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# THE IDEA MARRIAGE

HOW ACHIEVE IT?  
By JOHN A. O'BRIEN, Ph. D., LL.D.  
THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME



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# The Ideal Marriage

## HOW ACHIEVE IT?

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*The University of Notre Dame*

### I

**I**n many messages our late Holy Father, Pope Pius XI, has called upon the Catholic laity to take a more active part in the extension of Christ's kingdom on earth. His Holiness has pointed out that the penetration of Christ's teaching into the social and economic life of humanity can be accomplished not by the efforts of priests alone, but only by the whole-hearted co-operation and assistance of all the faithful. Catholic Action, stressed so frequently by the Holy Father, means essentially that our laity must abandon their purely passive role wherein they are merely the recipients of priestly ministrations, and assume an active part in the application of the Christian evangel to the social, political and industrial life of the world today.

There are few, if any, fields where the achievement of the Church's ideal is so directly dependent upon lay co-operation as in that of marriage. The Church's ideal is a Catholic marriage, a union where both husband and the wife are members of the same holy faith, founded by Christ and propagated by the Apostles and their successors down to the present day. In such unions the faith is most likely to be strengthened in the parents and handed down intact to the children.

The Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America has recently commented unfavorably upon the consequences of

mixed marriages, and has pointed to them as a source of friction in the relations of Protestants and Catholics. The Catholic Church likewise agrees that such alliances are inadvisable, and are conducive to the weakening of the faith of the parents and to the loss of the same in the children. It is in no spirit of narrow-mindedness, therefore, or out of a lack of regard for the high character and sterling integrity of our fellow citizens of other faiths that the Church encourages her children to marry within the fold. In so doing the Church has the support of the officials of Protestantism in America.

### **How Assist?**

How may laity assist in the attainment of this ideal, and thus remove a source of irritation to many of our dear non-Catholic friends, who view the Church's requirements for a mixed marriage as a device to ensnare outsiders from their own denominations? The answer is simple. By marrying their own co-religionists. This implies, however, that Catholic young men must have ample opportunities of meeting in a social way young ladies of their own faith. It raises the whole question of a Catholic social life calculated to promote acquaintance and friendship among our young people of both sexes. In a population where we are outnumbered five to one, it is obvious that if no organized effort be made to foster a Catholic social life, partners for life will be chosen in increasing numbers from those outside the fold.

The hunger for the love and companionship of a helpmate who will lessen the sorrows of life and increase its joys has been planted in the bosom of mankind by God Himself. Instead of ignoring such a craving, or of making light of it, as is so often done, it should be recognized as the reflection of a divine plan. The necessity of making adequate provision for the satisfaction of such an innate and universal longing should

be faced honestly and squarely. Its fulfillment should not be left to the whims and caprices of blind chance.

Susan Marr Spalding has portrayed the whimsicalities of chance, or fate as she terms it, in bringing some individuals from the opposite ends of the earth together, and keeping others near by from ever meeting. She writes:

Two shall be born, the whole wide world apart,  
And shall speak in different tongues, and have no thought  
Each of the other's being; and have no heed;  
And these, o'er unknown seas to unknown lands  
Shall cross, escaping wreck; defying death;  
And, all unconsciously, shape every act to this one end  
That, one day, out of darkness, they shall meet  
And read life's meaning in each other's eyes.

And two shall walk some narrow way of life  
So nearly side by side that, should one turn  
Ever so little space to right or left,  
They needs must stand acknowledged face to face  
And yet, with wistful eyes that never meet,  
With groping hands that never clasp; and lips  
Calling in vain to ears that never hear;  
They seek each other all their weary days  
And die unsatisfied—and that is fate.

While admitting that the events she describes are of frequent occurrence, particularly in America, whither peoples come from all the countries of the earth, the conclusion she draws—"and that is fate"—cannot stand the searchlight of careful analysis. We are the carvers of our own fate, the hewers of our own destiny. The so-called decrees of fate, we write with our own fingers. That two young people, congenial in culture, tastes, character and of the same religious faith, living "nearly side by side" never meet, is not to be attributed to the decrees of blind fate, but to ourselves, to the individuals and the social group of which they are mem-

bers. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings."

Is a Catholic social life so organized as to enable our young people to attain the Church's ideal of a Catholic marriage? Alas! Here is our great weakness. A weakness pointed out by prelate, priests and laymen, and deplored by all alike.

