

# MARRIAGE:

**Catholic or Mixed?**

**Protestant and Catholic Relations Frankly Discussed**

By REV. JOHN A. O'BRIEN

“Why does the Catholic Church forbid her members to marry persons outside her fold? In our country, where religious tolerance is so necessary and should be encouraged in every way possible, is not the ruling of your Church on this subject narrow-minded and apt to breed intolerance? It builds up needless barriers between our citizens. It isolates them into clannish groups and prevents their free assimilation into a unified citizenry, so essential for the well-being of such a country as ours, which is composed of people of every race and of every faith.”

Such was the view recently expressed to the writer by a non-Catholic friend. His words reflect a sentiment common among our separated brethren. In proceeding to answer the criticism, let us first assure our dear non-Catholic readers that we agree heartily with them upon the necessity not merely of tolerance, but even of friendliness and good will, throughout the whole vast domain of our common civic relationships. To discriminate against a person in business or politics simply because of a difference in religion or in race is indeed un-Australian.\* We Catholics, who have been among the chief victims of such discrimination, will be the last people in the world to defend bigotry in any of its forms. Whether those forms be racial or religious, they are all alike—ugly, un-Australian and un-Catholic—and merit our unqualified condemnation.

## **Idea of Tolerance Pushed Too Far.**

The idea of tolerance, however, can be pushed too far. It can be intruded into domains where it has no relevance. Thus to the query, “What is the sum of two and three?” no one would expect the teacher to smile as benignly and as friendly upon the response, “ninety-seven” as upon the answer “five”. Why? Because truth has rights which error does not possess. Tolerance does not mean that people cannot hold certain principles to be true and others to be false without being guilty of narrow-mindedness.

Thus Catholics believe that the doctrines taught by Christ and promulgated by the Church which He founded are correct. They believe that all doctrines which contradict anything in the deposit of divine revelation are wrong. But they do not carry their disagreements on matters of religious belief into the altogether disparate field of business or politics, and discriminate in these fields against those with whom they differ on religious grounds. To do so would be intolerance, bigotry and fanaticism; it would go counter to the whole spirit of the Catholic Church and to everything for which she stands.

## **Why the Church Opposes Mixed Marriages.**

Having thus cleared the way, we can now come to grips with the real problem: Why does the Church oppose mixed marriages? She does so not because she is lacking in high esteem for non-Catholics nor because she is indifferent to their happiness. It is precisely because she loves non-Catholics, children of the same Heavenly Father as we, and because she is as solicitous for their happiness and welfare as she is for that of her own children that she bids them to marry those of their own faith and bids Catholics to do likewise. From long experience she knows that marriages between persons sincerely attached to different religious faiths contain elements of danger to the happiness of both parties and to the stability of their union.

The Church speaks in this matter not from the experience of but one generation or of one country, but from many centuries of experience in all the countries of the world. Reason and common sense testify that where there is a difference on one of the most important matters in life, there is a subtle line of cleavage which should not be present in a union that is meant to be the most intimate that human beings can ever contract on this earth—a union of heart, mind, and soul, a union of aspirations and of prayer.

*\*[For ‘un-Australian’ you can read ‘un-American’, or ‘un-British’, or ‘un’ whatever country that truly values its countrymen. It certainly means Discrimination is un-Catholic, as it is opposed to the principles of Christ, Our Lord.]*

Then, too, it must be remembered that the Church, mindful of the obligation imposed on her by her divine Founder of safeguarding the faith of her children and of her children's children, is deeply concerned over their entering for life into an atmosphere likely to damage or at least chill their faith. It is because such marriages frequently lead to religious indifference on the part of the parents and to the neglect of the religious up-rearing of the offspring that the Church forbids them. In her eyes the greatest treasure in life is the deposit of religious truth given to mankind by Jesus Christ; it is the pearl of great price. She would rather suffer death a thousand times than to deny that faith or to betray her trust; no consideration of wealth or social preferment or political influence could ever recompense for the loss of faith in even one of her children.

