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A Christian Ethos for Multicultural Marriage

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I. Catholic Unity-in-diversity in Sacramental Marriage

The following theoretical considerations grow out of two years of experience founding and animating a lay marriage preparation team at the Parish of *Ste. Geneviève* in Garges-les-Gonesse, France. This dynamic, multicultural Christian community is typical of the new face of Roman Catholicism on the margins of many traditionally Catholic European nations. *Ste. Geneviève* is multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-class, comprised principally of Catholic immigrants from Southern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, the Indian subcontinent, and South East Asia. There is also a core of "old Gauls", founders of the parish in this *ville nouvelle* to the north of Paris. French was our common language, though relatively few of us were native speakers.

It is a testament to the socially constructive forces of religion that such a wide diversity of peoples have been able to form an integrated worshipping community. One of the parish's premiere instances of cross-cultural bonding is marriage. A high percentage of newer unions are "mixed marriages". The adjective begs definition. Until recently, by "mixed" marriage one often referred to those unions wherein one of the two parties was non-Catholic.[1] Today, however, we are witnessing more of a different type of "mixture": marriages where both parties are Catholic yet come from markedly different cultural backgrounds. This is due both to increased migration of peoples and to a breakdown of social prejudices against intercultural marriages. The recent marriage at Garges between a Chaldean Catholic from Syria and a Roman Catholic from the island of Guadeloupe is a good example of the geographic and cultural distance that sacramental love is now stretching to bridge. We should note parenthetically that the present study looks only at intercultural Catholic couples; the complexification of the issue by the introduction of another faith tradition into the mix goes beyond our competencies and the structure of this argument.

The spiritual preparation of engaged couples from different Catholic cultures poses fresh challenges to lay and clerical ministers. The aspect of interculturalism adds a novel dimension to the sacramental character of these unions and invites new reflection and new experimentation with methods of catechesis. It is the purpose of this article to suggest a cross-cultural Christian ethos which takes into account the growing diversity of European Catholicism, so that parish communities be helped in their efforts to prepare and to support intercultural sacramental unions.

1 In the 1969 revision of the rite of marriage, the Sacred Congregation of Rites made special provisions for the tactful and appropriate adaption of the liturgy in the case of a marriage between a Catholic and either an Orthodox, a protestant or an unbaptized person (n. 8). It also makes provisions for the adaptation of the rite to local customs, whereby it assumes that the bride and groom are both members of the same tradition (e.g., n. 15). The Code of Canon Law maintains this understanding of "mixed marriage" as a difference of cult; e.g., canons 1124-1129 outline ecclesial supports for those Catholics who would enter into marriage with a non-Catholic person and who still wish to retain faithful membership in the Catholic Church.

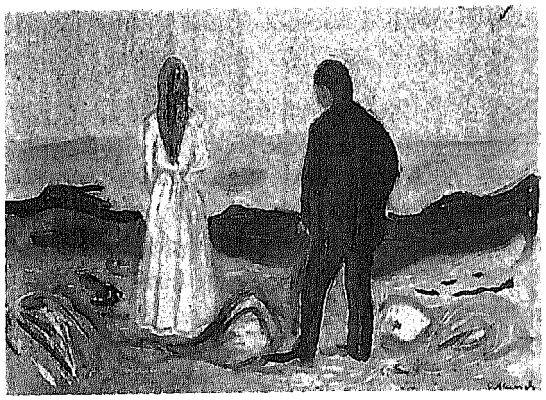
Theological Presuppositions

A few hopeful presuppositions will undergird our entire approach to this task. Catholicism is by definition and by historical fact a multicultural project of the Holy Spirit. Named in reference to the Greek phrase *kata holos* (by way of the whole), Catholicism has for two thousand years been an ecclesial communion of communities, an international family of particular churches united in belief, in sacramental practice, and through evolving moral norms and values. All these commonalities find specific expression in a great variety of human languages, economic and political systems, mystical and aesthetic traditions. The fundamental unity of the Church allows for, and thrives upon, the great diversity of its many communities as a reflection of the universality of God's gracious offer of salvation to all peoples through Jesus Christ. The English Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins put it well:

> For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
> Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
> To the Father through the features of men's faces.[2]