### **Segregation in School**

In order to suggest proper constructive measures, let us first glance at our present social organization to see how difficult it renders social acquaintance among our young people and thus tends to defeat the very end which we strive at least in theory to practice, namely, Catholic marriage. Let us begin with our schools. Above the grades it is the common practice, where resources permit, to segregate the sexes. In separate buildings the girls are taught by nuns, and boys by brothers and priests. This segregation of the sexes during high school is continued into our colleges and universities.

Without any expression as to the relative merits of the educational efficiency of segregation and of coeducation, we merely point here to the fact that our educational system keeps our young people during the years of adolescence and of young manhood and womanhood in two separate worlds where points of contact are few and far between. It is only in recent years that some of our Catholic universities and colleges have been willing to hazard the entrance of young women into their halls of learning. Apparently the distraction has not proved too great. For the practice is markedly on the increase.

Not only has the custom been to establish separate high schools and colleges for the education of young men and women, but also to permit few, if any, social relations between the student groups at the two schools. Even when such colleges are adjacent, prefects and teachers have exhausted all their ingenuity in keeping the students from meeting one another.

Huge walls, built of stone, or of prohibitions rigorously enforced, prevented the acquaintance of Catholic college men with Catholic college women. Such acquaintances as were formed were largely surreptitious—achieved by climbing over a stone wall or outwitting a prefect who momentarily relaxed his vigilance.

Until recently the Sisters in charge of a college for girls, situated in the vicinity of an institution of higher learning for Catholic men, accompanied their girls returning on the train to a large city where most of them lived. This they did for fear the young ladies might meet some of the Catholic men returning on the same train. The acquaintanceship and friendship of Catholic women with young men of the same faith and of similar culture was strictly taboo. In their home parishes, these young people listen to sermons on the dangers and evils of mixed marriages. Instead of helping them by constructive measures to avoid such marriages, our colleges have at times unwittingly tended to render such unions a not unlikely occurrence.

If we were to set about to bring together two groups of Catholic young men and women of congenial interests and similar culture, with a view of fostering happy Catholic marriages, where else would we turn but to the students at the very institutions which were striving by might and main to keep them apart? Is it any wonder that the graduates of our Catholic colleges and universities in about the same proportion as their co-religionists who did not enjoy the same educational opportunities, have sought their life partners from among those outside the fold? The wonder is that they have not done so in even larger numbers. Happily the situation is improving. High schools and especially colleges, located in the vicinity of similar institutions for Catholics of the opposite gender, do not frown so severely as formerly upon the formation of friendships between their respective student bodies.

The simple truth, so persistently ignored in the past, that such students will ultimately marry, and, if they are not allowed to meet Catholics of congenial culture, are likely to marry non-Catholics, is at least beginning to be recognized. That there is still much ground to be traveled in this direction is recognized by none more frankly than by our Catholic educators themselves. As one educator put it recently to the writer: "Unwittingly we have acted on the assumption that most of our students were preparing to enter the religious life, ignoring the practical necessities for their entrance into the matrimonial state, into which about 95 per cent plan to go."

## II

### **SOCIAL LIFE IN PARISHES**

What about our parishes? Do not these have organizations designed to enable our young people to meet one another in a social way? The problem, of course, is much simpler in rural districts and in smaller urban parishes where practically all the members know one another. In our large city parishes, however, the problem is much more difficult. Pastors of such parishes generally acknowledge the lack of a social organization that solves this problem to their satisfaction. Competing with commercial entertainment of many kinds, it is difficult for the officers of parish societies for young people to get their members out in large numbers. Indeed, clergy and laity will alike agree that the failure to maintain a vigorous social life among our young people, giving them such ample opportunity to meet, among their own, congenial helpmates so as to counteract the usual preponderance of the day's contact with outsiders, is one of the most glaring weaknesses of our organization—or of our lack of it.



With the idea of getting the viewpoint of the laity on the causes of mixed marriages, the writer requested a number of scholarly and devoted laymen and women in different parts of our country to favor him with a statement of their observations on this subject. The gist of most of the replies is that we allow acquaintance to be largely a matter of chance, and that we do little or nothing of a constructive nature to promote friendship among our young people.