### **The Church—A True Mother.**

With this profound faith in the supreme value of the religion of Jesus Christ, and with a keen consciousness of her divinely appointed duty of safeguarding that deposit of truth in all its integrity for all generations of men, is it not natural that she would warn against any and every danger threatening the faith of her children? She would not be a faithful mother if she did not exhaust every ingenuity to remove any condition menacing her children's birthright. Must not our fair-minded citizens of other faiths then be prompted to sentiments of admiration for the Church's ceaseless policy of protecting her children from serious dangers to their faith—a policy which is alone consistent with her belief in its supreme value?

“But if the Catholic religion is the true religion, as a Catholic believes it is, then why should there be any danger of his losing his faith from association in marriage with a non-Catholic? Does this not imply a lack of conviction in the intrinsic strength of the credentials of the Catholic faith? It shows that the Catholic religion needs a hothouse atmosphere, from which blasts from the outside are carefully excluded, to preserve it intact.” Such is the objection which some of our non-Catholic readers may feel inclined at this point to interject.

The objection overlooks the fact, however, that men and women are not mere machines for logical reasoning but are flesh and blood, influenced by emotions and feelings as much perhaps as by intellectual considerations. Take a young man, for instance, who has the conviction that the moral law should be obeyed; it is a conviction well grounded in reason. Place him in an environment where temptation assails him on every side: vice clothed in the beguiling garb of beauty intrigues his imagination, stirs his emotions, inflames his passions. He is like a reed shaken by the wind. No person of experience will question the powerful influence of daily environment upon any human being. Because the Church recognizes this fact she strives to safeguard her children from lifelong residence in surroundings uncongenial to their religious faith.

Then, too, owing to the lack of religious instruction in school and in the home, many of her children are not properly grounded in their faith. In consequence, unfavourable criticism, ridicule, social pressure, political discrimination and many other extraneous considerations prompt them to sell their birthright for a mess of pottage.

### **Effect on Children.**

The influence of the home environment is probably most marked in the case of the children. With the spectacle of a division in religious creed among their own parents, it is indeed difficult to develop a strong, robust faith in the offspring. How natural it is then for the child who has grown up in such a divided home to say: “If my own parents cannot agree as to which is the true religion, how can I?” Even when the non-Catholic father goes to no church and honestly tries to encourage the children to practise the faith of their Catholic mother, he is working against great odds. Example is more powerful than precept. If the latter does not square with example, it is likely to be of little value, as the following incident illustrates.

In a home where the non-Catholic father strove to fulfil the promise he made at the time of his marriage to see that the children were reared in the Catholic faith, there was every outward appearance of success crowning his efforts. On Sunday morning the father prided himself on the regularity with which he called the children and saw that they went to Mass with their mother. He himself remained at home reading the worldling's bible—the Sunday newspaper. In such an environment, where the paternal example is at right angles with the precept, the children grew to maturity.

Finally, on one Sunday morning when he called his son for Mass, the latter refused to arise. Astonished, the father

said to him:

“Why, what does this mean? Have I not trained you from early youth to attend to your religious duties? Why are you not going today the same as on other Sundays?”

“Father,” replied the son, “you have always called me and told me to go, but you have never gone yourself. I am no child any longer. I am a man. And I figure that if you don’t have to go, neither do I”

The logic of his contention the father could not deny. Little had he realized that his own example was undermining the foundations of the faith he was seeking by precept alone to build for his child. Thus in every home where there is a division of religious faith, the force of parental example is fashioning slowly but surely its tangled imprint upon the impressionable mind and memory of the children—an imprint they will carry with them to their dying day.

### **Influence of Example.**

As this point is crucial in securing a correct understanding as to why the Church does not consider a mixed marriage as the ideal, let us present one further illustration.

