



Most engaged couples at least the brides love thumbing through any of the popular bridal magazines, reading the numerous helpful articles, and taking note of the various ads, photos, and other information offered, be it helpful wedding tips, reception planning or honeymoon ideas. These magazines try to be a resource guide for couples who want to have the perfect wedding. This isn't a negative notion in itself, other than the fact that "perfect" is not reachable, nor even necessarily, desirable.

There is an adage in Catholic Engaged Encounter: "A Wedding is a Day; A Marriage is a Lifetime." So the key is not to put more emphasis on the wedding plans than the subsequent marriage. These magazines are not designed to do any more than they do: sell gowns, rings, dinnerware, furniture, luggage, travel packages, honeymoon trips, sex appeal, and "take-your-breath-away-beauty."

### **The Wedding: A Celebration of God's Love**

There is, of course, nothing wrong with a well-planned wedding day; nor for that matter, with a reception and wedding celebration of large proportions – that is, if they fit into the proper context. This means that the wedding celebration needs to point to the reality of what is truly happening with this coming together as husband wife. It is actually a party to celebrate that God loves His people. The husband and wife express this divine love concretely– through words and deeds– as they live out their conjugal love over a lifetime. Their bond of love becomes the image and symbol of the covenant that unites God to His people. This is wonderful! It is wonder-filled. It demands to be celebrated. And the need and desire to have a great wedding celebration is therefore appropriate and fitting.

Sometimes, though, a couple can get so caught up in planning that a reality check is needed. When wedding planning threatens to spin out of control, it's time to step back and ask a few questions:

1. Why are we doing whatever we are doing regarding our wedding plans?
2. What is the purpose of our large, small, costly, intimate, informal, formal,

etc. reception?

3. How are we acting as a visible sign of God's love for all of us as we participate in the celebration and related events?
4. Whom are we inviting? And why are we asking these people?
5. Is there anything we can do to help others? Perhaps even assist family reconciliations? How might we be a sign of God's love to the poor, the afflicted, and the needy?
6. What does the term "counter-cultural" mean to us in the context of our wedding celebration?
7. For the interfaith couple: How can aspects of both our faith traditions be acknowledged and affirmed in our wedding celebration?

The marriage covenant illustrates and illuminates God's love for us. The couple enters this covenant with their own promise, or vow, to do three things: to be faithful to each other forever, to be exclusively for one another, and to be open to new life. The couple says "yes" - to be their word - while not knowing how they are going to fulfill such a promise. They say "yes" to live out their commitment regardless of whatever circumstances come about in their life.

They do so, not solely based upon their own good intentions and abilities, but do so in the confidence of God's grace. It is God's faithfulness that we can always count on, and it is this faithfulness that the couple is committed to mirror to each other and to the world.

The promise the couple makes - publicly to God and to community - is a radical departure from any contract, whereby in a contract both parties know up front what will or won't take place before hand. This promise - or covenant - is counter-cultural, and it is profoundly freeing and powerful.

### **Marriage as an Invitation to Personal Growth**

Marriage is also a social matter. It has always been an occasion for rejoicing, bringing together families and friends. For Catholics it is also a sacrament that draws them into an on-going process of sacrifice, compromise, raising children, prayer, and dealing with the joys and annoyances of a life shared together. For the wise couple, it is a challenge that, when embraced, opens the door to tremendous opportunities for personal growth and development. The married couple takes this way of living on as their specific spiritual journey-one where maturity and growth occurs for each person, as God gets revealed over and over through their love for one another.

In addition to making thoughtful and wise choices concerning the wedding plans, a couple needs to put a major effort into their marriage plans. The wedding can often be exhausting and lots of work. It's only worthwhile if the couple has also prepared for the marriage. Then the work of the marriage, the work that continues long after

the bills for the reception and gown are paid, and long after the honeymoon photos are placed into an album or on a website, can become the exclusive focus.

While bridal magazines are exciting and fun to look at, they won't say all this. And they only tell a part of the story. The rest is about the excitement and fun in store for those blessed and courageous enough to invest in this lifelong journey of work and effort - this thing called sacramental marriage. So plan - for a great wedding - as well as a great and fulfilling marriage.