



Summo Iugiter Studio

On Mixed Marriages

Encyclical Of Pope Gregory XVI

May 27, 1832

Venerable Brothers, Greetings and Apostolic Benediction.

The Apostolic See has always ensured that the canons forbidding the marriages of Catholics with heretics have been observed religiously. Occasionally such marriages have been tolerated in order to avoid more serious scandals. But, even then, the Roman Pontiffs saw to it that the faithful were taught how deformed these marriages are and what spiritual dangers they present. A Catholic man or woman would be guilty of a great crime if he presumed to violate the canonical sanctions in this matter. And if the Roman Pontiffs themselves very reluctantly relaxed this same canonical prohibition in some serious cases, they always added to their dispensation a formal condition: that the Catholic party must not be perverted, but rather must make every effort to withdraw the non-Catholic party from error and that the offspring of both sexes must be educated entirely in the Catholic religion.

Mixed Marriages

2. Therefore, guided by the example of Our predecessors, We are grieved to hear reports from your dioceses which indicate that some of the people committed to your care freely encourage mixed marriages. Furthermore, they are promoting opinions contrary to the Catholic faith: namely, they dare to affirm that a Catholic may freely and legally contract marriage with a heterodox party, not only without asking for a dispensation (which must be obtained from the Apostolic See in each individual case), but also without agreeing to the necessary obligations, especially the duty to educate all the offspring in the Catholic religion. Indeed it has even come to the point that these same persons insist that mixed marriages ought to be approved when the heretical partner is a divorced person whose former spouse is still alive. To this end they issue serious threats of punishments in order to induce priests to announce mixed marriages in the churches and, afterwards, to defend the act by which these marriages were contracted or, at least, to grant the

contracting parties what they call dimissory letters. Finally some of these misguided people attempt to persuade themselves and others that men are not saved only in the Catholic religion, but that even heretics may attain eternal life.

Praiseworthy Situations

3. Some circumstances, however, lighten Our grief which arises from this matter: namely, the constancy of most of the Bavarian people in holding fast to the Catholic faith, their sincere obedience to ecclesiastical authority, and the steadfastness of nearly all of their clergy in carrying out their ministry according to the canons. We know that, although you may not all hold the same opinion in this business of mixed marriages, all of you are resolved to hearken to the Apostolic See and, with its guidance, to protect the flocks entrusted to you, not even fearing to encounter dangers in order to safeguard the sheep.

Help from King Louis

4. Through these letters We hope to strengthen your fraternity so that in the matter under consideration you may continue to preach the unchangeable Catholic teachings and to safeguard the observance of the canons. Since Our opinion has been made known to you, We hope it will result in a more perfect agreement between all of you and the Holy See. We hope that Our dear son in Christ, Louis, the illustrious king of Bavaria, when he understands the present problem, may assist Us and you with his patronage because of his grandfather's zeal for the Catholic religion which Louis has inherited. If he does, the evils which threaten the Catholic cause from this source may be prevented and our most holy religion may be restored and protected throughout Bavaria. Then Catholic clergy may enjoy complete liberty in carrying out their ministry, just as was provided for in the agreement entered into with the Apostolic See in 1817.

History of Dictum Against Mixed Marriages

5. Next let Us start with the things which concern the faith which, as We mentioned above, some are endangering in order to introduce greater freedom for mixed marriages. You know how zealously Our predecessors taught that very article of faith which these dare to deny, namely the necessity of the Catholic faith and of unity for salvation. The words of that celebrated disciple of the apostles, martyred St. Ignatius, in his letter to the Philadelphians are relevant to this matter: "Be not deceived, my brother; if anyone follows a schismatic, he will not attain the inheritance of the kingdom of God." Moreover, St. Augustine and the other African bishops who met in the Council of Cirta in the year 412 explained the same thing at greater length: "Whoever has separated himself from the Catholic Church, no matter how laudably he lives, will not have eternal life, but has earned the anger of God because of this one crime: that he abandoned his union with Christ." Omitting other appropriate passages which are almost numberless in the writings of the Fathers, We shall praise St. Gregory the Great who expressly testifies that this

