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**STATEMENT ON THE  
IMPLEMENTATION  
OF THE  
APOSTOLIC LETTER  
ON MIXED MARRIAGES**

**January 1, 1971**

**NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
OF  
CATHOLIC BISHOPS**



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**STATEMENT OF THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
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**on the**

**IMPLEMENTATION OF THE APOSTOLIC LETTER  
ON MIXED MARRIAGES**

**INTRODUCTORY  
PRINCIPLES**

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council requested the Holy See to provide for the application of conciliar teaching to marriages which unite Catholics and those of differing religious convictions. Following discussions of this matter by the Synod of Bishops in 1967, the Holy See, after collegial consultation with the episcopal conferences, prepared a response to that request. And on March 31, 1970, Pope Paul VI issued *motu proprio* the Apostolic Letter Determining Norms for Mixed Marriages. The provisions of this Apostolic Letter, effective October 1, 1970, open the way to an improved pastoral approach in support of couples united or to be united in such marriages.

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops welcomes the Apostolic Letter and encourages its ready application within our country. We call to mind the principles upon which it is based and the values it seeks to uphold. Our statement is to be understood only with a view to the complete text of the *motu proprio*.

First of all, the Apostolic Letter recognizes the natural right of man to marry and beget children, and to exercise this right, free from undue pressure. (cf. *Pacem in Terris*, n. 15)

Within marriage the Church seeks always to uphold the strength and stability of marital union and the family which flows from it. For "the well-being of the individual person and of human and Christian society is intimately linked with the healthy condition of that community produced by marriage and family. Hence Christians and all men who hold this community in high esteem sincerely rejoice in the various ways by which men today find help in fostering this community of love and perfecting its life, and by which spouses and par-

ents are assisted in their lofty calling.” (*The Church in the Modern World*, n. 47)

As the Apostolic Letter observes, the “perfect union of mind and full communion of life” to which married couples aspire can be more readily achieved when both partners share the same Catholic belief and life. For this reason, the Church greatly desires that Catholics marry Catholics and generally discourages mixed marriages.

Yet, recognizing that mixed marriages do occur, the Church, upholding the principles of Divine Law, makes special arrangements for them. And recognizing that these marriages do at times encounter special difficulties, the Church wishes to see that special help and support are extended to the couples concerned. This is the abiding responsibility of all. For “Christians should actively promote the values of marriage and family, both by example of their own lives and by cooperation with other men of good will. Thus when difficulties arise, Christians will provide, on behalf of family life, those necessities and helps which are suitably modern.” (*Ibid.*, n. 52)

In a particular way, priests with a pastoral ministry to families and all persons engaged in the family life apostolate are to be commended for their attention to the specific needs of individual couples. Since these will vary, the Apostolic Letter stresses the importance of individualized support for diverse situations. It recognizes that “. . . the canonical discipline on mixed marriages cannot be uniform and must be adapted . . .” and “the pastoral care to be given to the married people and children of marriage” must also be adapted “according to the distinct circumstances of the married couple and the differing degrees of their ecclesiastical communion.” Consequently, pastors, in exercising their ministry in behalf of marriages that unite Catholics and others will do so with zealous concern and respect for the couples involved. They should have an active and positive regard for the holy state in which such couples are united.

In such marriages, the conscientious devotion of the Catholic to the Catholic Church is to be safeguarded, and the conscience of the other partner is to be respected. This is in keeping with the principle of religious liberty. (cf. Appendix, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, Second Vatican Council, n. 3)

In all valid marriages the Church recognizes sacred and abiding values. For “the intimate partnership of married life and love has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws. It is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent. Hence by that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other,

a relationship arises which by divine will and in the eyes of society too is a lasting one. For the good of the spouses and their offspring as well as of society, the existence of this sacred bond no longer depends on human decisions alone.” (*The Church in the Modern World*, n. 48) So the sacred character of all valid marriages, including those which the Church does not consider as sacramental, is recognized. For these, too, manifest the hand of God, Who is the author of marriage, and should lead the couple to holiness of life. In preparing couples for mixed marriages, pastors should make clear to the partners the deep significance which the Church perceives in their intended union as “two in one flesh.” (Mt. 19:16)

In this regard, the broad areas of agreement which unite Christians and Jews in their appreciation of the religious character of marriage should be kept significantly in mind. (cf. *Joint Statement on Marriage and Family Life in the United States*, issued by the United States Catholic Conference, the National Council of the Churches of Christ, and the Synagogue Council of America, June 8, 1966)

In this context, it should be clearly noted that while Catholics are required to observe the Catholic form of marriage for validity, unless dispensed by their Bishop, the Catholic Church recognizes the reality of marriages contracted validly among those who are not Christians and among those Christians separated from us.

