

Performing the Rite of Marriage: Agency, Identity, and Ideology

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Theorizing Ritual: The Priority of Practice

Defining ritual—even delimiting the scope of its practices—has proven highly evasive and contested over the past few decades, no less than has the definition of religion among anthropologists for well more than a century. Current writings in ritual studies and performance theory bespeak the debates about religion that the nascent, then burgeoning, yet still methodologically eclectic discipline of anthropology has waged. The elusive phenomenon of religion has exerted no small measure of power over the best minds in their pursuits of functionalist, structuralist, processual, materialist, or other more recent emergent methodologies. Characteristic of current theories is the conceptual disentanglement of ritual from religion and, moreover, even in cases of religious ritual, rejection of the cross-disciplinary assumption that religion is primarily a matter of ideas, “meaning,” for which ritual serves a merely expressive function.

In her widely read *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Catherine Bell summarized what theorists are arguing against as they press to make the particular activity of a given ritual understandable (to use a phrase more recently coined by Don Handelman¹) *in its own right*:

In sum, it is a major reversal of traditional theory to hypothesize that ritual activity is not the ‘instrument’ of more basic purposes, such as power, politics, or social control, which are usually seen as existing before or outside the activities of the rite. It puts interpretive analysis on a new footing to suggest that ritual practices are themselves the very

production and negotiation of power relations. . . . In the . . . alternative position . . . ritualization as a strategic mode of practice produces nuanced relationships of power, relationships characterized by acceptance and resistance, negotiated appropriation, and redemptive reinterpretation of the hegemonic order.²

Evident in the continuing arguments over ritual among anthropologists and performance theorists (the latter comprising a still more eclectic [anti-] genre) is their almost urgent need to disassociate themselves from “religion” as ideological belief system in ways that strike me as reaching beyond the specific peoples and practices a particular researcher may be studying in a given case. Still, such efforts have yielded a fulsome range of sophisticated insights—if not in some cases comprehensive theories—about ritual, or better yet, *ritualizing*,³ and, in some instances, about the possibilities and limits for such theorizing.

The question for the liturgical scholar (whether theologian or “liturgiologist,” to use Ronald Grimes’s nomenclature⁴) is one of location vis-à-vis all these theories. Some fifteen years ago, Mary Collins astutely queried as to whether and when sacramental and liturgical theologians would not only study and apply ritual theories from the philosophical and social sciences, but also so come of age as to proffer their own theories and methods as viable with and, indeed, valuable to other academic theorists of ritual.⁵ For his part, Grimes clearly places theologians and liturgiologists on equal footing with the whole host of other scholars interested in ritual, fully expecting to learn from what liturgical theologians have to offer by their ways of being ritual critics. Collins’s (typically) wise and astute challenge, of course, entails the liturgical theologian’s availing oneself of insights from theorists across the whole range of scientific disciplines. What I hear in her exhortation, as well as in Grimes’s invitation, nonetheless, is the disqualification of any defensiveness or unnecessary apologetics on the part of the liturgical theologian in his or her contextual practice of what Grimes broadly calls ritual criticism. Grimes essays a theory of the ritual critic as one who evaluates the efficaciousness of a particular ritual practice, doing so while reflexively aware that any act of criticism is itself “judgment-laden” and, thus, “must systematically attend to the politics of critique.” For both “anthropologists and religiologists” studying ritual, Grimes argues, “Criticism is inescapable, though one can minimize, disguise, or try to subdue it. There is no possibility of fully disengaging normative and critical intentions from descriptive ones.”⁶ My point at the outset, then, is to acknowledge both the flexibility in theory that the range of ritual studies affords and my own reflexivity as one type of ritual critic, namely, a liturgical theologian and Roman Catholic priest, in the following consideration of the rite of marriage in contemporary U.S. Catholicism.