The Incarnation was God's definitive entrance into one human culture, and Pentecost was God's multiplication of that penetration into all human cultures. The gift of Emanuel is God's pledge to be present and available within and through all that is human, even as God challenges all human beings and all human cultures to slough off sinfulness and embrace holiness in the specificity of their life-worlds. What has long been an essential aspect of Catholicism in general is now becoming an increasingly common aspect of parish life in particular: people from ten thousand places (or at least a few dozen) are sharing communion not only through the bishop of Rome but also through common worship and sacramental practice in the pews and at the altar of the parish church. More to our point, they are meeting at nuptial masses and founding new domestic churches that embody the rich diversity of God's children. Intercultural marriages are therefore not an aberration but rather an exemplary manifestation of Catholic unity-in-diversity. Where such intercultural unions are occurring, this fact demands acceptance and hearty support by the parish community, for beyond mere tolerance lies the promise of enrichment for the entire community, if multiculturalism is understood to be the grace that it is: an opportunity to seek God in an ever richer, an ever lovelier panorama of graced presence.

Our second presupposition has to do with the sacramental nature of Catholic marriage. Generally speaking, sacramentality names the Catholic conceptual framework for understanding the human experience of the Divine. Such human-Divine communication takes place in the culturally structured, socially oriented context of human life, especially in moments of heightened importance such as birth and death, sin and forgiveness, love and commitment. These can be experiences of both the immanent and transcendent, for while they reveal human imperfection and limitation, they also convey to believers the perfect love and the absolute presence of God within and beyond human finitude. Thus limit experiences become experiences of grace, yet they do so only within culturally defined structures of language, ritual and meaning.



Edvard Munch, *Two People (The Lonely Ones)*, 1899

As children are socialized into a given culture, they become open to understanding their experiences of the world to the degree that they learn to name them. This is as true concerning the

world of grace as it is concerning the world of nature. Each culture has its particular ways of making possible and ways of understanding the human encounter with the Divine; liturgical rituals and pious devotions, Sacred Scriptures and traditions, forms of prayer, and ethical norms combine to comprise each local manifestation of religion.[3] This is true among the many variants of Catholicism: Polish, Chilean and Japanese inculturations of Catholicism have much in common; they also have much that is singular to each, given the inescapable nuancing of language, culture and history. Therefore, insofar as it is incorporated into the cultural categories of human experience, sacramental grace is always inculturated grace.

Our third presupposition is to note that the various cultural forms of Catholicism are not static; rather, they are quite elastic, open to growth and able to adapt to changing circumstances. Pope John XXIII saw the adaptation of Church discipline to modern needs as one of the tasks of the council he chose to call, whose major task would be the *aggiornamento* of the *ecclesia semper reformanda.* In this he was evoking both God's providential love for His Pilgrim People and their religious duty to respond obediently to God's gracious initiatives throughout salvation history.[4] The Council Fathers at Vatican II responded by a faithful adaptation of ancient verities to new cultural situations.[5] Pope Paul VI extended this duty to people in their cultures and to particular Churches; they must apply universal Catholic doctrine to the specific challenges posed by local conditions.[6] Throughout his pontificate, Pope John Paul II has called Catholics throughout the world both to global solidarity and to a firm implantation into local cultural realities. Unity in diversity is an essential feature of Catholicism in general and intercultural Catholic marriage in particular.

The Challenge of Intercultural Marriage

When the partners come from different Catholic cultures, their experience of the sacrament of marriage will have both similar and different cultural nuances. The marriage preparation team needs to take this complexity into account as it seeks two complementary goals: the appreciation of difference and the search for commonality. As persons mature within various Catholic cultures, they slowly learn the real and the ideal rules that govern the institution of marriage in their families, their communities, and their particular Churches. They witness fidelity and infidelity, conflict and its resolution, meaningful love and its absence. They internalize a set of expectations and learn to perform a number of behaviors which are meant to further them towards their desired goals. They do all this according to the specific religious vocabulary of their local Catholic culture.

