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Mixed Marriage, the Gospel and the Youth: Reflections on our Faith in a Global and Pluralistic Society

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Chapter Seven

Mixed Marriage, the Gospel and the Youth: Reflections on our Faith in a Global and Pluralistic Society¹

“In your country, there are many marriages between Catholic and other baptized Christians. Sometimes, these couples experience special difficulties. To these families I say: you live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity. Express that hope in prayer together, in the unity of love. Together, invite the Holy Spirit of love into your hearts and into your homes. He will help you to grow in trust and understanding.” (John Paul II, Address at York, UK, 1982).

Background

Catholic Church is genuinely concerned to develop an understanding of human nature and to teach the truth about love and humanity as received from Jesus Christ, a truth founded on human reason and divine revelation. This truth is often confirmed in the cultures and traditions of peoples and civilization throughout ages. Its intent is to promote mankind’s welfare and happiness rather than using them, serving rather than dominating or exploiting; guiding in truth and charity rather than promoting ignorance; preaching love rather than the law. It is this vision of love that seeks to reflect on mankind’s search for the meaning of life from the beginning and to apply this vision to the particular conditions of every age.

The youth and adults of Nigeria are asking questions. They have a right to reasonable and honest answers. What the Church seeks to do is to present a vision of life in which love is the norm. It is a learning process, though, often carried out with the rest of mankind, and based on experiences gained from the various branches of science, art and literature. The Church’s stand may be unpopular and even contradict the much-accepted wisdom of the age, but that does not mean that it is wrong. A heavy responsibility rests with the Church to show that fidelity and generosity in human relationships is not just practical, it is also a norm. Moreover, it is the best way. Perhaps to link its understanding of sex and marriage to a ‘moral law’ is not the best since law tends to restrict and to prohibit. On the contrary, the way of love that Jesus

¹ Ike O.F.; Paper presented to Catholic Young Men and Women at the St. Leo the Great Catholic Parish, Enugu in 2010

has shown us is the way to freedom of spirit, to greater personal growth and development, to the promotion of warm human values.

Scope

The topic namely; *Mixed Marriage, the Gospel and the Youth based on Reflections on our Faith in a Global and Pluralistic Society* is a broad theme. Things have changed so much from what used to be. Many new questions emerge and old answer does not seem to be satisfactory for the youths of our time.

A growing global and pluralistic society widens the horizons to choice, to knowledge and to critical enquiry as well as to faith, which poses challenges among the youths. An era of permissiveness has set in, nonetheless, people are daily searching for meaning and for happiness. The youths accept often that truth matters but have hard time finding it easily or trusting the sincerity of adults who tell them this 'truth'. The youths look at actions of elders and or institutions, not just the spoken words. They want conviction and witnessing, not merely authoritative statements. Our young people are the "Church of today, as well as the hope of tomorrow."

The question of 'mixed marriage' is a very important one that raises a number of delicate ecumenical and pastoral issues. In our society, mixed marriage is more likely than ever. The days when Catholics live apart from the rest of the society are over, and we have become used to living in a society where men and women of different races, cultures and traditions mix together. These changing patterns of the society are bound to be reflected in the experience of the Church. The Church's policy concerning marriages between Catholics and those of other faiths was clearly spelt out by Pope Paul VI in a '*Motu Proprio Matrimonia Mista*' in 1970. The question has been asked as to the appropriateness of the term 'mixed marriage' to describe a variety of different situations. Pope Paul VI himself was well aware of the problems created by this particular term. In many parts of the world, it is used to describe marriage between members of different races and religions.

On the one hand, it refers to the marriage of a Catholic to a non-baptized person or to someone who, although baptized, is not an active member of any Church. On the other hand, it also refers to the marriage of two practicing and committed Christians. It is obviously important to make the distinction very clear. The suggestion has been made many times that the

more appropriate term to describe the second kind of marriage would be 'inter-Church marriage'.²

Nonetheless, great confusion could be caused if different terminologies would be adopted for different cases, therefore, generally, the term mixed marriage shall be used.

What is Marriage?

Marriage is the state in which two people live together in a partnership of love and life, expressed through free consent, that is, not being under restraint; and not impeded by any natural or ecclesiastical law for the purposes of founding a family, for assisting one another in mutual help, for bringing up the children entrusted to them by God, that is to say, for securing their physical, mental and moral development until such time as they are capable of carrying on for themselves. If consent is lacking, there is no marriage.³

The consent must be an act of the will of each of the contracting parties, free of coercion or grave external fear. No human power can substitute for this consent. If this freedom is lacking, the marriage is invalid. In the beginning, the command was given by God to men to increase and multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28). It is evident, therefore, that if God instituted this natural contract of matrimony, it is a holy thing. The state of matrimony is a good state; it follows naturally upon a mutual agreement, which is called contract.

