

UNMIXING A MIXED MARRIAGE

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John was twenty-two and I was twenty-one when we married. It was a "war marriage." We came from different parts of the country; our parents had never met; our educational backgrounds were different: country boy, city girl; John's folks rabidly, "intellectually" Protestant—mine firmly, "intuitively" Catholic; we married after only three months' acquaintance, without the real approval of either family. It looked like one of those marriages least likely to succeed.

On the credit side, we had approximately the same intellectual level and an identical belief in the sacredness and life-long character of marriage, as well as an instinctive distaste and distrust of everything connected with artificial contraception. We had thrashed out our religious and moral problems in our daily correspondence over that three-month period. Since John had no formal religion or belief, except to be vaguely Congregationalist, there was no question of marrying anywhere but in the Catholic Church. We loved each other, we each felt we could enjoy real mutual support temperamentally, mentally, and spiritually. To cement this rapport, we had two years together away from all in-laws—definitely a help for us.

With all these advantages you might think that survival as a practising, believing Catholic should not have proved difficult for me. Any "mixed" couple knows better. It is not so much that John does not like fish—it is just that he would rather have it on Wednesday or Saturday so that he wouldn't be dictated to by the Pope as to his Friday menu. It isn't that John objects to church on Sunday, it's just that with the crowd leaving early for the beach it's a nuisance to always have to adjust the schedule so that the "guilt-ridden" Catholic can go to Mass. It isn't that anyone objects to regular prayers of petition, but really—NINE days? Why not, (with a sardonic grin) six, or ten, or better still, something ordinary, like a week of seven? As for fasting to go to Communion, when everyone else is having a merry time Saturday night. well, anyone can see that religion such as that is a kill-joy.

We were isolated from all Catholic companionship, John being a Naval officer in a Southern town, on a base which was strangely devoid of other Catholic officers. I was the "odd man out," the different one; but the twitting from the others was usually good-natured enough. Still, I was a fish out of water, having been completely sheltered from secularism, paganism, and Protestantism from my childhood. I was completely innocent of any knowledge of apologetics. Most of our acquaintances were older and much more sophisticated than we. The temptation to kick over the traces was strong. Not strong enough, however: it was in the face of the eye-high, wartime, eat-drink-and-be-merry existence that the firmest foundations of my Catholicism were laid.

Which brings us to Point One for Catholics in a mixed marriage: when the world is shouting in your ears "Don't be silly, everyone is doing it," go to the Church to find out the reasons behind her laws.

This may seem an obvious solution to the loyal Catholic. To the Catholic in a mixed marriage, whose loyalty is mocked as superstition or fear, this step may be difficult, especially if he has had no previous personal contact with priests. There is a human fear, too, that if his belief is made stronger, it will cause an even deeper cleavage between him and his partner who, far from being more tolerant of his religion since marriage, has shown himself to be rather more intolerant as he sees the little daily evidences of devotion. There is a very real, if unacknowledged, conflict between the desire for unity with God and unity with that person most loved on earth. Yet it is no Pollyanna remark that if religion is put first (tactfully, unobtrusively, modestly), love and respect will deepen on the part of the non-Catholic party. He or she may be irritated or even jealous, but will be impressed nonetheless.

In my own case, as quickly as doubts began to gather, I asked a priest about them, formally in confession or informally in the street or in the parish rectory reception room. May I say there was never a lack of an answer—a reasonable, down-to-earth answer. It never failed to make me wonder why the whole world did not beat a path to this luminous source of truth. In addition, books were recommended. I soaked them up like a dry sponge.

I was able to profit from all this only because of Point Two, frequent reception of the grace-giving sacraments, which came about like this. Since the world in which we lived was not, obviously, going to adapt itself to my practice

of religion, I was forced to adapt myself to the world—at least exteriorly. John liked late Sunday mornings, comics and Rotogravure spread all over the bedroom, a pillow fight, a leisurely breakfast—but I had to fight my puritanical notion that such leisure was wrong before I grew to enjoy it. My worries were based on the fact that such luxuriously lazy proceedings rendered reception of Holy Communion impossible, although John would afterwards invariably accompany me to the last Mass. Solution, simple. Started daily Mass and Communion, instead of imagining that Sunday Communion was somehow better just because it was more difficult for me. Nor did I go six days to make up for one, but rather because in the first few mornings I found a peace and wholeness in my religion, a security in my faith I had never known before. Since this was a hidden devotion, it caused no comment. My faith grew deeper with the help of sacramental grace. My desire for John's conversion, which I never put into words because it daily seemed to grow less likely rather than more likely, became a bitter-sweet pain, always with me, scarcely attended to.

