



Saint James Parish

Weddings and Marriage Preparation Policies

Congratulations and best wishes on your engagement! The Church rejoices in your love and commitment to one another. Be assured of the prayers of Christ's Church for you as you prepare to enter the sacred covenant of matrimony.

As you make plans for your wedding and your married life, please read through these policies to familiarize yourself with the requirements for marriage preparation and ceremonies at Saint James Parish.

1. How to Begin

First, complete the [intake form](#) and submit it to Susan Ramsel (sramsel@stjamescatholic.org). Then, one of the priests or deacon will contact you to meet and begin marriage preparation.

Please know that there is a six-month minimum time for marriage preparation. The six months begin from the first meeting with the priest or deacon.

Given the scheduling constraints for reception venues and for the church, please contact the parish offices as soon as you get engaged. Do not set a date or presume that you can get married on a particular date before meeting with the priest for marriage preparation.

2. Who can get married at Saint James

Parishioners. Any Catholic who lives within the geographical boundaries of Saint James is a parishioner and may be married in the church. It is not necessary that both the bride and the groom be parishioners, but at least one of them must be. A parishioner who does not live within the parish boundaries, but who is a registered parishioner still needs the permission of the pastor of the parish in which he/she resides. That pastor's written permission needs to be submitted prior to any arrangements being made.

Children of parishioners. Any Catholic whose parents are active parishioners of Saint James may be married in the church, provided that the pastor of the parish in which they reside gives his written permission prior to any wedding arrangements being made.

Non-Parishioners. Any non-parishioner wanting to get married at Saint James must first meet with the pastor to obtain permission. Such permission is completely the pastor's decision and will only be granted if he is assured of the couple's proper preparation, the reverent celebration of the ceremony by a visiting cleric, and if the pastor of the parish in which they reside gives his written permission. *Prior to reserving a date, non-parishioners must secure the permission of their pastor in writing.*

3. What is required in marriage preparation

Preparation for marriage consists of a series of meetings with the preparing priest/deacon. Although every priest/deacon does marriage prep a little differently, each one will cover the following:

1. **Prenuptial Investigation.** An interview of both parties, under oath, to determine their freedom to marry and their basic understanding of marriage.
2. **Catechesis on matrimony.** The preparing priest/deacon instructs the couple on the truth of matrimony as taught by the Catholic Church.
3. **Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding & Study (FOCCUS).** This survey helps to identify strengths and weaknesses in the couple's understanding of matrimony and communication with one another.
4. **Preparation for the liturgy.** The preparing priest/deacon will walk the couple through the nuptial liturgy and answer any questions they might have.
5. **Conferences.** In addition to individual meetings with the priest/deacon, each couple is required to attend one of the three diocesan approved conferences (these options will be explained in brochures you will receive at your first session with the priest/deacon):
 - [Conferences for the Engaged](#)
 - [Catholic Engaged Encounter](#)
 - [Three to Get Married](#)
6. The preparing priest/deacon may also require the couple to enroll in a Natural Family Planning (NFP) course. More information can be found [here](#).

4. Documents needed for marriage preparation

All Catholic parties will need to provide a recently issued (i.e., within the last six months) baptism certificate and confirmation certificate. These can be easily obtained by contacting the parish where those sacraments were received and requesting them.

Baptized non-Catholics will also need to provide some proof of baptism. The preparing priest or deacon can explain this further and assist.

The preparing priest/deacon will provide Affidavits of Free Status for the bride and groom (2 each) to confirm their freedom to marry and basic understanding of matrimony.

5. Marriage between a Catholic and a non-Catholic

For a Catholic to marry a non-Catholic, special permission from the bishop is required. The preparing priest/deacon will help obtain this. This permission can be granted only when the Catholic is committed to continue practicing the faith and to raise the children in the Catholic Church. This also means that the non-Catholic party will not interfere in the raising of the children in the Church.

6. For couples living together before marriage

Cohabitation is a sinful situation and presents an obstacle to marriage preparation. The best way to prepare for a successful marriage is for the couple to separate during the course of marriage preparation. The preparing priest/deacon will be happy to work with you on this.

7. For those who have been married before

Those who have been previously married cannot marry again until and unless they receive a declaration of nullity (annulment) from the Catholic Church or if they are a widow or widower. If either party has been married before, proof must be submitted regarding either the annulment of that prior bond (i.e., a decree of nullity from the competent Catholic tribunal) or the death of the prior spouse (i.e., a death certificate).

