

Should a Catholic attend an invalid wedding ceremony? Or only the reception? Or just send a gift or card? Or ought he do none of these?

Participation in invalid marriages?

By Regis Scanlon

■ How long has it been since you preached or heard from the pulpit that it is evil for a Catholic to marry in a ceremony not approved by the Church? Perhaps fear of publicly embarrassing someone in the pews and belief that these invalidly-married Catholics may be in good conscience has silenced preaching against invalid marriages. This new sympathy toward invalid marriages is not without grave risks. Couples living in invalid marriages could remain blind to the truth that they are really (objectively) living in adultery or fornication and that "these are the sins which provoke God's wrath" (Col. 3:5-6). The ultimate danger here is that invalidly-married Catholics will not heed St. Paul's warning that "God will judge fornicators and adulterers" (Heb. 13:4) and "those who do such things (impurity) will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:19-21). A fact that must not be ignored today is that

a number of these Catholics die cut off from the sacraments of the Church because they are still living in an invalid marriage.

The impossibility of reconciling a number of these invalid marriages in the Catholic Church, along with the difficulty of abandoning an invalid marriage once a family is formed, argues for a prompt and honest response to these marriages right from the start. Should a Catholic attend such a wedding ceremony? Should he attend only the reception following the ceremony, or just send a gift or card? Or ought he do none of these? This article is an attempt to evaluate certain pastoral answers to these questions recently adopted by both pastors and laity in the United States.

Traditionally, Catholics did not participate in invalid marriage celebrations because it was seen as approval to adultery

or fornication. As invalid marriages increased among Catholics, however, moralists began to de-emphasize the danger of scandal from these celebrations. For example, Msgr. Raymond T. Bosler, nationally known during the 1970s for his syndicated column answering moral questions for Catholics, stated that "Attendance at a wedding shower or giving a gift does not today mean approval of marriage."¹ Msgr. Bosler implied that this applies to parents attending invalid weddings, since most relatives and friends would understand and sympathize with the parents. Once more, according to Msgr. Bosler, ". . . it is quite possible that more scandal might be given to Protestants by what could appear to be a lack of love and interest in their child were the parents to avoid the wedding."²

Parents must manifest disapproval

More than a decade later Fr. Frank Sheedy offered another version of this new pastoral approach in "Ask Me a Question" of the July 22, 1984 issue of *Our Sunday Visitor*. When Fr. Frank Sheedy was asked about the possibility of parents being present for their child's invalid wedding, he stated that "some pastors would permit a presence in such a case as long as the child was clearly aware that the parents disapproved of their action."³ According to Fr. Sheedy, attendance is justified on the grounds that one should not "irretrievably cut off the relationship with a son or daughter."⁴ Two years later in the same column of *Our Sunday Visitor* Fr. Sheedy commented more extensively on the wisdom of attending an invalid marriage of a divorced person in these words:

There are three things that have to be considered here. One, we cannot cooperate in the

wrong of another. Thus it would be forbidden for a Catholic to take an active part (bridesmaid, best man, etc.) in such a wedding. Second, one cannot give seeming approval to an illicit act. Third is family harmony, which is particularly important for parents and siblings. If the person is *fully aware* of their disapproval of such a ceremony, I would permit parents and siblings to attend so that family lines of communication may be kept open and the door not closed. Other relatives and friends I would counsel to avoid the ceremony but attend the reception. This way they let the person know that while not approving of his or her actions, they still care for the person and do not want to end the relationship. People who have followed this counsel tell me that it works well. However, there may be a case where an uncle, aunt or godparent might feel obliged to attend the wedding for the sake of family harmony. This would be permitted as long as the Catholic relative was *truly aware* of personal disapproval.⁵

This pastoral advice of Fr. Sheedy, which permits Catholics to attend invalid marriages, is similar to the official position of a number of dioceses in the United States. Fr. Charles Bober of the Pittsburgh Diocese, for example, states that:

There is a Pastoral Manual in use within the Diocese of Pittsburgh. It states that "As a rule, Catholics should not attend or participate in marriage ceremonies which are invalid. However, when such attendance cannot be construed as approval and when there are serious reasons for attendance (such as retention of Christian ties of family or friendship, or the founded hope of contact for future reconciliation) such attendance may be justified."⁶

