

## **Response to the 2015 Synod on the Family from the Interchurch Families International Network**

*The Interchurch Families International Network (IFIN) gives a voice to interchurch families at global level, bringing together associations and groups of interchurch families from different parts of the world. Following the Second Vatican Council, with its more positive attitude towards mixed marriages, national and regional groups and associations began to come together in many European countries, beginning in the 1960s (France, Italy, Switzerland, England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany and Austria), and later developed also in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. At a multi-lingual world gathering held at Rome in 2003 representatives came from eleven different countries and three continents; it adopted the paper Interchurch Families and Christian Unity, which is still the most comprehensive statement in brief format of the self-understanding of interchurch families, the contribution they feel they can make to Christian unity, and the kind of pastoral understanding they need if they are to fulfil their potential (available in English, French, German and Italian at <http://www.interchurchfamilies.org/rome-document/rome-document>). IFIN is also in touch with interchurch couples and families in countries where groups and associations do not yet exist, including Africa.*

### **SUMMARY OF THE IFIN RESPONSE**

#### **I. Mixed and interreligious families**

This submission to the Synod suggests that the *Instrumentum Laboris* should devote a *special section with a clear heading* to mixed (Christian) and interreligious families (1).

It notes that marriages with ‘disparity of cult’ are now called ‘interreligious marriages’, and suggests that more specific terminology should be given to ‘mixed marriages’ (between baptised Christians), e.g. ‘interchurch marriages’ in English, and similar expressions which have gained currency in other languages. ‘*Interchurch families*’ seems to be a suitable parallel description to ‘*interreligious families*’ (2).

#### **II. The vocation and mission of interchurch families in the Church and in the contemporary world**

The particular *vocation of interchurch families* is described (3). Like other Christian families, they are called to mirror the reconciling love of God in Christ, on the pattern of Christ’s love for his Church. In the covenant of marriage they form one church at home, but in their case their domestic church is related to two as yet separated ecclesial communions. Thus interchurch families embody Christian unity. Simply by their existence interchurch families can offer a visible sign of unity, and by their involvement in the life of two churches can help to bring them together.

The *mission of interchurch families* is set out (4). The first witness of the partners is to one another. As their love and mutual understanding grows, they have practical experience of a ‘hierarchy of truths’, an ‘exchange of gifts’ and ‘receptive ecumenism’. They share with their children the particular riches of both their ecclesial communions, stressing unity in diversity. They bring together their extended families and their local congregations in important family celebrations such as baptism. They undertake local ecumenical responsibilities, stimulating common prayer, study together and joint service to the community. They demonstrate on a family scale the conditions in which growth into unity becomes possible. In this way they exemplify and anticipate some of the attitudes and actions that the churches also need as they strive to grow closer together.

Interchurch families need *wise pastoral understanding* if they are to fulfil their vocation and mission to be a sign and means of visible unity within their churches (5). Sometimes church legislation and attitudes seem to be pulling the partners apart, rather than strengthening their unity. *What they need above all is a pastoral understanding that will focus on building up their marriages in respect for the unity and equality of the partners.*

The paper then deals with particular pastoral issues. First, there is need for *marriage preparation and follow-up adapted to interchurch partners* (6). The contribution that interchurch couples themselves can make to marriage preparation should be valued, and pastoral support given to the work of *interchurch family groups*.

The pre-nuptial 'promise' required from the Catholic partner can still cause pastoral problems, and appear to deny the shared responsibility of parents for the religious upbringing of their children (7). *Interchurch families ask whether a pre-nuptial 'promise' in any form need be required; might it not be sufficient to remind Catholics of their responsibilities as parents, and ascertain that they seriously desire to share their faith with their children, without requiring that this be expressed in juridical terms?*

Interchurch parents sometimes have difficult decisions to make about their children's religious education (8). They ask for *respect for parental decisions on the baptism and upbringing of their children, and support for the whole family unit as they seek to walk forward together in growing unity.*

Some interchurch families experience a serious spiritual need and deep desire for on-going eucharistic sharing (9). Interchurch families would therefore ask for an *explicit statement that interchurch spouses who express a real need and desire for eucharistic sharing, and who fulfil the criteria for admission, can be allowed to receive communion alongside their Catholic partners on an on-going basis, whenever they are at mass together.*

Interchurch families are greatly encouraged when their ecclesial communions see them not as problems, but as pioneers of Christian unity. They need pastoral understanding and support to liberate them to give this witness to the best of their ability (10). As they are welcomed in their family units into both their communities, the gift of ecclesial communion that they offer on a small scale to their churches will be more clearly seen. *They ask for the kind of pastoral care that will welcome them as family units, while recognising that they also have loyalties to another ecclesial community.*

## I. MIXED AND INTERRELIGIOUS FAMILIES

### 1. *Special attention to mixed (Christian) and interreligious families*

A preliminary question in the final section of the *Lineamenta* for the Synod on the Family 2015 asks whether the description of the various familial situations corresponds to what exists in the Church and society today, and what missing aspects should be included.

