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*If I Marry*  
*A Roman Catholic*

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*by*

The Commission on Marriage and the Home  
of The Federal Council of the Churches  
of Christ in America

1947

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## IF I MARRY A ROMAN CATHOLIC

There is nothing to keep young people of other churches from falling in love with Roman Catholics. They associate freely in recreational and social life, and to some extent in school, as they ought to do. So far as the individuals themselves are concerned, many are well suited to each other in character and personality. Their spiritual ideals also may be reasonably harmonious so that they believe that there is nothing to prevent their marriage. Even though they may be dimly aware that there are inevitable difficulties in the path ahead they are inclined to feel their love is so all-important that any problems which arise will take care of themselves.

It is not realistic, however, to make such an assumption. The facts, which cannot be ignored, are that an alarmingly large proportion of such marriages fail in disillusionment and heartbreak. This pamphlet aims to help our young people see why this is so.

The most significant large-scale report showing the instability of mixed marriages is the one commonly called the Maryland study. It is published under the title, "Youth Tell Their Story," by the American Council

on Education, Washington, D. C., with Howard M. Bell as author. In one part of this study 12,000 young people reported the religious connection of their parents and whether they were living together or whether their home was broken by divorce, desertion or separation.

### More Mixed Marriages Fail

The striking fact was that those who came from mixed marriages reported two and one-fourth times as many broken homes as young people whose parents were both Protestant and two and one-third times as many as homes in which both parents were Roman Catholic. The percentages were as follows: Where both parents were Protestant 6.8 per cent of homes were broken. Where both were Roman Catholic 6.4 per cent were broken. Of mixed marriages 15.2 per cent were broken. Where there was no religious connection there were even more broken homes, namely 16.7 per cent. Childless marriages were excluded by the nature of the study. Otherwise the proportion of failures would have been higher.

### Harmony in Training and Background Desirable

Religious conviction and philosophy of life are more significant for lifelong hap-

piness than are the early raptures which do not take these factors into account. Marriage is more than an emotional tie. It is a vital union of a man and woman in which both need harmony and mutual help at the highest levels.

Recent research has confirmed the observation of the best interpreters of marriage that similarity of cultural background is one of the foundation stones of marital success. Wide difference in childhood environment and education inevitably brings domestic difficulty. Of course Roman and non-Roman Christians share in the values of the great Christian stream of culture and of American democratic life. They are, however, shaped to different patterns and their convictions about family life are not the same.

## Do Not Drift Into Love Blindly

The difficulties which arise in a mixed marriage are illustrated in a case reported by Dr. Grace Sloan Overton.<sup>1</sup> There came to her a daughter of a Methodist minister with her young man who was a Roman Catholic. She was a senior in college and he a graduate student. Both were fine and serious young people. They had just come from the priest and he had explained the Roman Catholic position and the require-

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<sup>1</sup> *Mixed Marriages*, by Grace Sloan Overton, *Forward*, June 21, 1941, p. 5.

ments which would have to be met in their marriage.

Could the prospective bride plan her marriage and select the minister who was to marry them as she had thoughtlessly assumed? Not at all. They would have to be married by the priest or else the man would be excommunicated from his church.

"The young man explained his position by saying: 'My people have been Catholic for four-hundred years. I could not feel married if I married outside the Church. But as I think it over it leaves my wife out, for both the children we may have and I must be Catholic. This seems a bit harsh, but this is the way it must be.'

"The young woman expressed her position by saying: 'I cannot be Catholic. I want my preacher-father, whom I love very dearly, to perform our ceremony. Why should I promise to bring up our children as Catholics? This would make me seem an outsider in my own home.'

"He, seeing how she was hurt by the situation, hastened to say: 'My dear, it has nothing to do with the way I love you. These are things which are beyond our control—it is just the way it is.' "

In such a situation a young woman might well ask, "Who determines 'the way it is' with my life and with my own marriage? Should I allow my family relationships to be 'out of my control' as you have expressed it? If things have been fully settled without

my consent, one thing that I can do is to decide not to enter marriage on such terms."

Christians who are not Roman Catholics have something that is quite as precious to them as the teaching of the Roman Church is to its members. Why should they not stand for the preciousness of their faith and resist the exactions of a Church which says, "We make all the rules for any marriage in which one of our members is involved?" In a mixed marriage the Protestant or other non-Roman Christian is just as much involved as the Roman Catholic, and where his happiness and his freedom are concerned he must take a stand.

