

Mixed Marriages Roadblock to Ecumenism

By Religious News Service

Mixed marriages remain a major source of difficulty for those who seek to advance ecumenism.

But friction over mixed marriage is not limited to Christians. The president of the (Orthodox) Rabbinical Council of America has called the suggestion of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation that Jews adopt more liberal regulations for interfaith marriages.

Perhaps no other ecclesiastical issue strikes deeper roots of contention in the daily life of the religious home. It is the crab grass in grass roots ecumenism.

Because of special tensions in mixed marriages, added to the normal difficulties, churchmen of all faiths try to discourage such weddings from the very start.

In a 1967 study Dr. Victor Sauna, associate professor of psychology at New York's Yeshiva University, reported that spouses in interfaith marriages have a higher divorce probability than those who marry within their own Church.

The study also revealed that Catholics and Jews experience greater family and religious difficulties in mixed marriages than do Protestants.

However, Prof. Sauna said, "with few exceptions the rate of intermarriage is on the rise and expected to continue upward." The report indicated that "in some parts of the country as many as 50 per cent of the Catholics and Protestants married outside their faith." The national average among Jews was given as 17 per cent.

Two factors directly related to religiously mixed marriages are at work in the Churches today. These two factors, ecumenism and personalist theology, are reflected in recent statements by theologians and other churchmen.

First, the Churches are moving from static legal positions largely formulated in 17th Century Western Europe after the religious wars to a new stance of mutual respect and ecumenical concern.

Second, moralists have evolved from classical Protestant and Catholic natural law

theologies, developed while biology was a dominant science, to personalist theologies which reflect a large extent the modern insights of psychology.

Thus Father James R. Hertel, of the Paterson diocesan matrimonial tribunal, argued for "a reassessment of the (Catholic) law that now favors the institution of marriage over the rights of the people of God."

Father Hertel was discussing the question of Church law in annulment and divorce cases. But the principle he enunciated, that such laws should "favor and protect the basic human rights of persons," is applicable to the whole area of Christian marriage.

Father Ralph Thomas, assistant director of the Graymoor Ecumenical Institute, recently suggested that in addition to a promise for the Christian upbringing of the children, there should be a promise "to respect each other's conscience in religious matters."

"Such a promise," he maintained, "would be in keeping

with traditional theology which stresses the obligation to follow one's conscience, as well as with the declaration of the Second Vatican Council.

Taking note of the religious vacuum that frequently exists in a mixed marriage, Father Thomas urged such couples "to become actively involved in ecumenical study clubs and projects." Religious interests of this kind, he said, "would preserve a spiritual involvement that could offset the religious isolation frequently experienced in these marriages."

Reformed Church and Catholic Authorities in the Netherlands have produced a set of tentative guidelines for pastors and couples involved in mixed marriages which also stress the primacy of the person.

This so-called Amsterdam Draft declared, "The Churches need one another on the way to the one Church of Jesus Christ." The document concentrated its attention on the good of the couple to be married rather than Church laws "because only thus can the best interests of the Churches be served."

It recommended that each spouse study the other's faith and Church tradition and suggested that there might be cases when one spouse will adopt the other's beliefs.

In such instances, the draft stated, "the change of Church membership must take place in an ecumenical spirit, in consciousness of the temporary character of the Churches' divisions, and with a view to the one Church of Christ to which the divided Churches are called and toward which they are on the way."

While many, possibly most, Catholics outside the Netherlands would not go this far, there have been a number of changes in Church law which permit some flexibility in mixed marriages.

Thus Catholic priests have officiated in Anglican and Protestant Churches and ministers have conducted marriages in Catholic churches. But in most of these cases the minister was the father of one of the spouses. In all cases the Protestant was required to make an oral promise that the children would be baptized and reared as Catholics.

There have been developments in Catholic practice over the past few years and these are particularly obvious to those who remember the days when a mixed marriage was not permitted in the church itself, but had to be performed in the rectory. Still an undertone of rigidity in the official Catholic position remains, at least from a Protestant point of view.

The main lines emerging in Catholic thought on mixed marriage have been summarized by John Cardinal Heenan, the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster:

blessing of the couple by a Protestant minister.

Bishop Hammes, however, did not give the diocesan clergy that Vatican permission was necessary for a Protestant minister to be the official witness at such a marriage. The prelate conceded that such a request might be sought if the Protestant party is the son or daughter or close relative of a Protestant minister.

In such cases, with the Protestant minister acting as official witness, the Catholic priest would participate by reading the Scripture lesson, by giving the blessing, and by sharing in the ecumenical service.

The guidelines also considered the role of a Protestant clergyman at a mixed marriage being performed in a Catholic church. Bishop Hammes declared:

"It is an insult to the basic unity we have in virtue of our Baptism into Christ and to the person of the minister to restrict his part in the ceremony of marriage to that of a silent spectator or some sort of ecumenical appendage to whom a few lines are grudgingly granted."

He suggested that the Protestant minister read his own exhortation to the bride and groom, give the final blessing and compose and lead the invocation during the Prayer of the Faithful when the mixed marriage is celebrated during the Mass. The priest would preach the homily and receive the wedding vows.

Bishop Sets Guidelines For Marriages in Protestant Churches

Superior, Wis. — (RNS) — Roman Catholic Bishop George A. Hammes of Superior has eased the way for the marriage of Catholics to Protestants in Protestant churches.

The prelate's action, announced in a letter to the priests of his diocese, is believed to be the first time general permission for such marriages has been granted by a member of the American hierarchy.

According to the Wisconsin prelate, the reason for the formulation of the guidelines was ecumenical.

For the marriage of a Cath-

olic to a Protestant in a Protestant church, the guidelines call for the following conditions:

• There should be a signed commitment by the Catholic party that the children of the marriage will be raised as Catholics.

• The official witness at the marriage should be the Catholic pastor or duly authorized priest delegated by the bishop.

• The marriage should take place at a Bible Vigil service constructed around the exchange of vows, which may include the reading of the Scriptures, a sermon, and a



Mt. Tabor (top photo), which rises 1,900 feet above sea level, was the site of Jesus' transfiguration before his apostles Peter, James and John. In the Church of the Transfiguration on the mountain, a Franciscan monk (bottom photo) opens the trapdoor in the sanctuary through which pilgrims can touch the rock of the Mount of the Transfiguration. In the church designed by Italian architect Antonio Barluzzi, a mosaic ceiling depicts Christ's transfiguration. This event is commemorated on Aug. 6. (RNS Photo)

Bishops Consider Pan-African Unit

Ouagadougou, Upper Volta — (RNS) — Paul Cardinal Zoungrana, Archbishop of Ouagadougou, has proposed the formation of a Pan-African association to facilitate communication among all the Roman Catholic bishops of the continent.

His suggestion, sent to all of the regional episcopal conferences of North, South, East, West and Central Africa, has been given tentative approval by the East African Bishops' Conference.

If the bishops of the other regions agree, the association's inaugural meeting will be the first assembly representing all regional conferences.

There is a precedent for such an organization, however, in the Pan-African Board which held meetings in Rome during the Second Vatican Council. In approving the idea of the Pan-African association, the East African bishops cited "confusion" at the Rome meetings and called for the establishment of procedural rules to forestall such confusion.

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