The Contemporary Rite of Marriage as Ideology in Practice

If ever there were a particular ceremony in Roman Catholicism demonstrative of how ritual does not simply express or symbolize a presumed, established, univocal religious ideology, it is the rite of marriage. In this present exercise of

ritual criticism, I adopt Bell’s rejections of both (1) the long-regnant modern “ideology-as-worldview perspective,” with “its ‘totalistic fallacy,’ the assumption that a group is dominated by a single, holistic set of ideas, which acts as the cement for [a given] society,” and (2) ideology “as dominant class interest,” which “simultaneously casts ideology as self-conscious and articulate, but also ‘false’ and able to dominate through mystification.”⁷ The society in this case is the Roman Catholic Church in the USA, and the dominant class, the local clergy (priests and deacons) to whom the laity would be seen as the passively obliging underclass, with said clergy likewise viewed as obediently subservient to the official rites and ongoing directives (canonical and otherwise) issued by the Vatican hierarchy and executed by the bishops they appoint across the globe.

As I shall attempt to demonstrate in the following descriptive and analytic work, the actual ritualizing of the sacrament of marriage provides considerable evidence to support Bell’s conclusion that

ideology is best understood as a strategy of power, a process whereby certain social practices or institutions are depicted to be ‘natural’ and ‘right.’ While such a strategy implies the existence of a group or groups whose members stand to gain in some way by an acceptance of these practices, it also implies the existence of some form of opposition. Thus, ideologization may imply an unequal distribution of power, but it also indicates a greater distribution of power than would exist in relationships defined by sheer force. It is a strategy intimately connected with legitimation, discourse, and fairly high degrees of social complicity and maneuverability.⁸

I can attest as both a Catholic priest and, earlier in my young adulthood, a church organist that many in both guilds can be heard to opine, “I’ll take a dozen funerals over one wedding any day!” That lament testifies to the extent to which the lay agents of the marriage rites, typically the brides and their mothers but by no means to the exclusion (increasingly) of the principal male agents, exercise robustly (often aggressively) their own power in negotiating the ideology of Christian marriage through their particular ritualizing thereof.

The following narrative plots an itinerary of sorts, whereby my practical work as a professor and pastoral minister has brought home for me just how great indeed are the degrees of ideological negotiation entailed in the practice of the marriage rite (and thus, the “institution” of marriage) in white, middle-class sectors of U.S. Catholicism. I begin from my experience in the undergraduate core-theology classroom, a venue felicitous to my rehearsing something of the current Roman Catholic theology (meaning) of marriage within a sacramental anthropology and ecclesiology that, nonetheless, inevitably encounters contestation in ritual practice.

The Sacramentality of Marriage: Agreement in Principle, Contestation in Ritual

During my recently concluded fifteen-year tenure on the faculty of a large, national, Catholic university, I regularly taught a section of the theology department's yearlong core course, "Exploring Catholicism: Tradition and Transition," to a class of approximately forty undergraduates. The mandate for the second semester was for ecclesiology, sacramental theology, and spirituality. I rearranged the order and took some liberty of interpretation, such that I began with sacramental-liturgical theology, moved on to ecclesiology, and concluded with moral theology, as I remained convinced college-age students are more interested in ethical issues and case studies than discussions of lofty, often abstract spiritualities. That practical angle⁹ was paramount in my approach from the semester's start with sacraments, for which I had the students read in tandem a work in systematic theology, Bernard Cooke's *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, and a thematically edited collection in practical-liturgical theology, *Bodies of Worship: Explorations in Theory and Practice*.

To follow Cooke's original (indeed, controversial) appropriation of Rahner and Schillebeeckx in his phenomenology of symbol and communication, personhood and community, is to arrive at marriage (not baptism or Eucharist) as the starting point for discussing the seven official sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church. Cooke meets still-adolescent college students where they are, namely, in the process of discovering their senses of identity by growing in their capacity to think reflexively, to recognize that all experience is interpreted experience, and that interpretation takes place only through symbolizing (for which word is fundamental). Sacrament is the term for any symbol or symbolic process revelatory of the (totally other) God beyond our sensing who, biblical tradition attests, communes with humanity personally, that is, through the limited but powerful reality of intersubjective and communal life. Cooke arrives at this summary statement:

