

**A Guide  
for Catholics  
Considering  
Marriage with an  
Orthodox Christian**

COMMITTEE ON  
ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS  
NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

This pamphlet was produced under the auspices of the Catholic members of the Joint Committee of Orthodox and Catholic Bishops. Its purpose is to provide pastoral guidance to Catholics who are considering marriage with an Orthodox Christian. The text was reviewed by Archbishop Rembert Weakland, Catholic Co-Chairman of the Joint Committee of Orthodox and Catholic Bishops, and was approved for publication by the NCCB Administrative Committee on September 9, 1997. It is authorized for publication by the undersigned.

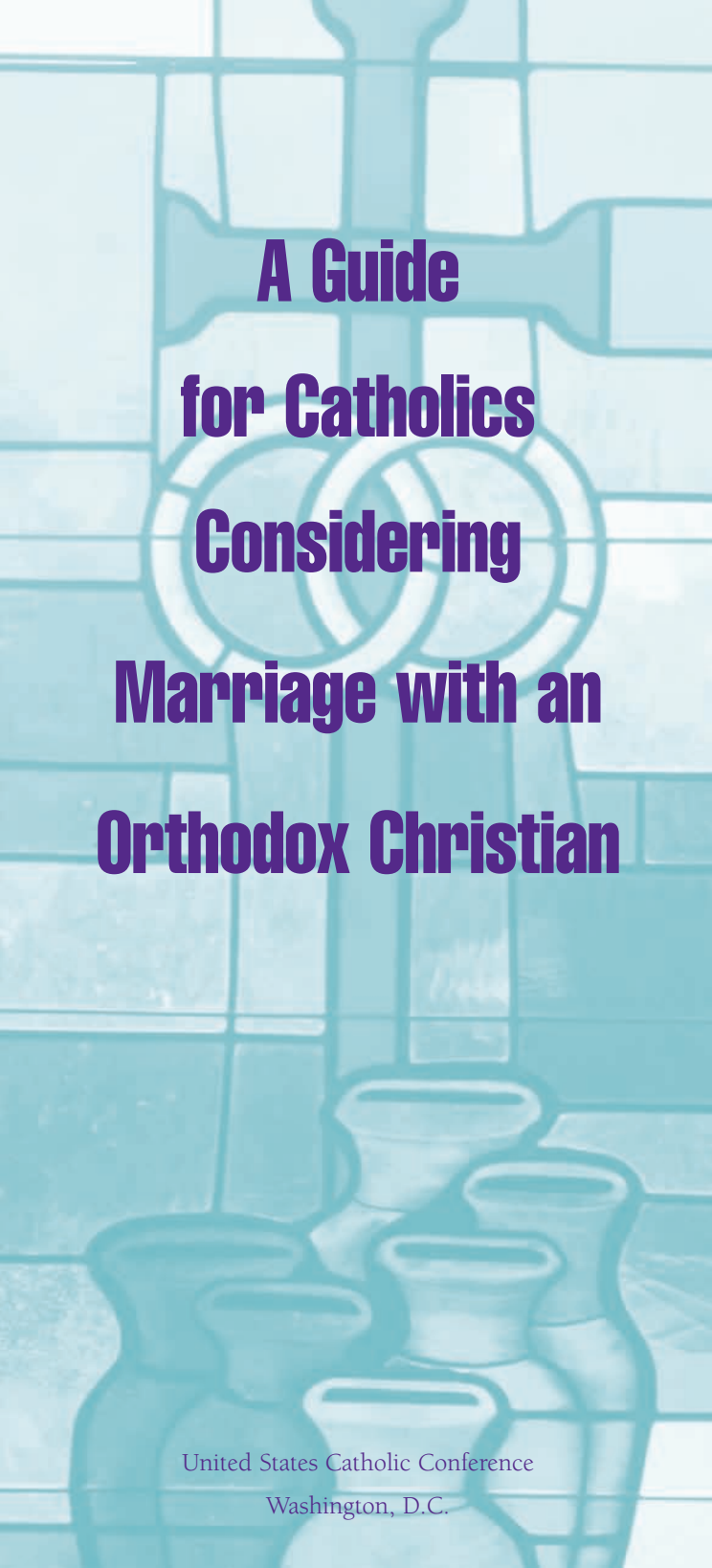
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The background is a light blue stained glass pattern. It features a central cross with a circle in the center, and two interlocking rings below it. At the bottom, there are several stylized, rounded shapes that resemble candles or vessels.

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for Catholics  
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United States Catholic Conference  
Washington, D.C.

