Catholic interfaith marriage agreement termed milestone

By DOUG LeBLANC

Episcopal and Catholic bishops of Louisiana met at the Catholic Life Center Wednesday to sign an agreement on interfaith marriages that Baton Rouge Roman Catholic Bishop Stanley Ott hailed as a milestone.

In an ecumenical gesture the two churches gave official approval on a statewide level to mixed marriages that had occurred for years.

"This will free pastors from having to ask the bishop each time" there is a marriage between a Catholic and an Episcopalian, said Willis R. Henton, Episcopal Bishop of Western Louisiana.

Henton was joined in signing the statement by Philip M. Hannan, Roman Catholic Archbishop of New Orleans; and Catholic bishops Gerard L. Frey, Lafayette; Warren L. Boudreaux, Houma-Thibodaux; Jude Speyrer, Lake Charles; and William B. Friend, Alexandria-Shreveport.

James B. Brown, Episcopal Bishop of Louisiana, was represented at the signing by Charles Wolmesdorff, ecumenical officer of the diocese.

There are two dioceses of the Episcopal church in Louisiana, divided along the same boundaries as telephone area codes.

"Both the Episcopal Church and the Roman Catholic Church agree that Christian marriage is a sacrament of God's love and sign of the spiritual unity between Christ and His Church," said the statement.

The agreement said the churches' aims for "both parties of an Episcopal-Roman Catholic marriage" are that they:

• Continue to live devoutly within the tradition and discipline of their respective churches.
• Live and teach the apostolic faith within their churches.

There were signs in the document of unresolved questions.

"Until our churches achieve full sacramental sharing, Roman Catholic discipline requires the Roman Catholic party to promise sincerely (that everything possible will be done to see that the children of this marriage will be baptized and educated in the (Roman) Catholic Faith," the statement said, quoting canon law.

Despite those unresolved questions, the assembled bishops saw the agreement as a breakthrough, at least in Louisiana.

"Our two churches have been in dialogue for a number of years, both on a national and international level," Henton said.

Further steps are "very dependent on what happens on the international level," Henton said.

Hannan said the churches, however, implement what has been agreed on internationally.

"No dialogue is ever successful unless both parties are satisfied in," Hannan said. "This document simply advances the spirit of cooperation."

Statewide dialogue on the question of Catholic-Episcopal marriages started about three years ago, Speyrer said.

Agreements were reached in the Lake Charles and Alexandria areas, and rather than sign those, it was decided to develop them into statewide agreements, he said.

Such interfaith marriage agreements have been reached in Los Angeles, Albany, N.Y., and Mississippi, the bishops said.

They said other issues still are ripe for dialogue and resolution, such as the role of Christ in the Eucharist.

Boudreaux pointed out that Catholics and Lutherans had recently been discussing the role of faith and works in the life of a Christian, an issue that has divided the church drastically since the time of reformer Martin Luther. The centuries-long debate has been filled with potshots, he said.

"That's human nature," Boudreaux said. "It's because we're all sinners."