

Pastoral Guidelines for Interfaith Couples

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What has the Orthodox Church said about interfaith and intercultural marriages?

Orthodox Church's Position Regarding Interfaith Marriages

For the following reasons, the Orthodox Church has essentially held to the position that intra-Orthodox marriages are strongly preferred to inter-Christian and inter-religious marriages for the following three reasons. First, scripture tends to support intra-faith marriage and rejects interfaith and inter-religious marriage. Second, the Church has determined that intra-Orthodox marriages have a more favorable impact on the well being of spouse's religious and spiritual development as compared to interfaith and inter-religious marriages. Third, by supporting intra-Orthodox marriages the Church believes that it will ensure its continued survival at both a micro and macro level.

Holy Canons

- A number of canons have been promulgated to bolster these latter positions. These canons function to either discourage interfaith, inter-religious marriages or condemn them.
- The promulgation of these canons does not, however, suggest that Orthodox Christians were completely dissuaded from engaging in interfaith, inter-religious marriages, since historical evidence indicates otherwise.
- With the steady increase in the number of interfaith marriages occurring between Orthodox Christians and non-Orthodox around the world, the Church has tended to modify its position regarding interfaith marriages through the use of *economia*, a type of theological tolerance, which is sometimes utilized for pastoral reasons.
- Depending on the perceived pastoral needs of a given autocephelous Orthodox Church, more leniency has been shown toward inter-Christian marriages, and inter-religious marriages throughout the Orthodox world.
- And finally, since the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese falls under the direct jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Constantinople decidedly impacts the position of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese toward interfaith marriages.

Pastoral Directives

- The following pastoral directives function to guide and facilitate Greek Orthodox priest's *diakonia* with couples who are either contemplating an interfaith marriage or are presently involved in an interfaith marriage. These directives flow out of the Orthodox Church's understanding of marriage, and its desire to assist its marriages and families in their efforts to cultivate, through God's grace, a Christian/Orthodox environment in their homes.
- As a result of the Orthodox concept of *economia*, inter-Christian marriages are conducted in the Orthodox Church. Briefly, the church has made this concession because it recognizes that we live in an increasingly pluralistic society. The church is also concerned with its memberships' salvation, and does not desire to place any

impediments before its faithful by denying the Sacrament of Marriage to those who choose to enter an inter-Christian marriage.

- Although the Orthodox Church has determined to permit inter-Christian marriages between its faithful and other Christians, it has done so by seeking to protect its theological integrity. To that end, the following additional pastoral directives (regarding inter-Christian marriages between Orthodox Christians and other Christians) have emerged.
- The Orthodox Church does not perform the Sacrament of Marriage for two non-Orthodox Christians or for an Orthodox Christian and an unbaptized person.
- Non-Orthodox Christians wishing to get married in the Orthodox Church must be baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, and in water.
- In order to remain in proper canonical and spiritual standing with the Orthodox Church, Orthodox Christians must be married by an Orthodox priest, in an Orthodox Church, and in the manner prescribed by the priest's service book, i.e., the *Euchologion*.
- Since only Orthodox Christians are permitted to participate in the Orthodox Church's sacraments, sponsors exchanging the wedding rings and crowns must be Orthodox Christians in good standing with the Orthodox Church. This latter rule is connected to the church's understanding of the sponsor. Briefly, the sponsor is more than a legal witness. The sponsor also functions as a spokesperson for the congregation.
- Orthodox partners should be made aware that if their marriage is not blessed by the Orthodox Church, they no longer are in good standing and are not permitted to receive the sacraments or participate in the sacraments as a sponsor.
- Double performances of the wedding service, in both the Orthodox Church and another Church are not encouraged. This guideline is relaxed when an Orthodox Christian has been married outside of the Orthodox Church and wishes to become canonically and spiritually in good standing with the Orthodox Church. In this case, after the Orthodox priest receives permission from his bishop, the Sacrament of Marriage is performed.
- Con-celebrations of the Sacrament of Marriage between Orthodox and non-Orthodox clergy are not permitted.
- Interfaith couples who wish the presence of a non-Orthodox clergyman during the Sacrament of Marriage should (subject to the Bishop's permission) make their desire known to the Orthodox pastor.
- Interfaith couples should also be made aware of the following additional procedures.
  a. The Orthodox priest will extend an invitation to the non-Orthodox clergyman. At that time, the Orthodox priest will respectfully state that a con-celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage is not permitted, since the Orthodox Church does not permit non-Orthodox to participate in the sacraments.
  b. The Orthodox priest will also clearly advise the guest clergyman on matters of appropriate vesture, and his seating position (which is generally located in a prominent place on the *Solea).* Additionally, he will also clearly indicate that the

guest clergyman will be properly acknowledged and permitted to give a benediction, and address the couple with some words, good wishes, and an exhortation at the conclusion of the Sacrament of Marriage.

c. The couple should also be told that the wedding invitations announcing the marriage should differentiate between the Orthodox celebrant and the guest (non-Orthodox) clergyman. Terms such as assisted or participated should be avoided.

- Orthodox Priests who are invited to attend non-Orthodox wedding services may only attend as guests.
- Interfaith couples should also be respectfully informed that non-Orthodox Christians who marry in the Orthodox Church do not subsequently have sacramental privileges in the Orthodox Church. Because of the Orthodox Church's position of sacramental participation, only those who are in canonical and spiritual good standing in the Orthodox Church have sacramental privileges.
- Interfaith couples should also be told that only Orthodox Christians who are in canonical and spiritual good standing are permitted an Orthodox Funeral Service.