When intolerable conditions are introduced the young person should reject them even if it means delaying one's marriage until an equally attractive person of one's own faith can be found. With such a person the outlook for success will be distinctly more favorable. Most young people do not marry the first persons with whom they are in love.

In the case just mentioned the complaint was made, "Why couldn't we have been aware of this before? We have walked into love blindly, believing our love to be the biggest thing in the world, only to find that there is something bigger, something to which one of us must yield if we are not to give each other up."

## The Official Roman Catholic Position

In warning young people against the pitfalls in mixed marriages we are taking a position similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church on this matter. Pope Pius XI in his encyclical letter "*Casti Connubii*," after characterizing such marriages as rash and heedless goes on to say:<sup>2</sup> "This attitude of the Church to mixed marriages appears in many of her documents, all of which are summed up in the Code of Canon Law:<sup>3</sup> 'Everywhere and with the greatest strictness the Church forbids marriages between baptized persons, one of whom is a Catholic and the other a member of a schismatical or heretical sect; and if there is, add to this, the danger of the falling away of the Catholic party and the perversion of the children, such a marriage is forbidden also by the divine law.' If the church occasionally on account of circumstances does not refuse to grant a dispensation from these strict laws (provided that the divine law remains intact and the dangers above mentioned are provided against by suitable safeguards), it is unlikely that the Catholic party will not suffer some detriment from such a marriage. . . .

"Assuredly, also, there will be wanting that close union of spirit which as it is the sign and mark of the Church of Christ, so

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<sup>2</sup> *Casti Connubii*, Sections 82 and 85.

<sup>3</sup> Cod. iur. can. c. 1060.



also should be the sign of Christian wedlock, its glory and adornment. For, where there exists diversity of mind, truth and feeling, the bond of union of mind and heart is wont to be broken, or at least weakened. From this comes the danger lest the love of man and wife grow cold and the peace and happiness of family life, resting as it does on union of hearts, be destroyed."

## Important Differences

A Roman Catholic interprets marriage as one of the sacraments of his Church. He is taught that "a<sup>4</sup> Catholic can be validly married only before a Catholic Priest." The Protestant Christian thinks about marriage just as reverently, whether he calls it a sacrament or uses some other term. He thinks of it as instituted by God and perfected by God's blessing. He holds that it is God who joins the man and woman together by his grace and through their own sacred pledges to each other.

Marriage is an undertaking of two persons with God and with each other. In solemnizing it the minister acts as a representative of God and of the church. He is also an agent of the state for this particular purpose. The Protestant recognizes the authority both of the church and of the state, but repudiates the claim of one church

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<sup>4</sup> *Why Not a Mixed Marriage*, by John A. O'Brien, Ph.D., LL.D., Paulist Press, N. Y., p. 11.

that its priests have exclusive authority over his marriage when he marries a Roman Catholic.

Christian marriage is both a condition and a process. Its validity rests upon God's blessing of an undertaking in which the man and woman promise lifelong fidelity to each other in God's name and with his grace. For its happiness everything depends upon the way in which the two persons work out this mutual dedication throughout their lives. Their marriage succeeds in proportion as they achieve rich fellowship, creative cooperation, and a complete family life.

## Standing for One's Own Faith

Recognizing that the Roman Catholic Church has the right under the freedom of religion to promulgate its teaching about marriage in any way it sees fit, we are compelled, in duty to those who look to us for counsel, to emphasize the fact that we of the other churches have freedoms and convictions that are inexpressibly precious to us. And we want to help our people in the safeguarding of these inheritances.

John, a Protestant, was engaged to Jane, a Roman Catholic. Because he loved her he was taking a course in Roman Catholic doctrine, as her church required. At one of these sessions the priest handed him a form to sign.<sup>5</sup> "John looked at the paper and

began to read it. The blood rushed to his head but he managed to speak calmly.

" 'Do you mind, father,' he said, 'if I sign it when I come next week? There is still time and I would like to take it home and read it over carefully.'

" 'It is a bit unusual,' the priest answered, 'but take it along with you. There must be no compulsion about it. But unless you and Jane sign it, I cannot marry you. And unless Jane is married by me, the priest of her church, she is virtually excommunicated. There can be no other decision.'

"John Parkridge went directly home that evening. He sat down at his desk and read the paper carefully.

