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Interchurch Marriages: An Orthodox Perspective

I. Canonical and Theological Considerations
Introduction

The divine institution of marriage according to the classic definition of Orthodox canonical tradition is "the union of man and woman, the sharing of the same destiny in life forever, the communion of divine and human law"[1]. A contemporary definition sees the institution of marriage resembling the institution of the Church in its oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. It is one in its unity, holy in its divine origin, catholic in its universality, and apostolic in its outreach to the world through the married couple and the family.[2]

The Church's unequivocal canonical teaching regarding the sanctity of marriage and the family was articulated in an "Agreed Statement" published in 1978 by the Orthodox-Catholic Consultation in the United States. It states the following: "Christ affirmed and blessed the oneness and profound significance of marriage. Christian tradition, following his teaching, has always proclaimed the sanctity of marriage. It has defined marriage as the fundamental relationship in which a man and woman, by total sharing with each other, seek their own growth in holiness and that of their children, and thus show forth the presence on earth of God's kingdom"[3].

Only with such an understanding of marriage is it possible to comprehend the Church's firm position on matters arising from a variation of the norm. The norm is what the Church projects as the ideal. Variations from the norm include besides marriages beyond a first marriage and dissolution of a marriage, marriage with a non-Orthodox Christian.

The emphasis of the present article being "interchurch marriages", marriage with a non-Orthodox Christian will be the focus of this report. Furthermore, owing to lengthy dialogue on this issue between Orthodox and Catholics in North America, comments expressed mainly reflect interchurch marriages between Orthodox and Catholics. Nevertheless, it should be understood that many of the principles involved relate to other trinitarian Christians as well.

"Interchurch Marriage" within the Orthodox Church[4]

Several ancient canons, five to be exact (10 and 31 of Laodicea, 21 of Carthage [419], 14 of Chalcedon, and 72 of Trullo), address the issue of "interchurch marriage", or marriage with a non-Orthodox Christian. Characteristically, the normative canon 72 of Trullo states: "An Orthodox man is not permitted to marry an heretical woman, nor an Orthodox woman to be joined to an heretical man"[5]. Marriage with a non-Christian or non-believer is not mentionned at all, except in the case of a pre-existing marriage, where either one of the spouses had subsequently espoused the Orthodox faith. The continuation of such a marriage is permissible, according to the teaching of St. Paul (1 Cor 7,12-14), if so willed by the believing spouse.

The canonical discipline of the early Church regarding marriage with a person not of the Orthodox faith can only be understood in the light of the canonical/theological teaching articulated above. As affirmed in the "Agreed Statement on the Sanctity of Marriage", "marriage mirrors the union of Christ and the Church (Eph 5,23)"[6]. Such a spiritual image, however, presupposes the mutual sharing of the same faith, the liturgical expression of which is participation together in the eucharist. The mystery of the eucharist is at the same time the ultimate expression of our unity with Christ. It is indeed what accords a marriage its specifically Christian character.

Herein lies the canonical anomaly presented by marriage with the non-Orthodox, whether Christians or non-Christians. The non-Orthodox may not be admitted to eucharistic communion due to the fact that they do not share the

same faith. Nevertheless, "interchurch marriages" involving Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians within the Orthodox Church have since the end of the 19th century been permitted with the official sanction of the Church. This was possible only because marriage since the 9th century is no longer blessed within the context of the eucharistic liturgy. Canonically, however, such marriages must conform to the following conditions:

1) they must be performed by an Orthodox priest;
2) children born must be baptized and nurtured in the Orthodox faith;
3) marital problems must be adjudicated by the Orthodox Church.

In the final analysis, the contemporary canonical discipline governing "interchurch marriages" within the Orthodox Church reflects an awareness of existing realities. Not only is it conditioned by the Church's compassion and pastoral sensitivity, but also by her concern for the stability of the family.

