

Marriage Between Baptized and Unbaptized

(Or a non-practicing Christian)

This article addresses the specific situation of a Catholic who wishes to marry someone who is unbaptized. Many of these principles however, should serve as a caution for any Christian who wishes to marry another Christian who does not value or practice their Christian faith.

In 1 Corinthians 7:39, St Paul speaks of our obligation to be married *“in the Lord.”* For Catholics, this means being married according to the laws of the Catholic Church concerning marriage. These laws are based on the commands of Christ and the teaching of Sacred Scripture.

When a Catholic wishes to marry an unbaptized person, the Catholic Church refers to this as *“disparity of worship.”* Basing itself on the advice of St. Paul in Sacred Scripture, who instructs us to *not* marry an unbeliever, the Catholic Church considers *“disparity of worship”* an impediment to a valid marriage.

The Instruction of St. Paul in the Bible:
“Do not be mismated with unbelievers.”
 2 Corinthians 6:14

A pastor must obtain a special dispensation from the bishop for a disparity of worship marriage to go forward. To do so, the pastor must first approve of the marriage. Even when this dispensation is granted however, the marriage will not be a *“sacramental”* marriage and it may not take place within the context of Mass. This is because the *“sacramental”* bond of marriage can only take place between two *baptized* people.

What to look for in a Spouse / Raising Children

It is important to note that the primary goal of marriage is not one’s own fulfillment. Marriage is a sacrament of *service*, namely, the service of helping your spouse and children get to Heaven. The purpose of marriage is thus both unitive (for the good of the spouses) and procreative (for the good of raising children). How will you be able to achieve these goals if your spouse does not share your most foundational value of faith?

It is difficult to raise children in a culture that has become increasingly hostile to faith. In fact, studies show that most Catholic youth stop practicing their faith as they become young adults. Parents need to be united in this task and receive all of the grace available to them if they wish to successfully transmit their Catholic Faith to their children. This becomes all the more difficult if one of the parents is not a believer.

What the Bible says about marriage between the baptized and unbaptized:

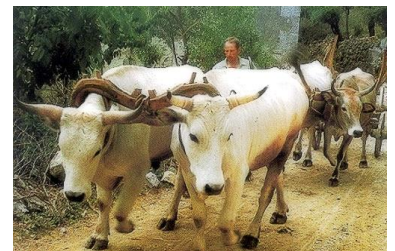
“Do not be mismated with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Be'lial? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore, come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” 2 Corinthians 6: 14-18

Another translation says, ***“Do not be yoked... with unbelievers...”*** To understand this better, it helps to think about what a yoke does (shown in these pictures). A yoke enables two to pull together as one. But it also requires them to pull in the *same direction*. Marriage is a “yoke” that makes two people a “team,” both in the pursuit of married life together, and in the raising of children. The “yoke” of marriage is a helpful blessing as long as the two marriage partners pull in the same direction toward the same goal. As Christians, we are also yoked to Jesus who said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:30) In baptism, we are united - “yoked” - with



When St. Paul exhorts us to not be *“mismated with unbelievers”* he asks: *“what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?”* Our Catechism explains that it is through baptism that one is *“freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God.”* CCC 1250 Simply put then, the children of God (baptized believers) should not marry the children of darkness.

Christ and are made one with Him as part of his team. Because we are “yoked” to Christ, He pulls with us to lighten our load – as long as we pull in the *same direction*! When we choose a marriage partner, we want to choose someone who has the same overall goal in life as we do – to get to heaven. We do not want to yoke ourselves to those who will pull us in a *different direction* than Christ. This is why the Bible tells us not to yoke ourselves with unbelievers.



Marriage to those of another faith was forbidden in the Old Testament

The Israelites were forbidden to marry foreign women because their religious practices were contrary to those of the Israelites. God knew that doing so would turn their hearts away from Him to follow after the gods of their foreign wives. When you marry someone who does not share your faith, you risk compromising and abandoning your faith and it becomes much more difficult to pass on your faith to your children.

"Do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of that land; else, when they render their wanton worship to their gods and sacrifice to them, one of them may invite you and you may partake of his sacrifice. Neither shall you take their daughters as wives for your sons; otherwise, when their daughters render their wanton worship to their gods, they will make your sons do the same." Exodus 34: 15-16

"You shall not make marriages with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons. For they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly." Deuteronomy 7:3-4

"If you turn back, and make marriages with them, so that you marry their women and they yours, know assuredly that... they shall be a snare and a trap for you... (and you will lose the blessings God has given you)." Joshua 23:12-13 (also see: Genesis 28:1; Nehemiah 13:27; Tobit 4:12)

When the Israelites were disobedient and married those who worshiped false gods, the warnings God had given them came to pass – they began to compromise their faith to please their spouses who did not share their faith. When you marry someone of another faith (or with no faith), the desire to please your spouse will constantly tempt you to turn your heart away from the practice of your faith. This happened to both Solomon, and, for a time, even Moses.

Solomon, who was given greater wisdom than anyone, was not able to overcome this temptation to compromise his faith when he married outside of his faith in God.

