

Religious Intermarriage and the American Dream, Panel Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the College Theology Society, June 2, 2017, Salve Regina University, Newport, RI.

Whenever I hear the phrase, “The American Dream”, I think of family-based sitcoms. To this day, I have never seen the 1950s sitcom “The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet”, but it is forever linked to the American Dream in my mind. White, stable, homogenous, quaint, and uncomplicated are descriptive words that come to mind. These images persist in my imagination, although less so in reality. It causes me to wonder *whose* dream is the “American Dream.” If I’m honest, I remain somewhat unclear on precisely what is meant by the “American Dream”. Has it become individualized, like most everything else in American culture, or is it still an operable socially defined construct? Perhaps that is why we’re here today. I simply raise it as a question that we might circle back to during the Q & A.

Let me make one orienting remark as I begin. It is my sense that I have been asked to join as a panelist with my more accomplished colleagues today because of my work in the Ecumenical and Interreligious Office of the Archdiocese of Chicago, where we are working closely with the Marriage and Family Office to initiate

programs of preparation and support for mixed marriage couples. As such, I will tend to draw on my experience in that role as much or more than from my theological background. Considering myself a constructive and pastoral theologian at heart, I find drawing upon these experiential realities of utmost value.

To enter into a conversation about religiously mixed marriage in the United States, a good place to start is with the numbers. Statistics on religious intermarriage for American Catholics, and most other religious communities, are showing unprecedented growth rates. Nationally, about 2 of every 5 weddings involving a Catholic are interchurch (Catholic/other Christian) or interreligious.¹ In Chicago, Archdiocesan records indicate that in the past 5 years 21% of weddings that took place in Catholic parishes were interchurch or interreligious.² In a city where 40% of residents identify as Catholic, those percentages translate into over 1,000 marriages *a year*. We know that the rates of intermarriage in Christian churches in Chicago with smaller populations are much higher. And this tally doesn't include the myriad Catholics (and others) who increasingly are choosing to marry outside of the Catholic Church or not at all.³ One of our growing tasks as an ecumenical

¹ See 1999 Creighton Study, American Grace, and Recent Pew Study

² Internal Archdiocesan Marriage Statistics

³ Marriage statistical numbers

office is to regularly field questions from pastors and pastoral ministers related to religious intermarriage.

Statistics also show, and my experience confirms, that the increasing diversity seen in religious intermarriage in the U.S. has become accepted, if not celebrated, by the mainstream of American culture, particularly the younger one falls on the spectrum. What was unthinkable in 1967 is common in 2017. However, some religious traditions, the Roman Catholic Church included, remain institutionally wary or even staunchly opposed to these unions. This concern with interchurch and interreligious marriage rates has become counter-cultural extremely quickly.

Despite these trends, how often have you heard mention of this issue from the pulpit on a given Sunday? How many Catholic websites have you seen speaking positively, or not, of the sacramental nature of Lutheran/Catholic marriages or devoting any space to outlining how best to live out a Catholic/Muslim union? In the theological community, as little attention is devoted to this topic as I see from traditional ecclesial sources, despite concerted reflection on marriage and family in both theological and ecclesial forums of late. Rarely in Catholic resources, either pastoral, theological, or magisterial is religious intermarriage treated as anything more than as a grudgingly acceptable, but non-recommended choice, despite its

culturally accepted status in America. This is surely not the case with other issues surrounding marriage with which the Catholic Church is quite vocal to oppose.

Why is this so? And, more importantly for our topic today, what does this have to do with the American Dream? Does the American Dream challenge the traditional choice to marry someone from within one's own religious tradition or does this very choice fit squarely within the vision of the American Dream? This is the question that I most want to pursue with you today.

A quick disclaimer so we're all clear, I'm addressing the American situation and relating it to the Roman Catholic Church and its theology and tradition, not speaking for realities in other parts of the world or of other religious traditions. I'm also not presuming to say that others should follow America in this regard.

With that said, let me pose, rather briefly, two reasons/causes for conflict between the American Dream and the Catholic tradition that may come into play here, before offering some concluding remarks. First, the American Dream is rooted in "choice", but the "Catholic dream/imagination" (if I can re-purpose that phrase for argument's sake) is rooted in "freedom," not "choice" as such. This tension becomes ever clearer in the opposition seen in the corporate sense of identity advocated in the Catholic Church and an increasingly individualized understanding

of freedom in American culture. Second, the American Dream is centered on upward mobility and social stability, but the decision to religiously intermarry hampers one's ability to easily integrate, "commune" in its most basic sense, into a local Catholic community/parish. Let's look at these briefly in turn.

First, the American Dream is rooted in "choice", but the "Catholic dream" is rooted in "freedom." "Freedom" is not the same thing as "choice" in the Catholic tradition. From its earliest days, and seen clearly in Augustine, true freedom is based on "choosing the good." As we hear in the *Confessions*, one is "free" to choose to do dumb and sinful things, such as stealing pears or fornicating, but one is not "free" when one is doing so. In fact, one has become a slave to some abnormal love, wayward concupiscence (or lust) as he calls it, for a lesser good.⁴ Sometimes these competing goods aren't all that clear in the moment, but Christians are called to constantly discern our true good and tend toward it.