"Interchurch Marriage" outside the Orthodox Church[7]

The claim of the Orthodox Church to be the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church has as its result the deep reluctance to ascribe to another Church "ecclesial reality" in a formal, documentable way. No official statement has been issued in this regard even during the present days of ecumenism on the part of Orthodox hierarchs, theologians, episcopal synods, or local Orthodox Churches. If, therefore, no ecclesial reality is recognized in another Church, neither can its sacraments be recognized. This is also true of the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, even though this Church has so much in common with the Orthodox Church and has preserved the structure of classic catholicism (episcopate, creed and canon).

Unofficially, a number of Orthodox hierarchs and theologians recognize ecclesial sacramental reality especially in the Roman Catholic Church. Officially, they may well talk of a "Sister Church" relationship[8] and of "sharing many things" in terms of the ancient catholic tradition. However, they are usually guarded about expressions which would explicitly affirm sacramental and canonical validity even of the Roman Catholic Church. This is due to the fact that only a Pan-Orthodox Council has the authority to make such a pronouncement.

Nowhere is the painful reality of this position felt more than in "interchurch marriages" between Orthodox and Catholics performed only in the Roman Catholic Church. The reluctance to accept the validity of sacramental marriage in the Roman Catholic Church derives less from differences in theological understanding about the sacrament of marriage in our respective Churches. The "Agreed Statement" referred to above clearly demonstrates the near identical theology of marriage of both Churches. It is rather due more to the complete separation of the two Churches as communities of faith, a separation which in the Orthodox tradition has been interpreted as "heresy", and not merely "schism", on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. Once the category of heresy is applied, there is no possibility within the canons of the Orthodox Church to recognize a valid sacramental marriage or any ecclesial reality as such in that Church, no matter how close or identical the theology may be on specific issues.

Because of the above, the canons of the Church universal do not deal with the status of marriages outside of the Orthodox Church and formally prohibit Orthodox Christians from such.[9] The only concession made by local Orthodox Churches is to allow "interchurch marriages" of other trinitarian Christians with Orthodox Christians, but in the Orthodox Church. Permission for such marriages first began to be granted reluctantly only at the end of the 19th century.[10]

Interestingly, the formal reason given for denying recognition of marriage performed outside the Orthodox Church is neither lack of recognition of a valid sacramental marriage nor that of ecclesial reality. It is the absence of the nuptial blessing by an Orthodox priest, considered an essential element in the marriage rite, regardless whether it is an "interchurch marriage" or a marriage between two Orthodox Christians.[11]

Although the importance of the nuptial blessing by an Orthodox priest is consistently stressed, this blessing was not always obligatory as a constitutive element of the marriage rite. The Byzantine emperors contributed much to its imposition. Justinian was mainly responsible for adopting a uniform practice (6th century), following which Leo VI in the 10th century made the nuptial blessing obligatory.

The absolute necessity of the blessing by an Orthodox priest is a matter some Orthodox theologians, clearly a minority, are willing under certain conditions to overlook. These are that the clergy who perform marriage outside the Orthodox Church belong to a Church which recognizes the sacramentality of marriage and priesthood as does the Orthodox Church. The justification for this accommodation is that in theory and practice the sacraments of some non-Orthodox Christians have been recognized by "economy". The same recognition could, therefore, be granted the sacrament of marriage. Accordingly, if "economy" can be invoked for the recognition of baptism, the first sacrament received sequentially, it ought also be invoked for the recognition of marriage.[12]

Conclusions

The fact remains that the uninterrupted practice regarding "interchurch marriages" is that they must be blessed in the Orthodox Church. This is especially true in places where Orthodoxy has been the predominant faith. There have been exceptions to this general rule, however. Before the Bolshevik Revolution, for example, Russian civil law, which was also binding upon the Church, required that only in Russia itself must marriages between Orthodox Christians take place within the Orthodox Church. Exceptions to this requirement were foreseen for the Baltic Provinces, where the faith of the husband determined both the place of the marriage and the religious upbringing of children.[13] The brevity of this article prevents the mention of other examples.

