

Ritual of Marriage

Liturgical treatment of matrimony



Marriage, RITUAL OF.—The form for the celebration of the Sacrament of Matrimony, as it stands in the "Rituale Romanum" of the present day, is remarkably simple. It consists of the following elements:

(1) A declaration of consent made by both parties and formally ratified by the priest in the words: "Ego conungo vos in matrimonium in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen" (I unite you in wedlock in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen). (2) A form for the blessing of the ring which the bridegroom receives back from the hand of the priest to place it upon the ring finger of the bride's left hand. (3) Certain short versicles and a final benedictory prayer. This ceremony according to the intention of the Church should be followed by (4) the Nuptial Mass, in which there are Collects for the married couple, as well as a solemn blessing after the Pater Noster and another shorter one before the priest's benediction at the close. At this Mass also it is recommended that the bride and bridegroom should communicate. But although here as elsewhere the "Rituale Romanum" may be regarded as providing the form of the Church's ceremonial, in treating of the Sacrament of Matrimony a special rubric is inserted in the following terms: "If, however, in any provinces, other laudable customs and ceremonies are in use besides the foregoing in the celebration of the Sacrament of Matrimony, the holy Council of Trent desires that they should be retained" (see *Decreta Conc. Trid.*, Sess. XXIV, De Reformatione, cap. 1).

The reason of this exceptional tolerance here shown towards diversity of ritual is not very far to seek. Matrimony being a sacrament in which the contracting parties themselves are the ministers, it is plain that its essential forms must be expressed not in Latin but in the vernacular, and this fact alone at once introduces a certain element of divergence. Moreover, change of established tradition in such matters is always disconcerting to the minds of the imperfectly educated. Hence the Church's wisdom is apparent in refraining from interference in those countries where certain rites and ceremonies, in themselves free from abuse, have been immemorially associated with this solemn contract. The effect of this tolerance is particularly noticeable in the British Isles. Before the Reformation a considerable variety of local usages prevailed in England, as elsewhere, affecting the ceremonial even of the Mass itself, as well as other ecclesiastical functions. The divergences of the "Use" of Sarum, or of York or of Hereford etc., from the practice of Rome or Augsburg or Lyons were not inconsiderable. When however through the Elizabethan persecution the clergy were forced to go abroad for their ecclesiastical training, the distinctively English customs of Sarum or York gradually became unfamiliar. No attempt or hardly any was made to print new Missals or Breviaries according to the English rite, and Roman usages were thus everywhere adopted by the missionary clergy. But in one respect an exception was made. The Catholic laity who lived on at home knew no other marriage service than that of their forefathers. Hence the Sarum form was in substance retained and in 1604 and again in 1610 in the English "Rituale" printed at Douai, under

the title "Sacra Insbitutio Baptizandi, Matrimonium celebrandi etc.", the old Sarum text was reprinted unchanged, though at a later date, e.g. in the book of 1626 (? printed at Antwerp), certain modifications were introduced, The form thus modified remains in force for England, Scotland and Ireland down to the present day. Seeing that the Anglican marriage service has also retained a great deal of the primitive Sarum rite, we find ourselves confronted by the curious anomaly that in the British Isles the Catholic marriage service resembles the Anglican service more nearly than it does the form provided in the "Rituale Romanum".

Origin of Ecclesiastical Ceremonial.—*Turning* to the historical development of the ritual for matrimony we may say that the Church from the beginning realized that Matrimony was in its essence a contract between individuals. So far as regarded the external forms which gave validity to that contract, the Church was ready to approve all that was seemly and in accordance with national custom, recognizing that an engagement thus lawfully entered upon between two baptized Christians was elevated by Christ's institution to the dignity of a sacrament.. Duchesne is thus probably right in connecting those broader outlines of a religious service, which we can trace amid the diversities of the different medieval rituals, with the pagan form of marriage which had prevailed at an earlier date in Rome and throughout the Roman empire. Tertullian expatiates upon the happiness of "that marriage which is made by the Church, confirmed by the Holy Sacrifice (oblatio), sealed by the blessing, which the angels proclaim and which is ratified by our Father in heaven" (Ad Uxor., ii, 9); while elsewhere he speaks of the crown, the veil and the joining of hands ("De Corona" xiii, "De Virg. vel.", ii). We can hardly doubt, then, that the Church accepted the leading features of that ceremony of marriage which was most in honor in pagan Rome, i.e. the *confarreatio*, and that it blessed these rites, substituting in particular the holy Sacrifice of the Mass for the libations and sacrifices to the gods with which the profane ceremonies were solemnized.