## Ante-Nuptial Agreement<sup>6</sup>

(to be signed by the non-Catholic party in a mixed marriage)

I, the undersigned, not a member of the Catholic Church, wishing to contract marriage with....., a member of the Catholic Church, propose to do so with the understanding that the marriage bond thus contracted is indissoluble, except by death. I promise on my word and honor that I will not in any way hinder or obstruct the said, ....., in the exercise of.....religion and that all chil-

<sup>5</sup> *An Un-American Marriage*, by Benjamin Lotz, *Christian Century*, Nov. 15, 1944, p. 1317.

<sup>6</sup> See, *Why Not a Mixed Marriage?* by John A. O'Brien, Ph.D., LL.D., Paulist Press, New York, N. Y., p. 9.

dren of either sex born of our marriage shall be baptized and educated in the Catholic faith and according to the teaching of the Catholic Church, even though the said.....  
.....should be taken away by death. I further promise that I will marry.....  
.....only according to the marriage rite of the Catholic Church; that I will not either before or after the Catholic ceremony, present myself with.....for marriage before a civil magistrate or minister of the gospel.

Signature.....

Signed in the presence of Rev.....

Place..... Date.....”

When John turned the paper to the other side he found a pledge to be signed by Jane. In addition to its provisions for the baptism and education in the Roman Catholic religion of any children born to the union he discovered that Jane must promise to do all in her power to bring about his conversion to her faith.

Such demands mean that a Christian person who believes his own church to be a true church of Christ is asked, when he marries a Roman Catholic, to act as if his church were no church at all but a dangerous organization. He is required to proceed as if he had no faith in the adequacy of Jesus Christ as Savior and Guide but rather must assume that only in the Roman

Catholic Church could his children have assurance of salvation.

Against such demands a man or woman of another church should set reasonable proposals of his own. When he is asked to submit to a course of instruction in Roman Catholic doctrine in order that he may understand the religious requirements of the person whom he is marrying, should he not ask the other to take a course under his church that the Roman Catholic person also may understand the life and ideals of the one whom he is marrying?

One proposal is as reasonable as the other except to the Roman Catholic who justifies a one-sided position by saying that, "Truth has rights which error does not possess."<sup>7</sup> A Protestant might say the same thing if he were inclined to be equally arbitrary, but, on either part, it is merely begging the question to assume that one side has the truth and the other is in error. A home in which one has to be right while the other has to be wrong has a poor chance of lasting mutual esteem and harmony.

When a Christian of another church is asked to sign an agreement that he will not interfere in the least with the free exercise of the Roman Catholic party's religion why should he not ask for a similar agreement in return? The present arrangement silences

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<sup>7</sup> *Why Not a Mixed Marriage*, by John A. O'Brien, Ph.D., LL.D., Paulist Press, New York, p. 2, 10.

one party while encouraging in the other a proselytizing zéal.

When the demand is made that a Christian of another church shall sign an agreement that any children of a proposed marriage shall be reared as Roman Catholics it would be equally fair for him to present a counter proposal that they be reared in his faith. If concessions are to be made they should be mutual. There should be in any case an understanding that when children have reached a suitable age they shall be free to determine their own faith in order that their religious allegiance may be a matter of inner conviction and self-dedication and not the outcome of any kind of constraint. If such proposals are rejected by the other party that fact would raise the gravest question whether the marriage ought to take place.

The Roman Catholic demand puts the other member into a domestic strait-jacket and in a measure alienates him from his children. It takes away the normal liberty of a loving parent of imparting to his child the truths that are deepest and dearest to him concerning God and His kingdom. This attitude is so utterly lacking in the conception of freedom of religious conviction that other Christians regard it as an attack upon their freedom of conscience.

## Look Before You Leap

A Protestant girl and her family, who have not thought of all these things may be inclined to say, "But Jimmie is such a lovable boy and he comes from such a fine family?" Yes, but Jimmie also comes from a church which is unbending and which will make you a spiritual outsider in your own home.

A counsellor of youth was asked to see a certain young woman who was engaged to a Roman Catholic. At the very outset the girl said, "I am going to marry this young man and nobody can talk me out of it." The counsellor replied, "I have not the slightest wish to talk you out of anything. I do not know either you or the young man, but I do know that marriage calls for the best in any of us. It is important for you to be reasonably confident both that this is the right man for you and that you have a fair chance of proving to be the right wife for him.

