

The Christian Home

Part 2B. On Mixed Marriages

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CHAPTER 5B: Harmony in the Home and Mixed Marriage.

[Holy Mother Church wants all her children to be happy. Experience has taught her that is more easily achieved if her children avoid mixed marriages. What follows was written in the 1930's and since then, the Catholic Church has amended some aspects of her marriage legislation. These changes are outlined in an appendix, but you would be well advised to read the article through in order to understand the mind of the Church and how it abhors mixed marriages and how any mitigation of her previous rigor has only been done out of her maternal compassion for the difficulties of the modern age. The Catholic Church prefers to recommend that her sons and daughters marry within the Catholic fold. This principle does not change. However, the actual regulations themselves do change. Only in the latter area is this work 'dated'. For the most up to date information have a friendly chat to your local Catholic priest. He's there to help you do God's Will, and has a welcoming word for all comers.]

Main Cause of Disharmony.

The other kind of disharmony that calls for a special warning, in addition to disharmony over parental authority, is disharmony or the lack of unity in religion. I will say more of this in this booklet.

It is easy to understand how many of the difficulties of maintaining harmony in the home are removed or lessened, when husband and wife are united by the profession and practice of the true Faith.

And by the same token, it should be easy to understand that, apart from serious character defects or moral lapses in one of the parents, there is no more frequent cause of dissension and discord in the home than the lack of unity in religion. Yet many Catholics fail to realize this fact, and in consequence make the attempt, which nine times out of ten is doomed to failure, of rearing the stalwart structure of a truly Catholic home on the cleft foundation of a mixed marriage.

A Lawyer's Sad Experience.

The following quotation from a letter published in "Our Sunday Visitor" gives the experience with mixed marriages of just one single lawyer; but it will no doubt open the eyes of many of my Catholic readers.

"As an active practicing lawyer in Chicago, handling divorce cases along with my general practice I have had considerable opportunity to make investigation as to the causes of domestic strife leading to divorce among Catholic clients where either party married a non-Catholic; and I am now forced

to inquire of you what is being done, if anything, to prevent mixed marriages by Catholic men and Catholic women.

"I ask this question only after having handled approximately five hundred divorce cases and cases involving annulment and separate maintenance, wherein one of the parties was of the Catholic Faith; and wherein I have found that this difference in religious belief was fundamentally the cause of almost all of the discontent, sorrow, and trouble which led to divorce or separation; and that in ninety percent of the mixed marriage cases, the Catholic was confronted with the question of abstaining from receiving the sacraments and living with the spouse, or of separation, in order to be able to follow the teachings of our Faith on the matter of marriage duties and obligations."

A Basic Disagreement.

But why does a mixed marriage almost inevitably sow the seed of discord in the home? Because the Catholic party accepts and is obliged to accept the teachings of the Church as the only true standard of moral and religious conduct in every phase of life; whereas the non-Catholic party does not accept that standard. From the very outset, then, there is a basic disagreement concerning the most important thing in life. From the very ground up there is a breach between husband and wife, which no unity of sentiment in other things will ever be able to fill.

For, no matter how kind, how considerate, how loving, how free from prejudice, how magnanimous the non-Catholic partner may be, the Catholic spouse that has a truly Catholic mind must forever realize most keenly that, so long as the religious barrier exists, there can be no complete understanding of each other, no full and perfect sympathy; because the things that mean most and are most conducive to happiness for the one mean little or nothing in the life of the other.

Complete Harmony.

How much more intimate the union between husband and wife who share the same religious convictions! Arm in arm they go to church; side by side they assist at Mass; and together they seek the consolation of Confession and the spiritual nourishment of Holy Communion. In their attitude towards the question of having children, in the choice of a school, in the questions regarding prayer in the home, Catholic reading, courtship and marriage, religious vocation, and many similar matters, the Catholic couple are in complete accord, because these questions are all decided for them in advance by the teachings of Holy Mother Church.

Innumerable Dissensions.

What a rift on the other hand in the life of a couple who do not share the same Faith! What one cherishes and esteems, the other perhaps abhors. What one looks upon as an act of virtue or even as a most solemn duty, the other may despise as silly superstition or a mere idle ceremony.

