

When a Catholic Marries a Protestant

WALKING TOGETHER SERIES

When a Catholic marries a Protestant, the two baptized Christians have the opportunity to share in one of the spiritual marvels of our time, the modern ecumenical movement. Today, interchurch marriages give witness to the broader effort to heal the longstanding divisions separating Christian communities on matters of faith and religious practice. Roughly 40 percent of engaged Catholics in the United States intend to marry someone from another religious background.¹ It falls to the Church's pastors and laity involved in marriage preparation to help these couples make a thoughtful transition to married life.

Marriage faces many challenges. When those challenges include religious differences, couples must frankly and honestly discuss their future life together. Many questions must be explored when such couples prepare for the sacred covenant of marriage. How important is my faith to me? Where will my spouse and I worship on the Lord's Day? In what religious tradition will our children be raised?

Differences in background need not always be a burden. People generally do not marry someone exactly like themselves. St. Paul tells us that the Christian community benefits when individuals bring their differences into harmony and place their unique gifts at the service of one another (see 1 Cor 12:4-11).

1. WHY DOES IT "TAKE THREE" TO MAKE A CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE?

Couples who unite with Jesus Christ find a rich source of strength and blessing in their relationship—a friend and companion on the journey of married life. To assist them “in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health,” the divine Savior offers his powerful gifts to Christian partners so that their bond may become a true communion of love that spills over to their children, extended family, and friends.

Marriage comes from the Creator, the Father of Jesus Christ—indeed as a vocation written into the very nature of his sons and daughters from the beginning. It exists for the good of the couple, as well as the health and progress of the whole human family. Yet in a world marred by sin and its manifestations of domination and selfishness, “man and woman need the help of the grace that God in his infinite mercy never refuses them” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], no. 1608).² Jesus, the Son of God, came into the world to give all who call upon his name the supreme example of forgiveness and compassion.

2. IS MARRIAGE A CONTRACT OR A SACRAMENT?

In the broad Christian understanding, marriage is more than a contract. As a relationship between two persons bonded in a permanent union, it is a sacred covenant that fulfills God's plan for humanity. A contract may be broken when one party chooses to no longer abide by its terms, but marriage is a covenant that promises lasting fidelity and stability.

Jesus Christ brings to full awareness the value of marriage as a sign and instrument of God's spousal love for his people. Catholics, therefore, understand marriage between two validly baptized Christians (of any denomination) to be a sacrament. This powerful sign makes visibly present the “oneness” of divine-human partnership in the Church that prepares us for eternal life. As St. Paul says, “For this reason a man shall leave [his] father and [his] mother / and be joined to his wife, / and the two shall become one flesh. / This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:31-32).

3. WHAT NOBLE PURPOSES DOES CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE SERVE?

The Catholic Church has spoken of two “ends” of marriage: the good of the spouses, and the procreation and education of children. Every human being finds fulfillment in self-giving love, and in marriage the self-gift of spouses is expressed and renewed by sexual relations that are open to new life. Other opportunities to show affection and concern happen in ordinary, daily acts of selfless love.

By bringing new human life into the world, married life achieves “its crowning glory” (CCC, no. 1652). Love is the only gift that grows the more it is shared. Having children confirms spouses in their mutual love and strengthens their bonds of faithfulness. By living for each other and for their children, husbands and wives create a home that becomes a suitable environment for imparting to their children the wisdom and values of the Gospel.

4. DO WE HAVE TO “JUMP THROUGH HOOPS” TO MARRY IN A CATHOLIC CHURCH?

The Church desires that couples enter into marriage with the highest degree of freedom and knowledge about the vows they will exchange before God and the community. Like all those seeking to marry under Catholic auspices, interchurch couples attend a marriage preparation seminar in which the spiritual and interpersonal challenges of married life are discussed candidly. Many dioceses offer the seminar in a variety of formats, including weekend retreats or weekly meetings with married parishioners.

The Catholic-Protestant couple also requests “permission to enter into a mixed marriage” from the local bishop. The priest, deacon, or lay person assisting the couple fills out the necessary paperwork. The local bishop can also permit the wedding ceremony to take place in the church of the partner who is not Catholic, or in another suitable place, to respect the wishes of that partner and of his or her family. Such permission is called a “permission to marry outside a sacred place.”

When either party has entered into a previous marriage, the couple must inquire into the annulment process to determine whether they possess the necessary freedom to enter into a sacramental marriage. An annulment is not a divorce; it is a Catholic determination that the earlier marriage was not valid.