In a large city parish a class of little children had just been prepared to receive their First Holy Communion. The pastor had established the beautiful custom of having the parents kneel at the side of each child and receive their Eucharistic Lord along with their offspring. As he went along the rail, distributing the bread of angels to his young communicants and to their proud parents, he could not wholly close his eyes to the beauty, innocence and happiness radiating from the upturned faces of the little children. Then of a sudden he came upon one, a little girl of eight, whose reddened eyes and saddened face contrasted sharply with the holy joy mantling the countenances of her school-mates.

On one side the mother was kneeling. But on the other there was . . . a vacancy. Thinking that some foolish scruple was disturbing her, the priest bent low and said: “Don’t worry, my dear child, Jesus will comfort and bless you.”

Then after placing upon her tongue the heavenly manna, he whispered: “Come into the sacristy for a moment after the Mass.” When later she appeared with her mother, the secret came out.

Apparelled in her dress of white, with a wreath of flowers upon her brow and the smile on her face mirroring the joy in her heart, the little child, just before leaving for Mass, had turned to her father with the words:

“Won’t you please come with me, Daddy, and kneel near me when I make my First Holy Communion?”

“I don’t believe in such things,” the father had replied, and walked away.

If he had taken a dagger and plunged it into the heart of his little girl he could scarcely have broken her heart more completely. Taught by the sisters in school and by her mother that she would receive her Lord and Saviour in Holy Communion, the words of her father, not intended to hurt her, had actually stabbed her to the quick.

### **Influence of Home.**

Example does count. The influence of the home is more powerful than any school; for it teaches not by precept alone but by example as well. Parents are designed by God and nature to be the child’s most effective teachers. If there is disagreement on the matter of religion between these two teachers, it is difficult to see how the pupil can escape the penalty in the form, of religious confusion and bewilderment.

It is true that there are those who say: “Difference in religion need not affect the happiness of the family life, nor mar its unity.” If all such could have witnessed the crushing effect of the father’s words upon his little child they would realize that they are in a world of speculative theories and not in our actual world of flesh and blood, where the tears flow and hearts ache because a family is cut in twain by the sword of religious differences. Religion does count in the happiness of the family; it is a bond that unites or a sword that tends to separate. It touches the unity of the family at a crucial point. There are exceptions, of course, but they only prove the rule.

### **Mixed Marriages.**

“If the Church has a law forbidding mixed marriages, why does she grant so many dispensations therefrom, thus allowing such marriages to take place?” Such is a question often on the lips of our non-Catholic friends. While holding fast to the ideal of a Catholic marriage, the Church understands that the ideal is not capable of realization in every instance and under all circumstances. Her vast army of more than four hundred and thirty million members

[1962,] is scattered out among all the nations of the world.

In daily contact with such neighbours, surrounding us on every hand, the Church realizes that the occasional development of friendships and courtships leading to the marriage of a Catholic with a non-Catholic is in such an environment simply inevitable. She does not bury her head in the sand, ignoring unpleasant realities; she faces them honestly and squarely. She applies her laws in the light of actual conditions, having always in mind the welfare and happiness, temporal and eternal, of her children.

### **Dispensation Requirements.**

When circumstances prevent the attainment of the ideal, then the Church legislates to obtain the next best result. Rather than say to one of her children who, deeply in love with a non-Catholic, feels that her life's happiness is conditioned upon her marrying him, "You can never, under any circumstances, marry such a person," the Church follows a kindlier and more sympathetic policy. It is a policy which reflects the Church's twin solicitude for the promotion of human happiness and the preservation of the faith of her children. She grants a dispensation to such an individual for sufficient grounds, permitting her to marry a Protestant or a person unbaptized in any faith. This she does, however, only when she has been given assurances of the proper safeguarding of the faith of the Catholic party and of the children. [1962 Rule.]

These assurances are contained in the following promises which are signed by the non-Catholic party in the presence of two witnesses: "I, the undersigned, not a member of the Catholic Church, wishing to contract marriage with N. N., a member of the Catholic Church, intend to do so with the understanding that the marriage tie cannot be dissolved, except by death, and promise her on my word of honour, that she shall enjoy the free exercise of her Catholic religion, and that all the children of either sex born of this marriage, shall be baptized and educated in the faith and according to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. I further promise that no marriage ceremony other than that to be performed by the Catholic priest shall take place."