If we restrict 'sacrament' to certain liturgical rituals, it is logical to think of baptism as the initial sacrament. If, however, we realize the fundamental sacramentality of all human experience and the way Jesus transformed this sacramentality, there is good reason for seeing human friendship as the most basic sacrament of God's saving presence among us. Human friendship reflects and makes credible the reality of God's love for humans. . . . Within human friendship there is a paradigmatic role played by the love between a Christian wife and husband. Building on the transformation of marriage's meaning that began with the Israelitic prophets, Christianity sees the love relationship of a Christian couple as sacramentalizing the relationship between Christ and the church, between God and humankind. God's saving action consists essentially in the divine self-giving [grace]. This is expressed by and present in the couple's self-gift to each other; they are sacrament to each other, to their children, and to their fellow Christians. This sacramentality, though specifically instanced in Christian marriage, extends to all genuine human friendship.¹⁰

Cooke's theology creatively builds on the official theology of the church, as presented in the Introduction to the *Rite of Marriage*, which reiterates the Second Vatican Council's bold advance in asserting that the couple are, together and to each other, God's offer of salvation and working out of their sanctification, and in that a living, personal sign of God's love to the world.¹¹ The reformed rite of marriage itself, in its various ritual elements, serves to bring this about, that is, to actualize this union through the virtual space the ritual creates for the couple to reshape their identities in relation to each other.

To speak of virtual space is to profit from Bruce Kapferer's original contribution for theorizing about the "inner dynamics of rite as the potency of the capacity of ritual to alter, change, or transform the existential circumstances of persons."¹² Ritualizing enables people explicitly to negotiate what the "chaotic" character of the quotidian, non-ritual "lived word" is incapable of engaging: "[The] virtuality of ritual reality is really real, a complete and filled-out existential reality—but in its own terms. . . . By entering within the particular dynamics of life by means of the virtuality of ritual, ritualists engage with positioning and structuring processes that are otherwise impossible to address in the tempo and dynamics of ordinary lived processes as these are lived on the surface."¹³ Precisely on that terrain of ritual agency is where, I discovered, contestation arises for young American Catholics as they imagine and celebrate the rite of marriage.

I found my students receptive, if not enthused, about Cooke's theology in all its concreteness and incarnational honoring of human agency and identity as exercised in friendship, broadly conceived, and marriage, specifically examined. Turning from the systematic theology of meaning to the liturgical theology of ritual, on the other hand, was another matter. For that, I availed myself of marriage-rite specialist Paul Covino's chapter in *Bodies of Worship* and his thirty-minute video, *Our Catholic Wedding*.¹⁴ In both text and video, Covino's approach to the Catholic wedding ritual relentlessly advocates practices based on what he distills as the fundamentals in the theology (meaning) of the sacrament, namely, (1) the couple as agents of their personal union and, thus, as sacraments of the church, itself being the "sacrament of unity," the people as one in Christ; and (2) the "corporate dimension" of the marriage rite by its very nature *as liturgy*, citing "Vatican II's strong preference for 'communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful . . . to a celebration that is individual and quasi-private.'"¹⁵ Covino rues the extent to which U.S. Catholic couples remain "uninterested in or even resistant to promoting communal participation in the wedding liturgy," thereby causing "Catholics who actively participate in Sunday Mass [to] succumb to the social custom of attending weddings as polite, but passive, observers."¹⁶ Both book chapter and video (composed of footage from the actual, real-time wedding of a young couple, interspersed with "talking head" comments by the bride, groom, their parents, and Pastor Austin Fleming) entail Covino's commentary on the major steps of the ritual, from entrance procession forward, arguing for how (*and why*) he has shaped each element of the rite over the years: "Together, these practices have helped to overcome the cultural tendency toward passivity at weddings, and create an assembly that is ready to celebrate the wedding liturgy as a corporate body" and "a better enfleshment of the Catholic faith concerning marriage."¹⁷

