for only sixty (60) days; therefore, do not get it too soon.
- 3) A blood test is no longer required in the Commonwealth of Virginia; therefore, the license may be obtained upon application.
- 4) There is a fee for the Civil License.

28. Do you still do the "Wedding Banns"?

Per the Diocese of Arlington’s policy, marriage banns - the public announcement of a forthcoming marriage in the weeks prior to the wedding - generally is no longer done due to the pre-nuptial investigation and affidavits for the free status to marry which are required components of the marriage preparation process.

29. What other requirements should we be concerned about during this process?

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of **honesty and candor**. Unfortunately, occasionally a couple will feel it necessary to hide important information from the priest or from each other. Such untruthfulness not only casts doubt on all the documents and statements given by the couple, it also seriously undermines the whole process of discernment and preparation. Since it is the priest’s obligation to assure that the marriage begins in justice and freedom, any discovery of deception in any important matter may result in **postponement of your wedding** (see No. 24).

Perhaps the most important aspect of this preparation process is your **openness to becoming not just a good person, but a saint**. Your future happiness depends on the joy you have in

obediently serving the well-being of others. Now is the best time to renew your commitment to daily prayer, Sunday Mass, and monthly confession.

THE NUPTIAL MASS

30. Who will help us plan our wedding at the Basilica of St. Mary?

While the priest is certainly happy to help you with your plans, the Wedding Coordinator is the one who will help you with the detailed planning of your wedding ceremony or Nuptial Mass. She is familiar with all our policies and preferences and can answer all of your questions regarding the wedding. Furthermore, the Wedding Coordinator will be present at the rehearsal and at the wedding itself to make sure everything runs smoothly. You may reach the Wedding Coordinator at weddings@stmaryoldtown.org.

In addition, you will work with our parish Music Director, Mr. David Elliott, (delliott@stmaryoldtown.org) in planning the music for the wedding. Please contact him as soon as you have set a date with the priest. He also is familiar with the policies and preferences of the parish with regard to music and can give you sound advice and direction.

The generous and professional contributions of our Wedding Coordinator, Music Director, and other parish staff have proven to be invaluable. In recognition of this, and in the spirit of simple Christian charity, we ask you to always show due courtesy and cooperation when working with them.

31. Should our wedding take place during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass?

If both parties are Catholic, the wedding should normally be celebrated within the context of the Holy Mass so that the couple, together, may worship the God Who made them and unites them in Holy Matrimony and so that they may receive Holy Communion together as their first married act.

If one of the parties is not baptized, it is **NEVER** permitted that the wedding be celebrated within the context of Holy Mass.

If one of the parties is baptized, but not a Catholic, the wedding is normally celebrated without Mass, since the non-Catholic spouse may not receive Holy Communion (see “Invitation to Holy Communion” below). A wedding ceremony without Mass focuses on what the newly married couple shares in faith, rather than highlighting their differences. Please consult the priest preparing you and the Wedding Coordinators for ways to make this service both sacred and beautiful.

32. If our wedding takes place at Mass, may those who are not Catholic receive Holy Communion?

Non-Catholics (including members of the wedding party) may **NOT** receive Holy Communion in the Catholic Church at a wedding, due to our very different beliefs and convictions about

the Eucharist. The only exceptions to this norm are members of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church.

Catholics may receive **IF** they are in the state of grace, properly disposed, and desirous of receiving. An announcement briefly summarizing these requirements will be made prior to Holy Communion; and, if a program is to be printed for a Nuptial Mass, the following Invitation to Holy Communion **MUST** be printed in the program:

INVITATION TO HOLY COMMUNION

FOR CATHOLICS

As Catholics, we fully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist when we receive Holy Communion. We are encouraged to receive Communion devoutly and frequently. In order to be properly disposed to receive Communion, participants should not be conscious of grave sin and normally should have fasted for one hour. A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord without prior sacramental confession except for a grave reason where there is no opportunity for confession. In this case, the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible (Code of Canon Law, 916). A frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance is encouraged for all.

