

Mass attendance required?/ Questions on a mixed marriage

Q. An elderly woman in our parish has terminal lung cancer. I have seen her condition deteriorate over the last two months. She is no longer driving, is very weak and is now on oxygen full time. I had been helping her to get to church, and the other day she told me that she “goes back and forth” over whether she is still required to attend Sunday Mass.

Out of sympathy, I responded that I thought it would be OK if she did not attend. But now I worry that I may have said the wrong thing. Did I? (City and state withheld)

A. Relax. You gave her the right advice. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “The faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants)” (No. 2181).

Note that the catechism does not define the gravity of the illness that would excuse, leaving room instead for the person to make the judgment. If the illness were contagious, or if — as, it would seem, in this case — the burdensome condition would preclude a prayerful experience, a person need not (indeed, should not) go to church and would be better off praying at home.

Your friend, though, might feel added comfort if she heard this same advice from a priest. Why not call your pastor and let him know about the woman’s situation? He might want to call and assure her that she is not obliged to attend Mass. Even more important, he can visit her, bringing her holy Communion and, perhaps, the anointing of the sick.

Q. My son was born and raised Catholic, attended Catholic school and received all of his sacraments. Now he is about to marry a very nice Protestant woman. Her cousin is a Protestant minister, and he has been asked to perform the wedding ceremony. I remember that you had recommended that a member of the Catholic clergy also be involved in such a ceremony.

The uncle of their best man happens to be a priest, and my wife and I tried to

encourage our son to have that priest participate in the wedding, but unfortunately they said no. What are the long-term ramifications of this? Will their marriage be recognized by the Catholic Church as valid? And if one day they should decide to raise their children Catholic and have them receive the sacraments, will they run into any trouble? (Virginia)

A. Catholic priest need not be present at a mixed marriage ceremony in order to have it be recognized as valid by the Catholic Church.

However, your son and his fiancée — some time prior to the wedding — would need to meet with a Catholic priest to obtain from the diocese the necessary permissions: a) for the marriage to take place in a setting other than a Catholic church; and b) for the officiant to be someone other than a Catholic priest or deacon.

Even if the couple does not choose to do this (the result being that their marriage is not recognized by the church), that does not preclude them from having a child baptized in the Catholic faith — provided, of course, that they intend to raise the child Catholic. (In the words of Canon 868.1.2 of the church's Code of Canon Law, "there must be a founded hope that the infant will be brought up in the Catholic religion."

Pope Francis in 2009, while still a cardinal in Argentina, was reported to have told an Italian news magazine that "the child has absolutely no responsibility for the state of the parents' marriage. And often a baptism can be a new start for the parents as well."