On another note, non-Christian spouses who subsequently embrace the Orthodox faith and enter the Church through baptism, chrismation and communion, are not remarried. Their entry into the communion of the Church through these sacraments confers upon their "natural" marriage concluded outside the Church its heretofore lacking sacramental quality. This being the case with such a marriage, the question arises with regard to an "interchurch marriage" of an Orthodox Christian performed in a Church which recognizes the sacramentality of marriage. Is it theologically justifiable to require that this marriage be repeated in the Orthodox Church?

The issue at stake here is the reception by an Orthodox Christian of a sacrament outside the communion of the Orthodox Church. For the Orthodox spouse of an "interchurch marriage", marriage sought outside the communion of the Orthodox Church is tantamount to the denial of one's ecclesial affiliation. As a corrective for the Orthodox spouse to be restored to communion, the marriage must be performed within the Orthodox Church.[14]

An alternative to the above practice is the Service of Blessing in Sacramental Confirmation of a Marriage Entered into Outside the Orthodox Church celebrated by some Orthodox in place of the rite of marriage.[15] As a blessing required by the Orthodox Church for the restoration to communion of an Orthodox spouse, it is the festive affirmation of what had previously taken place without her sanction. It should be noted that the blessing imparted through this service to the marriage is not viewed as giving substance to what was never there. The service, however, should be preceded by the sacrament of penance, as an indication of the Orthodox spouses's sincere intention for reconciliation with the Orthodox Church (16).[16]

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II. Pastoral and Ecumenical Considerations

The numbers of interfaith marriages occurring in the Orthodox Church varies from one segment of the church to the other. Where Orthodox faithful are embedded in predominately homogeneous Orthodox societies such as Greece and Russia, interfaith marriages are fewer in number when compared to multi-cultural, multi-religious countries such as Canada and the United States. Furthermore, while the canonical and pastoral issues related to interfaith marriage are of concern to the entire Orthodox Church, this issue takes on greater urgency in segments of the Orthodox Churches where the frequency of these marriages is greatest. This article will consider one such example, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOA).

Statistics kept by the GOA indicate that two of every three marriages (66%) presently conducted in its churches are inter Christian.[17] In addition, over the past 60 years, interfaith marriages in the GOA have increased nine-fold from around 400 annually to about 3600.[18] Where available, Diocesan statistics in the GOA suggest that there are more Orthodox/Catholic marriages occurring than Orthodox/Orthodox marriages.[19] If individuals marrying outside of the GOA were considered, it is estimated that the percentage of faithful in the GOA intermarrying would be closer to 75 - 80% (20).[20]

Given these and other similar statistics, the GOA has recently chosen to examine these trends more carefully in an effort to determine how it might minister more effectively to this growing population of faithful.[21] However, this task has proven to contain certain inherent challenges, the chief of which is the GOA's desire to meet this population's unique pastoral needs, while also protecting its theological integrity. Closely interrelated with this challenge is how its attitude toward interfaith marriages impacts the Orthodox Church's work on ecumenical affairs. The following examples should function to illustrate this point.

Observations from the Interfaith Research Project (IRP)

Interfaith, Intercultural Differences

Results from the IRP suggest that intermarriages are richer, more complex marital systems due in large part to both partners' religious, cultural, and in some cases, racial differences. As such, the challenges that these couples potentially face in their efforts to cultivate a religious environment in their homes, tend to be greater in number and qualitatively different than the challenges that single faith, single cultural couples might typically encounter. Given this empirical reality, the GOA has sought to identify and become more sensitive to these unique challenges in its efforts to facilitate religious and spiritual growth among the members of this growing group of faithful who attend its churches. Furthermore, the GOA has determined that doing anything less, would have a negative impact on the well-being of these marriages and families, as well as an adverse effect on the future viability of many of its churches.

A Diverse Population

While this population of faithful tends to be grouped under the label "interfaith", there is a great deal of diversity within this aggregate of faithful. In some instances, both partners are highly religious. In other instances, one partner has a high connection to their religious background, while the other has nominal religious connections. In other instances, one or both partners may have nominal religious connections, and high ethnic attachments. In short, the variations are almost limitless. Moreover, because of this diversity, clergy and lay leaders ministering to these couples will be challenged to view these couples from both an aggregate and statistical perspective, as well as individual, unique couples.

