

INTERCHURCH FAMILIES AS DOMESTIC CHURCH: THE IMPROBABLE GRACE

They gather for Eucharist in both their churches, singing hymns such as “One Bread, One Body, One Lord of all ...”. They grow in their marriage relationship and raise their children according to Jesus’ great commandment, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (Jn 13,34). Theirs, too, are “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties”¹ of today’s Christian people.

They stand shoulder to shoulder to serve at soup kitchens and shelters, feeding the homeless, affirming human dignity and social justice. They serve parishes and congregations as catechists, liturgical ministers, youth ministers – some even serve on the vestry or parish council (or analogous body) of one another’s church. In their homes they cultivate a Christian ethos of prayer, mutual respect, forgiveness, shared meals, hospitality, compassion, and a spirituality that strives to integrate both the personal and communal. Unselfish love engenders ongoing gift exchanges in the home. They publicly engage their faith in dialogue with cultural, social, and political realities. They make palpable in their homes the visible unity of Christians which their respective churches scandalously lack. They recall continuously the sacred charge given at their marriage liturgy: “What God has joined, men [sic] must not divide”².

“They” are the conscientious interchurch married couples and their children – a significant minority among the broad category of religiously “mixed marriage” in our pluralistic society. They pioneer an ecumenical way-of-life that coincides (perhaps unexpectedly) with Roman Catholic teaching on the “domestic church”³. By word and example, such parents are their children’s first teachers of faith and values. Children, too, witness their maturing faith by intergenerational evangelization of parents. Each family member strives to become a virtuoso of unselfish love within *la vie provisoire* of the household where Christ’s love takes root, is first tested, and continually becomes refined.

I. INTERCHURCH FAMILIES IN THE USA:

AUTHENTICALLY INTERCHURCH MARRIAGE AND FAMILY VERSUS *NOMINALLY* INTERCHURCH RELATIONSHIPS

Over the past twenty-five years Interchurch Families have begun to emerge and be well-received in numerous parishes and congregations in the United States of America. Most European countries developed ministries and advocacy groups for interchurch families long before us. European nations’ religious demographics, which typically report two or three major church traditions and related mixed marriage patterns, contrast sharply with patterns in the USA. We find a virtual smorgasbord of fifteen to twenty Christian denominations and independent

¹*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World [Gaudium et spes]*, no. 1 in W. M. ABBOTT (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, Baltimore, MD, The America Press, 1966, p. 200.

² *The Rite of Marriage*, New York, NY, Catholic Book Publishing, 1970. Analogous formulas are found in the ritual books of other Christian churches.

³ *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium]*, no. 11, in ABBOTT (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 29.

churches in any mid-size city. Our long history of religious liberty and the voluntary principle account for the splintering off into multiple new Christian denominations or autonomous Protestant congregations and the more recent growth of independent mega-churches. This data combines with research indicating a remarkably fluid church membership. Almost half of adult Protestants in the USA have transferred to another church (the vast majority, to another Protestant church⁴). One in ten of those born Catholic no longer affiliates with this church (and contemporary studies monitor a hemorrhaging of Catholics from participation in parish life, a fact particularly evident in declining attendance at Sunday Mass)⁵. Add the phenomenon that forty to fifty percent of Catholics in our large USA dioceses are entering what the Catholic Church designates as a religiously mixed marriage. In our nation, the ecumenical task has grown ever more complex.

For over thirty years I and other scholars have employed a definition that our research and pastoral experience confirm: Interchurch marriage “(1) joins in marriage two baptized Christians from different [church] traditions, (2) each spouse participates actively in her or his particular church, and to various degrees in one another’s church, and (3) each spouse takes an active, conscientious role in the religious education of [their] children”⁶. This definition makes an explicit effort to distinguish *authentically* interchurch marriage and family life from *nominally* “interchurch” relationships. The generic, religiously “mixed marriage” between two Christians encompasses a wide band on the spectrum of marriages in the USA. In numerous, religiously indifferent types of mixed marriages one spouse usually drops out of the church and children receive religious education from only one parent. In a worse case when both parents drop out of the church, a child’s religious education is completely neglected. This latter, sad fact has led to the neologism of baptized unbelievers to identify children who were baptized as nominal Christians but lacked any substantive religious education because the family discontinued active church participation.

