


Volume 39 • Number 4 • January/February 2013 www.ccli.org

Family Foundations



The journey begins

Wedding planning vs. marriage building

NFP ON YOUTUBE
GETTING OFF THE PILL
MATTHEW KELLY'S RESEARCH





for **richer** *or* **poorer**

What's a Catholic couple to do in the face of surging wedding costs?

by Jessica Zimanske

Thirty years ago it was all different.

There was a ring, a white dress and an “I do.” There were chicken and mashed potatoes, an open dance floor and an overjoyed couple ready to start their lives together as husband and wife.

Now as 20- and 30-somethings prepare to say “I do,” William and Kate’s extravagant royal wedding is more top of mind — not the modest celebrations



of ages past. More than 2 million weddings take place in the United States every year, fueling a

\$48 billion industry that continues to grow at a steady clip. What many once considered a simple yet profound public declaration of love has transformed into an expensive party with the sacrament of marriage buried under yards of tulle.

Engaged Catholic couples already know that Christ is the center of any wedding ceremony, but in the face of a lengthy to-do list and a fixed timetable, many faithful brides and grooms find themselves losing sleep over chair covers, photography packages and an expanding budget.

The costs are staggering, and the stakes are high, so what's really needed and what's not? How should Catholic couples navigate through the weeks and months prior to the big day as they prepare for a lifetime together?

Joe and Lauren Flaughner know firsthand how easy it is to be swept up in the wedding planning process. The CCL members met on the campus of Westminster College in Fulton, Mo., and said "I do" in their campus chapel on a Saturday afternoon in June 2011 before 250 guests. Every aspect of their special day was meticulously planned, and expenses quickly piled up.

"My family wanted to make this special and sometimes got caught up in the extravagance that was a wedding," Lauren, 24, an elementary school teacher, said. "Many things were not necessary."

Her family took on the bulk of the planning roles after helping coordinate Lauren's sister's wedding only a few years prior, which Lauren admits did influence many of the wedding decisions. As a true family affair, the couple wanted to invite as many people as possible, and they

“Marriage is a sacrament, so prepare for it like you would for your first Communion and Confirmation. What you’re preparing for is a lifetime with someone who will be your partner for life.” *Liz Dempsey*

worried up until the final moments about having enough seats at the reception. And even though Lauren wanted to focus her attention and budget to the flowers and reception venue, music and catering became top-line items.

Through it all, Lauren was adamant about following a detailed agenda to ensure the wedding was organized and efficient.

It was during an Engaged Encounter weekend that Joe and Lauren’s outlook changed from wedding planning to marriage preparation and they first started considering NFP. They began reflecting on the bigger picture, outside of glossy bridal magazines.

“We did get caught up in planning for the wedding, but this retreat allowed us to take a step back, reconnect as a couple and focus on our relationship together and with God,” said Joe, a 25-year-old who works in banking.

The couple’s recommitment to their faith was evident to every guest as they prayed together to Mother Mary and gave each other the Eucharist during the wedding Mass.

“It’s easy to get caught up in the planning, but remember that these are the moments you will remember the rest of your lives,” Lauren urged engaged couples. “Try to stop and breathe as much as possible to enjoy the process and be grateful for that time you have together.”

Country-club prices

Eoin and Liz Dempsey, now both 31, of Barrington, Ill., had a relaxed perspective during their engagement. But even though they carved out time to take CCL classes, which they found beneficial, and managed to keep their stress levels in control, the reality of the wedding costs were difficult to keep in check.

Eoin, an attorney, and Liz, a former nurse and current stay-at-home mom to their three young children, found that many high-cost items were inevitable.

“I think it’s a tough balance,” Eoin said. “From our

perspective, it was important that people had a good meal and felt welcome, but because of that, our reception was definitely one of the biggest expenditures.”

Eoin and Liz were blessed financially by their parents during the wedding planning process, but even though they weren’t directly responsible for the country-club bill didn’t mean they went overboard with their wedding choices.

“I always thought it was crazy that a woman could spend thousands of dollars on a wedding dress,” Liz said. “I bought a dress that was \$300 even though I know my dad would have paid more.”

The couple did not want to be fixated on every detail of their wedding, but they paid careful attention to select aspects that were important to them, like the music at the wedding Mass to make the ceremony more prayerful. Looking back, they now see that that their big day could

Soaring wedding costs



If you think weddings are becoming more extravagant every year, you’re right. Here’s the low-down on the average total cost of weddings, as determined by an American Wedding Study.

have been simplified even more. For instance, they hired an Irish band to entertain guests during cocktail hour, but Eoin and Liz were taking pictures during this time and never heard a single note.