In American lexicon, however, our ability to do whatever we want, whenever we want, is touted as the exemplar of freedom. I can become enslaved to lying, meth, pornography, or pear-stealing, but at least I'm still free because I made the choice

⁴ See *Confessions*

to do so. This mindset does not cohere with the Catholic understanding of true freedom as choosing the good.

So, when I learn from couples that priests and deacons who advise couples preparing for marriage have stated (as they did to me!) that it would be better and easier if they were both Catholic, I hear a well-intentioned concern for the couple and their ability to partake together of the goods shared when they are both in full communion with the Church. Even with other Christians, there is a sense that this choice will yield clearly foreseen tensions around where to worship, eucharistic sharing, baptism and education for future children, among other issues. The Church minister seems to say that, “yes” you are free to choose this option, but we think that we can better support you if you don’t and we want you to think it through carefully.

This (usually) good-intentioned concern, however, is often misread as mistrust, challenge or (gasp!) lack of respect for my inviolable ability to do what I want, whenever I want. Who is this old man with a white collar who has never been married a day in his life to tell me that my choice is suspect or even to be rethought

with utmost caution? Doesn't he know that I'm in love and my fiancé is perfect in all things?!? Not a recipe for pastoral success.⁵

At root here is the understanding of corporate identity and its relation to soteriology. Unlike a few generations ago, Church law now regularly permits interchurch and interreligious marriages to take place, with rather easily obtained permissions and assurances. This situation, ushered in in large part because of such Vatican II texts as *Unitatis Redintegratio*, *Nostra Aetate* and *Dignitatis Humanae*, opened the door to seeing these unions as good and holy by nature, not as opportunities rife with the prospect of endangering one's very salvation. When, for example, the Catholic Church officially declared at Vatican II that elements of sanctification and holiness could be found outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church (LG 14),⁶ the choice to intermarry didn't become primarily about one's salvation, but about the challenges that one will face in making such a decision. The sense remains that the easier, more assured, road to salvation exists when both spouses are living out their Catholic faith together in a united home, but

⁵ Naomi Schaefer Riley, *Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage is Transforming America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 202. While the context differs, the overall point fits when she writes in her conclusion, "In part because we have come to think of marriage as such an individual decision, we often underestimate the ways in which a religious community can still tug at us."

⁶ Lumen Gentium 14.

it is no longer a choice between good and evil but between good and good, with potential risk.

The Catholic perspective on salvation remains centered in the awareness that we are saved as a community, a communion of saints. Sure, one is personally saved by being justified before God through grace, but this grace is personally experienced through the mediation of a community of believers in fellowship with God and others. Communion ecclesiology was central at Vatican II and continues to be formative for Catholic understandings of Church

In part, this is why I find the return to language of the “domestic church” at Vatican II so significant and, as yet, profoundly undeveloped theologically. How does the family, my family, play a role in my salvation history, along with that of my wife and children? If home is the smallest unit of Church, what responsibility do I have as a son, brother, father, and husband for those with whom I share a familial relation? If I have a stake in my wife’s salvation, I should do all in my power to assist her on her journey to follow God’s call. What impact does a religiously mixed household have on this journey or on our ability to participate with God’s grace in this regard? Frankly, I’m not sure, but I find it odd that so few are asking the question.

The increasing privatization of religious choice in America has not helped this conversation. In fact, it often has served to undercut the communal aspects of the Catholic Christian tradition. As Americans continue to view religion as a private matter, we will continue to see a growing cultural mindset that effectively says that my decision to marry someone from another church or religious tradition is none of my church's business. A church, however, that sees Christian mission as a communal endeavor cannot easily abide by that glib dismissal of interest or responsibility.

Many Americans, particularly those in their 20s and 30s, can easily mistake concern and well-intentioned pastoral advice for subverting their own freedom, understood as choice. It bears admitting, as well, that pastoral advice can be poorly administered at times. Either way, a tension exists in how the Catholic Church [if I can personify it] dreams its members will freely choose when deciding whom to wed and the American Dream, centered in the most sanctified of American freedoms, the ability to choose a marriage partner to one's liking.

In laying this tension out, let me clearly say that I am not suggesting that those who enter into interreligious or interchurch marriages are committing a sin or not

exercising true freedom. Moreover, I'm not suggesting that it is a misplaced lust after something not good for oneself that is at work here. Rather, my point is that Catholic ministers are often placed in the awkward spot of having to raise awareness about some potentially competing goods in order to assist the couple in openly discussing them and how they might impact their impending, lifelong union. Even doing this awareness-raising exercise, however, can be read as an affront on one's freedom understood as choice, not as an attempt to have the couple be more free in their choice in its truest sense. It grates against the American Dream understood as personal choice trumps all things. Perhaps given the aforementioned, it isn't all that shocking that this topic isn't more openly discussed.

