

Orthodox Christianity and Interfaith Marriage

Rev. Dr. Nicolas Kazarian¹

“A great mystery is being celebrated. How is it a mystery? They come together, and the two are made one. They have not become the image of anything earthly, but of God Himself. They come in order to be made one body; behold the mystery of love!”

(St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 12 on Colossians*)

“It was always with the necessary strictness and proper pastoral sensibility, in the compassionate manner of Paul, Apostle of the Gentiles (Rom 7:2-3; 1 Cor 7:12-15, 39), that the Church treated both *the positive preconditions* (difference of sexes, legal age, etc.) and *the negative impediments* (kinship by blood and affinity, spiritual kinship, an existing marriage, **difference in religion**, etc.) for the joining in marriage. Pastoral sensibility is necessary not only because the biblical tradition determines the relationship between the natural bond of marriage and the sacrament of the Church...” (*The Sacrament of Marriage and its impediment*, par.6)

The 2016 Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church seems to have written in stone what the canonical tradition had said for centuries: the sacrament of marriage should not be performed between an Orthodox Christian and someone from another faith or with no religious affiliation. In fact, the Church canons strongly discourage the union of an interfaith couple. A shared faith in Jesus Christ and belonging to the Orthodox Church are perceived as facilitating the spiritual fulfillment of both members of the couple, as well as offering their children the best environment for future spiritual development.

Practically speaking, Orthodox Christians who intend to marry a non-Christian are not allowed to receive the sacrament of marriage – composed of the betrothal service and the crowning service – in church, and also lose their sacramental privileges, such as receiving Holy Communion during the Divine Liturgy.

Despite the theological arguments made to justify the religious impediment to the sacrament of marriage, one should also consider the pastoral care (Orthodox theology prefers to speak about *economia*) that allows clergy to adjust the rigor of the canons to the context in which the couple lives. Certainly, marrying an Orthodox Christian and a non-Christian is considered as the limit to which the pastoral approach would and should apply. But, as we will see, this pastoral *economia* also applies to a certain degree to the question of inter-Christian marriage (with Catholics and Protestants).

Moreover, the very nature of the sacrament of marriage, in the context of its historical and theological development, allows for a plurality of interpretations, practices and certain interesting opinions that favor a more inclusive approach to interfaith couples. In other words, to what extent could or should pastoral care, understood as the *economia* of the church, justify the acknowledgment and celebration of the sacrament marriage for an interfaith couple? Can the *economia* of the church look for more pastorally open decisions on the sacramental participation of the Orthodox member of the couple, either in terms of the sacrament of marriage itself or his/her participation in the sacramental life of the Church despite his/her marital status?

¹ Visiting fellow of the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University (New York, USA)

The Theology of Marriage

The religious impediment to celebration of the sacrament of marriage is based, in the Orthodox Church, on the theological definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman in the image of the union between Christ and Church (*Eph.* 5:20-33). The sacrament of marriage does not only express unity between Christ and Church, but also the unity among the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, sealed by the participation of both members of the couple in the Holy Communion.

However, contrary to other sacraments such as Baptism or the Eucharist, the sacrament of marriage was progressively introduced into the life of the Church. As Fr. John Meyendorff wrote: “The Christian Church, both at the time of persecution and during her alliance with the Roman State, accepted the Roman laws regulating marriage.”² Thus, at first, the union of a Christian man and woman was placed during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. The sociological environment of the first Christian communities, in a pagan-majority society, explains the possibility of mixed unions recognized by the Church. There are signs of a rite of crowning back to the 4th century, but this celebration does not seem to have been systematic at that time. Even though the principle of the sacramental dimension of marriage appeared in the first Christian communities, the form and celebration have evolved through the centuries.

As the sacrament of marriage came to be instituted as a separate celebration, the limits of its application were defined. Thus, following the adoption of Christianity as the state religion of the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire, the Church formulated Canons condemning mixed marriages. For example, the Council of Laodicea in 343, in its 10th Canon, forbade members of the Church to marry their children to heretics, while its 31st Canon specifies that “it is not lawful to make marriages with all sorts of heretics, nor to give our sons and daughters to them; but rather to take of them, if they promise to become Christians”. Here we see that during that time, conversion to Christianity was a precondition for marriage. The Council of Carthage (394), in its 29th Canon, decreed that the sons of clergy should not be allowed to marry heretical or pagan women. The canonical directives of these two local Councils were later reaffirmed by Ecumenical Councils. Thus, the 4th Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451), in its 14th Canon prohibited marriages “with a heretic, or a Jew, or a pagan, unless the person marrying the Orthodox shall promise to come over to the Orthodox faith”. In this Canon, we have the confirmation of the abovementioned 31st Canon of Laodicea, namely that conversion to Christianity is a prerequisite for the celebration of a marriage. The most explicit Canon on this issue is the 72nd Canon of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council *in Trullo* (692). This particular Canon not only spoke about impediments of interfaith marriages, but also prescribed the sanctions to be applied against those who transgress the rules of the Church. This Canon reads as follows: “An Orthodox man is not permitted to marry a heretical woman, nor an Orthodox woman to wed a heretical man. And if anything of this sort should appear to have been done by anyone at all, the marriage is to be considered null, and the unlawful wedlock is to be dissolved. For it behooves not to mingle together the things that ought not to be mingled, nor it is right that the wolf be joined with the sheep, nor the lot of sinners with the portion of Christ [meaning: the Church]. But if anyone shall transgress what we have decreed, let him be excommunicated.”