Thus a staunch Catholic laymen, Dean Hagerty of Ohio State University, whose long and distinguished service to public education has brought honor both to himself and to his Church, writes in the following frank manner: "I never could feel that the sermons on mixed marriages, badly needed as they are, did very much good. It seems to me that, if the clergy would give some attention to the social organization of the members of their parishes in bringing the young people together in social relationships, it would do far more good than all the sermons that could be preached on mixed marriages. The notion of some churchmen on coeducation tends to keep the sexes apart in the schools. This may or may not be a good thing, but it is often much easier for Catholic young men to meet Protestant young women than it is to meet Catholic young women, and the opposite is also very true.

"It seems to me that the leakage from the Church is chiefly through mixed marriages. That is the reason for the above comments. The Protestant churches are organized pretty largely upon a social basis, as you understand. The Catholic churches are organized in no sense upon a social basis. As an undergraduate and graduate student in a number of colleges and universities away from home, I always found it much easier to get acquainted with Protestants than with Catholics. Catholics make no effort whatever to look after the stranger in the parish, and although I have been, as a young man, in a number of university communities, I never found it at all easy to get acquainted with Catholic families."

### **Outstretched Hand?**

The foregoing sentiment reflects the views of the other lay contributors to this investigation and of the overwhelming majority of our laity with whom the writer has discussed the subject. One of the contributors, Joseph F. Miller, states the case thus succinctly: "Mixed marriages reflect the unsociability that characterizes most of our parishes. I do not think I exaggerate when I say that the average city parish is about as reserved, unsociable and unfriendly as any group of similar size to be found anywhere in the country. The Catholic social consciousness, the corporate sense of friendliness, the outstretched hand to the lonely stranger in our midst, the friendly interest in the young man or woman hungering wistfully for social companionship—these are woefully lacking."

Is it any wonder, then, that mixed marriages result, and that they will continue to increase as long as the present social frigidity within our parishes continues? The Church rightly stresses the supernatural and the religious elements in her services. But supplementing her devotions, and auxiliary to them, might there not be developed a Catholic social consciousness and a sense of friendliness among her children?

Other lay contributors write in the same vein. Thus, Arthur H. Bedard reports that because of the nature of his work he had occasion to reside in a dozen different cities for periods ranging from six months to three years. During his attendance at parish churches in those cities, he states, he had rarely found an opportunity of meeting his co-religionists through any activity sponsored by the Church. Social life among the members of most of the parishes was practically nonexistent. The opportunities for social contact for young people are afforded chiefly by agencies which have no connection with the Church, and the result is that our young people meet about five times as many non-Catholic young folks as

they do those of their own faith. Under such circumstances the wonder is not that there are so many mixed marriages, but rather that they are not even more numerous.

### **Catholic Social Aloofness**

Another lay contributor, Vincent L. Martin, reports that he and his family recently returned from an auto trip to the Western Coast where they spent several months. Naturally they attended Mass at many different churches, but met practically no one through such attendance. On their return they happened to be passing through a large city in the Middle West on Sunday morning. From a passerby they inquired the directions to the nearest Catholic church. In their anxiety to be present at Mass on time, they hurried in without stopping to observe the name—the Episcopal Church—carved upon the corner stone.

When they perceived the slim attendance they began to wonder if they were really in a Catholic church. But a clergyman wearing the proper vestments appeared to be celebrating Mass at an altar. When the service ended, a number of the people came over and greeted the visitors in a friendly way, and said how happy they were to welcome them to their service. "Then," reports the contributor, "we knew we were not in a Catholic church! For Catholics never display any interest or friendliness towards visitors in their midst."

We are proud of the fact that the Church has remained true to her essential nature as a religious institution. We are proud of the fact that the emphasis in her service is upon the strictly religious element, the worship of God, and the offering of praise and sacrifice and homage to the Most High. Not for any price would we allow that emphasis to be minimized or to be shifted to any other value. Yet it is well to remember that the Church is composed of human beings who have been endowed by God with a social nature. The Church has like-

wise always sought to promote the social happiness of mankind. Her charitable and philanthropic institutions ministering to the sick and dying, the delinquent and homeless, the feeble-minded and the insane, the orphans and the aged, have won for her the admiration of the world.

In a society, however, where we are outnumbered about five to one, there would seem to be the need of special organized efforts in every parish to bring our young men and women together in a social way, to foster acquaintance and friendship among them, and by these constructive measures for the promotion of Catholic marriage to lessen the likelihood of its opposite. This would appear to be one of the steps most urgently needed if we are to stem the ever-increasing tide of mixed marriages.

