

Catholic Marriage in Taiwan

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THE SITUATION

Because Catholics in Taiwan comprise only 1% of the total population of the island, it is very difficult for a Catholic to find a Catholic marriage partner. However, the cause of evangelization as well as the faith of individual Catholics requires that the Taiwan Catholic Church do more to facilitate our young people to marry Catholics. Catholic marriages today will do much to insure a healthy church tomorrow.

Today no less than 75% of our Catholics marry non-Catholics, entering what is called an inter-faith marriage. According to a 2001 study of 1,269 mixed marriage couples, over half of the Catholics are estranged from the church, 34% have become less fervent, attending mass only monthly, while only 15% have remained fervent. Only one out of three of their children have been baptized.

The same study shows that in Catholic marriages (i.e. where both partners are Catholic), only 9% are estranged from the church, 28 percent attend mass monthly, and 63% remain fervent. 94% of the children from Catholic marriages have been baptized.

Clearly, inter-faith marriages are a formula for attrition. We must do whatever is needed to reverse this trend. Church growth depends on our doing this.

WHAT DO CATHOLIC SINGLES THINK ABOUT MARRIAGE?

Most Catholic singles in Taiwan are hoping to find a marriage partner and many would welcome help from the Church in doing so. Among the many results of a 2008 survey of 92 Catholic singles in Taipei who consider their faith very important or important to them are the following:

- Of seven possible criteria for choosing a marriage partner (compatibility, same value system, appearance, same religion, employment, finances, level of education), women listed being a Catholic in third place and men listed it in fourth place. (Both men and women had compatibility and the same value system in first and second place.) 60% listed “being a Catholic as being “very important” or “important” in a potential marriage partner.
- 64% said they were “very concerned” or “concerned” about finding a boy or girlfriend.
- 59% said they don’t have many opportunities to meet potential spouses and 71% would like to increase their chances to meet someone.
- 41% have accepted a direct marriage introduction in the last three years.
- 57% said they would consider taking part in a church sponsored “getting to know you” session.

The conclusion is obvious: there are a large number of Catholic singles who would welcome church help in finding a Catholic spouse.

That Catholic singles are actively looking for a spouse [not necessarily a Catholic one] is clear from the fact that in 2013 over 2000 Taiwan Catholic singles joined the Yahoo marriage introduction website in search of a spouse. My own experience points to the same conclusion. In my 37 years of work in the Taipei Friendship House for single Catholics, well over 300 Catholic couples have married, having met one another at the center, most on their own during activities, and many by way of direct introduction by a staff member.

For years now, the larger Protestant congregations have had elaborate programs and regulations designed to have Protestants marry other believers. Three examples are:

- In March, 2014, they opened their own marriage introduction website for all Protestants in Taiwan.
- The Taiwan True Jesus Church has a Christian Marriage Bureau on the General Assembly level, a Marriage Introduction Service Center on the district (diocesan) level, and 400 parishioners serving their 170 parishes as matchmakers. This structure has been part of their official church procedures since 1937.
- The leadership board of the Presbyterian Church sponsors large weekend gatherings four times a year so that singles from their 179 parishes can meet each other.

WHY DO WE HAVE THIS PROBLEM?

Fervent Catholic singles and their parents want Catholic marriages. The Church wants Catholic marriages and requires a dispensation for the marriage of a Catholic to a non-baptized person. Still, inter-faith marriages have become the norm, not the exception, in the Taiwan church, even though they are a formula for mass attrition.

Why do we live in this self-contradiction? Do we operate out of a pastoral theology that fits a society in which most people are Catholic? Do we think it is a new era and that “arranged” marriages are passé? Do we think that it is inappropriate for celibate clergy to be involved in arranging marriages? Are we afraid the church will be blamed if a marriage doesn’t work out? Do the foreign clergy among us feel they don’t understand the local customs enough to get involved in spousal selection?

Whatever the reasons are for the present situation, the importance of the Catholic family to both the health of the parish community and the faith of the individual Catholic has not changed. Facilitating Catholic marriages must be seen as an integral part of the Church’s pastoral/missionary work.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

There are ways to improve the situation. Among the efforts that could be made are:

- Establish a marriage introduction website for Taiwan Catholics. The website would also serve Taiwanese Catholics living overseas.
- Encourage the establishment of a matchmaker system whereby each parish appoints a person who knows the parishioners well and who meets periodically on a deanery level (and sometimes on a diocesan level) with the representatives of the other parishes. The exchange of the names of potential marriage prospects at those meetings, as well as by phone between meetings, would result in the build up of a network, or a verbal database, that could produce many Catholic marriages.
- Through catechesis, homilies, and the Catholic press, promote the ideal of Catholic marriages to the point that it eventually becomes part of the Taiwan Catholic consciousness.
- Establish activity centers such as the Taipei Friendship House in the major cities of Taiwan providing activities, courses, training sessions, and liturgical services for Catholic singles. These will be on-going occasions and would provide chances for Catholics to meet one another.
- Make a detailed study of the more successful Protestant approaches to the problem with an eye to incorporating helpful methods into our own programs.

REFERENCES FOR MATERIAL CITED ABOVE

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