

Getting Married

This article, written by the late Fr John Coventry S.J., one of the co-founders of the Association of Interchurch Families, addresses a number of general considerations that couples from different church traditions might wish to consider before getting married. In particular it discusses the "Promise" that Catholic partners are required to make when marrying someone who is not also a baptised Roman Catholic. The article was written after the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales had promulgated their Revised Directory on Mixed Marriages in April 1990.

These paragraphs presuppose a marriage between a Roman Catholic and a member of another Christian Church. A lot of the processes to be gone through in order to get married only make sense in the light of being married: the responsibilities the couple will have to each other precisely as Christians of different Churches; the steadily developing responsibilities they will have to their children; their responsibilities to their families and their Churches; their opportunity to develop a spiritual union with each other at the deepest levels; their opportunity of creating their own Christian union in their marriage; their opportunities for uniting their Churches. They won't be able to start with a blueprint for the future; this will develop out of their experience of being married. And so they need as far as possible to keep their minds and their options open. But they do have to start somewhere.

First steps

First of all, it is best to think, and read, and talk together a lot. It is best to do this before approaching clergy of either Church, so that when you do this you already know a good deal about your aims and the meaning of any steps that have to be taken to fulfil them. There are bound to be new ideas to get used to, and you must get beyond being defensive with each other. A marriage belongs wholly to both partners all the way through.

The next step will be to approach the clergy, in order to make arrangements. Which clergy? Well, why not both, even if you have already decided in which Church you would like the marriage to take place? This is part of each taking the other seriously as a Christian. It may be that the Catholic is a far less committed and developed Christian than the other. It may be the other way round. If so, the Catholic should not make the mistake of having it all his or her own way and taking charge of the religious side of the marriage. And Catholics are a bit inclined to do this. But that is not love, and it does not make for a Christian marriage, which can only be created by both partners. So I would say to the Catholic, forget about your partner becoming a Catholic; if your husband or wife ever does that, it will be because through you they will have found in the Catholic Church what they need. Here is your chance to help your partner to be a better Anglican or Protestant, and for him or her to make you a better Catholic. There will be far more in either of you than meets the eye. Love develops the other by giving; it does not possess. So shed your hang-ups and set about creating each other in the image and likeness of God.

The next steps may well concern the two families. One or both families may in varying degrees be

hostile to the marriage on religious grounds. It would be wrong for the couple simply to go it alone. You are each part of your own family and are about to become part of two. You will need them and you are part of their fulfilment, so it is worth a good deal of effort to reconcile them to your marriage. But don't let them pull you apart! Don't let them get you tearing each other's eyes out, when left to yourselves you could sort everything out. At the end of the day you may have to put your own union and your own lives first, and to work for reconciliation on a longer term. Families nearly always come round when the couple are seen to be quietly united already. You may have to let one or other family let off some steam, and so get rid of a feeling of being threatened, without letting it upset you. It is often a help to get sympathetic clergy of your own Church, who know your family, to help you in reconciling them.

So parental opposition can be one of those many instances in two-church marriage where what starts out as an obstacle and a problem turns into a creative opportunity; in reconciling families to the marriage you are to some extent, through them, reconciling your two Churches.

Permission to marry and the 'promise'

As was said at the beginning, I am presupposing a marriage between two Christians, one of whom is a Roman Catholic. And the Roman Catholic Church has some rules which need to be explained and understood. A Church is a human society, even if it is also the Body of Christ, and human societies have laws or rules to support and express what they value, and to hold them together as human communities. Rules, and the ideas on which they are based, are not the same thing and should not be confused with each other. The Catholic Church may change its ideas and so change its rules. But there will be other, more basic, ideas and values which it cannot change; they are part and parcel of what it is; they are understood as God's revelation and his will. But even in these cases the Church could convey its ideas simply by teaching; it does not have to have a rule of action, and if it does, the Church can change one rule of action for a better one, to express the same idea. The permission a Catholic needs to marry another baptised Christian is a matter of this kind.

The Catholic Church believes itself to be not just one Church among others, but central to God's plan of salvation: a centre of God's self-gift and teaching, the Church that expresses the full idea of what God's Church should strive to be. Part of what being a Catholic means is to share this conviction.

The Catholic Church does in fact express this conviction in the form of a rule of action, by

requiring the Catholic to get permission to marry a Christian of another Church. The Church does not have to have such a rule, and could abolish it, if that seemed best. It serves to make a Catholic entering upon a two-church marriage face up seriously and from the outset to the responsibilities of this sort of marriage. But it is important to realise that it is not some arbitrary way of being difficult about two-church marriage; it seeks to bring out into the open a particular idea of the Church.

The parish priest in England or Wales can now grant this permission, or the dean in the absence of the parish priest. But he cannot refuse it. If for some reason he thinks a couple, otherwise free to marry, are not in the right frame of mind, he has to refer the question of granting permission to the bishop.