indeed is the teaching of the Catholic Church. He says: "The holy universal Church teaches that it is not possible to worship God truly except in her and asserts that all who are outside of her will not be saved." Official acts of the Church proclaim the same dogma. Thus, in the decree on faith which Innocent III published with the synod of Lateran IV, these things are written: "There is one universal Church of all the faithful outside of which no one is saved." Finally the same dogma is also expressly mentioned in the profession of faith proposed by the Apostolic See, not only that which all Latin churches use, but also that which the Greek Orthodox Church uses and that which other Eastern Catholics use. We did not mention these selected testimonies because We thought you were ignorant of that article of faith and in need of Our instruction. Far be it from Us to have such an absurd and insulting suspicion about you. But We are so concerned about this serious and well known dogma, which has been attacked with such remarkable audacity, that We could not restrain Our pen from reinforcing this truth with many testimonies.

Help the Bavarian People Avoid Mixed Marriages

6. Strive to eradicate these slithering errors with all your strength. Inspire the populace of Bavaria to keep the Catholic faith and unity as the only way of salvation with an ever more ardent zeal, and, thus, to avoid every danger of forsaking it. Once the Bavarian faithful understands this necessity of maintaining Catholic unity, admonitions and warnings to them against joining in marriage with heretics will certainly not be in vain. If on occasion some grave cause should suggest such a mixed marriage, they will then apply for a dispensation from the Church and observe the conditions We mentioned above. You and their parents and others who have care of them are responsible for teaching them what the judgment of the canons is in this matter. They must be warned lest they should dare to break these canons and, thus, jeopardize their souls. Hence if the circumstances suggest it, it may be necessary to remind them of that wellknown precept of the natural and divine law, which commands us to avoid not only sins but the next occasion of sin as well. Remind them also of the other precept of the same law which enjoins parents to rear their children in the discipline and admonitions of the Lord (Eph 6.4). Therefore, they must instruct them in the true worship of God, which is unique to the Catholic religion. Hence, exhort your faithful to weigh seriously how great an offense they commit against the supreme Deity and how cruelly they act toward themselves and their future children when, by rashly contracting a mixed marriage, they may expose themselves and their children to the danger of perversion. So that the gravity of such danger may appear more clearly, recall for them those salutary admonitions of the Apostles, of the Fathers, and of the canons, which warn that familiar association with heretics is to be shunned.

Responsibility of Clergy

7. But it may happen that these warnings and admonitions go unheeded and that some Catholic man or woman is unwilling to give up his perverse intention of

entering upon a mixed marriage. If a dispensation is not requested or not obtained from the Church or if the necessary conditions or a certain one of them is not fulfilled, then it will be the duty of the priest to abstain not only from honoring the marriage itself with his presence, but also from announcing the marriage and from granting dimissory letters. You must admonish the priests and demand that they abstain from every such act. For one who has the care of souls and who acts differently, especially in the circumstances prevalent in Bavaria, would seem in some way to approve these illicit marriages by his actions. His works would encourage the liberty of those souls, a liberty which is pernicious to their salvation and even to the cause of faith.

Cases Involving Divorce

8. After these things it is hardly necessary to add statements concerning those other, far more serious, cases of marriages contracted between Catholics and heretics in which the heretical party may have a previous partner still living from whom he separated by divorce. You know how strong by divine law the bond of marriage is. This bond cannot be broken by human authority. Therefore, a mixed marriage in such cases is not only illicit, but entirely invalid and adulterous. The only exception is when the former marriage, which the heretical party considers dissolved by divorce, was entirely invalid because of some canonical impediment. In this last case, not only must all the things which were said above be observed, but the new marriage must not be permitted until after the first marriage has been declared invalid by an ecclesiastical judgment made according to canonical standards.

9. These are the things, venerable brothers, which We thought should be called to your attention in this matter. Meanwhile We do not cease to ask our omnipotent and merciful God with fervent prayers to clothe you and all the clergy of Bavaria with virtue from on high and to cover you with His right hand and defend you with His holy arm. May the Apostolic Benediction be a pledge of the great love with which We regard your fraternity in the Lord. We most lovingly bestow this benediction on you. Distribute it to the clergy and faithful laity of your dioceses.

Given in Rome, at St. Peter's under the ring of the Fisherman, May 27, 1832, the second year of Our Pontificate.