

The Wedding Season

Last Saturday, the seventh day of the seventh month of the seventh year of the century (7/7/07), drew a lot of attention. Engaged couples around the world were married in the hope that the repeating number seven would bring luck to their marriage and future. The unlucky ones that day were the overbooked clergy and justices. One Chicago pastor presided over five weddings last Saturday.

A Christian wedding should depend on forces other than “luck.” Yet, superstitious and pagan customs have stubbornly clung to wedding arrangements. The Church learned to tolerate or transform some of them.

In the very ancient Western world, a wedding was a family-based religious event. Each family had its own gods, worshipped its own ancestors, and maintained an “eternal” flame in the hearth. The family had its own liturgy and prayers. For the bride, marriage was “conversion” to another religion, the religion of the groom. Her father was the priest of the household religion. Consequently, a marriage began with a religious ceremony of separation and the offering of a sacrifice to the gods in the home of the bride’s father. The father formally “handed over” his daughter. A procession to the home of the groom followed, and he staged a symbolic abduction of his bride by carrying her over the threshold. Another religious ritual was performed to introduce the woman to the gods and ancestors of her husband, now the priest of this household. The former Christian custom of having the groom wait at the altar surely echoes this ancient tradition.

The custom of attendants dressed alike was not about fashion or color coordination originally. The bride’s servants were dressed like the bride to confuse evil spirits who might endanger the bride.

The groom and groomsmen, viewed as the bride’s protectors, stood on her left to keep their swords, worn on the right, free and at hand.

Most wedding traditions come from patriarchal societies where women were second-class and regarded as property, dependents, and mothers solely. Strangely, many such traditions are still seen as essential to a wedding.

A Catholic wedding is a sacrament—a sign of Christ’s love for his Church. A good wedding should try to reflect meaning that can be grasped in our day. For example, a Catholic wedding is a liturgical event—it begins with a procession of *all* the participants into the church, including the priest, servers, and the groom. Family willing, the groom may be accompanied by his parents or other family members who have made him the man he is. The bride is no longer “given away” by her father, but is accompanied by both mother and father who walk as continuing support to their daughter and son-in-law, instead of grieving them as lost property.

For two Catholics, the Eucharist is the “wedding cake” or “unity candle” which expresses the communion between the couple and among the families. Marriages that are rooted in faith and its symbols are more likely to endure.

Father Keith