An Ecumenical Perspective

Interfaith couples attending churches within the GOA generally espouse an ecumenical view of the Christian Church. This perspective appears to protect marital and family stability by serving to de-emphasize spousal and familial religious differences. Orthodox Church ecclesiology finds this view problematic, since it runs counter to the Orthodox Church's conceptualization of the Church. Discovering pastoral approaches that are mindful of interfaith couples' unique needs to avoid contention related to their religious differences, while protecting Orthodox theology is a challenge that the GOA is grappling with today.

Respectful Critiques of Non-Orthodox Faith Groups

Results from the IRP also suggest that interfaith couples espouse a respectful attitude toward all religious groups, and inculcate their children with a similar respect. Results also suggest that Orthodox theologians' critiques and observations of non-Orthodox faith groups should be made respectfully. When the GOA draws doctrinal distinctions between itself and other faith groups, it must seek to do so respectfully. Finding ways of affirming and celebrating Orthodox theology, while also avoiding disparaging remarks about non-Orthodox faith groups is crucial to its efforts to minister more effectively to interfaith marriages and families. Failure to do so will likely have a negative impact on interfaith families' church attendance and commitment.

Orthodox Sacramental Theology

Interfaith couples involved in the IRP repeatedly reported feeling like outsiders when they attend church services in the GOA. This was especially true of the non-Greek Orthodox partner and members of their extended family. Since only Orthodox in good standing are allowed to participate in the sacraments, many of these feelings appeared to be linked to the Orthodox Church's view of the sacraments and their administration. Orthodox theologians within the GOA will be challenged to present Orthodox sacramental theology in a manner that is both respectful to Orthodox holy tradition, and sensitive to non-Orthodox who choose to worship with their families in the GOA.

Parental Challenges

According to the IRP, interfaith couples who attend a church in the GOA generally choose to raise their children in the Greek Orthodox partner's church, but also desire that they develop a familiarity and respect for both parents' ethnic and faith traditions. Results also indicated that interfaith couples are interested in attending churches that celebrate ethnicity and value Christianity, and are disinterested in attending churches that tend to be ethnocentric and religiocentric. When churches in the GOA were perceived as being too ethnocentric and religiocentric, interfaith families' church attendance was negatively impacted. Moreover, this appeared to have negative consequences on children's efforts to bond with their developing Orthodox faith.

Conclusions

Given the increased numbers of inter Christian marriages occurring within some segments of the Orthodox Church, more attention has been given to this growing population of faithful. Additionally, because inter religious marriages are also on the increase, some theologians have called for a reexamination of the Orthodox Church's present position toward these types of marriages. They have posited some persuasive arguments that could serve to facilitate future discussions. Whether the Orthodox Church will choose to reexamine its present position toward inter religious marriages is unclear. However, what is becoming increasingly more apparent, is that the pastoral challenges related to inter Christian couples and their families who worship in the Orthodox Church exist and should not be ignored. Furthermore, research suggests that these challenges are qualitatively different than the challenges that single faith Orthodox marriages and families encounter.

Discovering ways of ministering more effectively to this growing population of couples and families will tax Orthodox theologians as they attempt to protect Orthodox theology while also seeking more effective pastoral approaches to intermarried couples and their families. Addressing this issue as an inherent postmodern reality and challenge, rather than viewing it as a threat and, therefore, ignoring it, will likely prove profitable to the religious and spiritual well-being of those intermarried couples and families that choose to worship in the Orthodox Church.

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Major publications: Entry into the Clergy during the First Five Centuries (in Greek), Athens, 1973: Editor of: AThird International Conference of Orthodox Schools of Theology: Icon and Kingdom@, in: Greek Orthodox Theological Review 38/1-4 (1993); Holy Cross Conference: AThe Council >inTrullo=@, in: Greek Orthodox Theological Review 40/1-2 (1995); Primacy and Conciliaritv (Studies in the Primacy of the See of Constantinople and the Synodal Structure of the Orthodox Church), Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Press, 1995. Numerous articles.