Now seven years into their marriage and still using NFP, Eoin said that it’s easier to see the sacramentality of marriage than when they were planning their own



Damon and Melanie Owens

Q&A: If you've been living together

Marriage preparation is crucial for all couples, but for Catholics who are living together, an engagement represents a necessary time to recommit to God's plan for marriage.

Damon Owens, 46, executive director for the Theology of the Body Institute, lived with his wife, Melanie, before they were married, a decision he says circumvented God's plan. Now they have been married for nearly 20 years and are raising eight children. He shared his personal and professional experience with *Family Foundations*.

"Like most couples who decide to live together without mar-

riage, we chose it as something 'good' for our relationship and us," he said. "We knew it was against the rules, but we figured our love was special enough to count us an exception to the rules. We started to see the real and perceived hypocrisy in our living together in the midst of a return to practicing our Catholic faith. As our faith grew, our consciences sharpened also. It was a painful grace."

Now as a married man, how did the decision to live together affect your marriage?

I definitely see it as an early failure on my part in building our marriage even before we were actually married. It was a shortcut to embracing God's plan for love and marriage that was rooted in my own pride that I knew better than God and his Bride, the Church. It was a real drag on our faith maturity that we will really never make up.

What have you learned about couples who cohabitate and later say "I do"?

There are important distinctions and outcomes for couples who never cohabitate, cohabitate during marriage preparation and cohabitate with no wedding plan. Cohabitation sets up habits, expectations and memories that are serious impediments to a happy marriage. Far from the promises of revealing "compatibility" or reducing future divorce, cohabitation increases the likelihood of divorce and marital unhappiness.

How can a conditional arrangement prepare you for the unconditional love of marriage? It simply cannot.

What advice do you have for engaged couples living together?

Seek all available Theology of the Body resources, which can be found at www.tobinstitute.org or www.theologyofthebody.com. Theology of the Body will lead couples to NFP as another sure means to building their future marriage. I unpack the richness of NFP in my 12-episode EWTN television series "NFP: Embracing the Marital Gift," found at www.ewtnreligiouscatalogue.com.

How can engaged couples make their wedding more special and meaningful if they've lived together beforehand?

Finding good, committed spiritual direction — either individually or as a couple — is the single most powerful way for a couple to meaningfully prepare for marriage. It is in this spiritual direction that the challenge of separating before marriage can be worked out. Whatever the length of time before their marriage, they need to live in separate places.

What advice do you have for couples who are using the pill for contraception before marriage and decide to go off the pill before the wedding?

Maturing sexual love is Olympic-level spiritual formation, and it cannot be accomplished alone. Prayer, reconciliation and Eucharist are the sure spiritual means. Good NFP instruction, marriage courses, an NFP-friendly Ob-Gyn and a married NFP mentor couple would provide the best encouragement.

Despite its popularity, the hormonal contraceptive pill is a powerful steroid that can have serious negative effects on your health and fertility. Restoring your reproductive health is one of the greatest gifts you can offer your future spouse!

nuptials. “We have a better understanding of our relationship and the commitment we made at the altar that day. For weddings we’ve attended since our own, we understand what they are actually getting into. But if they’re like how we were at that point, they have no clue.”

Both Eoin and Liz credit their pre-marriage preparation for keeping their priorities in line in the midst of a demanding wedding planning process. Even though they had been together since the eighth grade, they discovered new things about each other.