Let me link this analysis with a development in the USA that I find (as I will explain momentarily) particularly vexing. Some of you may be familiar with the 1999 research project that resulted in the publication *Ministry to Interchurch Marriages: A National Study*. It introduced unwarranted ambiguity by its least-common-denominator definition: “This study selects the term interchurch marriage [sic] ... in a broad sense which embraces every marriage in which the spouses belong, *however loosely*, to two different denominations”⁷. In fact, those who were merely nominal Christians were included in the USA national study. In effect, that 1999 research co-opted the pre-existing, received meaning and context of understanding for interchurch marriage. The study arbitrarily redefined interchurch marriage to include every mixed

⁴ THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE, *Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.*, 27.04.2009, available from <http://pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux.aspx>; accessed 21.07.2011.

⁵ P. STEINFELS, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2005. Cf. the results of the 2009 research report published at LeMoyne College: *Le Moyne College/Zogby Contemporary Catholic Trends Poll*, 2009, available from <http://www.lemoyne.edu/CENTERSOFEXCELLENCE/CATHOLICTRENDS/LATESTPOLL/tabid/548/Default.aspx>; accessed 21.07.2011.

⁶ G. KILCOURSE, *Double Belonging: Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*, New York, NY, Paulist, 1992.

⁷ *Ministry to Interchurch Marriages: A National Study*, Omaha, NE: Creighton University, 1999, p. 11 (emphasis added).

marriage involving spouses who belong, *however loosely*, to two different denominations. To make these two distinct realities synonymous ignores three decades of ecumenical pastoral practice, research, and scholarly literature to the contrary.

The methodology of *Ministry to Interchurch Marriages: A National Study* then yielded overreaching and misleading conclusions such as: (A) Overall interchurch respondents placed less emphasis on religion in raising children than did same-church and interchurch couples who changed to same-church respondents; and (B) Over three-quarters of married interchurch respondents were raising their children exclusively in one parent's church⁸. No doubt for statistical purposes (and to secure significant external funding) an expansive pool of subjects for research proved desirable, perhaps even necessary. However, the project's thin definition of "interchurch marriage" compromised its integrity. Arbitrarily interjecting a new, loose definition eclipsed the lived realities and distorted the case to be made concerning conscientious and authentically interchurch marriages and families as "domestic church".

In the interest of full disclosure, I report that I was one of the consultants for the three year project that resulted in the 1999 USA national study. No sooner was the novel definition proposed, however, than I voiced ongoing concern and reservations.

II. THE REGRETTABLE ABSENCE OF PASTORAL CARE FOR INTERCHURCH FAMILIES IN THE 2009 PASTORAL LETTER OF THE USCCB

In November 2004 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) launched a National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage which led to the drafting of their November 2009 pastoral letter. During the interval the Conference of Bishops developed an elaborate website, including texts of papers presented by selected scholars and pastoral ministers at regional consultations. The American Association of Interchurch Families (AAIF), our USA organization, made overtures to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) concerning the place of interchurch families in their pastoral initiative; I visited the director of the USCCB's Family Ministry office in Washington, DC to discuss AAIF concerns and to emphasize the unique identity of an interchurch family as distinct from the broader, generic nomenclature of religiously "mixed marriages." The AAIF Co-Chairs, an interchurch couple, invited the director of the bishops' then-Committee on Marriage, a layman, to be the plenary speaker at our 2006 biennial AAIF national conference in Virginia. He promised to take interchurch families' concerns to the drafting committee of bishops and staff – and I have confidence that he did so.

When the penultimate draft of the pastoral letter was circulated shortly before the November, 2009 USCCB meeting, I read it with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. Its length (57 typewritten pages) surprised me; I was hoping for something in length and pastoral tone comparable to Paul's *Letter to Philemon*. Instead, the style and tone of our bishops' letter devotes the largest portion of "Part One: Marriage in the Order of Creation – *The Natural Institution of Marriage*" to an eleven-page section entitled, "Fundamental Challenges to the Nature and Purposes of Marriage". The letter shifts next to "Part Two: Marriage in the Order of the New

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8, 116-117, 120, 139-143.

