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Nihil Obstat:

ARTHUR J. SCANLAN, S.T.D.,
Censor Librorum.

Imprimatur:

✠ PATRICK CARDINAL HAYES,
Archbishop of New York.

New York, November 12, 1937.

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED IN THE U. S. A.
BY THE PAULIST PRESS, NEW YORK, N. Y.

Why Not a "Mixed" Marriage?

A PLAIN ANSWER TO A COMMON QUESTION

by

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“**W**HY does the Catholic Church forbid her members to marry persons outside of her fold? In our country where religious tolerance is so necessary and should be encouraged in every way possible, the ruling of your Church on this subject is 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 a country such 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-American. 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-American—and merit our unqualified condemnation.

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 any in the deposit of divine revelation are wrong. But they do not carry their disagreement 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 of everything for which she stands.

Why Church Opposes

Having thus cleared the way, we can 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; not because she is indifferent to their unhappiness. It is precisely because she loves non-Catholics, children of the same Heavenly Father as we, and because she is 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 does not speak in this matter 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.

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 to 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 uprearing 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.

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 birth-

right. Must not our fair-minded citizens of other faiths 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 example, who has the conviction that the moral laws should be obeyed. It is a conviction well grounded in reason. Place him in an environment where temptation assails him from 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. What person of experience will question the powerful influence of daily environment upon any human being? It is because the Church recognizes this fact that she strives to safeguard her children from lifelong residence in surroundings uncongenial to their religious faith.

Then, too, because of the lack of religious instruction in school and in the home, many of her children are not properly grounded in their faith. In conse-

quence, unfavorable 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 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 practice 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 the example, it is likely to be of little value, as the following incident illustrates.

In a home where the non-Catholic father strove to fulfill 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 poor man's bible—the Sunday newspaper. In such an environment where the paternal example was 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 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 in 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 schoolmates.

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.

Appareled 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 the father 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 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 at least 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 over three hundred and thirty million members are scattered out among all the nations of the world. In daily contact with such neighbors, 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 attain 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 individual for the sufficient grounds above mentioned, permitting her to marry a Protestant or a person unbaptized in any faith. She does this, however, only when she has been given assurances of the proper safeguarding of the faith of the Catholic party and of the children.

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 honor, 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."

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 the father and the girls in that of the mother?" Such are questions raised by non-Catholics. The answer is: 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, allow some to be brought up outside her fold, she would be false to her divinely appointed mission of teaching all the truths taught by Christ. The Church is, therefore, under a divine obligation of protecting 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 Protestant 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. Then the Catholic Church regards marriage as a sacrament, while most Protestant ministers do not. With no wish to hurt the feelings of our dear Protestant friends, the Church finds herself compelled by the clear consciousness 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 Form of Treason

To place the churches founded by Martin Luther, John Calvin, Roger 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 willfully 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, April 19, 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 Church 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.¹ The same law has been promulgated many times by the Popes and by the Sacred Congregations. The Church only permits a small donation for diocesan and Roman chancery expenses. For it is obvious that the issuing of documents, and the recording of the same, entails some clerical and office expenses, which should be met by the persons necessitating such service. The amount is always small, and the poor are explicitly dispensed even from this.²

¹ Sess. IV., *De Ref. Mat.*, 5.

² Canon 1056.

Supremacy of Truth

At a good will seminar of Protestants, Jews and Catholics held recently 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 such antagonism. "The Church's requirement," he said, "that the marriage of a Catholic and a Protestant must take place only before a Catholic priest and that all the children must be raised in the Catholic faith is 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 Protestant 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, which believes that Christian marriage was committed to her as a sacrament? We undertake to show on objective evidence, by the facts of history, by the words and deeds of Christ, by the teachings 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 be-

fore Protestantism first saw the light of day. Throughout His whole ministry Christ insisted upon unity of faith. Following the example of her divine Founder, 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 believeth and is baptized, shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be condemned"?

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 from their own denominations 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.

She displays her disapproval by forbidding them to be celebrated in the church. They are to take place in the rectory, or in the sacristy of the church. The banns proclaiming the approaching occurrence of such a marriage are omitted. The blessing of the wedding ring, as well as the nuptial blessing, is likewise omitted. 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 in 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 will admit to membership no one who does not come 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 a person whose decision was the result of mere impulse and not grounded on intellectual convictions.

In her eyes membership in the household of the 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 recent pronouncement of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America commented unfavorably upon the requirements of the Catholic Church in the case of mixed marriages. Replying to such criticism, Archbishop Hanna of San Francisco pointed out that the Church does not encourage such alliance but is in agreement with the leaders of Prot-

estantism in stressing the advisability of marriages 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 judgment in religion. Acting on this principle, a Protestant suffers no qualms of conscience in renouncing his previous creed and in 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 bewildering 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 judgment, 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 Protestant can pass so easily from one creed to another. Then, too, may it not truly be said that no Protestant 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 the Protestant denominations today reflects itself in the unsettledness and the groping for greater security of truth, which is 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 Protestantism. 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 assumed.

Does this maternal attitude not 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 Americans 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.

DISCUSSION CLUB QUESTIONS

1. Why does the Catholic Church not permit her members to marry non-Catholics?
2. Does this prohibition reflect either intolerance or ill-will towards non-Catholics? Why?
3. What effect does a mixed marriage often have on the Catholic party? On the children?
4. Why is the influence of the home so important?
5. What are the requirements for a dispensation permitting a Catholic to marry a non-Catholic?
6. Why does the Church strongly recommend a Catholic marriage instead of a mixed marriage?
7. How does the Church's stand on this question reflect the attitude of a true Mother?

