

Appendix C: Honoring Ethnic and Cultural Traditions

A child eating with her mother and grandmother asked, “Mom, why do you always cut an inch off the end of the Thanksgiving ham?” The mother replied, “I learned that from your grandmother. It makes the ham juicier. Right, Mama?” The grandmother giggled: “I did it because I didn’t have a roasting pan big enough!”

Some say tradition is an excuse to act without thinking. When it comes to rituals, whether religious or secular, we often simply do what we’ve seen and learned from others. But not knowing where our traditions come from can lead us to do some strange things that may not fit our own situation.

The same is true when preparing a wedding. You might be surprised to know that a lot of what you see and hear on television or in the movies, or even at the last Catholic wedding you attended, isn’t actually in the Catholic *Rite of Marriage*. Some examples of these customs include the bride walking down the aisle by herself or with her father, improvised or customized vows, lighting a unity candle, pouring sand into a vase, binding the couple with a veil and cord (or lasso), blessing and giving coins (arras), or placing flowers at an image of Mary.

If these aren’t in the Catholic rite, where did they come from? Why do some Catholic weddings have them? And how do you know which of these would be appropriate for your wedding?

Something Old

Some of these traditions come from a time and culture in which marriage was treated as a contract between families, and the transfer of wealth and property played an important role. “Giving away the bride” ritualized this contract. In this light, you can see how the tradition of the father escorting his daughter to her groom may have developed. Catholics, however, believe that the bride and groom give themselves to each other as equal partners, and as one, they give themselves to God. That is why the rite directs the bride and groom to walk in together or be escorted by both of their parents. That is a practice you hardly see, but the option is there for you to choose if you wish.

Does this mean it would be inappropriate to follow tradition instead? Not necessarily. Parents play a major role in our lives, and sharing this moment with them is a gift. But there are ways to blend tradition with what the rite requests. For example, the groom might walk in first with his mother and/or father, followed later by the bride with her father and/or mother. Discussing these options with your family and parish ministers might also give you some valuable time to reflect on the role your family has had in your relationship and may help mend preexisting divisions.

Something New

Some traditions are actually trends in popular culture. These include customs like the unity candle, a sand ceremony, or improvised vows. These practices developed relatively recently and have been used in both religious and civil ceremonies. Of these, the unity candle is most popular, but it is not required and technically not allowed to be used during the *Rite of Marriage* (see the FAQ on page 8 of *Together for Life*).

Lighting candles, however, does have great significance in the Catholic Church. Our most important candle is the Paschal or Easter Candle, which is first lit each year at the Easter Vigil and remains prominent throughout the Easter season. All the candles given at infant and adult baptisms are lit from this candle. It is also lit during funerals to mark our loved one's passage to eternal life. We honor the Paschal Candle because it represents Christ, the Light.

One reason the Church's rite does not include a unity candle may be that its popular meaning—two lives becoming one—is already profoundly signified through the couple's exchange of vows and rings and in the nuptial blessing. Some churches allow a unity candle to be lit after the conclusion of the rite, just before the recessional.

If you are both baptized (even if in another Christian tradition) and permitted to incorporate a unity candle at the end of your wedding, you might light your smaller candles from the Paschal Candle and, using them, light your unity candle. Don't blow out your own smaller candles—your identity does not disappear when you get married; it is shared and transformed into something new, a third reality represented by the unity candle. Another custom in some places is to light a unity candle

to formally open the wedding reception. For an example of how to do this, visit togetherforlifeonline.com/unitycandle.

Something Borrowed

Other traditions are rooted in our ethnic cultures. These customs hold deep meaning for many families, and the Church invites couples to include them in their ceremony if they do not conflict with a Christian understanding of marriage. For example, in many Hispanic families, there is a blessing and giving of coins; Filipino families place a veil and cord over the couple; Vietnamese couples honor their ancestors; and Celtic families wear the colors of their clan. Additional information about ethnic wedding traditions and how to adapt them to the *Rite of Marriage* and the liturgical norms of the Catholic Church are available at togetherforlifeonline.com/wedding/traditions.

Something Blue

Finally, some of our traditions developed from a spiritual devotion to the Virgin Mary. She is a model for living one's faith in the good and bad of everyday life. It is natural, then, for Catholics to want to pray to her as they begin their new life together. Some couples place flowers at an image of Mary and spend a few moments in prayer to her during the wedding. But more often than not, couples really just want a special song sung at that time, and they may think they need to take flowers to a statue of Mary in order to have that song included. Not so. If both of you genuinely have a devotion to Mary, then certainly ask if you can include this tradition. But if it is not allowed, keep in mind that you are not required to do it.

Ritual traditions take root in our lives most often because they unite us to the past, connect to who we are today, and help us express who we want to become. Good rituals are powerful because they communicate this connection clearly. As you prepare your wedding, look first at the traditions that have been handed on to you from all the cultures that make you who you are today. Especially begin with the rite from our ancestors in the faith. Explore where these traditions come from and what

they mean. Adapt them for your wedding with the help of your parish staff, so they express what the two of you hope for in your married life.