



# Mixed Marriage is Major Topic of U.S. Catholic-Jewish Consultation

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The semi-annual meeting of the U.S. Catholic-Jewish Consultation Committee was held at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore, Maryland, on November 3, 2004. The major topic of discussion was the challenge of mixed marriage in American life and how our communities are responding to its problems and possibilities both for the couples involved and for the raising of their children. With the mixed marriage rate rising to around 50 percent in the Jewish community and close to that in the Catholic community, the challenges have become more acute for both communities. The four presenters discussed both the understanding of marriage in their respective communities and the pastoral and programmatic responses of each. They were Dru Greenwood of the Union for Reform Judaism and Rabbi Alan Silverstein of the Rabbinical Assembly (RA) of Conservative Judaism, on the one hand, and Rev. John Crossin, OSFS, of the Washington Theological Consortium and Lori Pryzbysz of the Archdiocese of Baltimore on the other.

The Reform Movement in Judaism took note some 25 years ago of the words of Rabbi Alex Schindler that "mixed marriage is the sting that accompanies the honey of freedom in an open society," and in an attempt to save or even increase the Jewish element in such marriages launched an ambitious program of outreach, inviting the non-Jewish partner to learn about and perhaps accept Judaism, as well as acknowledging as Jews children whose father is Jewish, where Judaism traditionally has accepted as Jews only those born of Jewish mothers. The Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform) discourages Reform rabbis from participating in interreligious marriages, but allows its members to follow their own interpretations of Jewish law (halachah). If the children of the marriage are being raised as Jews, and only as Jews, the non-Jewish spouse may be involved in certain activities within synagogue life. The Conservative Jewish approach actively promotes endogamy, the marriage of Jews with Jews, through youth and young adult programs, outreach to the non-Jewish partner, and concerted efforts to integrate the newly converted into the mainstream of synagogue life. The RA prohibits its members from any participation in an interreligious wedding ceremony. Conservative Judaism sees only the marriage of two Jews as kiddushin (a sacred event).

Fr. Crossin discussed the sacramental meaning of marriage in which God is a spiritual partner. As marriage is for Judaism a symbol and image of God's covenantal love for God's People, Israel, so is the marriage of two baptized persons for Christianity a sign and symbol of the unbreakable bond

of love between Christ and His Church. Lori Pryzbysz described the need to counsel couples both before and after the wedding ceremony in strengthening and growing in their religious commitment without sacrificing religious principles. All four presenters concurred that a marriage is a holy union sanctified by a religious ceremony, a "sacrament," a spiritually transforming event that demands of the couple an attitude and life of sanctity. All four also agreed that it is vastly preferable for the offspring of mixed marriages to be raised exclusively in one tradition or the other, while maintaining an attitude of respect for the religious traditions of the "other" side of the family. Attempting to raise a child simultaneously as both "Jewish" and "Catholic," all agreed, can only lead to violation of the integrity of both religious traditions, at best, and, at worst, to syncretism.

In one sense the Catholic Church may be more accepting of the phenomenon of intermarriage than Jews, since it sees marriage as a right and a duty conferred on all humanity in the very act of Creation (Genesis 1) and hence prior to any religious distinctions within the one human family. On a practical level, there are over one billion Catholics in the world, whereas there are today only some 13 million Jews, less than the number of Jews in the world before the Holocaust, so out-marriage (exogamy) poses a very real demographic threat to the survival of Judaism, which in most places in the world is at best a tiny minority of the population. The challenge of raising children in such marriages is real, as are the challenges it poses for the duration of the marriage itself. All agree that the dialogue of the religious community must begin as early as possible and not end with the ceremony itself. The individualism and autonomy inherent in American social norms was seen as one factor enabling more and more people to "marry out." More recent trends toward a search for meaning in spirituality, it was offered, might provide religious communities with the opportunity to stress the importance of heteronomy as integral to the full spiritual maturity of the individual.

In the session on sharing concerns the group heard a report by Judith Hertz of the URJ and Cardinal Keeler on the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (ILC) meeting held in July 2004 in Buenos Aires. The ILC's joint statement on "Justice and Love" was embodied for participants by its visits to a Catholic-Jewish anti-poverty center and to the Jewish Community Center of Argentina (AMIA), which had been destroyed in a terrorist attack ten years earlier. The ILC statement also condemned recent manifestations of anti-Zionism around the world many of which, in the words of the Vatican's 1988 statement, *The Church and Racism*, serve today, as then, "as a screen for anti-Semitism" and which "may lead to it." Msgr. Robert Stern of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association reported that progress has been made in Israel in addressing concerns of the Christian community there, such as the issuance of visas for Church workers, which have been raised in earlier meetings of the U.S Consultation Committee..

The Consultation also discussed the state of Jewish-Catholic relations in the wake of the film, "The Passion of the Christ," which caused such deep and understandable concern within Jewish community world-wide. The film, it was noted, was in reality a modern version of the notorious medieval Passion Plays which so often over the centuries have triggered riots against the Jews of Europe. Happily, however, the film precipitated no such anti-Jewish violence. Rather, in many places it sparked discussions in which Catholics learned why Jews feared such dramatic depictions of the death of Jesus, and Jews learned that many Catholics today have taken to heart the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that the Jews collectively cannot be held responsible "then or now" for Jesus' death. It was noted as well that continuing work needs to be done among those who have not yet absorbed these official teachings of the Church.

With regard to the beatification of Catherine Emmerich in October 2004 it was noted that the book of visions ascribed to her was in fact written by a German writer named Brentano. At the time of the beatification the Holy See's Congregation for the causes of saints made clear that because there was no way to distinguish what in the volume could be attributed to Emmerich and what to Brentano, the volume was not considered as part of her "cause," so the beatification itself could not be used in any sense to verify particular assertions or descriptions contained in it.

**Participating in the meeting were:**

*For the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops* - Cardinal William H. Keeler; Bishops Arthur J. Seratelli of Paterson NJ, John J. Nevins of Venice FL, Gerald Walsh of New York, John Nienstedt of New Ulm; Msgrs. Guy Massie of the Archdiocese of New York, Denis Madden and Robert Stern of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association; Reverends John Crossin, OSFS, of Washington Theological Consortium, Charles J. Parr of the National Association of Diocesan Ecumenical Officers, Lawrence Frizzell of Seton Hall University; Drs. Dennis McManus and Eugene Fisher of the USCCB staff; and Lauri Przybysz of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

*For the National Council of Synagogues* - Rabbinical Assembly (RA): Rabbis Alan Silverstein, Jonathan Waxman, Moses A. Birnbaum, Jeffrey A. Wohlberg. Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR): Rabbis Paul Menitoff, David Sandmel, Ruth Langer, Shira Lander. Commission on Interreligious Affairs of Reform Judaism (URJ): Judith Hertz, Mark Pelavin, David Segal. NCS Staff: Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal.

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