

## **What if I'm not registered in a parish?**

Each person is a “member” of a parish by virtue of residence ([Canon 518](#)). It is generally expected that a Catholic will be married in his or her proper parish by his or her proper pastor ([Canon 1115](#)). If you do not know your parish, please visit the Diocese of Richmond website to locate the one nearest you.

## **Do I have to get married in my own parish?**

No, but you will have to obtain a letter from your proper pastor granting you permission to marry outside the parish ([Canon 1115](#)). This letter will be included in your marriage file.

## **Do I need to have received the Sacrament of Confirmation before I can be married in the Church?**

Catholics should be confirmed before their marriage, as long as this would not pose a grave inconvenience ([Canon 1065-1](#)). Often, preparation for this sacrament can be done alongside marriage formation, and the preparation for Confirmation need not follow the curriculum or schedule of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

## **What do we do if we are getting married in one diocese but live in another?**

Contact your pastor and the pastor of the parish where you intend to marry regarding preparation. You should complete the marriage preparation process in the parish where you live. Then the chancellor of that diocese will forward the marriage file to the chancellor of the diocese in which the marriage will take place, to ensure that it reaches the correct parish. Begin the documentation at your local parish, and be sure to allow plenty of time! If you are getting married outside of the United States, more time may be needed to allow for the proper transfer of documents between Church officials.

## **What happens to my marriage file if I am getting married outside the Diocese of Richmond?**

Be sure you start this process as soon as possible. Once your file is complete, your parish priest will send your marriage file to the diocesan chancellor, who will then send it to the chancellor of the diocese where you are to be married. That diocese will in turn review it and send it on to the parish where the wedding will take place.

## **What happens to our marriage file once it is completed?**

The marriage file is kept in the archive of the Catholic parish of the territory in which the marriage is celebrated.

## Can my pet be part of the wedding?

Pets can be an important part of family life, but marriage is a sacred rite. Including pets in the marriage rite is not permitted (unless they are required as service animals).

## What is the purpose of marriage preparation?

Because marriage is significant for the Church and for society as a whole, the Diocese of Richmond requires that all couples receive a thorough preparation for marriage ([Canon 1063-1064](#)). The goals of marriage preparation are to help you to grow in love, and to be open to God's grace, so that you can have a happy and fulfilling marriage. The goals for each couple are to:

- foster an understanding of the essential properties of marriage (i.e., unity, fidelity, indissolubility, and fruitfulness); ([Canon 1056](#))
- determine whether you have the basic elements of a psychological, intellectual, moral and legal capability for marriage and family life; ([Canon 1095-1096](#))
- offer an opportunity for deepening your personal faith and to help you discover the value of the sacraments and the experience of prayer; ([Canon 1065](#))
- offer you practical advice and assistance to deepen your married love, including communication and how to overcome the challenges and difficulties of married life; and
- provide education regarding the defense of human life and the nature and importance of marital sexuality

## What are the requirements for marriage under the Church's law?

According to the *Code of Canon Law* (the law of the Church), in order for a marriage to be valid, there are certain requirements:

- the two spouses must be free to marry; ([Canon 1103](#))
- they must be capable of consenting to the marriage; ([Canon 1095](#))
- they must understand the nature of marriage (i.e., exclusive, permanent, and open to having children) ([Canon 1096-1](#)).

## How often do I need to meet with the priest or deacon?

The priest or deacon who is witnessing your marriage will meet with you several times. The following items are likely to take place over the course of three to five separate meetings:

- getting to know you as a couple (if he does not already);
- completing the “Pre-Nuptial Investigation” required by the Church;
- facilitating your premarital inventory (i.e., [FOCCUS](#) or [Prepare-Enrich](#)) and discussing it;
- reviewing final details before your wedding