"For one thing, if you marry this young man you will become a daughter to his parents and he will be a son to yours. Do you like his parents well enough, and do they approve of you and like you enough so that you will be sure to get along with them?" The girl replied that she had not met the parents of the young man. Nor had she met his brother and sisters.

The counsellor went on to say that after marriage the two would need to have a

set of happy friendship experiences. He asked the girl if she and this young man knew each other's friends and got along well with them. She replied that during the six months that she had known him he had met some of her friends but that his were mainly in another city. She assumed that if they themselves got along they would not need to worry about the friends. This of course was only partly true.

When the counsellor asked about their church life she said that she loved her church and had always been active in it. She expected so to continue. The counsellor summarized: "You and he love each other but your family and his have never met and do not know anything about one another. For the most part you have different circles of friends. Your friendship circle is largely in your own church and his in the Roman Catholic Church. He has entered a little bit into your friendship circle but you have not entered into his. After marriage he will continue in the Roman Catholic Church and you in yours, so that in everything that pertains to church life he will go one way and you will go another. You will not be able to take your children to your own church with you, and you must not teach them the things that mean most to you because the Roman Church would call this 'perversion of the children.'"

The young lady said, "All that you have said is true, but I had not thought much



about that side of it. I only know that I love him and I cannot give him up."

"Love is a beautiful thing and one which anyone would respect," said the counselor, "but marriage takes in more than we are likely to realize at first, and its success depends not merely on how people feel toward each other beforehand, but how they work out their various adjustments during a lifetime. It is fair to ask yourself these questions. 'Would I have a good chance to mean everything to this man if he and I always go in different directions in our spiritual life and to a certain extent in our social life? And could I give in gracefully to having my children taught that my church is no real church and that my religious ideas are not to be trusted?' "

Could such a person later as a mother bear to see her own children successively carried to baptism by others? Could she bear never to be able as a Protestant to take communion with her own family?

## Harmony with In-Laws Desirable for Happiness

The problem of getting along with in-laws, often difficult under the best of circumstances, is always heightened when they are of different faiths. To cite an extreme instance, some time ago a middle-aged woman came into the office of the Com-

mission on Marriage and the Home. Showing an unusual amount of agitation she stated that she was a Catholic and that her daughter had married a Protestant two years before. She and her husband had liked the young man and all would have been well if they had been married in the Roman Catholic Church, but they had been married by a Protestant minister.

The mother said that the situation might not be so bad if the girl's father would be reconciled to her but that he had taken the position that so long as she was the wife of that man she would never see his face again. She might return home any time she pleased but not as the wife of the man whom she had married. Thus parental influence was marshalled on the side of a broken marriage. But the young woman, although the situation brought her great sorrow, held firmly to her husband. The mother went to see her occasionally but did not dare to let the father know of this. There was a grandchild a year old but the grandfather would not even see her.

Representatives of the Roman Catholic Church hold that if one of their members has been married by a Protestant minister he or she is not really married. Roman Catholics call this "an<sup>s</sup> attempt to contract matrimony." It is sometimes specifically stated that such a person is living in sin

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<sup>s</sup> See, *Why Not a Mixed Marriage?* by John A. O'Brien, Ph.D., LL.D., Paulist Press, New York, p. 10.

however spotless his or her life may be. Such an idea can, of course, have no standing outside Roman Catholic circles.

That some mixed marriages do succeed is a tribute to the power and beauty of love and to the good sportsmanship of the persons concerned, but even in these cases the marriages succeed because one side gives up more than anyone has a right to ask. And the spiritual agony underneath many an apparently smooth domestic surface can be taken for granted when there are children before whose eyes the religious faith of a Christian parent is discounted. The Roman Catholic partner may even be less religious, may have much less of the love of God and the grace of Christ in his heart, yet he must be the dominant parent religiously. Thus religion becomes a blight rather than a blessing to the family.

## Cooperation and Mutual Respect Should Exist

How much better it would be if, in those cases in which young people insist on marrying in spite of religious differences, both churches would cooperate in helping them to see the best in each other and in their respective churches and to create at the heart of family life a loving spirit of religious appreciation. So long, however, as the Roman Church brands all other Chris-

tians as "heretical" or "schismatic" Roman Catholic individuals will be handicapped as marriage partners for men and women of other churches.

We wish to be in a relationship of spiritual unity with all of God's people including those of Roman Catholic faith. We also want to work with them in safeguarding religious freedom. We cannot, however, without emphatic protest, allow the teaching that a mixed marriage solemnized by another minister is no real Christian marriage.