FOR OUR FELLOW CHRISTIANS

We welcome our fellow Christians to this celebration of the Eucharist as our brothers and sisters. We pray that our common baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit in this Eucharist will draw us closer to one another and begin to dispel the sad divisions which separate us. We pray that these will lessen and finally disappear, in keeping with Christ's prayer for us "that they may all be one" (John 17:21).

Because Catholics believe that the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith, life, and worship, members of those churches with whom we are not yet fully united are not ordinarily admitted to Holy Communion. Eucharistic sharing in exceptional circumstances by other Christians requires permission according to the directives of the diocesan bishop and the provisions of canon law (Code of Canon Law, 844 § 4). Members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church are urged to respect the discipline of their own Churches. According to Roman Catholic discipline, the Code of Canon Law does not object to the reception of Communion by Christians of these Churches (Code of Canon Law, 844 § 3).

FOR NON-CHRISTIANS

We also welcome to this celebration those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ. While we cannot admit them to Holy Communion, we ask them to offer their prayers for the peace and the unity of the human family.

FOR THOSE NOT RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION

All who are not receiving Holy Communion are encouraged to express in their hearts a prayerful desire for unity with the Lord Jesus and with one another.

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33. Do we still need to go to Mass the next day?

Yes, if your wedding takes place on a Saturday morning or early afternoon, you still must attend Holy Mass the next Sunday. Only when a Mass on Saturday begins in the evening could it satisfy the obligation to observe the Lord's Day.

THE WEDDING RITUALS

34. How can I personalize my wedding?

In coming to the Catholic Church for your wedding you have recognized that the liturgical celebration of marriage is not something that belongs simply to any one person, couple or family. It is primarily the action of the whole Church—the *Bride of Christ*. It is a solemn and holy occasion. The Church has its own Rituals that allow the faith of both bride and groom to be expressed while ensuring that those gathered will be drawn towards the Lord. A Catholic wedding is not about you as much as it is about what God is doing through you and for you.

Consequently, while you are free to make decisions regarding various options in the Rite (e.g., Scripture passages, blessings, etc.), we will also very carefully adhere to all the Church's liturgical norms, customs, and teachings in every respect. In addition, since there are practical limitations to what our resources of space, time, and personnel can accommodate, we ask that you respect the specific policies that apply at the Basilica of St. Mary.

At your first meeting the priest will give you a book containing the options for the readings and prayers of the wedding; this will also contain a form on which you may indicate your choices. Most importantly, try to get to know your priest and let him get to know you so that it will be a friend who is preaching at your wedding.

With the help of the Music Director (delliott@stmaryoldtown.org), you will also be able to select the music for your wedding. Please coordinate your decorations and flowers with the Mary Martha Guild (MMG@stmaryoldtown.org)

35. May I incorporate pious customs into the wedding, such as laying flowers at the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary?

It is perfectly legitimate to incorporate well-established pious customs into the wedding, such as a devotion to Our Lady (which is *always* encouraged at the Basilica of St. Mary), as long as they are situated in the appropriate place in the wedding and do not tend to dominate or distract from the liturgy. Practices, however, which are not parts of the Catholic tradition of piety or which are overly distracting will not be permitted.

36. May the Unity Candle be used during the wedding?

The origins of the Unity Candle seem to be found in the secular wedding industry (e.g. Hallmark) rather than the pious custom of Christians. In any case, it is not part of the Catholic tradition. For example, the three lighted candles associated with the Unity Candle are usually understood to represent the bride and groom becoming one in marriage, but in the Catholic liturgy the symbol of the lighted candle *always* represents Jesus Christ who is “the light of the world.”

In the Catholic Church, candles in the sanctuary are used to represent the presence of God. The tabernacle lamp and the altar candles correspond to the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. You will notice that candles representing individuals' prayers are located on the votive stands outside the sanctuary.