Creation – *The Sacrament of Matrimony*” with an immediate focus upon Original Sin⁹. I was reminded of Pope John XXIII’s opening speech at the Second Vatican Council, where he boldly distanced himself and the ecumenical council from “those prophets of gloom who are always forecasting disaster”¹⁰ during a similar era of hierarchical pessimism.

Early in the bishops’ text the reader encounters a perplexing shift of emphasis: “We intend this pastoral letter to be a theological and doctrinal foundation”¹¹. To what extent does such equivocation disorient readers? Do we really have a *pastoral* letter? Why has the pastoral letter genre in the USA, so richly represented by the USCCB’s *Economic Justice for All* (1983) and *The Challenge of Peace* (1986) – carefully distinguishing between principles and their application in concrete, particular cases – so abruptly ended? In *The Challenge of Peace* the USCCB speaks about how they “use principles of Catholic moral teaching and apply them to specific contemporary issues”. They point out that the bishops at Vatican II opened the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) with a guideline on how to relate principles to concrete issues. In Part I, the Church develops its teaching on human existence, on the world which is the context enveloping human existence, and on human relationships with others. In Part II, the Church gives closer consideration to various aspects of modern life and human society; they then give special consideration to questions and problems “of greater urgency.” The bishops note their use of the conciliar guideline in *The Challenge of Peace*:

We do not intend that our treatment of each of these issues carry the same moral authority as our statement of universal moral principles and formal Church teaching. Indeed, we stress here at the beginning that not every statement in this letter has the same moral authority. At times we reassert universally binding moral principles (e.g., non-combatant immunity and proportionality). At still other times we reaffirm statements of recent popes and the teaching of Vatican II. Again, at other times we apply moral principles to specific cases. When making applications of these principles, we realize – and we wish readers to recognize – that prudential judgments are involved based on specific circumstances which can change or which can be interpreted differently by people of good will (e.g., the treatment of ‘no first use’). However, the moral judgments that we make in specific cases, while not binding in conscience, are to be given serious attention ... Some elements have a permanent value; others, only a transitory one. Consequently, the constitution must be interpreted according to the general norms of theological interpretation¹².

In a similar way, the 1986 USCCB pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*, distinguishes between principles and their application:

We believe that the recommendations in our letter are reasonable and balanced. In analyzing the economy, we reject ideological extremes and start from the fact that ours is a ‘mixed’ economy, the product of a long history of reform and adjustment. We know that some of our specific recommendations are controversial. As bishops, we do not claim to make these prudential

⁹ *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, Washington, DC, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009, 1.

¹⁰ JOHN XXIII, *Opening Speech to the Second Vatican Council* [11.10.1962], in Abbott (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, 710-719, p. 711.

¹¹ *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, 4.

¹² See *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, 03.05.1983, available from <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/TheChallengeofPeace.pdf>, nos. 8-10; accessed 21.07.2011

judgments with the same kind of authority that marks our declarations of principle. But, we feel obliged to teach by example how Christians can undertake concrete analysis and make specific judgments on economic issues. The Church's teachings cannot be left at the level of appealing generalities¹³.

Once again, early in the USCCB's 2009 pastoral letter on Marriage, the document constricts (and arguably precludes) an engaging pastoral tone in the bishops' text:

Our pastoral letter presents those beliefs and teachings of the Catholic Church – informed by human reason and enlightened by Divine Revelation – that summarize and express God's plan for marriage. This divine plan, like the gift of marriage itself, is something we receive, not something we construct or change to fit our purposes¹⁴.

Where is the rich Catholic understanding of tradition as a living, developing reality? Where is the *pastoral* voice? What attention is given to the church's duty to scrutinize "the signs of the times" and to interpret new realities in Christian marriage (such as the increasing frequency of both interchurch marriage and religiously mixed marriage) in the light of the gospel, the "good news"¹⁵?

Yves M. Congar, O.P. is widely recognized as the foremost ecumenical *peritus* at the Second Vatican Council. The ecclesiological implications of his theological acumen are visible in contributions to an understanding of tradition. Congar offers a fuller understanding of the process of reception than we find in the USCCB's 2009 pastoral letter. He reminds us:

If faith, the initial reality of salvation, is transmitted, it must also be received, actively received. 'Actively', that is, there exists a subject who receives not by merely a transmission followed by a passive, mechanical reception; it entails the making present in a human consciousness of a saving truth"¹⁶.

