

An Historical View:

Mixed Marriages Can Work

By FR. JOSEPH M. CHAMPLIN

I don't remember my own parents' wedding ceremony, but I presume it took place in St. Gabriel's Catholic rectory in Hammondsport. My father, you see, was an Episcopalian and my mother a devout Roman Catholic. I do recall, however, at the age of 12, some years after dad died of cancer, my mother's second marriage service. The vows were exchanged in that same rectory because my new father was also a faithful member of the Episcopal Church.

When my brother took unto himself a lovely bride, the rules had changed — slightly. The scene shifted from the parish house in that little village at the end of Lake Keuka to the church itself. We stood inside the building, but outside the sanctuary. My sister-in-law was then a Protestant (she has since become a Roman Catholic) and the Church thus manifested its discouragement of mixed marriages through this exclusion of participants from the area near God's altar.

I discovered, at the beginning of my pastoral ministry after ordination in 1956, a further easing of these restrictions with regard to the liturgical celebration of mixed marriages. Now bride and groom were permitted to come within the sanctuary and, a few years later, even to exchange nuptial promises in the context of a Mass.

Recent decrees go even further. They allow — and ecumenists encourage — ministers from other Communion to share in the Catholic ceremony and the latest decrees make it easier for couples to obtain in-

special situations permission to marry before a minister instead of the priest and in a church other than the Roman Catholic one.

These limitations, despite their radical liberalization in such a short period of time, probably seem harsh, even cruel to some.

Perhaps one individual who glances at these words remembers only too well the end of a beautiful romance, the finish of a courtship — all because he wouldn't be married by the priest or she insisted on having a wedding in the Protestant church of her childhood.

The Church bears a delicate, thankless burden here. Aware that mixed marriages mean division on something vital, possible danger to an individual's faith, and complications with regard to the children, she cannot lend enthusiastic approval to them.

But other Christian churches don't either and, likewise Jews today usually take a dim view of matrimony with non-Jews. Even marital experts, from purely human considerations, wonder about the wisdom of two persons marrying who do not share similar religious beliefs. The Catholic Church, it seems, doesn't stand alone on the matter.

At the same time for many, many reasons in our pluralistic, rapidly communicating world, an ever-increasing number of men and women decide to spend the rest of their lives together despite the differences and difficulties which do exist.

The Church recognizes this

obvious fact and urges bishops and parish priests "to aid the married couple to foster the unity of their conjugal and family life" and to "establish relationships of sincere openness and enlightened confidence with ministers of other religious communities."

The wedding liturgy can do much to cement that union, dis-

solve fears, and start the marriage off happily in a positive direction. Changes in Church regulations mean, in practice, that questions of who will officiate, where the service will be held, and according to what ritual are almost always resolvable. In addition the revised Catholic rite offers a wealth of opportunities for joint planning of the ceremony — by bride, groom, priest, minister, families.

Twenty-eight biblical readings plus many scripturally-oriented prayers and blessings provide ready texts which should be most acceptable to all concerned. Finally, participation of clergymen from other denom-

inations in the Roman Catholic wedding and involvement of the congregation in the ceremony itself cannot but foster good will at a time when this is most needed.

A couple begins married life when they leave the altar. Future happiness depends upon a willingness to love, understand, accept, and adjust.

This perhaps is more true in a mixed marriage than in one which finds husband and wife united in their religious beliefs and attitudes. A beautiful and satisfying nuptial celebration doesn't guarantee bliss in the days ahead, but it can successfully launch bride and groom along the right course.

The Rules on Mixed Marriages

At the beginning of 1971, new regulations went into effect regarding mixed marriages

The regulations were issued by Pope Paul VI and were implemented by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops at their November 1970 meeting.

The new legislation states that Catholics may, for serious reasons, be dispensed from the obligation of marrying before a Catholic priest.

The promise that was required for the non-Catholic partner; to baptize and raise the children as Catholics, has also been reworded and is now required only of the Catholic spouse.

The reasons cited by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops which could dispense a couple from marrying before a priest include the following: to achieve family harmony, to avoid family alienation, to obtain parental agreement to a marriage, to recognize the significant claims of relationship or special friendship with a non-Catholic minister, and to permit the marriage in a church that has particular importance to the non-Catholic.

At the same time the bishops stressed the list of reasons serve only as guidelines and are not intended to be exhaustive.

The Catholic in a mixed marriage, according to the new regulations, must promise to do all in his or her power to share the Catholic faith with his children. He must have them baptized and reared Catholics.

Previously the non-Catholic also had to make the same promise. Now he is informed of the promise, responsibility and obligation of the Catholic.

The wording of the promise now reads:

"I promise to do all in my power to share the faith I have received with all of our children by having them baptized and reared as Catholics."

The priest's role has also changed. Previously, a priest, in submitting a dispensation, would sign a statement that read in part: "I declare that from my knowledge of the parties, I am morally certain that these promises will be faithfully kept."

The priest now signs a statement which reads: "I am morally certain that the declaration and promise (of the Catholic party) have been sincerely made."

It is still required that both parties accept marriage as permanent, open to children and requiring faithfulness.

Ministers and rabbis may now offer prayers at a Catholic wedding, when a dispensation has been received; and a priest may do the same at a non-Catholic ceremony. Dual ceremonies, however, in which a priest and minister or rabbi officiate, or successive ceremonies in which the marriage vows are performed twice, are still not permitted.

Catholic priests, with approval, may perform the Catholic wedding in a Protestant church.

The new regulations are not retroactive. However, marriages that have already taken place outside the Church may be validated provided the Catholic party makes the promise to baptize and educate his children in the Catholic faith.

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