Thus, the Unity Candle may not be used at St. Mary. Please do not request an exception to this policy. Whenever a couple desires to preserve this symbol, they are encouraged to use it at the reception, in conjunction with grace before dinner, as a way of carrying the spiritual dimension of their wedding event to their celebration.

37. What are some of the Catholic wedding customs that I might not have seen before?

You should ask the priest about a betrothal ceremony. Also, the entrance procession recommended by the Church for weddings is different from current popular practice. If you are interested in learning more about this, please ask the priest preparing you or the Music Director. Some Catholic cultures also maintain their own particular wedding customs. You should also ask about receiving a Papal Blessing on your wedding day as well as public audiences that the Holy Father grants to newlyweds. You also might want to think about having a House Blessing after you return from the honeymoon.

38. May I prepare and distribute a “program” at my wedding?

Certainly. A wedding program is often helpful for wedding guests and can make a beautiful keepsake. The content of the program, however, must be consistent with the Catholic nature of this wedding; that is, it may not contain art or poetry that is incompatible with Christian faith. It should include a schedule showing the order of the ceremony or Mass, and it often lists the names of the wedding party, family members, those taking liturgical functions, the priest, and the musicians. It may also contain a simple sentiment of appreciation or mutual love or a prayer composed by the bride and groom. Whenever there is a Nuptial Mass, the “Invitation to Holy Communion” **must always** be printed in the program (see No. 32).

In order to avoid confusion and error, **programs are to be reviewed by the Director of Music two (2) months prior the wedding date and then submitted for review by the priest preparing the couple and the Basilica wedding coordinator assigned to the couple one (1) month prior to the wedding date.** The program may not be printed without the priest’s approval.

PARTICIPANTS IN THE WEDDING

39. How many people may I have in my wedding party?

At least two (2) witnesses (Best Man and Maid/Matron of Honor) must be present in the wedding party to witness your vows. Wedding parties larger than five couples (including the Best Man and Maid/Matron of Honor) are *strongly discouraged* due to the spectacle that they can become.

40. How many people may I invite to serve in “liturgical functions” at the wedding?

The Music Director will serve as the cantor/soloist. You may invite different individuals (all must be practicing Catholics) to fulfill the following liturgical functions,

- 1) A reader for the 1st reading
- 2) A reader for the 2nd reading
- 3) A reader for the General Intercessions
- 4) Two (2) presenters (bearers) of the offertory gifts (only at a Mass)
- 5) **Altar Boys** (at least two for a Nuptial Mass and one for a wedding ceremony) are normally taken from the Basilica’s regular Altar Boys. **You must** contact the parish office (703-836-4100) two weeks prior to the wedding to schedule the Altar Boys. Outside Servers are normally not permitted.

41. May I invite a non-Catholic minister to participate in my wedding ceremony?

In the wedding of a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic, where a Nuptial Mass is **NOT** celebrated, a non-Catholic Christian minister may be invited to participate but not co-officiate in the wedding ceremony. These arrangements must be made with the officiating priest and approved by the pastor of the Basilica of St. Mary.

42. May I invite non-Catholic lay people to fulfill liturgical functions in my wedding?

Anyone invited to fulfill the liturgical functions of readers, gift bearers and altar servers **must be a practicing Catholic** (or Eastern Orthodox Christian) whose good qualities of Christian life, faith, and morals recommend them to this function. Anyone asked to read at the wedding (i.e., Scripture and intercessions) should also have some experience at public reading/speaking.

43. May I invite non-Catholics to stand in my wedding party?

Absolutely! The Best Man, Maid of Honor, bridesmaids, groomsmen, and ushers need not be Catholic.