Supposing the mother to be the Catholic party to the marriage, which is the more common case, how keenly will she not feel the lack of religious harmony if her husband insists on unnatural limitation of the family; if he objects to having their children baptized by a Catholic priest; if he insists that three or four years' training in a Catholic school is enough to fulfill his promise to have his children brought up Catholic; if he refuses all money for Catholic books, papers and periodicals; if he objects to all display (as he terms it) of religion by means of Crucifixes, pictures of the saints, or other religious articles in the home; if he discourages prayer at meals and all family devotions; if he protests against sending the children to Mass when the weather is the least bit inclement or disagreeable, or against sending them from home without breakfast when they wish to receive

Communion and keep our rigorous fasts; if he scolds about his sleep being disturbed or having to get his own breakfast when his wife goes to early Mass; if he demands meat at all meals on Fridays (a day of abstinence) and all the other days of abstinence; if he encourages as broadening, the association of his boys and girls with the children of his own Protestant or even irreligious relatives and friends; if he refuses to call the priest or even denies him admission into the house when some member of the family is seriously ill; if — to put an end to the list — he does any of the thousand and one different things like these that other non-Catholic husbands of Catholic wives have done in the past and are still doing to-day. For these are not purely imaginary cases such as everyone must admit might happen. They are actual cases drawn from stories of mixed marriages in real life.

The Pre-nuptial Pledge.

But some young lady who is contemplating a mixed marriage may say, on reading the foregoing paragraphs, that she would make adequate provision against all such possible evil consequences by demanding a solemn promise of her future husband never to interfere with her or her children's practice of religion. In doing that, she would be doing only what thousands of Catholic girls have done before; for the Church requires such a promise as an indispensable condition every time she tolerates a mixed marriage. [As you will see in the appendix, it is no longer a requirement, but still actively sought.] But it is notorious how lightly these pre-nuptial pledges are broken, and how sadly these thousands of Catholic wives of non-Catholic husbands have been disillusioned when the time came for the promises to be redeemed. To make a promise, and to keep it, are two quite different things. In many cases, too, the non-Catholic party never had any intention of keeping his promise; or, if he did, he maintained afterwards that changed circumstances gave him the right to change his mind. So it may very easily happen that not many moons have passed since the honeymoon before the wife finds obstacles placed in the way of the performance of so simple and fundamental a duty as the hearing of Mass on Sunday. And even should the wife be gifted with such exceptional strength of character and devotion to her Faith as to practice her religion in defiance of her husband, what would become of domestic harmony?

Children of Mixed Marriages.

Yet even more deplorable than its effects upon domestic harmony will be the effects of a mixed marriage on the education of the children. As set forth in the first booklet of this series, the religious education of the child should begin in earliest childhood, even in infancy, by surrounding the impressionable young heart with an atmosphere of religion and instilling into its daily expanding intelligence the idea that nothing in this world matters so much as the love and service of its God and Creator. But how can a uniform and lasting impression of this kind be made on the child, when its father and mother, whose combined actions create the atmosphere of the home, are not in agreement on the importance of religion? Certainly, if the mother is not a Catholic, the child will stand little chance of receiving any religious education before it is sent to school. But even if the mother is a Catholic, the child's religious training will be one-sided; because it will lack the support of the father's good example.

Exceptions are Few.

Some mixed marriages, it is true, do turn out well, apparently, despite the initial handicap to religion and domestic harmony that ordinarily attends them. But it must be admitted that those are exceptions. The preponderating testimony of experience is against mixed marriages as it is the

cause of loss of interest in religion or of complete loss of Faith on the part of the Catholic Consort or of the children.

Something Often Overlooked.

But there is still another objection to mixed marriages, the explanation of which will, I trust, make my unmarried readers still more determined never to contract a marriage that would introduce disharmony into their future homes. Very many Catholics, I dare say the great majority of them, are of the opinion that a Catholic is forbidden to marry a non-Catholic in much the same fashion as he is forbidden to eat meat on Fridays, namely, merely by a positive law of the Church; and that the only practical difference between a Catholic marriage and a mixed marriage lies in the fact that the latter may not be celebrated in church nor without a dispensation. That idea is entirely wrong. The eating of meat is not wrong in itself, and the Church has never condemned the eating of meat; but she condemns mixed marriages and abhors them not only as dangerous to the Faith of the Catholic party and the children, but also because entering into such a marriage involves the participation by a Catholic and a non-Catholic in the same sacred rite.