The matter is not entirely clear, and Freisen is tempted to look rather to Jewish prototypes, especially the blessing, for the outlines of the earliest ritual of Christian marriage (see "Archiv. f. Kathol. Kirchenrecht", LIII, 369 seq., 1885). Remembering, however, the details given by Pope Nicholas I (c. 866) in his answer to the Bulgars, and regarding this description as the type of Christian marriage then recognized in Rome, we find that the whole ceremonial of Christian Matrimony falls into two clearly defined parts. We have first the preliminaries constituting the betrothal (*sponsalia*) in its broader sense. Under this head we may reckon primarily the betrothal strictly so called, i.e. the expression of the consent of the couple to be married and of their parents to the projected union. But this is supplemented by (1) the *subarrhatio*, i. e. the delivery of the *arrace* or pledges, ordinarily represented by the giving of a ring, which Nicholas I calls *annulus fidei* (the ring of fidelity), and (2) by the handing over of the dowry, secured by some legal document and delivered in the presence of witnesses. The second act, which may follow the *sponsalia* immediately or after some interval, comprises (i) the celebration of Mass, at which the bride and bridegroom communicate, (ii) the solemn benediction which Pope Nicholas associates with the veil (*velamen*) held over the married pair, and (iii) the wearing of crowns as they leave the church.

Although it is extremely difficult to determine in what precise measure the Roman and Teutonic marriage usages influenced each other from the time when the Goths and the Lombards made their power felt in Italy, there seems to be nothing here which may not be of purely Roman origin. Long before the birth of Jesus Christ, Roman custom drew a clear distinction between the *sponsalia*, or preliminaries, and the marriage itself, which latter culminated in the conducting of the bride to her husband's house (in *domum deductio*). The *sponsalia* usually consisted of a promise ratified by the giving of a ring as a pledge. The actual nuptials, especially the *confarreatio*, were marked by the offering of a bloodless sacrifice (a cake of spelt) to Jupiter; the bride always wore a flame colored veil (*flammeum*) and a crown encircled the brow of both bride and bridegroom. On the other hand some of these features, for example the clear distinction between the betrothal and the marriage, and the use of the wedding ring in the former ceremony, were also known among various Teutonic peoples at a very early date (see Sohm, "Recht der Eheschliessung", 55, and for Spanish usage, Ferotin in "Monuments Liturgica", V, 434 seq.) and seeing that other ancient

Teutonic usages were undoubtedly retained in a service which in the end became purely religious and was conducted by the priest, it is not always easy to disentangle the elements of the later ritual and to assign the exact origin to each.

Development of the Marriage *Ritual*.—Probably we shall be right in assuming that the first effort everywhere made by the Church to impart a religious character to the contract of marriage was by requiring or urging the married pair to be present at a special Nuptial Mass (q.v.). The Mass itself constitutes the highest form of consecration and the available evidence points strongly to the conclusion that in such very different matters as the dedication of a church or the burial of the dead, the Christians of the first few centuries had no special ritual adapted for such occasions but were content to offer the holy Sacrifice with appropriate collects. Looking at our actual Nuptial Mass which has retained the essential features of that found in the Sacramentary ascribed to St. Leo, the earliest collection preserved to us of Roman origin, we find that the prayers themselves constitute a blessing of the married pair while the eucharistic benediction which is headed "Velatio nuptialis" is in effect a consecration of the bride alone to the estate of marriage, a point of view which vividly recalls the Roman conception of matrimony as the veiling of the woman for the special behoof of her husband. This velatio nuptialis spread in slightly varying forms to every part of Western Christendom which received the Roman Mass Book. Down to the present day the same nuptial benediction, specially devoted to the bride and introduced at an unwonted position (immediately after the Pater Noster of the Mass), remains the highest form of sanction which the Church can give to the union of man and woman. By a law of ancient date which is still in force, this special benediction is withheld in all cases in which the bride has been previously married. Further, though in the early Middle Ages the Nuptial Mass seems sometimes to have been celebrated on the day after the first cohabitation of the pair (see Friedberg, "Eheschliessung", 82-84 and Sohm, "Recht der Eheschliessung", 159), these solemnities seem always to have been associated with the marriage itself as distinct from the espousals.

