

Does heaven pass away?/ Mixed marriage and children

Q. We all hope to spend eternity in heaven. However, Jesus says in Matthew 24:35 that “heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” If heaven passes away, and earth will not provide a home for their glorified bodies, what will become of those who are saved? Where will they spend eternity? (Woodbridge, Virginia)

A. Scriptural commentators agree that, in its context, Matthew’s language that “heaven and earth will pass away” refers to the entire created universe — the earth and the firmament, our material world and all that it contains. Scripture is clear that people will outlast this material world, either in a state of eternal bliss in the presence of a loving God or in eternal misery.

Q. If a practicing Catholic marries a non-Catholic Christian, do they have to promise to baptize their children and raise them in the Catholic faith? (North Vernon, Indiana)

A. This is a very pertinent question — particularly at a time when, in some parts of America, as many as 40% of Catholics marriages involve ecumenical or interfaith couples — and the answer requires some explanation and historical perspective.

Under the old Code of Canon Law, both parties to a mixed marriage had to promise (in writing) that the children of the marriage would be baptized and brought up in the Catholic faith. St. Pope Paul VI, though — in his 1970 apostolic letter “Matrimonia Mixta” — modified that guideline somewhat, and his changes made their way into the current Code of Canon Law that was published in 1983.

The present state of Catholic church law is as follows. Normally it is the bishop of the diocese of the Catholic party who gives permission for a mixed marriage to take place. To receive this permission, the Catholic party must pledge to continue to practice the Catholic faith and must also (Canon 1125.1) “make a sincere promise to do all in his or her power so that all offspring are baptized and brought up in the

Catholic faith.”

The non-Catholic party doesn't have to promise anything; he or she simply has to be made aware of the pledge that the other spouse has made. Neither spouse is required to sign anything in writing; instead, the priest — in requesting permission for the marriage — attests with his signature that the Catholic party has made the required pledge and that the non-Catholic spouse is aware of it.

None of this guarantees, of course, that things will work out as the guidelines envision. It might happen that, with the arrival of a child, the non-Catholic spouse reevaluates and objects to a Catholic baptism and rearing.

In such a situation, the Catholic partner may be forced to choose between the harmony of the household and the religion of the child. My view is that the wording of the pledge — to “do all in his or her power” — must be interpreted within the context of the marriage.

No one can be required to do what is practically impossible, and it is the sacred and lifelong commitment to a spouse that must prevail — although the Catholic partner should continue his or her own Catholic practice and do what is reasonable to share that faith with the children.

But this is exactly why a couple ought to discuss such a matter well before the marriage — preferably in a pre-Cana session with a priest. If the issue of the children's religion forecasts future struggles and strife, one wonders whether the marriage itself is such a good idea.

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