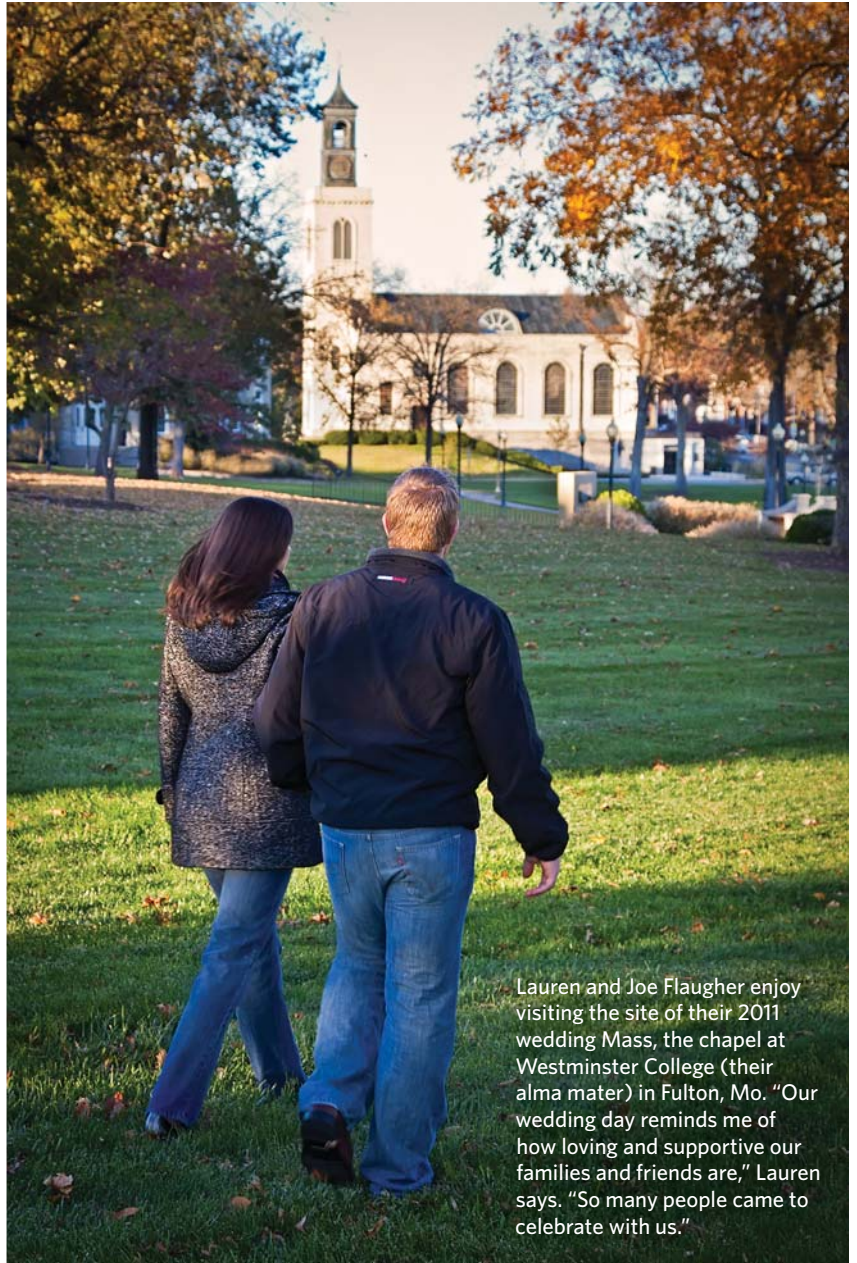
While many engaged couples rely on a wedding planner as they count down to their big day, married couples practicing NFP completely surrender their will — and their fertility — to the “master planner.”

“Marriage is a sacrament, so prepare for it like you would for your first Communion and Confirmation,” Liz recommended. “What you’re preparing for is a lifetime with someone who will be your partner for life.”

As for wedding planning, Eoin hopes that other couples can also keep a realistic approach. “It’s just one day,” he said. “You won’t remember all of the details.”

Liz and Eoin viewed their wedding preparation through the faith-filled lens of NFP, which Liz said kept her mind on a “higher focus” rather than cake flavors or a stretch limo. While many engaged couples rely on a wedding planner as they count down to their big day, married couples practicing NFP completely surrender their will — and their fertility — to the “master planner,” Liz said. “You should include God in your wedding decisions, just as you will include Him in your family-planning decisions throughout your marriage.”

Joe and Lauren did not begin practicing NFP until months into their marriage, but the couple believes that



Lauren and Joe Flaughter enjoy visiting the site of their 2011 wedding Mass, the chapel at Westminster College (their alma mater) in Fulton, Mo. “Our wedding day reminds me of how loving and supportive our families and friends are,” Lauren says. “So many people came to celebrate with us.”

an earlier understanding of NFP could have influenced their approach to wedding planning. Using NFP has improved their communication and their ability to assess tricky topics, including budget, Lauren said. “We have put our lives more completely under God’s control. Joe and I continually discuss what choices we would like to make for our family together, and it’s not just our decision, but God’s will as well.”

A snowy lesson

Erik and Maria Pedersen approached their 2011 New Year’s Day wedding with that same mentality. They were living across the country as Erik, 30, attended graduate school in Washington D.C., and Maria, 28, worked as a

“You don’t have to pay a lot for a church wedding. The wedding is not the reception, meal and big party. The wedding is between the two of you and God.” *Archbishop Michael Sheehan*



journalist in St. Paul, Minn., and with a short six-month engagement, time and budget were a premium. Even if the couple, NFP users now living in Baltimore, Md., had decided to overanalyze any element of their wedding, those plans likely would have never come to fruition.

A Minnesota blizzard derailed nearly half of the couple’s guests from attending their winter ceremony in Maria’s rural hometown in the southwestern corner of the state. It wasn’t until Maria was sitting in the confessional the night before her wedding that the reality of the impending weather hit in full force.