In addition to the sacred character of all valid marriages, still more must be said of marriages between a Catholic and another baptized Christian. According to our Catholic tradition, we believe such marriages to be truly sacramental. The Apostolic Letter states that there exists between the persons united in them a special “communion of spiritual benefits.” These spiritual bonds in which couples are united are grounded in the “true, though imperfect, communion” which exists between the Catholic Church and all who believe in Christ and are properly baptized. (*Decree on Ecumenism*, n. 3) Along with us, such persons are honored by the title of Christian and are rightly regarded as brothers in the Lord. In marriages which unite Catholics and other baptized Christians, the couple should be encouraged to recognize in practical ways what they share together in the life of grace, in faith, hope and charity along with other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, and that in service to the same Lord they await the salvation which He promised to those who would be His followers.

A number of the particular difficulties faced by Catholics and other Christians in mixed marriages result from the division among Christians. However successful these marriages may be, they do not erase the pain of that wider division. Yet this division need not weaken



these marriages, and given proper understanding, they may lead to a deep spiritual unity between the spouses. Such couples should accept the painful aspects of Christian division insofar as these affect their lives together as a sharing in the suffering of the Church. Thus they should regard their personal efforts at understanding and patience as symbolic of and a participation in the broader efforts toward unity among the separated churches. Their own love as it reaches out to relatives and friends should have a healing effect in establishing closer relationships between groups of Christians who have been estranged due to divisions among them. In this way, such marriages, while encompassing within one home the divisions among Christians, nevertheless, like all sacramental marriages, should be seen as compelling signs of the mystery of Christ's abiding love for His Church, a love which continually seeks to reconcile. Finally, such couples, should they achieve such a perspective in regard to their marriage, can do much to intensify the longing among Christians for the day when all shall be one.

In order to aid these couples to come to this deep understanding of their married life together, when possible, their Catholic and other Christian pastors should jointly do all that they can to prepare them for marriage and to support them and their families with all the aids their ministry can provide. They can, for example, enliven the couple's appreciation of the virtues of fidelity, mutual trust, forgiveness, honesty, openness, love and responsibility for their children. In this way the pastors of the different Christian communities can best bring the couple to a keen awareness of all that they have in common as Christians as well as to a proper appreciation of the gravity of the differences that yet remain between their churches.

In their homes, these couples should be encouraged in practical ways to develop a common life of prayer calling upon the many elements of spirituality which they share as a common Christian heritage and expressing their own common faith in the Lord, together asking Him to help them grow in their love for each other, to bless their families with the graces they need, and to keep them always mindful of the needs of others. The example of parents united in prayer is especially important for the children whom God may give them. In regard to public worship together in each other's churches, pastors may explain to the couple the provisions made for this by the Holy See in the *Ecumenical Directory*. (cf. *Ecumenical Directory*, nn. 39, 41, 42, 47-50, and 55-59. The texts of these sections of the Directory are reproduced in full in the Appendix of this document.)

Beyond this, parents have the right and the responsibility to provide for the religious education of their children. This right is clearly taught

by Vatican II: "Since the family is a society in its own original right, it has the right freely to live its own domestic religious life under the guidance of the parents. Parents, moreover, have the right to determine, in accordance with their own religious beliefs, the kind of religious education that their children are to receive." (*Declaration on Religious Freedom*, n. 5) It is evident that in preparing for a mixed marriage, the couple will have to reach decisions and make specific choices in order to fulfill successfully the responsibility that is theirs toward their children in this respect. It is to be hoped for their own sake that in this matter, the couple may reach a common mind. If this issue is not resolved before marriage, the couple, as sad experience has shown, find a severe strain later in their marital life that can subject them to well-meaning but tension-building pressures from relatives on both sides. If this issue cannot be resolved, there is a serious question whether the couple should marry. In reaching a concrete decision concerning the baptism and religious education of children, both partners should remember that neither thereby abdicates the fundamental responsibility of parents to see that their children are instilled with deep and abiding religious values. In this the Catholic partner is seriously bound to act in accord with his faith which recognizes that, "This is the unique Church of Christ which in the Creed we avow as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. After His Resurrection our Savior handed her over to Peter to be shepherded (Jn. 21:17), commissioning him and the other apostles to propagate and govern her (cf. Mt. 28:18 ff). Her he erected for all ages as 'the pillar and mainstay of the truth' (1 Tim. 3:15). This Church, constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with that successor, although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structure. These elements, however, as gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ, possess an inner dynamism toward Catholic unity." (*Constitution on the Church*, n. 8) This faith is the source of a serious obligation in conscience on the part of the Catholic, whose conscience in this regard must be respected.

