

I want to get married outside, but my priest says that I can't. My fiancé and I love the outdoors, and it is really meaningful to us, why can't this be a part of our wedding day?

You are asking a question that more and more couples find confusing. It is a good question and I am glad that you are seeking an answer. Of course, this can be a very sensitive issue. Many brides (and grooms!) have dreamt of their wedding day for years. To then have the Church say "no" to any of your plans can feel like it is coming from out of nowhere. It can feel like the Church imposing some arbitrary rule on your big day. I've known individuals who have actually used this issue as a reason to leave the Church, and so I hope that this response will help anyone who has been confused and hurt by this teaching.

I believe that there are at least two reasons behind this discipline. The first is purely historical and practical. If you've ever seen "Braveheart" you know that there have been times in the history of the Church when couples have been compelled (for very serious reasons) to keep their marriage secret for a time. This seemed to work out for William Wallace and Murron. The unfortunate thing is that some scoundrels used secrecy as an opportunity to deceive their intended spouse and the Church. In other words, a man (more often) would get married to one woman secretly, and then to another (in another community) secretly. In order to protect brides, the Church demands that weddings be public. The common, public place is the parish church building.

I can imagine a number of objections ("Well, I'm not a bigamist! We'll be even more public at the beach! If I can prove that I'm not already married, why isn't that enough?"). Those are good objections to the first reason why weddings must be in a church building. But remember, this first reason is simply historical and practical. There is a much deeper theological reason. This is my Big Answer.

Catholics believe that marriage is a Sacrament and a vocation. Because marriage is a Sacrament, it is also a Church act. It happens in a church building because we are in danger of forgetting this fact. Since Matrimony is a Sacrament, it would seem to follow that the Church gets to have something to say about how it is celebrated. If I am seeking out a Sacrament, why would I resent the Church giving me instruction on how this Sacrament is celebrated? The only reason I can think of is that the couple doesn't really desire the "Sacrament" of Matrimony; they simply "want to get married". That is not a condemnation, it is simply a description of what the couple is really looking for. This is a question of identity: do I really see myself as Catholic?

Marriage is a vocation. Vocation literally means "call"; it is a call from God lived in the context of the Church. For the Christian, it is the call to be a part of God's Kingdom in a specific way. That is very important to let sink in. A vocation is never a private thing. It is deeply personal, but not private in the sense that it is simply about the couple's life together. It is their call to live in Christ in a new way. This has everything to do with the Church. We can never separate the call to

belong to Christ and the call to belong to His Church without doing violence to Christ's unity.

If we understand marriage as a vocation, we begin to understand that it is not really about "me"...at least it is not ALL about me. My own vocation to be a priest is not for me alone. It is not simply "me doing what fulfills me". In fact, I think we would all agree that a priest who lived his priesthood for himself would be missing at least half the point. Marriage understood as a vocation is the same.

I believe that many couples who are disturbed by this teaching haven't yet experienced the Church as a meaningful community. I understand that, but they will certainly not if they stay away from church on that very important day.

The short answer to this question comes back to the degree to which a couple considers themselves to be Catholic. If I am Catholic, then it simply makes sense that I would desire to get married in a Catholic wedding. Catholic weddings happen in Catholic churches. Circular reasoning? Possibly.

Last thing. There are some exceptions to this. A bishop of a diocese may grant permission for a couple to marry outside a Catholic church building. Hopefully, he would only do this for serious reasons (really liking the outdoors is not a serious reason). God's creation is His gift. You know that already. Why not have your reception outside and keep the church part in a church?