

# Mixed Marriages

## A Letter to a Non-Catholic

From The Most Rev. John C. Heenan, D.D., the Archbishop of Liverpool.  
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MY DEAR FRIEND,

— You have become friendly with a Catholic but before deciding on marriage you ask me to explain the attitude of the Catholic Church to mixed marriages. Some people think that the Catholic Church is very narrow-minded in discouraging mixed marriages. Do Catholics imagine that they are better than everybody else? We had better clear up this point at the very beginning. When talking about the evils of mixed marriages the Church has in mind the good of Protestants as well as Catholics. You will understand this better when you have read a little further.

There is something else we must make clear before talking about mixed marriages. It concerns the marriage of two Protestants. Two Protestants married in their own Church are just as truly married as two Catholics married in the Catholic Church. Christian marriage was not invented by the Catholic Church. Holy Matrimony is a sacrament given to the world by Jesus Christ the Son of God. The Catholic Church does not say that you are not good enough for a Catholic. The Catholic Church says that if you are not a Catholic you probably won't be happy if you marry a Catholic. I don't expect you to agree with that view. So let me explain what the Church has in mind.

Marriage is a contract between two people. A man and woman accept each other as man and wife until one or other dies. It is a complete and unconditional surrender. On the day of their marriage they take each other "for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part".

So a marriage is not something you can try to see how it will turn out. Once you marry there is no going back. You may discover in later years that you have made an unwise choice. Your partner may prove unkind or unfaithful. War, sickness, loss of a job, crime — anything may spoil the ideal marriage you had imagined. But if you are married nothing will break the marriage bond. There will be no question of divorce. That is one reason why it is so important for you to go into marriage with a Catholic with your eyes wide open. The Church, of course, regards all true marriages, wherever celebrated, as permanent. So a divorced person is not free to marry a Catholic.

MIXED MARRIAGES OFTEN FAIL.

There are all sorts of reasons why mixed marriages go wrong. It is only fair to you to tell you about them now. But before we look at them, let us admit that some mixed marriages seem to turn out well. That is just what you would expect. If a mixed marriage were bound to fail the Catholic Church would never allow Catholics to contract such a marriage. The Church, in fact, would be glad if mixed marriages never did take place. But there are sometimes good reasons for allowing

them. Then the Church does what is possible to avoid the dangers. But, as you will see, despite all precautions things very often go wrong.

Do not think that I am over-stating the case when I say that things go wrong very often. It is true that your experience may lead you to doubt this fact. Probably friends of yours have married Catholics and, so far as you know, they are absolutely happy. They don't quarrel about religion and they don't regret their marriage. It is natural for you to think that your mixed marriage would turn out that way. So it is just as well for you to know right away that such mixed marriages are not the rule but the exception. For every mixed marriage which is perfectly happy I could show you a dozen which are not. Any priest will tell you the same.

I am not saying that most mixed marriages break up, but only that, far more often than not, they are not really happy marriages. There are thousands of partners of mixed marriages who, though they would never think of separation or divorce, regret their marriage. Do not judge by appearances; for decent people like to show a brave face to the world. But any Catholic priest could tell you, from first-hand experience of families, that partners of a mixed marriage usually feel that they have made a mistake. The strain can be too great. I want to tell you the kind of thing that can easily upset a mixed marriage.

For the first few months most marriages go smoothly. That is natural. The thrill of setting up home with someone you love is almost bound to overcome all difficulties at the beginning of married life. It is said that familiarity breeds contempt. Like most old sayings, that is only partly true. But young couples are likely, in fact, to make more allowances for each other's faults on the honeymoon than after ten years. The longer people live together the more they learn about each other's characters. If love is true and deep, husband and wife grow closer with the years. But if love is not real, husband and wife grow more intolerant of each other's faults. The atmosphere of a home, instead of being one of peace, may become, if not actually warlike, a kind of armed neutrality. There are grumbles, arguments and wounding silences.

When love is true, as I have said, husband and wife grow closer with the passing of time. This may be, strangely, an obstacle to success in a mixed marriage. The more people love each other the more they want to share all the good things of life. But for a convinced and sincere Catholic the best thing in life is the Faith. There must always be an intimate and important part of life which a Catholic cannot share with a non-Catholic partner. This matters more as people grow older. Age always brings a certain loneliness. When a couple is divided on religion that loneliness becomes more painful.