**SPECIFIC  
NORMS**

This Apostolic Letter on mixed marriages leaves to episcopal conferences the further determination of specific questions. (The norms of *Matrimonia Mixta* are not repeated here, nor are the special norms affecting the marriages of Eastern Catholics and marriages of Catholics with Eastern non-Catholic Christians. They are found in the *Decree on*

*Catholic-Orthodox Marriages*, of February 22, 1967.) In order to

implement this mandate, the NCCB sets forth the following for the dioceses of the United States.

**I. PASTORAL  
RESPONSIBILITY**

1. In every diocese, there shall be appropriate informational programs to explain both the reasons for restrictions upon mixed marriages and the positive spiritual values to be sought in such marriages when permitted. This is particularly important if the non-Catholic is a Christian believer and the unity of married and family life is ultimately based

upon the baptism of both wife and husband. If possible, all such programs should be undertaken after consultation with and in conjunction with non-Catholic authorities.

2. In every diocese there shall be appropriate programs for the instruction and orientation of the clergy, as well as of candidates for the ministry, so that they may understand fully the reasons for the successive changes in the discipline of mixed marriage and may willingly undertake their personal responsibilities to each individual couple and family in the exercise of their pastoral ministry.

3. In addition to the customary marriage preparation programs, it is the serious duty of each one in the pastoral ministry, according to his own responsibility, office or assignment, to undertake:

(a) the spiritual and catechetical preparation, especially in regard to the "ends and essential properties of marriage (which) are not to be excluded by either party" (cf. *Matrimonia Mixta*, n. 6), on a direct and individual basis, of couples who seek to enter a mixed marriage, and

(b) continued concern and assistance to the wife and husband in mixed marriages and to their children, so that married and family life may be supported in unity, respect for conscience, and common spiritual benefit.

4. In the assistance which he gives in preparation for marriage between a Catholic and a non-Catholic, and his continued efforts to help all married couples and families, the priest should endeavor to be in contact and to cooperate with the minister or religious counselor of the non-Catholic.



**II. DECLARATION AND PROMISE**  
**(M.P., n. 7)**

5. The declaration and promise by the Catholic, necessary for dispensation from the impediment to a mixed marriage (either mixed religion or disparity of worship), shall be made, in the following words or their substantial equivalent:

“I reaffirm my faith in Jesus Christ and, with God’s help, intend to continue living that

faith in the Catholic Church.

“I promise to do all in my power to share the faith I have received with our children by having them baptized and reared as Catholics.”

6. The declaration and promise are made in the presence of a priest or deacon either orally or in writing as the Catholic prefers.

7. The form of the declaration and promise is not altered in the case of the marriage of a Catholic with another baptized Christian, but the priest should draw the attention of the Catholic to the communion of spiritual benefits in such a Christian marriage. The promise and declaration should be made in the light of the “certain, though imperfect, communion” of the non-Catholic with the Catholic Church because of his belief in Christ and baptism. (cf. *Decree on Ecumenism*, n. 3)

8. At an opportune time before marriage, and preferably as part of the usual pre-marital instructions, the non-Catholic must be informed of the promises and of the responsibility of the Catholic. No precise manner or occasion of informing the non-Catholic is prescribed. It may be done by the priest, deacon or the Catholic party. No formal statement of the non-Catholic is required. But the mutual understanding of this question beforehand should prevent possible disharmony that might otherwise arise during married life.

9. The priest who submits the request for dispensation from the impediment to a mixed marriage shall certify that the declaration and promise have been made by the Catholic and that the non-Catholic has been informed of this requirement. This is done in the following or similar words:

“The required promise and declaration have been made by the Catholic in my presence. The non-Catholic has been informed of this requirement so that it is certain that he (she) is aware of the promise and obligation on the part of the Catholic.”