This is a point that many Catholics do not know or entirely overlook. They know quite well that they are not allowed to take an active part in a Protestant religious service; and that to assist as bridesmaid or groomsman at a Protestant wedding is forbidden under mortal sin. Yet the degree of a bridesmaid's participation in a wedding is small compared with that of the bride herself; because, for a Catholic, marriage is a sacrament, and the bride and groom actually administer the sacrament of Matrimony to each other, the priest being only the Church's official witness. It is this intimate commingling in a religious rite by a Catholic with a heretic, which is the reason why the Church does not permit a mixed marriage, except for a grave reason, even if it were certain that this or that particular mixed marriage involved no danger to the Faith of the Catholic partner or of the children.

Communication with a Heretic.

It will give the reader a better idea of how the Church detests the active participation of her children in a sacramental rite with a heretic, if we observe how she legislates regarding it in other cases. Such a communication with a heretic occurs also when a Catholic receives sacramental absolution or Holy Communion from a validly ordained but heretical or schismatic priest; and so averse is Mother Church to such an act that only in danger of death does she permit a Catholic to request absolution and to receive Holy Communion at the hands of such a priest.

It is evident, therefore, that there must be a grave reason for permitting any religious communication of that kind with a heretic; and that holds also for participation with a heretic in the Sacrament of Matrimony.

Permitted Only for a Grave Reason.

This is another point that is commonly overlooked or not understood. A Catholic must have a grave reason for entering a marriage with a non-Catholic and a dispensation for such a marriage may be granted only for a grave reason. It is not enough that the couple want to get married and are willing to sign the pre-nuptial pledges. By no means. The first requisite is that there must be some weighty reason for permitting an exception to the general law of the Church forbidding mixed marriages. Only when serious ground for making such an exception exists, may a dispensation be granted, — and even then only on the further condition that the usual promises regarding the practice of religion be given in writing.

The Church Not Too Severe.

From the foregoing explanation, it should be abundantly clear to any Catholic that the Church is by no means unreasonable or too severe in her opposition to mixed marriages.

To adopt any other attitude would be for her to underrate the sanctity of Christian matrimony, which Christ raised to the dignity of a sacrament, and to underestimate the preciousness of the Faith, which it is her duty to preserve and propagate.

And as all those who are so fortunate as to be blessed with the priceless gift of the true Faith are obliged to take the same attitude as the Church on all questions of Faith and morals, the attitude of the Church towards mixed marriages must be the attitude also of all her loyal children.

No Lofty Idealism.

It follows, therefore, that in asking you, dear reader, to accept the Church's position on mixed marriages as your own, I am not making an appeal for anything extraordinary or heroic. There is no lofty idealism, far beyond the reach of ordinary mortals, in taking such a stand. It is nothing but plain Catholicism. Any other attitude is unchristian and opposed to the teaching of our holy Faith. That a Catholic should woo and wed only a Catholic is not a sublime ideal, which the Church expects to see realized only in her most perfect children. The marriage of a Catholic with a Catholic is the general rule for all, the only truly Catholic union; the only union the Church positively sanctions and approves.

Every other conjugal union that a Catholic enters into, no matter how securely braced with excuses, cautions, and dispensations, is at best only tolerated, — tolerated as a lesser evil, either to right some wrong already done or to avert some impending greater evil.

The Chief Occasion of Mixed Marriages.

I trust that every young man and every young woman who reads what I have here written, will be so deeply impressed by the un-desirableness of mixed marriages as to resolve not only never to contract a mixed marriage but also to avoid the chief occasion that leads to such a marriage; namely, the companionship of non-Catholics. To mingle freely in a social way with non-Catholics and to say that one is earnestly determined never to marry a non-Catholic is like paddling down the rapids of Niagara with the determination not to strike a rock. The Catholic youth or maiden, therefore, that is in earnest about avoiding a mixed marriage will make no dates with a non-Catholic and accept no invitations to non-Catholic social affairs.