Obviously, there are differences, small and large, between Catholic cultures.[7] In some places, marital infidelity is occasional and generally (if painfully) forgivable. In other cultures, a continent away, it is rare and most often results in divorce. Again, in some cultures, a practical equality exists between husband and wife in the area of economic decision-making, while in other cultures the power of the purse may be the exclusive purview of either husband or wife. When both partners in a marriage come from the same cultural background, it is a fairly simple matter during the engagement period to make explicit

2 From "As kingfishers catch fire", in: *Poems,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, ⁴1997, 90.

3 For an excellent treatment of this dynamic, see M. Meslin: *L'expérience humaine du Divin: Fondements d'une anthropologie religieuse,* Paris: Cerf, 1988.

4 See John XXIII: "Ad Petri cathedram", in: *AAS* 51 (1959), 511; "Gaudet mater ecclesia", in: *AAS* (1962), 791.

5 See *Dignatitis humanae,* 1, where the Fathers of the Council note the Church's ability to bring out new things from her treasury and doctrine "that are in harmony with the things that are old". Further along in that same number they state their intention "to develop the doctrine of recent Popes", signaling their basic appreciation of the fact that the tradition of the Church is an ongoing, progressive understanding of divinely revealed truth.

6 See Paul VI, *Populorum progressio,* 81-83, and *Octagesima adviens,* 4.

7 Even between proximate European cultures with a strong Catholic tradition (e.g., Spain and Portugal), there can be a noticeable variation attitudes toward the institution of marriage, as one sees in the responses to the poll on reasons for divorce in *INTAMS review* 3 (1997), 153.

what both already tend to know implicitly. But when the two partners in a marriage come from quite different cultures, then great care and effort must be expended to bring to light the many variant understandings, strategies, expectations, hopes and fears that each brings to the union. For the marital sacrament to be a truly human encounter with the Divine in a communally supported structure of meaning and purpose, a carefully constructed cross-cultural dialogue must be fostered by the marriage preparation team. The couple will then come to the sacrament with a fair degree of mutual understanding and a common set of goals and expectations, as well as an appreciation of the equally valid, yet quite distinct, sacramental experience of the partner. This good beginning will establish a pattern of communication that will become habitual and will constitute a central pillar, along with prayer and Eucharist, for intercultural, sacramental marriage.

II. A Transcultural Ethos for Christian Marriage

Having established that intercultural marriage is consonant with the deepest identity of Catholicism, and having begun to evoke some of the stresses and strains on the sacramental experience of such unions, we can proceed to sketch out a Christian ethos of marriage that can undergird and support intercultural marriages. This ethos will work best if and as it supports the broadest possible understanding of Christian unity in diversity.[8] Our principle question is this: "In the face of great variety and diversity, what is common to all inculturations of a truly Catholic marital spirituality? We will propose four foundational beliefs/attitudes that can support and sustain intercultural marriages: the dignity of each human person, the universality of God's love, the mutuality of Christian community, and the efficacious nature of Christian love. From the perspective of human beings, these values are transcultural, for they are recognized as true only in their various inculturations, where they can be encountered, considered, and dealt with as such. From the point of view of God, these would be true meta-culturally, though such an understanding surpasses the human capacity to know in any truly meaningful way. For example, to support the dignity of human beings *as such* is a fairly empty proposition, and only becomes humanly meaningful (and Christian) when we support the human dignity of specific human beings in fact and in deed.

The Dignity of the Human Person

The first transcultural verity is the Christian notion of the personhood of God and the unique and inalienable dignity of every human person in *imago Dei*. This basic belief supports the intrinsic worth of each individual, not only in his or her biological facticity but also in his or her cultural specificity, for as we have said, human personhood occurs within and not apart from cultural context, as does the understanding of, and struggle to accept the practical consequences of, this notion. By virtue of its personalistic Theism – the conviction that God is loving creator of each person – Christianity posits God's graceful presence in and through all human persons as a consequence of the Divine choice to create human beings in God's image and likeness. This fundamental Judeo-Christian belief precludes in theory all racism and all ethnocentrism, and it condemns such sins in practice. In the context of marriage, this faith vision of human dignity offers a standing invitation to seek to encounter God through God's self-imaging in one's own selfhood and in that of one's spouse. S/he is that other self, that other human person with whom one is so intimately in communion that the interchange is named and appreciated as a sacramental, i.e., as the opportunity for a human experience of the Divine. In the specific context of intercultural marriage, the belief in the intrinsic dignity of the partner leads the believer to search for God in the biological, the spiritual and the cultural dimensions of one's partner, finding therein ultimate and unsurpassable worth and dignity.

