

Despite odds, mixed-faith marriages don't have to fail

By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

Fact: Almost 40 percent of all Catholics who married in the 1970s married non-Catholics.

Fact: The younger a couple is, the more likely their religious affiliation differs.

Fact: Attitudes about interchurch marriages are becoming more positive. Seventy-two percent of Americans approve of such marriages.

Sad-but-true fact: Mixed Protestant-Catholic marriages are more likely to end in divorce than either Protestant or Catholic same-church marriages, but it is unclear what is the cause of instability. It is safe to say that differing religious affiliations could lead to conflict in a marriage.

The happy fact, however, is that "mixed marriages" need not lead to unhappiness and divorce, especially if the couple takes time before the wedding to candidly discuss the ceremony itself as well as the overall role of religion in their lives and in the lives of any children they may have.

Dr. Richard Lawless, vicar for education in the Diocese of Syracuse, N.Y., and a specialist in the area of interchurch marriages, discussed in a recent interview how these couples can minimize possible conflict.

"Beginning with the Vatican Council II document on ecumenism," Lawless said, "there has developed a whole new respect on the Catholic side for all other religious groups, especially other Christians."

The developing ecumenical movement "undergirds a real pleasant change in pastoral practice," he added.

Asked what steps an interchurch couple should take before their wedding, Lawless had several suggestions.

"The couple should first ask, 'What would we like to see happen at our wedding' and then work backward from there," he said. "For example, is there a strong reason to have the wedding in one church or the other? That might be a problem. Another question is: How does the couple see the role of the priest? Is it a passive role or an active one?"

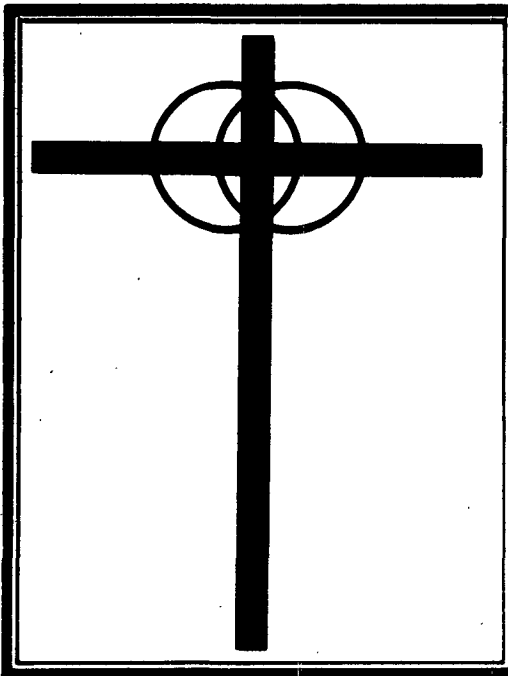
Lawless believes there is no substitute for communication and open discussion between an engaged couple from different churches.

"If the couple can be clear as to what their own expectations are, as well as the expectations of others, they'll be in far better shape. As much as possible, any wishes, desires, wants or needs should be discussed openly from the beginning."

"The very act of working out these difficulties can strengthen the relationship," Lawless said.

Next, Lawless commented, conferences should be arranged with the clergy from both communities, no matter which church the ceremony will take place in or the roles of each minister.

"It would be good to visit with the Protestant minister, not only as a courtesy, but as a real recognition of the Protestant clergy's role" of leadership in a community.



faith and vice versa," he said.

No one should be carrying "any hidden agenda to try to change one person's faith," Lawless believes; the expectation is that each partner will continue to live within the tradition of his or her church.

Another area of extreme consequence that should be discussed prior to the wedding is the subject of children and their faith, Lawless said.

The church's Code of Canon Law still requires the Catholic party in a "mixed marriage" to promise "that everything possible will be done to see that the children of this marriage will be baptized and educated in the Catholic faith."

Because "it is not simply the conscience of the Catholic involved here," but also the conscience of the non-Catholic, Lawless said, the canon regarding Catholic baptism of children may not always be possible to fulfill.

For a married couple, the pastoral practice "is that the Catholic is not expected to put the marriage in danger in order to carry this (canon) out," Lawless said.

Children of interchurch couples should not be "raised" in both denominations, Lawless said, but they should be "exposed" to both. The fact that a couple draws on the best in each partner's religious tradition "can be a strengthening element in that family," Lawless said.

Many bridal customs stem from Victorian era

For the bride and groom as well as their families and friends, the "big day" is one of celebration and joy. Whether the guest list is large or small, the event is sure to be remembered fondly by all participants and observers.

The mention of the word "wedding" conjures up thoughts of delicate lace, fragrant flowers, the exchange of rings and strains of "Here Comes the Bride."

Whether the bride walks down the aisle in an elaborate, long-trained gown or in more simple garb, it is certain that much deliberation has gone into deciding on the style for this special occasion. Today's couples choose to incorporate whatever elements of tradition

they find meaningful.

Many of the customs associated with weddings came to the fore during the Victorian period. For example, the tradition of the honeymoon was established in Victorian days, also the era in which wedding attendants were first identified as "maid of honor" and "best man."

At royal and society weddings, six or eight bridesmaids were required to help carry the elaborate train of the bride's dress. Even at less flamboyant weddings, the weight of the bride's clothes dictated that at least one attendant help maneuver her gown, and of course, the bride also needed help getting into the drastic corsets that were in vogue

during the Victorian and Edwardian periods.

Then, as now, the maid of honor would help the bride with assembling the trousseau and planning the details of the wedding.

Bridesmaids are no longer needed to aid in the uncomfortable donning of the corset, and in most cases, the bride's train trails gracefully behind her as she walks down the aisle.

So, rather than serving as ladies in waiting, today's bridal attendants are chosen by the bride as special friends she wants to have standing with her on her momentous day.

The enormous floral arrangements that sometimes threatened to dwarf the Victorian bride have given way to smaller, more

refined bouquets, with the bride usually carrying an arrangement of her favorite flowers.

Men are also becoming much more involved in making the wedding plans. Gone are the days when the bride and her family automatically took charge of all the arrangements and decisions. From helping to choose a china pattern to picking the wedding site, the groom can now be involved in all aspects of the prewedding planning.

No matter what the setting chosen by the bride and groom, the freedom to design a wedding day that fulfills their idea of a dream come true will result in a happy and memorable day.

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