Ah, but therein lies the rub! Is not Covino's assumption that a prior set of meanings (a totalistic, static ideology) of the marital sacrament somehow exists and needs only be ritually expressed? To my viewing of the video, the bride and groom and parents do not seem particularly articulate of anything specific about the official church theology of marriage or its rite; rather, their comments basically run along the lines of vague feelings of togetherness, welcome, and inclusivity of guests. But, my perceptions aside, what interested (and continues to interest) me the most were the students' responses to the video. Every year, as I entered the three-session marriage unit of my Catholicism core course, I began by showing the video and then opening the floor for discussion with, "So, what'd you think?" One year a particularly bright, engaged, articulate, unselfconscious young woman seated in the back of the large classroom (the type of student an undergrad professor prays for), instantly blurted out, "That ruined everything I've dreamed for my wedding since I was four years old!" "Yippee, let's go!" I thought gleefully to myself. "How so?" I replied professorially to her.

My student was readily able to list key features of the ritual, as she had been imagining them since preschool. I list them here in contrast to what Covino advocates as the logical ritual expressions of the reformed Catholic theology of marriage: the bride hidden from sight until the guests turn dramatically toward the back of the church for her dazzling epiphany at the foot of the aisle (versus the couple and both sets of parents standing in the doorway to greet the guests as they arrive for the ceremony); the bride on her proud, adoring father's arm, appearing only after a sufficient pause, and even change to heraldic music, following the procession of single bridesmaids and, even prior to that, the singular seating of the bride's mother (versus the rite of marriage's description of the procession as including all together the ministers [acolytes and lectors], priest, bride and groom and, optionally, "at least their parents and the two witnesses"¹⁸); the guests positioned in couples or single family units along opposite edges of the pews—"Bride or groom?" ushers ask in seating guests—all the way down the aisle, while professionally performed music wafts overhead (versus groomsmen and bridesmaids seating everybody anywhere and across entire pews, so as "to encourage people to form a cohesive assembly," while a cantor rehearses all in the ritual music prior to the start of the service¹⁹); bride and groom, flanked by maid of honor and best man, positioned from the start at the top step of the sanctuary, backs to the people, the maid of honor having arranged the substantial train of the bridal gown to flow down the steps (versus the couple themselves sitting in the front row of the assembly or at one side of the sanctuary, only to step to the center-front of the sanctuary at the end of the Liturgy of the Word for the exchange of consent and rings); bride and groom quietly repeating their vows after the priest, who faces them in the sanctuary, their backs to the people (versus the priest moving to the head of the aisle, between the front row of pews, while bride and groom stand front and center in the sanctuary, facing out to the assembly); and, in addition, Covino encourages the couple's ministering cups of the Eucharistic wine (the Blood of Christ) to the assembly during the communion rite (versus their typically being seated to revel reflectively or quietly smile or even gesture at their guests as they reach the front of the communion line).

Repulsed by Covino's practical interpretive implementation of the ritual details and overall theology of the reformed Roman Catholic rite of marriage, my twenty-year-old college student's priorities exuded the popular and commercial cultures' criteria for a "fairytale wedding." Indeed, that was the very title the press used for the royal nuptials of "Will and Kate" this past April and now, again, in the news and entertainment media's obligatory year-in-review exercises during the last days of 2011. My point here is not to deride the multimillion-dollar bridal industry or decades (often centuries)-long Euro-American wedding ceremonial customs and superstitions but, rather, to articulate their evident function as fundamental sources for Americans' (Catholics as much as others)—especially brides' and their mothers'—vehemently held convictions for what constitutes a suitable, if not powerfully impressive, wedding. Perhaps most notable is the fact that the bride-to-be, as early as age four, has a strong sense of her agency (power) in shaping and controlling all aspects of the ritual, with her mother expected and expecting to hold the key supporting role as critical advisor, sometimes in conflict with the bride but always allied with the bride as her advocate toward their hired service providers—photographer, florist, caterer, musicians for church and reception, and the officiating minister. The wedding, *pace* Covino's passionate convictions and efforts, is a private family affair and, as such, ritually actualizes the basic way in which the vast majority of late-modern U.S. Catholics practice (and *thereby* understand) their marriages as private, interpersonal commitments (expecting ongoing support from family and friends) between the couple. My impression from both classroom teaching and pastoral work with wedding couples is that they do indeed sense what Cooke theologizes as sacramentality in the marriage relationship, but with one key difference. Their practical theologies of Christian marriage lack a strong ecclesial dimension or at least an ecclesiology in which institution, including authoritative teaching and officials as well as public (Covino's "corporate") ritual, figures integrally.

