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Interdenominational and Interfaith Marriages

WILLIAM P. ROBERTS

In order for spouses to experience their marriage as a sign of Christ's love, they must show some faith in Christ, in sacramental living, in the ultimate meaning of marriage, love and life itself. Today there are more marriages between people with profound religious differences than there were a generation ago. From the Catholic perspective the reasons are obvious. The second Vatican Council promoted a healthier attitude toward other Christian denominations and world religions and has encouraged closer association with them. And within Catholicism a wider diversity of beliefs and ethical opinions is overtly expressed than was possible two decades ago.

As a result religious differences exist not only in interdenominational marriages, but also in marriages between persons of the same denomination. We must be aware of five areas in which such differences can affect the achievement of a happy marriage before we can consider what couples can do to resolve these differences in a constructive way.

1) Commitment to Christ. Individual Christians can seriously differ about what they actually believe in regard to Christ. Do they both accept Christ as the enfleshment of the Son of God, the Word of God? Do they agree that he is Lord and Savior of all? Do they believe that the crucified Christ is risen from the dead and continues to guide us and lead us to God?

Beyond these areas of traditional Christian belief, there can be major differences in the personal meaning that Christ

This excerpt, copyright © 1983 by Dr. Roberts and used with his permission, is from his recent book, *Marriage: Sacrament of Hope and Challenge*, published by St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1615 Republic Street, Cincinnati, OH 45210, 136 pp., paperback, \$4.75.

has for us. Is he a mere lawgiver, a distant model from the past, a meaningless abstraction — or a personal friend who is intimately present? To what degree is Christ a central point of reference in a couple's decision-making and in their perception of each other and their marriage?

What does it mean for each of us to be followers of Christ? For one spouse it might mean merely abiding by the Ten Commandments and the laws of the church. For the other it involves a dedicated pursuit of the ideals of the Sermon on the Mount and a radical openness to the Spirit given us by the crucified and risen Christ.

2) Commitment to church affiliation. "Belonging to the church" can mean anything from nominal membership due to past baptism to attendance at Christmas and Easter to an explicit involvement in the life and mission of the church that is a significant part of one's life. Special tensions can arise in a marriage where there are profound differences in the way spouses relate to the church.

3) The meaning of Scripture. There are two aspects to this issue. First, what role does Scripture have in the shaping of one's faith consciousness and one's spirituality? Is it a regular part of one's reading and one's prayer, or does Scripture have very little practical impact on one's faith life?

The second aspect has to do with the interpretation of Scripture. A person who insists on a fundamentalist or literalist interpretation of Scripture will have an understanding of the Bible that is very different from one who interprets Scripture in light of its historical, cultural and literary context. In recent years some Christian denominations have split over these two approaches to the interpretation of Scripture; it is not surprising that such a difference could cause serious, perhaps unresolvable difficulties in a marriage.

4) Beliefs about marriage. Notable differences also arise in the degree of religious meaning individuals find in marriage. On the level of moral convictions, the differences can be drastic and fraught with tension. How compatible are a couple's views regarding the morality of abortion, contraception, sterilization, extramarital affairs, diverse sexual actions in the marriage?

5) Religious formation of children. In interdenominational marriages, the first question concerns the denomination in which the child will be reared. When there are differences within the same denomination, another set of questions surfaces. Will we have the child baptized in infancy or allow the child to decide at a later age? Will we insist that the child go to church with the parent who attends weekly, or allow the child to stay home with the parent who never attends? Will we raise the child in the strict tradition or in a more liberal approach?

It is most important that two people contemplating marriage deal with the issues in these five areas in a forthright manner prior to the wedding. They must identify where they both stand in regard to these matters. They must also determine whether they can in fact resolve their religious differences, or whether their divergent views present an insurmountable obstacle to a happy marriage. It is a mistake to pretend that the problem will automatically resolve itself after the marriage.

Even when agreements have been made prior to the marriage, the couple must continue to share with each other how they feel about the dissimilarities in their religious views, and about the way these divergences actually affect their marriage. They must be willing to evaluate the efforts they are making in working out their religious differences in a manner compatible to the growth of their marriage.

Most of all, such a couple must strive to explore the ways in which they can share the elements of faith they do hold in common through discussion, shared prayer and cooperative participation in worthy human causes. Very often what binds us together in the area of religion outweighs what separates us.