### **Fostering Catholic Marriages**

In a city parish of some four hundred families, where mixed marriages were numerous, the pastor set out to see what could be done in lessening their number and in promoting Catholic marriages. He organized the young people of the parish into a society, giving them considerable latitude in arranging dramatics, entertainments, and socials of various kinds under proper supervision. He assisted the officers in working up a splendid attendance at their socials, enlisting the co-operation of several young married couples as a "floating committee" in helping every one, even the most timid, to get acquainted. After two or three years he reported that the mixed marriages had notably decreased and the Catholic marriages had increased by leaps and bounds.

"Father," he writes, "it means work and lots of it, but it's eminently worth while. Too many of us are content to follow the easier procedure of simply denouncing mixed marriages from the altar without doing anything to promote Catholic marriages. It isn't fair to our young people. They are more sinned against than sinning. If we were not deaf and dumb

and blind, we would hear the cries for companionship, and see in their faces the hunger for friendship which God has planted in their nature. Young people appreciate interest which a pastor takes in promoting their social happiness, and show it by their greater loyalty and enthusiasm in the work of the parish. It develops a Catholic morale and offers a powerful re-enforcement to the spiritual work of the Church."

### III

#### WORK FOR LAITY ALSO

As one of the clergy, I think I may acknowledge in the name of my brother priests that much still remains to be done by us in initiating constructive measures to foster Catholic marriages and in supplying leadership to execute such plans. But may I not ask my Catholic lay readers if they too have not been remiss in this matter? Why do not our Catholic laity turn out in large numbers at the socials planned for their benefit? For almost a quarter of a century I have been ministering to Catholic young men and women of university age, seeking among other things to promote acquaintance and friendship among them and thus to establish a strong Catholic *esprit de corps*. Like many other pastors, I have never been able to understand why our young people feign such indifference, if not even reluctance, at meeting those of the other gender. I have been working among them long enough to know that inwardly and in reality they are glad and anxious to meet one another. But why they insist on making it more difficult for the pastor to promote acquaintance among them in a systematic way, by feigning unwillingness to go through the ordeal of shaking hands and saying "Hello," is not easy to understand.

Let me invite our Catholic readers to co-operate generously and whole-heartedly with their pastors in galvanizing into ac-

tion the moribund social life of many of our parishes. Let me assure our readers that their spiritual guides will be only too glad to have them initiate measures that will promote Catholic acquaintance and foster marriages between those of the household of the faith. In many respects the laity are better situated to promote such social measures. They will earn the lasting gratitude of their pastors as well as of those they assist in finding congenial helpmates for the journey along life's highway.

### **A Second Measure**

One other way in which our laity can render yeoman service in promoting Catholic marriage is by bringing non-Catholics with whom they are keeping company to a priest for a thorough course of instruction in the truths of our holy religion. In most dioceses in our country there is a requirement that the non-Catholic party receive six instructions, covering matrimony and a few of the other fundamentals of the Catholic religion. While the value of such a brief glance is not to be minimized, it is always better to bring the non-Catholic to the pastor several months before the contemplated wedding is to occur, to enable him to receive a complete course of instruction in the truths of our holy faith.

Great numbers of such non-Catholics, probably the vast majority who come with an open mind, will find the credentials of the Church's divine origin and mission so overwhelming and the beauty and helpfulness of her teachings so appealing as to prompt them to return to the Church in which their forebears worshiped for fifteen centuries or more. Their misconceptions will fade away before the light of truth. They will see that what they have fought against are not the real teachings of the Church but the caricatures of such as drawn by her enemies. What appeared at the beginning as a mixed marriage ends by becoming a Catholic one.

In the achievement of such an end, the attitude of the

Catholic party is of paramount importance. If the Catholic displays indifference, gives little or no encouragement to take a complete course of instruction, and is perfectly satisfied with the fulfillment of the minimum requirements, there is little prospect of winning the outsider to the faith of Christ. It is harder for the pastor to contend against such an attitude of cold indifference than it is to overcome the prejudices and misconceptions of the non-Catholic. More influential and more eloquent to him than the words of any pastor is the voice of his beloved. If that voice is cold and indifferent, the budding interest of the neophyte is speedily killed. He becomes content with the mere gesture of attendance at the six required instructions.