Second, the American Dream is centered upon upward mobility and social stability, but the decision to religiously intermarry hampers one's ability to easily integrate, "commune" in its most basic sense, into a local Catholic parish (or other house of worship).

Studies show that Catholic spouses who marry spouses from other religious communities or Christian churches are more likely to stop attending Catholic

services than those who marry Catholics.⁷ Generally speaking, we know that their affiliation to a local Catholic parish is less strong in terms of attendance and overall participation. The reasons for this trend, however, are not clear. Are they leaving or falling away because they feel unwelcomed or out of place, or because there is something inherent to the interchurch of interreligious relationship that pulls them away? Are they being pushed, pulled or both? My sense is that both reasons come into play, but rarely is the former, namely, the unintended pushing that one's Church or tradition of origin might be doing, discussed openly.

Simply taking a look at the neuralgic issue of Eucharistic sharing for interchurch couples may serve to illustrate matters. I have met several interchurch couples who have voiced displeasure (to put it mildly) over not being welcomed to receive Eucharist together at a Catholic service. These couples, most often one of whom is a practicing, baptized non-Catholic Christian married to a Catholic, have exhibited to me true faith in the sacrament while revealing a strong desire to receive it. All of these elements lead them to expect that they would be able to make an informed choice in this matter unencumbered by the dictates of someone else (whether the local pastor or the Church writ large). This perception grates against the dictates of the American Dream in two regards. First, it is seen as limiting their ability to

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freely choose in this specific instance and, second, it limits their ability to socially and sacramentally integrate into the fabric of this local Catholic community. I know couples that consider this tantamount to past segregationist laws dictating who can enter certain restaurants, bathrooms, and drink from particular water fountains.

While understanding the frustration, I don't similarly recognize the apples to apples comparison implied here.⁸ There are ecclesial and ecumenical principles at play that have clear theological bases. Granted, one could disagree with these bases, but implying that they are simply made to be discriminatory, exclusivist or to mark someone as unwelcomed because they are unworthy is not the reality. If the Eucharist does not signify our ecclesial unity, the teaching goes, we should refrain from normally communing together until such a time as it does.⁹ It is unfortunate, if not sinful, that interchurch couples bear the brunt of this ecclesial reality, but that is much different than calling the practice of limiting Eucharistic sharing itself sinful. More to the point of this talk, in the experience of feeling unwelcomed, these non-Catholic spouses have difficulty fully integrating into the life-giving fabric of a parish community.

⁸ "Our cultural attitudes about the importance of diversity continue to intensify...And the celebration of diversity has carried over into marriage. But religion is not race and marriage is not a public school." (205)

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Their upward social mobility in this context, which is supposed to be open to all based on the American Dream, is hampered by their marginal status. Some couples I have met have simply decided to have their status remain anonymous in that they don't share that they are Presbyterian, Methodist or Lutheran, for fear of what they will be told or how perceptions of them would change in an instant. Don't ask, don't tell, has become coping strategy for interchurch couples based on a felt need to participate socially and liturgically in Catholic parishes.

Several questions emerge here that time does not permit me to explore; however, I want to return to the overall suggestion that a tension exists between the American Dream and the experience of being interchurch or interreligious in that one's ecclesially-based social mobility and sense of belonging is impacted by one's choice of spouse. Much of the pastoral advice offered by Catholic ministers before the wedding says as much, but it often isn't until the lived reality of this situation, particularly with the addition of children, becomes known that the effect of this tension becomes felt. When it does, it can strike the couple as incredibly unfair and decidedly un-American, even if theologically grounded in sound teaching.

To conclude, a current tension exists in the way the American Dream, as an imaginary, but influential construct, approaches this topic to how it is framed within Catholic theological reflection. If this is a game of “tug of war”, my sense is that the Catholic understanding is drawing ever closer to the mud-pit in the center of the contest than is the American Dream. Either way, this tension, either directly or indirectly, along with other issues beyond the scope of this talk, has seemingly led to a lack of sustained and explicit reflection within the Catholic community about Christian intermarriage and interreligious marriage in America. An unhappy result of this inattention, intentional or not, is that pastoral resources are presently inadequate to assist countless interchurch and interreligious families as they try to live out their lives in a culture increasingly agnostic about religion. Furthermore, as these diverse homes continue to experience religious belonging on the periphery of ecclesial participation, the Church and the theological community is limiting its ability to see the wider ecumenical, interreligious, cultural and even existential, concerns being raised by its members as well as its Christian, Jewish and Muslims brothers and sisters, among others. This issue is playing out constantly in our cultural context in our communities, schools, workplaces, and families, yet it has not yet reached the big, or even small, screen of Catholic consciousness-raising platforms, let alone the far-reaching platforms offered on FOX, ABC, NBC, or CBS. My hope is that this reality is soon to change, perhaps

with a new Netflix original series entitled “The Adventures of Mary and Muhammad”...