“The priest offered to let me use the Catholic high school chapel for the wedding in case we couldn’t get out to my country church,” Maria said. “A lot of different emotions came out at once, but I strengthened my resolve to focus on the sacrament and not the unraveling details.”

As the snowfall waned and the roads turned to ice, guests began to call and cancel, including aunts and uncles, a concelebrating priest and even the cantor. Other guests braved the icy roads, and a personal attendant stepped in to sing. Maria’s cousin, a newly ordained

priest who had just returned home from Rome, gave the homily and spoke of Mary and Joseph’s trust in God despite not knowing what was in store for them — an apt lesson for a couple who also started their marriage in the midst of uncertainty.

Their reception was smaller than expected, but Erik and Maria, along with their wedding party clad in green cocktail dresses and green-and-white paisley bow ties, danced through the storm while marveling at the harrowing tales of the guests who were able to join them. Through it all, they never considered rescheduling.

“In my mind we had both been preparing for so long that the wedding seemed like an end-zone. And we got married!” Erik said. “The thought of going through another discussion of what centerpieces would be in season makes me, in retrospect, all the more delighted that it happened just the way it did.”


The Pedersens were very cost conscious in their wedding planning. They took pride in negating cultural expectations for extravagant weddings that dig deep into the pocketbooks of brides, grooms and their families.

By doing so, they heeded the advice of Archbishop Michael Sheehan of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, as expressed in a 2011 pastoral letter. “A church wedding does not require some lavish spectacle and entertainment costing vast sums of money,” he wrote. “Indeed, how often we have seen the most costly weddings end in divorce in but a few months or years! While beauty and joy should surround a Christian wedding, we must remind everyone that it is a sacrament, not a show.” (What prescient remarks, issued months before Kim Kardashian and Kris Humphries wed in a nationally televised, over-the-top ceremony and divorced 72 days later.)

In an interview with Family Foundations, Archbishop Sheehan elaborated on the views expressed in his letter, saying that weddings should not be about “one-upmanship” and outdoing others’ weddings. “The point I make is that you don’t have to pay a lot for a church wedding,” he said. “The wedding is not the reception, meal and big party. The wedding is between the two of you and God.”

With a closest overflowing with towels they received as wedding gifts and drawers bursting with more kitchen utensils than they will ever need, Joe and Lauren Flaughter know their wedding day was not defined by a photo slideshow or an exhaustive wedding registry.

“Our society allows people to get swept up in the physical materials of this world,” Joe said. “The wedding is really just one day, but the sacrament of marriage is an ongoing sacrament that the husband and wife must commit to every single day.”

Lauren echoed that sentiment, offering this advice to engaged couples: “The only thing that truly matters is that you stay focused on the incredible sacrament that you and your future spouse are about to experience. Know that you are beginning a wonderful journey together.” 

Aloha, Honolulu!

10 reasons not to have a destination wedding

Considering beach-side nuptials or a short, intimate ceremony at an outdoor venue? The Catholic Church teaches that all sacred events (especially the sacraments!) be celebrated in a church, the sacred place that is the center of our faith life as a community. But beyond the religious ones, here are 10 additional reasons you should rethink a destination wedding:

- 1 By jetting off to a random locale, you automatically disinvite the vast majority of your guest list. Be prepared to cut old college friends, neighbors and anyone other than your closest family and friends.
- 2 Now that you’ve trimmed your guest list, you have to assume that your guests are willing to spend hundreds to thousands of dollars to attend your out-of-state wedding. Talk about a substantial wedding gift.
- 3 Planning a wedding remotely only increases the chance that the personal touches you want to incorporate will be replaced by cookie-cutter, impersonal features.
- 4 Destination weddings are prone to cheesy vows anyone can print off the Internet — just the opposite of the sacred Scripture and tradition found at the core of a Catholic wedding.
- 5 Your parish priest will not be present at your destination wedding and any personal anecdotes will have to be said by a stand-in presider with no connection to you (and likely wearing a Hawaiian shirt).
- 6 Did you ever envision inviting Uncle Joe to your honeymoon? Awkward.
- 7 Destination wedding locations are trendy and, let’s face it, generally coincide with the most recent season finale of “The Bachelor.” A church wedding never goes out of style.
- 8 Do you really want your wedding party to witness your union while wearing flip flops?
- 9 No matter how controlled the venue, there’s no guarantee that random bystanders won’t stroll past while you’re saying your vows, providing a very unwelcome interruption.
- 10 Saying “I do” in your hometown church — your spiritual home — represents years of memories and dreams, which can never be replaced by an ocean view.

— Jessica Zimanske