You may think that I am wrong here. You don't see why religion should make all that difference. After all, some of your best friends are Catholics. You respect their views and they respect yours. You don't argue about religion or, if you do, it is a perfectly friendly argument. If you marry a Catholic why not carry on in the same way? You are not going to interfere and you are not going to be interfered with. So why should religion spoil anything? A wife and husband can belong to different political parties. They don't necessarily like the same television programmes. They disagree on details like this and remain happy and united, so why should religion make such a difference? That is the whole point. If you marry a Catholic you will find out that religion makes all the difference in the world. I mean, of course, if you marry a true Catholic. If you marry a Catholic who is unfaithful to the Catholic religion the outlook for a happy marriage is, in any case, not very bright. But let us suppose that you intend to marry what we call a practising Catholic. You are

asked, when you come to be married, to promise not to interfere with the religion of your Catholic partner and to allow all the children who may be born of your marriage to be brought up in the Catholic religion. That sounds very easy. But, as I shall show you, this promise is not at all easy to keep. It is because the promise is hard to keep that so many mixed marriages fail.

There is often an argument about where you are going to be married. Why must it be in the Catholic Church? What about your rights? You may not go to your own church or chapel very often but you and your people can't see why the ceremony shouldn't be in your religion.

You think it would be reasonable to compromise and have two ceremonies — one in each church. The Catholic Church is not really unreasonable in refusing this arrangement. Holy Matrimony is a sacrament. A Catholic may not receive the sacraments in a Protestant church or chapel or in a Register Office. You should not expect a Catholic to receive this or any other sacrament in a non-Catholic church. A Catholic would be a hypocrite, for example, to "take communion" in the Church of England. But why should you be the one to give in?

Now you see the kind of difficulty that arises. If you do not understand that to the Catholic there is only one true Church of Christ and that all other religions are false, you will not be able to live happily with a Catholic. Notice that Catholics do not say that Protestants are not living good Christian lives. Many Protestants are far better than many Catholics. It is a question of true and false doctrine. Catholics may not take an active part in the worship of a false religion. So there can be no question of two religious ceremonies. [Since Vatican II, certain dispensations are now permitted to the Catholic partner.]

Now let us come back to the promises. It sounds easy to promise not to interfere with your partner's religion. But it is not so easy as it sounds. You may think that all your partner's religion means is going to Mass on Sunday. If that were all it meant most mixed marriages would probably turn out well. But being a Catholic means much more than going to Mass. The Catholic religion is not just a way of saying prayers but a way of living. Non-Catholics often do not understand this until after they marry Catholics.

I doubt if you have the same ideas about marriage as the Catholic you are thinking of marrying. What do you think marriage is for? A Catholic believes that God made marriage mainly to provide for children. Animals are not born into families. As soon as they are strong enough to fend for themselves they lead independent lives. But children for many years need the help of a father and mother and the security of a home. There would be no need for marriage or the family if men were merely animals. So the object of marriage is not only the birth but the education of children. That, of course, is not the only purpose of marriage but it is the first. The second is to enable two people in love to give each other the pleasure of intercourse and the comfort of family life. This all sounds very simple. But marriages are always breaking up because people do not share the same views on the purpose of marriage.

## BIRTH PREVENTION

Take birth prevention. Catholics do not believe, as is sometimes said, that their duty is to have as many children as they can in the shortest possible time. But Catholics hold that intercourse between husband and wife must not be frustrated by unnatural means. Catholics accept the teaching of Christ. It is sometimes hard to keep the law of God. A young couple with a growing family may be severely tempted to use contraceptives. Now if husband and wife are Catholics, they both know that it would be wrong. They can encourage each other to fight temptation. They can go together often

to Holy Communion to obtain grace to resist sin. But in a mixed marriage birth prevention often becomes a source of strife and misery.

You do not need to be a Catholic to see how easy it is for a marriage to be ruined by a conflict of this kind. You may honestly believe in the use of contraceptives. If you are a Protestant you may know that your sect does not condemn contraceptives. If you belong to no church you probably can't see any reason against their use. You may think it unfair that you have to suffer because the Catholic Church has private rules for its members. But here you will be in error. The practice of contraception is not a private rule. It is sinful not because the Church forbids it but because it is against the law of God.