**T**his pamphlet has been prepared for Catholics who are contemplating marriage with an Orthodox Christian. It is not intended to replace the materials that your pastors will share with you, but to provide background information about the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church and how that relationship may affect your life as a couple. For this reason we encourage you to share this pamphlet with your prospective Orthodox spouse.

Some information contained here will point to certain obstacles and challenges you may experience. Your family and friends may have already suggested this to you. Misinformation only adds to the misgivings some couples feel when weighing the serious decisions of marriage and life together. This pamphlet will be as clear as possible about certain matters it would be good for you to reflect on before making some important decisions together.

But there is also good news here, news that will add to the joy you already feel towards one another, especially about how your churches have sought over the past few decades to heal their thousand-year-old separation. Your marriage will provide many opportunities to make real and concrete the renewed respect and love that your two ancient churches have for one another.

## **FACTS TO CONSIDER**

### **A Relationship Between Churches**

When spouses are active participants in separate churches, their marriage easily becomes a reflection of the relationship between their churches. These married couples are living examples of the ecumenical relationship between two churches that are both seeking to

overcome the obstacles that prevent complete unity and celebrating all that they have in common in faith and practice. Even though the situation can be awkward and sometimes painful, good interchurch marriages will inevitably contribute to greater understanding between the two churches and, ultimately, to the deepening of unity between them. Fortunately for Catholics and Orthodox, their churches have undertaken monumental steps, in our own times, towards restoring unity between them. Referring to the coming millennium, Pope John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I said together in 1995 that “we will celebrate this Great Jubilee on our pilgrimage towards full unity and towards that blessed day, which we pray is not far off, when we will be able to share the same bread and the same cup, in the one Eucharist of the Lord.”

Although there are still obstacles that prevent the reestablishment of full unity, even now Catholics and Orthodox often refer to one another as “sister churches,” that is, churches that profess the same apostolic faith, share the same sacraments, especially the priesthood and the eucharist. None of these is considered to be the exclusive property of either church.

## **A Catholic-Orthodox Relationship**

Your pastors and friends, both Catholic and Orthodox, hope that as a married couple you will be actively engaged in the life of the one Church of God by being active members of sister churches. Both of you are baptized into the one Church of Christ, and most likely both of you have received the Holy Spirit in the sacrament that Orthodox and Eastern Catholics call chrismation and Latin Catholics refer to as confirmation. Your incorporation into the one body of Christ is made complete by participation in the eucharist. Your unity as a couple has a firm

foundation in your Christian faith that will be a source of inspiration and strength for you. If one of you is an Eastern Catholic, you will be able to draw upon the similar heritage of your churches. You may have been reading together from both the eastern and western spiritual heritages of the one Church, and you may already be reciting many prayers together.

At the same time, you may have observed that the form of the creed used in your churches is slightly different regarding the sending of the Holy Spirit: the Orthodox profess belief in the “Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father,” while Latin Catholics say that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father *and the Son*” (*filioque* in Latin). There are other differences and disagreements in viewpoints and practice that may be bothersome at times and even harshly divisive. All of them, happily, are being studied in pursuit of the reconciliation of our churches.

### **The Reality of a Mixed Marriage**

These differences help explain why the marriage you are considering is still viewed as a “mixed marriage” by your churches. If both of you were members of either the Catholic or Orthodox Church, then the primary concern of your pastors would be that you remain firm in your faith and be as free as possible from factors that might endanger the strength and stability of the permanent marital union and the family life that flows from it. Practical experience suggests that mixed marriages frequently encounter difficulties, and the same is true for the children born of mixed marriages. This is why both churches present marriages within the same faith community as the ideal.

Although, as Pope Paul VI once put it, the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church are in “nearly total communion” with each other already, a Latin rite Catholic is still expected to

obtain the permission of his or her local bishop to marry an Orthodox and a dispensation if the wedding is to take place in an Orthodox service. The Catholic partner will be asked to state that he or she intends to remain a Catholic. Obtaining permission for an Eastern Catholic to marry in an Orthodox ceremony is more complicated, and one's pastor should be consulted about this. An Orthodox also needs the permission of the Orthodox Church to marry a Catholic. Here it must be kept in mind that as a general rule, the Orthodox Church does not allow its faithful to be married in a non-Orthodox ceremony.

So, the rules and practices of the two churches may create difficulties when it comes to deciding where the wedding should take place. It will be very important to discuss the implications of whatever decision you make with both your pastors, Catholic and Orthodox.