The Universality of God's Love

The second aspect of a universal Christian ethos is the belief in that the Divine love which creates all individual persons also offers to unite them into a communion which cannot ultimately be sundered. Christianity rests upon the foundational revelation of a triune God who is a community of love and who desires that human beings discover and realize their identity as persons in community. In this perspective, a lack of community is the result of human sin, and God's grace opens the way to reconciliation of all humans with each other and with their Creator. A marital partnership which excludes the dimension of grace is one that is based on sexual instinct and attraction, shared work and the organization required to raise children and provide for old age; all of these aspects are qualified and engaged within the constructs of culture, and all of them are subject to sinful human choices and actions: rape and seduction, domination and exploitation, and abandonment. When it is an intercultural marriage, the cultural differences between partners can increase the danger of estrangement by adding a layer of conceptual separation between the partners, diminishing their chances for human happiness and for shared meaning. Christian openness to God's grace makes possible a human connectedness which transcends all the purely human aspects of marriage even as it illuminates and transforms them. Sexual relations become co-creative with God's ongoing labors; raising children becomes participation in the kenotic, redemptive love of Christ; engagement in the world of work and culture becomes collaboration with the Holy Spirit's ongoing sanctification of the world. The interpersonal connection that is structured according to the sacrament of Christian marriage can become indestructible when it is grace-filled, yet it always remains embodied and incultured, and so it remains an encounter with "not I". In each person's struggle to be faithful, it is revealed to be God's will that she finds her completion in the formation of spiritual communion with that which is radically different from her: her partner. By doing so, she is shown the essential, common identity which unites real difference without canceling it out.

The Mutuality of Christian Community

Thirdly, because each individual person is an expression of ultimate value in her specificity, and because each person contains a unique mixture of strengths and weaknesses, desires and needs, all of which are culturally configured, the Christian ethos provides an ability and a mechanism to accept and to integrate human difference into a harmonious whole. For Christians, equality does not mean sameness. Differences in intelligence, in talent, in health, in emotional strength, in spiritual depth mark the inequalities that exist between persons within a given culture. Add to this the differences between cultures and we can be hard pressed to identify human equality apart from the appeal that was earlier made to inalienable human dignity in the eyes of God. A Christian ethos of mutuality allows us to integrate inequality into human relations without denial or glorification of difference. Where the Nietzschean cult of breed would absolutize the superiority of one person, race, or culture over another, and where Marxist Leninism would deny the patent facts of life by doctrinaire egalitarianism, the Christian ethos recognizes differences as a positive advantage for humankind. Personal and cultural differences are an aspect of the human condition which has been established by the inscrutable Will of God. Christian faith would name this condition an invitation to mutual responsibility through the elaboration and the enactment of ethical norms directed towards the common good. In the context of intercultural

8 In his monumental study of Christianity in its diverse historical forms, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, Berlin, 1911, ERNST TROELTSCH discerned four hallmarks which be posited to be both essential and universal to Christianity. We shall borrow from his concluding typologies and apply them to our situation a century later.

sacramental marriage, the intention of mutual obedience and mutual service are expressions of the reciprocity of difference. Each spouse enters the marriage with the desire and the trust that natural and cultural differences can and should be transmuted into ethical values of mutual recognition, confidence and care for the other.

The Efficacy of Christian Love

The best efforts to accept in faith the other in his radical difference and to construct in grace a sacramental marriage will fall short of perfection. Human limitation and human frailty will inhibit perfect understanding. Cultural prejudices and biases will thwart perfect intercultural communion. No matter how just and how rationally constructed, no human marriage will be fully free from suffering, distress, and sickness for which we cannot account. This remains true for sacramental marriage, for grace overcomes sin without delivering us from our sinfulness this side of the eschaton. With the interpersonal obstacles to full communication and full understanding, and with social pressures due to sinful xenophobia, intercultural marriages will continue to bear an even greater burden in their pilgrimage in – and yet towards – the Kingdom. Therefore, like all marriages, these intercultural unions must rely always and finally upon charity. Christian charity, or active helpfulness, is the fruit of the Christian Spirit, an infused virtue which alone keeps committed love alive even as it must struggle towards that end for which it was created. Faithful love, based on the free decision to respond to a Divine vocation, will hold together that which cannot be completed by human beings until God perfects all things.