This is not the place to prove why unnatural acts are sinful. I mention contraception only as an example of what makes life more difficult in a mixed marriage. When your Catholic partner refuses intercourse if contraceptives are to be used you may become frustrated and resentful. If, on the other hand, your Catholic partner gives way, you are little better off. Intercourse with a sense of guilt makes a mockery of the act of love. You may preserve your peace of mind but your Catholic partner will not. The Catholic may be so upset in conscience as to give up the full practice of the Faith. The Catholic, peaceful in conscience, used to receive Holy Communion every week. Under pressure from you, acts are permitted which to the Catholic are immoral. The Catholic feels unable to go to Confession or receive Holy Communion. It is the turn of the Catholic to grow frustrated and unhappy.

Do not think that I am painting an imaginary picture. I am telling you what often happens in mixed marriages. It is only right for you to know these things before you marry a Catholic. When you promise not to interfere with the religion of your Catholic partner you undertake not to make demands which to the Catholic are sinful. You may reply that many Catholics use contraceptives. That is true. There are also Catholics who cheat, lie and commit adultery. But I am supposing that you intend to marry a Catholic who wants to obey God's Commandments. If you induce a Catholic to do wrong it is no excuse to say that other Catholics also do wrong. That is to degrade the person you are pledged to honour.

## THE CHILDREN

The next most common cause of dissension in a mixed marriage is the Catholic upbringing of children. Most non-Catholics when they promise to allow their children to be brought up as Catholics really mean what they say. But sometimes they do not realize what their promise entails. It is easy to agree to the Baptism of a child in the Catholic Church instead of the Church of England, say. But it is often not so easy when the time comes. Protestant relatives may bring strong pressure on you to go back on your word. Your own Protestant instincts may suddenly come to life even if you never attend your own church.

But when the child is of school age, keeping the promise may become still more difficult. Let me give you a very simple and common instance of how conflict arises over the education of children. Although Catholics spend millions of pounds on schools, there are hundreds of old buildings still to be replaced. This is especially true in large towns.

You may regard it as absurd to send your child a mile's journey to an old Catholic school if there is an up-to-date County School (a state-funded government school) just across the road. It can't matter very much, you think, what teaching is given to a child of five.

Nobody is going to attack the Catholic religion in an Infants' school. You consider it perfectly reasonable for your child to go to the County School until it is a little older. It can get all the religion it needs on Sunday in church or at home from the Catholic parent.

Catholic mothers and fathers do not agree. They regard not the building but the teaching as the main feature of a school. They know that even in the Infants' school a Catholic child begins to learn its religion. They also know that once a child starts school and makes friends, it resents having to start all over again at the age of seven or eight. That is why the Catholic parent will fight to secure Catholic schooling for the child from its earliest years. The Catholic does not have to fight if the promises made by the non-Catholic partner are honoured in their spirit. Children should not be a cause of friction between parents but a bond to draw them more closely together.

Among all classes it is found that disharmony commonly arises over the education of children. In the United Kingdom Independent private schools are called Public Schools and their former students maintain great loyalty to them. Public School men for traditional and social reasons often insist, despite their promises, that sons shall go to the father's old school. In working class areas, as they are called, parents easily accept the argument that large and new County Schools give children a better start in life than the smaller, and often older, Catholic Schools. But Catholics are ready to insist on the right of their children to be educated in a Catholic School.

I am giving you, admittedly, the dark side of the picture. This is because I want you to realise why the Catholic Church opposes mixed marriages. Experience has shown that such marriages are too often unhappy. There is, of course, another side to the picture which I shall give you later on. But it is only fair to tell you first why mixed marriages so frequently fail.

#### WHY MIXED MARRIAGES FAIL

Marrying a Catholic is not like marrying a person of any other religion. If, for example, an Anglican marries a Presbyterian or a Methodist there is no reason to fear that such a marriage will fail on religious grounds. Both, after all, are Protestants. They belong to sects which do not insist on the traditional Christian teaching on marriage. Thus the Catholic Church alone forbids divorce in a valid and consummated marriage. Among Protestants, opinions vary.

Some hold stricter views than others — it is a matter of personal and private judgment. That is the essence of the Protestant Faith. Outside the Catholic Church, no Christian denomination would refuse to remarry the innocent partner of a divorce. Some clergyman can always be found to perform the ceremony. Then, as we have already said, contraception is not absolutely forbidden by Protestant teaching. Nor is there any problem about the education of Protestant children. County Schools teach a religion which is neither Anglican nor Nonconformist. Protestant parents of different religious persuasions need not fall out about the kind of religious teaching their children will receive in a County School. By law County Schools are forbidden to teach definite doctrines.

