NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

The wedding season

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Jun. 11, 2009

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Dear Roman Rite,

All is forgiven. Maybe not forgotten; there is still the issue of those prenuptial Natural Family Planning classes. Don?t look away. You know the ones I mean. They?re distressingly short on welcoming the stranger and distressingly long on the car-manual approach to marital relations. OK, it?s helpful to know that tab A fits into slot B, I suppose, though most people seem to figure that out all on their own. The young couples of my acquaintance leave those classes wondering simply, ?Did we hear correctly? Is the glue that holds a marriage together really cervical mucus??

There is the new mandatory 12-month waiting period from engagement to marriage (during which you will keep your hands to yourself!) and all the forms and meetings and certificates and classes and dispensations requested (and denied). And hanging over it all, like some ecclesiastical sword of Damocles, is the marital basal thermometer. Learn it. Live it. Love it. (My niece swears the chastity requirement for those 12 months is only aided by the classes she calls ?Secretions: More Than You Ever Wanted to Know.?)

Sometimes trying to get married in the Roman Catholic church feels a lot like applying for a bank loan. (With less warmth and no free toaster.)

Still, as oppressive as the rules and regulations can be and are, I have seen enough examples of rule-and-regulation-free weddings in the past year to send me racing back into the arms of the curia. There are the (usually) fundamentalist weddings in which the two people getting married stand mute while the pastor talks and talks and talks. Their only speaking role is to echo their vows when the pastor intones, ?I, Fred ??

Then there was the ?winter solstice wedding? in which all of us Episcopalians, Catholics, Presbyterians and devout Sunday skiers and faithful Broadmoor brunchers were asked to pretend we were Celts, gathered in our animal skins around the communal fire as we implored the sun to return. There was a lot of solemn talk about people of the land by people of the suburbs as we lit and passed among us the ubiquitous white candles (complete with cardboard drip-catchers) and pretended there weren?t light switches within an arm?s reach to dispel the darkness.

The presider at that wedding, an American Baptist pastor wearing a Franciscan habit, called the winter solstice ?the most sacred night of the year? and spoke of all the families and friends who gather throughout the world to keep watch on this night. I?m pretty sure this was my first official winter solstice celebration. (Does sitting in the glow of a black-and-white RCA watching Perry Como?s Christmas special count as a solstice gathering? If so, call me a Celt and sign me up.)

His sermon -- and there was a sermon, for the shortest day of the year does not, as one might hope, call for the shortest speech of the year -- was, he told us, modeled on one given by Jesus. He began by saying, ?Number one, blessed are the losers,? which led me to snort and blow out my candle. I whispered to my husband, ?Do you suppose some biblical redactor left out the numbers??

?No,? my husband whispered back, ?Jesus used bullet points.?

By the time the bride?s cousin warbled John Denver?s ?Annie?s Song,? crooning, ?You fill up my senses like a night in the forest,? making all and sundry -- or, at least, me -- think of nothing so much as a sinus infection, it was, mercifully, time to go and find the open bar.

At least this couple didn?t vow ?to love as long as love shall last.? Or promise always to ?make you laugh,? a vow that can quickly turn ugly the first time a husband watches his wife pull on a pair of control-top pantyhose.

Nor did they pass their wedding rings throughout the assembly so that each person might touch and ?bless? them. The assembly for which I saw this rite concocted was comprised largely of a family gathered both as wedding guests and as plaintiffs and defendants in an intra-family lawsuit. As the rings passed from one unsmiling relative to the next (relatives who had grown accustomed to talking solely through lawyers and court documents), the teenager on my right whispered to me, ?Now, take those rings and throw them in the fires of Mount Doom.?

And, to their everlasting credit, the winter solstice folks did host an open bar. Have I mentioned that?

Faithfully (or least trying to be) yours,

Melissa

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Source URL (retrieved on *2016-05-31 09:11*): http://www.ncronline.org/news/wedding-season