Moving from the shaping of their wedding ceremonies forward into marital domesticity, the overwhelming majority of lay Catholics reject the Roman hierarchy's repeated insistences that the use of contraceptives even in marriage is grave matter for mortal sin.²⁰ Contraception and child rearing, they counter, is a private matter for the couple, to be worked out personally on the basis of a wide range of criteria—social, economic, and religious. Indeed, many American Catholic couples (not unlike British Anglicans Prince William and Kate Middleton) cohabit for extended periods prior to formal marriage. This fact has, I must confess, at times sparked my incredulity over the manner and extent to which I have found couples clinging to superstitions and medieval-era symbolic conventions in the execution of their wedding ceremonies. For the last part of this essay, then, I shall turn to one detail in practice that arrested my attention when presiding over a wedding and opens the way to considering further how likely it most often is the case that people's ideologies of marriage are, as Clifford Geertz said of religion generally, not so much "well-formulated beliefs" as "collections of notions."²¹

Ideology as Ritual Activity: Practical Executions of the Marriage Rite

This is not to imply that the notions, however disjointed compared to the normative liturgical *ordo* and formal theology of marriage, do not in their cumulative execution provide the ritual actors with a feeling of well-being. No, it is just that this well-being rests not on well-formulated beliefs but, rather, in the (inchoate) promise arising from *well-doing*, that is, from the adequate if not elegant execution of the several gestures, words, and poses that are “right” or “natural” to a good and proper wedding. This affective rightness or naturalness that the performers of the rite—bride, groom, mothers, attendants—feel at various points and overall in the ceremony (and thereafter upon reflection) is what Bell is driving at in arguing for ritual as a strategic mode of practice wherein people negotiate their power and positions (their performative identities) within a social as well as, most often, a cosmic order.

Take, for example, the custom prohibiting the groom from seeing the bride on the day of the wedding prior to the opening of the ceremony, lest they bring “bad luck” down upon themselves. A performative element utterly outside the ritual frame and ideology of the current Roman Catholic rite of marriage, this superstition would also seem beyond the pale for university-educated middle-class Americans. And yet I recall how, in preparing two affluent professionals in their late twenties for their wedding, I had proposed that they together greet their guests as they arrived at the church and then process into the ceremony each on the arms of their respective parents. Surprised yet attracted by the suggestion, they seemed to adopt it warmly. Yet, on the day of the celebration, I found the groom in the entry of the church, along with the rest of the attending party, but not the bride. He explained that the couple subsequently agreed that his seeing her in her bridal dress prior to her processing down the aisle would be bad luck. I simply smiled and shrugged it off, for, after all, their happiness and peace of mind was of paramount importance.

Still, I could not help musing, both then and now years later, at how the couple renegotiated that strategy on their own—that is, apart from the priest with whom they’d made the preparations—but, moreover, at how vitally important that ritual-symbolic detail was to the two of them. The conclusion I have come to draw from this small example (which nonetheless was a truly big deal to that groom and bride) is that the archaic practice of hiding the bride from the groom, as part of the long-abandoned ideology of European arranged marriages transferring possession of a woman—and her dowry—from one man to another, has in all its strangeness retained its force in conveying how much is at stake in what is about to take place in the wedding ceremony. As Kapferer and Handelman have each argued in their own ways, it is precisely the very oddity or strangeness of many rituals in their actual contexts—their non-representational or directly causative significance—that enables them to draw their performers into a deep, self-enclosed phenomenal pocket²² or virtual space²³ wherein the ritual-actors may realize for themselves (bodily, semiotically) something of their own singular, interpersonal, or social agency at which they could not arrive by argument or explanation. At my present

