



Stephanie Batterman, a parishioner at Fairport's Church of the Assumption, and her husband Dean, a member of Penfield's Faith Lutheran Church, sit with their dog Gypsy in their Fairport home.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Ecumenical couples gaining greater, but not total, acceptance from church

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

In the small Maine town where Stephanie Batterman grew up, the notion of her marrying a non-Catholic never even crossed the minds of other people.

"Little old ladies in my parish were always picking me out for their son," laughed Stephanie.

Imagine their astonishment when they learned that she had become engaged to a Lutheran, of all people. Included on that list of surprised parishioners were Stephanie's own parents.

Her family did not give her too much grief, however, "because they had met Dean — and also because they thought he was going to become Catholic." The thought of converting was also on the mind of Stephanie's priest, who asked the couple on the night before their wedding if Dean planned to do so.

Stephanie replied, "This man is a good Christian and a good Lutheran, and I've dated a lot of bad Catholics!"

In other words, Stephanie felt that the issue was not much of an issue at all. And 28 years later, Dean Batterman now practices the religion he grew up with at Penfield's Faith Lutheran Church. Meanwhile, Stephanie does likewise as a

parishioner at Fairport's Church of the Assumption.

The Battersmans, who reside in Fairport, have never found their relationship to be hindered because of differing religious beliefs. In fact, they believe that each spouse's faith has deepened because of their situation.

"It makes you think about what's important," commented Dean. He added that rather than choose one faith over the other, he and Stephanie "help each down the path each has chosen."

Ecumenical marriages are increasingly commonplace today, observed Karen Rinefierd, who serves as diocesan consultant on family faith formation. Rinefierd, also a marriage-preparation team member at Pittsford's Church of the Transfiguration, estimates that 30 to 50 percent of married couples at her parish have differing faith backgrounds.

"One thing parishes are going to have to deal with is sensitivity to the non-Catholic," remarked Barbara Carroll, diocesan coordinator for sacramental catechesis.

Father Robert Kennedy, assistant professor of liturgical studies at St. Bernard's Institute in Rochester, notes that this trend is a far cry from 1946, when the marriage of his

Catholic father and Presbyterian mother was performed in a Catholic parish's rectory.

"At that point there was no consideration about being married in the church at all," Father Kennedy remarked.

By the time his sister married a non-Catholic in 1980, Father Kennedy noted, their ceremony was conducted in a Catholic church and included a Mass.

"We're in a generation where we can make a more open expression," said Father Kennedy.

Yet even with this comparatively tolerant mind-set, people who choose to remain in a non-Catholic faith — even those who are Christians — are still not allowed to take Eucharist in a Catholic church.

"The most difficult part is not being able to go to Communion together," acknowledged Stephanie Batterman. "If receiving Eucharist is a sign of being Christian and both of us are doing that, it's hard for me to understand why we can't do it together."

Carol Vyverberg, who attends Greece's Bethany Presbyterian Church, has also grappled frequently with this issue since her husband, Martin, comes from a large Catholic family (he became Presbyterian at the time they were married in 1962).

Vyverberg said the Catholic

Church's ruling is perplexing because her own faith permits Christians of all denominations to receive Eucharist.

"I've been going to Catholic churches for many, many years and it's been clear that if I'm not Catholic I cannot go for Eucharist," Vyverberg commented. "It's a feeling of not measuring up somehow — that's how it comes down. When I've gone to Mass for the purpose of having a spiritual experience with family or close friends, I want to be a part of it."

Another Catholic directive that can put a strain on an ecumenical marriage is that the Catholic spouse must promise "to do all in his/her power to give the children the Catholic faith, including baptism," according to diocesan marriage-preparation guidelines.

Although the Battersmans' three daughters were all raised Catholic, one is now married to a Presbyterian and another is engaged to a Southern Baptist. Whether her daughters choose to remain Catholic or raise their children in that faith, Stephanie believes, should be up to them.

At the same time, Dean acknowledged, the "children issue would be different" if the married couple consists of a Christian and non-Christian.

Among Christians, meanwhile, Stephanie asserted that theological divisions — some so severe that they can even provoke wars — must stop tearing people apart.

"Look at Northern Ireland, for crying out loud," she commented.

Following Jesus' example should be the top priority for both Catholics and Protestants, her husband added.

"We do call it Christianity," he concluded.

Europe's Catholics divorce, but ignore church annulments

By Agostino Bono
Catholic News Service

ROME — While many European Catholics seek civil divorces, few seek an annulment.

The result is Catholics relegating themselves to the margins of church life rather than seeking an ecclesial legal remedy.

Although no statistics are available, the situation is worrisome to church officials trying to deal with the pastoral situation. They say the reluctance stems from misconceptions and fears about the church process.

"There is a rooted opinion that it is not possible to have a solution to a bad marriage in the church," said Henry Degen, a permanent deacon and marriage tribunal judge in the Diocese of Hertogenbosch, Netherlands.

Some people believe that you have to blame your spouse or "be absolutely crazy or totally impotent to get an annulment," he said.

Church authorities are quick to note that a good portion of divorced and remarried Catholics do not use church courts because they have stopped going to church.

But the recent controversy surrounding reception of Communion by Catholics in unapproved second marriages shows that there is a significant number of remarried Catholics who want to have both feet in the church and yet have not used church courts. Many of these Catholics either want to go to Communion or de facto do it despite its prohibition. Catholic officials in several European countries have said.

In Europe, only 10,956 annulment cases were introduced in 1992, while the Catholic population was 288 million. In the United States, with a Catholic population of slightly more than 55 million during the same year, there were 47,071 annulment cases introduced.

In the Netherlands, about 10 percent of the estimated 10,000 yearly divorces involving Catholics end up in a church court.

Church officials say misconceptions include that the annulment process is expensive and lengthy.

A church annulment declares that the marriage never took place because all the conditions for a Catholic marriage — such as free consent or desire to have children — were not present in at least one of the spouses at the time of the wedding ceremony.

An annulment also means that the parties re-

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