Congar emphasizes that the understanding of God's will and obedience to its requirements are exhibited to us over centuries of gradually unfolding development in the fidelity of God's people. Such fidelity presupposes "a particular actualization, by the Holy Spirit, of what was delivered initially, an actualization in response to the fully historical character of moments successively lived out." Congar goes on to make a paramount distinction:

This is not the mere playback of the message recorded in apostolic times, but an historical life, as much one of contemplation and praise as of constant struggle against error, of delimitation of the truth, of missionary endeavors and of response to the demands of the times. All this is done by the Holy Spirit ... Revelation is complete, but there is a 'Spirit of wisdom and revelation' who enables men to live by it and to grasp its meaning more fully. Thus tradition is development as well as transmission"¹⁷.

¹³See *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 1983, available from http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx, no. 20; accessed 21.07.2011

¹⁴ *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, 4.

¹⁵ *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World [Gaudium et spes]*, no. 4.

¹⁶ YVES M. CONGAR, *Tradition and Traditions* (New York, NY, Macmillan, 1967), p. 253.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 266. The Second Vatican Council's speaks in a compelling manner about tradition as a living, developing reality in its Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), no. 8: "This tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study

The lengthy section of Part I of the bishops' letter, identifying "Fundamental Challenges to the Nature and Purposes of Marriage", suggests a hermeneutic that dominates the bishops' letter. It identifies four primary challenges: contraception, same-sex unions, divorce and co-habitation. Pastors have confided to me that the reception of this list is problematic (even marginal) concerning marriage as lived by their active parishioners. Does the bishops' agenda to promote Natural Family Planning (as an alternative to contraception) and to oppose growing political efforts within our pluralistic society to legalize same-sex unions, lead them, in effect, to ignore specific and authentic *pastoral* needs in the lives of married couples? Why are the unique identity and real gifts of authentically interchurch families subordinated or even denied by marginalizing them under the broader generic category of religiously "mixed marriages"?

Let me turn to the absence of pastoral care for interchurch marriage and family life as such an instance of negligence. Five pages in the text deal explicitly with "The Domestic Church", including mention of "mixed marriages". *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* states: "The family is called a 'domestic church' because it is a small communion of persons that draws its *sustenance* from the larger communion of the Body of Christ, the Church, and also reflects the life of the Church so as to provide a kind of summary of it"¹⁸. The lack of reciprocity between the reality of the church as the larger communion of Christ's Body and the reality of the family as domestic church is noteworthy. What sustenance does the church receive from domestic churches when they merely "reflect" the life of the larger Church but are not recognized as contributing new insights and warranting developments born of their experience as faith-filled Christian spouses?

The text turns to John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio* (no. 21) quoting: "The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason ... it can and should be called a *domestic church*"¹⁹. The bishops' letter reaffirms that, "[e]very marriage between Christians gives rise to a domestic church" – only to turn immediately and idealize marriages between two Catholics because they "most fully reflect the life of the Church, because only Catholic couples can fully participate in the sacraments of the Church, including the Eucharist"²⁰. A footnote references Canon 844 and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity's 1993 *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*. However, the bishops omit any direct mention or discussion of the pastoral possibility by way of "exception" for other baptized Christians to participate in Eucharistic communion. The directory is not a minor or marginal ecclesial document; it was approved by His Holiness Pope John Paul II on March 25, 1993 and promulgated under the signatures of Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, President of the PCPCU, and Bishop Pierre Duprey, secretary of the PCPCU.

made by believers who treasure these things in their hearts (cf. Lk. 2:19, 51), through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth. For, as the centuries succeed one another, the Christian constantly moves forward toward the fullness of truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her", Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, no. 8, in W.M. ABBOTT (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 116

¹⁸ *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, 40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

This lacuna constitutes a major deficiency. Is it not ecumenically disingenuous to preclude an honest discussion of those very real pastoral possibilities that touch so intimately the lives of authentically interchurch families²¹? Are the bishops not prejudicial (by their very silence on this pastoral question) toward the interchurch family, relegating them to a second-class status as domestic church?