Conclusion

Our considerations must end on this rather theoretical level. These four aspects of a Christian ethos provide a theological basis for married love that is charitable, based upon an active, efficacious love which recognizes the dignity of the other and is cooperative, not competitive, is neither dominating nor slavish, and seeks to give glory to God even as it brings human beings to fullness of life. But what does all this mean in practical terms for marriage preparation teams, marriage renewal teams, and intercultural couples themselves? It becomes a blueprint, an initial trajectory for the hard work of meeting the living God in the concrete reality of human lives in community. The men and the women who choose to respond to grace accept thereby the challenge to actualize their personhoods through their mutual spousal love, in their specificity and in their interdependence, in their equality of dignity and in their difference of graced giftedness. We who are their Christian neighbors have a corresponding, complementary obligation in faith to assist them in this effort.

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Selected publications: *Economic Justice for All*, 1986 (pending publication), "A Model for Dialogue: Cyprian of Carthage on Ecclesial Discernment", in: *Theological Studies* 59 (1998), 236-253.

• Résumé

L'éthique chrétienne et les mariages interculturels

L'Eglise catholique s'entend depuis toujours comme une communauté ecclésiale de différentes communautés qui, au delà de leurs différences, sont unies par une foi commune, une pratique sacramentelle commune ainsi que des normes et des valeurs communes. Cette caractéristique transculturelle du catholicisme prend un relief tout particulier dans les mariages interculturels où les partenaires, bienque catholiques tous les deux, sont clairement issus de contextes culturels différents. C'est de l'éthique chrétienne de telles unions qu'il est question dans l'exposé suivant.

Trois postulats théologiques sont à la base de cette éthique: 1- la sacramentalité, dans la conception catholique, offre un cadre de sens à l'expérience humaine du divin. Ces expériences se manifestent à l'intérieur de structures linguistiques et cultuelles ainsi que de conceptions définies par la culture. 2- les différentes formes culturelles du catholicisme sont ouvertes à une influence et un enrichissement mutuels. Le mariage interculturel catholique pose, pour le contexte culturel impliqué, le défi de vivre l'unité dans la différence. 3- Pour des partenaires de cultures catholiques différentes, le sacrement de mariage – selon le vocabulaire religieux utilisé dans le contexte culturel concerné – a une signification chargée de nuances allant dans des sens à la fois divergents et convergents, ce qui fait qu'un dialogue interculturel circonspect s'impose.

Une éthique chrétienne d'un mariage catholique et interculturel demande une compréhension assez large de l'unité chrétienne dans la différence. L'article suivant présente quatre éléments fondamentaux (transculturels du point de vue humain, metaculturels du point de vue divin).

1. La conception chrétienne de Dieu en tant que personne soutient la dignité absolue de chaque être humain, créé à l'image de Dieu, non seulement dans sa constitution biologique, mais également dans son appartenance culturelle. Dans le sacrement de mariage, les partenaires sont donc appelés à chercher en eux-mêmes et chez l'autre la ressemblance avec l'image de Dieu.

2. Selon la foi chrétienne, l'amour universel de Dieu non seulement crée les individus, mais encore les amène à se rejoindre pour former des communautés indissolubles. Le lien interpersonnel du sacrement de mariage préfigure déjà la construction de cette communauté..

3. Les différences naturelles et culturelles entre les personnes correspondent à la volonté du Dieu créateur: elles ne doivent ni être reniées, ni glorifiées, elles sont plutôt une invitation à a responsabilité mutuelle, à la reconnaissance de l'autre dans sa différence et à l'empathie.

4. L'amour actif et concret du prochain est indispensable afin de maîtriser tous les obstacles et toutes les difficultés qui entravent le chemin ici-bas vers l'entente et la communauté. Cet amour contient en même temps l'appel lancé à chaque communauté chrétienne pour qu'elle accompagne et qu'elle soutienne en particulier les unions interculturelles.