theoretical (“expert”) distance, I would argue that for this couple, who had been cohabitating for several years, their careful avoidance of physically even laying eyes on each other the day of their wedding was a performance of how deeply and how much they sensed was at stake in what they were about to do with and for their relationship; how deeply they desired that their love and partnership not suffer misfortune but, on the contrary, endure and even thrive; how poignantly they knew of both the positive and negative forces—natural and supernatural—their world portended for their marriage. In this one can, to follow Bell’s lead, recognize the couple ritually enacting their own ideology of marriage in a highly complex social (economic, class, religious, national, ethnic, pluralistic) context.

Were space to allow for a more fulsome treatment of my experiences of the rite of marriage in actual practice, I would similarly discuss in detail such dichotomies between the official ritual text, along with expert guidelines for performance, and the conventional middle-class American expectations for practice as I listed from my earlier classroom account.²⁴ Here I must simply attest that I have come to find in my practical, pastoral experiences of presiding at U.S. Catholic weddings strong evidence to support Kapferer’s insightful theory of ritual virtuality, wherein he seeks “to push ritual as a radical suspension of ordinary realities” in such a direction as

to suggest that it is the very disjunction of the world of rite from its larger context that contributes to the force of much ritual dynamics. I add to this notion the nonrepresentational character of the world of rite as this is formed in its disjunctive space. I mean by this that the processes of rites are not always to be conceived of as directly reflective of outer realities, as has been the thrust of conventional symbolic analyses. This is not to say that they do not grasp or represent meanings that are integral to broad, abstract cosmological notions. . . . They may even be metaphoric of larger processes, but this is secondary, frequently an analytic construction made by scholars who maintain themselves as being external to the phenomenon in question and committed to other rationalities. . . . The direction I take here is one that concentrates on ritual as a virtuality, a dynamic process in and of itself with no essential representational symbolic relation to external realities—that is, a coded symbolic formation whose interpretation or meaning is ultimately reducible to the sociopolitical and psychological world outside the ritual context.²⁵

The very weirdness of many customary practices is often what makes the virtual space of ritual so existentially transformative for the agential identities of its performers. This theoretical insight goes a long way in helping explain why, for example, brides (as well as, at times, their grooms) hold to a processional choreography that a ritual critic might perceive as bespeaking patriarchy (that is, a father’s delivery of a bride, veiled, complete with dowry).

By contrast Covino, in his analytic distancing from the popular bridal culture, exemplifies the bias of the expert when he argues the following:

Most women today would resent the implication that they are being “given away” by one man to another, yet there is still strong emotional attachment to this form of the wedding entrance procession. “Tradition,” a wise person once said, “is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” The customary American form of the wedding entrance procession seems no longer to reflect what we actually believe about marriage, as Americans and as Catholics. It would be safe to say that this is a case of traditionalism, not tradition.²⁶

Rather, I would proffer, it would be safe to say that Covino’s essay proves to be a case of what Kapferer, along with Bell in her own way, has identified as the ideological-theoretical blinders the ritual theorist can unknowingly wear. Here, Covino is stumped in trying to explain why American Catholics persist in this type of processional practice because his (modern) insistence on a totalizing concept for the entire marriage rite fails to recognize that a given bride’s notions of *her* Catholic Church ceremony most likely include the ideal of the “fairytale wedding”—a virtual ritual space that is really real, and all the more virtual, given its mediation through digital technology: the magazines, websites, movie scenes, and marketing that altogether shape the “picture-perfect wedding.” That plethora of influences upon the bride and groom’s imagining of the virtual space of their wedding certainly puts pressure on their ritual agency, but still most often especially on that of the bride, who senses that other women will judge her accountable for whether the “wedding went off well.”²⁷

The Rite of Marriage Going Forward: Indications of Creativity and Crisis

Still, middle-aged folk (such as myself) would be mistaken in thinking that contemporary American brides and wedding couples largely experience themselves as totally constricted by media culture, fairy-tale ideals, marketing campaigns, and, yes, ecclesial ritual books and clerical authorities. Not only is the construction of one’s “perfect” wedding a creative project of which great numbers of brides take charge, but couples also increasingly expect to be able to negotiate together their own decisions about how to put the religious ceremony together and, indeed, whether to have such a ceremony as part of their wedding at all. One final anecdote can serve as an indicator of the still significantly changing ideologies young American Catholics are practicing as they approach and execute the rite of marriage.

