

The Wedding of Boris Johnson and Carrie Symonds

Following the recent wedding of Carrie Symonds and Boris Johnson, the Archdiocese of Westminster issued the following statement:

On Saturday 29 May, the wedding of Carrie Symonds and Boris Johnson took place in Westminster Cathedral. The bride and groom are both parishioners of the Westminster Cathedral parish and baptised Catholics.

It is not appropriate to comment on the personal circumstances or disposition of this couple other than to confirm that this marriage took place in full accordance with the requirements of the Church. These requirements, rather than sentiment, must guide action. No privileges or exceptions were afforded to this couple, other than the closure of the Cathedral for security reasons.

The Catholic Church celebrates marriage as a great blessing instituted by God for the good of the spouses, their children, and the wider community. Marriage is a sign of God's love for all of human creation and the marriage of a man and a woman, both of whom are baptized Christians, is considered a Sacrament--a sacred sign of the enduring union of Christ and the Church. The Catholic Church holds that it is the legitimately manifested consent of the man and the woman marrying that creates the marriage bond which is a lifelong bond of love and fidelity and is particularly characterized by an openness to receiving the blessing of children.

The Catholic Church holds:

That a valid marriage creates a bond which ends only with the death of one of the spouses.

That to marry validly a number of factors must be present including capacity to marry, both legal and personal, as well as genuine marital intent and the absence of any other existing marital bond.

That a Catholic, defined as a person who was baptized or formally received into the Catholic Church, who wishes to enter a marriage which is recognized as valid in the eyes of the Catholic Church must exchange marital consent before a Catholic priest/deacon or receive special permission to exchange marital consent in another setting. If a Catholic does not observe this rule the marriage is considered not to be valid under Catholic Canon Law.

That a civil decree of divorce impacts only the civil effects of marriage and does not, in and of itself, leave the parties free to enter a marriage recognized as valid in the eyes of the Catholic Church.

That after a civil divorce has been issued either of the parties may ask the Catholic Church to look into whether the presumption that the marriage is valid in the eyes of the Catholic Church is verified or whether there is information present which requires that the presumption be overturned. In situations where the presumption is overturned what is commonly called an annulment is issued by the Catholic Church. It is to be noted that an annulment has no implications for the children of the couple.

Unfortunately, most of the media ignored this statement which does much to allay fears that the couple received special treatment and privileges. As a result, the wedding has generated considerable confusion and anger, with many people, even Catholics, accusing the Church of having double standards and one law for the rich and powerful and another for the rest. In the following series of questions and answers, I have tried to answer some of the questions raised.

Frequently Asked Questions

Question 1 *"I didn't know that Boris Johnson was a Catholic and, anyway, didn't he cease to be a Catholic when he was confirmed as an Anglican as a teenager?"*

Boris Johnson's Catholic mother had her son baptised as a child. Once baptised, a person remains a Catholic forever even if he joins another church or ceases to believe. Baptism is an action of Christ Himself which effects a permanent change.

Question 2 *"How comes it that the wedding took place in Westminster Cathedral?"*

Simply because Downing Street where the couple are domiciled lies within the boundaries of the Cathedral Parish. Westminster Cathedral is their local parish church.

Question 3 *Marriage should not take place in secret and in private.*

For a serious reason, the local bishop can give permission for a marriage behind locked doors. In this case, the security considerations surrounding a Prime Minister would have been a just reason.

Question 4 *Boris Johnson has been twice divorced. How then can he be married in the Catholic Church?*

Neither of his previous marriages were ever recognised by the Church as valid because of what is known as lack of canonical form. When a Catholic party gets married, he or she ordinarily must have a Catholic wedding ceremony in order for the marriage to be valid, usually entailing that the marriage be contracted before a priest or deacon in the presence of two witnesses. This is nothing new: it was decreed by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century and is there in the Penny Catechism. Once a person is a Catholic, he remains bound by the Church's form of marriage even if he later falls away from the Church.