### **A Helpful Attitude**

On the other hand, if the Catholic displays a profound solicitude in having her friend secure the whole picture of the Church's teachings, if she tells him frankly what a world of happiness the practice of her religion has brought her, the non-Catholic will be stimulated to make an honest and thorough investigation of the religion of Christ. How natural it is for him to say: "If your religion has meant so much to you, why can it not mean as much to me? I will look into it fairly and honestly, and if it convinces my reason of its truthfulness, I will not hesitate to embrace it." That is all the Church asks of any one. For she knows that the objective evidence of her divine origin and of her commission to teach all mankind is so overwhelming as to carry conviction to the open mind, aided and enlightened by the grace of God.

Monsignor Hugh L. McMenemy, pastor of the Cathedral in Denver, has given a splendid demonstration of what can be achieved along these lines. With the co-operation of his assistants, he has averaged about sixty-five converts per year for the last twenty-four years. In generous compliance with the writer's request for a statement of his experiences in this

matter, he writes: "With a little zeal, *devout Catholics can be made out of nine of every ten young women* who wish to marry or have married Catholic young men. Similar results but in greatly reduced proportion can be obtained in those mixed marriages in which the non-Catholic party is the man.

"Almost every young man and every young woman," he writes, "who desires to marry a Catholic can be induced to take instructions. How? When the non-Catholic party calls upon us to arrange for a marriage, we explain the customary promises, devoting fifteen minutes or half an hour to that explanation, pointing out that a Protestant who is quite willing to admit that one religion is as good as another can conscientiously sign them. The Catholic party may not, however, conscientiously make such concessions. After he has signed the promises, we point out the necessity of his knowing something of the Catholic religion in order that he may the more willingly and more intelligently fulfill the promises, and moreover in order that he may be able to sympathize with the Catholic party in the practice of his or her religion. In almost every instance the promise to take instructions will be given.

### **Change in Methods**

"When all is said and done, you will find this to be one of the most fruitful sources of conversions, and it minimizes the evils which often result from mixed marriages. One such convert is worth more than two or three others. You have saved the faith of children. We have been asked: 'Why are you so enthusiastic over those converts who enter the Church merely because they wish to marry a Catholic?' We answer: 'We know none such.' We do know of many who submitted to a course of instructions for that reason but their motives changed. Let me cite one interesting instance out of many.

"A young woman brought a non-Catholic man to the writer. She made it plain that she would marry him on one



condition only, namely, that he become a Catholic, and insisted that he take instructions. She departed for the East for a vacation in her old home. He came twice a week for instructions. Upon her return they were to be married. About the fourth week we received a letter from the young woman announcing her engagement to an old sweetheart and a package containing a diamond ring which she requested that we give to the young man. As may be presumed, there was little talk of instruction when the young man called and received his ring, but when saying good-night, he added: 'When do you want to see me, Father?' He continued his instruction. He was received into the Church. He has since married a girl whom he induced to take instructions. They are raising a growing Catholic family."

### **Achieving the Ideal**

To summarize: The Catholic marriage is the Church's ideal. To lessen mixed marriages and to increase Catholic ones, we propose two constructive measures which invite the co-operation and challenge the zeal of the many Catholics who read these lines.

The first is the establishment of a vigorous Catholic social life which will enable our young people to make a sufficient number of acquaintances within the fold so as to enable every young man and woman who has the normal healthy ambition to marry, to find a devoted Catholic helpmate for the journey along life's winding pathway.

Occasionally at these social gatherings the priest will avail himself of a golden opportunity to present the Catholic marriage and the mixed marriage in their true aspects to people who are actually concerned.

The second is to bring all non-Catholics contemplating marriage with Catholics to thorough courses of instruction where the overwhelming evidence of the Church's divine origin

and divinely appointed mission to teach all mankind will, with God's unfailing grace, lead the vast majority into the Church of Jesus Christ. The carrying out of these two measures in a whole-hearted and vigorous manner will go a long way toward the elimination of danger to the faith of parents and of children, toward the unifying of the family life and toward the promotion of abiding human happiness.

### STUDY CLUB QUESTIONS

1. What is the meaning of Catholic Action?
2. How are mixed marriages frequently a source of friction in the relations of Protestants and Catholics?
3. What is the Catholic ideal in regard to marriage?
4. How may our laity assist in the achievement of this ideal?
5. How may the social life in our parishes be so organized as to promote acquaintance among Catholic young men and women?
6. Describe the manner in which one city parish has fostered Catholic marriages?
7. What practical measures may our laity adopt in promoting Catholic marriage?
8. Narrate the experience of Father Hugh L. McMenamin in converting prospective mixed marriages into Catholic marriages.
9. Summarize all the practical measures you can think of to achieve the Church's ideal in the matter of marriage.