The present practice of Catholics attending invalid marriages in the United States goes far beyond any limits set down by recent pastoral moralists and diocesan statutes. If one scans the wedding announcements in the societal section of one's home-town newspaper, he will find Catholic names listed time and again as best men, bridesmaids, formal attendants, and ushers at weddings not approved by

the Church. Reports of Catholics being ridiculed by family members for not attending invalid marriages of relatives indicates that a type of reverse legislation has taken root. The unwritten rule now seems to be that the Catholic must attend the invalid wedding of a loved one, and the exception, for which the Catholic will receive much flack, is to avoid these celebrations.

Let us evaluate this new pastoral approach permitting parents to attend the invalid marriages of their children by examining the theories of Msgr. Bosler and Fr. Sheedy.

Bible reflects 2 types of scandal

In order to clearly understand the question about scandal in relation to attending invalid weddings, one must first recall that there are two types of scandal mentioned in Sacred Scripture. There is the scandal arising out of *evil* mentioned by Jesus Christ in a well-known passage from the Bible: "Scandals will inevitably arise, but woe to him through whom they come. He would be better off thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck than giving scandal to one of these little ones" (Luke 17:1-2). Then, there is the scandal from *good* actions which comes from Christ himself (Luke 2:34). This second type of scandal involves the truth that, like Christ, all Christians must suffer and die rather than yield to sin to attain eternal life. This is the scandal of the cross (Matt. 16:21-27). About this kind of scandal Jesus says: "Blest is the man who finds no stumbling block in me" (Matt. 11:16).

In today's materialistic and permissive society, the only absolute imperative seems to be the avoidance of pain. Following the sexual revolution, too many Catholics in the United States believe that it is wrong to require children to suffer for the sake

of chastity and purity. Because parental avoidance of weddings usually involves both parents and children in the pain of misunderstanding and rejection, parental avoidance of weddings is a "cultural heresy." Consequently, Msgr. Bosler fears that avoidance of a child's invalid wedding by parents, out of fidelity to Christian Law, will be interpreted by others as a lack of love and interest in their child.

Msgr. Bosler, however, confuses the scandal of the cross with the scandal of evil. For it has never been the Christian philosophy of love to yield to impurity and infidelity in the face of misunderstanding so that others might not feel rejected. If it had been, John the Baptist would have never enraged the feelings of Herodias at the cost of his own life over the matter of her adultery (Mark 6:14-29 and Matt. 14:1-12), nor would Saints Agnes and Maria Goretti have been honored as Christian Martyrs for infuriating their suitors by rejecting their sexual advances. In other words, if the early Christians had compromised Christ's teaching on chastity to spare the feelings of others, Christianity would have never made it to the twentieth century. Scandal arising from following the Law of Christ is not only permitted, it is even desirable! Karl Rahner was correct when he stated that in our pluralistic modern world people should be encouraged to give witness to Christianity "even if their environment is scandalized."⁸

Msgr. Bosler's theory, that parental attendance at invalid weddings does not mean approval nor cause scandal, hinges entirely upon his claim that even if the parents attend these invalid wedding celebrations, friends and relatives will still understand that the parents disapprove of the invalid marriage. Msgr. Bosler probably thought that the faith of Catholics in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s

was so strong that almost all Catholics believed that marrying invalidly was evil. The difficulty with Msgr. Bosler's theory today is that recent parochial studies following the sexual revolution show that many Catholics in the United States no longer believe that marrying invalidly is evil. Consequently, it makes little sense today to claim that relatives and friends of Catholic parents who attend invalid marriages will understand that these parents disapprove of these marriages.⁹

Some approve invalid marriages

What is even more damaging to Msgr. Bosler's theory is the fact that the change among Catholics from disapproval to approval of invalid marriages surfaces about a decade or so after Msgr. Bosler first began advising Catholics through the public media to attend the invalid marriages of their loved ones. It is most difficult to believe that this change on the part of Catholics toward approving invalid marriages is not in some way linked to Catholics attending invalid marriages for the past ten years or more. It certainly appears that Msgr. Bosler was wrong when he advised that attending invalid marriages does not mean approval and does not cause scandal. Whatever credibility Msgr. Bosler's theory had decades ago, it certainly has less today!

