

Priests born out of wedlock?/ Marriage to non-Christian

*Q. Is it true that men born out of wedlock cannot enter the priesthood?
(Philadelphia)*

A. No, that is not true. But your question does reflect a lengthy period in the church's history when illegitimacy was ruled a barrier.

The Council of Poitiers, under Pope Paschal II, determined in the late 11th century that being born out of wedlock constituted an impediment to the priesthood. That stipulation continued in force for many years and was, in fact, written into the church's Code of Canon Law published in 1917 (Canon 984). The current code (as revised in 1983) eliminates that impediment entirely.

(As I understand the historical background, the chief reason for the rule was this: During the Middle Ages, a wealthy man embarrassed by the existence of an illegitimate son would sometimes try to "hide" the boy in a monastery where he would later be ordained to sacred orders. To preclude this, the impediment of illegitimacy was put in place.)

Even in the years, though, when the canonical prohibition was in force, a bishop who wanted to accept for ordination a man born out of wedlock could apply to the Vatican for a dispensation to do so.

Certainly, the fact of illegitimacy was not the fault of the aspiring seminarian; yet, because a priest is the visible representative of Christ and should illustrate all that is best about the church, some bishops were not keen on ordaining men known in the community to be illegitimate or to have been born in other than a Catholic-recognized marriage.

In the case of couple of friends of mine who fit that description and who wanted to enter the seminary in the 1950s and 60s (and I suspect this may have been a common practice then), these men were accepted for theological studies but were ordained to minister in a diocese different from their native ones.

Q. As a baptized and confirmed Catholic and member of a parish, if I marry a non-Christian who does not want to convert to Christianity, can I be married in a Catholic church? And if we don't get married in a Catholic church, can my children be baptized as Catholics as long as I am a member and my spouse does not object? (We plan for me to bring up our children as Catholics.) (Iowa City, Iowa)

A. By all means, you are welcome to be married in a Catholic church and are encouraged to do so. Or, with the proper permissions, you are also free to be married in a different place.

With the blessing of my diocese, I have officiated at many weddings between a Catholic and a non-Christian in a setting that was “neutral”: Catholic-Jewish weddings, for example, at a hotel or country club or by a lakeside (sometimes assisted by a rabbi who offered some prayers or readings of his own); a Catholic-Muslim wedding on the lawn of the groom's parents, etc.

The key is for you and your spouse to decide mutually where you will feel most comfortable – remembering that a wedding ceremony invokes the universal Lord and should highlight the love that unites the two of you and your families as well. Then the two of you should visit a priest of your choosing, tell him of your desires and complete with him the necessary paperwork.

I am pleased that you are committed to raising your children as Catholic and that your fiance has no objection. Those children may and should be baptized as Catholics, and your parish would be delighted to arrange that.

Questions may be sent to Father Kenneth Doyle at askfatherdoyle@gmail.com and 30 Columbia Circle Dr. Albany, New York 12203.

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