

MARRIAGES BETWEEN ANGLICANS AND ROMAN CATHOLICS

1 Anglicans and Roman Catholics agree very largely on the nature and purposes of christian marriage. The following short statement does not attempt to express this fundamental agreement in belief. Nor does it consider various aspects of married life between an Anglican and a Roman Catholic. It aims simply to provide guidelines for those about to be married, particularly in areas where Roman Catholic thinking and discipline cause difficulties and misunderstandings.

2 Dispensation to marry

The Roman Catholic Church regards it as an impediment to marriage if the intended partner is not a Roman Catholic, if however, that partner is a baptised Christian, it is an impediment which would make the marriage against ecclesiastical law but not invalid. Hence the Roman Catholic needs a dispensation from the impediment to marry an Anglican. This is easily granted once other requirements are fulfilled.

The Church of England does not recognise any such impediment, and is not happy with the idea that one Christian should need permission to marry another. Basically the difference of attitude is one that stems from different understandings of the Church in the two communions.

The impediment is simply one of positive Roman Catholic law which that Church could abolish. One might argue that it is better to abolish a law than to preserve one that is so frequently dispensed from, particularly if it causes difficulties to other Churches. The Roman Catholic Church, however, sees the request for the dispensation as an important opportunity for ensuring that the Roman Catholic partner is made fully aware of his obligations.

3 The promise about the children

In order to obtain a dispensation to marry anyone not a member of his Church, the Roman Catholic partner is required to make two promises: 'that he is ready to remove dangers of falling away from his faith'; and that he will 'do all in his power to have all the children baptised and brought up in the Catholic Church.'

The point of the first promise is that religious differences can, as experience so well shows, lead to the weakening and even abandoning of religious practice altogether. This is more likely to happen when a convinced Christian marries someone with little or no religious beliefs. In asking for this promise, the Roman Catholic Church intends to help its member to face his obligations and possible difficulties in good time. The Promise is readily understood in this light and is not liable to cause any difficulty to an Anglican partner. The promise about the children, however, has frequently led to both resentment and misunderstanding - on both sides - and therefore needs very careful explanation.

First of all, in asking for this promise the Roman Catholic Church does not consider it is imposing any new obligation in conscience on its mem-

bers; it regards itself as asking the Roman Catholic to express in the form of a promise an obligation in conscience which he already has. Both Churches agree that a Christian, by being a Christian, has an obligation to bring up his children as Christians; and that this is not something either Church could abolish or change, as it is Christ's will. The Roman Catholic Church, however, regards itself as the fullness of the Church as Christ wished it to be; and so it not only specifies the obligation more narrowly, but regards this as something it cannot change. With this, of course, Anglicans do not agree.

So, in Roman Catholic thinking, the obligation to bring up one's children as Roman Catholics is part of what it is to be a Roman Catholic. To be required to express that conviction in the form of a promise is, however, a matter of positive law, which the Roman Catholic Church could change. Other Churches find this promise very damaging to ecumenical relations: they will have equally strong convictions about their own authenticity, and yet do not require the expression of such convictions in any formal promise; to require such a promise appears to them one-sided, and to put the marriage relationship out of balance from the start. Once more, the basic difference is in basic understandings of the Church; but other Churches find the Roman Catholic Church too prone to hedge its convictions with laws. As with the other promise, the Roman Catholic Church has hitherto retained the promise about the children in order that its members entering a mixed marriage will face and understand their position as Roman Catholics.

Does the promise in fact create an imbalance? It need not do so, if it is rightly understood by both partners. First of all, it is of its nature simply an assurance by the Roman Catholic to his own Church that he understands his beliefs as a Roman Catholic. It is not, as it were, addressed to the Anglican partner. The latter is not asked to make any promises. He is simply to be informed of the Roman Catholic's promises, in order that he should understand his partner's state of mind. Secondly, it is necessary to realise that the Roman Catholic does not promise that the children will in fact be baptised and brought up as Roman Catholics: this he cannot do, as eventual decisions about the children must be joint decisions, which both partners can co-operate in carrying out, since the children's religious upbringing is a joint responsibility of both. Hence the promise does not pre-empt the eventual decision. If it did so, it would bring undue moral pressure on the Anglican, who may have equally strong, or even stronger, convictions about the religious upbringing of the children. The Roman Catholic can only promise, and does only promise, that he will do what he can in the circumstances to see that the children are brought up as Roman Catholics. What he will be able to do will depend, not simply on the attitude of the Anglican, but on the capacity of both to reach a joint decision, which must be their own decision, and which both can conscientiously accept. The phrase in the promise's normal wording, 'do all in my power', must be understood in such a way as to put the unity of the marriage first and as not to imply undue moral pressure. Moral pressures are built into the situation when consciences conflict, but a joint decision cannot result simply from pressures: it requires a growth of two persons towards unity.