Catholics may grow careless but they usually retain their religious convictions. Non-Catholics are sometimes surprised to discover how deeply even careless Catholics feel about their religion. Though not regular in attending Mass, Catholics will vehemently defend their Church against attack. This brings me to another cause of unhappiness in mixed marriages. It is not so important as the others I have described, but it deserves to be mentioned.

Non-Catholics, as their children grow up, may develop a sense of not-belonging to the family. The Catholic parent and the children have much in common which is not shared by the non-Catholic.

The non-Catholic may feel isolated. The Catholic parent, in turn, may become increasingly envious of those families which are completely Catholic. Let us take a very obvious example. A priest calls regularly on his flock. But his call may give rise to embarrassment in a mixed marriage home. He will not call if his visit is going to make family life more difficult. This makes the Catholic partner feel isolated from the Church. But even if the priest and callers from the local church are made welcome there is often a certain restraint. The conversation has to be guarded. This is the kind of situation which makes Catholics realize the shortcomings of a mixed marriage.

Even chance remarks may lead to misunderstanding. Catholics have a way of talking among themselves which is often infuriating to a non-Catholic. They will be delighted if a well-known sportsman, actor or writer is a Catholic. No Anglican, for instance, would think of rejoicing if the captain of the English Test team were a member of the Church of England. Except to a Catholic, the religion of a public figure is irrelevant. To the Catholic it is often absurdly relevant. This is only a tiny point but even small things can become most irritating.

The news on the radio or in a daily paper can often cause upsets in a home where there is a non-Catholic. The Pope may make some pronouncement. A scandal involving Catholics may be widely reported. Where there is unity of faith such news items can be discussed without passion. But most Catholics are sensitive about their religion and even mild criticisms of the Church may cause resentment and start a quarrel.

I refrain from discussing mixed marriages where the non-Catholic is actively hostile to the Church. It need hardly be said that such marriages are always a failure. Unfortunately a non-Catholic originally not hostile may become anti-Catholic in course of time. In all honesty a non-Catholic may not have realized all that marrying a Catholic entailed. After marriage the non-Catholic may feel defrauded or even trapped. But it is so obvious that a mixed marriage will fail if the non-Catholic is not at least sympathetic to the Church that there is no need to say more.

## SUCCESSFUL MIXED MARRIAGES

Let us now come to the brighter side of the picture. A non-Catholic contemplating a mixed marriage may realize what the future holds. The promises are understood and faithfully carried out. We have all known marriages of this kind. Here is a non-Catholic determined that this mixed marriage is going to be a happy one. The conscience of the Catholic will be respected and there will be no attacks on the Catholic religion. The Catholic resolves to be equally scrupulous in refusing to attack non-Catholic beliefs. The children will be sent to a Catholic school whatever the inconvenience. All turns out as planned. The non-Catholic takes a real interest in the spiritual life of the children. No Catholic could be more insistent that the children must be at Mass on Sunday in good time. The non-Catholic is in church for all great occasions like First Holy Communion Day. Social events are attended with the rest of the family and perhaps the non-Catholic is active in support of the local parish. The priest is made just as welcome by the non-Catholic as by the Catholics in the family.

If all mixed marriages were like this there would be no need for the Catholic Church to deplore the evils resulting from mixed marriages. It may seem strange but there is more likelihood of a mixed marriage being successful if the non-Catholic is a worshipping member of some Protestant sect. Many mixed marriages fail because non-Catholic partners simply and honestly do not think that religion is really important. If the non-Catholic is an unbeliever the Catholic has a hard road to travel.

Many, though belonging to no religious denomination, are not unbelievers. They know little or nothing about Christian teaching yet in their own way they lead Christian lives. They live honestly and are generous to those in need. Though not attending church they pray to God. They are tolerant and faithful to their promises. Before signing the promises required for a mixed marriage they thought carefully and now honour their bond. Such people make happy marriages. But, it must be stressed again, happy mixed marriages are rare.

