

## ...and After

By Katharine Bird  
NC News Service

The Catholic Church today takes the approach that mixed marriages can serve as "a sign of hope for unity among churches," said Father John Hotchkin, director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

The church also recognizes that people in mixed marriages may encounter special complications, Father Hotchkin said. "We think such marriages have special claims on the pastoral ministry of the church." He added that nationwide 27 percent of Catholics marry non-Catholics. In some areas, the Far West and the South, it's 80 percent.

Much church help takes the form of counseling before marriage. Couples are encouraged to face potential difficulties and make decisions "in a way that respects the religious conscience of each," Father Hotchkin said.

But more thought is now being given to serving mixed-marriage couples after the wedding. He thinks more local consultation on the experiences of such couples could produce a workable list of their special needs.

Asked what he considers the greatest pressure point on mixed marriages, Father Hotchkin promptly replied: "the religious upbringing of children."

It's not an area where people

are neutral, he indicated. "People feel religious values are the most precious things they have to transmit to their children."

The church asks Catholics "to promise to do what they can" to have their children raised as Catholics, Father Hotchkin explained. The Catholic is expected to act with integrity in living up to the promise, he added. But the church realizes that the way family situations develop sometimes prevents this.

Raising the issue before marriage provides an opportunity for a couple to consider the matter in a calm environment. Once children are born, they become "the object of affection by parents and grandparents," Father Hotchkin said. Children can become part of a tug-of-war.

Father Hotchkin told of a Catholic wife who went through "a crisis of conscience" 17 years ago. Her Protestant husband insisted on sending their children to the Lutheran school.

The woman took the issue so seriously that she was considering a separation, Father Hotchkin reported. That impasse ended when the husband's career required a move to a city whose only Christian school was Catholic.

Today such a situation is less likely to develop. Representatives of one or both communities would want to help find a workable solution that preserved the marriage, the priest said.

In premarital counseling today, couples are advised to "make use of all that is shared" by their faith traditions. This could include reading the Bible at home and using prayers sacred to both.

A tension point for many couples is the inability to participate fully in each other's religious rites. Father Hotchkin would like to see more ministry to couples in this situation. The danger is that couples "will fall into the cracks between the churches."

Father Hotchkin counsels couples to participate together in worship as much as possible. He suggested that services held in some parishes during Lent and Advent may be a place to start.

But for parishioners at the Church of Holy Apostles in Tidewater, Va., that problem is alleviated somewhat. Their building houses both a Catholic parish and an Anglican congregation.

People "tell me they feel blessed" to be able to attend services in the same church, the priest commented.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

## I will follow

mained a pagan. But what Paul writes shows him reacting with his usual pastoral sense.

He advised the couple to remain married as long as the pagan partner caused no serious difficulties for the other in living the Christian life. His reason: "The unbelieving husband is consecrated by his believing wife; the unbelieving wife is consecrated by her believing husband" (1 Cor. 7:13-14).

In other words, Paul hoped the pagan spouse would be affected by contact with the believing community. But even if the pagan partner should not become fully Christian, the implication is that the couple should stay together and live in harmony. For, as Paul put it, "God has called you to live in peace."

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## FOOD...

### ...for thought

What happens when a Catholic husband and his Methodist wife approach the time of their teenage son's confirmation, which will be celebrated in a Catholic parish? Are there ways for this couple to work together in preparing their son for his confirmation? Can they plan together for the special day and celebrate it together?

Again, what happens with couples in mixed marriages in these times when the at-home observance of special seasons like Advent and Lent is so much stressed? Must they conclude that the open practice of faith at home is not possible for them? Or must one partner participate actively in the observance of faith at home, while the other partner stands by passively?

These are questions of the ecumenical age. Church leaders have been suggesting that these kinds of questions are particularly urgent now — at a time when it is considered so important that values be communicated to children at home. To the extent that couples in mixed marriages can work together to share and communicate values at home, they should work together, these leaders say.

Of course, like any other couple, a couple in a mixed marriage may need some assistance in doing this.

In light of such concerns, ministry to couples in mixed marriages after their wedding — not just before — is expanding.

The road to the full unity of divided Christians is long. But it appears there are important tasks to carry out in common along the way — ecumenism's practical side, you might say.

It is fairly easy to see that divided Christians can cooperate to carry out valuable social-justice work. But can they cooperate in other ways?

The day when divided Christians receive Communion together may be somewhere off in the future. But when it comes to preparing for a child's First Communion or confirmation, or even a child's wedding, how much can a couple in a mixed marriage contribute together on the level of faith?

The challenge is to recognize that divided Christians share more than they sometimes realize. The challenge is to bring what is shared to bear in practical ways on life at home.

How is this done?

### ...for discussion

1. Should a Catholic father and Protestant mother cooperate at home to communicate Christian values to their children? Where might they find help in doing this?

2. What is the ecumenical movement? Has it influenced your life or the life of someone close to you? How?

3. Joe Michael Feist indicates that while Catholic and Jewish worship differ in significant ways, there are some common threads between them as well. Why would this be the case?

4. In Feist's article, what does Dr. Eugene Fisher mean when he says it is important for Christians to regard Judaism as more than just a valuable religion of the past?

### SECOND HELPINGS

An easy-to-read book that surveys the current movement for unity among divided churches and reviews the history and causes of their divisions is "Twenty Centuries of Ecumenism," by Father Jacques Desseaux. "Nowadays ecumenism is hardly front-page news for the mass-circulation magazines. Is it therefore dead? By no means! The ecumenical life has quite simply changed its character; it has become diversified and widespread, with the result that it has become commonplace. It is now lived day by day," the author writes. Father Desseaux, who died recently, was a French priest of the Diocese of Versailles. At one point in his book, he writes about some concrete forms ecumenism takes in ordinary life. A brief section comments on ministry to mixed marriages (Paulist Press, 545 Island Rd., Ramsey, N.J. 07446 \$4.95)