Should the partners reach this decision about the children before they marry? In trying to answer this question one must first make clear that there is no legal requirement from the Roman Catholic side that they should: i.e. it is not required in order that the dispensation to marry may be granted. Indeed, the Roman Catholic law only requires that the Anglican be informed of the promise made by the Roman Catholic, not that his attitude should be expressed or even known. It thus becomes a pastoral question, and, as such, allows of no single answer. The priest, Roman Catholic or Anglican, cannot pastorally help the couple to enter into the

marriage with constructive attitudes and goals, unless he learns something of the beliefs and commitment of both partners; and his way of assisting them will vary according to these. If the Roman Catholic is a purely nominal one, and the Anglican deeply committed to his beliefs and his Church, it must surely be doubted whether the Roman Catholic is capable of making such a promise at all in any real or sincere way. If the reverse is true, then it is very probable that the Anglican will be willing that his children should be Roman Catholics. Yet it is not unknown for the commitment of either partner to reawaken the commitment of the other to his own Church. But if both are already committed to their own Churches in a real way, then there seems a strong case for leaving the decision to emerge in the course of time: the couple will usually be in an early stage of their understanding of each other either as persons or as Christians; and the actual experience of christian marriage and of joint prayer should be allowed to play its part in forging an eventual joint decision.

Thus it is not practicable to separate the legal from the pastoral aspects of the promise situation into stages: the Roman Catholic priest cannot first settle the legal question and then handle the pastoral side, if only because the legal aspect needs a pastoral context and explanation. But it is nonetheless important for the priest to keep the two aspects separate in his own mind. He will mislead the couple seriously, and destroy his pastoral relationship with them, if they find that what comes out in a personal conversation intended for their guidance (e.g. a reticence on either side about their probable future course of action) counts against their being granted a dispensation to marry, even though the Roman Catholic is sincerely able to make the promise.

In any case it is very desirable that the couple should go together to see the priests of both their Churches. A Roman Catholic priest should make some attempt to reattach even a nominal Anglican to his own Church, and vice versa. A greater degree of christian conviction and involvement on the part of the weaker partner will be a help and support to the more committed one.

Finally there is the matter of whether the Roman Catholic's promises are verbal or written. It is open to Roman Catholic hierarchies to ask for either, and in Britain they are to be written. This is partly a matter of administrative convenience; it is also a way of bringing some Roman Catholics to a more serious sense of obligation. A promise is really the same whether written or verbal. Nevertheless, the process of signing a form is frequently found to cause embarrassment, often to both parties, not to mention the priest. It can increase the external impression of one-sided pressure, even though it does not in fact alter the situation which is one of conscience and intention.

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Talks with the priest

Diocesan Roman Catholic regulations require that before a mixed marriage the couple should have four talks with the Roman Catholic priest. The content of the talks will vary according to need. The large majority of mixed marriages of Roman Catholics in this country are found to be with not probable readers of these guidelines, but with those of little or no religious beliefs; and then the talks will normally try to give some idea of what central Catholic convictions are, including convictions about the nature of marriage and about married life. If an instructed Roman Catholic is marrying an instructed Anglican, the talks could well serve as a help to both in understanding each other, in realising that they

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share a basically common faith, and in thinking of how they can live a prayerful and united christian life together.

5 Place and form of the wedding

A final part of Roman Catholic law which needs to be understood concerns the wedding ceremony. Canon law requires for the validity of the marriage of a Roman Catholic that it should take place before an authorised Roman Catholic priest and two witnesses: this is called the 'canonical form' of marriage. The law was introduced, not with an eye to mixed marriages, but to prevent secret or runaway marriages. Both Anglicans and Roman Catholics agree that baptised men and women are themselves the ministers in marriage; the priest is the official witness of the Church. Without such a law baptised Christians could truly marry each other in secret without anyone else knowing, with consequent chaos about public repute and the rights and responsibilities of marriage and the status of children: they would be married to christian understanding, even if they were not so in civil law or in the eyes of society. However, the Roman Catholic Church only binds its own members by this law; hence it regards other Christians as truly marrying each other in their own churches or registry offices, provided other conditions for a valid marriage are fulfilled. The law of canonical form was never intended to cast doubt or slight on the marriages of other Christians, though it has sometimes been misunderstood in this sense. But a Roman Catholic must be married before an authorised Roman Catholic priest, otherwise his marriage is not recognised by his Church as a true marriage.

