

Liturgical Prayer and Civil Marriage

J. Frank Henderson

© March 2002

Contents

Prayer of Blessing
Ritual Following Civil Marriage
Prayer for Persons who have Married Civilly

Prayer of Blessing

Couples who choose or are required to have a civil marriage may still believe in God, have a developed spirituality, have regard for the church - and appreciate prayer at their wedding. Thus the couple – and/or their family – may desire that prayer be included in their wedding, before or after the civil ceremony or perhaps at the banquet or reception.

The following is one example of such a prayer. It may be led one (or two) lay persons. It will of course be adapted as seems appropriate. It has been used at the end of a civil ceremony.

Where the prayer refers to “N and N,” the woman’s name might be said first once, then the man’s name would be said first, and so forth.

Presider: I invite everyone present to join in blessing N. and N.,
giving them your own personal blessing
and invoking the blessing of God.
[This blessing is found in the bulletin / program.]
At the end of each section you may affirm the blessing
by saying AMEN, or other words that seem appropriate.
Please rise.

God of all creation,
you made woman and man in your very own image;
you created them as equals.
Bless N. and N. as they set out in their new life.
May they take delight in their love for each other,
a love which hopes and shares, heals and forgives.

AMEN

God of wisdom,
pour out your Spirit in blessing upon N. and N.:
Bless them in their work and in their companionship.
May they speak to each other with words that cherish and respect,
that challenge and console,
that refresh and bring peace.

AMEN

God of joy,
as Jesus blessed the wedding at Cana with much wine,
may you bless this wedding and this marriage
with gladness and feasting, laughter, joy and loving;
may N. and N.'s home be a sanctuary of love,
a haven of peace and joy.

AMEN

God of love,
send the abundance of your blessing upon N. and N.
in their joy and in their sorrows,
in their living and in their work.
Let their love be strong and generous,
a fire that floods cannot drown,
a jewel beyond all price.

AMEN

For this blessing [all these blessings] we pray to you, O God,
with Jesus Christ your word [wisdom, beloved]
and the Holy Spirit of love.

AMEN

Ritual Following Civil Marriage

Some couples, though baptized, do not practice their Christian faith and consider that they cannot authentically participate in the Roman Catholic Church's wedding liturgy. They feel that their marriage would not be sacramental because of the lack of living faith and therefore conclude that a civil marriage best suits their needs and best recognizes the reality of their lives.

Nevertheless, they still have a sincere respect for the church and do not wish to sever all contact with the Christian community. The local church community, in turn, understands their decision to marry before the civil authorities and hence non-sacramentally. At the same time the church community hopes that the couple will grow in Christian faith, and hopes as well that the time will come when they can celebrate sacramental marriage in the church.

Provided here is a short and adaptable rite by which the family, friends and church community can acknowledge couples and through which such couples can feel affirmed, supported and loved by the church community.

It is envisioned that couples would consult with the parish priest regarding their decision soon after their engagement. The alternatives should be made clear to them. If, finally, their decision is to seek civil marriage, then the priest may invite them to consider celebrating this ritual. It is for the couple to request this ritual and take leadership in preparing it.

Family, friends and other members of the Christian community may gather in the church or in a home. The ritual may include the following element and will be adapted as seems appropriate:

Gathering and welcome

The situation of the couple involved is stated and there is a period of reflection

There may be scriptural or secular readings

The couple makes a statement and the community responds

Silence and prayer (if the couple so desires)

A conclusion.

The statement by the couple may be along the following lines:

We affirm our desire to build our life together on the basis of fidelity and love. We will endeavor to establish complete confidence in each other, based on knowing each other well. Mutual support is necessary to achieve a solid and lasting relationship.

We will do this in the hope that we will give the best of ourselves to our children, in order to teach them goodness, love, and the right way to live.

We hope and desire to learn to know God through a genuine and sincere life. We ask our Christian friends and family members to sustain us and help us to persevere in our search. We ask God to bless our union and to help us to make it last.

Prayers for Persons who have Married Civilly

Some couples feel that they are not ready to enter into sacramental marriage, or are not permitted to marry in the Roman Catholic Church; they therefore marry before civil authorities.

Though alienated from the church in some respects, they are still daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, and friends of active members of the church. In addition, in the eyes of their families and of the church community, there is still hope that the time may come when they will be ready to enter into sacramental marriage.

It may be appropriate, therefore, for Christian families and members of the local church community to gather to pray for and over these couples. This would not signify that civil marriage is the same as or as significant for Roman Catholics as sacramental marriage; it is not a “blessing” of the civil marriage. Rather, it is an expression of love and concern for the couple and a pledge of support in their married lives. Prayers may be offered for their happiness, for their growth in faith, and for their eventual reconciliation with the Church.

Such a service of prayer presumes an appropriate state of readiness on the part of the couple. This may be the case at the time of the civil marriage, or not until some time later. It may mark the beginning of their return to the church after some period of estrangement.