The language of the PCPCU's 1993 *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*²² takes into account both canonical and conciliar sources. It is also pastoral in tone where appropriate, such as no. 129: "... [The Catholic Church] also recognizes that in certain circumstances, by way of exception, and under certain conditions, access to these sacraments [Eucharistic Communion, Penance, and Anointing of the Sick] may be permitted and even commended, for Christians of other Churches and ecclesial Communities". In nos. 143-160 entitled "Mixed Marriages", the 1993 directory clearly defines the conditions under which "Eucharistic sharing can only be exceptional and in each case the norms stated above concerning the admission of a non-Catholic Christian to Eucharistic communion...must be observed" (160). Those conditions are: "(1) that the person be unable to have recourse for the sacrament desired to a minister of his or her own Church or ecclesial Community, (2) ask for the sacrament of his or her own initiative [thus removing the possibility of coercion], (3) manifest Catholic faith in this sacrament (4) and be properly disposed" (no. 131).

Nowhere in the USCCB's *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* is there any explicit acknowledgement or pastoral reflection upon these conditions or their pastoral application to the life of the baptized person who is a spouse or child within an interchurch marriage. It is important to note the 1993 directory, no. 130, when it states: "Catholic ministers will judge individual cases and administer these sacraments only in accord with these established [Episcopal Conference] norms, where they exist. Otherwise they will judge according to the norms of this Directory".

Quoting from *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the bishops repeat that the domestic church receives its "strength and life by participating in the life and worship of the larger Church". The domestic church "exercise[s] the *priesthood of the baptized* in a privileged way 'by the reception of the sacraments ...". The bishops add: "Moreover, since it is Christ's presence within the family that truly makes it a domestic church, their participation in the Eucharist, especially the Sunday Eucharist, is particularly important"²³. From an ecumenical perspective, this leaves a genuine conundrum for conscientious, authentically interchurch families. Again, the bishops tell us that spouses in a mixed marriage "do not ordinarily share the Eucharist"; yet the bishops fail to address how such spouses and their children might, by way of an extraordinary exception, receive communion – information that is explicitly detailed in the 1993 ecumenical directory which the bishops reference in a footnote but fail to articulate, to develop, or to reflect upon with a pastoral voice that one has a right to expect in the twenty-first century.

²¹ For a compelling discussion grounded in theological and canonical understanding see the comprehensive work of G. RUYSSSEN, *Eucharistie et oecumenisme* (Paris, Cerf, 2008) and the two-part English series derived from his book, *Mixed Marriages and Sharing in the Eucharist: Universal Catholic Norms and Some Particular Norms in One in Christ* 43 (2009), no. 1, 75-97 and 43 (2009), no. 2, 75-98.

²² London: Catholic Truth Society, 1993.

²³ *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, 40-41.

The concluding five paragraphs of the five-page section “The Family as Domestic Church” in *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* address specifically “mixed marriages” by focusing upon “challenges” encountered in “mixed marriages,” e.g., a parent’s difficulty in sharing faith with children. “Mixed marriages”, state the bishops, are limited to expressing their common baptism and the dynamism of grace through spiritual ecumenism²⁴. We face again a conundrum for the interchurch family as domestic church: “Although Christian spouses in a mixed marriage ... do not ordinarily share the Eucharist, they are called to witness the universality of God’s love which overcomes all division”²⁵. The scandal of divided Christians stands and the fuller witness of the authentically interchurch family is ignored or, even worse, frustrated. The bishops remain silent on the real, albeit extraordinary, possibility of Eucharistic sharing by way of “exception” which is explicitly envisioned and addressed in the 1993 ecumenical directory. Is it any wonder that an interchurch family might question whether the bishops’ silence is a form of pastoral malpractice?

A woman I have admired over several decades for her family’s steadfast interchurch identity voices this urgent pastoral issue with the caliber of theological and pastoral insight that is absent in the USCCB’s letter:

I think there is a close relationship between sexual intercourse and Eucharistic sharing – both are ways of expressing in bodily terms the relationship of love in God to which we are called in marriage. This being together at the Eucharist is as much the expression of our married unity in Christ as is our sexual union. This experience of being together at the Eucharist over many years brought us to a profound longing to share communion as a couple. ... After all, marriage is about living invisible realities in visible signs – and so is the church.

