

Inter-Faith Marriage

Challenges for the Catholic Community

Notes from a paper presented by Alfred Agius at a seminar to mark National Marriage Week at Liverpool Hope University on 8th February 2006

We are dealing with marriages in which one partner is a Catholic and the other a non-baptised person. In the eyes of Canon Law, a dispensation arising from the “disparity of cult” is required for the validity of such marriages.

The pastoral approach needs to have as its starting point what is and not what ought to be, not the ideal but the real. The following facts are therefore good to bear in mind:

- 1 Catholic marriage is a declining phenomenon, has been for the last 20 years or so. Fewer and fewer Catholics marry in the Catholic Church . In my parish of roughly 1600 families, and where 1700 people come to church on a week end, only four marriages were blessed last year. A few more were prepared and married elsewhere (1 in Ireland, a few in Africa, Asia).
- 2 Very many Catholics are in marriages that the Catholic Church considers invalid. Many Catholics and non-Catholics are bewildered by the stance of the Catholic Church. Some disagree or feel hurt. For many it is not an issue. When prospective partners have their wish to be married in church turned down, not infrequently they resent the high moral ground taken by clergy whose personal record and moral behaviour seems to them to leave much to be desired . The fact that all Catholics profess at mass that they have all sinned, does not register with them. On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that some in ‘invalid marriages’ do good work in the Church, e.g. as school teachers, social workers etc.
- 3 While partners describe themselves as belonging to a particular faith (before or after marriage), the faith life of either one or the other partner or of both is often nominal. It often just describes their roots not their faith.
- 4 Deeper than the challenge of inter-faith marriage and indeed of any marriage is the question of relationships. We live in a society in which relationships are increasingly fractured and complicated. People need to be educated more into relating to one another.
- 5 The dioceses in the UK have been granting more and more dispensations in cases of disparity of cult because of new situations arising from our multi-faith society. But many do not bother to ask for any dispensation. Those who ask, it is for a variety of reasons, some valid others pragmatic.
- 6 One has to listen to the increasing number of stories of couples coming from different faiths who met at work or at a party, fell in love and are happily married. The Book of Ruth in the Bible is seminal in that it describes what could happen when somebody of an outside faith enters into another culture and religion. There are some tragedies, some challenges but there is also enrichment. Children of such marriages are in a position to build bridges between communities. If parents respect each other’s faith, the children often grow with an acute sense of fairness and will not tolerate racism or other social injustices. On the other hand, as one Christian mother married to a Muslim admits: “Rites that define communal belonging also define non-belonging and tend therefore to be contentious or difficult in interfaith families”.

All the above factors raise challenges for the Catholic Community:

For Clergy:

For Bishops and priests, this is a relatively new area for which no seminary training was provided. Pastoral experience too is quite limited. With the diminishing number of priests and the overload of admin requirements in parishes, pastoral care of “inter-faith marriages” cannot receive anything like an adequate attention. As one honest, experienced parish priest confessed to me: “I have made many mistakes in this area”. With a celibate clergy in the Latin rite of the Catholic Church, prepared married Catholics who are more in touch with the nitty-gritty of married life, may be the more appropriate persons to provide pastoral care in such situations.

As the granting of dispensations in a fast changing society could be described as fluid, parish priests in cases of doubt need to refer such cases to the chancellor of the diocese.

Priests need to lead by example in valuing the diversity of cultures and to regard the family life of people of other religions as sacred while maintaining the integrity of the Catholic sacrament of marriage.

For couples (prospective or in a marriage relationship)

All must ponder seriously on the implications of marriage. While often the format of an oncoming wedding takes some negotiation as to how it is to be conducted, much more important is the way the couples live their family life including their faith life. Equally important is the agreement on the views and values regarding the upbringing of any children including their religious education, a matter the future spouses should agree upon well before committing themselves to marriage. Sometimes no agreement is reached about the faith any children will be brought up in. A compromise solution is sometimes chosen: the children to decide for themselves when they grown up. It has to be acknowledged as some cases have shown that this does not work out well.

Although there are some fine examples of successful ‘mixed faith ‘marriages, it has to be realistically admitted that such marriages are life choices fraught with foreseeable and not infrequently unforeseen difficulties. Such marriages however, can also provide opportunities for faith and cultural enrichment of the spouses. It is in a multifaith situation that that dialogue between people of faith can be at its deepest. The dialogue of life then becomes a reality, indeed a necessity.

The unity of the family is of paramount value while the faith of each of the partners is to be respected (basic religious freedom). In such contexts partners need to be encouraged to live out, with great commitment, both their common values and the specific ideals of their respective traditions. In no way should one religion be used against another. Religions hopefully should not be an occasion of conflict but a source of enrichment. The pastoral challenge here is how to hold all these values together.

Families of ‘mixed-faith’ couples

Sometimes, parents of future spouses find the oncoming event of a ‘mixed-faith’ marriage a traumatic experience. They may see their upbringing as a failure, as a betrayal of their faith etc. The pastoral challenge here is to enlighten all concerned about current Church teaching, that the religious traditions of the prospective son/daughter in law are holy, that family life is sacred for them too, that God loves all people etc.

The pastoral challenge here is to help the families recognize that their children have the right to make their own choices and to support them in their way of planning their life knowing that God’s ways are mysterious and that cultural and human enrichment can come through an interfaith marriage of their son or daughter.

The Catholic community

The Catholic community has the responsibility of not marginalising or in any way excluding the couples in a mixed faith marriage. Partners must feel that they are accepted by the parish as a whole. The non-Catholic side must not feel that they are ‘losing’ a member and that their belief in marriage is respected by the Catholic Church

Catholic Schools

A long term preparation for likely future inter-faith marriages, indeed for living and interacting in our multifaith society involves schools inculcating in their Catholic pupils the values of respect for all people, for freedom of religion and of conscience. The current information in the RE slots about other Faiths is a help. In many cases better preparation is needed. Every effort must be made to provide places in a Catholic school for such children.

Notes: There are no stereotypes in 'mixed Faith ' marriages. Each case is unique and has to be approached pastorally, seeking the good of each concerned. Also, the faith of each person is not a given that is static. Faith grows, diminishes, dies out, is born. It is in the nature of human beings to act illogically – contradictory attitudes do coexist within one person. Conversion is possible and all must be open to it. Sometimes one partner adopts the faith of the other for the sake of peace in the family. For some this is not an issue. Is this something one can recommend? It seems to me there are no standard answers to these questions. This is uncharted territory. We can only befriend and accompany such couples but let them find the way that seems best for them and for any children.

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