The Catholic party likewise signs the following promise: "I, the undersigned, a member of the Catholic Church, wishing to contract marriage with N. N., do hereby promise that I will have all my children baptized and educated in the Catholic religion, and that I will practise my religion faithfully and do all I can, especially by prayer, example and the frequentation of the sacraments, to bring about the conversion of my consort."

The Catholic party now declares that he is ready to remove dangers of falling away from the faith, and, under grave obligation, makes a sincere promise to do all in his power to have all the children baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church.

The non-Catholic party is absolutely informed of these promises made by the Catholic party, so that he is cognizant of the promise and obligation on the part of the Catholic. Both parties are clearly instructed on the ends and essential properties of Marriage, not to be excluded by either party. The dignity of marriage, and especially with regard to its principal characteristics, unity and indissolubility, is thus to be stressed.

### **Is It Narrow-minded?**

"Is it not narrow-minded and unreasonable for the Church to ask that all the children be reared in the Catholic faith? Would it not be fairer if the Church allowed the boys to be brought up in the faith of their father and the girls in that of the mother?" Such are questions frequently raised by non-Catholics. The answer: Underlying these questions is the assumption, commonly made by the non-Catholic, that all religions are about the same—equally good and equally true. On that assumption the Church's stand is one-sided. But that assumption is false.

Christ founded not many churches, but one Church. Catholics honestly believe that theirs is that Church. On the basis of actual fact and historical truth, the Church's policy is not unreasonable but, on the contrary, is the only one which demands for truth rights which error does not possess. If the Church were to compromise, actively allow some to be brought up outside her fold, she would be false to her divinely appointed mission of teaching to all mankind the truths taught by Christ. The Church is, therefore, under a divine obligation to protect the faith of her children and of her children's children. The Church not only believes in her divine origin and mission, but she has the courage to translate that belief into action.

For the same reason the Church finds herself obligated to require that the marriage be performed by a Catholic priest. To sanction the marriage of one of her children with a non-Catholic before a non-Catholic minister would mean that the Church was implicitly recognizing such a denomination, founded by a mere man, to be of equal validity with the Church established by Jesus Christ. This the Church could do only at the cost of her intellectual integrity. [The Church recognizes the validity (but not the lawfulness if no dispensation was granted) of mixed Marriages performed in the Oriental Orthodox Churches, who have maintained an authentic priesthood and believe that Marriage is one of Christ's Seven Sacraments. These Churches are effectively 'only' in schism as they acknowledge all Catholic truths except those surrounding the on-going role of Peter in the Church and Papal supremacy.]

Moreover, the Catholic Church regards marriage as a sacrament, while most non-Catholic ministers do not [except for the Oriental Orthodox Churches]. With no wish to hurt the feelings of our dear non-Catholic friends, the Church finds herself compelled by the clear conscience of her divine origin and of the mission divinely appointed unto her to give to error no more recognition than her divine Founder gave to it. [A marriage between two baptized persons, of whom one is a Catholic, while the other is a non-Catholic, may not licitly be contracted without the previous dispensation of the local bishop, since such a marriage is by its nature an obstacle to the full spiritual communion of the married parties. In all marriages between baptized persons the actual 'minister' of Marriage is the baptized spouses. (The majority of Protestant churches administer a valid Baptism.) However, without the proper dispensation, such a marriage is not licit as Pope Paul VI made clear.]

### **A Form of Treason.**

To place the churches founded by Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy and by Mrs. Aimee Semple MacPherson Hutton on the same plane as the Church founded by Christ, and to clothe them with the same authority, would be for her to commit the sin of apostasy. That is why the Church forbids her children to attempt to contract matrimony before the minister of an heretical sect. Those unworthy members who deliberately and wilfully violate that solemn law the Church punishes with excommunication. For they are guilty not only of grievous disobedience to the Church, but also of treason to the faith of Jesus Christ.