"...his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God... Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done." 1 Kings 11: 4,6

Moses did something similar. Exodus 4:24-25 reveals Moses had become complacent in his obedience to God regarding the initiation of his son into the Covenant. Moses' wife followed the religious practice of the Egyptians and other surrounding peoples and, because of her influence, Moses delayed having his son circumcised at the proper age. Biblical scholar Scott Hahn explains: *"When Moses accepted the call of God to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, he was in violation of the covenant with Abraham. His son, Gershom, hadn't been circumcised on the eighth day as God had commanded."* (see Genesis 17: 9-14) Moses, like Solomon, was not following God "wholeheartedly" because he had been swayed by the religious practice of his wife in delaying his son's initiation. Although Moses was called by God to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, he himself was following the religious practice of the Egyptians (because of his wife) in delaying the initiation of his son.

What the Catechism of the Catholic Church says about *Disparity of Worship* (par 1606-8)

1606. *Every man experiences evil around him and within himself. This experience makes itself felt in the relationships between man and woman. Their union has always been threatened by discord, a spirit of domination, infidelity, jealousy, and conflicts that can escalate into hatred and separation...*

1607. *...the disorder we notice so painfully does not stem from the nature of man and woman, nor from the nature of their relations, but from sin. As a break with God, the first sin had for its first consequence the rupture of the original communion between man and woman. Their relations were distorted by mutual recriminations; their mutual attraction, the Creator's own gift, changed into a relationship of domination and lust; and the beautiful vocation of man and woman to be fruitful, multiply, and subdue the earth was burdened by the pain of childbirth and the toil of work.*

1608. *Nevertheless, the order of creation persists, though seriously disturbed. To heal the wounds of sin, man and woman need the help of the grace that God in his infinite mercy never refuses them. Without his help man and woman cannot achieve the union of their lives for which God created them "in the beginning."*

The Covenant of *Sacramental Marriage* can only occur between baptized parties

1617. *The entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. Already Baptism, the entry into the People of God, is a nuptial mystery; it is so to speak the nuptial bath, which precedes the wedding feast, the Eucharist. Christian marriage in its turn becomes an efficacious sign, the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the Church. Since it signifies and communicates grace, marriage between baptized persons is a true sacrament of the New Covenant.*

1625. The parties to a marriage covenant are a baptized man and woman, free to contract marriage, who freely express their consent...

1633. In many countries the situation of a mixed marriage (marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic) often arises. It requires particular attention on the part of couples and their pastors. A case of marriage with disparity of worship (between a Catholic and a non-baptized person) requires even greater circumspection.

1634. Difference of confession between the spouses (who are both baptized) does not constitute an insurmountable obstacle for marriage, when they succeed in placing in common what they have received from their respective communities, and learn from each other the way in which each lives in fidelity to Christ. But the difficulties of mixed marriages must not be underestimated. They arise from the fact that the separation of Christians has not yet been overcome. The spouses risk experiencing the tragedy of Christian disunity even in the heart of their own home. **Disparity of worship can further aggravate these difficulties.** Differences about faith and the very notion of marriage, but also different religious mentalities, can become sources of tension in marriage, especially as regards the education of children. The temptation to religious indifference can then arise.

1635. ...In case of disparity of worship an express dispensation from this impediment is required for the validity of the marriage. This permission or dispensation presupposes that both parties know and do not exclude the essential ends and properties of marriage; and furthermore that the Catholic party confirms the obligations, which have been made known to the non-Catholic party, of preserving his or her own faith and ensuring the baptism and education of the children in the Catholic Church.

1637. In marriages with disparity of worship the Catholic spouse has a particular task: "For the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband" (1 Cor. 7:14). It is a great joy for the Christian spouse and for the Church if this "consecration" should lead to the free conversion of the other spouse to the Christian faith. Sincere married love, the humble and patient practice of the family virtues, and perseverance in prayer can prepare the non-believing spouse to accept the grace of conversion.

When the Church considers granting a dispensation for the impediment of a "disparity of worship," so that a non-sacramental marriage may take place, there are three conditions that must be fulfilled. The Catholic party must:

1. recognize the extra challenges they will face
2. affirm their commitment to remain steadfast in the practice of their Catholic Christian faith
3. promise to do everything in their power to raise their children Catholic.

If the Catholic party cannot in good conscience affirm their intent to live their Catholic Christian faith and raise their children Catholic, the Catholic Church will not approve their marriage.

If a Catholic chooses to get married outside of the Catholic Church (without the permission of the Catholic Church), they separate themselves from full communion with the Catholic Church and, because of this, may no longer receive Holy Communion, or any other sacraments, except in danger of death.

Summary of the Catechism:

Marriage has been wounded by the Original Sin of Adam and Eve and needs the help of redeeming grace through faith and baptism in Christ to achieve the union God intended for man and woman, "in the beginning." When a baptized person marries a non-baptized person, this necessary grace is lacking because the marriage only achieves a natural bond and does not become a sacrament. This is why Sacred Scripture instructs us to avoid these unions. A special dispensation must be obtained from the Church for a Catholic to enter into this kind of a non-sacramental marriage.

No relationship can rank higher than our relationship with God

Jesus said: "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple... So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." Luke 14:25-33