“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21)

Introduction

Ancient churches, with their majestic vaults, stained glass windows bathing the altar in color, and that sacred silence, have a magnetic power. They are the perfect setting for a dream photo, the ideal frame to seal a love story… at least from an aesthetic point of view. Each year, thousands of couples choose to marry in Catholic churches not so much because of faith, but because of the beauty of the building, family tradition, or social pressure. But what happens when the heart of the sacrament is empty? What is the meaning of a church wedding if the essential element is missing: Christ?

This article aims to be a spiritual, educational, and pastoral guide to understanding the true meaning of Christian Marriage, to analyze the implications of celebrating it without faith, and to offer light to those who want more than a beautiful photo: a married life built on the rock that is Christ (cf. Matthew 7:24).

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1. Christian Marriage: Much More Than a Ceremony

In the Catholic view, marriage is not a social contract or a romantic symbol. It is a *sacrament*, that is, a visible sign of the invisible grace of God. When a couple gets married “in the Church,” they are not just making a public promise, but entering into a sacred covenant that reflects the indissoluble union between Christ and His Church (cf. Ephesians 5:25–32).

What does this imply?

- **Divine vocation**: Marriage is not merely a human choice, but a call from God to live love as a path to holiness.
- **Unity and fidelity**: The “yes” that spouses give each other is definitive and total, until death.
- **Openness to life**: Marital love is naturally oriented toward procreation and the Christian education of children.
- **Sacramental grace**: God grants a special grace to spouses to live their vocation with

joy, patience, and strength.

When these elements are missing, what remains is not a Christian marriage, but a simple ceremony devoid of theological meaning.

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2. The Phenomenon: Weddings for Aesthetics, Custom, or Pressure

Today many couples choose to marry in a church because:

- It's "more beautiful."
- "It's what's always been done in the family."
- The bride dreamed of walking down the aisle in her white dress.
- The pictures will look "more special."

However, many of these couples:

- Do not practice the faith.
- Do not receive Communion or go to Confession.
- Have no intention of raising their children in the Christian faith.
- Do not see marriage as a sacrament, but as a social event.

What's the problem with this?

From a **pastoral** perspective, it's a great opportunity to evangelize. But from a **sacramental** perspective, there's a very serious risk: **profaning the mystery**. Turning a sacred rite into mere scenery is a way of using the sacred without desiring the Holy.

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3. History and Evolution: From Sacrament to Spectacle

For centuries, Christian marriage was lived as a deeply spiritual reality. Even in times of widespread illiteracy, the faithful understood that getting married in the Church meant "placing oneself under God's blessing."

But with the secularization and changing mentalities of the 20th century, marriage began to be seen as a personal right, detached from God. The Church, seeking not to close its doors, has continued to allow access to the temples for those who request it… even when there is no living faith behind it. This openness, though well-intentioned, has fostered a kind of **“sacramental tourism”**: weddings, baptisms, and First Communions as cultural traditions, without true conversion.

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4. Can the Church Refuse to Perform a Marriage?

Yes, in certain cases. The Code of Canon Law states that certain conditions must be met for the sacrament to be validly celebrated:

- Both parties must **freely** and **knowingly** enter into it, with no **impediments** (such as a prior marriage not annulled).
- They must have the **intention** to live out Christian marriage: that is, with unity, fidelity, openness to life, and permanence.

If a couple openly states that they don’t believe, won’t go to Mass, won’t have children, or won’t raise them as Christians, **the pastor must discern** whether there is a true sacramental intention. If it is lacking, he **can and should** postpone or even deny the celebration.

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5. A Theological and Pastoral Guide for Discernment

A. For couples requesting marriage without religious practice

Pastors and marriage prep teams should:

1. **Listen without judging**: Often, there is a dormant faith that can be awakened.
2. **Clearly explain** what the sacrament is and what it entails.
3. **Invite to a process of conversion**: catechesis, prayer, sacramental life.
4. **Discern honestly**: If there is no intention to live as Christians, **it is not pastorally valid to celebrate** the sacrament.

> *"Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine." (Matthew 7:6).*
> *Though harsh, this verse reminds us that the sacred must not be treated like a commodity.*

B. For believing family and friends

- Pray for the couple.
- Bear joyful witness to Christian Marriage.
- Avoid collaborating with empty social pressures.
- Accompany with charity, not hypocrisy.

C. For the engaged couple

- Ask yourselves honestly: **Do we want Christ in our married life?**
- If the answer is no, have the courage to be coherent and don't use the church as decoration.
- If you're unsure, talk to a good priest and ask for guidance. God may be calling you without you even knowing it yet.

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6. What If You Already Got Married Without Faith?

God is infinitely merciful. If you already had a church wedding but without real faith, you can begin a **journey of rediscovery** today:

- Start praying with your spouse.
- Begin attending Mass and receiving formation.
- Renew your vows with sincere intention.
- Raise your children in the faith, even if you discovered it late.

Your marriage can be transformed into a true sacrament lived in fullness, **even after years of spiritual drought**.

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7. Practical Application: How to Prepare for a Real Catholic Marriage

Here's a step-by-step guide for engaged couples:

STEP 1: Discernment

- Are we open to living our faith together?
- Do we want to raise our children as Christians?
- Are we willing to live with fidelity, openness to life, and permanence?

STEP 2: Formation

- Actively participate in marriage preparation.
- Go to Confession and receive Communion.
- Study the meaning of the sacrament.

STEP 3: Sacramental Life

- Attend Sunday Mass.
- Pray together.
- Go to Confession regularly.

STEP 4: Coherent Celebration

- Choose a liturgy with spiritual meaning, not just aesthetics.
- Avoid extravagance that eclipses the sacred.
- Involve family and friends in the religious dimension.

Conclusion

Getting married in a church for its beauty, without faith or Christian intention, is like lighting a candle inside an airtight jar: sooner or later, it goes out. But when outward beauty is joined with sincere faith, Marriage becomes an **altar of lasting love**, not just a postcard for social media.

The Church does not exist to judge, but to accompany. Yet it also has the duty to protect

what is sacred. So before getting married in the Church, ask yourself if you're willing to live as a Catholic every day… not just for 45 minutes in a beautiful temple.

Because a beautiful church does not make a happy marriage. But a love built on Christ turns any place, even the humblest, into a sanctuary of eternity.