

Interchurch Families in the Vanguard of Ecumenical Discourse

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I am indebted to the work of Dr Neil Ormerod of Australia. The introduction to his recent book, "Revising the Church: An Experiment in Systematic-Historical Ecclesiology" was the instigation of a significant change in this paper's focus.

If we wish to look at how far we have come in our ecumenical discourse, we need do not more than to compare the 1928 papal encyclical *Mortalium Animos*, which warned Catholics against having anything to do with the movement for reunion,ⁱ with the wondrous reality of this conference.

While this movement is true within ecumenical circles in general, my focus will be interchurch families, that subset of mixed marriages in which both spouses seek to participate fully, to the extent they are able, in the lives of **both** their churches, and to raise their children within both.

Interchurch families have in many cases been at the forefront of changing ecumenical discourse. As we have discussed our differences and commonalities, we have not only talked of what is, but also what should be; not only what the Spirit has said and what has been formulated within Church polity, but what the Spirit is saying and what must yet come to be. And we have worked toward what must be, so that we might live our vocational unity.

Ian Walter, Diocesan Ecumenical Officer for the Anglican Diocese of Manchester, recognized this when, in 1990, he wrote of interchurch families that "It could be heart-rending to hear of the problems surrounding say, their weddings or the baptisms of their children. But what impressed and encouraged me was how they were not to be put off, how they did not take the easy way out and say "A plague on both your houses". Instead, convinced of God's will to reconcile his separated people, they strove to join both Christian traditions in their own lives."ⁱⁱ

Each church has its own doctrine, dogma and polity. Each church rightly calls its adherents to live by that doctrine and polity, as parameters for what it is to be part of the ecclesia.

Yet scripture proclaims, our churches believe and teach, and we experience and believe, that in marriage, two individuals join to become one body. While we still see two, there is now in reality *one*, just as while in the Eucharist we still see bread and wine, yet we believe there is now the invisible but totally real presence of Christ himself. Marriage is understood to create, to make real, a new situation, that of unity. How, then, shall we live that new situation of unity?

Allow me to propose a somewhat simplistic, but I believe apt basis for our discussion.

- Same-church couples live that new situation according to the very same ecclesial parameters that existed prior to their marriage. While they are now one, both

spouses share the same doctrine and polity. Nothing has changed in that regard.

- Mixed-marriage couples live the new situation of unity according to the parameters of the old situation of ecclesial division, while patiently waiting in hope (and in some cases diligently working) for the parameters of the new situation, that of unity, to develop between their churches.
- Interchurch couples, while aware that the parameters of the old situation of ecclesial division may impact heavily on them, still choose to live as much as possible according to the new situation of unity, while (perhaps impatiently) working to help develop the parameters of the new situation. We are, to quote Monsignor David Donnelly in his 1990 article *Mixed Marriages: The Revised Directory*, “here and now the people of *today’s Church*, not yesterday’s and not yet tomorrow’s, although we are affected by the former and can affect the latter.”ⁱⁱⁱ In signifying the new situation surrounded by the old, and working to bring the new into being, interchurch families become “signs and instruments”^{iv} of that yet-to-be-fully-revealed future.

This was recognized years ago. Ruth Reardon wrote of the formation of the Association of Interchurch Families in 1968:

“We seemed to be so unusual in being two practising Christians who wanted to conserve our links as a couple with both the churches that had nurtured us.”^v Continuing in the same article, she says “We were, too, very concerned to promote Christian unity, and to bring our churches together so far as we could. Thus the Association, besides being a support network, also became a voice **in** the churches. We tried to explain the kind of pastoral care we needed for the sake of our marriages, and also how we thought the churches could come together more readily if they worked at their unity in the way married couples have to work at theirs.”

