



CHAPTER 5: INTERRELIGIOUS MARRIAGE

In Britain today many people marry partners with different religious beliefs from their own. This chapter looks at the Catholic understanding of marriage and how Catholics thinking about marrying someone of a different religion should be prepared and supported.

Summary: In Britain today Catholics marry Christians of other denominations, people of other religions, or those of no religious faith. The Church provides these couples with guidelines so that their marriage is a valid union in the eyes of the Church and the couple can receive the right support and formation in their understanding of marriage.

The Catholic Church affirms that marriage is created and blessed by God to be a lifelong and fruitful union between a man and a woman. The aim of the marriage is that the couple contributes to each other's wellbeing, has children and raises them. When the couple are both baptised Christians their marriage is a sacrament - they are enabled to live their marriage in a way that makes it a real sign of Christ's love for his Church. Because of this, the Christian family is often referred to as '**The domestic church**'.

Other religious traditions are committed to marriage and family life as well. This commitment is also based on traditional religious and moral values. Cultural and religious differences may cause problems to arise within an **interreligious marriage**. However, if cultural and religious differences are treated with respect and consideration, the different religious beliefs of the couple can be a source of enrichment rather than a burden, and make an interreligious marriage a place of deep dialogue.

A marriage between a Catholic and an un-baptised person is described in the law of the Church as having a '**disparity of cult**'. Such a marriage must receive permission from the local bishop to be a **valid marriage**. This permission, or **dispensation**, can only be granted if certain conditions are fulfilled by the Catholic partner and when it is certain that there is no pressure that might endanger their Catholic faith. The Catholic partner must also promise to bring up the children of the marriage as Catholics as far as is possible within the unity of the marriage. It is essential that the non-Catholic partner is aware of these promises and also has some understanding of what Catholics believe about marriage, including the necessity that both parties give full and free consent to the marriage.

An interreligious couple can experience opposition from parents, friends or religious communities. There are many things to consider, particularly regarding the upbringing and religious education of the children and any potential pressure that might come from within the marriage, from the families of the partners, or from their respective religious communities to convert to the other religion. But practical matters such as how the wedding should be celebrated are also important and must be treated carefully and sensitively – it is, for example, possible to have the wedding outside a church. An interreligious marriage needs proper and appropriate preparation and strong and skilled support, as well as pastoral care at every stage of the couple's life together.

An interreligious marriage:

- Is when a Catholic marries a person from a different religion who is not baptised
- Is a life-long, exclusive union between a man and a woman in love
- Is freely entered into by the couple for their own benefit and for the good of their children
- Is only valid when a special dispensation is granted by the local bishop
- Requires agreement from both parties regarding the raising of children
- Can give rise to many challenges
- Can be an opportunity to deepen the faith of both partners
- Can lead to cultural enrichment
- Requires careful planning and preparation
- Needs long term pastoral care

Glossary

The domestic church: the Christian family which is the church in miniature. 'A community of grace and prayer, a school of human and Christian virtue and the place where the faith is first proclaimed to children.' #156 p66

Interreligious marriage: when two people of different religions marry each other

Disparity of cult: the technical term for a marriage between a Catholic and a person who has not been baptised

Valid marriage: a marriage recognised by the Catholic Church

Dispensation: the permission of the bishop to allow a marriage between a Catholic and a person of another Christian denomination, a person of another religion or a person of no religion

The importance [other religions] give to marriage and the family manifests once again the unity of the human race at its creation and in its common aspirations. #157 p66

Part of the goodness of any legitimate marriage is that it is blessed by, and comes from, the one God whose will it is to bring every human being to salvation. #159 p67

An interreligious marriage can offer opportunities for deepening faith and for cultural enrichment. In such marriages dialogue between people of faith can be at its most profound: a 'Dialogue of Life'. If such a marriage is to flourish, such dialogue is necessary. # 160 p67

Discussion questions:

On the text

- What is Christian marriage? What does this mean for the difference between a Catholic marrying a person from another Christian tradition, and marrying a person from a different religion?
- How does the Church view marriage and family life in other religious traditions?
- Why is it important to give the couple every support both before and after the wedding, and who are the best people to offer it?
- How can a Catholic prepare for marrying someone from another faith, and what must both partners agree to?
- What agreements must the couple make in order to receive dispensation to marry from the local bishop?
- What special training is required by people preparing couples for marriage and why?
- To what extent will these couples need pastoral care?

From your experience:

- What, if any, have been your experiences of interreligious marriages?
- Do you know anyone from an interreligious family? What are the issues they face? Describe your relationship with the family.
- How would you feel if someone from your family or parish community were to marry someone from a different religion? Can you think of ways of offering support?
- What difficulties, problems or dangers do you foresee when a Catholic marries someone from another religion?
- What benefits could there be in marrying someone from a different religion?

Ideas for action

To begin with

- Read what the Church teaches on marriage in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.
- Read the Code of Canon Law on marriage – both are available online.
- Look up the “Home is a Holy Place” initiative – www.homeisaholyplace.org.uk.

To go further

- Find out what other faiths teach about marriage and family life.
- Make contact with interreligious families in your area.
- Find out what pastoral support is available to interreligious families.
- Find out what interreligious training and formation is available for priests and deacons and members of the laity involved in marriage preparation.
- Read a Church document on marriage, or read up on the “Home is a Holy Place” initiative (on- or off-line), or read a document interreligious dialogue (for example *Meeting God in Friend and Stranger* or *Nostra Aetate*, which are available online).