A few years ago I presided over the wedding of a former student who, along with his bride, had majored in theology at the Catholic university where I had been teaching. As we three went through the official text several months in advance, the couple embraced a number of elements of the rite distinctive from the conventional “fairy tale” or industry-driven imagery, including an order of procession that included not only the ministers but also the groom with his parents, followed by the bride with hers; the couple’s standing at the center of sanctuary facing out to

the assembly for the act of consent (exchange of vows); and the couple’s serving the assembly as ministers of the cup during the communion rite. During the rehearsal, however, on the eve of the wedding day and with many people in attendance, the three of us came upon a ritual impasse: As I positioned them front and center in the sanctuary for the act of consent (exchange of vows and rings), the groom informed me that he and the bride had written their own vows. I was floored by this and had to reply straightforwardly that what they wanted to do was impossible for me to carry out. I explained that Roman Catholic canon and liturgical law together prescribe what constitutes the proper matter and form for a valid performance of a sacrament. In the case of marriage the matter is comprised of the couple themselves, freely entering into the marital covenant, while the form is their speaking to each the words of consent in the official ritual text (for which in the U.S. dioceses there are two options). Their pronouncing other words would not constitute their validly celebrating the sacramental rite of marriage. My explanation, I could perceive, was lost on the couple, with the groom telling me he had never heard of such rules and could not see why I was imposing them. I told him I could not negotiate this point but what I could suggest would be for them to share their words with each other and for the assembly in the concluding rite of the service, that is, after the meditation and prayer after communion. Unhappy but also able to see that such was my “final offer,” the couple agreed to the compromise.

That pastoral-liturgical incident is indicative of a distinctive feature of the late-modern milieu of American weddings, namely, an assertion of the uniqueness of the couple involved that demands explicit, original expression in formal traditional and religious ritual itself. This is not to deny that traditions, including ritual traditions, always entail change; however, the degree to which the laity consciously pursue individual creativity and explicitly demand of the officials innovations in the ritual forms constitutes a new wrinkle in the overlapping folds of this and other rituals’ histories of practice. In the case of Euro-American Catholicism (such is the stated limit of my study here), the marriage rate among the younger generations has been decreasing steadily, reflecting the rate within the wider population. While multiple social forces are contributing to this phenomenon, one factor surely is the dissonance many Catholic laity experience between their human agency and religious ideology and the ideology of the official, expert class of their church, namely, the bishops and clergy. The overall situation would seem to be an instance of what Bell argues can take place when leaders “on higher levels of social organization” (in this case, the clerical hierarchy of the church) ritually construct power in relation to “the microrelations of power that shape daily life on the lower levels of the society” (namely, the laity in the church): “changes in the latter level can precipitate a crisis in which the demands of ritual to conform to traditional models clash with the ability of those rites to resonate with the real experiences of the social body.”²⁸

The last pastoral-liturgical scenario I recounted indicates the degree to which U.S. Catholic couples increasingly expect to be able to take creative license, as it were, with the official rite of marriage, but a further alienation between hierarchy and laity seems to be accelerating as well, namely, the decision of couples to forego the sacramental rite entirely. For some this is a matter of their ideologies of

marriage or even the religion in general being at odds with the official teachings, regulations, and ritual procedures of the church, such that they would not even consider a “Catholic church wedding.” For others, however, the alienation is not so comprehensive but, rather, against the specific practices and procedures the hierarchy requires for preparing and executing the rite of marriage, such as the restriction of the celebration to consecrated church spaces (e.g. churches, chapels, oratories), a specified amount of marital preparation through either classes or a retreat program, or the prohibition of substituting secular literature or sacred texts from other religious or cultural traditions for biblical readings in the marriage celebration’s liturgy of the word. Across the range of alternate practices one cannot help but perceive the performances of real breaks (crises) between the official ideology of marriage for the church and the Christian agential identity many younger Catholics are forging as they construct their own ideologies of marriage with partners variably of their own or other or no religious traditions, and, with changing marital laws in a growing number of states, even with partners the church officially does not recognize.

