

Marriage is a Public Sign

By FATHER ROBERT COLLINS

The Sacrament of Matrimony begins when a couple stands "In the sight of God and in the face of this company," and declares, in some form, "We take each other for better or for worse . . . til death do us part."

Notice, when they do this they are not in fact starting a love relationship. They have presumably been in love with each other for months or even years.

No! What they are doing is announcing, describing and dedicating their relationship. They are making it a sacrament. They are becoming a sacrament, the public sign and cause of redemptive love

A New Attitude

Interfaith Marriages

At this moment, as you stand in the magic circle of love looking forward to your wedding day and your future life together, events that took place years ago, understandably, hold no great interest for you. However, because yours is an interfaith marriage, a little background on the history of such unions could provide some useful insights.

A hundred years ago many people considered marrying outside one's religious grouping to be a horrendous act — a betrayal of God, tradition and family honor. Mixed marriages often led to bitter feelings and even to the ostracism of the young man or woman who dared attempt one.

Even 20 years ago they were looked upon with a good deal of shock, suspicion or dismay. The person who entered one was considered to have em-

barked on a dangerous and questionable course. The "unbelieving" mate was a stranger, an outsider, whose presence often made family and friends quite uneasy.

They are in fact saying something joyous, yet awesome: "Whatever befalls we are going to mingle our two lives completely into one, together, forever; to live, love and grow together, forever; to raise children, to build a family, to serve God and man from this new nuclear community of love."

They are crying out, "Whoever I am, whatever I can become, I give to you. I want to discover myself with you and through you, and I will try to summon forth the best self that is in you."

They are shouting: "People, we believe in the foolish, glorious Christian vision, the impossible dream that if we pour out

our lives for each other, we'll possess life more richly. We have the courage to try to imitate and live the Gospel love story.

"We want you people who call yourselves Christians to know about it, to take heart from us, to be inspired by the fact that we are willing to hazard ourselves on the fact that this vision is reality, is what life is all about, and will bring us to happiness, here and hereafter."

And finally they are saying, "We do this as part of the Christian community and we need your help, support, friendship, your discipline, prayers, and presence to make this dream work."

(Father Collins is director of the diocesan Office of Family Life.)

Sometimes in a mixed marriage the wedding service itself was shortened and stripped of ceremony, further underlining the fact that the families and the churches, too, were unhappy with the event. In these instances religion, which should be the deepest source of union in any marriage, was looked upon instead as a wedge, a problem, and a serious danger to the couple.

Often it was hoped that the "outsider" might prove tractable and become interested in the religion of his partner. If he took the leap and became converted to Lutheranism, Catholicism, Presbyterianism or what-

ever, the "winning" family was pleased, and, in their eyes, the unfortunate liaison was "redeemed."

Much of this type of thinking has changed significantly in the last two decades. Time has blurred and softened many of the religious rivalries and prejudices of past centuries. Travel, mass communication and the mingling of populations (as they moved beyond the confines of "old neighborhoods" or communities where their forefathers had settled) were all factors which have melted many of the rigid barriers of custom and "religion" that separated man from his brothers.

The world is shrinking and we are truly beginning, but just beginning, to consider ourselves "fellow travelers on spaceship earth."

In the past, interfaith marriages were somewhat rare. Now because of the pluralism, openness and interaction of people in our society, they are becoming much more frequent. In the mysterious encounter of a young man and woman, God's providence draws them to each other because of shared experience, personal needs, proximity, mutual likes and dislikes, special personality traits and commonly held ideals.

Somewhere in the process of dating and courtship they discover the differences in religious backgrounds. For some couples this causes personal, familial or faith problems which lead them to break off or drift out of the relationship. Other couples, while realizing the complications two faiths may cause, nevertheless decide that married life together is the vocation God has in store for them. Presumably you are in this second category. You have concluded that you will marry. Now your task

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A Prayer for Courtship

Remember, O Most Blessed Mother, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored they help or sought thy intercession was left unaided.

Inspired with this confidence, unworthy as I am of thy protection, in the presence of God the Father, the Author of life, of God the Son, who gave marriage the dignity of a Sacrament, of God the Holy Ghost, who sanctifies marital love, I entrust my

courtship to thy motherly protection.

Guide me in the choice of a partner. Keep my courtship pure and chaste. Bless our union with a holy love. Watch over us from heaven.

Send us grace to live in the favor of God and to share in the eternal love in which we shall all be united forever in heaven. Amen.

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Diocesan Family Programs

Preparation of engaged couples for marriage and development of programs to enrich family life are the responsibility of the Office of Family Life of the Diocese of Rochester. The diocesan director is Father Robert Collins whose office is located at 50 Chestnut St., Rochester.

The Pre-Cana Conference is a series of talks by priests, married couples, and physicians with the purpose of preparing engaged couples for marriage. In these talks engaged couples have an opportunity to examine their love for one another in the light of the reality of married life.

The Office of Family Life provides a variety of Cana Conference programs to fit the needs of individual parishes.

Couples Retreats are held at Notre Dame Retreat House or the Cenacle Retreat House. The director helps parishes and parish groups to plan specialized retreats or days of recollection for married couples.

The Christian Family Movement is a national ecumenical movement of, by, and for married couples and their families. Its couples meet bi-weekly in small action groups at each other's homes to talk about how they can love their neighbor more effectively. Assisted by a guide book they observe a problem from daily life. They judge whether the situation needs to be changed. They agree to act to bring the world closer to what Christ wants. Mr. and

Mrs. Michael Charleton, 65 Hilary Dr., Chili, are the diocesan chair couple.

Marriage Encounter is a weekend where each participating couple is given the opportunity to renew their basic commitment to each other. The Encounter team, a priest and two married couples, encourages each husband and wife to question and evaluate their relationship with self, spouse, and God. Occasions for private dialogue between husband and wife let them discover for themselves the great beauty of their marriage. Encounters are held monthly (beginning in June) at the Cenacle Retreat House. Further information is available from Mr. and Mrs. Alan Monahan, 340 Filbert Pl., East Rochester.

Mothers' Circles are groups of mothers meeting monthly to discuss, to learn, to be inspired to be better mothers. An agenda containing articles of interest to mothers of teenagers, youngsters, and toddlers is supplied for each meeting. Groups are free to follow the agenda, to work from a selected text or engage a speaker for their meetings. For information regarding formation of a Mothers' Circle, please contact the Office of Family Life.

The Judean Society exists to bring understanding and friendship to divorced and separated Catholic women. A spiritual and social program is held once a month at St. Machael's rectory, Rochester. Father Gerard Gulh is the moderator.



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