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Vatican office looks at challenges facing couples from different faiths

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Catholics need to know that marrying someone from a different Christian community or, even more so, from a different religion will create extra challenges in their marriage, but church leaders also must learn how to help people in mixed marriages meet those challenges, a Vatican official said.

"We can express a positive judgment only when the conditions are met for a family life where the values and purposes of marriage are respected, and where a common faith in God helps the spouses to weave together an authentic communion of life and love," said Bishop Jean Laffitte.

An interview with the bishop, secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Family, was posted on the council's website and summarized in an article in the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*.

He was commenting, in part, on a research project conducted by the Catholic bishops of Lebanon, which looked at the realities and challenges of marriages between Christians of different traditions and between a Catholic and a Muslim.

In an interview for the family council's website [1], Lebanese Cardinal Bechara Rai, the Maronite patriarch, said Lebanon "is a mixed society: in schools, universities, towns and cities. We all live together," and, naturally, that has given birth to many mixed marriages.

The study said there are positive experiences of marriages between a Christian and a Muslim in countries like Lebanon, where followers of the two faiths have lived side by side for centuries. The diversity of the country is one of its riches, which is reflected in the number of mixed marriages and strengthened by them as members of the communities grow closer, the study said. However, it also found that different understandings of the family, conjugal life and the roles of men and women can make Catholic-Muslim marriages a challenge.

Rai said in Lebanon, "the judgment about mixed marriages is positive," because they contribute to peaceful coexistence, including on a social and political level.

However, he also said, "we try not to encourage mixed marriages in order to preserve the faith and traditions" of the various communities, because studies show that often couples handle belonging to different faith communities by one or both of them limiting or eliminating their involvement in the community.

When such couples do decide to marry, the church must be there "to help them respect the religion of the other and the family and community of the other," the cardinal said. "It's important to educate each of the spouses to fully live his or her faith and to respect the faith of the other and of the children. In Lebanon, marriage is regulated according to the religious affiliation of the husband. Children under 18 years of age belong to the father's religion. Once they reach adulthood they can choose."

Commenting more on mixed marriages in general, Laffitte said social, cultural and political realties can have

such a huge impact on how the couples are able to live their marriages that it is the responsibility of national bishops' conferences to study the phenomenon and design pastoral responses.

However, he said, the church takes seriously the challenges mixed marriages pose. On a theological level, the Catholic church insists marriage is a sacrament that binds a couple together for life and calls them to have children and educate them in the Catholic faith. And on a practical level, it believes families should pray together, attend Mass together, and have a relationship in which the husband and wife are seen as equal partners in the marriage.

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Links:
[1] http://www.family.va/