For the parish priest to be able to grant the permission the Catholic has to make a two-fold 'promise'. This is another case of a rule which the Catholic Church could change (and has in fact changed in some respects in recent years). As has been said, the convictions on which the 'promise' is based are not changeable by the Church. But it is for the Church to decide whether to ask a Catholic about to enter a two-church marriage to express in formal terms his or her already existing conviction; and if the Church does do this, then the Church can decide what sort of formal expression in words is appropriate.

The other partner does not have to make any form of promise. He or she has to be told of the undertaking the Catholic gives, and have it explained to avoid misunderstandings. As far as the mere law goes, in order that the permission should be granted the non-Catholic partner does not have to state or indicate a position, or, indeed, to show any reaction at all. The Catholic Church is not making rules for what those who are not Catholics should do. But in the more personal and pastoral setting of preparation for marriage, as opposed to legal requirements, it is reasonable for the priest, if he is able to offer any help, to discuss the situation with both partners.

Most other Churches do not require their members to get permission to enter a two-church marriage, or any form of promise. This does not mean that they do not mind whom their members marry. Catholics would be wrong to think that. But, conversely, other Christians would be wrong to think that the Catholic Church is introducing unfair moral pressure at this point; permission and 'promise' are intended, as has been said, to bring out into the open a particular idea of the Church.

The form of words that the Roman Catholic bishops of England and Wales have decided upon for the two-fold '**promise**' is as follows:

'I declare that I am ready to uphold my Catholic faith and to avoid all dangers of falling away from it. Moreover, I sincerely undertake that I will do all that I can within the unity of our partnership to have all the children of our marriage baptised and brought up in the Catholic Church.'

(The Catholic partner may choose either to sign this declaration, or to make it verbally to the priest who is arranging the marriage.)

The first point to notice is that the formula has two parts. The first part, the declaration of readiness to preserve one's Catholic faith, is clear, and does not

normally cause any difficulty to either partner. Marrying another committed Christian can, of course, be a great help to one's faith.

The second point to notice about the formula is that, though it is elsewhere described by Canon Law and by the bishops in their Directory as a promise, the actual word 'promise' does not occur in the wording. That is why 'promise' has so far been put in inverted commas. It is a word with rather too hard edges in English.

The third point to notice is perhaps the most important of all, namely that the *content* of the 'promise' was changed by the Pope's Letter of 1970: the Catholic does not give an undertaking that his or her children will be baptised and brought up as Catholics, as had to be done in the past, and as the word 'promise' might still suggest. He or she undertakes to 'do all that I can within the unity of our partnership' to bring this about. The bishops clarify this wording as follows: 'that is to say, all one can do in the actual circumstances of the marriage, without jeopardising the marriage (i.e. putting it at risk), within the unity of the marriage'. Thus they banish the idea of the Catholic using unfair moral pressure to satisfy his or her conscience at the expense of the conscientious position and rights of the other partner, or at risk to the growth into unity of the marriage. What it will be in the power of the Catholic partner to do about the children's baptism and upbringing in the actual future will depend, not simply on the attitude of the other partner, but on the ability of both to grow in mutual understanding and Christian love.

Some other committed Christians may think it is their duty in conscience to bring up their children in their own Christian tradition, but others may not feel so strongly about bringing them up in their own Church, so long as they are brought up as Christians. In this latter case there is a certain imbalance built into the situation which has to be faced. The Catholic will not be creating an imbalance or putting in an unfair bid for the children; he or she will be bringing out into the open an imbalance which is already there. It can be seen as another expression of the self-understanding of the Catholic Church. Both partners will have to face this situation and decide by degrees how they are going to live it. But the imbalance should not be exaggerated. Once married, the two are on an equal footing: each partner is in conscience impelled to share with their children as fully as possible the truth as that partner sees it. What is vitally important is that husband and wife should have a deep sense of equality within the marriage.

The fourth important point to notice is that the 'promise' does not require the couple to have decided what they are going to do about the baptism of their children in advance of their marriage. They may well feel that they need to grow into unity within their marriage first, and reach an eventual decision by that route. It is not a requirement for getting the permission to marry that they should have decided beforehand. The priest helping the engaged couple would be right to get them to talk about this question, but he cannot make a decision on the issue a condition for granting the permission.

With the air cleared and the ground prepared, the serious sharing of ideas and purposes between the couple can now begin. The Catholic partner must, obviously, be sincere about doing all he or she can

to fulfil the undertaking. But the bishops guide the Catholic who in practice finds that in *this* marriage it is not possible to carry out the undertaking fully. They write as follows in the Revised Directory on mixed marriages, called simply *Mixed Marriages*, CTS 1990:

'Where the children, despite all the Catholic's efforts, are baptised and being educated in the faith of the partner, the promise made by the Catholic still has meaning. It demands that the Catholic partner: (i) intends to play an active part in the Christian life of the marriage and the family; (ii) will do all that he or she can in the actual circumstances of the marriage to draw the children to the Catholic faith; (iii) will deepen his or her faith in continuing to study it, so as to have a fruitful dialogue with the partner on matters of faith, and be able to answer the questions of the children; (iv) will pray with the family, especially asking the grace of unity, as Our Lord willed it.'