For a long time, undoubtedly, the espousals and the actual nuptials remained distinct ceremonies through-out the greater part of the Western world, and except for the subsequent bringing of the parties before the altar for the celebration of the Mass, the Church seems to have had little directly to do with either function. Nevertheless a negative approval of such ceremonies as containing nothing unbecoming the Christian character may be presumed. Indeed this seems to be required even at the beginning of the second century by the epistle of St. Ignatius to St. Polycarp: "It becometh men and women, when they wed, to marry with the consent of the bishop, that the marriage may be after the Lord and not after concupiscence". (Cf. Ephes., v, 32, and the Didache, xi.) Moreover at Rome, Pope Siricius (A.D. 385), in a letter accepted as genuine by Jaffe—Wattenbach (Regesta, n. 255), speaks clearly of the blessing pronounced by the priest at the ceremony of the betrothal (illa benedictio quam nupturae sacerdos imponit) where the context seems to make it evident that the actual marriage is not meant. We may believe, though the point is contested, that in some places the Church by degrees came to take a part both in the betrothal and in that "giffta" or handing over of the bride in which our Teutonic forefathers seem to have seen the essence of the nuptial contract. This eventually successful effort of the Church everywhere to bring the solemnization of matrimony more immediately under her influence, is well summed up in the following Anglo-Saxon ordinance: "At the nuptials there shall be a Mass-priest by law who shall with God's blessing bind their union to all prosperity" (Liebermann, "Gesetze der Angel-Sachsen", I, 422).

The great authority of Charlemagne was exerted in the same direction. Many times in his "Capitularies" it is enjoined that marriages should not be celebrated without the blessing of the priest (see Beauchet in "Nouvelle Revue de Droit Francais", VI, 381-383). He even declared that without this blessing marriages should not be held valid, but this view was not supported by later pronouncements of the Holy See. From about this period too the ring seems to have received an ecclesiastical blessing, one of the earliest known instances occurring in the marriage of Judith of France in 856 to the English King Ethelwulf, the father of Alfred the Great (see the whole ritual in M. G. H., Legum, I, 450). With this exception the oldest ordines of a marriage service conducted by

ecclesiastical authority are several centuries later in date, and those that bear a distinctly religious character almost always show the betrothal and the nuptial ceremony amalgamated into one. This is conspicuously the case in the "Ordinals" of Sarum and York and in the modern English Catholic service which is derived from them. Indeed it has been disputed whether the Church originally made any claim to bless the betrothal as distinct from the nuptials (see Freisen, "Geschichte des can. Eherechts", 131-134, and 160). But some ecclesiastical control of the betrothal ceremony seems in itself highly probable, especially when we take into account the analogy of the Oriental rituals; while the clearly marked division in the earliest Spanish Ordines between the "Ordo Arrharum" and the "Ordo ad benedicendum" (Ferotin in "Monumenta Liturgica", V, 434 seq.) equally presupposes a double intervention of the priest.

Indeed the Spanish rituals, especially that of Toledo, even down to modern times, recognize a double ceremony. In the first, after a solemn admonition to disclose any impediment that may exist, the parties give their consent "per verba de presentia", and the priest, at least in the later forms (see "Manuale Toletanum", Antwerp, 1680, 457) pronounces the words: "I on the part of God Almighty join you in wedlock", etc. None the less the priest is directed in the rubric which immediately follows to warn the parties that "they must not dwell together in the same house before receiving the blessing of the priest and the Church". Then follows under quite a separate heading the "Order for the Nuptial Benediction",—which begins with the blessing of the rings and arrhae in the church porch and is completed by the celebration of the Nuptial Mass. No doubt the contract of marriage and the nuptial benediction are distinct things in themselves and are neither of them identical with the betrothal, but it seems highly probable that the traces of duality which maybe observed in so many of the older marriage rituals are primarily to be attributed to some confused and vague perpetuation of the betrothal and the nuptials as distinct ceremonies, as was the case both in Rome and among the Teutons.

In the Sarum "Ordo ad faciendum Sponsalia" two points may be noticed which illustrate this duality. First, the celebration of the earlier part of the ceremony in the church porch; a feature which indeed was common to all Western Christendom. Thus Chaucer writes of the Wife of Bath:

" She was a worthy woman all hir live, Housebondes at the chirche dore had she had five."