44. May children be included in our wedding party?

You are *strongly discouraged* from allowing children below the age of reason (7 years old) to serve as ring bearer, flower girl, etc., since very young children often disrupt and distract rather than enhance the ritual, especially during the wedding procession. If the children are not able to display the necessary demeanor at the rehearsal, the priest may have to exclude them from the wedding party. Finally, any children involved in the procession must always be supervised by an adult.

45. Are there any rules about what the wedding party may wear?

It is customary for the bride to wear white as a sign of purity. The white garment worn at baptism symbolized holiness in just the same way that Sacred Scripture describes the angels

and saints robed in white; the white dress worn at First Holy Communion also can serve as a model for the wedding dress, both in symbolism and style. Similarly, altar boys, deacons and priests wear the white surplice and the alb, which specifically refer to having been washed clean in the Blood of the Lamb.

Wedding guests would do well to recall the parable told by Our Lord about their counterparts who were unceremoniously ushered out because of their inappropriate attire. Their apparel also should fit not only the solemnity of the day but also the sacredness of the church. Church attire, while being appropriately fashionable, must always be **modest** and **chaste**. We should want neither to attract attention to ourselves nor distract others in prayer. Unfortunately, many of today's fashions attempt to do just the opposite. Here are some specific guidelines:

A wedding dress with sleeves is both elegant and unique. Brides and their attendants must cover their shoulders with a jacket or shawl in the church for the wedding if their dresses are strapless or otherwise expose bare shoulders, the back, or waist. Low necklines designed to show cleavage are not permissible in the church. Hemlines above the knees and slits which rise above the knees must be avoided (even by men in kilts)

These rules must also be observed by all those who serve in liturgical functions (such as readers and gift bearers).

Appropriately modest dress should also be **observed at the rehearsal**. Please tell your guests that because the air conditioning is very cold, they might need sweaters.

46. Where does the wedding party dress and prepare for the wedding?

The bride and her attendants should dress before arriving, and they should arrive at the church no later than **20 minutes** prior to the start of the wedding. In the event of extreme weather conditions that preclude walking outside, the bride may arrive right before the ceremony and wait in bell tower entrance lobby. The bridesmaids, maid of honor, the bride, and the mother of the bride may wait in the Father Rankin House next to the church should they arrive earlier. Please consult the wedding coordinator for details and restriction.

The groom and his groomsmen are asked to arrive no later than **30 minutes** prior to the wedding. The groom and his groomsmen are asked to wait in the "main sacristy" located to the left of the sanctuary.

The Basilica of St. Mary is not responsible for any personal items left behind. Please designate someone to collect all of your belongings so that you will not be burdened by cleaning up after the wedding!

MUSIC

47. May we choose our favorite songs for our wedding?

A wedding (whether within the context of Holy Mass or not) is a sacred service; therefore, only sacred music – that is, music composed for the specific purpose of the worship of God – may be played or sung during the Mass or ceremony. Please do not request an exception to this law of the Church. Recorded music is also never permitted during any liturgy of the Church.

The parish Music Director, Mr. David Elliott, will help you select music that will be both beautiful and appropriate for your Catholic wedding. Therefore, please remember to contact the parish Music Director (delliott@stmaryoldtown.org) immediately after setting your date with the priest. Couples are advised to meet with David at least three months prior to the wedding date so that music arrangements can be finalized two months prior to the wedding date.

You may wish to schedule the joyful celebration of your wedding outside of the penitential seasons of Advent (the four weeks before Christmas) and Lent (the six weeks before Easter), because during these seasons, the music and decorations must also be of a penitential nature. If you do choose to schedule your wedding during a penitential season, however, the Music Director will advise you on what is appropriate.

48. Who may serve as musicians?

The Parish Organist will play for your wedding, and the Cantor will serve as the soloist. Outside musicians are only allowed after consultation with the parish music director.