Catholics who attempt marriage before a civil officer, such as the justice of the peace, sin mortally and do not contract a valid religious marriage. They do not, however, incur the penalty of excommunication, because they have not committed the sin of apostasy or of treason to the faith. Since the *Ne Temere* decree of Pius X, which went into effect on Easter Sunday, 19 April, 1908, a Catholic can be validly married only before a Catholic priest. This legislation applies only to Catholics, as the Church does not legislate for non-Catholics as such. **CONTRARY TO A CHARGE FREQUENTLY MADE, THE CATHOLIC RECOGNIZES THE VALIDITY OF THE MARRIAGE OF PROTESTANTS CONTRACTED EITHER BEFORE THEIR OWN MINISTERS OR BEFORE A CIVIL OFFICER.**

"Is it not true that your Church, although ostensibly opposing mixed marriages, nevertheless grants a dispensation when sufficient money is offered for the same?"

Such is the notion existing among many of our separated friends. It is, however, without foundation. The Council of Trent decreed that marriage dispensations, if granted at all, should be given without charge. The same law has been promulgated many times by the Popes and by the Sacred Congregations.

### **Supremacy of Truth.**

At a good-will seminar of Protestants, Jews and Catholics held at the University of Illinois for the purpose of removing needless sources of friction in the civic relations of these various groups, a Protestant spokesman pointed in a friendly manner to the Church's marriage laws as a source of antagonism. "The Church's requirements," he said, "that the marriage of a Catholic to a Protestant must take place only before a Catholic priest and that all children must be raised in the Catholic faith, are irritating to many Protestants. To us it seems not only a one-sided arrangement, but also a crafty device whereby the Catholic Church ensnares many of our members into her fold. Could not this requirement be modified so that the Protestants would have equal rights in the selection of the officiating minister and in the religious rearing of the children?"

By way of reply, the writer pointed out, as previously indicated, that this question cannot properly be answered by

itself alone. It is necessary to go much deeper, to raise and to answer the question underlying his whole viewpoint, namely, are all religions of equal validity, all equally good and equally true? Or is there but one religion, founded by Jesus Christ, which possesses rights and authority which no sect founded by mere man can properly claim?. We undertake to show on objective evidence, by the facts of history, by the words and deeds of Christ, by the teaching of the Apostles, by the voice of tradition, by the unbroken continuity of Apostolic succession, by the overwhelming testimony of impartial historians of every faith, that the Catholic Church was not only founded by Jesus Christ but also that she was in existence for almost fifteen centuries before Protestantism first saw the light of day. Throughout His whole ministry Christ insisted upon unity of faith. Following the example of her divine Father, the Church does likewise.

She would be guilty of disloyalty to her deepest convictions if she compromised in her doctrines with any of the creeds founded in opposition to the faith of Jesus Christ. It is true that this uncompromising stand of the Church in regard to the truth of her teachings, and her steadfast refusal to place on a basis of equal validity creeds which contradict her doctrines, may not be particularly pleasing to non-Catholics. It may even irritate them, as the speaker declared. But does it differ from the position of her divine Founder Who solemnly declared: "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved; he that believes not shall be condemned"? (Mark 16:16)

### **A Crafty Device?**

In regard to the second charge of the Protestant spokesman that the Church's marriage legislation is a crafty device by which she seeks to ensnare as many Protestants as possible into her fold, the answer is obvious. If this were true, the Church would not be forbidding mixed marriages, but she would be encouraging them. The fact is, however, that she warns her children against them.

In all these ways the Church drives home to her children that a mixed marriage is not her ideal. From long experience she knows that the offspring of such marriages not infrequently grow up unaffiliated with any church and remain throughout their life indifferent to all organized religion. She would much prefer to have them members of some Church than believers in none.

Furthermore, the thought of ensnaring or entrapping through subtle craft any human being into her fold is entirely alien to the whole spirit of the Church.