In recent years, however, it has become reasonably common for a dispensation from canonical form to be granted to a Roman Catholic to enable him to marry a committed member of another Church, usually the bride, in her own Church. In this case the ceremony will be according to the rite of the other Church. Its minister may invite a Roman Catholic priest to take some part, in order to represent the two-Church nature of the marriage, but this is not a condition of the dispensation being granted. The dispensation from canonical form has to be obtained by the Roman Catholic from the bishop of the diocese in which he lives; normally the priest who handles the necessary preliminaries will apply to the bishop for it on his behalf.

When a marriage with an Anglican is to take place in a Roman Catholic church, the Roman Catholic bishops of England and Wales allow a Nuptial Mass, but hitherto they have not permitted the Anglican partner to communicate at this Mass. It must first be realised that to have Mass at all at a wedding will appear to some Anglican families to make the occasion seem one for the Roman Catholic family rather than for them, even if Anglican priests are invited to take some part. Further, the ability of only one partner and one family to communicate is seen by many on both sides as a serious difficulty. Hence it will be for the pastors of both Churches to help the couple to decide what they themselves want for their wedding, and to help them with any family pressures that may arise.

It is very desirable that a pattern of joint pastoral care should be developed by the clergy of both Churches in the stages leading up to marriage, should be exhibited at the wedding, and should be continued throughout married life.

6 Marriage: the sign of unity and the way to it

A marriage between an Anglican and a Roman Catholic is, in some sense,

a setting out on a path towards unity on which the Churches themselves are preparing to travel. It is bound, therefore, to encounter those very difficulties which the two Churches have yet to resolve. The different degrees of reliance upon law in the two Churches have already been commented on. The Church of England is less reliant upon law than the Church of Rome is; it has, nevertheless, standards and expectations which it trusts its people to uphold.

The Church of England has no laws applicable to inter-Church marriages which do not apply to marriages in general. That is to say that a Roman Catholic marrying an Anglican has to meet no extra legal obligations simply because he is a Roman Catholic and not an Anglican. He ought nevertheless to seek to understand Anglican churchmanship and spirituality - what living the Christian life means to an Anglican - and the parish priest is available to help him.

What, therefore, is a legal as well as a moral obligation on the Roman Catholic in respect of his own priest - that he should, with his fiancée, present himself for instruction in 'the ends and essential purposes of marriage' - is no less a moral obligation on the Anglican in respect of his parish priest in the Church of England. It should appear natural that the Anglican rector or vicar should be entrusted with his part also in the preparation of the couple for their marriage.

In matters where the Roman Catholic Church has ruled more definitively than the Church of England has, for instance upon the allowable methods of spacing and timing the conception of children, it is important that each partner should understand the other's obligations in conscience, in order that they can come to some basic agreement between themselves before they commit themselves irrevocably in marriage. The priest or clergyman can help to assure that the teaching of the respective Churches is fully understood, and that the couple are equipped to decide these matters for themselves; he cannot decide them for them; and certainly he can require no promise to be made relating to them as a condition of application for any necessary dispensations.

In planning the wedding, just as the two families will shew themselves sensitive to its inter-Church character by the courtesy of their invitations, so the clergy will be sensitive to the risk of over-clericalizing and fragmenting the service. They will be sensitive also to the risk of 'using' or 'exploiting' the marriage for a, no doubt laudable, ecumenical purpose, as well as for the - less laudable - assertion of ecclesiastical claims. The liturgy of marriage, in whichever church it is solemnized, has an integrity and order of its own, and this should be respected. Each Church has to satisfy certain requirements of law in the conduct of marriage. Where discretion is allowed, a balance has to be struck. Above all, the central truth must not be overlaid, that the bridegroom and the bride are themselves the ministers of the marriage; the clergy and congregation provide, in their several capacities, the Christian body or community within which they make their covenant together.