Is there any way of guaranteeing that a mixed marriage will be successful? There is no certain way but two suggestions may be made. First, non-Catholics should not sign the promises without fully understanding what they mean. Nor should they sign the promises with a sense of grievance. They should remember that the Church has not only the right but the duty to demand these promises. Holy Matrimony is a Sacrament of the Church. So it is for the Church to lay down the rules. The Catholic Church does not force anyone to marry a Catholic. It is the non-Catholic who comes to ask the Church to bless the marriage. Since the institution of marriage has as its primary object the foundation of a family, the Church must safeguard the interests even of the unborn child. To be born of a Catholic parent is to have the right to inherit the Catholic religion. Nobody would call it unfair of a mother to fight for her children's inheritance. This is what the Church does in requiring partners of a mixed marriage to promise to hand down the Faith to their children.

The second suggestion for making a mixed marriage happy is for husband and wife, from the very beginning, to say their night prayers together. This becomes more important as the family grows. If at the close of the day the whole family kneels together the blessing of God will rest upon the home. "Where two or three of you are together in My Name." Jesus said "There am I in the midst of you". Many non-Catholics attend Mass with the rest of the family and so give example and encouragement to the children. Nobody, of course, can become a Catholic without the gift of faith. It is impossible to become a Catholic merely to please the rest of the family. But frequently by their example and prayers the gift of faith comes to the non-Catholic.

#### THE VIEWS OF A NON-CATHOLIC

Please do not think that these strong views about the dangers of mixed marriages are the result of Catholic prejudice. But, in case you think that I have exaggerated, I want to give you some words from an article written in a London evening paper by a non-Catholic clergyman. The article appeared under the title "Two Lovers — Two Faiths":

"Every marriage involves risk. In a mixed marriage there are particular snags which must be frankly faced. The difficulty arises whether or not the couple are devout in the practice of their religion. Those who have been reared in a certain religious faith cannot shake off its influence by discarding the intellectual beliefs.

"One particular factor arises in marriage with a Catholic which the non-Catholic will have to face very seriously. It is the Catholic attitude to birth control... The non-Catholic must respect the attitude of his intended wife. He has no right to ask her to do anything which would violate her Faith; and he will not wish to do so if he truly loves her. This is a point at which, for want of full consideration beforehand, marriages of this kind often come to grief. "One cannot live in the world today without recognizing that marriages do fail; and that the modern tendency, when they do, is to dissolve them all too lightly and start again.

"Let any man or woman who marries a Catholic recognize quite plainly at the outset that anything of that kind is absolutely out of the question. To the Catholic, marriage is a Sacrament, a bond

which is indissoluble. The Catholic standard of marriage is very high and no man should bind it upon himself by marrying a Catholic woman unless he is fully resolved to honour and respect it, come what may...

"It would probably be a good thing, if a Protestant is bent upon marrying a Catholic girl, for him to seek out a wise and understanding Catholic priest and talk things over. One solution is found where the man can accept the Catholic faith and share the religion of his wife and family. But this will probably be impossible to a young man deeply devoted to his own religion. At the very least he should study the Catholic Faith — its doctrines and its way of life — so that he may understand as sympathetically as he can the world of ideals in which his intended wife lives and moves."

Remember that the above was written by a non-Catholic clergyman. You will see how closely his views resemble those of the Catholic Church. The reason, of course, is that the Catholic view is the common-sense view. It stands to reason that people divided on the most important thing in life are risking their future if they marry.

## CONCLUSION

I have tried, my dear Friend, to give you the Catholic point of view. I want to tell you that if you were a Catholic I would have written in a much more emphatic way. You, after all, cannot be expected to know the spiritual risks of a mixed marriage. But your Catholic friend has known them since childhood. I have never heard of a Catholic whose Faith and Catholic practices remained as strong after a mixed marriage as before. Most Catholic partners of a mixed marriage reduce the practice of their religion to an absolute minimum. Many more reduce it still further and for the sake of peace give up the practice of the Faith entirely. A Catholic, too, has a duty to remember the fate of thousands of children born of mixed marriages in this country. Born of a Catholic parent they had the right to inherit the Faith.

But they have become the victims of broken promises. A weak Catholic has "for the sake of peace" given in to the non-Catholic.

There is no excuse for a Catholic who does not insist that, as a condition of marriage, a non-Catholic friend shall take a course of instruction in the Faith. Where there is full knowledge of the Catholic Faith the dangers of a mixed marriage are obviously lessened. It is now easy for non-Catholics to be instructed in the Faith by correspondence. If you decide to marry a Catholic be wise and learn as much as you can about the Faith before marriage. Whatever you may decide to do, I wish you God's blessing.

JOHN C. HEENAN, Archbishop of Liverpool

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