

COLUMNISTS

Mixed marriages can lead to conversion

Ecumenical and interfaith marriages are on the rise, as are conversions of one spouse to the other's faith community. What are the reasons people convert?

Researchers at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., who are presently studying interfaith marriages, identify six factors for conversion:

1. Keeping peace with an extended family.
2. Desiring the unity that comes from worshipping together.
3. Preserving unity that strengthens a family.
4. Wanting peace of mind for children.
5. Liking a particular church.
6. Seeking sound religious teaching.

It is helpful to hear the reasons people give for converting to the Catholic Church. For, while in many mixed-marriages neither spouse will ever convert and each will need to respect the other's faith, none of us in Catholic parishes wants to serve as an obstacle to a non-Catholic spouse who may one day join us as a member.

Researchers are finding that many couples deeply cherish an extended fam-



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BY FATHER EUGENE HEMRICK

ily and want to preserve it at all costs. One man told interviewers that his wife's sister converted to Catholicism to remove a "bone of contention" with her husband's family, which was strongly Catholic.

Interestingly, the value of staying closely connected with relatives is strong enough to cause a radical change in one's worshipping habits.

Married couples cherish togetherness. With some frequency, one spouse will convert to the other's faith community to keep this bonding alive and well.

One woman interviewed attributes her conversion to the principle: "In uni-

ty there is strength. ... Families have a lot of problems, and if you are split by religion you only create more problems."

Spouses also feel that unity in religion is important to the well-being of children for much the same reason, that is, there are enough other things to mix them up without adding religion to the list.

In addition to family concerns, a warm welcoming church community plays a role in conversions. One Catholic convert liked the inclusiveness in the parish she joined. In her former church she said she felt like running to the car and leaving the parking lot as soon as possible.

Converts tell us that church teachings that are founded on good authority, are credible and are presented clearly as a factor in conversions.

Parishes can learn a number of lessons from these findings. Catholic couples can be made aware of the growing number of ecumenical and interfaith couples sitting in the pews next to them. It might be explained that there is a good chance that one of those spouses will convert to the other's faith community. The welcome given them will play a role in this.

Parishes might want to construct a precautionary list of "don'ts" to make sure a positive warm atmosphere is created and people are not made to feel like running to the car and making a quick exit from the parking lot.

In addition, ecumenical and interfaith couples who prepare for marriage need to fully reflect on their extended family's influence, their future need for unity as a couple and the role of religion in their children's lives. These issues need to be addressed in depth before marriage.

Finally, parish councils need to work together with priests and deacons to review the role of homilies, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and adult education in all of this.

When we sum up the reasons for converting, unity stands out above all others. Thanks to current research, we have a better picture of the elements that create unity and their relation to the conversion process.

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Father Hemrick is director of diocesan relations at the Catholic University of America.

Poor catechesis produces liturgical sloppiness

St. Somebody's Church, Anywhere, U.S.A., on a typical Sunday morning. The church building itself, though uninspired architecturally, is neat and clean. Fresh flowers adorn the sanctuary. But then Mass begins ...

The celebrant is vested in a chasuble devoid of Christian symbols and constructed of materials that would not be out of place in the drapery department of the local Wal-Mart.

There are two altar servers. One's cassock is too short; the other's is too long. Beneath the short cassock, a pair of well-worn Nikes are clearly visible. Atop the long cassock is an unironed surplice, askew. One server's hair had last seen a comb the previous week.

When crossing the sanctuary (never in tandem), the servers manage a brief, perfunctory head bob at the tabernacle. The servers are also unsure of what to do with their hands; they have never been instructed to fold them, fingers erect, before their chests.

The lector is dressed in a Ban-Lon sports shirt and an ancient tweed jacket. He mumbles the readings, mispronouncing names and places.

The cantor is devoid of a jacket, and appears in an oxford shirt without tie, buttoned at the neck. The congregation is similarly decked out in informal gear.

At the creed, four members of the as-



the
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difference

BY GEORGE WEIGEL

sembly bow (as instructed by the rubrics) at the words that constitute the core of the Christian confession: "by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary ..." The rest of the congregation grinds on.

A family presents the offertory gifts. After the gifts are received by the celebrant, the father bows, the mother genuflects, and their child, confused, wanders back to the family pew alone.

The eucharistic ministers are unvested liturgically. One wears a skirt that ends an inch and a half above the knee. Another wears a leisure suit.

Ninety percent of the congregation receives holy Communion in the hand. Most take the host from the eucharistic minister and immediately start back to their pews, consuming the host en route, somewhat in the manner of a snack.

The last third of the church empties during the singing of the recessional hymn.

Observing these people with a neutral, empirical eye, an anthropologist wholly unfamiliar with Catholic ritual might easily conclude that they don't take what they're doing very seriously. They dress as they would not imagine dressing at the office, or at a dinner party. They exhibit no sense of formality in their movements or posture. Their children tend toward the unkempt. The rite concluded, there is a rush toward the exits.

That neutral anthropologist would, in fact, be wrong. The people of St. Somebody's (a composite based on my experiences around the country) take what they do on Sunday morning quite seriously; that's why they're there.

The problem with St. Somebody's is not a lack of devotion or religious purpose. The problem is sloppiness. And the chief culprit in fostering that sloppiness is a misunderstanding of liturgical theology, carried into our congregations by a misinterpretation of Vatican II's liturgical reforms.

The liturgy is not, primarily, our action: It is primarily God's action, in which we participate. The chief protagonist of the Eucharist is Jesus Christ, the true and eternal high priest, offering

himself in sacrifice to the Father and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, offering himself as life-giving food to his baptized and consecrated people.

The liturgical reform never intended to replace the divine action at the heart of the liturgy with a kind of user-friendly suburban religious jamboree. Rather, liturgical reform was to foster what the Council Fathers called the "full, conscious, and active participation" of the congregation in a divine work — a work with its own intrinsic structure, in which we are privileged to participate, but which is not ours to reinvent at will.

Our neutral anthropologist would miss the remarkable piety of our people. But he would not be amiss in concluding that many Catholics in America are liturgical slobbers. And the reason for that is not the ubiquitous, oppressive informality of our culture, but a failure to communicate the theological foundations of liturgical action.

Thirty-two years after the altars were turned around and the vernacular was introduced into our worship, isn't it time to catechize the church in America as to what all this is supposed to be about?

...
George Weigel is a senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

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