

When a Catholic Marries an Orthodox Christian

WALKING TOGETHER SERIES

1. WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT MARRYING AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN?

From the Catholic point of view, the Orthodox churches occupy an exceptional place. In fact, the *Decree on Ecumenism* (a document of the Second Vatican Council concerning our relations with other Christians) says that these churches are special because they have preserved the ancient traditions that came down to us from the Apostles. Most importantly, they “possess true sacraments, above all—by apostolic succession—the priesthood and the Eucharist, whereby they are still joined to us in closest intimacy” (*Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 15). The fact that we celebrate the same sacraments as the Orthodox churches puts them in a special category, closer to us than the ecclesial communities that sprang from the Protestant Reformation.

Still, some theological matters continue to divide us. Most importantly, Orthodox churches do not accept Catholic teachings regarding the primacy and infallibility of the Pope. And while Catholics and Orthodox both believe that Christian marriage is a sacrament, we differ regarding the possibility of divorce and remarriage, as well as who is the minister of the sacrament. Roman Catholics believe the two people getting married are the ministers of the sacrament, while Orthodox and Eastern Catholics believe the minister is the priest.

In recent decades, growing closeness between our churches has been shown in various ways. Popes and heads of Orthodox churches have exchanged visits and signed common declarations, and international theological dialogues have been established to work to overcome what still divides us. As early as 1971, Pope Paul VI spoke of the “almost perfect communion” that exists between Catholic and Orthodox Christians.

2. WHAT CHURCHES ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

Three groups of churches fall into the Orthodox category. By far the largest is the communion of churches known as *Eastern Orthodox* or simply as the *Orthodox Church*. These are the churches of the Byzantine tradition—including the great Russian, Greek, Romanian, Bulgarian, and Serbian Orthodox churches, and several others—that look to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople as a point of unity. The next group is the family of six *Oriental Orthodox Churches*: the Armenian, Coptic, Syrian, Ethiopian,

Eritrean, and Malankara (or Indian) Orthodox churches. The third group is the *Assyrian Church of the East*, an ancient church centered in modern-day Iraq and Iran. The great majority of the churches of all three groups make provision for their faithful to marry Catholics. The exceptions are the Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Malankara (Indian) Oriental Orthodox Churches, which do not bless interchurch marriages under any circumstances.

3. WHAT KIND OF PREPARATION DO WE NEED TO MARRY?

In keeping with the friendly relationship between our churches, a Catholic-Orthodox couple considering marriage should work closely with both of their pastors regarding appropriate marriage preparation courses. Each will also need to obtain the permission of his or her local bishop (or his delegate) to marry the other, and the Catholic will need a special dispensation from the Catholic bishop if the wedding is to take place before an Orthodox priest. During this process, the Catholic will be asked to state that he or she intends to remain a Catholic. The dispensation to marry in an Orthodox service is necessary only for the lawfulness of the marriage. If it takes place without the dispensation, the Catholic Church still considers the marriage to be valid if both parties were free to marry.

As a general rule, the Orthodox do not allow their faithful to be married in a non-Orthodox ceremony. For example, the dialogue between Catholics and Eastern Orthodox in the United States has recommended that all weddings between their faithful take place in an Eastern Orthodox ceremony, since this is the only way the Orthodox party can remain in good standing in his or her church. If the Orthodox party does not practice his or her faith, a Catholic ceremony might be the best option.

4. WHAT ABOUT THE UPBRINGING OF CHILDREN?

The couple should address this sensitive question before the wedding. In the course of preparing for marriage, each party is likely to be asked to promise in some way to baptize and raise any children in his or her own church. Both churches consider this to be a serious matter. In the United States, where Orthodox are small in number compared to Catholics, this question touches upon the future of Orthodox churches in our society.