Her husband Martin connected this with the call to ecclesial communion:

“If our churches are really to be motivated to move to the next stage, they need not just to remove obstacles, but to see that the other churches may have preserved some Christian gifts and values better than ours have, or discovered new gifts which they also would like to share. They need to move from defining their own identity as distinct from, and in some cases over against, that of other churches, to a common identity. This, after all, is what we experience in a good marriage. Husband and wife remain distinct individuals, with their own individual identity, but they gradually establish also a common shared family identity, and it is this shared family identity on which their children build, and into which they grow.”^{vi}

These statements have all been descriptive, or what John L Austin of Oxford called “constative”. I wish now to point to two specific statements which are descriptive, but have also what Austin called “performative” power, making real that which they signify.

In 1982, Pope John Paul II, speaking at York, said of interchurch families: “You live in your marriages the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity.” This statement was descriptive, in that it stated an existing reality. It was, however, also performative, in that it called forth within interchurch families that deep, integral and indeed essential reality of who we are before God.

The second is by Pope Benedict XVI, speaking in Warsaw in May 2006, when he described interchurch families as “a practical laboratory of Christian unity.” As with the statement by John Paul II, it was descriptive of our reality. But it, too, was performative, in that it caused us, and hopefully our churches, both to recognize ourselves in those words, and to conscientiously take on our reality as *ecclesia domestica*, places and spaces where the unity of Christians is being realized in human terms before our very eyes, as a labour of unitive and procreative love. The interchurch family is

“a microcosm of the whole movement for promoting Christian unity... In it things happen that cannot yet happen on the scale of the church communities as a whole. But what happens in laboratories and workshops is intended to have a larger reference, to show what *could* happen more widely. For this to be effective, however, the wider communities must trust the process and attend to it in both a supportive and a constructively critical way.”^{vii}

This is not to say that all is perfect in the world of Christian unity as lived in interchurch families. As Ormerod states so succinctly, “While the churches may be united eschatologically, in the here and now they are divided on many scores, and it would be methodologically unsound not to recognize this.”^{viii} This applies as well to the *ecclesia domestica* of interchurch families. We continue, as Pope Francis has said, both within our families and with our churches, to have to say at times “Please”, “Thank you”, and “Sorry”. But regardless of any flaws, this laboratory of Christian unity exists and continues. It is practical and empirical. The dialectic which takes place within that laboratory, and which should take place between that laboratory and the churches, is critical, always searching, challenging, calling. This laboratory is also normative, in that it speaks not only of what is, but also of what should be. And it is evaluative. Together as Church we can determine whether the changes evidenced in this laboratory contribute to the purpose of the Church, “an incremental realization of the kingdom”.^{ix}

It is particularly in that sense of lived reality that I say interchurch families are not only in the vanguard of ecumenical discourse, but also an excellent resource for ecclesiological exploration. We did not set out to do this. We fell in love. And everything else, any gift that we are or may become, flows from that.

Paulist priest Tom Ryan says “Interchurch families stand at the very heart of the conversion which ecumenism requires. ... they put the truths of their faith in order, so as to unite around a central core of belief, accepting a certain diversity at the periphery. They are a moving force because they already live as reconciled Christians. Everything that is gained by them and for them serves the whole Church.”^x

We have also learned something of vital importance within our interchurch families. Jesus says it is better to give than to receive. But we have learned that authentic receptivity is itself a gift. In marriage, I give myself to my wife Fenella who is a deeply faithful Anglican, yes. But it is her reception of me, receiving me *as I am*, and

encouraging me to be faithfully who I am as a Catholic, which provides me the security and safety to become the person I am called to become. In her reception of me, she becomes for me the incarnational call of Christ to conversion.

It is important that our churches begin to recognize that it is not only what they have to offer each other that is important. Their capacity to receive and love the other *as that church is* will also be the key element in calling both churches to become what God calls them to become.