Falling in Love Not Inevitable.

But what if a Catholic falls in love with a non-Catholic? A Catholic should not fall in love with a non-Catholic! There are persons, it is true, who maintain that falling in love is something that simply happens and is entirely beyond a person's control; but such an idea of love is opposed to reason and to common sense. Human love is not merely a passion that bursts forth spontaneously upon the perception of a suitable object. It is also a voluntary activity of the will; and hence it is subject to the control of the will, which can check and even extinguish a passion for a person whom one's reason declares to be an undesirable or even impossible partner in marriage.

Is it not the consideration of the impossibility of a marriage that prevents many a one (not all, alas!) from falling in love with a person already married or bound by the vow of virginity or celibacy? Why, then, should the consideration of the evils of a mixed marriage not suffice with the grace of

God to prevent a Catholic from falling in love with a non-Catholic? No, even though the human heart is a strange and willful creature, it is not so intractable that, with due precautions, it cannot be restrained from desiring forbidden fruit. (To lower the moral tone for a moment, do we not see even ‘worldly’ people impose this willed restraint on their passions when for mere ‘social standing’ the poor hired man is refrained from falling in love with the daughter of his rich master?) Hence, the Catholic boy or girl who starts out with the correct Catholic attitude that mixed marriages are forbidden fruit, and who does not court danger by mixing socially with non-Catholics, will keep from falling in love with a non-Catholic without extraordinary difficulty.

Conversion of the Non-Catholic Partner.

And now a word also to those of my readers who have contracted a mixed marriage and who are still living with a non-Catholic partner.

No matter how unpleasant the reading of this chapter may have been for you, you must not be disheartened. You cannot, it is true, alter the past; but you can do a great deal to mend matters for the future. Whether your marriage has been one of those exceptional ones that have turned out well despite the lack of harmony in religion; or whether it has further corroborated the wisdom of the Church in condemning such unions, your duty is the same: you must endeavor to bring about the conversion of your partner to the true Faith. It was with the understanding that you would fulfill this duty that the dispensation for your marriage was granted. But even if Canon Law did not stress this obligation, you should nevertheless be solicitous for your Consort’s conversion for his, or her, own sake, no less than for the sake of religious harmony in the home.

Prayer Alone Not Sufficient.

But how can this most desired event be brought about? By earnest and persevering prayer; by the constant force of your own good example; by occasional invitations to read Catholic literature and to attend Catholic services and sermons; and — not to be forgotten! — also by prudently intimating, on opportune occasions, your own great desire that your non-Catholic partner embrace the true Faith.

You must not expect Almighty God to do everything. In dispensing His graces and especially the blessing of the true Faith, He makes use also of human means and human agents. And the most natural as well as the most suitable agent He could employ to convert your partner in marriage is yourself. Why, then, this timid reticence on the subject of religion? If you persist in depending exclusively on prayer, you may be held responsible for your Consort’s long delayed conversion and for his or her loss of innumerable priceless graces.

Such was the woman who on the day of her husband’s conversion exclaimed to him: “This is the happiest day of my life. I have been longing and praying for this day for many years.”

To which her husband replied: “That is strange. Then why did you never intimate to me that you longed for me to become a Catholic?”

Enthronement of the Sacred Heart.

Among the supernatural means of obtaining the conversion of a wife or husband, one that I would recommend most strongly is devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus; and in particular that form of this devotion known as the Enthronement of the Sacred Heart in the home. This consists in setting up an image of the Sacred Heart with appropriate solemnities in the home, and in consecrating the

family to the Sacred Heart in permanent recognition of His Kingship over the home. The fruits of the Enthronement have been simply marvelous in all parts of the world. Men who had never gone to Confession in their lives, high-degree Freemasons, have humbly made their Confession after the Enthronement had been performed in their home at the request of a wife or daughter.