49. Is there a fee for the music?

The organist, cantor, and any other musicians' fees are separate from any offering made to the priest or church. The Parish Organist's fee is \$350 and the Cantor's fee is \$250. A check can be made out to the Basilica of Saint Mary for these services, which will then be distributed to the appropriate individuals. This check must be submitted to the Parish Office no later than 30 days prior to the wedding but couples can take advantage of the early bird special if paying prior to 30 days (see question no. 58). These fees, however, assume that the wedding begins on time. Additional charges will apply if the wedding begins late.

WEDDING DECORATIONS

50. Are there any norms regarding flowers and decorations?

The use of floral and other decoration to enhance the liturgy and give glory to God is a time honored custom. Please consult with our Mary Martha Guild (MMG@stmaryoldtown.org) when planning your wedding flowers and decorations. This consultation should take place at least 2 months before the wedding and **BEFORE any final arrangements are made** regarding flowers or decorations.

The historic nature of the Basilica of St. Mary and the number and variety of liturgies in addition to weddings necessitate our floral donation policy. Engaged couples may donate for one or more arrangements placed within the sanctuary of the church using the floral [donation form](#) on the parish website. These sanctuary arrangements are provided by *the parish's florist* in consultation with the Mary Martha Guild. The guild will do their best to honor the color and type of floral arrangements requested within the norms provided for the liturgical season and other wedding and donation requests for the same day. If desired, the couple's donation will be announced in the bulletin.

Donations may be made to place arrangements at one or more of these locations in the church:

- Sanctuary (both shelves)
- Blessed Virgin Mary statue
- Saint Joseph statue
- Sacred Heart statue

These flowers placed in the church sanctuary are considered your gifts to Our Lord and are not to be removed after the wedding. Please take this into account when coordinating your donation with other personal flowers you may order for your wedding and reception.

If your wedding is not taking place during a penitential season, flowers may be of any style or color you wish, if they are consistent with the solemn and religious nature of the celebration. Note also that the parish installs floral arrangements for the Christmas and Easter seasons which cannot be removed for weddings. Couples are welcome to make donations toward these arrangements.

Brides may choose to include a bouquet for the Blessed Mother among their personal flowers. Please consult with the Mary Martha Guild regarding this devotion and guidance on sizing this bouquet. Ribbons and flowers may be attached to pews using special varnish-friendly adhesive or plastic slips. Aisle runners are discouraged. Because of the decorations and candles already in place in the church, additional candelabra may not be used.

Any other special decorations not mentioned here must be specifically approved by the Mary Martha Guild.

51. May we use rice, birdseed, flower petals, etc.?

The Basilica of St. Mary does not have a full-time custodian on staff to clean up immediately following weddings. Though popular, blowing bubbles, throwing rice, or any other substance is strictly prohibited since **ALL** of these present some degree of hazard on the walkway outside of church. We certainly don't want your celebration marred by anyone accidentally slipping and injuring himself or herself, so please inform your family and friends to refrain from such practices. For this same reason, no flower petals, etc., may be dropped in the aisle in front of the bride by flower girls in the entrance procession.

PHOTOGRAPHS

52. Are there any norms regarding photographs at the wedding?

We do allow candid photographs during the wedding Mass or ceremony. It is also permitted to have your wedding videotaped. We urge photographers to exercise good judgment and common sense out of respect for the solemnity of the occasion, and at all times accept direction from the Wedding Coordinator and the priest.

Once the wedding has begun the following rules must be followed:

- 1) No flash photography (or strobe/movie lighting) is allowed;
- 2) The photographer/videographer is asked to keep his/her visible movement to a minimum;
- 3) They may never walk in the area in front of the sanctuary or enter into the sanctuary;
- 4) They may never take a position during the wedding which would distract the assembly or obstruct anyone's view of the couple, the readers, or the priest;
- 5) They may not stop the procession; and
- 6) They may take candid shots from the back of the church.

All photographers/videographers must read this policy and sign agreement forms available on the Basilica of Saint Mary's website.