It was at the end of the first year that our first child was born, an event that turned into a spiritual crisis for both of us. During the long labour we were completely separated physically, but closer spiritually than ever before, since we were both confronted with the problem of suffering simultaneously. We were exhausted after 20 hours of waiting and wondering. We both asked God over and over, "Why?" but no booming reply came to reassure us that everything would be all right. In his fear and desperation, John spent an hour in the Catholic Church begging heaven to let it end happily. I was beyond anything like prayer; he was doing the praying for both of us.

Afterwards, when we were surveying our new son and joking about parenthood in general, I was suddenly overcome with a wild weeping session which strongly resembled grief. I was unable to explain my behaviour to John.

Greatly in need of spiritual comfort and reassurance, I was unable to express my fear of the God who permitted such suffering. I knew that John had no answers, but only questions himself. Actually, I was grieving for my lost belief in a good God: grieving for my mistake in marrying someone unable to help me spiritually, wondering confusedly if my suffering were the price of that mistake.

It was in this crisis that I realised how separated we were spiritually. John had not even seen me since I was admitted to the hospital; I was glad because I was afraid that if he had seen my suffering, it would have completely killed any religious faith he might have, since he is so tender-hearted and protective. I felt then, and for years continued to act upon the belief, my personal Point Three, that I would necessarily face any spiritual problem alone, without John ever knowing there was a problem.

The answer to childbirth suffering is largely the child itself. The miracle looms larger than the pain; the memory fades to the point where another child seems possible. Yet, the period after the first child is likely to be the severest test in a mixed marriage on the question of morals. The non-Catholic cannot see why a woman should "go through that"? very soon again; the Catholic viewpoint may be weakened because it is now no longer an academic problem but a very real experience to be faced. Birth-control suddenly seems not only right, but imperative. The atmosphere is so loaded emotionally and even physically, after a period of continence, that the needs of each may cloud the issue of right or wrong.

At times like this the Church, most reasonable of all mothers, may seem completely unreasonable, especially to the non-Catholic. It is then that the Catholic must stand his ground on Point Four, not allowing himself to be persuaded of evil at a time when he is exceedingly vulnerable to the easy way. In the face of suffering and new responsibility, the gentle goodness of God recedes, and the firmness of God comes to the foreground. There is a temptation to turn one's back on this seemingly less attractive aspect of God and even to justify such actions on the grounds that if He is that "tough," you don't like Him anyway; or maybe the Church is wrong, God really does not expect such heroism. The answer to the dilemma is not a blind clinging to a right conscience, but again a deliberate review of all the Church's reasoning on morals in marriage, including all kinds of interference with life processes birth control, sterilisation, and abortion. It is sound. It is practical. It stands up in a strong light. Adherence to the moral code builds character; concessions have been proved to weaken not only the individual, but society as a whole.

Once over the first hurdle without falling, the Catholic's position will probably never be challenged as seriously again. But it isn't easy. On the other hand, it seems to me that many non-Catholics are seldom given credit for the amount of good will they are able to muster in this matter. Either they are not fully informed or, fully informed, they are not encouraged to make the sacrifices for the sake of honour, which may well lay the groundwork for conversion.

In our case, both my determination not to live in sin and John's distaste for the whole technique involved in artificial methods combined to keep us safe. At this time John might have been persuaded otherwise, but there was no point in even discussing it. Rhythm was available to us; we made use of the system for a year or so (though even that was too "artificial" for our natures), then took up our courage and plunged into parenthood again. With the second experience the problem of suffering seemed less acute, the baby more instantly adorable. It was never again so hard for me to accept God's ways.