Notes

- 1 See Don Handelman, “Introduction: Why Ritual in Its Own Right? How So?” in *Ritual in Its Own Right: Exploring the Dynamics of Transformation*, ed. Don Handelman and Galina Lindquist (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 1–32.
- 2 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 196.
- 3 This terminology (*ritualizing* or *ritualization*, as opposed to *ritual*) indicates an epistemological shift in study, such that the subject is “a strategic way of acting . . . acting ritually emerges as a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures.” Bell, 7–8.
- 4 Ronald L. Grimes, “The Scholarly Contexts and Practices of Ritual Criticism,” in *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 210–33. Here, 214–15.
- 5 Mary Collins, OSB, “The Church and the Eucharist,” *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 52 (1997): 19–34, especially 30–34.
- 6 Grimes, 226, 216, 227.
- 7 Bell, 188.
- 8 Bell, 192–93.
- 9 For a description of my methodology for that course see, “Liturgical Theology as Critical Practice,” *Spotlight on Theological Education* 2, no. 1 (annual supplement in *Religious Studies News*, March 2008): 9–12.
- 10 Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, rev. ed. (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994), 91. Cooke himself came to address explicitly the power dimensions of symbol (word and image) and ritual, among some dozen forms of human power as these intersect with the divine ways revealed in Scripture, in his *Power and the Spirit of God: Toward an Experience-Based Pneumatology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 121–55. For a Protestant treatment of human friendship as revelatory of divine presence, the activity of the Spirit of God, see the penultimate chapter in Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992).
- 11 See *Rite of Marriage*, nos. 1–4, in *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, volume 1, study edition (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), 720. See also Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (*Dogmatic*

Constitution on the Church) (1964), no. 11. The fullest elaboration comes in the Vatican Council’s final document: “Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ’s redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church, so that this love may lead the spouses to God with powerful effect and may aid and strengthen them in the sublime office of being a father or a mother.” *Gaudium et Spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*) (1965), no. 48, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed 26 December 2011).

- 12 Bruce Kapferer, “Ritual Dynamics and Virtual Practice: Beyond Representation and Meaning,” in *Ritual in Its Own Right: Exploring the Dynamics of Transformation*, ed. Don Handelman and Galina Lindquist (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 35–54. Here, 47.
- 13 Kapferer, 47–48.
- 14 See Paul Covino, “Christian Marriage: Sacramentality and Ritual Forms,” in *Bodies of Worship: Explorations in Theory and Practice*, ed. Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 107–19; and *Our Catholic Wedding*, VHS video by Paul Covino and Austin Fleming (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2001).
- 15 Covino, “Christian Marriage,” 109. Internal citation from Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*) (1963), no. 27.
- 16 Covino, 109.
- 17 Covino, 111, 113.
- 18 *Rite of Marriage*, no. 20.
- 19 Covino, “Christian Marriage,” 112.
- 20 Year after year, in teaching my concluding unit on moral theology in that core Catholicism course, taking the students through a close, historical-theologically informed reading of John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*), I found the students dumbfounded to learn of the church’s official condemnation of artificial contraception within marriage. That proved to be news to most of these cradle Catholics.
- 21 See Bell, 184–85.
- 22 See Handelman, 10–17.
- 23 See Kapferer, 46–48.
- 24 See above, pp. 98–99.
- 25 Kapferer, 46.
- 26 Covino, 114.
- 27 I am indebted to members of the Emerging Critical Resources for Liturgical Studies seminar who provided me with this and other insights while discussing my first draft of this essay during one of our sessions at the annual meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy in Montreal, 6 January 2012.
- 28 Bell, 213.