53. May we take pictures in the church after the wedding?

We encourage couples to take group photographs at the reception. It may also be possible to receive permission from the Wedding Coordinator to take pictures in the Parish Hall for a few minutes after the wedding. Since the altar is not intended as a backdrop for photos and out of respect for the Blessed Sacrament, posing for pictures at the altar after the wedding is ***to be limited and individuals should be mindful of the sacredness of the space. *At no point should any person enter the Sanctuary.***

If a couple does receive permission from the pastor and Wedding Coordinator to pose at the altar for photos, **the church must be cleared within an hour and a half (1 ½ hours) after the start time for the wedding. This time limit is strictly enforced.** We also remind the couple and the photographer that they are still in the presence of Our Lord, truly present in the Tabernacle. During picture taking, the wedding guests and photographer must maintain an atmosphere of reverence that will not disrupt prayer in the church.

54. Are there any rules for guests with cameras?

Guests are also asked to observe the above rules for photography.

OTHER CONCERNS AFTER THE WEDDING

55. How long may we stay in the church after the wedding?

For a 10:30 a.m. wedding the church must be cleared by 12 p.m. For a 12:30 p.m. wedding the church must be cleared no later than 2:00 p.m. and a 2:30pm wedding must be cleared by 3:50pm due to the beginning of Confessions, followed by the Saturday Evening Mass. Thank you for your cooperation in this regard.

56. May we have a “receiving line” after the wedding?

Because of the limited space and time constraints, **no receiving line is allowed at the church.**

57. Who is responsible for cleaning up after the wedding?

The couple is responsible for arranging for the removal of all the decorations that they have set up for the wedding, as well as all the trash that is directly related to the wedding (loose programs, boxes, bows, etc.). Please delegate this task to someone so that you will not be burdened by cleaning up after your wedding! If you have contributed to sanctuary flowers or offered a devotional bouquet to the Blessed Virgin Mary, **those arrangements are considered your gifts to Our Lord, and are not to be removed after the wedding.**

WEDDING FEES

58. Is there a fee for our wedding?

Since marriage is a sacrament, no fee is ever charged by the parish or the priests of the Basilica of Saint Mary to prepare the couple or witness the sacrament. However, when planning the wedding, fees for professional services and customary donations are considered by the couple.

Fees are due to those individuals who provide professional services in support of the wedding. The fees outlined below are paid no later than **30 days** in advance of the wedding date to the parish office. Payment is made by check payable to the Basilica of Saint Mary or by [selecting the appropriate transaction on the parish Faith Direct site](#). *If payments are made on Faith Direct, couples must alert the parish office (703-836-4100) in order to receive credit for their payments.*

- Parish Organist \$350
- Cantor \$250

Early Bird Special: After couples have finalized music arrangements with the Director of Music, they may pay the organist and cantor fees *prior to 30 days* before their wedding date to save \$50 off the organist and \$50 off the cantor(s).

Couples may also choose to make a customary donation to those who volunteer their services in support of the wedding. Such voluntary donations are greatly appreciated and made directly to the volunteers. Please do not make any of the following payments online via Faith Direct:

- Priest – at the discretion of the couple (please write the check directly to him)
- Altar Boys - \$15 each (paid by cash only on the wedding day)
- Wedding Coordinator – at the discretion of the couple (check written directly to the wedding coordinator)

Additionally, couples may choose to make a pious gift to the parish in honor of their marriage, through a floral donation or general donation to the parish. Such a gift witnesses to sacrificial and mutual self-giving of spouses. These donations are either made by check to Saint Mary or through the parish Faith Direct site. Floral donations are accompanied by the [floral donation form](#) found on the parish webpage, and they can be submitted to the parish office.

59. If the priest at St. Mary prepares us but the wedding is in another city or state, is there a fee for his assistance?

Again, there is no fee for this pastoral service. Couples, however, do choose to give a gift to the priest in appreciation of his efforts.

Once your wedding date has been set, please follow the QR code link below to access important forms and other helpful resources.



May God bless you as you prepare for marriage!