

Appendix A: Marriage between a Catholic and a Non-Catholic

The Catholic Church believes that marriage between one man and one woman is a *natural* institution; that is, it is woven into the very fabric of what it means to be part and parcel of the human family and reflects God's plan for that family. When these two people are baptized Christians, this natural institution of marriage becomes a *sacrament*. In other words, because each person shares in the life of the Holy Spirit and discipleship to Jesus, their whole life together becomes a vibrant, visible sign of the invisible reality of God's unending love for the world. Marriage brings the couple God's rich blessing of grace—and the couple becomes a medium of God's grace to others.

It is quite common, of course, for a Catholic to marry a member of a different Christian tradition. For example, many Catholics marry Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, members of nondenominational communities, or Christians who for one reason or another remain unaffiliated with a particular faith community. Other Catholics marry someone who has never been baptized. The person may be Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or a person unaffiliated with any faith. Keep in mind that whether a Catholic enters into a sacramental marriage with a Christian of a different church or a valid marriage with a non-Christian, the Church supports the witness of love and fidelity the couple offers to the world.

During the course of your marriage preparation, issues of faith and belief should be addressed in an open and honest way, both about the faith you share and also the significant differences in what you believe and how you practice your religious faith. Speaking candidly about these issues with the priest or deacon helping you prepare for your marriage is very important.

A Pastoral Note on Intercommunion

One of the most sensitive and easily misunderstood issues in Catholic life and practice today is the prohibition of intercommunion—the reception of Holy Communion in the Catholic Church by non-Catholics or its reception by Catholics in other Christian churches. Some Catholics who have a non-Catholic fiancé, family members, or friends may believe that an injustice is being done and that

Catholic limitations on intercommunion are contrary to the Gospel's teaching of love and acceptance. Why, then, are non-Catholics asked not to take Communion at Mass?

The reasons behind the Catholic prohibition of intercommunion are not based on a perceived moral or religious superiority of Catholics over other Christians. There are many faithful members of other Christian traditions who are morally or religiously better Christians than nominal Catholics, but that is not what is at stake in intercommunion. The Catholic discipline of not practicing intercommunion is based on a theology of the Eucharist: what it is, what it does, and what it signifies. Many Christian denominations do not share our Catholic understanding of the Eucharist. Some view communion as a rich symbol and a memorial of what Jesus has done for us, but for Catholics, the Eucharist is more than a memorial meal. It makes real again all of the power and promise of Christ's life-giving death and resurrection. Catholics believe that the Eucharist is a sacrament and therefore a particular kind of sign that effects or brings about what it signifies. In essence, we believe that Holy Communion doesn't just *point us* to the presence of Christ but that—through a profound mystery—it *is* the presence of Christ, which we consume in order to better become that divine presence in the world.

But these differences regarding what Holy Communion is are not the sole obstacle to intercommunion. There is also the matter of what Holy Communion does. Catholics believe that the Eucharist draws those who receive Communion into greater unity within the Body of Christ and at the same time signifies that unity. The Eucharist, simply put, is both a sign and source of unity in the Church. Thus, the Eucharist is not only about uniting individual believers to Christ through a share in Communion but more fundamentally about uniting a community of believers together. When one receives Communion, he or she is saying yes to a communion of mind and heart with the Church. It is an act that signifies not only a spiritual union with other members of the Church but also a public affirmation of being united in the beliefs and practices of that community.

The reception of Holy Communion by members of another Christian denomination cannot be a sign of unity among those believers when, in fact, significant differences in belief and practice still remain between Catholics and those of other Christian churches. Eucharistic communion would then

be a counter-sign: it would signify a unity that does not exist among these Christians. Given all of this, while it is certainly not prohibited for couples to use the *Rite for Celebrating Marriage Within Mass* when one partner is a baptized non-Catholic, it may be better to use the *Rite for Celebrating Marriage Outside Mass* in order to avoid misunderstanding.