Her lived experience manifests in a compelling manner the sacramentality of Marriage and Eucharist (in addition to Baptism) that resonates with the reality of the domestic church. She and her husband approach the Eucharist with the same sense of the sacred and of personal integrity that they bring to their human sexuality. Hers is a vivid illustration of the living tradition which the Second Vatican Council pointed out in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation*, “a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down”. Her believing, contemplation, and study shows us how the apostolic tradition grows and develops, how that process even happens among the laity who, like Mary, as the council emphasized, “treasure these things in their hearts (cf. Lk. 2:19, 51)”²⁶.

The Vatican’s 1993 ecumenical directory teaches us, that “[a]ll those engaged in pastoral work will be faithful to the holy and living Tradition which is a source of initiative within the Church. They should be able to evaluate and welcome truth wherever it is found. ‘All truth, by whomsoever it is spoken, is of the Holy Spirit’”²⁷. The Second Vatican Council’s *Decree on Ecumenism* alerts us not to accuse those who have been born into Protestant and Eastern Orthodox communities of the sin of separation but to embrace them with respect and affection²⁸.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

²⁶ *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation [Dei verbum]*, no. 8, in W. M. ABBOTT (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 116.

²⁷ *Directory*, no. 57.

²⁸ *Decree on Ecumenism [Unitas Redintegratio]*, no. 3, in W. M. Abbott (ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 345.

The decree goes on to remind us, “Whatever is truly Christian never conflicts with the genuine interests of the faith; indeed, it can only result in more ample realization of the very mystery of Christ and the Church²⁹”. Such Catholic teaching is virtually eclipsed in the USCCB’s “pastoral” letter.

The dynamism of grace in Christian life follows a trajectory from Baptism to Eucharist. Baptized persons need the Eucharist. Do our bishops appear “tone deaf” when it comes to understanding *authentically* interchurch families as a full expression of the domestic church? I am reminded of the poet’s insight: “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood is Incarnation³⁰”. When two baptized spouses become one flesh this same gift becomes the reality the poet metaphorically calls the dance, “the still point of the turning world”³¹. These families who stand marginalized by *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* are “the gift half understood” – improbable for the “tone deaf” but an unmistakable grace for those who have ears to hear and to fathom the parable of their lives as domestic church.

A local couple returned from a trip to France last autumn. They brought a copy of the participation sheet from the Sunday Eucharist at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris. It included a stunningly concise *pastoral* articulation of the Catholic Church’s teaching on Eucharistic sharing by way of exception: “The bread distributed during Mass has a high significance for Christians: it is the body of Christ, their Lord and God. If you do not share our faith in the living presence of Christ in the Eucharistic bread, we ask you not to join your neighbors at communion time”.

III. TOWARDS A MORE COLLABORATIVE, ECUMENICAL, AND INCLUSIVE MINISTRY TO INTERCHURCH MARRIAGES

Like every ecumenist, I embrace the ambition to be inclusive of every “mixed marriage” couple so that they might mature to an authentically interchurch family identity. We have an enormous educational task in supporting religiously mixed marriages even before couples are engaged. The USCCB’s recent letter, in effect, conflates authentically interchurch marriages with mixed marriages. The USCCB has quoted from *Ministry to Interchurch Marriages: A National Study*. That project’s arbitrary re-definition of “interchurch marriage”, however, misleads by misconstruing the facts of the matter. So the bishops can embrace selected data from that study: “IC [interchurch] respondents reported the highest overall percentage of divorce (20%)”; “On average, married IC respondents emphasized religion in raising children less than married all-SC [same-church] respondents. The large majority (77.6%) of married IC respondents was raising their children exclusively in one partner’s church”. Such assertions³² may alarm bishops who are unaware of this 1999 project’s thin definition of interchurch marriage and the resulting distortions; those assertions contribute to prejudice against authentically interchurch marriage and family life.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 4 (p. 349).

³⁰ T.S. ELIOT, *The Dry Salvages*, line 215, in IDEM, *Four Quartets*, New York, NY, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943, p. 44.

³¹ T.S. ELIOT, *Burnt Norton*, line 62, in *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³² *Ministry to Interchurch Marriages*, pp. 7-8, 142-143.