Proof that Msgr. Bosler's (no scandal) theory has lost its appeal is that recent moralists, like Fr. Sheedy, insist that the children be made "clearly aware" that the parents disapprove of the marriage before the parents attend the wedding celebrations. Obviously, the need for clarification implies that scandal will be caused. The explanation to the child by the parents is supposed to cancel or wipe out the scandal from parental attendance at the wed-



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ding celebrations.

The problem here, however, is that it is impossible for parents to make the child "clearly aware" of parental disapproval of the invalid marriage when the child knows full well that the parents are attending the wedding celebrations. One should recall St. Anthony of Padua's sound advice about teaching morality when he stated that "actions speak louder than words."¹⁰ It may be possible for parents to convince their son or daughter that they disapprove of the invalid wedding, but these parents will not convince their child that they *seriously* disapprove. Any high school teacher

knows that the only way to inform students that you are serious about anything is to back up words with action. Similarly, the only way for parents to convince their child that they seriously disapprove of the invalid marriage is to avoid the wedding celebrations altogether. If one follows Fr. Sheedy's pastoral advice, however, not only will actions supporting parental disapproval be lacking, but, instead, the parent's actions will contradict their words of disapproval. When words and actions collide, the best that can be hoped for is that the child will be confused, and the worst that can happen is that the child will be more influenced by the actions than by the words.

The same must be said for Fr. Sheedy's advice that the friends and relatives might avoid the wedding ceremony, but attend the wedding reception. Recall that Fr. Sheedy required, as a necessary condition for parental attendance of the wedding celebrations, that the child be "fully," "truly," or "clearly aware" of parental disapproval. Inconsistency, whether it be in words or actions, can never be a basis for clarity.

We cannot cooperate in a sin

But there is something more than scandal that is fundamentally wrong with attending an invalid wedding celebration. Fr. Sheedy, himself, stated that, first of all, "we cannot cooperate in the wrong of another." It would be illicit, then, to formally cooperate in the evil act of adultery or fornication by cooperating in an invalid marriage. Thus, as Fr. Sheedy says, "it would be forbidden for a Catholic to take an active part (bridesmaid, best man, etc.) in such a wedding."

Fr. Sheedy, however, must be limiting his consideration of the couple's formal act of adultery or fornication just to the for-

mal exchange of invalid wedding vows since he limits formal cooperation in this act of adultery or fornication just to being a formal member of the wedding party. But the formal act of adultery or fornication of an invalidly-marrying couple certainly includes the attempted consummation of these invalid wedding vows in the couple's act of sexual intercourse on the night of the wedding. It is precisely the promise of this act which makes the invalid wedding ceremony evil.

Now, according to sound traditional moral theology, if one "concur[s]" in the will and attention of another doing an evil act, or, if one's own action "influence[s]" the evil act of another, then, one is formally cooperating in evil.¹¹ Consequently, anyone who concurs in the will and intention of an invalidly-marrying couple to have sexual intercourse on the night of their wedding, or anyone who influences such an act of sexual intercourse, is formally cooperating in adultery or fornication. It is obvious, however, that: giving away the bride; throwing rice and kisses; giving hugs and handshakes of support; sending congratulatory cards and gifts; and even singing and dancing at the following reception all concur in the will and intention of the couple to complete their wedding vows with the act of sexual intercourse on the night of their wedding. Because these actions all encourage the invalidly-marrying couple to some degree (be it ever so slight) to consummate their invalid marriage on the night of their wedding, they all influence the couple's act of adultery or fornication. All who knowingly do such things, therefore, are formally cooperating in the evil act of adultery or fornication.

