

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 that 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.