No more can we tolerate the idea that it is the duty of the Roman Catholic member to do everything possible through his home to proselyte while a Christian of another church must avoid even expressing his deepest religious convictions as if they were some kind of poison that would destroy his children. A Protestant or other non-Roman Christian who has found God in and through his church and who in its fellowship has had communion with Christ cannot for a moment tolerate the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church toward his faith.

We urge our young people to stand on their rights as self-respecting Christians and as members of the great fellowship of all Christians who cannot in conscience submit to Roman Catholic domination. They should respect the freedom and the rights of all and should cultivate an appreciation

of the best in other faiths but should stand firm against the requirements of a church which would handicap them in their family relationships, and which forbids that when life is over a Protestant and a Roman Catholic who have lived together as husband and wife be buried side by side.

## Churches Should Make These Issues Clear To Their Young People

We urge that all churches present these issues clearly to their people. We urge in addition that all churches constantly improve their provision for the instruction of their people in the foundation principles upon which sound Christian homes can be built and in the arts of adjustment which make family life beautiful and creative. We appreciate the fact that more and more the churches of our land are recognizing that preparation for Christian marriage and family life is an important part of training in Christian living.

Some ministers are rendering a service of incalculable value to the church and to the individuals concerned by providing in their educational programs helpful courses of instruction dealing with courtship, marriage and family life. They supplement these courses by counsel of tested value in helping young people get a good start in marriage. Young people appreciate this help.

Such instruction and counseling not only help marriages to succeed but also create closer ties between the couple and the minister who marries them and between the family and the church.

It is, of course, not enough that a husband and wife should be of the same faith. They must live out that faith in their home life. With the help of God they should make their home a center of truth, love and mutual understanding that through them the beauty and grace of Christian living may be manifest in the world.

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## Book List

Prepared by L. Foster Wood. Unofficial. Listing means simply that a book is regarded as useful in preparation for marriage.

### I. PREPARATION FOR MARRIAGE

*Home Builders of Tomorrow*, by Warren D. Bowman. Elgin Press. 1938. 123 pp. \$1.00. A helpful study book for church youth groups.

*From Friendship to Marriage*, by Roy A. Burkhardt. Harpers. 1937. 161 pp. \$1.50. Broad sympathetic study for college age young people.

*A Guide for a Man and Woman Looking Toward Marriage*, by Roy A. Burkhardt, Hearthside Press, Flushing, N. Y., 1943, 60 pp. \$.50. An excellent little book to give to young people at engagement, or just before marriage.

*Marriage is What You Make It*, by Sylvanus M. and Evelyn Millis Duvall, Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1942, 32 pp. \$.20. A valuable study course for young people. Interpretation of love, meaning of engagement and planning for marriage.

*Youth and the Homes of Tomorrow*, by Edwin T. Dahlberg. Judson Press. 1934. 160 pp. \$1.00. A helpful book for youth. Courtship, postponed marriages, wedding and honeymoon, parenthood, work, play and religion.

*When You Marry*, by Evelyn Millis Duvall and Reuben Hill. Association Press. 1946. 464 pp. \$3.00. Stimulating and readable college text on marriage, presenting results of recent research.

*Personality and the Family*, by Hornell and Ella Hart. Heath, Revised 1941. 526 pp. \$3.25. Analysis of wise preparation for marriage and creative living in the family.

*Planning for Marriage and Family Life*, by W. H. and Mrs. W. H. Morgan. Association Press, 1943. 85 pp. \$.50. Discussion course on vital issues of courtship and marriage.

*Christian Marriage: A Manual on Getting and Staying Happily Married*, by Floyd Van Keuren. Morehouse-Gorham, 1947, 182 pp. Paper \$1.50. Originally published as "Outfitting for Spiritual Marriage," it deals with engagement and marriage. Emphasizes comradeship and spiritual values.

## II. ADJUSTMENTS IN MARRIAGE

*Marriage and Sexual Harmony*, by Oliver M. Butterfield. Emerson Books. 1934. 96 pp. \$.50. Has proven very useful for young married people and those entering marriage.

*Harmony in Marriage*, by Leland Foster Wood. Round Table Press. 1939. 122 pp. \$1.00 cloth. \$.75 gift edition, with certificate, in white box. For brides and grooms. Physical, mental and spiritual harmony. Meaning of parenthood.