Some Catholics believe that they are justified in attending an invalid marriage because they intend to support the inval-

idly-marrying couple, but not the invalid marriage, itself. But these Catholics intend to support the invalidly-marrying couple *by means of* supporting (attending) the invalid marriage. And to do so is to adopt an old pagan theory that the end justifies the means, which was rejected by St. Paul (Rom. 3:8) and by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, when the Pope stated that "it is not licit, even for the gravest reasons, to do evil so that good may follow therefrom."¹² Against the theory that one can have a good reason to formally cooperate in evil, Genicot said that "formal cooperation in sin is always illicit," and Bernard Häring stated that "It is never permitted, directly or indirectly, to cooperate in an act which is in itself evil, even though one anticipates the very greatest good as a result of the act."¹³

End does not justify means

Sometimes the wrong of formal cooperation in a specific evil act can be more easily seen when it is paralleled with formal cooperation in another act which is more obviously evil—like abortion. What pastor or moral theorist, for example, would advise a disapproving husband or parent to show up at the abortion clinic to hold his wife or daughter's hand and comfort her through the ordeal of abortion to support her (but not the abortion!), or to avoid irretrievably cutting off his relationship with her? Yet, this parallels the pastoral advice to Catholics which states that they should attend the invalid marriage of their loved ones to support them or to avoid irretrievably cutting off their relationship with them.

Influencing, supporting, concurring in, or celebrating the evil act of adultery or fornication by formally cooperating in an invalid marriage out of a so-called motive of love is also inconsistent with the gos-



pel. No one loved sinners more than Jesus Christ, yet he avoided their evil acts entirely. While Jesus Christ did not shun Mary Magdalene, he certainly did shun her sin of impurity, and he ordered her to do the same when he said: "But from now on, avoid this sin" (John 8:11). If a Catholic attends an invalid wedding of a loved one, attends the reception following the ceremony, or just sends a congratulatory card or gift, he cannot claim he is acting out of love, because, as St. Paul states, "Love does not rejoice in what is wrong but with the truth" (1 Cor. 13:6). Love is always honest!

The idea of a Christian cooperating in the evil act of adultery or fornication by attending an invalid marriage seems so contrary to correct reasoning and Sacred Scripture that one wonders why so many Catholics today attempt to justify it. Fr. Sheedy expressed the main reason when

Fr. Sheedy expressed the main reason when he stated that one should not "irretrievably cut off the relationship with a son or daughter." When Catholic parents have to say "no" to their children and break the peace of the family, the parents themselves often feel that they are the ones who are doing something wrong and un-Christian.

he stated that one should not "irretrievably cut off the relationship with a son or daughter." When Catholic parents have to say "no" to their children and break the unity and peace of the family, the Catholic parents often feel that they are the ones who are doing something wrong and un-Christian.

It is at these times that reason must prevail over emotion. Catholics must recall that, while honesty and chastity are absolute moral values for which a Christian may even have to give his life (St. John the Baptist, St. Agnes, St. Maria Goretti, etc.), filial friendship or family unity is not. Our Lord, himself, has said:

Do not suppose that my mission on earth is to spread peace. My mission is to spread, not peace, but division. I have come to set a man at odds with his father, a daughter with her mother, daughter-in-law with her mother-in-law: in short, to make a man's enemies those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me. He who will not take up his cross and come after me is not worthy of me. (Matt. 10:34-38)

As painful as it is, invalidly-marrying couples must clearly understand that in-

sofar as they reject the moral teaching of Jesus Christ concerning the sixth commandment, it is Christ's will that they be separated from their parents, the Christian community, and even Christ himself. In the same way the parents must understand that it is Christ's will that the parents embrace this cross of division rather than lay it down in a false gesture of moral unity.

As the primary teachers of their children in the Catholic faith, parents have the solemn responsibility to clearly teach to their children the truth that sin separates one from Christ. So if the invalidly-marrying son or daughter interprets parental avoidance of the wedding celebrations as a sign of her separation from the Christian community of her parents, then this is good—because it is the truth! Again, there is no way to clearly communicate this truth to an invalidly-marrying son or daughter other than by avoiding the wedding celebrations altogether.

