

**Ten creative years  
In Rome and in French-speaking countries  
Moments to be noted  
1959-1970**

**by Fr René Beaupère o.p., Centre St Irénée, Lyon**

**Beforehand:** First of all there was – as there always will be – prayer. I give you one example, that of Abbé Paul Couturier, a priest of Lyon, who prayed every day, when he celebrated mass, for mixed marriages. ‘Lord, I ask you to change the Church’s legislation on mixed marriages ... May supernatural prudence, based on confidence in your Spirit who directs and inspires everything, replace that earthly prudence which seems to want to dampen down and imprison your Spirit.’

**1959, 25 January:** Without knowing what a far-reaching movement he was making, John XXIII opened a window in the Vatican. He announced a council – and it was to be ‘ecumenical’. This was fresh air that allowed Christians – Catholics and others – to express their desires and to begin to tread new paths.

**1962, 7-16 August:** In his report as General Secretary to the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC) meeting in Paris, Pastor Visser’t Hooft affirmed, in a famous phrase, that the Second Vatican Council which was about to open was also of concern to the WCC (‘nostra res agitur’). He added that particularly important areas of concern would be the conciliar decisions on ‘religious liberty, mixed marriages, prayer for unity and the nature and limits of the Church’. Mixed marriage: the second important theme!

**1962:** That same year there appeared in France the first groups of *foyers mixtes* (at Lyon, Montrouge, then Taizé, Poitiers ...) as a fruit not of Vatican II (only just beginning) but of an improving interconfessional climate.

**1964, Pentecost:** The group of *foyers mixtes* at Lyon undertook the elaboration of a text that became known as ‘the charter of Lyon’.

**1964, November:** Vatican II promulgated its Decree on Ecumenism. In addition, at the end of its third session Vatican II considered a ‘Votum on Marriage’ proposing a softening of the Catholic discipline concerning mixed marriages. This document was discussed briefly by the council fathers. There was a clear desire for a reform of canon law, without a clear unanimity for the particular points proposed. The Votum was therefore handed over to the Pope, for him to promulgate in the form and by the method that seemed best to him, taking account of the debates held in the Council.

**1965, around Easter:** Paul VI discreetly submitted a draft *motu proprio* to a certain number of bishops. Opinions were sufficiently divergent for the Pope to decide to delay the matter.

**1965, December:** Vatican II adopted a declaration on religious liberty. A Joint Working Group was set up between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC; it had on its agenda, among other questions, that of mixed marriages.

**1966, 18 March:** An Instruction signed by Cardinal Otaviani was published; it was less open than the propositions of the Council’s Votum. In fact the hasty publication of the document (signs of this haste can be seen in the document itself) was due to the imminent visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Vatican. Dr Michael Ramsey had not hidden his intention of raising the question of mixed marriages with Paul VI.

**1966, 20-24 July:** A consultation of experts gathered together by the WCC at Crêt Berard in Switzerland put together and published a document entitled *Marriage and Division among the Churches*’.

**1966, October:** In France the newly-formed Episcopal Committee for Christian Unity consulted some experts and asked one of them, Fr René Beaupère, to draft the outline of a Directory for the application of

the Roman Instruction and the decisions recently taken by the French bishops at their annual meeting in Lourdes.

**1967, 25-28 February:** There was a Catholic consultation on mixed marriages at Nemi, Italy (Scripture, theology, canonical discipline, pastoral care), followed immediately, **1-4 March**, by a colloquium between this Catholic group and experts chosen by the WCC. This work at Nemi, which the RCC-WCC Joint Working Group had asked for, finished up with a request for a tripartite study (the Catholic Church, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches) on marriage and mixed marriages. This work was only published in 1977 and aroused little interest, probably because it was too general and too international to be effective at local level.

**1967:** Fr René Beaupère learned that the Protestant Commission for Relations with Catholicism in France had asked Pastor Hébert Roux to do some work on a Directory similar to the project in which he was engaged. He asked for and obtained agreement for the two projects to be combined and to end up with a common text.

**1967, May:** For the first time mixed couples from Lyon and Lausanne spent a weekend together at the Ermitage des Voirons (Savoy). This meeting inspired later meetings in different parts of France and then in Switzerland.

**1967, 19 July:** *A Common Declaration on Marriages between Christians belonging to different confessions* (Catholics, Old Catholics, Protestants) was published in Switzerland. This document expressed 'the intention of the Churches to collaborate together ... to overcome negative and unilateral thinking by constructive propositions formulated in common'.

**1967, October:** One of the themes on the agenda of the first Bishops' Synod in Rome held after Vatican II was that of mixed marriages. This was necessary after the cool reception that had been given to the Instruction of 1966. On the whole the Synod returned to the more open positions that had been put forward in the conciliar Votum of 1964. However, it was only a consultative body.

**1968, June:** After revision by the competent authorities, the work that Fr René Beaupère and Pastor Hébert Roux had done between them was published as (official) *Recommendations of the Catholic Church and the Reformed and Lutheran Churches in France*. Under the title *Pastorale commune des foyers mixtes*, it was the first document published by the newly-formed Catholic-Protestant Joint Committee in France.

**1968, October:** The first number of the quarterly bulletin *Foyers Mixtes* appeared for French-speakers (fiancés, couples, pastors and priests). From this first number there were echoes of what was beginning to happen beyond France and Switzerland: in Italy, then in Great Britain, Holland, Germany ...

**1969, November:** The plenary session of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity was partly devoted to mixed marriages. Replies had been received to a questionnaire that went out to episcopal conferences during the course of the year. But nothing was published, as a document on mixed marriages was expected from the Vatican.

**1970, 31 March:** The motu proprio *Matrimonia Mixta* was published in Rome; it took account of the documents produced in the previous three years, and proposed a less harsh legislation for mixed marriages, rather similar to the Votum of 1964. Except for a few small details, this legislation was adopted by the new edition of the Code of Canon Law (1983) which is still in force.

## **Bibliography**

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