The *Code of Canon Law* states, "The form . . . must be observed if at least one of the parties contracting the marriage was baptized in the Catholic Church or received into it" (can. 1117). The Church's God-given authority imposes this law—Christ gave the Church the authority to enact such laws that bind her citizens (see Matthew 16:18, 18:18). Thus, a Catholic ordinarily must observe canonical form for his marriage to be valid.

If a Catholic wishes to marry validly in any other way (for example, observing his fiancé's Protestant form), he or she must obtain a dispensation from canonical form from his bishop, normally granted by the Bishop's delegate, the Chancellor. If he or she fails to obtain a dispensation, and proceeds with a wedding apart from the Church, his wedding lacks canonical form and the marriage is not valid. Lack of canonical form constitutes grounds for annulment.

(Note: An exception to this exists in the case of a Catholic marrying a non-Catholic Christian of an Eastern rite, such as an Eastern Orthodox Christian, in that party's Church's setting. In such a case, failure to obtain a dispensation is illicit but not invalidating of the marriage.)

Question 5 *Why is the form of marriage so important?*

Marriage is not just a private agreement between two individuals; it is also a social and public reality. As well as the Church, the state will prescribe a set form for a marriage to be recognised as civilly valid. If, for example, two people exchange wedding vows by themselves on the top of Mt Snowdon, then live together as husband and wife, and subsequently split up and go to a solicitor to seek a divorce, he will promptly tell them that there can be no divorce since they were never married in the first place. The public nature of marriage requires that it be celebrated publicly, partly to protect the freedom of the spouses and also to make evident and certain the existence of the marital bond between them.

Before entering marriage in the Catholic Church, the Church requires all couples to be instructed as to the nature and essential properties of marriage and to establish that they are canonically free to marry. Westminster gave both parties the required pre-nuptial preparation. Canonical form ensures that there will be pastoral care and preparation of the couple.

In the Latin Church, it is the consent of the parties that constitutes the marriage. The Church requires that where either one or both parties are Catholic, that this consent be manifested in a legitimate form for the marriage to be valid. In the Latin Church, the priest assists at the marriage when he personally asks those who are getting married to declare their consent and receives their consent in the name of the Church. The requirement of canonical form helps a couple to appreciate the seriousness and religious dimension of the step they are undertaking.

Since neither of Boris Johnson's previous marriages were within the Catholic Church, they were never recognised as valid by the Church. After the careful investigation of the status of these marriages, he was therefore found to be free to marry within the Catholic Church after the necessary canonical processes. Part of that process would have been that a careful check was made to ensure that neither of his previous marriages had ever been put right or blessed (i.e. convalidated or sanated) by the Catholic Church.

Question 5 *Does this mean that the children of the previous marriages would be regarded as illegitimate in the eyes of the Catholic Church?*

Absolutely not. Canon 1137 of the Code of Canon Law states: "The children conceived or born of a valid or putative marriage are legitimate."

Question 6 *Does this mean that the Catholic Church is saying that for any marriage to be recognised by the Catholic Church it must take place before a Catholic minister?*

Absolutely not. The Catholic Church's law only applies to Catholics. With non-Catholics, providing the parties are married according to a legal form of marriage, the Church recognises as valid all marriages of those free to marry, whether the marriage take place in a Protestant Church, Registry Office, or according to the rites of the Hindus, Moslems, Jews, Sikhs, Humanists, etc.

Postscript

Finally, as Chancellor, with the delegated authority of the Archbishop, I am responsible for granting the various dispensations and permissions for marriages within the Diocese of Menevia. What happened in Westminster Cathedral was nothing unusual save for the celebrity of the two parties involved and, like the rest of us, celebrities also have the right to the pastoral and legal ministry of the Church.

In all dioceses, there will be cases where previous marriages "outside the Church" have been proven null and void due to lack of canonical form, thus establishing that the Catholic is free to marry within the Church. In most parishes, there will be married couples who have been enabled to get married in the Church because a previous marriage has been shown to be null and void because of lack of canonical form. The same law and processes are applied to all.

Monsignor Michael Lewis,
Chancellor