The change of scene from the porch to the altar for the celebration of Mass is a marled feature in all early rituals. Secondly, we may note the italicized words in the following form for plighting troth, still retained in the English Catholic marriage service and closely reproducing the old Sarum Text: "I, N. take thee, N. for my wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part, if Holy Church will it permit, and thereto I plight thee my troth." It is tolerably clear that this troth-plighting originally formed part of a betrothal ceremonial and recognized the possibility that the Church might still refuse to confirm and bless the union thus initiated. But as the words occur in the modern service, where the parties have already given their consent, where the marriage is consequently an accomplished fact and the (priest has said "ego conjungo vos in matrimonium", they may readily cause a difficulty. Needless to say that this particular clause has been omitted in the Anglican "Book of Common Prayer".

Ancient Observances surviving in later Rituals.—The traces of the old betrothal ceremony in the modern nuptial Ordinals of different countries are many and varied. First the wedding ring itself, in accordance with the old Roman custom, seems to have been originally a pledge or arrha given at the sponsalia by the bridegroom as the earnest of the future fulfilment of his share in the contract. At a later date however it probably became confused with certain German customs of "morning gifts" after marriage and consequently was transferred to the nuptials proper. Further in many places it ultimately became and still remains the custom for bride and bridegroom to present each other mutually with rings as a pledge of fidelity, and this is in fact the symbolical meaning attached to the ring in the modern ritual of the Church, as the form for its blessing plainly signifies. Perhaps the first trace of the use of two rings occurs in the early Spanish Ordines. Furthermore, while the

use of the wedding ring has been retained among most, though not quite all, the rituals of the West, the manner of putting it on varies considerably. The English custom that the bridegroom should place it, first, on the bride's thumb with the words "in the name of the Father"—then on the index finger—"and of the Son"—then on the middle finger—"and of the Holy Ghost"—and finally on the fourth finger—"Amen"—is found in medieval ceremonials in places as far separated as Spain and Norway, but it was by no means universal. In some places the priest puts on the ring, and elsewhere it was customary to place the ring on the bride's right hand. This was the case in the Sarum rite and it was retained among English Catholics until the middle of the eighteenth century. The reason so frequently assigned for the choice of the fourth, or ring, finger, viz, that a vein runs from that finger to the heart, is found in early non-Christian writers like Pliny and Macrobius.

A second survival which appears even in the concise Roman Ritual, is the hand-clasp of the married pair. This was a custom also in the pagan marriage ceremonial of Rome, and it is hard to say whether it comes to us through Roman or Teutonic traditions. Certain it is that the "hand-fast" constituted a sort of oath among most Germanic peoples and was used for the solemn ratification of all kinds of contracts (see Friedberg, "Eheschliessung", pp. 39-42). In many, and especially the German rituals, the priest was directed to wrap his stole around the clasped hands of the bride and bridegroom while he pronounced some words of ratification. This ceremony may often be noticed in medieval pictures of a marriage, e.g. the "Espousals of St. Joseph and our Lady". This also is quite probably of heathen origin for we find a reference to something very similar in Arbeo's "Life of St. Emmeram", written before the year 800. It contains an account of a pagan woman summarily given in marriage to a Christian, her hand wrapped round with a cloak "as is the custom in espousals". A most elaborate ceremony of this kind is prescribed in the "Rituale" compiled for the Christiana of Japan in 1605. It was noticed above that the "gifta", or formal surrender of the bride, who thus passed from the "mund" of her father or guardian to that of her husband, was regarded as the most essential feature of Anglo-Saxon nuptials. This left its mark in the Sarum rite, and something of it still survives both in the Anglican and the Catholic ceremonial. In the former the minister asks "Who giveth this woman to be married to this man"; in the latter no question is put, but the rubric still stands "Then let the woman be given away by her father or by her friends".

