

## MIXED MARRIAGE—UNMIXED TRAGEDY

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THE Catholic who truly appreciates his religion, no tragedy is comparable to loss of Faith. It is a complete disaster. It is the destruction of the foundation work of the only bridge by which man can communicate with God.<sup>1</sup> An understanding of this is by no means as widespread today as the estimated number of Catholics might indicate. A measure of the lack of appreciation of the importance of Faith is the degree of astonishment with which even Catholics regard the treatment meted out to heretics in the Middle Ages. Nor can repugnance only to the tortures then in common use be pleaded here. Upon these, our more delicate civilization looks askance for a different reason. It is the failure to comprehend the importance that the Ages of Faith attached to the crime itself, that accuses present-day Catholicism. The external form which correction or punishment takes in any age is accidental. But the crime, "loss of Faith"—or rather *rejection of Faith*—was no more awful then than it is today.

But Catholics today have come by some strange perversion of reason, perhaps by the use of the phrase "loss of Faith" itself, to the opinion that its loss is something that happens to people by the operation of agents beyond their control. Emphasis is placed on the element of misfortune while the fact that the misfortune is entirely voluntary is forgotten. In the minds of present-day Catholics a man who has lost his Faith is very like one who has lost his pocketbook, entirely a victim of circumstances.

Faith, once it has been given as a free gift of God is not lost save by sin. It is not withdrawn by God even as a punishment for sin; its loss is always a special sin in itself. Unless a man voluntarily omits to do what he ought to do, he will not lose his Faith.<sup>2</sup> A consideration of the nature of Faith makes this evident. Faith is concerned with knowledge and hence it is

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<sup>1</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 2, a. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *II Sent.*, dist. 39, q. 1, a. 2, ad 4.



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properly an act of the intellect. Since however the object of Faith is not known in itself but only through the testimony of another, the will must command the intellect to assent. If one is told that King George V of England is dead, he assents by an act of his intellect to the proposition, but since he himself has not seen the dead body of the late king, his will must command the assent which his intellect gives.

But God will not force our will, and nothing else can. Faith is not lost, then; it is rejected. Faith is rejected by an intellectual act which the will commands; for as was just noted, it is at the dictate of the will that the intellect accepts faith.<sup>3</sup> The picture that is often drawn of the unfortunate person more sinned against than sinning, who cannot submit his intellect, try as he will, is not true to fact. He is not required to see and understand what he believes; he is required only to believe it. His intellect is required to assent by an act of his will to truths which are inevident. His will is free, free to extort assent from his intellect even when that faculty is torn and twisted by difficulties and faced by apparent contradictions. Saint Augustine very briefly sums up the whole matter. "A man is not able to believe unless he wishes to do so."<sup>4</sup>

Rejection of Faith, then, is always a sin. In the whole category of crimes against God there is but one sin that is more grievous. This single exception is hatred of God. Next to it and exceeding all others is rejection of Faith.<sup>5</sup>

The present-day attitude toward the outlook of the Middle Ages upon loss of Faith—an outlook for which even good Catholics feel themselves called upon to apologize—in itself as an isolated fact would be unimportant.

There is a much more practical and more sorry indication of present-day misconception than that. This is the increasing number of mixed marriages in the Church. It would be hard to conceive a more fertile source of positive danger to Faith. For to contract a mixed marriage is to form the closest union that can exist between creatures, with someone who at best is totally indifferent to Faith—which a Catholic must consider the necessary means to eternal happiness, the only thing that gives purpose to life.

There are in general only two types of mixed marriages

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Tract. in Joannem, 26, § 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 20, a. 3.

which do not result in the conversion of the non-Catholic. In the more unfortunate of the two, the Catholic family is made to give up the practice of religion. Either a direct and unequivocal demand is made, or difficulties are placed in the way. The marriage promises are scrapped and the children, unbaptized, are reared as pagans.

The second is the more favorable outcome of a bad situation. The Catholic party is left free, even aided in the practice of the Catholic religion and the children are baptized and brought up as Catholics. This condition is certainly less unfavorable to Faith than the other. But it remains so while—and only while—the children do their thinking through the mind of the Catholic parent. When they have come to the age of independent thought, the danger lies precisely in the tolerant attitude and virtuous life of the non-Catholic parent. To the child of such a marriage, the danger of mixed marriage can make little or no appeal. Because of the harmony that always existed in his own home and from the virtues of his non-Catholic parent, the child will easily reason away the danger of mixed marriages. It will be useless to tell him the verifiable truth that his home is the rare exception. He has been deprived of his birthright, the strong Catholic instinct to guard his Faith jealously and expose it to no unnecessary peril. Like Saint Peter, he is ready to thrust himself into danger, and negligible indeed is the probability that his resistance will be greater than that of the impetuous Apostle.

Moreover, no matter how favorable the outcome of any mixed marriage may seem to be, there always remains the insuperable barrier between Catholic and non-Catholic. As long as the marriage remains a mixed marriage, the mutual help which husband and wife should render one another is, in some most important respects at least, impossible. There is a field of knowledge and there is a terminal of affection possessed by the Catholic which the non-Catholic party usually does not even consider. For if he were convinced, as the Catholic should be, that there is but one Truth and one Good, and one Way to the possession of them, he would be just as unwilling to marry a Catholic as the Catholic should be to marry him.

