

‘Crossing over and coming back’ – impressions of

Inter-faith Marriage: Challenges for the Catholic Community.
Liverpool Hope University, February 8th 2006

A day of realism and vision.

Realism, first, about the whole situation of marriage in the Catholic Church in Britain today. ‘Catholic marriage is a declining phenomenon’ even in flourishing parishes; many Catholics are in marriages not recognised by the Church in which, nevertheless, they may continue to be active; UK dioceses have been granting more and more dispensations for disparity of cult because of the multi-faith situation, yet interfaith marriage is a relatively new area, for which the seminary gave no preparation to today’s generation of hard-worked priests. Realism, also, in the personal stories told by the Christian partners in interfaith marriages, and by a parent reflecting on his daughter’s marriage to a Muslim. It became clear that the anxieties of devout Catholic parents can be echoed by those of devout Muslims, unsure about attending a wedding in a Catholic church, and facing difficulties of acceptance in their own faith community afterwards; that differences of culture about the position of women can be an ongoing problem; that new questions arise with the birth of children; that both priests and imams can vary greatly in their approach, and be either sympathetic and imaginative, or heavy-handed and discouraging.

Each couple has its own story

- the reality behind the partners’ descriptions of themselves as of particular faiths can be very various, ranging from full practice to a more or less vivid sense of personal and family roots, with little faith commitment. ‘Problems of interfaith marriage’ can be problems of relationship, as in any marriage; growth and change in personal faith, positive or negative, are a reality of life for any person.

But relationship, growth, change, are also part of vision and opportunity.

The dynamic of relationship between self and other, the ongoing experience of difference by which our lives are enlarged – the ‘crossing over and coming back’ in which we experience the new, then come back and see the old in a new light – can be particularly intense within marriage. Seen in that perspective, an interfaith marriage offers the possibility of a spiritual dialogue of experience in which each partner can be enriched by the other’s faith. For the Church as a whole,

New areas of theological exploration might be opened up. Answers to questions touched on some possibilities. What is the status of marriage to an unbaptised person? St. Paul says that the believing wife sanctifies the unbelieving husband (cf.1 Cor.7:14); Vatican II speaks of the domestic church, which as real church must have its own sacramentality, and of Christ himself as the first sacramental reality, then of the whole Church as sacrament. Then there is the theology of Christ as Word, at work and revealing himself also through other religious traditions. How, in a particular relationship, is he revealing himself here and now? It may be that, precisely through the challenge of interfaith marriage, and the new questions raised, God is calling us to new depths of knowledge of himself.

It is not easy to establish guidelines in a complex and fluid situation, and the day did not attempt to do so. But some of the **'Challenges to the Catholic community'** emerged clearly. Above all there is the need for positive appreciation of other faiths by the Church, and of work with other faiths to help them to appreciate Christianity. This must include an awareness and acceptance of the diversities within other major faith groups, as within our own. Support for marriage, specifically, should include 'remote preparation', during religious education, for the possibility of marrying someone from another faith, and consideration of the questions that would be raised. A couple in love, ready to 'jump through any hoops' to get what they want, are not well-placed to look at the possibility of problems. Married Catholics are a positive resource that should be used more in the preparation and support of young couples, and special marriage preparation for interfaith couples needs to be organised. Networking between interfaith couples was described during the day; organisations exist to promote it. But here the most difficult question is how to contact those who are not going to church. Our concern is with persons and what happens to them; with enrichment of life. We need to **find ways of addressing this concern, together with people of other faith communities.**

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