

Marriages in Non-Catholic Churches

Question: I have been invited to a friend's wedding, but it is not taking place in a Catholic Church. Am I permitted by Church law to attend?

Answer: It depends upon the situation. We need to know a few facts before we can answer properly. First of all, is either the bride or the groom Catholic? If neither is Catholic, there is no problem, and you may attend, even if the ceremony is not in church or is performed by a Justice of the Peace. Just remember that this ceremony does not satisfy your Sunday Mass obligation. You still must attend Catholic Mass on Sunday. If the wedding takes place at a non-Catholic communion service, you must *not* receive communion, even if you are invited to do so. To give a few examples: two Jews are getting married before a rabbi: no problem. A Methodist and an Episcopalian are getting married in an Episcopalian church: no problem. A Lutheran and a Presbyterian are getting married by a Justice of the Peace: no problem.

Question: What if one of them is Catholic?

Answer: Now we need to ask a few questions of the bride and groom. Catholics are obliged by Canon Law to exchange their vows before a minister delegated by the Church to receive the vows in the Church's name. Ordinarily, this minister is a Catholic priest or deacon. In some situations, particularly when one of the parties is not Catholic and wishes to be married before a minister of their own denomination, the Church will give dispensation from the canonical form of marriage for a non-Catholic minister to receive vows in the name of the Church. The couple must be willing, however, to raise their children Catholic. They must do all the usual marriage preparation with a Catholic priest or deacon, who will request the proper dispensation from the bishop. This dispensation is never given for a Catholic to be married before a Justice of the Peace, so if you know the marriage is before a justice and not a religious minister, you automatically know the marriage is invalid. Our modern experience has been that, in most situations where a Catholic is getting married in a non-Catholic ceremony, the proper permissions have not been sought, in which case the Catholic party is invalidly attempting marriage. The marriage is therefore invalid in the eyes of the Church, the Catholic party is committing a serious sin, and Catholics are urged not to attend such ceremonies. We can't, however, assume this to be the case. You need to ask the bride and groom if they have received the proper permissions from the Catholic Church for the marriage to take place in a non-Catholic church building. If they have done so, the marriage is valid, and you may attend. If not, it is invalid, and you should not go. If both the bride and groom are Catholic and the wedding is taking place in a non-Catholic church, you can be almost 100% sure the marriage is invalid.

Question: What if the other party is Jewish and they're getting married at the reception hall?

Answer: This is a tricky situation. The marriage may in fact be perfectly valid. Everything written above applies here as well (raising children Catholic, dispensation, etc.). You must ask the bride and groom beforehand. If they have received all proper permissions, everything is acceptable and you may go. Sometimes, however, a couple does not go through proper church procedure and think they will be able merely to have a priest come to the ceremony and give a blessing. They mistakenly believe that, if they can find a priest who is willing to come and give a blessing, everything is okay in the eyes of the Church. This is not so. Sadly, there are priests who for whatever their reason, believe it's okay for them to go and give a blessing at an invalid marriage. Perhaps they are related to the bride or groom, or think they're being pastorally sensitive. Priests who do so are misleading people terribly and are making a grave mistake. It is not permissible for a priest to give a blessing at an invalid marriage; in fact, priests are absolutely forbidden to attend such celebrations. The mere presence of a priest misleads people into believing that the marriage is valid. Others who are present then go out and think they can do the same, and the result is that people are left with a completely befuddled, chaotic understanding of what the Church teaches.

Objection: But these are good friends of mine and they'll be hurt if I don't attend. They'll accuse me of being *holier-than-thou* and of passing judgment on them. Surely God wouldn't want me to alienate my closest friend needlessly?

Answer: First of all, it's dangerous for us to try to decide what God would and wouldn't want of us. Yes, your friend may be offended. But then again, he or she may understand; you never know. But if they do accuse you of being difficult, it is important for you to remind them **B** with all Christian charity **B** that you are not the one causing the problem: *they are* - by ignoring the teachings of the Church they have willingly embraced. It is a common defense mechanism of many people to accuse those who point out their error of judging them. It is an attempt to transfer their guilt to you. No, you are not judging them, but you are judging their *action* as sinful, and it is wrong of them to ask you to accept and bless an action which both of you know is wrong.

Question: How about if I don't go to the ceremony but only attend the reception?

Answer: What does that accomplish? It doesn't change the fact that they are sinning. This is especially true if the person is a divorced Catholic who is remarrying civilly. According to what Jesus taught, they are committing adultery. Are we to go and dance and feast and bring them a gift to celebrate their adultery? We can never celebrate public sin.

Objection: But how can it be a sin for two people to love each other?

Answer: Very easily! Remember that Catholic marriage is not merely a bond between two people: it is a covenant two people enter with God! When God is left out of someplace where he belongs (such as a marriage of a Catholic) a terrible sin has been committed. Our greatest love of all is not our love for a spouse **B** it is our love for God. God must be the heart of our existence, our first and primary love. As St. Paul says, *In Him we live and move and have our being.* We as Christians are expected to sacrifice all things **B** even our very lives **B** rather than deny God or place anything in life before Him. This includes even the love of another human being, if that love prevents us from loving God completely. Your friend may not realize it, but he or she has been presented with a big question: *Who do I love more, God or this other person?* If they choose to marry invalidly, they have answered, *This other person.* And that, you can see, is a serious sin. No matter how strong two people's love for each other nor how sincere their intentions, nothing must ever come before obedience to God's law. By all means, continue to be this person's friend. Wish

the two of them well, and love them as Christ would have you do, but do not pretend there's nothing wrong. You do them no favor by pretending their sin is a virtue.

Question: But suppose this person is part of my immediate family B a child, or a brother or sister?

Answer: This may present the only exception to the rule. Because of the very close bond between family members B particularly the parent-child relationship B which could be irreparably damaged and which as a rule of Christian charity needs to be preserved at higher cost, immediate family members may attend an invalid marriage ceremony in order to preserve the familial bond. The family, however, must make it absolutely clear to the individual that they don't approve of the marriage, but because they are a family, they will be there to preserve the unity of the family.

Final Note: The above discussion is intended to explain the general rule of the Church's teachings on this matter and to explain the reasons for them. It is by no means intended to be an exhaustive discussion of the topic. There may be extenuating circumstances and particular instances which need to be examined on an individual basis. Please do not assume that the information contained in this flyer is the be-all and the end-all of the topic. If ever you are presented with a situation such as is mentioned here, we strongly encourage you to seek the individual guidance of a priest before making any decisions. This may help avoid any needlessly hurt feelings or help you explain to your friend or loved one the difficulty in a manner which may lead them to a better understanding of the situation and even an acceptance of what is proper in the eyes of God.