Most remarkable of all perhaps is the giving of gold and silver by the bridegroom to the bride. This has been much modified in the Anglican "Book of Common Prayer" which speaks only of "laying the ring upon a book with the accustomed duty to the priest and clerk"; but the Catholic rite, more closely following the Sarum, directs that gold and silver be placed with the ring and given to the bride while the bridegroom says: "With this ring I thee wed; this gold and silver I thee give, with my body I thee worship and with all my worldly goods I thee endow". This action takes us back to Tacitus's account of German marriage customs. "The wife", he says, "does not present a dower to her husband, but the husband to the wife" (Germania, xviii). Undoubtedly this is a trace of the primitive sale by which the bridegroom paid a sum of money for the transference to him of the "mund" or right of custody of the bride. Originally that money was paid to the father or guardian, but by successive stages it became a sort of dower for the bride and was represented by the symbolical payment to her of "arrhae", the name by which the money thus given in the marriage ceremony is still designated. In certain branches of the Teutonic family, notably the Salians, this form of purchase of a bride was known as marriage "per solidum et denarium". See for example the account of the nuptials of Chlodwig and St. Clotilde in the history of the so-called Fredegarius (c. xviii). The solidus was a gold piece, the denarius a silver one, and in the time of Charlemagne and later the solidus was the equivalent in value of twelve denarii. When the custom of coining gold pieces was given up in the ninth century, it seems that the solidus and denarius were represented by their equivalent value, i.e. thirteen silver pieces. Certain it is, in any case, that in Spain and in some parts of France thirteen pieces of money, known in French as the "Treizain", are still blessed and given to the bride along with the ring. The ceremony was duly observed at the marriage of King Alfonso of Spain, in 1906 (see "The Messenger", 1906, 113-130).

To mention the many observances peculiar to particular provinces, for example the Hungarian custom of taking an oath of mutual fidelity upon relics at the dictation of the priest, or the York

practice by which the bride threw herself at the feet of her husband if he gave her land as part of her dower—would here be impossible. We must not however omit to note the pallium or pall (French, poele), which in a very large number of dioceses was held over the married pair, they in the meantime lying prone before the altar, while the nuptial benediction was pronounced in the Mass. The custom was retained until recently in many parts of France and is still observed in the more ceremonious weddings which follow the Toledan ritual. This and the "jugale", or parti-colored yoke of ribbon binding together the married pair, are mentioned by St. Isidore of Seville, and it is not quite clear how far they are to be identified with the velum or flammeum of the bride in the Roman marriage. It is to be noted that according to certain rituals the pallium is completely to cover the bride but only the shoulders of the bridegroom. This seems clearly to be connected with the fact that, as already observed, the nuptial benediction is almost entirely devoted to the bride and consecrates her to her special responsibilities. The parallel of this marriage ceremony is seen in the pall held over nuns while the consecratory preface is being said at their clothing or profession. It follows that the idea that this is a funeral pall and is symbolical of the death of the religious to the world is not historically justifiable.

The words of the priest, "Ego vos in matrimonium conjungo", which, though sanctioned by the Council of Trent, are apt to convey the false impression that the priest is the minister of the Sacrament, are not primitive, at any rate in this form, and are only to be found in Rituals of comparatively recent date. In the medieval Nuptial Mass, and in many places until long after the Reformation, the kiss of peace was given to the married pair. The bridegroom received it from the priest either directly or by means of the pax board, or instrumentum pacis, and then per osculum oris conveyed it to the bride. The misconception, found in some modern writers, that the priest kissed the bride, is due to a misunderstanding of this piece of ritual, no such custom is recorded in manuals approved by ecclesiastical authority.

Oriental Marriage Rituals.—*That* of the Orthodox Greek Church may be conveniently taken as a model, for the others, e.g. the Syrian and Coptic rites, resemble it in many particulars. The most noteworthy feature in a Greek or Russian marriage is the fact that there are two quite distinct religious services. In the service of the betrothal a contract is entered upon and two rings are presented. A gold ring is given by the priest to the bridegroom and a silver one to the bride, but these are subsequently exchanged between the parties. The second ceremony is that of the nuptials proper and it is generally called the crowning. The service is one of considerable length in which the parties again solemnly express their consent to the union and towards the close of which a crown is placed by the priest on the head of each. The bridegroom and bride afterwards partake of a cup of wine previously blessed and exchange a kiss. Marriages in the Greek Church take place after the celebration of the Liturgy, and, as in the West, the season of Lent is a forbidden time. It may be noticed that some rituals of the Western Church retain more positive traces of the ancient ceremony of the crowning than is preserved in the wreath usually worn by the bride. Thus in a Latin ritual printed for Poland and Lithuania in 1691 it is directed that two rings be used, but if these are not forthcoming, then the priest is to bless two wreaths (serta) and present them to the married pair.

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