I therefore invite and encourage you, as you go home to your colleges, congregations and churches, to do several things. Firstly, recognize the mixed marriages in your midst, not as problematic, but as potential gift from God for the unity of the Church. Secondly, welcome them into your community specifically as mixed marriages. Thirdly, and I recognize this is for many counter-intuitive, encourage both spouses in such marriages to explore, nurture, and share that “pearl of great price” that each spouse brings to their marriage in the form of their respective Christian tradition. As they do so, and begin to feel *safe* in doing so, they are likely to become laboratories of Christian unity. Fourthly, ask yourself how the gift of unity that is their *ecclesia domestica*, to whatever extent they feel they can live it out, can be incorporated into the larger *ecclesia* that is your congregation, your church. And finally, ask yourself what needs to change within your congregation or church, while remaining faithful to your core doctrine, so that their gift of ecclesial unity may be fully realized within you. As you do so, you will, as Fr Rene Beaupere of France said in 1996, “integrate these 'islands of reconciliation' where they appear into the life of the churches at the structural level too”^{xi}.

The hockey great, Wayne Gretzky, was once described as “small but agile”. I suggest that had he been described as “agile but small”, he would today be working in an office or a factory.

If you take nothing else away from all the speakers you hear at this conference, I ask that you take a recognition that we as individuals, as families and as churches have grown, well beyond *Mortalium Animos* in our self-understanding of who we are as brothers and sisters before God. It is my hope and prayer that we no longer speak of our unity as real but imperfect. Rather, as evidenced in a variety of areas, and concretely and immediately in the lives of interchurch families, we have grown over time into a self-understanding where we can say, with confidence, that our unity as Christians is “imperfect, but real”.

Return to [Conference Panel index](#)

ⁱ Cf Ruth Reardon, *A Source of Joy: Ut Unum Sint and interchurch families*, Interchurch Families Journal, Vol 4, #1, January 1996, P 4. <http://interchurchfamilies.org/journal/pdf/1996V04N01January.pdf#page=4> Accessed 22 May 2014

ⁱⁱ Ian Walter, *Mixed Marriages Spearhead the Interchurch Process*, Interchurch Families Journal, Summer, 1990 <http://interchurchfamilies.org/journal/n23p04a.html>, accessed 7 May 2014

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Mgr David Donnelly, *Mixed Marriages: The Revised Directory*” Interchurch Families Journal, Summer 1990. <http://interchurchfamilies.org/journal/n23p05.html>. Accessed 7 May 2014
- ^{iv} Cf Walter Cardinal Kasper, *A Message Addressed By Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, to the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families*, Interchurch Families Journal, Vol 12 # 1, January 2004, P 3. <http://interchurchfamilies.org/journal/pdf/2004V12N01January.pdf#page=3>, accessed 8 June 2014
- ^v Ruth Reardon, *A Short history of the Association of Interchurch Families*, published in Interchurch Families Issues and Reflections, October 2007, <http://interchurchfamilies.org/ifir/2007/ifir07-200710reardon.pdf>, accessed 20 May 2014.
- ^{vi} Martin Reardon, *Why? What? And How?* Address at Swanwick Annual gathering, 2001, http://interchurchfamilies.org/confer/aife/swanwick2001/m_reardon.html accessed 20 May 2014
- ^{vii} Ruth Reardon, *Pope Benedict XVI on Interchurch Families: “laboratories of unity”*, in *One in Christ*, vol.41, no.2, April 2006, pp.85-87.
- ^{viii} Neil Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic-Historical Ecclesiology* (Kindle Location 185). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.
- ^{ix} Cf Neil Ormerod, *Re-Visioning*, Location 234.
- ^x Tom Ryan CSP, *Interchurch Families: Sign and Summons*, Interchurch Families Journal, Vol 10, #2, p7, <http://interchurchfamilies.org/journal/pdf/2002V10N02Summer.pdf#page=7>, access 26 May 2014
- ^{xi} Rene Beupere OP, *Foyers Mixtes Chretien*, no 115, Jan-March 1997, cited in *Interchurch Families Journal*, Vol 5 #2, p 12. <http://interchurchfamilies.org/journal/pdf/1997V05N02Summer.pdf#page=12>, accessed 8 June 2014