To all, therefore, whose home life is marred by the lack of unity in religion or by any other kind of disharmony, as well as to those who wish to preserve the harmony that has hitherto prevailed, I say: Invite a priest to perform the act of Enthronement in your home. Consecrate your family to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Renew that consecration from time to time, especially on the first Friday of each month; and in the spirit of that consecration regard the Sacred Heart as the King and intimate Friend of your family. Make Him the confidant of your joys as well as of your sorrows, your failures as well as your successes. Let Him be your support in trial, your comfort in sorrow, your refuge in distress.

Let His principles govern your family life as well as your private and public life; and then you, too, most assuredly, will realize the truth of those loving promises, which the Sacred Heart of Jesus revealed to Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque:

“I will bless the houses wherein the image of my Heart shall be exposed and honored.

“I will give peace to their families.

“I will give them all the graces necessary for their state.

“I will shed abundant blessings on all their undertakings.

“I will comfort them in all their trials.”

APPENDIX.

[Under the new Norms issued: in the Instruction on Mixed Marriages, *Matrimonii Sacramentum*, in 1966 by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in the Instruction, *Crescens Matrimoniorum*, in 1967 by the Sacred Congregation for the Oriental Churches, and in the Apostolic Letter on Mixed Marriages, *Matrimonia Mixta*, in 1970 of Pope Paul VI, the Catholic party now declares that he is ready to remove dangers of falling away from the faith, and, under grave obligation, makes a sincere promise to do all in his power to have all the children baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church. {All of these documents are accessible through the Vatican Web-site www.vatican.va }

The non-Catholic party is absolutely informed of these promises made by the Catholic party, so that he is cognizant of the promise and obligation on the part of the Catholic. Both parties are clearly instructed on the ends and essential properties of Marriage, not to be excluded by either party. The dignity of marriage, and especially with regard to its principal characteristics, unity and indissolubility, is thus to be stressed.

The 1966 Instruction makes the principles clear when it says: "A mitigation of the rigor of the existing discipline on mixed marriages {is suggested}, not with regard to what is of divine law, but with regard to certain ecclesiastical regulations which our separated brethren find offensive."

The regulations now in force require the following conditions to be met: (Taken from the Vatican document *Matrimonii Sacramentum* of 1966. These were re-affirmed by Paul VI's *Matrimonia Mixta* of 1970.)

"1. The need to safeguard the faith of the Catholic partner must be kept constantly in mind and the children's education in the Catholic faith must be ensured.

"2. The Catholic partner's local ordinary or parish priest must be careful to impress on him or her seriously the obligation of ensuring the baptism and education in the Catholic religion of the children. The Catholic party will make an express promise that he or she will fulfill the obligation.

"3. The non-Catholic partner should, with due delicacy, but clearly, be informed of the Catholic teaching on the dignity of marriage and especially with regard to its principal characteristics, unity and non-dissolubility.

"The non-Catholic party should also be informed of the grave obligation on the Catholic party to safeguard, preserve and profess his or her faith and to baptize and educate in it such children as may be born.

"In order to ensure the fulfillment of this obligation, the non-Catholic party is to be invited to promise, sincerely and openly, that at the very least he or she will not impede it. If, however, the non-Catholic party feels that such a promise would go against his or her own conscience, the ordinary should refer the matter to the Holy See, with all the details.

"4. Ordinarily these promises should be given in writing."

Each Bishop is empowered to dispense from former restrictions in the celebration of mixed marriages within his own diocese in regard to the location of the marriage ceremony, should he think conditions warrant such a dispensation. But, unless the Bishop dispenses from it, the normal law of the Church must be observed. After Vatican II, a near universal dispensation from this restriction has been granted.

The marriage itself, of course, is not affected by the place of its celebration. A mixed marriage, celebrated before an authorized Catholic priest and two witnesses, is as true and valid a marriage in the eyes of the Catholic Church, and of everybody else, as a marriage between two Catholics.

The 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church (Numbers 1633-1637) states the position of the Catholic Church in clear and easy to understand terms.

Mixed marriages and disparity of cult.

1633 In many countries the situation of a mixed marriage (marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic) often arises. It requires particular attention on the part of couples and their pastors. A case of marriage with disparity of cult (between a Catholic and a non-baptized person) requires even greater circumspection.