5. ARE WE OBLIGED TO RAISE OUR CHILDREN CATHOLIC?

This question invites careful discussion and generally causes more conflicts than any other in an interchurch marriage. Couples do themselves a great disservice when they put off frank conversation about this topic, just as they do their children a disservice when they do not raise them in a particular faith. Despite the challenges, a sympathetic exchange of views on future religious practice in the family can deepen the bonds of trust between the engaged partners.

Today the Church asks the Catholic party to sign a statement to this effect: “I reaffirm my faith in Jesus Christ and, with God’s help, intend to continue living that faith in the Catholic Church. I promise to do all in my power to share the faith I have received with our children by having them baptized and reared as Catholics.” This statement of intent, springing from the spiritual convictions of the Catholic party, is a very serious commitment. If he or she becomes unable to carry it through, no penalty is incurred. A Protestant who marries a Catholic must be made aware of this intent of his or her future spouse. When there is strong disagreement about raising the children in the Catholic faith, the couple is encouraged to seek further spiritual counsel. This process should help both parties come to a deeper understanding of their own faith traditions.

6. WHAT ABOUT THE WEDDING CEREMONY?

The central moment of the marriage ceremony takes place in the exchange of vows. The ministers of the sacrament are the couple themselves—the celebrant acts as the Church’s official witness. Generally, the interchurch wedding takes place outside of Mass, since Protestants may receive Catholic Holy Communion only in rare circumstances. The attention that the couple gives to selecting readings, prayers, and music can make the ceremony a profound experience of their unity and a joyful memory in the hearts of all guests.

Frequently, the Catholic pastor allows the person of another Christian tradition to invite a minister from that community to offer prayers and a blessing at the Catholic service. In certain cases, that minister is invited to read from Sacred Scripture and to preach. Whatever choices are made within the parameters of Catholic discipline, the guests of other traditions are warmly welcomed as Christian brothers and sisters and as esteemed friends of the bride and groom.

7. HOW CAN WE GROW TOGETHER IN OUR DISTINCT PATHS?

Studies have shown that religious practice helps to ensure the permanence of marital commitment. Spouses deepen their love for one another when they practice their faith in Christ and witness to the importance of that faith in the lives of their children. Building on shared reverence for the word of God, an interchurch couple can include, within the family routine, grace before meals and prayer services around holy days. The home may be decorated with religious items to honor the traditions of both spouses. Books and magazines about the two faith families may also foster growth in Christian virtue.

The challenge of scheduling worship on Sundays can be an opportunity to witness to the unity in charity that Christ wills for all families and for the whole human family. Some interchurch couples pray together at home before going to their respective churches. Others attend the Saturday vigil Mass at a Catholic parish and a Sunday morning service with a Protestant congregation.

CONCLUSION

Whatever decisions are made, the interchurch couple does well to recall that a loving marriage is God’s work before it becomes theirs. May all Christian couples hear the call to make present the love of Jesus in their marriages. Let the words of an early Church Father express the wonderful blessing of a marriage lived in our Savior Jesus Christ: “How can I ever express the happiness of a marriage joined by the Church, strengthened by an offering, sealed by a blessing, announced by angels, and ratified by the Father? . . . How wonderful the bond between two believers, now one in hope, one in desire, one in discipline, one in the same service! They are both children of one Father and servants of the same Master, undivided in spirit and flesh, truly two in one flesh. Where the flesh is one, one also is the spirit” (Tertullian of Carthage [late second to third century], quoted in CCC, no. 1642).

NOTES

- 1 Robert J. Hater, *When a Catholic Marries a Non-Catholic* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press and Franciscan Communications, 2006).
- 2 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), no. 1608.

RESOURCES

- American Association of Interchurch Families (AAIF). Provides services for Catholic/Protestant families in the areas of education, support, spiritual growth, outreach, and fellowship. Contact the Family Life Office of your local diocese. See www.interchurchfamilies.org.
- Bush, John C., and Cooney, Bishop Patrick R. *Interchurch Families—Resources for Ecumenical Hope: Catholic/Reformed Dialogue in the United States*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press; Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 2002.
- Hater, Robert J. *When a Catholic Marries a Non-Catholic*. Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press and Franciscan Communications, 2006.
- Kendall, SJ, Daniel, and Nappi, Rebecca. *101 Questions and Answers on Catholic Marriage Preparation*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004.
- Kilcourse, George. *Double Belonging: Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992.
- USCCB Catholic Communication Campaign. *For Your Marriage: Resources for Living Happily Ever After* (www.foryourmarriage.org). Offers a variety of resources for building stronger, healthier marriages, including articles on religion and spirituality and interchurch marriages.

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