We would like to point to the very restricted space given to mixed marriages (between baptised Christians) and interreligious marriages, and also to the fact that they are not given a specific heading in the text.

In Part I, 'Listening: the Context and Challenges of the Family', there is a clear recognition of the existence of many mixed and interreligious marriages. It speaks of their 'inherent difficulties in terms of jurisprudence, Baptism, the upbringing of children and the mutual respect with regard to difference in faith'. It is recognised that in these marriages there can be 'a danger of relativism or indifference'. However, it states, there can also be 'the possibility of fostering the spirit of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue' (7).

Yet in the rest of the *Relatio* there seems to be nothing about the pastoral care of mixed (Christian) and interreligious families. (There is simply a reference to the fact that the matrimonial regulations of the Orthodox Churches create serious problems in some contexts (54); nothing else.) Should not the particular difficulties and potential of such marriages be given specific consideration? Should not these families be helped to foster the spirit of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, rather than allowing them to fall into relativism or indifference through neglect?

In Part III, 'Pastoral Perspectives', the *Relatio* states that the problems relating to mixed marriages were frequently raised in the interventions of the synod fathers in 2014 (54). But this passing reference is hidden away at the end of the section entitled 'Caring for Wounded Families (persons who are Separated, Divorced and Not Remarried, Divorced and Remarried and Single-Parent Families)'. This does not seem to be a suitable heading under which to address the specific needs of mixed (Christian) and interreligious families.

Similarly, in the list of questions given in the final section of the *Lineamenta*, the question on mixed and interreligious marriages comes under the heading of 'Caring for Wounded Families (Separated, Divorced and Not Remarried, Divorced and Remarried, Single-Parent Families)'. It asks: 'Does current legislation provide a valid response to the challenges resulting from mixed marriages or interreligious marriages? Should other elements be taken into account?' (q.39). Again, this question seems to bear no relation to the heading.

**We ask that a specific section in the *Instrumentum Laboris* should be devoted to mixed (Christian) and interreligious families', with its own clear heading.**

### 2. *Similarities, differences and terminology*

Within that heading, there are some questions that affect both mixed marriages (between baptised Christians) and interreligious marriages. One is that of the pre-marital promise required from the Catholic partner to do all that is possible for the Catholic baptism and upbringing of any children of

the marriage. This can cause pastoral difficulties in both. Would it not be sufficient to ensure that Catholic partners were reminded before marriage of their responsibility to share their faith with their children? Similarly, both mixed (Christian) and interreligious couples need special attention during the period of marriage preparation; they will both have to face particular situations and decisions that do not arise in the marriages of two Catholics. Should not this be considered in the section on 'Guiding Engaged Couples in their Preparation for Marriage' and in the following one on 'Accompanying Married Couples in the Initial Years of Marriage', or else in the proposed new section?

Although there are certain similarities between mixed marriages (between baptised Christians) and interreligious marriages, there are also big differences, and the two will need to be considered separately. If the Catholic Church gives permission or dispensation for them, it recognises both kinds as valid marriages, and therefore to be supported. However, the marriage of a Catholic with a baptised Christian of another church or ecclesial community is recognised as a fully sacramental marriage. The partners 'share the sacraments of baptism and marriage' (*Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, 160). What is said of Christian marriage in Part II of the *Relatio*, 'Looking at Christ – the Gospel of the Family', applies to all mixed marriages between baptised Christians. The kind of pastoral care needed for mixed Christian marriages on the one hand and interreligious marriages on the other is therefore different. Indeed, it is recognised in Part I (7) that mixed marriages can promote Christian unity, while interreligious marriages can contribute to interreligious dialogue.

The distinction between the two has long been canonically recognised by the terminology of 'mixed religion' and 'disparity of cult'. In the preparatory papers for the Synod the expression 'disparity of cult' has now been replaced by 'interreligious marriage'. We would like to suggest that it may be time to revise the terminology for mixed marriages (between Christians). For a long time couples have disliked being called 'mixed marriages', which is an ambiguous term which can apply to many kinds of mixity, including interracial and interreligious marriages. When such couples have come together in groups and associations for mutual support they have used other terminology to identify themselves. In English-speaking regions they call themselves 'interchurch families', in German-speaking regions 'konfessionsverbindende Familien', in French-speaking regions 'foyers mixtes interconfessionnels', and in Italy 'famiglie miste interconfessionali'.

