

Did Jesus die at 33?/ Civil wedding ceremony — should we go?

Q. Our parish council the other night got into a discussion of several questions, one of which was this: Was Jesus actually 33 years old when he died, and how do we know? Can you help us? (West Pawlet, Vermont)

A. Although we do not know with certainty at what age Jesus died, it is generally believed that he was 33. The Gospel of Luke says, “When Jesus began his ministry he was about 30 years of age” (3:23). And John’s Gospel notes that there were three annual feasts of the Passover during the course of Christ’s public life — one in Chapter 2:13 (the cleansing of the Temple), another in 6:4 (the multiplication of the loaves) and a final one in 11:55-57 at the time of the crucifixion.

Putting those references together, one is led to the conclusion that Jesus was probably 33 at the time of his death. The actual age, though, does not matter theologically, as no doctrinal truths are built upon it.

Q. My son is scheduled to be a groomsman for one of his best friends, who has been living with his girlfriend for several years. It is to be a civil ceremony held in a hotel. I told my son that I would not be able to go since I am a Catholic and my attendance would look like approval. Naturally, my son was annoyed. Am I doing the right thing? (County Westmeath, Ireland)

A. As regards your son’s friend and his bride-to-be, I am assuming that at least one of them is a Catholic. If not, of course, there is no problem with your attending their wedding. Non-Catholics, it stands to reason, have no obligation to marry with the Catholic Church’s approval. But if at least one of them is a Catholic, then some other considerations enter in.

Presumptively, their civil ceremony would not be a valid marriage in the eyes of the church — since they are not being married by a Catholic priest or deacon or, in the alternative, with the required dispensation from the church. But — perhaps surprisingly — canon law has no explicit prohibition against Catholics attending an

invalid wedding. That decision is left to the prudent judgment of a Catholic, after prayerfully considering several factors.

Maintaining peaceful relationships within a family is important. Also, it is certainly better for the couple in question to solidify their commitment with a civil ceremony than simply to continue living together — and this might even be the first step in their full return to fidelity to Catholic practice.

On the other hand, one must not give the impression that the canonical norms of marriage do not matter, so you wouldn't want your presence at the wedding to be seen as a stamp of approval by the Catholic Church.

Weighing these several values, here is a course of action that I might suggest. Why not explain to your son that, after thinking and praying about it, you have decided to attend the ceremony out of loyalty both to him and to his friend? But tell him that you do have some reservations about doing so because of your strong belief that they should be married in a Catholic ceremony.

Then, ask your son if he would feel comfortable passing on your feelings to his friend. The ideal outcome would be that the friend, upon reflection, would be reminded of his religious responsibilities and decide to have the marriage blessed by the church.

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