The 'form' of marriage

Here again we have a Catholic rule which the Catholic Church could modify or abolish, if this seemed best. The rule is that, for the marriage to be recognised by the Catholic Church as a true marriage, it must take place before an authorised priest (or deacon) and two witnesses. This, then, is a law about what is called the legal 'form' of marriage. The origins and history of this rule are too complicated to explain here. It goes back to the time, before the rise of modern states in Europe, when there was no civil law of marriage; the Church had the responsibility of protecting marriage by her own laws. A few points of explanation may help.

(a) The rule arises from putting two facts together. The first is that the ministers of marriage as a sacrament are the baptised couple themselves, and not the priest who officiates; the second is that marriage is not simply an event between the couple, but gives them status and responsibilities in society. Hence the rule about marrying before a priest and two witnesses, the priest being the official witness of the Church. Without this rule a couple would be truly married if they simply exchanged vows in secret, but there would be no evidence for others of their status and responsibilities.

(b) So the rule did not arise because of mixed marriages, though it has some effects on them. It was not introduced to put pressure on mixed marriages, but to prevent secret ones.

(c) It says nothing about the place where the marriage is to be celebrated. It is the law of the land which says that marriages must take place in buildings registered for the purpose. So it is not true (as is sometimes said) that the Catholic Church forces her members to be married in a Catholic church. The Catholic rule would be kept if the couple married before a Catholic priest in an Anglican or Protestant church, but the law of the land and of the other Churches puts obstacles in the way of that.

Because this is a law which the Church could abolish, she can and does dispense from it for serious reasons. And in England and Wales this dispensation is now often given, to enable the marriage to take place in the church of the other partner according to the rite of that church. A good reason for dispensation would exist if a practising Anglican girl were marrying a Catholic man, and

both wanted to be married in the bride's church. This not only fits in with social custom; it fits in with the meaning of the marriage ceremony. In this, the bridegroom represents Christ and the bride represents the Church: marriage exemplifies and is a means of bringing about the union of Christ with his Church, that is, the people he draws in love to himself.

This dispensation still has to be obtained (by the priest who is fixing things up) from the bishop of the place where the Catholic lives; bishops want to keep track of how frequent requests are, and what reasons are advanced. It is different, then, from the permission to marry someone who is not a Catholic, explained above, which can now be given by the parish priest.

The marriage ceremony

A practising Catholic, being married in a Catholic church, would normally want a Nuptial Mass. And this has been allowed for marriages with baptised Christians of other Churches in this country for some years.

But the matter needs a great deal more thought.

Most people only get married once and every detail of their wedding means a great deal to them. So since the Catholic in the case we are considering is already having the wedding in his or her church, he (she) has to take extra care that his (her) partner is really made to feel that the wedding belongs to both of them, and to both their families. For a marriage is the beginning of a union of two families, not just of two people.

For many other Christians it would be strange to have a wedding in the middle of a eucharistic service at all. So the first thing the couple would have to ensure is that having a Nuptial Mass is not going to seem to the other side like a Catholic take-over that partly excludes them.

More serious is the question of Holy Communion. Marriage is above all a sacrament of union, and it seems to many that a totally jarring note would be brought into the wedding if one of the couple received Communion and the other did not; this would be a great imbalance and a painful separation at the very celebration of union. Even if the other partner were allowed to receive Communion, that would still not solve the problem, unless the permission embraced that partner's family - otherwise one family and their friends who were Catholics would be receiving, and the rest not.

There are, then, strong reasons why it is better not to have a Nuptial Mass in a two-church wedding. But, as always, the couple must decide about it together.

The new Catholic rite of marriage lends itself to a good deal of participation by others present apart from the officiating priest, whether the marriage is mixed or not. If a two-church couple are marrying in a Catholic church, that is a good reason for giving a large share to the other family. Relatives can be drawn in to read the readings, and to lead the responsorial psalm and the bidding prayers; a minister of the other Church can be asked to give the address, to add prayers of his own for the bride and bridegroom and to give a blessing.

There is nothing to be lost, and everything to be gained, by each being sensitive to the religious

needs the other partner; a wedding can then be an expression before all who are present of what the couple are going to attempt in life. A two-church couple cannot solve the problems arising from the division of the Churches - rather are they the chief sufferers from that division. But many a couple has found that what at first looked like problems and obstacles have become opportunities for deepening their sensitivity to each other and deepening their Christian union. There is a basic unity already

existing between all Christians, a unity given by Christ himself. A two-church couple can bring that unity to fuller and fuller realisation in their own lives, and so be a striking sign to their two Churches of the unity these Churches are still seeking. There is only one way in which couples or Churches can eventually become one and that is by each being more and more united with Christ.