1634 Difference of confession between the spouses does not constitute an insurmountable obstacle for marriage, when they succeed in placing in common what they have received from their respective communities, and learn from each other the way in which each lives in fidelity to Christ. But the difficulties of mixed marriages must not be underestimated. They arise from the fact that the separation of Christians has not yet been overcome. The spouses risk experiencing the tragedy of Christian disunity even in the heart of their own home. Disparity of cult can further aggravate these difficulties. Differences about faith and the very notion of marriage, but also different religious mentalities, can become sources of tension in marriage, especially as regards the education of children. The temptation to religious indifference can then arise.

1635 According to the law in force in the Latin Church, a mixed marriage needs for liceity the express permission of ecclesiastical authority. {Footnote: 137 Cf. CIC, canon 1124. CIC is the abbreviation for the Latin Code of Canon Law.} In case of disparity of cult, an express dispensation from this impediment is required for the validity of the marriage. {Footnote: 138 Cf. CIC, canon 1086.} This permission or dispensation presupposes that both parties know and do not exclude the essential ends and properties of marriage; and furthermore that the Catholic party confirms the obligations, which have been made known to the non-Catholic party, of preserving his or her own faith and ensuring the baptism and education of the children in the Catholic Church. {Footnote: 139 Cf. CIC, canon 1125.}

1636 Through ecumenical dialogue Christian communities in many regions have been able to put into effect a common pastoral practice for mixed marriages. Its task is to help such couples live out their particular situation in the light of faith, overcome the tensions between the couple's obligations to each other and towards their ecclesial communities, and encourage the flowering of what is common to them in faith and respect for what separates them.

1637 In marriages with disparity of cult the Catholic spouse has a particular task: "For the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband." {Footnote 140 1 Corinth 7:14.} It is a great joy for the Christian spouse and for the Church if this "consecration" should lead to the free conversion of the other spouse to the Christian faith. {Footnote: 141 Cf. 1 Corinth 7:16} Sincere married love, the humble and patient practice of the family virtues, and perseverance in prayer can prepare the non-believing spouse to accept the grace of conversion.

Since the Second Vatican Council, and in the spirit of Ecumenism, Catholics are now permitted to attend some Protestant weddings, for a sufficiently serious reason, provided certain conditions are met. Firstly, it must be acknowledged that the Catholic does NOT believe that 'one religion or church is as good as another'. The Catholic believes (as he has always believed) that Christ did, in fact, found only ONE Church, and that church is the Catholic Church. Any attendance at a Protestant service is most definitely NOT to be taken as showing ANY approval to other churches which have broken away from the true Church which is rightly called His. Moreover, Churches, which have broken away from the Catholic Church, have retained a large amount of the original inheritance, which they initially had from the Church founded by Christ. Thus, the Catholic has a great deal of 'common ground' with 'our separated brethren'. The Spirit of Ecumenism next acknowledges that for the majority of modern-day Protestants, they simply cannot be held responsible for the original tearing of the 'fabric of Christ's garment of unity' in the sixteenth century. Thus to associate with them in this age is no longer the scandalous behavior it would once have been. Finally, the Catholic acknowledges that Christ gave to the Church the power of BINDING and LOOSENING here on earth, so the Catholic fully endorses whatever regulations are made in connection with attendance at non-Catholic services for whatever serious reason.

Since the reforms of Vatican II, Catholics are now permitted to attend other Christian services for sufficiently serious reasons, including authentic ecumenical outreach, and providing there is absolutely no compromising of the Catholic's duty to practice his own religion and to maintain the Catholic's belief that Christ founded only one true Church. Such participation is in no way to be seen as sanctioning any non-Catholic belief.

We can mention, in passing that Cremation is now permitted, provided that there is no risk of implying that the person so cremated does not believe in the resurrection of the dead.

The rules for fasting and abstinence for Catholics have now been considerably mitigated. However, EVERY Friday is a day on which Catholics should perform SOME act of penance. Moreover, both Lent (in particular) and Advent are penitential seasons. The fast for receiving Holy Communion is now only one hour from food or drink, and water is permitted at any time.]

(Thanks to the Franciscan Herald.)