Life did march on, however. The war was over and we had escaped separation. Civilian life found us poorer than formerly. The second and third babies were a financial drain, and John began to show the strain. He became ill and lost a month's work. We were in debt. We seemed unable to meet all the demands life was making on us, but I had the rock bottom belief that somehow all our hardships meant something and were, in fact, building stronger characters. John had no such faith. He could see that in general our troubles were no worse than other peoples'-his conclusion: God (if there was a God) certainly did like people to live the hard way. When I felt doubts, I talked them over with the parish priest. Reinforced, I would return home to face John's moody reluctance to accept life as it is.

He mocked my faith and hope as "dope", he thought his own despair more honest. Yet he never did try to limit our problems by suggesting immoral solutions.

This estrangement during difficulties on account of different views of life is one of the strong temptations of a Catholic. He sees others, one in faith, helping each other through. "Perhaps," he may think, "this marriage was not made in heaven. Maybe I should have married one of my own kind." This is only a temptation in the sense that it tends to focus the eye on one's own need, rather than the partner's. The Catholic should rather feel for the poverty and need of his partner than his own desire for spiritual companionship. "How can I help?" should be the question asked of self. "I have the faith of 2000 years behind me. How can I somehow rub some of it off on him?"

When things were at their worst, this was the question I asked myself. He is so afraid, I thought; yet there is so much reason for him to trust. How can I help him? Point Five, generosity of spirit. The answer sometimes is just to be strong and silent, praying for God's help without offering any of the platitudes which may only serve to wound. The answer in our emotionally acute situation had to be stronger. I had received concrete help from a particular priest, and I suggested to John that the same priest might be able to inject a little strength into him. I had no thought or hope of a conversion. John's bitterness seemed to rule that out. Yet I could think of no one else to whom to turn, and John was desperate enough to try anything. After that visit, he was a different person. Not a whole new person overnight, but a man starting off in a new direction. He took instructions at our own parish from a different priest, came home to argue the doctrines with me, went back to the next session cocksure that he "had" the priest this time. Home again he would come, humbled, but sure he could still find things wrong in that "danged" catechism. Back he would go, jubilant with the "unanswerable" question. Home again. Well. After eight months of this, with not a question of his own left, he wrote his relatives to seek reasons why he should not be a Catholic. He received no reasonable replies, just repetitious prejudices without reference to fact.

He talked to ministers. They made no attempt to dissuade him, refuted no doctrines logically, only said they could not themselves accept such an "authoritarian" religion. At last, saying with Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go?" he was received into the Church in the sixth year of our marriage. I'm biased, of course, but I feel that there has never been a more confirmed, convinced, pure-of-heart Catholic in the Church.

Now, why did all this happen? Because I was a "good example"? Actually. I used to cringe every time someone would congratulate me on John's conversion, saying what a "good example" I must have been. I shamefully recall the mornings I spent at Mass seeking spiritual consolation for myself instead of home fixing his breakfast, letting him feed the baby while I was gone. I remember making an issue of fast-days or novena or missions, out of my own insatiable desire for tangible religious comfort, the Lents I refused to go to a movie with John instead of secretly choosing a mortification he would not be forced to share. These were all mistakes, but they were honest mistakes in a way. Gradually I was able to see what I was doing and why, and to seek God out in ways which would not drag John bodily after me. It was only when I learned gentleness that I was able to see his need clearly, and to lead rather than drag him to a recognition of its fulfilment.

If I was a good example at all, it was simply in caring about my religion. As much as I messed up parts of demonstrating my belief, John couldn't doubt that I did believe, and believed enough to live by the faith.

In fact, a whole programme for "un-mixing a mixed marriage" might be reduced to the one thing necessary: to care. To care enough to find out what you don't know about your religion; to care enough for the spiritual health of your marriage that you veritably "eat for two" in the reception of the sacraments; to care enough for the weakened nature of the non-believer to refrain from burdening him with your own questions; to care enough for the love you have in common not to let it be touched by detestable practices; to care so much for the poverty of your partner that you will suffer anything in order to share with him your riches.