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Major publications: A qualitative investigation of religion and spirituality: Implications for social scientists and marriage and family therapists, Dissertation Abstracts International, 1997; The Interfaith Marriage Challenge: Results from the Interfaith Marriage Research Project (IRP), Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America Interfaith Marriage Website. http:

//www.interfaith.goarch.org.; The Interfaith Marriage Challenge: A Manual for Clergy and Lay Leaders, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America Press (in press).

(Footnotes)

[1] See N. Milasch: To ekklesiastikon dikaion tes orthodoksou anatolikes Ekklesias, Athens: 1906, 823.

[2] See A. Stavropoulos: "The Understanding of Marriage in the Orthodox Church", in: One in Christ 15/1 (1979), 60-62.

[3] J. Borelli / J. Erickson (Eds).: The Quest for Unity, Crestwood, N.Y.-Washington, D.C., 1996), 202.

[4] See L. Patsavos: "A Canonical Response to Intra-Christian and Inter-religious Marriages", in: Greek Orthodox Theological Review 40/3-4 (1995), 289-292.

[5] H. Percival (Ed.): The Seven Ecumenical Councils, vol. 14 of ANicene and Post-Nicene Fathers@, second series, Grand Rapids, 1956, 397.

[6] J. Borelli / J. Erickson (Eds).: The Quest for Unity, 202.

[7] See L. Patsavos: "The Status of Second and Third Heterodox Marriage", in: Festschrift for Professor Constantine Bonis, Thessaloniki: Analecta Vlatadon, 1989, 474-477.

[8] Note most recently, for example, reference to the Orthodox and Catholic Churches as "Sister Churches" in the Balamand Document "Uniatism, Method of Union of the Past and the Present Search for Full Communion" issued by the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in 1993.

[9] See canon 72 of Trullo.

[10] See L. Patsavos: "'Mixed' Marriages and the Canonical Tradition of the Orthodox Church", in: Greek Orthodox Theological Review 23/3-4 (1978), 249.

[11] See J. Kotsonis: He kanonike apopsis peri tes epikoinonias meta ton heterodokson, Athens, 1957, 206-8.

[12] See H. Alivisatos: "Peri mikton gamon", reprint from the periodical Ekklesiastikos Faros, Alexandria, 1932, 438; see also J. Panagopoulos: Peri mikton gamon en Helladi, Athens, 1938, 104-109, as cited by J. Kotsonis: He kanonike apopsis, 207, n. 518.

[13] See A. Smirensky: "The Evolution of the Present Rite of Matrimony and Parallel Canonical Developments", in: St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly 8 (1964), 45.

[14] Divergencies in viewpoint and practice on this matter among several Orthodox Churches were recognized by the Second Pan-Orthodox Pre-Synodal Conference of 1982. As a result, flexibility was shown in reaching a resolution on the basis of local realities. Although this decision is non binding, it is indicative of the Orthodox Church's willingness to discuss this issue further. See my article "A Canonical Response to Intra-Christian and Inter-religious Marriages", 297.

[15] This is the practice of the OCA (Orthodox Church in America), one of several Orthodox church jurisdictions in America, which is also responsible for devising this particular service.

[16] See L. Patsavos: "A Canonical Response to Intra-Christian and Inter-religious Marriages", 295-296.

[17] Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America Yearbook 2000, New York: Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

[18] See J.S. Counelis: "Greek Orthodox Church Statistics of the United States, 1949-1989: Some ecclesial and social patterns", in: Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora 16 (1989), 129-159.

[19] See C.J. Joanides: The Interfaith Marriage Challenge: A Manual for Clergy and Lay Leaders, Manuscript submitted for publication, 2000.

[20] See S. Harakas: “Emerging ecumenical families”, in: A.C. Vrame (Ed.): InterMarriage: Orthodox Perspectives, Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997.

[21] The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese has recently funded the Interfaith Research Project (IRP). For more information about this research, the reader may log onto http://www.interfaith.goarch.org, or write Rev. Fr. Joanides.