The Catholic party should know that if—given the circumstances of the marriage—the children are brought up Orthodox, his or her relationship to the Catholic Church will not be jeopardized. Since Catholics and Orthodox share the same sacraments, the spiritual formation of children in authentic Christian doctrine and ways of Christian living would, for the most part, be similar in either church. In any case, since double membership is not possible, the children will need to receive the sacraments and be educated in one church or the other. That said, marriage also includes a special obligation for the couple to make every effort to help the children to know and appreciate the traditions and practices of the churches of both parents.

5. HOW CAN WE LIVE OUT OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH TOGETHER IN A CATHOLIC-ORTHODOX MARRIAGE?

When a Catholic and an Orthodox Christian are joined in matrimony, they will have many opportunities to illustrate, through their married life, the spiritual and theological closeness of our two churches. Under some circumstances this may include sharing in the Eucharist, but the two churches have different views on this question. The Catholic Church offers to Orthodox Christians the Sacraments of Penance, the Eucharist, and the Anointing of the Sick when they ask for them of their own free will and are properly disposed. But Orthodox pastors instruct their faithful not to receive Communion in a Catholic church. Both churches have the conviction that only those united in the same faith can share the Eucharist. For the Orthodox, this implies that the Eucharist can be shared only with Orthodox. For Catholics, the level of unity in faith that already exists with the Orthodox allows such sharing to take place. Consequently, a couple's desire to share the Eucharist, just as they will share the Sacrament of Marriage, touches on different points of view and practices that are not easily harmonized.

Couples should place high priority on becoming familiar with each other's traditions, customs, and devotions. This can be as routine as saying grace before meals or sharing fasting practices. They may wish to attend services with one another while allowing each to participate fully in his or her own parish. The family can also attend many other kinds of services together, apart from the Eucharist, that do not highlight the exclusion of any members of

the family. Vespers, Scripture celebrations and study, and seasonal services for Advent or Lent are all good examples. In some areas it may also be possible to join with other Orthodox-Catholic couples to share experiences and support one another. Above all, couples need to learn to pray together.

In this way, a Catholic and an Orthodox married to each other can provide a concrete example of how the faithful of our two churches can relate to one another with respect and love. May the Holy Spirit, who brings life to both our churches, bind all such married couples together in perfect love and make them a living sign of that unity for which both Catholics and Orthodox pray.

RESOURCES

- Evdokimov, Paul. *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.
- Oriental Orthodox–Roman Catholic Consultation in the United States. *Oriental Orthodox–Roman Catholic Interchurch Marriages and Other Pastoral Relationships*. Edited by Garabed Kochakian, John Meno, and Ronald Roberson. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 1995. Published jointly by the USCCB and the Standing Committee of Oriental Orthodox Churches in America.
- United States Catholic-Orthodox Theological Consultation. *An Agreed Statement on Mixed Marriage*. 1971. <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/ecumenical/orthodox/mixed-marriage.cfm>.
- United States Catholic-Orthodox Theological Consultation. *Joint Recommendations on the Spiritual Formation of Children of Marriages Between Orthodox and Roman Catholics*. 1980. <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/ecumenical/orthodox/spiritual-formation-of-children.cfm>.
- USCCB Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. *A Guide for Catholics Considering Marriage with an Orthodox Christian*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998.
- USCCB Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. *A Guide on Catholic-Orthodox Marriages for Catholic Clergy and Other Pastoral Ministers*. Washington, DC: USCCB, 1998.

The document *When a Catholic Marries an Orthodox Christian* is a part of the Walking Together Series and was developed as a resource by the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was reviewed by the committee chairman, Bishop Richard J. Sklba, and has been authorized for publication by the undersigned.

Msgr. David J. Malloy, STD
General Secretary, USCCB

Excerpts from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New Revised Edition, edited by Austin Flannery, OP, copyright © 1996, Costello Publishing Company, Inc., Northport, N.Y. are used with permission of the publisher, all rights reserved.

Copyright © 2008, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. All rights reserved.

A downloadable resource from



Catholic
Current