The promise of the Catholic must be sincerely made, and is to be presumed to be sincerely made. If, however, the priest has reason to

doubt the sincerity of the promise made by the Catholic, he may not recommend the request for the dispensation and should submit the matter to the local Ordinary.

### **III. FORM OF MARRIAGE**

**(M.P., n. 9)**

10. Where there are serious difficulties in observing the Catholic canonical form in a mixed marriage, the local Ordinary of the Catholic party or of the place where the marriage is to occur may dispense the Catholic from the observance of the form for a just pastoral cause. An exhaustive list is impossible, but the following are the types of reasons:

to achieve family harmony or to avoid family alienation, to obtain parental agreement to the marriage, to recognize the significant claims of relationship or special friendship with a non-Catholic minister, to permit the marriage in a church that has particular importance to the non-Catholic. If the Ordinary of the Catholic party grants a dispensation for a marriage which is to take place in another diocese, the Ordinary of that diocese should be informed beforehand.

11. Ordinarily this dispensation from the canonical form is granted in view of the proposed celebration of a religious marriage service. In some exceptional circumstances (e.g., certain Catholic-Jewish marriages) it may be necessary that the dispensation be granted so that a civil ceremony may be performed. In any case, a public form that is civilly recognized for the celebration of marriage is required.

### **IV. RECORDING MARRIAGES**

**(M.P., n. 10)**

12. In a mixed marriage for which there has been granted a dispensation from the canonical form, an ecclesiastical record of the marriage shall be kept in the chancery of the Diocese which granted the dispensation from the impediment, and in the marriage records of the parish from which application for the dispensation was made.

13. It is the responsibility of the priest who submits the request for the dispensation to see that, after the public form of marriage ceremony is performed, notices of the marriage are sent in the usual form to:

- (a) the parish and chancery noted above (12)
- (b) the place of baptism of the Catholic party.

The recording of other mixed marriages is not changed.

**V. CELEBRATION  
OF MARRIAGES  
BETWEEN  
CATHOLICS  
AND NON-  
CATHOLICS**

14. It is not permitted to have two religious marriage services or to have a single service in which both the Catholic marriage ritual and a non-Catholic marriage ritual are celebrated jointly or successively. (cf. n. 13 of *Matrimonia Mixta*)

15. With the permission of the local Ordinary and the consent of the appropriate authority of the other church or community, a non-Catholic minister may be invited to participate in the Catholic marriage service by giving additional prayers, blessings, or words of greeting or exhortation. If the marriage is not part of the Eucharistic celebration, the minister may also be invited to read a lesson and/or to preach. (cf. the *Ecumenical Directory*, Part I, n. 56)

16. In the case where there has been a dispensation from the Catholic canonical form and the priest has been invited to participate in the non-Catholic marriage service, with the permission of the local Ordinary and the consent of the appropriate authority of the other church or communion, he may do so by giving additional prayers, blessings, or words of greeting and exhortation. If the marriage service is not part of the Lord's Supper or the principal liturgical service of the Word, the priest, if invited, may also read a lesson and/or preach. (cf. *ibid.*)

17. To the extent that Eucharistic sharing is not permitted by the general discipline of the Church (cf. n. 11, *Matrimonia Mixta*, and the exceptions in n. 39 of the *Ecumenical Directory*, Part I, May 14, 1967), this is to be considered when plans are being made to have the mixed marriage at Mass or not.

18. Since the revised Catholic rite of marriage includes a rich variety of scriptural readings and biblically oriented prayers and blessings from which to choose, its use may promote harmony and unity on the occasion of a mixed marriage (cf. *Introduction to the Rite of Marriage*, n. 9), provided the service is carefully planned and celebrated. The general directives that the selection of texts and other preparations should involve "all concerned, including the faithful . . ." (*General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, n. 73; cf. n. 313) are especially applicable to the mixed marriage service, where the concerns of the couple, the non-Catholic minister and other participants should be considered.

## VI. PLACE OF MARRIAGE

19. The ordinary place of marriage is in the parish church or other sacred place. For serious reasons, the local Ordinary may permit the celebration of a mixed marriage, when there has been no dispensation from the canonical form and the Catholic marriage service is to be celebrated, outside a Catholic church or chapel, providing there is no

scandal involved and proper delegation is granted (for example, where there is no Catholic church in the area, etc.).

20. If there has been a dispensation from canonical form, ordinarily the marriage service is celebrated in the non-Catholic church.

The practical forms for the implementation of the above directives on the local level are to be developed by the local Chancery in accordance with its normal practices.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The provisions of this document, as well as the Apostolic Letter upon which it is based, call for a renewed pastoral concern toward couples contemplating and those already in mixed marriages.

We urge all who are in any way engaged in the pastoral ministry to families to study this and related documents, and sensitively to apply these latest provisions.

To assist our priests, religious and lay people in carrying out the further implementation of this document, we pledge a cooperative effort on the part of appropriate agencies of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United States Catholic Conference. Specifically, we call upon:

The *Family Life Division* of the United States Catholic Conference to develop basic pre-marriage and marriage education programs incorporating the norms and spirit of this document;

The *Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs* and the *Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy* to explore the possibility of an ecumenical form for mixed marriage. This should be done with appropriate consultation involving interested churches and ecclesial communities separated from us;

The *Bishops' Committee on Priestly Formation* to develop a plan of study and renewal for the pastoral care of mixed marriages to be

imparted both through seminary education and through programs for the continuing education of clergy.

While much remains to be done if the Church is to exercise more adequately a proper pastoral solicitude for couples in mixed marriages, we take this opportunity to commend the countless persons, lay, religious and clergy, at the diocesan and parish level, who are engaged in marriage education and family counseling throughout the country.

Finally, we encourage the priests of the United States, who share with us a particular responsibility for the Church's ministry, to renew their pastoral solicitude for couples already joined in a mixed marriage, and also for those engaged couples of differing religious convictions who will soon begin married life together.

Approved by National Conference of Catholic Bishops  
of the United States, November 16, 1970  
Effective January 1, 1971



## APPENDIX

### Excerpts

(A) *DIRECTORY FOR THE APPLICATION OF THE DECISIONS OF SECOND ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF THE VATICAN CONCERNING ECUMENICAL MATTERS*

- N. 39 “Although these (Eastern) Churches are separated from us, yet they possess true sacraments, above all—by apostolic succession—the priesthood and the Eucharist, whereby they are still joined to us in closest intimacy. Therefore some sharing in liturgical worship (*communicatio in sacris*), given suitable circumstances and the approval of church authority, is not merely possible but is encouraged.”
- N. 41 The principles governing this sharing set out in the *Decree on Eastern Churches* should be observed with the prudence that the decree recommends; the norms which apply to Oriental Catholics apply equally to the faithful of any rite, including the Latin.
- N. 42 It is particularly opportune that the Catholic authority, whether the local one, the synod or the episcopal conference, does not extend permission for sharing in the reception or administration of the sacraments of Penance, Holy Eucharist or Anointing of the Sick except after satisfactory consultations with the competent authorities (at least local ones) of the separated Oriental Church.
- N. 47 A Catholic who occasionally, for reasons set out below, attends the Holy Liturgy (Mass) on a Sunday or holy day of obligation in an Orthodox Church is not then bound to assist at Mass in a Catholic Church. It is likewise a good thing if on such days Catholics who for just reasons cannot go to Mass in their own Church, attend the Holy Liturgy of their separated Oriental brethren, if this is possible.
- N. 48 Because of the close communion between the Catholic Church and the separated Eastern Churches, as described above (n. 40), it is permissible for a member of one of the latter to act as godparent, together with a Catholic godparent, at the baptism of a Catholic infant or adult so long as there is provision for

the Catholic education of the person being baptized, and it is clear that the godparent is a suitable one. A Catholic is not forbidden to stand as godparent in an Orthodox church, if he is so invited. In this case, the duty of providing for the Christian education of the baptized person binds in the first place the godparent who belongs to the Church in which the child is baptized.

- N. 49 Brethren of other churches may act as bridesmaid or best man at a wedding in a Catholic church. A Catholic too can be best man or bridesmaid at a marriage properly celebrated among separated brethren.
- N. 50 Catholics may be allowed to attend Orthodox liturgical services if they have reasonable grounds, e.g., arising out of a public office or function, blood relationships, friendships, desire to be better informed, etc. In such cases there is nothing against their taking part in the common responses, hymns, and actions of the Church in which they are guests. Receiving Holy Communion, however, will be governed by what is laid down above, nn. 42 and 44. Because of the close communion referred to earlier (n. 40), local Ordinaries can give permission for a Catholic to read lessons at a liturgical service, if he is invited. These same principles govern the manner in which an Orthodox may assist at services in Catholic churches.
- N. 55 Celebration of the sacraments is an action of the celebrating community, carried out within the community, signifying the oneness of faith, worship and life of the community. Where this unity of sacramental faith is deficient, the participation of the separated brethren with Catholics, especially in the sacraments of the Eucharist, Penance and Anointing of the Sick, is forbidden. Nevertheless, since the sacraments are both signs of unity and sources of grace, the Church can for adequate reasons allow access to those sacraments to a separated brother. This may be permitted in danger of death or in urgent need (during persecution, in prisons) if the separated brother has no access to a minister of his own communion, and spontaneously asks a Catholic priest for the sacraments—so long as he declares a faith in these sacraments in harmony with that of the Church, and is rightly disposed. In other cases the judge of this urgent necessity must be the diocesan bishop or the episcopal conference. A Catholic in similar circumstances may not ask for these sacraments except from a minister who has been validly ordained.

- N. 56 A separated brother is not to act as a Scripture reader or to preach during the celebration of the Eucharist. The same is to be said of a Catholic at the celebration of the Lord's Supper or at the principal liturgical service of the Word held by the Christians who are separated from us. At other services, even liturgical ones, it is allowable to exercise some functions, with the previous permission of the local Ordinary and the consent of the authorities of the community concerned.
- N. 57 With the exception already dealt with above (n. 48) it is not permissible for a member of a separated community to act as godparent in the liturgical and canonical sense at Baptism or Confirmation. The reason is that a godparent is not merely undertaking his responsibility for the Christian education of the person baptized or confirmed as a relation or friend—he is also, as a representative of a community of faith, standing as sponsor for the faith of the candidate. Equally, a Catholic cannot fulfill this function for a member of a separated community. However, because of ties of blood or friendship, a Christian of another communion, since he has faith in Christ, can be admitted with a Catholic godparent as a Christian witness of the baptism. In comparable circumstances a Catholic can do the same for a member of a separated community. In these cases the responsibility for the Christian education of the candidate belongs of itself to the godparent who is a member of the Church in which the candidate is baptized. Pastors should carefully explain to the faithful the evangelical and ecumenical reasons for this regulation, so that all misunderstanding of it may be prevented.
- N. 58 The separated brethren may act as "official" witnesses (bridesmaid or best man) at a Catholic marriage, and Catholics at a marriage which is properly celebrated between our separated brethren.
- N. 59 Catholics may be allowed to attend occasionally the liturgical services of other brethren if they have reasonable ground, e.g., arising out of a public office or function, blood relationship or friendship, desire to be better informed, an ecumenical gathering, etc. In these cases, with due regard to what has been said above—there is nothing against Catholics taking some part in the common responses, hymns and actions of the community of which they are guests—so long as they are not at variance with Catholic faith. The same principles govern the manner in which our separated brethren may assist at services in

Catholic churches. This participation, from which reception of the Eucharist is always excluded, should lead the participants to esteem the spiritual riches we have in common and at the same time make them more aware of the gravity of our separations.

(B) *DECLARATION ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM*,  
SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

- N. 3 Further light is shed on the subject if one considers that the highest norm of human life is the divine law—eternal, objective, and universal—whereby God orders, directs, and governs the entire universe and all the ways of the human community, by a plan conceived in wisdom and love. Man has been made by God to participate in this law, with the result that, under the gentle disposition of divine Providence, he can come to perceive ever increasingly the unchanging truth. Hence every man has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth in matters religious, in order that he may with prudence form for himself right and true judgments of conscience, with the use of all suitable means.

Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication, and dialogue. In the course of these, men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth. Moreover, as the truth is discovered, it is by a personal assent that men are to adhere to it.

On his part, man perceives and acknowledges the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience. In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience faithfully, in order that he may come to God, for whom he was created. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious.

For, of its very nature, the exercise of religion consists before all else in those internal, voluntary, and free acts whereby man sets the course of his life directly toward God. No merely human power can either command or prohibit acts of this kind.