## Why does the Church have so many rules about marriage?

Rules exist to protect values. The Church understands marriage to have been established by God from the beginning of time and rooted in the natural order of Creation. Therefore, the Church’s rules about marriage serve to protect the institution as a sacred covenant between one man and one woman (cf. Genesis 1:28; 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6; cf. Mark 10:6–9), and as a visible sign of God’s love for his people (cf. Hosea 1–3; Isaiah 54; 62; Jeremiah 2–3; 31; Ezekiel 16; 23; Malachi 2:13–17; Ephesians 5:31–32). ([CCC 1611](#))

Marriage is also the foundation of the family and society (cf. Genesis 1:28), and sacramental marriage is central to the life of the Church ([CCC 1616-1617](#)). It is also a public act celebrated as part of the Church’s liturgy (worship), and ushers the couple into a special state of life in the Church ([CCC 1631](#)). Marriage forges a permanent bond between husband and wife, establishing significant rights and responsibilities between the spouses and, eventually, their children ([Canon 1134](#)).

Because it is so significant, the Church seeks to ensure that a couple is properly prepared for marriage, and that the bride and groom enter into it freely, without reservation, and with full understanding of their commitment to one another ([Canon 1095-1096, 1103](#)). The Church also has an obligation to make sure that the marriage is celebrated in the correct way ([CCC 1632](#)). All of this stems from the Church’s responsibility to tend to the care of God’s people.

The marriage preparation process is governed by rules and regulations that are part of canon law. While Church laws may seem complicated to those who are unfamiliar with them, most people find them no more difficult than the civil laws governing marriage. In addition, a couple that prepares for marriage with an open mind and heart will find that the Church’s norms address critical issues for their marriage. In discussing these issues as future spouses, and in discussing them with a priest or deacon, the bride and groom can avoid future problems and be more confident in their love and in the love of God.

## Do we have to give the priest or deacon any documents?

Yes, the following is required:

1. *Freedom to marry must be established.*
  - This is done by completing the “Affidavit of Freedom to Marry,” which is a document signed by a person (preferably parents or relatives) who can testify to the bride or

groom's freedom to marry. Both the bride and groom need two people to give testimony. This applies to both Catholics and non-Catholics.

2. *A certificate of Baptism (where applicable), no older than six months before the date of the wedding.*
  - This can be obtained by calling or writing the parish where you were baptized.
  - For a baptized non-Catholic, the priest or deacon must have some evidence of Baptism (e.g., a recent baptismal certificate or letter from your church).

## **When do I need to have all these documents ready?**

In the first or second meeting with the priest or deacon, he will complete the Pre-Nuptial Investigation and discuss the timeline for submitting the documents. Because baptismal certificates should be requested within six months, you may not be able to turn in all of the documents right away. It is important to obtain these documents as soon as possible to ensure that all of the canonical requirements for marriage have been met.

## **What do I do if I want to get married at a chapel that has special meaning for me?**

Your first conversation is with the priest or deacon at your parish. He will discuss with you the regulations of marriage and where it can take place. The priest or deacon will assist you in preparing a request for permission if it is needed. Please note that, in general, two Catholics, as well as a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic, must marry in a Catholic church or chapel. If you desired to be married in a non-Catholic chapel, you will need to discuss this with the priest or deacon who is preparing you for marriage, and you will need to explain the personal significance of the place in which you wish to be married. ([Canon 1118](#))

## **What if I want to have my Catholic wedding in a garden, at a hotel, on a beach, or in some other location?**

In the case of two Catholics, the wedding is generally celebrated in the parish church of one of them. Likewise, if a Catholic is marrying a baptized non-Catholic, the wedding should ordinarily take place in the parish church. With the permission of the Bishop or the pastor, the wedding may take place in another church or oratory. Outside of this, permission from the Bishop is required to hold a wedding somewhere other than a church or oratory. The main exception to this is for a marriage between a Catholic and an unbaptized person. In that case, the wedding may be celebrated in a church or in another suitable location. ([Canon 1118](#))