### **Celebrating the Eucharist Together**

There is one question that may be particularly problematic for you as a couple. Can you receive communion together? Here again there is a difference between Catholics and Orthodox. The Catholic Church offers to Orthodox Christians the sacraments of penance, 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 eucharist can be shared only with other Orthodox. But for Catholics, the level of unity in faith that already exists with the Orthodox allows such sharing to take place. Consequently, the desire to share the eucharist together, just as you will share the sacrament of marriage, touch-

es on different points of view and practices that are not easily harmonized. Catholic pastors should be sensitive to the requirements the Orthodox Church places on its members.

### **Children and Religious Upbringing**

The views of your churches on the question of the spiritual upbringing of your children may appear to clash as well. In all likelihood, each of you will be asked to promise in some way to baptize and raise your children in your own church. You may be tempted to put off this decision to see how things work out. It is true that as time goes by you will gain more experience in making decisions together, but the question has to be discussed now, before you marry. You will need to be completely honest with each other about your feelings, values, and beliefs.

Neither church wants you to be indifferent on this matter. Whether your children will receive the sacraments and be formally associated with the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church will also be a very serious concern of your families, your pastors, and your friends. In the United States, where Orthodox are very small in number compared to Catholics, this question touches upon the future of the Orthodox churches in our society.

In an ideal world you could make this decision on your own as responsible members of your churches, and make sure that your children, though members of one church, would be comfortable participants in the traditions and church life of the other parent's church too. Your home would be a sign of the unity our churches can enjoy, and your hopes would be in the forefront of our hopes for the restoration of unity between Christians of the east and the west. But the ideal is just that. Besides the impossibility of predicting how your own children will respond to your decision, you may feel pressure, overtly

and subtly, to raise the children exclusively in one way or another.

As a Catholic entering into a marriage with a non-Catholic, you will be asked to affirm that you will do everything possible to ensure that any children will be baptized and raised in the Catholic Church. The Orthodox party will almost certainly be asked to ensure that they be baptized and brought up in the Orthodox Church. It should be kept in mind that if, given the circumstances of the marriage, the children are brought up Orthodox, the Catholic spouse's relationship to the Catholic Church is not 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 each 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. However, there is a special obligation, especially in your marriage, for you to make every effort for your children to know and to appreciate the traditions and practices of the church of the other parent. This does not mean only an occasional visit to the other church or a brief discussion with that parent. It implies that the life of the family is marked in special ways by the traditions and practices of both churches. In addition, there are many worship services that the family can attend together, apart from the eucharist, that do not highlight the exclusion of any members of the family. Vespers or evening prayer services, scripture celebrations and study, and seasonal services for Advent or Lent are all examples of these.

### **Family Traditions**

Most likely, unless one partner is Eastern Catholic, each of you will not know very much about the customs and traditions of your part-

ner's church. Patience and adjustment will be required for your marriage to flourish. The seasons of Lent and Easter may not overlap exactly, the practices of fasting and preparation and reception of communion may not be the same, and the forms of daily and weekly prayer will differ. But the challenge will be given to you as a couple to try to work out these differences. Forming support groups with other couples and families may be of help. Certainly you have every right as Christians to expect your pastors to assist you through your marriage. Contact with them should not be limited to marriage preparation and the ceremony itself.

## **PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS**

### **Premarital Counseling**

1) Get both your pastors involved in your marriage preparation if at all possible. Visit them or their representatives in the premarital counseling program of the parish. Be honest with them and ask their assistance with your decision to be part of a program in either or both churches.

2) Good pastoral advice depends upon your concrete situation as a couple. This includes your spiritual formation and the knowledge each of you has of your tradition. This is also a good time, if you have not done so already, to attend with one another the services in your parishes. During the time of your marriage preparation, you will have opportunities to grow together in the Christian faith.

3) Your family will be involved from the moment you begin to consider the possibility of an Orthodox-Catholic marriage. Take into account both the encouragements and the discouragements your family will offer. Realize that your families may be harboring judgments about the other church. Some of these may be

rooted in the history of relations in certain parts of Europe or the Middle East. It may be unrealistic to think that these will cease once a wedding ceremony has taken place. On the other hand, consider the positive role you can play in the growing unity of Christians by being an Orthodox-Catholic couple and sharing in the movement of your churches toward full reconciliation.

4) Learn what is possible or impossible for your wedding ceremony. That way you will not ask of one another what either of you finds difficult to grant, nor will you be disappointed when you begin planning your wedding ceremony. Most likely the Orthodox partner will not be granted permission to be married in a Catholic ceremony. This would create an obstacle to the working out of an agreement on this matter between your pastors.

