

Thinking About an Outdoor Wedding?

In the Catholic Church, the Sacrament of Matrimony is a radiant celebration of love and faith and is most fittingly celebrated in the parish church.

The church building reflects the sacred realities at play: marriage between a man and a woman mirrors the loving relationship between Christ and His Bride, the Church. At the altar of sacrifice, husband and wife are reminded that they too are called to lay down their lives in self-giving love, united to Christ's perfect offering on the Cross. He who is the author of all life, love, and marriage itself is truly present in the Holy Eucharist, the source of grace that strengthens and sustains their covenant. A wedding celebrated in this context reminds all in attendance that marriage is not merely a human contract, but a divine institution!

While the parish church remains the ideal setting, we recognize that every couple's story is unique. In certain circumstances, the Bishop of Helena, or his delegate, may grant permission for the Sacrament of Matrimony to be celebrated outdoors or in another suitable location. In such cases, a formal request and approval process ensures that the sacred nature of the sacrament is preserved.

Because permission for outdoor weddings is an exception, couples are encouraged to keep the parish church as their first option and remain flexible in their planning. Weddings celebrated outside a parish church are normally celebrated outside the context of Mass.*

Steps for Requesting an Outdoor Wedding in the Diocese of Helena

1. **Pray and reflect together.** Take time as a couple to bring your hopes for your wedding day to prayer and to talk honestly with one another. Because Mass is normally not celebrated at weddings outside the parish church, be sure you are both at peace with celebrating without the Holy Eucharist and mindful of added challenges such as weather, distractions, and the need to create a truly reverent space.
2. **Check availability first.** Before you reserve a venue or lock in a date, make sure you have a priest or deacon confirmed. It is not enough to assume someone will be available, especially if you are planning a wedding outside the parish church. You must first confirm that a priest or deacon is both available and willing to witness your marriage at the location you have in mind.

Keep in mind: Saturday evenings are the most difficult to schedule since clergy already have parish Mass obligations. If you choose a time without checking first, you may find it impossible to secure an officiant, which could cause major complications for your wedding day. Our goal is to help you avoid those challenges from the start!

The best approach? Work with your priest or deacon before you sign contracts, send invitations, or finalize any plans. Doing so will save you stress, prevent scheduling conflicts, and ensure that you receive the Sacrament of Matrimony, celebrated with the beauty and dignity proper to this sacrament.

3. **Only consider outdoor venues that are truly fitting.** The setting should reflect the dignity of the Sacrament of Matrimony, invite prayer, and honor the sacredness of your wedding day.

4. **Write to Bishop Austin Vetter.** Your letter should explain:
 - why you chose the location you are requesting,
 - how you will ensure the sacrament is celebrated in a sacred way, and
 - how you would handle bad weather if needed.
5. **Give your letter to your priest or deacon.** He will add his own letter confirming that you are receiving good marriage preparation and making a recommendation to the bishop. Both letters, along with Form E, are then sent to the Chancery in Helena.

For Couples Who Come from Outside the Diocese of Helena

We warmly welcome you to celebrate your Catholic wedding in our diocese! To ensure a smooth process, please also note that you must:

- **Involve Your Pastor:** Your home parish must be part of the request process.
- **Complete Marriage Preparation:** Full marriage preparation, as required by the Catholic Church, must be completed through your home parish.
- **Find an Approved Officiant:** The Diocese of Helena does not assign priests or deacons to officiate weddings celebrated outside a parish church, including outdoor or alternative locations. You may:
 - Bring your own officiant — a priest or deacon in good standing — who must be approved to minister in the Diocese of Helena.
 - Contact a priest or deacon of the Diocese of Helena who may be willing and available to officiate

Important: *Before reserving your venue or finalizing a date, confirm the availability of an approved officiant. This ensures your wedding aligns with the Church's requirements and can proceed without delay!*

Things to Remember

Begin early. Ideally, start this process 9–12 months before your wedding date to allow sufficient time for preparation and review. At a minimum, six months is required.

Be flexible in your planning. Permission for outdoor weddings is not guaranteed, and approval takes time. Always keep a backup plan in prayerful consideration in case your request cannot be granted.

*Weddings outside a parish church are normally celebrated outside the context of Mass. Exception has been granted when a priest is willing to take full responsibility for the liturgy. This includes ensuring that all proper liturgical elements are present, protected from the elements, and celebrated with due reverence.

While this document was written primarily with outdoor weddings in mind, the same guidelines also apply to weddings proposed in non-denominational chapels or other settings outside the parish church. These locations likewise require a formal request and approval from the bishop to ensure the Sacrament of Matrimony is celebrated with proper dignity and reverence.