What must not be overlooked here is that it is the rejection of the gospel by the invalidly-marrying son or daughter that is the primary cause of separation, not Christ or the parents. The claim on the part of pastoral moral theorists, therefore, that parental attendance at invalid weddings is justified on the grounds that the parents should not "irretrievably cut off" their children must be rejected as false and as bad psychology. The notion of parents "irretrievably cutting off" their son or daughter merely by following their own conscience turns out to be a case of inverted logic. Who is cutting off whom? No one is demanding that the parents shun their invalidly-marrying child, but only that they shun the marriage. As long as Mom and Dad keep the lines of communication open from their side, no one is being irretrievably cut off. If a son or daughter, however, refuses to associate with the parents following the wedding, he or she is cutting off the parents, not vice

versa. It is downright immoral to make the parents feel guilty for following their consciences, especially when their consciences are formed according to Christ and his Church. It is the children who are out of step with the gospel, not the parents. Let us put the responsibility for the break-up where it belongs. The very justification offered by those who favor the new pastoral approach fosters immaturity in the young by stripping them of responsibility for their own actions.

Adults suffer moral defeatism

Although the new pastoral theorists do not state it, they could be yielding to popular pragmatic parental thinking which goes something like this: "My son (or daughter) is going to marry outside the Church anyway, so we might as well make the best of a bad situation." While this course of action may appear to be a benevolent act of diplomacy and prudence, it presumes that the son or daughter will do evil. This attitude fits so well a culture in which numerous minor seminaries, aspirancy convents, and Catholic schools have closed even though these institutions had more students than when they originally opened. The main problem here is not with the young, but with the adults who are suffering from moral defeatism. Contrary to popular opinion, it is possible for a son or daughter to master their sexual desires and heroically follow Christ's teaching on chastity and marriage. It is even possible for a son or daughter to call off a marriage prior to the wedding ceremony, or to reverse it soon after. But this is likely to occur only when parents struggle with their children to get them to do good and avoid evil because they expect their children to succeed.

If pastors and moral theorists are to reverse the plague of invalid marriages among Catholics in the United States to-

day, they must avoid a pastoral approach in these matters that "throws in the towel" on the moral life of our children. Rather, the pastors and moral theorists must adopt an approach which encourages adults to hope in the young by giving them the opportunity to be responsible for their own moral actions. But for this to be possible, both parents and children must be made clearly aware of the evil of invalid marriages and the immorality of formal cooperation in these celebrations. This means that pastors must engage in some tough preaching and teaching from the pulpit. This will be somewhat unpopular, but part of the pastor's job in preaching the word is ". . . to stay with this task whether convenient or inconvenient" (2 Tim. 4:2). This is surely part of the burden of the gospel, but the young are worth it! ■

¹ Raymond T. Bosler, *What a Modern Catholic Believes About Moral Problems* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1971), p. 73.

² Bosler, p. 71.

³ Fr. Frank Sheedy, "Ask Me a Question," *Our Sunday Visitor* (July 22, 1984), p. 11.

⁴ Fr. Frank Sheedy, "Ask Me a Question," *Our Sunday Visitor* (July 22, 1984), p. 11.

⁵ Fr. Frank Sheedy, "Ask Me a Question," *Our Sunday Visitor* (May 11, 1986), p. 18. My underline.

⁶ Charles Bober, "Questions for Fr. Bober," *Pittsburgh Catholic* (June 6, 1986), p. 4.

⁷ Daniel E. Pilarczyk, "On Preaching Heresy," *America* (February 22, 1986), p. 135.

⁸ Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary* (New York: Crossroads, 1981), p. 465.

⁹ James S. Young, "The Divorced in the Parish Community Today," *New Catholic World* (November/December, 1985), pp. 272-275.

¹⁰ St. Anthony of Padua, Sermon, I, 226, in *The Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. 3 (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975), p. 1470.

¹¹ Ed. Genicot, S.I. et Ios. Salsmans, S.I., *Institutiones Theologiae Moralis*, Caput II § 6, 235, Notiones, editio decimaseptima, ed. A. Gortebecke, S.I. vol. I (Brussels: Uitgeverij Universum, N.V., 1951), pp. 184-185; Bernard Häring, C.S.S.R., *The Law of Christ*, vol. I, trans. by Edwin G. Kaiser, C.P.P.S. (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1963), p. 293.

¹² Pope Paul VI, "On the Regulation of Birth (*Humanae Vitae*)," No. 14 (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1968), p. 9.

¹³ Genicot, *Asserta*, I, p. 185; Häring, p. 293.