## **What if only one of us is a Catholic and the other is a non-Catholic Christian?**

A marriage between a Catholic and a baptized Christian who is not Catholic (e.g., Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian etc.) is a sacrament according to the doctrine and discipline of the Catholic Church. In this case, the Catholic party must obtain a permission from the local bishop and promise that he or she will do everything in his or her power to continue to practice the faith, and have any children baptized and reared in the Catholic Church. This permission may be obtained through the assistance of the priest or deacon who is preparing you for marriage. ([Canon 1124-1125](#))

## **What if only one of us is a Catholic and we want to be married at a non-Catholic church?**

Discuss this with your priest or deacon in the first meeting. A Catholic should generally be married in his or her parish. However, in some cases (e.g., a personal connection to a Church or a minister in the family), permission may be granted for the Catholic to be married in another church or suitable place. In this case, if someone other than a Catholic priest or deacon will witness the exchange of vows, then a “dispensation from canonical form” is required. This dispensation may be obtained through the assistance of the priest or deacon who is preparing you for marriage. However, if a Catholic priest or deacon is witnessing the exchange of vows, then no dispensation is necessary. ([Canon 1118, 1127](#))

## **What if only one of us is a Catholic and we want a non-Catholic minister to officiate the wedding?**

There can only be one marriage ceremony. If the wedding is celebrated in a Catholic church, the priest or deacon presides, and a non-Catholic minister can offer prayers and invoke a blessing upon the couple (although not the Nuptial Blessing). If a non-Catholic minister will be present and the wedding is to be celebrated in a Catholic church, then special consideration should be given to celebrating the Rite of Marriage Outside of Mass. If the wedding takes place in another location, and with a “dispensation from canonical form,” then the non-Catholic minister should preside, and a Catholic priest or deacon may be present but not in a way that would give the impression that he is there to “bless the marriage.” ([Canon 1118, 1127](#))

## **What if only one of us is a Catholic and the other is not baptized?**

A marriage between a Catholic and a non-Christian is a valid marriage, although it is not a sacrament ([Canon 1055](#)). The Catholic party must obtain from his or her proper bishop a dispensation from the impediment of “disparity of cult” (difference of worship) ([Canon 1086](#)). The Catholic party must promise that he or she will do everything in his or her power to continue to practice the faith, and will any children baptized and reared in the Catholic Church ([Canon 1086](#)). The priest or deacon overseeing the marriage preparation will assist in obtaining the dispensation from disparity of cult.

## **What if one of us was married previously?**

If either party went through with a wedding ceremony of any kind—including a civil marriage that was later dissolved—it is essential to reveal this information to the priest or deacon early in the marriage preparation process, before setting a wedding date. A decree of nullity (annulment) regarding a previous marital union may be necessary, and that process can take one year or longer to complete. The Church assumes the validity of every marriage unless and until the opposite is proven; therefore, a declaration of invalidity is not to be assumed ([Canon 1060](#)).

## **What if one of us lives outside the Diocese of Richmond?**

If a Catholic is marrying in a parish other than his or her territorial parish, including a parish in another diocese, then the pastor of the home parish must grant permission, in writing, for that person to be married outside of his or her territorial parish ([Canon 1115](#)). As you will need some documents before you get married (e.g., a baptismal certificate), you should contact the parish in which you were baptized. That parish may send the documents to its diocesan offices, which will then forward them to the chancellor of the Diocese of Richmond. Therefore, it is recommended to begin as soon as possible.

## **What if both of us live outside the Diocese of Richmond, but would like to be married in a Catholic Church in the diocese?**

The marriage preparation process can be completed according to the norms of the diocese in which the Catholic party resides. The prenuptial investigation can be done by their pastor or during a visit to this diocese prior to the marriage, but should not be done at the last minute. The Affidavits of Free Status can also be witnessed (signed and sealed) by a cleric in the place(s) where the witnesses are located.

## **What if we don't fulfill all of the Church's rules?**

A marriage that does not comply with the minimum requirements of the Church's law may not be valid in the eyes of the Church, and a Catholic should not enter into such a union. If you have entered into such a marital union, you should speak with your parish priest.

