

Before...

By Father James Bacik
NC News Service

A young man and woman walk into my office. She is a member of our university parish and introduces me to her fiancé. They heard that you have to make arrangements with the priest at least six months before a wedding.

I try to make them comfortable. We engage in some small talk.

The young man grew up in a Protestant family, I am told, and he has a few things he wants clarified about Catholics.

"Why is it Catholics worship Mary?" he asks in a voice suddenly aggressive but also anxious. He continues with the usual litany — purgatory, calling priests "Father," not reading the Bible.

The young woman nervously blurts out that he has been asking her these questions and she can't answer them.

I find myself a bit resentful at having to go through all this still another time. Then I remind myself that this is a teaching opportunity. Both these people are a product of centuries of mistrust among Christians. They live in a culture where religious illiteracy is common.

But now there is an opportunity to break down barriers and deepen mutual understanding. The couple's upcoming marriage can be an element in the mysterious workings of the Spirit to further Christian unity.

I begin by giving them more time to talk over their feelings about the love drawing them together and about their religious differences. We talk about the problem of hidden resentments that can develop over religious practices.

I ask: How will you feel if you are married in another church? If your children are raised in a tradition different from your own?

We talk about the problems of raising children in religious ways. We discuss the promise she must make to practice her Catholic faith and to do all in her power to raise the children Catholic. I try to put this in a historical context and explain how the church has interpreted it. And I tell the story of a man and woman who wrestled with this question for nine years. Only then did they enter their happy marriage.

This contrasts with couples I know who thought they would solve the problem when the first child came, but never could.

The couple with me is burdened by an obvious lack of religious understanding. I try to respond to objections the young man raised. I encourage the couple to study each other's religious tradition.

Our parish has books, tapes and courses for that.

I also encourage the couple to consult his minister for a similar program. Their plans to marry offer a marvelous opportunity for them to reach an adult understanding of their faith.

The man and woman are interested in the marriage ceremony. He is relieved when I suggest we work out an ecumenical celebration with his pastor. He feared his family would be excluded and he wouldn't know what to do at a Mass.

He thinks it better that the ceremony be in her church, but is surprised and pleased to know it is possible to get permission to have it in his church.

I encourage them to plan the ceremony together. And I give them a book as a guide. I ask them to eventually write down for me why they made their choices of readings and what the passages mean to them.

I urge them to think beyond the ceremony to ways they can pray together regularly and bring Christian values they share into their married life.

As we conclude, my hope is that this first session has broken down some barriers, beginning a process that will lead this typical young couple to the serious preparation marriage demands.

(Father Bacik is pastor of a university parish in Toledo, Ohio.)



Today's Mixed Marriages

Ruth's decision: where you go,

By Father John Castelot
NC News Service

In ancient Israel about the 12th century B.C. a couple named Elimelek and Naomi lived in Bethlehem. When famine hit the land they moved east to Moab.

In Moab, Elimelek died. Naomi's two sons married Moabite girls, something frowned upon by the Israelites.

In the course of time both sons died and Naomi was left with her two foreign daughters-in-law.

When the famine eased in Israel, Naomi decided to go home. She urged the young women to remain in their own country where they might remarry and have families of their own.

Reluctantly, tearfully, one of them — Orpah — kissed her mother-in-law goodbye. The other, Ruth, insisted on going with Naomi.

"Do not ask me to abandon or

forsake you. For wherever you go, I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16-17).

The biblical account doesn't say why Ruth did this. Her choice was highly unusual. It meant Ruth was willing to pull up stakes and sever old connections.

In Bethlehem Ruth met a man named Boaz, whom she married. They had a son and named him Obed. He became the father of Jesse, who was the father of David.

Thus it was that a pagan woman became an ancestor of the great King David. This may be why Ruth's story was included in Scripture.

Later, Matthew singled Ruth out when his Gospel presented a genealogy — a family tree — of Jesus, son of David (Matthew 1:5).

Scholars generally agree that the basic points about Ruth are based

on historical fact. They doubt that the Old Testament writers would invent a pagan and a foreigner as David's ancestor.

It seems that mixed marriages have been with us for many centuries.

Naomi loved Ruth and accepted her, letting God direct the relationship's outcome. One can imagine that even if Ruth had not become an Israelite, Naomi would have loved her.

The Bible doesn't talk much about mixed marriages. One of the few times we hear of a "mixed marriage" in the New Testament is in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. But since what he had to say concerned a new Christian who already was married to a pagan, it is quite different from many of today's mixed marriages.

It seems certain people were demanding that a new Christian separate from a spouse who re-

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