Any age as given to mixed marriages as the present, is an age in which the gift of Faith is underestimated. No one deliberately exposes to danger of loss that which he prizes above all else; yet to take as a life companion, as co-educator of one's

children, someone who lacks the Catholic Faith, is to do just that. As long as it can be said that mixed marriage is not uncommon or that Catholics do not shrink at the thought of such a union, so long can it be said that Catholics do not appreciate their Faith.

This accusation leveled at Catholicism today is bad enough, but there is a worse one. *Catholics are not doing enough to change this situation.* The time to prevent a mixed marriage is not when the couple come to a priest for a dispensation. The time is long before that. The preventive is not the impatient remonstrance of the priest, but something much more potent than that, something much more suited to man's essential nature.<sup>6</sup> It is the formation of habits.

It is the formation first of all of habits of thought, since Faith is essentially in the intellect. Then it is the perfecting of these habits of thought by compelling them to overflow into habits of action. In other words, the preventive consists in surrounding Catholics with a Catholic environment. Nor is such strong insistence upon this natural remedy for mixed marriages a subtraction from God's omnipotent causality. It is rather a vindication of it. For while He and His sacraments remain the only efficient causes of the inception and augmentation of Faith, nature by the power with which He endowed it is a dispositive cause performing the work which He gave it to perform.

The only protection, then, which, under the grace of God, can offer any degree of security against mixed marriages is Catholic environment, which is generative of habits of thought and action opposed to such unions. Man is affected throughout his life, to a less degree indeed as he grows older, but very strongly in his younger years, by his environment. Nothing could be more natural. Man is placed in his environment precisely so that he may be affected by it, first to a greater knowledge and then to a more intense love of God.

The most important aspect of Catholic environment is Catholic education. This should begin not when the child enters grammar school but from the moment that he begins to acquire knowledge. It is really never too early to begin. The habit of Faith is infused at Baptism, but acts of Faith will never be produced unless truth is proposed for assimilation. At no period of life is man so plastic, so pliable as he is during his pre-school and primary school years. To the child, the highest authority

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<sup>6</sup> *Summa Theol.*, I-II, q. 49, a. 4.

is the nearest and dearest authority, regardless of the teacher's objective claim to such distinction.

Important however as this early education is, it is not at all sufficient. In the high school, the authority of the teacher is sufficient to color facts to a marked degree, and often the improper assimilation of one fact is the beginning of a prejudice that will never be overcome. Even in the college or university, the student is subject, sometimes unconsciously, to the influence of the professor whose knowledge or personal charm appeals to him most. This fact is not a disadvantage. Youth is a God-given period of life during which the individual is willing to take on authority that which he must learn but which he cannot reason out for himself. It is no more than right that the student should believe what he hears on the authority of the teacher, in order that he may come to the perfection of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> But this period of life must be used, not abused. It must be the beginning of that habit of thought and action which is to protect Faith.

When the young man or woman has finished the process of formal education, environment still has its effect, in a lesser degree, it is true, since the habit of thought and of action has been formed and it is now a question of preserving and of strengthening it. The means of strengthening this habit is to be had for the taking. Man is a social animal. The need for the society of his fellows exists in man; the fulfillment of that need can be met in a great measure in his parish. Young men marry young women in whose society they are thrown. Catholics ordinarily will marry Catholics whom they see in Church and know in the social life of their parish, who have tried each other's patience in the parish dramatics, who have united in the various parish societies to make successes of parish entertainments, who are fellow students in the courses in Apologetics which the parish offers to her members.

Through it all, these young people are strengthening the habit which is to protect their Faith. They are surrounded by a Catholic atmosphere, steeped in Catholic tradition. If the temptation comes that would expose to danger their own Faith and that of their unborn children, they know no other answer except that this precious gift must be safeguarded at any cost.

The Church in America has so many things of which she may be justly proud—her parochial school system, her wide

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<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 2, a. 3.

awake press, her splendid priests, her active laity—that this consummate shame of mixed marriages is the more disgraceful in contrast.

The end of the Church is the salvation of souls. Can it be said that her duty is fulfilled when she has used only the obligatory means to this end, the means that are of precept? It can never be said, as long as any means remain untried that are not evil. The obligation of the Church to foster Catholic social life in a country which is predominantly Protestant is not to be lightly estimated. If she condemns mixed marriages—and she does with all the vehemence of her motherly heart<sup>8</sup>—she must promote with all her power the strongest preventive, under God, that is effective in checking them—Catholic social life.

Where Catholic social life and Catholic education provide a Catholic environment, there will flourish habits of thought to oppose the enemy to Faith that is found in mixed marriages. There will be found Catholics “to contend earnestly for the Faith once delivered to the saints.”<sup>9</sup> There will be found young men and young women who will suffer anything but the accusation that they are willing to place themselves in danger of meriting the condemnation leveled by Saint Jude against those who have rejected the Faith: “clouds without water, which are carried about by the winds, trees of the autumn, unfruitful, twice dead, plucked up by the roots, raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own confusion; wandering stars, to whom the storm of darkness is reserved for ever.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Benedict XIV., *De Matrimonii Clandestinis in Belgio* (Denz. 1455).  
Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, 1060.

<sup>9</sup> *Jude*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Jude*, 12, 13.