She admits to membership only one who comes of his own free will, and then only after he is profoundly convinced of the truth of her teachings as the result of a thorough course of instruction. She would not dream of admitting a person who was under the slightest coercion; nor would she receive one whose decision was the result of mere impulse and not grounded on intellectual convictions.

In her eyes membership in the household of faith is a priceless treasure; it can never be imposed from without but must always come from the intellect and the will of man. Our Protestant friends need have no fear, therefore, that the Catholic Church is engaged in a conspiracy to deplete their ranks through her laws in regard to mixed marriages. The Church is happy to see them marry within their own faiths, as she is delighted to see her children achieve her ideal of a Catholic marriage, where the faith will be vivified through united action instead of being weakened by divergence in creed and in practice.

### **A Basic Difference.**

A pronouncement of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America commented unfavourably upon the requirements of the Catholic Church in the case of mixed marriages. Replying to such criticism, the chairman of the administrative committee of the American hierarchy pointed out that the Church does not encourage such alliances, **BUT IS IN AGREEMENT WITH NON-CATHOLIC LEADERS IN STRESSING THE ADVISABILITY OF MARRIAGE AMONG MEMBERS OF THE SAME RELIGIOUS FAITH.** What more can the Church do, than she is now doing, to discourage mixed marriages and to encourage her children to marry within their own fold? The fact that the vast majority of non-Catholics experience little or no religious scruple in signing the required promises testifies to the levity with which denominational ties rest upon them.

This is due to the cardinal principle of Protestantism, namely, the supremacy of private judgement in religion,

Acting on this principle, a Protestant suffers no qualms of conscience in renouncing his previous creed and embracing another which appeals more to him. He knows that his denomination cannot consistently bid him nay. For, according to this root principle of Protestantism, whence have sprung such a bewildered variety of sects and creeds, the individual becomes the supreme court from which there is no appeal.

In the Catholic religion, on the other hand, the principle of authority, in contradistinction to that of private judgement, is recognized as supreme. The authority of Jesus Christ and of the Church which He authorized to teach in His name is regarded by the Catholic as a safe and reliable guide in matters of religious belief. The fundamental principle of his faith does not admit, therefore, of the flexibility by which the non-Catholic can pass so easily from one creed to another. Then, too, may it not truly be said that no non-Catholic denomination feels sufficiently sure of itself as to proclaim that it is the one true church of Jesus Christ? The corporate uncertainty that characterizes practically all non-Catholic denominations today reflects itself in the unsettledness and the groping for greater security of truth which are manifest among vast numbers of their nominal adherents. These are factors which must be recognized in any honest and impartial study of the shifting of religious affiliations occasioned by mixed marriages.

### **Love of God and Man.**

In conclusion, it can be truthfully said that the Church has never envisaged, and does not now envisage, mixed marriages as occasions for increasing her membership at the expense of non-Catholic faiths. On the contrary, she wishes her children to live in peace and friendship with their fellow citizens of every faith. She is anxious to remove every needless source of friction which carries over into the civic relationships of her members with those of other faiths. In her marriage legislation she has at heart the welfare and happiness not only of her own children but of those who are without. Rather than blast forever the dreams of happiness of a non-Catholic by depriving him of all possibility of marrying the girl he loves, the Church permits such a union, provided proper safeguards for the faith are assured.

Does not this maternal attitude reflect an admirable blending of unfaltering loyalty to the truth with a tender solicitude for the happiness of all people, Catholic and non-Catholic alike? Can our fellow Australians [or any of our fellow citizens of this world] justly criticize the Church for her stand on mixed marriage, when she does everything possible, short of betrayal of her divinely appointed trust, to enable the non-Catholic to realize his dreams of conjugal love and happiness? In the Church's attitude on this vexing problem, our fellow citizens of other faiths who have followed this discussion with open minds and in a spirit of impartiality will perceive, we are confident, a reflection of the love and loyalty of the Church to her divine Founder and of her love and devotion for all His children.

\* \* \* \* \*