Inter-Confessional Marriage

Today mixed marriages between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians are allowed, under the following conditions: 1) The non-Orthodox spouse must be a Christian baptized in water and in the name of the Holy Trinity. 2) The wedding must be blessed by an Orthodox priest. 3) The

² John Meyendorff, *Marriage: an Orthodox Perspective*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 2000³, p.17

couple's children must be baptized and nurtured in the Orthodox Church. 4) In cases of conflict, the spouses should address themselves to Orthodox ecclesiastical courts.

It goes without saying that mixed marriages also reflect the historic division of the Churches. This is why in our day, in the context of inter-Christian relationships, both locally and globally, Churches cooperating through the wider Ecumenical Movement try to jointly assess the difficulties of such marriages, and work together to find mutually accepted pastoral solutions to this rapidly spreading phenomenon.

Anglicans and Protestants generally recognize all marriages, civil and ecclesiastical, as valid marriages, provided that they have been freely contracted by persons capable of marriage. Some of these Churches also recognize same-sex marriage, something which has created important controversies among Christian Churches because some of them, especially the Orthodox Church, do not allow same-sex couples to receive the sacrament of marriage nor recognize such a possibility.

The Roman Catholic Church also recognizes marriages between other Christians as valid. However, a Catholic who intends to marry a non-Catholic in a ceremony celebrated by a non-Catholic clergyman must obtain a dispensation from their ecclesiastical authority in order to ensure the validity of their marriage.

The Orthodox Church does not formally pass judgment on the validity of marriages performed outside her body among the non-Orthodox. As Fr. George Tsetsis puts it: "It is interesting to note, however, that in case two Protestants or two Roman Catholics, previously married in their Churches, are converted to Orthodoxy, they are not remarried in their new Church. In this way the Orthodox tacitly recognize Roman Catholic or Protestant weddings. Nevertheless, for a mixed marriage between an Orthodox and a believer of another Church to be valid, it should imperatively be celebrated in the Orthodox Church by an Orthodox priest and according to the traditional Orthodox rite."³

Interfaith marriage, a realistic option?

In the Orthodox Church today, at least in the U.S.A., the number of interreligious marriages seems to be a pressing reality. The statistics of the Department of Registry of the Greek Orthodox Church in America cannot reflect it due to the impossibility of celebrating an interreligious marriage, but we do know that in 2016, 60% of all marriages celebrated in Greek Orthodox churches in the US were inter-Christian marriages, meaning that the exposure to confessional, if not religious diversity, is indeed accelerating.

Although the early Church discouraged exogamy for religious reasons, she nevertheless tolerated marriages between a Christian and a pagan. In doing so, the Church followed St Paul's maxim that "the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband" (1 Cor. 7:14). Early Christian literature gives evidence that marriages between a Christian and a non-Christian were not rare, although they were problematic. Only when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire was the celebration of such marriages forbidden by the Church. From that time on, endogamy, namely marriage between two Christians, became the normative expression of the undivided Church during the first millennium.

³ Rev. Dr. George Tsetsis, "The Pastoral Dimension of Mixed-Marriages", http://www.apostoliki-diakonia.gr/en_main/catechism/theologia_zoi/themata.asp?contents=selides_katixisis/contents_Texts.asp&main=SK_texts&file=4.htm (last consultation September 15, 2017)

And following the Great Schism in 1054, marriage only between two Orthodox Christians became the praxis of the Orthodox Church, until very recently.