The Wedding Liturgy

Clergy

8. The officiant

Technically, since the exchange of vows makes the marriage, the bride and groom are the celebrants of the wedding. The officiant, however, must be a priest or deacon of Saint James Parish, except as provided below. You may request a particular priest or deacon to prepare you for marriage and officiate at your wedding.

9. Inviting other clergy

Ordinarily, one of the parish priests or deacons would officiate at your nuptial liturgy. However, you may invite a relative or close friend who is a Catholic priest or deacon to do so. In that case, as soon as the wedding date is set, the visiting priest must contact the Pastor of Saint James to request permission and proper delegation and to present a letter of good standing from his diocese or religious order. It is expected that any visiting priest will abide by universal liturgical law, parish custom, and these wedding policies.

Any cleric performing a wedding in Virginia must be properly authorized by the Commonwealth to do so. Virginia does not have a reciprocity agreement with any other State in this matter, and this authorization is never automatic. Please inform your visiting cleric to make sure he can and does comply with this law. If the priest is not properly authorized, he cannot legally witness your marriage or preside at the ceremony.

Location

10. Weddings in a Catholic church other than Saint James

A Catholic living in Saint James Parish boundaries who wishes to be married elsewhere must receive a letter of permission from the Pastor. In such cases, it becomes the responsibility of the priest officiating at the wedding to see that all requirements for preparation and documentation are fulfilled. The clergy of Saint James cannot commit to officiating at marriages outside of Saint James.

11. Wedding ceremony in another religious place

If for a serious reason a Catholic desires to have the wedding in a venue other than a Catholic church (a non-Catholic church, a synagogue, a mosque, etc.), permission can be requested from the Bishop. This permission is not guaranteed and should not be presumed. The priest or deacon preparing the couple can work with them to secure this permission.

12. Wedding ceremony in a home, a garden, a hall, etc.

Given the sacred nature of matrimony, its celebration should take place in a dedicated sacred space. Permission for weddings in other venues must be granted by the local bishop and is not done so in the Diocese of Arlington.

13. Only one wedding ceremony

Since the exchange of vows makes the marriage, there can only be one ceremony. It is never permitted to have two wedding ceremonies (e.g., first a Catholic ceremony in a church and then a non-Catholic ceremony on the beach or in a vineyard, etc.).

Date and Time

14. Scheduling the wedding date

As soon as the preparing priest/deacon has discerned that you are free to marry and possess the necessary fundamental understanding and capacity for marriage, he can set a wedding date for you. Please do not reserve a reception hall until and unless the priest has made this discernment.

Keep in mind that during marriage preparation the priest/deacon might discern the need to reschedule, postpone, or even cancel the wedding.

15. Days and times for weddings and rehearsals

Weddings are celebrated on Saturdays at 10:00am, 12:00pm, and 2:00pm.

Rehearsals take place on the preceding Friday evening at 4:30pm, 5:45pm, or 7:00pm, depending on the availability of the church and the priest/deacon.

Weddings and rehearsals must always start on time. Please keep in mind that the church may be scheduled for other events and the priest, coordinators, and musicians may have other obligations. The wedding party and vendors may only arrive 45 minutes before the ceremony begins. The church must be cleared 75 minutes after the wedding start time. (i.e., 9:15am arrival for a 10:00am wedding and 11:15am departure; 11:15am arrival for a noon wedding and a 1:15pm departure; 1:15pm arrival for a 2:00pm wedding and a 3:15pm departure.)

The wedding party should arrive at the church at least 15 minutes before the rehearsal and 30 minutes before the wedding.

If a wedding is delayed, the priest/deacon might have to modify the planned ceremony to compensate for the delay. He retains the right to drop certain songs, music, or readings. In cases of extreme delay, a Nuptial Mass might have to be replaced with a wedding ceremony outside of Mass.

For the 2:00pm wedding, the wedding party and guests must be out of the church no later than 3:15pm so that those coming to 3:30pm Confessions have a quiet atmosphere for recollection. Photography outside of the church, however, is permitted at this time.

Because of the space and time constraints, no receiving line is allowed at the church.

Wedding Masses are not celebrated on Sundays or Holy Days of Obligation.

16. Wedding between a Catholic and non-Catholic

When a Catholic marries a non-Catholic, the liturgy may be done outside of Mass. When a Catholic marries a non-baptized person, the liturgy can be a Mass only with special permission. The preparing priest/deacon can provide more information.

17. Obtaining a Civil License

Those marrying in the Commonwealth of Virginia must obtain a civil marriage license from the state. Residents of Virginia may obtain the license from the Clerk of the Circuit Court at any county courthouse in the Commonwealth. Non-residents of Virginia must obtain a Civil License from the Clerk of the Circuit Court at the courthouse of the county/city in which the marriage is to take place. For Saint James Parish, this means the City of Falls Church. Couples should plan ahead of time to obtain the marriage license. No cleric can perform the wedding ceremony without the civil marriage license.

18. Planning the wedding liturgy at Saint James

The preparing priest/deacon will provide the booklet to guide the couple in planning the liturgy. He will work with them in answering questions and preparing the liturgy. For those aspects of the liturgy that permit options, couples are invited to choose their preferences.

Please keep in mind that the nuptial liturgy doesn't belong to any one person, couple, or family. The Church's instructions and rubrics govern the liturgy and are to be respected and observed. Further, the parish's policies are to be observed, as they ensure that the celebration of the wedding fits in well with the schedule and practices of the broader parish.

19. Wedding Coordinators at Saint James

Saint James has a team of parish wedding coordinators to assist couples. They are familiar with the policies and can answer questions regarding the ceremony. A wedding coordinator will be present at the rehearsal and at the wedding itself to make sure everything runs smoothly. Privately hired wedding coordinators do not play a role in the wedding rehearsal or ceremony.

You may reach the wedding coordinator at sramsel@stjamescatholic.org

Please understand that the wedding coordinator is a resource only for the Church's liturgy and not a planner of the event outside of church.

20. Music

The parish Music Director, Mr. Don Carolina, will help you select music that will be both beautiful and appropriate for your Catholic wedding. Therefore, please remember to

contact the parish Music Director (dcarolina@stjamescatholic.org) immediately after setting your date with the priest.

A wedding ceremony is a sacred liturgy, directed primarily to God's glory and then to our good. As such, only sacred music – that is, music composed for the specific purpose of the worship of God – may be played or sung during the Mass or ceremony. Please do not request an exception to this law of the Church. Recorded music is also never permitted during any liturgy of the Church.

21. Wedding program

A wedding program is often helpful for wedding guests and can make a beautiful keepsake. The content of the program, however, must be consistent with the Catholic nature of the wedding. It should not contain art or poetry incompatible with Christian faith. It includes the order of the ceremony or Mass and typically lists the names of the wedding party, family members, priest, musicians, and others involved in the liturgy.

To avoid confusion or error, programs must be submitted to the Music Director and priest/deacon for review. The program may not be printed without prior approval.

22. The Wedding party

The Church requires two (2) witnesses for the exchange of vows. These should be one man and one woman, the Best Man and the Maid or Matron of Honor.

The couple may choose groomsmen and bridesmaids in addition. Wedding parties larger than five couples (including the Best Man and Maid/Matron of Honor) are discouraged due to logistical complications and time constraints.

23. Readers for the ceremony

Couples may choose family members or friends to do the readings at the liturgy. Anyone fulfilling an official liturgical function in the liturgy must be a practicing Catholic whose qualities of Christian life, faith, and morals recommend them to this function. Anyone asked to read at the wedding should also have some experience at public reading/speaking.

As many as three readers can be selected, for the first reading, second reading, and general intercessions.

24. Musicians and singers for the ceremony

The Music Director will make arrangements for the organist and cantor/soloist. If a couple would like to have a family member or friend involved in the music, they must work with the Music Director. His word on this matter is final.

25. Gift bearers

Couples may select family members or friends to bring up the bread and wine (only at the nuptial Mass). Gift bearers do not have to be Catholic.

26. Altar Boys

The parish will arrange to have two altar boys serve the liturgy. If couples would like family members or friends to take on this role, they should ask the preparing priest/deacon.

27. Non-Catholic minister in the wedding ceremony

In the wedding of a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic, where a Nuptial Mass is not celebrated, a non-Catholic Christian minister may be invited to participate but not co-officiate in the wedding ceremony. These arrangements must be made with the officiating priest and approved by the Pastor of Saint James.

28. Children in the wedding party

Couples are cautioned about having children under seven years old serve as ring bearer, flower girl, etc., since very young children often disrupt and distract rather than enhance the ritual. Any children involved in the procession must always be supervised by an adult.

29. Proper dress for the wedding party

Given the sacred nature of the liturgy, brides and bridesmaids must wear dresses that cover their shoulders or wear a jacket (bolero) or shawl in the church for the wedding if their dresses are strapless or otherwise expose the shoulders, back, or waist. Low necklines are not permissible in the church. Hemlines above the knees and slits which rise above the knees should be avoided.