## **What should we do if we're living together?**

Although “conventional wisdom” may hold that living together is a good way to prepare for marriage, a review of the available social science tells a different story:

- “Living together before marriage increases the risk of breaking up after marriage”;
- “Living together outside of marriage increases the risk of domestic violence for women, and the risk of physical and sexual abuse for children”;
- “Unmarried couples have lower levels of happiness and wellbeing than married couples.”

Additionally, the longer the couple lives together before marriage, the higher the likelihood of divorce. Women and children are the most vulnerable in a cohabiting relationship with a higher likelihood of physical or sexual abuse. (See [“Should We Live Together: What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage”](#))

Because of the moral and spiritual problems that surround cohabitation, speak honestly to your priest or deacon about the situation. Take a serious look at your motivations and expectations about marriage and your relationship. Ask yourself: Am I really ready for a life-long, exclusive commitment? Am I acting out of true freedom, without feeling pressured to get married? (This is essentially the first question that the priest or deacon will ask you at your wedding.) Ideally, a couple would move into separate living quarters and remain chaste until after the wedding. All Catholics, including those who are preparing for marriage, should strive to live chastely their state in life.

## **Does the Church have a position on pre-nuptial agreements?**

No. In many cases, these agreements essentially serve as a contract between the prospective spouses about how their property and other rights will be handled within their marriage, and how they will be handled in the event of a divorce. Generally speaking, pre-nuptial agreements are not prudent and may even call into question the validity of the marriage itself. However, there are some cases in which a pre-nuptial agreement might not call into question the validity of the marriage. For instance, older persons who remarry may wish to preserve an inheritance that was bequeathed from a deceased spouse to their children, rather than have it enter a joint estate in the new relationship. In the Rite of Marriage, the bride and groom are asked if they have come “without reservation,” and so it is prudent for them to ask themselves beforehand: “Does the existence of a pre-nuptial agreement preclude us from answering this question affirmatively?” The issue of pre-nuptial agreements is to be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

## **What is an annulment?**

Indissolubility is an essential property of marriage: no human power can dissolve the bond between husband and wife (Canon [1134](#), [1141](#)). Jesus himself declares: “What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder” (Matthew 19:6; Mark 10:9). An annulment, more properly called a “decree of nullity,” is essentially a process whereby a ruling is made about the sacramental validity of a marriage *from its beginning*. The Church begins with the presumption that every marriage is valid ([Canon 1060](#)).

## **Do we need to get a marriage license?**

Yes. If you have not been married in a previous civil ceremony, you must obtain a marriage license no more than 60 days prior to the wedding from any jurisdiction in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The priest or deacon must sign the license after the marriage and return to the clerk of court from which it was issued within five business days. The marriage is also recorded in the sacramental register of the parish church where the wedding takes place ([Canon 1121](#)). Note that the priest or deacon witnessing the

marriage must have at some time registered with the Commonwealth of Virginia, or obtain a one-time permission, to witness a marriage.

## **What is the “Pre-Nuptial Investigation” or “PNI”?**

This is the name for the meeting(s) at which the priest or deacon will make sure you are free to marry, if you understand the nature of marriage, and if it is your intention to marry with this correct understanding. He will also be discovering some basic information about you and your future spouse: parents' names; addresses; baptism status; etc. He will also ask you for proof of Baptism (if you are a Christian), and of First Communion and Confirmation (if you are a Catholic). He will determine what dispensations or permissions have to be obtained. The process offers an excellent opportunity to speak to the priest or deacon about any areas a couple would like to discuss. This is different from the “premarital inventory” that will be used during your preparation process such as [FOCCUS](#) or [Prepare-Enrich](#).

## **Where can we get a papal blessing for our wedding after we are married?**

Many people desire a blessing from the Holy Father on the occasion of their marriage. To request a papal blessing, please contact the [Office of the Bishop](#) in the Diocese of Richmond and they will assist you with the process.