However, tucked into *Ministry to Interchurch Marriages* is a subtle detail, easily discounted or ignored (even by that study's authors and editors): "A small minority [of interchurch respondents] (12%) was raising [children] in both churches". This is the same segment of interchurch respondents in the study identified with a "high religiosity" score: each spouse participates in his/her church, and to varying degrees in one another's church and both spouses are actively involved in the religious education of their children³³. Such *authentically* interchurch couples are indeed a smaller segment of all religiously "mixed marriages". We hope their tribe will increase and that more of the nominally religious "mixed marriages" (in which one or both spouses do not participate in the church and their children are characterized as baptized unbelievers without religious education) will mature and achieve truly interchurch marriage status!

Until an interchurch family is recognized as a first-class domestic church, these persons will be bundled with all religiously "mixed marriages", marginalized, and even eclipsed from consciousness. Catholic bishops have continually insisted that we not make any category of persons or occasions when following the directives of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity's 1993 ecumenical directory, which address the extraordinary possibility for other Christians to share Eucharistic communion by way of exception. These same bishops ironically have made such a "category" of "mixed marriages" in *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* and, *a fortiori*, by their silence have implied that the authentically interchurch family living as a true domestic church is, nonetheless, excluded because the spouses and their children are to be considered no differently than a religiously mixed marriage in which spouses belong, no matter how loosely (even nominally) to two different denominations.

Despite the disappointing alienation encountered by interchurch married couples and their families who read *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, one hopes that the bishops who "pledge our collaboration with all who seek to create a vibrant culture of marriage rooted in God's plan for the good of humanity" are honestly open to a more collaborative, diverse, ecumenical, and inclusive future as the hallmark of their ongoing commitment to Marriage in the mission of the USCCB. Their comments at the conclusion of the letter describe a specific ministry that "invites and includes the gifts of many, beginning with married couples themselves and welcoming also the service and witness offered by ordained ministers and by women and men in consecrated life"³⁴. Recognizing the role of ordained ministers in other churches, ecclesial communities, and denominations in the United States of America is essential to the integrity and fruitfulness of interchurch marriage and family life. As of this writing, however, a mid-November 2009 letter from the AAIF Co-Chairs to the bishops offering collaboration has not been reciprocated with a response.

May we embrace the overarching Catholic pastoral principle in the church's ministry to authentically interchurch couples and families: "...*prae oculis habita salute animarum, quae in Ecclesia suprema semper lex esse debet*"³⁵. If we progress with the ecumenical trust and faith found in the homes of interchurch families who live as domestic churches, then the renewal of a

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan*, 58.

³⁵ *Code of Canon Law*, Washington, DC, Canon Law Society of America, p. 629 (can. 1752). Translation: "... Having before one's eyes the salvation of souls, which is always the supreme law of the Church".

broader ecumenical marriage ministry may give rise to a transforming common witness among our divided churches. The Christian mystery centers upon how what is rejected as improbable ironically becomes the cornerstone. In the midst of our contemporary ecumenical impasse, the echo of Jesus' prayer resounds with a new urgency: "I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (Jn 17,20).

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THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD AND
LOCAL HOUSEHOLDS

REVISITING THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

THOMAS KNIEPS-PORT LE ROI – GERARD MANNION – PETER DE MEY



Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi
Gerard Mannion
Peter De Mey (eds.)

The Household of God and Local Households Revisiting the Domestic Church

In the growing body of theological and spiritual literature on the family over recent years there is hardly any publication that does not explicitly refer to the “domestic church”. In spite of this broad interest, however, the concept itself today still remains

unclear. Where the model of the “church in miniature” is not used to further align the family with the hierarchical ecclesiastical institution, it simply serves as a pious metaphor to instil some spiritual dignity to the Christian household. Likewise, theological treatises insist that the church is not a family and so the domestic church has remained a marginal and exotic note in ecclesiology as well. One may wonder, however, whether small communities, as families are, have indeed so little to tell the “new family of God” to which Christ has called his disciples to belong. Can the churches afford to neglect the specific competences that families have when it comes to serving and sharing with each other, to dealing with differences and otherness of its members (be they related to gender, age, ethnicity, or religious conviction), and to encountering God in ordinary life with its everyday ties, duties and responsibilities? This volume is intended to critically revisit the notion of domestic church and to explore both its pitfalls and potential for the life of the churches and of families.

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