

Clerical couple to advocate advantages of interfaith unions

By Teresa A. Parsons

When an ecumenical marriage founders, people are bound to say that the difference in faiths was a factor.

When an ecumenical marriage lasts, as Brian and Lynne McNulty's has, the same people observe that they must be together in spite of their backgrounds.

In other words, ecumenical marriages are still viewed as problems rather than opportunities.

That is an attitude the Deacons McNulty politely dismiss.

"If you are having problems anyway, the difference (in faiths) is just one more thing to fight about," said Brian. "The reality is that two human beings are going to have different experiences and attitudes regardless of how they were brought up.

"When you are involved in an ecumenical marriage, you end up having to answer all the difficult questions about why you do things a certain way," he said. "To be challenged like that can be a great opportunity for growth."

"You become more well-informed and deeply attached to your own tradition," Lynne added.

So deeply attached are the McNultys to their respective traditions that last June they became among the first husband-and-wife deacon teams in the country. On June 7, Brian McNulty, 36, was ordained to the permanent diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church and assigned to St. Augustine's Parish, Rochester. Several weeks later, Lynne, 38, was ordained to the Episcopal diaconate and assigned to St. Stephen's Parish across the street.

They reached their vocational decisions separately. "It's something that came to us as individuals, but which we pursued together," Lynne said. "I didn't talk him into it or vice versa."

Both studied for four years in basically the same program (the Episcopal diocese has no program of its own, so candidates participate in the Roman program). Brian will now serve a one-year internship, whereas Lynne will

serve for two. She is one of only two permanent deacons in the Episcopal diocese. "Most people go on to become priests," she said.

Although she considered the priesthood, Lynne discovered that she was attracted to the particular role of a deacon. During several years in the seminary, Brian also considered priesthood, but chose marriage, fatherhood and the diaconate instead.

"A priest is more a parish administrator. For a deacon, the door is left open to interpret the needs of the world to the Church and the needs of the Church to the world. They are not tied into those other duties," Lynne explained. "One of the big needs I see in the Church today is for clergy to be outside the door, not inside."

Each of them is committed to 10 to 15 hours of church work per week. Their duties and privileges are similar. Both visit the sick, preach, teach, assist at liturgies, and preside at funerals, baptisms and weddings. Both also serve on ecumenical commissions. But they hope to focus their team ministry on supporting ecumenical marriages, from pre-nuptial preparation to the golden anniversary.

Among their first projects is a presentation they will give at an Anglican/Roman Catholic Conference Wednesday, October 22, on "Preparing and Caring for Ecumenical Marriages."

According to the McNultys, such marriages are neither prepared for nor cared for systematically in either of their two denominations.

In fact, Lynne termed interfaith marriage preparation "abysmal," and ongoing support for couples after marriage "nonexistent."

"You're going along, doing all right as a couple, and then you stick out your hands together and say 'What do we do now?,' and there's nobody there to grab onto," she said.

Since they were married 15 years ago, the McNultys admit, most churches' attitudes toward "mixed marriage" have come a long way. One reason is that interfaith marriages

Continued on Page 5



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Brian and Lynne McNulty not only share their lives in marriage but also in ministry. Brian is a deacon in the Roman Catholic Church, and Lynne is a deacon in the Episcopal Church.

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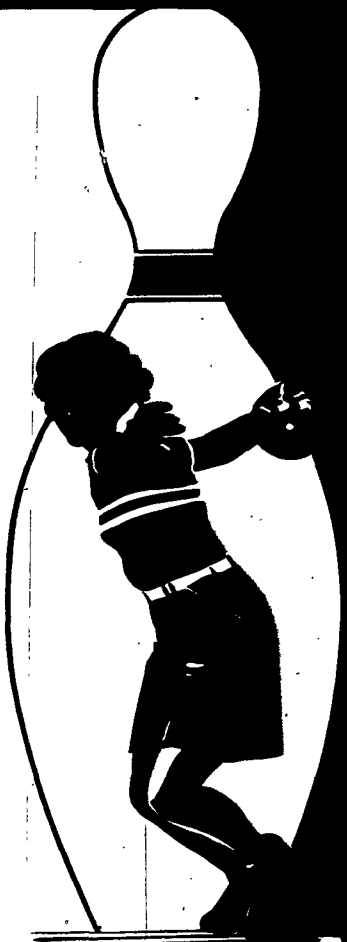
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