5) One situation should be noted specifically. If the Orthodox partner had been married before, was divorced, but has been declared free to marry again by the Orthodox Church, the Catholic pastor will not be able to permit the marriage until the case of the previous marriage has also been evaluated by the Catholic Church. Catholic leaders have expressed the greatest respect for Orthodox canon law, and no general council called by the Catholic Church has ever declared that the Orthodox practice of allowing divorced Orthodox Christians to remarry is an obstacle to full communion. Nevertheless, the Catholic pastor cannot allow a Catholic to marry a divorced person, whether Orthodox or Catholic, without a procedure by Catholic officials called a declaration of nullity.

## **The Wedding Ceremony**

1) With the help of your pastors, decide on where your marriage will take place and who will preside. If this decision is for a Catholic

wedding, realize that this may mean that the Orthodox partner will no longer be able to receive the sacraments in the Orthodox Church unless reconciled later.

2) For the wedding to take place in the Orthodox Church, the Catholic partner will need a dispensation. The Catholic pastor will discuss this with you. Catholic clergy may attend an Orthodox service, but any participation by them will be determined by the Orthodox.

3) If the wedding is to take place in a Catholic Church, it is highly unlikely that the Orthodox partner will be able to obtain a dispensation. The Orthodox pastor will know about this and will be able to explain about petitioning the Orthodox bishop.

4) A “double wedding” ceremony, that is, a wedding first before one pastor and then before the other, cannot be approved by the Catholic pastor because the sacrament can be received only one time. In the case of a Catholic wedding, the Catholic pastor will probably encourage you to invite your Orthodox pastor to the ceremony, and will most likely be willing to seat him in a place of honor and provide him with a role in the service. This could be reading from Scripture, giving an exhortation, and offering a blessing, but not the marital blessing. But it may be that the Orthodox pastor will not be able to attend your wedding in a Catholic parish.

5) Many Catholics desire a wedding ceremony within a eucharistic liturgy. Often for a mixed marriage, this serves to draw attention to the separation of Christians especially on the question of eucharistic sharing. Concerning an Orthodox-Catholic wedding, the guidelines are accommodating from a Catholic point of view. However, the Orthodox partner and the partner’s Orthodox family and friends will be asked by their church not to receive communion at a

Catholic eucharist. Conversely, at a eucharist in an Orthodox parish, Catholics will not be offered communion. Keep all this in mind when planning the ceremony. Know that for these reasons and others—for example, the distinct liturgical practices in the two churches—one family may feel “left out” as the ceremony takes place.

### **Life as a Couple**

1) Develop practical ways to share your traditions with one another. This can be as routine as grace before meals together or sharing the same practices of fasting. This can also involve attending services with one another while allowing each to attend one’s own parish regularly. Above all, learn to pray together.

2) Perhaps your pastors will be able to put you in contact with other Orthodox-Catholic couples, and together you can share your experiences and learn together.

3) Pressure to enter into full sacramental communion with your partner’s church may begin. In fact, this is the outcome for many who are in mixed marriages. Respect for freedom of conscience in making such decisions must be an aspect of your relationship. Be aware that resentment may occur later because of the requirements placed by one church or the other on you at the beginning of marriage. This is another reason for the necessity of continuing contact with both of your pastors.

4) At times, when events in other parts of the world cause ethnic tensions to flare up and provoke public disagreements between church leaders, the openness and honesty of your relationship will be tested. Be willing to learn together the facts about these and other situations in Orthodox-Catholic relations.

5) Share the spiritual life together. This includes prayer, silent meditation, reading, veneration of the saints, maintaining fasts, and hon-

oring holy days together. There is much that your churches share which you can joyfully celebrate each day.

6) It is very important to avoid negative comments and stereotypes, especially in reference to the church of your husband or wife. Each of them represents a very ancient and rich tradition that is of great value, even though their unity is not complete at the present time.

7) Give continuing careful consideration to the upbringing of your children. With due respect for the traditions of both churches, in consultation with your pastors, and with consideration for the feelings of both parents, make a decision in good conscience. While the children can be members of only one church, they should also be provided with knowledge and appreciation of the other.

## **Conclusion**

This pamphlet has attempted to explain some of the complexities of the relationship between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches and the ways in which the history of that relationship may influence your life together as a couple. We are very fortunate to live at a time when the animosities of the past have been giving way to greater understanding and to the rediscovery of a real if imperfect communion between these two ancient sister churches. As you enter into matrimony with an Orthodox Christian, it is our hope that the Holy Spirit, who brings life to both our churches, will bind you together in perfect love and make you a living sign of that unity for which both Catholics and Orthodox pray.