The recent Holy and Great Council opened the doors to a theological reexamination of this issue. Commenting on the preconiliar document on “Marriage” a group of scholars wrote: “The document states the marriage of an Orthodox Christian with a non-Orthodox Christian is forbidden and cannot be celebrated in the Church, though it can be **‘blessed out of indulgence’** if the children of marriage will be baptized and raised Orthodox (2.5a). This particular point may be the most challenging pastoral matter for contemporary Orthodoxy, especially in North and South America and Western Europe, where the overwhelming majority of marriages are mixed. The Church has honored marriages between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christians without ritual restrictions (except Holy Communion) for many years, and the non-Orthodox spouse frequently becomes Orthodox through participation in the life of the local parish. An attempt to implement this initiative pastorally would raise serious questions, especially given that ‘intermarriage’ is easily the norm for most Orthodox.”⁴

Evidently, this position is not shared by all the Local Churches of the Orthodox Church. However, the discussion surrounding the theological nature of sacraments in general, and of the sacrament of marriage in particular, together with the scope of interpretation of pastoral *economia*, allow the Orthodox Church to explore in a time of profound religious diversity in modern societies the inclusive care for the transmission of the faith and the salvation of the person. One way would be for the Orthodox Church to acknowledge the reality of the civil marriage, for instance, of heterosexual interfaith couples, thus allowing the Orthodox member to be fully integrated to the sacramental life of the Orthodox Church. The Russian Orthodox Church, in its *Basis of the Social Doctrine*, prepared in early 2000, proposes: “In accordance with ancient canonical prescriptions, today, too, the Church does not sanctifies marriages contracted between the Orthodox and non-Christians, while recognizing them as lawful and not regarding those who live in such a marriage as living in sinful co-habitation.” (par. 10.2.)⁵

Father Grigorios Papathomas, in a fascinating article, goes farther. According to this professor of Canon Law at the University of Athens, the Orthodox Church should allow the sacramental marriage of interfaith couples. His argument, based on the Antique tradition of the Church, opposes the impediment of interreligious marriage considering that the practice of the Orthodox Church today was influenced by the context of the Orthodox Church in the Ottoman Empire since the 15th century. He says: “Interreligious marriage freely admits religious alterity and, like the primitive Christian communities, does not impose or require the conversion of adults; the Church simply blesses her faithful member at the moment of unique choice of mystery of life which is, in itself, marriage.”⁶ For Father Papathomas, the Orthodox Church should reactivate the possibility of interfaith marriage.

⁴ Rev. Dr. Nicholas Denysenko *et al.*, “Pastoral Challenges for Marriage in Contemporary Orthodoxy” *Public Orthodoxy*, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/tag/alkiviadis-calivas/> (last consultation, September 13, 2017)

⁵ Entire document available at <https://mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/> (last consultation September 18, 2017)

⁶ Grigorios Papathomas, « Un communautarisme ecclésial ouvert : Mariages dispar-mixtes et conversions d’adultes », in *Le Feu sur la Terre*, Ed. des Presses Saint-Serge, Paris, 2005

Conclusion

As we have seen, current Orthodox practice does not allow interfaith couples to be married in Church. However, the theological analysis as well as the development of the sacrament of marriage can guide a new interpretation and practice in pastoral care. Ultimately, Orthodox Christians look for “holiness” as Saint Paul wrote. A discussion on the place of Interfaith couples in the Orthodox Church is needed in light of the growing reality of religious diverse society.

Annex

Example of Orthodox Prayer for Interfaith Couple

Blessed are You, Lord our God, for You, sanctify pure and mystical marriage, but also ordained the marriage of mortals; preserving our immortality, but providing for the needs of this life as well. Will You also now, Lord God send down Your grace on these Your servants N. and N. so that they may live according to Your will. Bless them, Lord God, as You blessed Abraham and Sarah; as You blessed Isaac and Rebecca. Bless them, Lord God, as You blessed Jacob and all the Patriarchs; as You blessed Joseph and Asenath; as You blessed Moses and Zipporah. Protect them, O Lord our God, as You did Noah in the ark. Protect them, O Lord our God, as You did Jonah in the belly of the whale. May there come upon them the joy of the blessed Helen when she found the Precious Cross. Be mindful, Lord, of the parents who nurtured them, for the prayers of parents make firm the foundations of houses. Be mindful, Lord, of Your servants the attendants to the bridal pair who have come to share this joy. Be mindful, O Lord our God, of Your servant N. and Your handmaid N., and bless them with a fruitful union, fair children, harmony of soul and body. Exalt them like the cedars of Lebanon, like a luxuriant vine. Let their goods so increase that, having everything in abundance, they may abound in good works, pleasing to You. Let them see the children of their children like so many olive saplings around their table. And finding favor in Your sight, may they be as radiant as the stars of heaven in You our Lord, to Whom all glory, dominion, honor and worship are due, now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen