

Guidance for Marriage

Introduction

The Government has announced that from 4th July 2020, communal acts of worship will be allowed in our Catholic Churches. This guidance, issued by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales for the Celebration of Matrimony, assumes that the general guidance published by the Conference, based on Government Guidance on the safe opening of Places of Worship for individual prayer, is in place.¹

Social Distancing - IMPORTANT

The Government maintains that the 2m social distancing requirements should be applied where possible. The Government has said it is possible to go to "1m plus;" this means you can space people more closely (with a minimum of 1m) providing a mitigation of risk is also applied. In the case of our churches, this would mean the compulsory wearing of a face covering for members of the congregation.² People from different households should maintain social distancing between one another.

Priests should remain mindful of their own personal situation with respect to potential exposure to virus transmission. It is permissible for those in the 70+ age group, and those who are vulnerable to infection, to celebrate marriages, but it is strongly advised that they take particular care to be constantly socially distant from the congregation.

The Wedding Itself

The Government Guidance for Small Marriages and Civil Partnerships³ states that "up to 30 people, but no more, can attend a marriage or civil partnership, where this can be safely accommodated with social distancing in a COVID-19 secure venue. This maximum number includes all those at the ceremony, including the couple, witnesses, officiants and guests. It also includes any staff who are not employed by the venue, which may include photographers, security or caterers. It does not include staff employed by the venue."

The Government Guidance goes on to say that "It is advised that the ceremonies and services should be concluded in the shortest reasonable time, and limited as far as reasonably possible to the parts of the marriage or civil partnership that are required in order to be legally binding under the law of England and Wales.

Religious communities should therefore adapt traditional religious aspects, especially where celebrations would otherwise have taken place over a number of hours, or even days, to ensure the safety of those present and minimal spread of infection."

The Church guidance therefore recommends that all Marriages at this time should be outside of the Celebration of Mass (see Chapter II or IV of the Order of Celebrating Matrimony, 2015).

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-announces-easing-of-lockdown-restrictions-23-june-2020>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-small-marriages-and-civil-partnerships/covid-19-guidance-for-small-marriages-and-civil-partnerships>

The Order of Matrimony

The minister should ensure his clear distancing from the couple to be married of at least 2m. the minister should explain the conditions of social distancing, of speaking with a gentle voice to responses in order to prevent aerosol projection, and that touching surfaces and people and items other than their own property should be avoided. Any service sheets provided for the congregation should be taken with them at the end.

If the bride is to be accompanied down the aisle to the groom, this should be done by someone from her own household or support bubble. Any bridesmaids should precede the bride ensuring they walk singly and at a social distance between them (unless they are from the same household or support bubble).

Music can be played at the wedding if pre-recorded, or an organist may play. If instrumental music is required other than an organ, the musicians are to be included in the total number of 30. Government guidance states that the use of musical instruments that require the person to blow into them is not advised because of the current uncertainty on air projection and viral transmission. There should be no congregational singing at weddings at this time. The use of music should not prolong the Marriage ceremony.

If members of the congregation are to read, they should either:

- Bring the reading with them on a pre-prepared sheet and then take it away with them
- Read from a lectionary after sanitising their hands, or wearing gloves.

The minister, before reading the Gospel, should sanitise his hands if reading from the Lectionary.

The Rite of Marriage

The minister should remain socially distant from the couple for the Marriage Rite. He should direct all questions needing a response to them without raising his voice. The use of a microphone would assist. The couple should answer clearly, so that he, or the Registrar for the Marriage (or Authorised Person) can hear the consent of the couple.

The couple should take each other's hands, as prescribed by the Marriage Rite, at the direction of minister. He should not touch the couple at this point.

If a ring or rings are to be exchanged, these should be placed on a plate by the Best Man (or other person) before the marriage ceremony begins. The plate should not be touched by this person. The minister should hold the plate and bless the ring (or rings) without touching them and then offer them, one at a time to the couple at arm's length, withdrawing immediately to a social distance, whilst the words are said by the ring-giver.

The couple should not kneel for the Nuptial Blessing; the minister should simply extend his hands over them and bless them in the usual way.

The Registration

The Civil Registrar, or the Authorised Person (who may be the minister) should have prepared the registration documents in another part of the church which is easily accessible to those who need to be present for the Registration.

All those who will be part of the Registration should sanitise their hands before touching a pen or a register. Social distancing has to be kept at this point and crowding around the table should be avoided. It would be good practice to have two pens, filled with Registrar's Ink, so one can be cleaned whilst the other is being used.

Photographs at this point may be taken after the registration is complete, but group photographs should have everyone socially distant from each other (apart from the bride and groom and those in households or support bubbles).

Recessional from Church

The Bride and Groom should leave the church first and all those in the congregation should leave in an orderly manner to avoid crowding at doors. All should sanitise their hands on leaving the church. If photographs are to be taken outside, they should obey the social distancing regulations.

The minister should clean the plate used for the rings. Any discarded printed materials should be removed and bagged for disposal.

The church should be closed after the Mass has finished in order to clean the space according to the Bishops' Conference guidelines on individual prayer. If there is cause for concern regarding the possible contamination of clerical vestments worn during the celebration of the Marriage, these should be washed in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions, using the warmest water setting allowed for the fabric and allowing time for them to dry completely.

Rev. Canon Christopher Thomas
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Revision 2