

Can we be married in a garden six months from now?

Our imaginations are full of wedding images from our culture with just such things as garden weddings. I enjoy seeing them just as much as the next person when I enjoy watching a movie. For Roman Catholics, the Sacrament of Marriage is solemnized only in a church where the Sunday Liturgy is celebrated, because we have come to know that Jesus makes an intimate link between Himself in the Sunday Liturgy and the couple celebrating and entering into Marriage.

Garden weddings are usually performed by Protestant ministers, who take marriage seriously and look for a minimum of faith in the couple requesting, but can marry them with relatively short notice. The Roman Catholic Church requires a longer preparation and discernment time. I don't know what the delay is for a civil wedding, but it is probably weeks or a few months for an appointment. With six months or less there is only enough time to prepare the wedding, but not married and family life. I can understand that a couple already living together and having children may simply see it as adding a blessing or seal of approval, like a cherry on a sundae.

However, in our Roman Catholic faith tradition and experience of life, Matrimony is a vocation and married life is also a challenge nowadays. So it has become obvious that time is needed for the couple to prepare themselves as well as can be with the help of the priest and of a marriage preparation course. There is more formality in our Church over Marriage because it is once and for life, and couples who later experience breakdown and want to enter a second marriage are dismayed to discover that they can not be freed from their first marriage in the Church as easily as with the state through divorce.

The Parish Bulletin states couples should begin the process with their priest a year in advance. With a spring request for a September wedding, that is only 5 months away, and some of that time will be lost due to summer vacations, which really only leaves about two months.

Priests try to be hospitable and cordially receive anyone desiring to formulate a request to get married or for any other religious or spiritual service. Couples wanting to get married less than a year from their first meeting with a priest need to understand that they are putting pressure on the priest to speed up the process and by the same token short changing themselves of the time it takes for a thorough and deeply engaging preparation process. There is a limit to how much time for serious preparation for marriage can be compressed.

This information may come as a cold shower on the excitement and desire for happiness that we associate with wedding and marriage plans, and believe me when I say that I don't at all relish being the one who has at times to say no, there just isn't enough time. It's just that we understand Marriage to be something that the Lord does in the life of a couple, so that my only authority is to honor the experience of countless couples in previous and current generations, to obey the instructions I receive from my bishop, and to do what I know to be the will of God.

Please keep in mind a concern to know what is God's will in considering whether it is possible in a short space of time to accomplish what needs to be done in order to honor God in the gift of Marriage as He intends it to be given. It's not just about booking a church and a priest.

So how do we go about getting married in a garden?

To sum up so far, there is supposed to be a minimum of 6 months of preparation time before a marriage celebration, and doing it outside is an added complication since virtually all Roman Catholic Marriage celebrations take place in Church. No Roman Catholic priests are authorized to perform a Roman Catholic Marriage Liturgy outside of a Roman Catholic Church. When such a celebration seems to take place, it is because there is something missing, in other words, it is not a Roman Catholic Marriage celebration and probably merely a civil ceremony.

Background

Early Christian marriages were entirely civil affairs done in accord with Roman civil law. The ceremony consisted in the bride being accompanied in the presence of a civil witness from her father's house to the house of her future husband's father. Once she crossed the threshold of that house she was married. When Roman persecutions ended churches were built and Christians who married stopped by for a blessing, in time they went inside for the blessing, which later was given during the Liturgy of the Holy Eucharist. When the Roman Empire disintegrated and society fell into chaos, the Roman Catholic Church took up the responsibility for keeping order in civil Marriage ceremonies, which by the same token became religious affairs.

For the past 1500 years or so Marriage in the Roman Catholic Church has been at the same time a religious and civil ceremony, except in countries such as France where the civil portion was separated after the French Revolution. They are also separate in the USA. In Quebec, the religious and the civil are still combined unless they are intentionally separated.

It is unusual for the Archbishop in Montreal to grant a dispensation from form to allow the Marriage to take place outside, such as in a garden. Under those circumstances, the priest cannot do it but may participate; however, a civil servant such as a notary must be the one to receive the vows from the couple. For a Roman Catholic to get married in a garden, you will need your own pastor to prepare your Marriage file and do all the preparation with you and with a letter from you containing your written request to the Archbishop for dispensation from canonical form and the reasons why you want the wedding to take place where and when you do. Once the Archbishop allows your Marriage to take place without canonical form (which is without the couple exchanging vows in the presence of a Roman Catholic priest in a Roman Catholic Church), then you can proceed with your wedding in a garden providing you have a notary to receive your vows and take care of the civil requirements.

A priest of your choice who agrees to could then be present and participate in a Liturgy of the Word which he would help you plan, but he would not be able to receive your vows. You in summary would have to foresee fees related to the church helping you with the preparations, the fees of the notary, and the extra fees of the priest who is performing a service above and beyond what his church provides.

I hope you find this information helpful. Feel free to ask further questions. Good luck and God bless you and your families.