In Bible Old Testament; "Therefore, a man shall leave his mother and father and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh"(Matt. 23: 24). Throughout the Old Testament, marriage was a natural and holy contract. In the New Testament, Jesus on the occasion of His miracle at the marriage feast at Cana, (John 2:1-11) sanctified marriage in a particular way and raised it to the level of a sacrament, that is "*an outward sign of inward grace*".

Sacramental marriage means that those who enter into it enter into a holy and a sacred state of marriage in which they receive an increase of sanctifying

² Refer to the CTS Publication, London 1990; Mixed Marriages: The revised directory promulgated by the Bishops Conference of England and Wales, 30.04.1990.

³ Cf. Code of Canon Law, CIC, 1057 paragraph 1; Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1983, Numbers 1625 – 1629.

grace; they are raised, as it were, to a higher plane of supernatural activity, and at the same time have a right to all the necessary grace that their state required from time to time. It can truly be said that those who fulfil their duties in the married state, both to themselves and to their children, arrive very easily at a high state of sanctity. The elements essential to Christian marriage as contained in *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council, 1965, in numbers 47 to 52 are:

- * *The essence of the matrimonial consent itself, namely, the exchange of the right to sexual intercourse which is open to the generation of new life;*
- * *The unity of marriage, namely that this right is to be exchanged with no other person during the lifetime of the other partner;*
- * *The permanence of marriage, namely, indissolubility and that this right is intended to remain as long as both live.*

The Code of Canon Law says that our Lord raised to the dignity of Sacrament the very contract of matrimony between baptized persons, and there can be no valid contract of marriage without it being a Sacrament. All those who are validly baptized, that is to say, really baptized, when they contract marriage between themselves receive the Sacrament of matrimony whether they know it or not, whether they will it or no not. In a mixed marriage between a Catholic or a baptized non-Catholic and one who is not baptized, there is no Sacrament but only the natural bond of matrimony.

But if the unbaptised partner should at a later date become baptized then that natural matrimony becomes a Sacramental marriage. It is important to remember this in the case of what is called 'mixed' marriages, when the non-Catholic partner is converted at a later date to the Faith, but of course if both parties were validly baptized and married, the marriage is a sacrament from the beginning.⁴

Mixed Marriages

The basic attitude of the Church has always been to pay special attention and render pastoral care to those who enter into the married state, both in preparation state and in the continuing support after marriage. The Catholic Church speaks of the family as the 'domestic Church', and is well aware that unity within the family is always something vital to the stability and development of the marriage. There are so many factors today which militate

⁴ Cf. Dom Peter Flood, OSB, *Matrimony and Nullity*, CTS Publications, No. S 247, London, 1971.

against that vital unity that the Church is naturally worried about blessing a union when religion itself might become a source of division. Yet, religion, different though they are, could form a good basis for a life and love relationship between two mature adults, leading to mutual fulfilment. The Catholic Church has a special concern for marriages between Catholics and persons of other Christian traditions or other faiths. Experience shows that certain problems arise in many mixed marriages. Preparation for marriage is part of a much larger programme of preparation for life, and it is the duty of parents, priests, and appropriate schools or centres of formation.

Writing in 1970, Pope Paul VI spoke of the Church's duty of discouraging mixed marriage, and of the Church's clear preference that "Catholics be able in matrimony to attain perfect union of mind and full communion of life." At the same time, the Pope was at pains to point out that, men and women have a natural right to marry and beget children, and that the Church must ensure that her laws do justice to the demands of God's law and to the right to enter into marriage in accordance with God's law. The points stressed by Paul VI are equally valid today, and will remain so.

"In entering into marriage, the Catholic partner must be reminded of the conscientious obligation they have of doing nothing to endanger their own faith; of doing all that they can to pass on that faith to their children; and to their children; and of respecting the conscientious convictions of their partners in marriage."

At the outset it is important that we should distinguish clearly between different kinds of 'mixed marriage'. According to the Motu Proprio of Pope Paul VI:

Neither in doctrine nor in law does the Church place on the same level a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic, and one between a Catholic and an unbaptized person; for as the Second Vatican Council declared, those who, though they are not Catholics, "believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church". Moreover, although eastern Christians who have been baptized outside the Catholic Church are separated from communion with us, they possess true sacraments, above all the Priesthood and the Eucharist, whereby they are joined to us in a very close relationship. Undoubtedly there exists a marriage between baptized persons, since such a marriage is a true

*sacrament, a certain communion of spiritual benefits which is lacking in a marriage entered into by a baptized person and one who is not baptized.*⁵

The Church is concerned to show proper respect for the beliefs and convictions of others. It is not possible to spell out in precise detail how each couple will solve the problems that sometimes arise when the sincere beliefs and convictions of each partner are in conflict.