These rules must also be observed by all those who serve in liturgical functions (such as readers and gift bearers).

Appropriately modest dress should also be observed at the rehearsal. Guests should be informed accordingly.

30. Where does the wedding party dress and prepare for the wedding?

Unfortunately, Saint James does not have a room in the church for the bride to prepare. The bride and her attendants should dress before arriving, and they should arrive at the church no more than 30 minutes prior to the start of the wedding. In the event of extreme weather conditions that preclude walking outside, the bride may arrive right before the ceremony and wait in a vehicle. Please consult the wedding coordinator for details and restrictions.

The groom and his groomsmen are asked to arrive no more than 30 minutes prior to the wedding. The groom and his groomsmen are asked to wait in the “altar boys sacristy” located behind the sanctuary.

Saint James is not responsible for any personal items left behind. Please designate someone to collect all of your belongings so that you will not be burdened by cleaning up after the wedding.

31. Flowers and decorations

Please consult with our wedding coordinator about wedding flowers and decorations. This consultation should take place at least two months before the wedding and before any final arrangements are made regarding flowers or decorations.

If your wedding is not taking place during a penitential season, flowers may be of any style or color you wish, consistent with the solemn and religious nature of the celebration. Note that the parish installs floral arrangements for the Christmas and Easter seasons which cannot be removed for weddings. Couples are welcome to make donations toward these arrangements.

Brides may choose to include a bouquet for the Blessed Mother among their personal flowers. Ribbons and flowers may be attached to pews using special varnish-friendly adhesive or plastic slips. Aisle runners are not permitted. Because of the decorations and candles already in place in the church, additional candelabra may not be used.

Please note that the “Unity Candle” is not permitted at Saint James.

32. No rice, birdseed, flower petals, etc.

Saint James does not have a full-time custodian on staff to clean up immediately following weddings. Blowing bubbles, dropping flower petals, and throwing rice, or any other substance, are prohibited. If this is not observed, the bride and groom will be required to clean up after the wedding.

33. Wedding pictures

Photographs and videos during the wedding liturgy are permitted. Photographers are to exercise good judgment and common sense out of respect for the solemnity of the occasion, and must always accept direction from the Wedding Coordinators and/or the priest.

Once the wedding has begun the following rules must be followed:

- No flash photography (or strobe/movie lighting) is allowed.
- The photographer/videographer is asked to keep his/her visible movement to a minimum.
- They may never walk in the area in front of the sanctuary or enter into the sanctuary.

- They may never take a position during the wedding which would distract the assembly or obstruct anyone's view of the couple, the readers, or the priest.
- They may not stop the procession.
- They may take candid shots from the back of the church.

Since the altar is not intended as a backdrop for photos, and out of respect for the Blessed Sacrament, posing for pictures at the altar after the wedding is to be limited, and individuals should be mindful of the sacredness of the space.

In planning pictures, keep in mind that the church must be cleared within one hour and 15 minutes after the start time of the wedding. This time limit is strictly enforced. During picture taking, the wedding guests and photographer must maintain an atmosphere of reverence that will not disrupt prayer in the church.

34. Rules for guests with cameras

We ask that guests refrain from taking photos during the ceremony. It distracts from the sacredness of the ceremony and can interfere with professional photography. Should you choose to allow guests to take photos, please advise them to observe the above rules for photography.

35. Cleaning up after the wedding

Couples are responsible for arranging for the removal of all decorations that they have set up for the wedding, as well as all the trash that is directly related to the wedding (loose programs, boxes, bows, etc.).

36. Wedding fees

Although there is no fee for a wedding at Saint James, a \$500 donation is requested. No parishioner will be denied a wedding due to inability to pay.

Non-parishioners are required to get permission from their pastor before a reservation can be made. If the request is approved, the reservation fee is \$500.

Couples are asked to make the customary donation to the altar boys (\$25 each).

37. Music fees

The organist, cantor, and any other musicians' fees are separate from any offering made to the priest or church. The organist's fee is \$300, and the Cantor's fee is \$200. A check can be made out to the organist and cantor directly for these services. If you are bringing your own musician, please know that a "bench fee" of \$300 is payable to the Director of Music. These checks must be submitted to the Parish Office no later than one week prior to the wedding.

The generous and professional contributions of our Wedding Coordinator, Music Director, and other parish staff have proven to be invaluable. In recognition of this, and in the spirit of simple Christian charity, we ask you to always show due courtesy and cooperation when working with them.