

May the Bride and Groom Process up the Aisle Together?

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During the past six years, I have been involved in the wedding liturgies of four family members: two brothers, a nephew, and a niece. I was struck by how the ceremonies were shaped and also by the inspiration for the celebration of the liturgies. The couples' ideas on the wedding liturgy had been formed by television, movies, and their participation in the weddings of friends and members. In most of the wedding liturgies, the bride processed up the aisle last (following the bridesmaid and the maid of honor) along with her father. The groom did not walk up the main aisle but was already standing with the priest and the groomsmen near the altar. In one brother's wedding, the bride and the groom walked down the main aisle together, and the bride was not "given away" by her father.

May the bride and groom process up the aisle together? A simple answer is yes. In fact, the *Rite of Marriage* describes a procession with the bride and bridegroom walking together.

The present *Rite of Marriage* suggests the order of and the persons who should be part of the procession. The rite states:

If there is a procession to the altar, the ministers go first, followed by the priest, and then the bride and the bridegroom. According to local custom, they may be escorted by at least their parents and the two witnesses. (20)

Note that the rite presupposes a liturgical procession. As a rite of the Church the marriage rite is prepared as a liturgical act. The rite, then, takes for granted that the procession follows what we ordinarily participate in on Sundays, with the addition of the couple and with the possible inclusion of parents and witnesses. Another important element of the procession is not only the inclusion of the liturgical ministers but also the placement of the couple after the priest. Typically, the priest is the last to process up the aisle, but the *Rite of Marriage* calls for the couple to be last. Why is this? It is because the ministers of the Sacrament of Matrimony are the bride and bridegroom together, while the priest witnesses the exchange of vows.



Couples' ideas about their wedding ceremonies often are inspired by popular culture. The *Rite of Marriage* describes a procession in which the couple processes up the aisle together.

Theologically and also liturgically, if both the bride and the bridegroom are the ministers of the Sacrament of Matrimony, then both should have equal roles and should participate similarly within the rite, including the wedding procession. The procession in which the bride walks down the aisle with her father, with the groom awaiting her, suggests the groom is not only incidental, but theologically, that his role in the rite itself is marginal. The rite presents that the couple share in growing in their union with Christ Jesus and his Church, as well as the coming together of two families, that is, two domestic churches. The bride and bridegroom have been reared in the family, the domestic church, where it is hoped that faith was nurtured. Now, in and through this rite, these two members of the Church and members of their respective domestic churches will be uniting, in faith. The marginalization of the groom, even in the procession, may communicate that one member of the domestic church is more significant than the other.

The official *Rite of Marriage* is prophetic in regard to how the marriage rite is prepared and executed. It may be challenging to our popular imaginations, but it speaks to the depth of faith that should be a part of not only the rite but the entire marriage.