It is however, necessary to insist that those who are about to enter into marriage should recognize and face up to their responsibilities in this area. When two people are planning to get married, they are much more open to God's grace and His influence. The experience of being in love is one that touches people very deeply. You cannot quench love. But you can bend your position because of love. This could be a good point for the Catholics towards the non-Catholic partners. Love should make intending couples to be willing and ready to do anything good for each other. This is an opportunity for the clergyman and the parents to deepen the faith of the Catholic partner, and to alert the other partner to the seriousness with which the Church approaches marriage.

Mixed marriage in modern society is always likely to bring to the surface the difference between the Catholic understanding of marriage and that of others. Among Christians, there may well be differences about the nature of marriage as a Sacrament, the importance the Church attaches to the celebration of marriage within the Church, and about certain moral principles pertaining to marriage and family life. These questions can only be fully resolved when Christian unity is restored.

Meanwhile, it would be desirable if Catholics are fully aware of the teaching of the Church in these matters as well as being sensitive to the different views of other Christians. Where a marriage takes place between a Christian and an unbaptised person, this difference may well be far more radical. In practice, the same will often be true where the other partner has been baptized but has no actual experience of Christian faith or practice.

It is wise to anticipate that in both of these cases, the Christian view of marriage may well be entirely unfamiliar. Thus, the requirements of the Church that Catholics should marry according to 'canonical form', that is, in

⁵ Paul VI, *Matrimonial Mixta*, 1970.

the presence of a priest and two witnesses, are a matter of Church discipline, and can be dispensed by the Church for serious reasons. However, the requirement that marriage be accepted as a life-long union of two people in love and fidelity is an expression of the teaching of Christ himself, and can never be altered. The same is true of the duty to preserve one's faith.

The Church's Norms

The new Code of Canon Law, which came into force on 27th November 1983, states the following in Canons 1124, 1125 and 1126:

“Without the express permission of the competent authority, marriage is prohibited between two baptized persons, one of whom was baptized in the Catholic Church or received into it after baptism and has not defected from it by a formal act and the other of whom belongs to a Church or ecclesial community not in full communion with the Catholic Church.”

What may be important in this legislation and different from the old Canon Law of 1917 is that:

'Mixed Religion' is no longer referred to as an impediment requiring dispensation. What is required is the express permission of the competent authority, that is, of the Local Ordinary. Without that permission, a marriage would be unlawful, but not invalid. The Church's legislation now takes account of those Catholics who have defected from the Church by a formal act. Such persons are not obliged to observe 'canonical form'. However, they do require permission to marry Catholics as such marriages are now considered to be mixed marriages.

“The Local Ordinary can grant his permission if there is a just and reasonable cause. He is not to grant it unless the following conditions are fulfilled” (Canon 1125).

- * *The Catholic party is to declare that he or she is prepared to remove dangers of defecting from the faith, and is to make a sincere promise to do all in his or her power in order that all the children be baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church;*
- * *The other party is to be informed in good time of these promises to be made by the Catholic party, so that it is certain that he or she is truly aware of the promises and of the obligation of the Catholic party;*

- * *Both parties are to be instructed about the purposes and essential properties of marriage, which are not to be excluded by either contracting.*

It is important to note that the new code requires “a just and reasonable cause” to justify a dispensation, which should not be interpreted in a negative sense only different from the 1917 code which required “a grace reason”.

“The spiritual maturity of the couple and their ability to face up together to the difficulties of a mixed marriage would also be a just and reasonable cause for granting the required permission. The Local Ordinaries and other pastors of souls are to see to it that the Catholic spouse and the children born of a mixed marriage are not without the spiritual help needed to fulfil their obligations: they are also to assist the spouses to foster the unity of conjugal and family life.” (Canon 1129).

Couples that have entered into a mixed marriage have a special call on the pastoral care of the Church community and of the clergy. There can often be pastoral difficulties for such couples, and they are entitled to the Church for pastoral care. This responsibility can only be met fully when the whole parish community is involved in the support of marriage and family life. In the case of marriage between Catholics and persons from another Christian tradition, this pastoral care should be given whenever possible in co-operation with the clergy of the Catholics partners.

Gospel Values and Conclusion

What the Gospel makes clear is that love is the driving principle and motivation for creation, the incarnation and salvation of mankind. “*God loved the world so much that he sent his only begotten son*” (John 3:16). Much of what Jesus urged his disciples to be, to do and to teach is “to love one another” (John 13:34). In its teaching on love and marriage, the Catholic Church takes up the theme of love, being giving of self to secure the wellbeing of the other.

What make life interesting and exciting are the endless possibilities for growth and development. Like love, marriage is a challenge to a couple to help each other to grow and develop the positive sides of their character. They can do this by learning to cope with life together, enjoying the good times and weathering the bad times. Romance can suffer a severe shock when confronted with the limitations placed on dreams by shortage of money. Genuine love helps when confronted with these challenges and responds with “for better for worse”. It expresses what may be too complicated or too sensitive to put into words. It can express gratitude,

hope, forgiveness, acceptance and equality. It brings with it the ultimate in intimacy, in sharing one's very self in mutual possession.