**We ask that consideration should be given to revising the terminology 'mixed marriages' when it refers to mixed marriages between baptised Christians. 'Interchurch families' seems to be a suitable parallel description to 'interreligious families'.**

## II. THE VOCATION AND MISSION OF INTERCHURCH FAMILIES IN THE CHURCH AND IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

### **3. *The vocation of interchurch families***

There are many kinds of mixed (Christian) families where the spouses 'share the sacraments of baptism and marriage' (*Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, 160). Here we are mainly speaking of those who would intentionally call themselves 'interchurch families'. Husband and wife both retain their original church membership, but so far as they are able they are

committed to live, worship and participate in their spouse's church also. As parents they exercise a shared and equal responsibility under God for the religious and spiritual upbringing of their children, and they teach them by word and example to appreciate both their Christian traditions. There is no blueprint for interchurch families; each is unique, and makes its own conscientious decision about the way in which it lives out its two-church character. But as the couple and family strive to build up the unity of their own 'intimate communion of life and love', their own 'domestic church', they intentionally situate their efforts within the wider ecumenical commitment of the churches to which they belong. They believe that this is what God is calling them to do.

They did not choose this path for themselves. For many it was not easy to come to a decision that God was calling them to marry someone from another ecclesial communion. They have often been strongly discouraged by church authorities and by their families, and in some places by the society in which they live. Yet it was often the deep Christian faith of the other that attracted them to one another. As one Canadian Catholic wife put it: 'God gave me all I had asked for in a spouse – only I had forgotten to say he must be a Catholic'. And a Protestant wife from New Zealand said the same: 'only I didn't ask that he shouldn't be a Roman Catholic'.

But once the decision to throw in their lot with one another for life has been made, they want to share all that is of value in each other's lives, and as Christian marriage partners this includes especially the riches of their respective ecclesial communions. When they meet, the two individuals often share the mutual ignorance and prejudice of their fellow church members. But because they love and respect one another, and try to forgive each other's weaknesses, they grow to love and respect each other's churches. Just as 'your family' becomes 'my family too', so 'your church' becomes 'my church too', and their children take their places naturally in 'our churches'. By learning to live in the traditions of one another's communities they realise that not all differences are church dividing, but many are complementary and can lead to the enrichment of diversity. They want to share their joy in this discovery with their fellow Christians. Thus a vocation to marriage becomes also a vocation to promote Christian unity.

Interchurch families, like other Christian families, are called to mirror the reconciling love of God in Christ, on the pattern of Christ's love for his Church. In the covenant of marriage they form one church at home, but in their case this domestic church is related to two as yet separated ecclesial communions. Thus interchurch families embody Christian unity. Simply by their existence interchurch families can offer a visible sign of unity, and by their involvement in the life of two churches can help to bring them closer to one another. They can form a connective tissue helping in a small way to bring the churches together in the one Body of Christ. Their domestic church can become a visible and prophetic sign of the unity to which all Christians are called – an imperfect sign, because of human weakness and frailty, but all the same a real sign that can be recognised in their mutual love and forgiveness, in the way that they share the whole of life with one another as they strive to help each other forward on their journey to the Father's house.

#### **4. *The mission of interchurch families***

Christian married partners are called to bring one another to perfection in the love of God. Their first witness is to one another. Because they love one another they want to understand one another, and they keep on asking questions. So many spouses have said: 'I am a better Catholic (or whatever) because I am married to a Christian of another tradition. I have had to think through and articulate

my faith in a way I would never have done otherwise.’ One Anglican wife reflected: ‘I don’t suppose many engaged couples spend an evening discussing what it means to ask the prayers of a saint, what incense is for, or what the word “priest” really means. We still share, and we are still growing in knowledge and respect for each other’s churches.’ Interchurch partners have practical experience of the ‘hierarchy of truths’, as they discover the many Christian resources they have in common. They also understand, from their daily life together, that ‘exchange of gifts’ which comes from sharing with one another the specific riches of their respective traditions. They practised ‘receptive ecumenism’ before it had a name.

Interchurch partners are sometimes able to draw their own families of origin into an ecumenical orbit too. Their parents may at first be shocked by their son or daughter’s choice, but be won over by the human and Christian qualities of their daughter- or son-in-law. They are enriched by being drawn into a wider ecumenical context. Instead of battling over which family is going to control the religious upbringing of their grandchildren, both can come to rejoice together in the broader perspective in which the children’s Christian initiation takes place.

The primary responsibility for the Christian upbringing and education of children rests with their parents. Interchurch parents, like all Christian parents, are together the first teachers of their children. From their earliest years they give witness to them by their actions and their words of the self-giving and reconciling love of God. It is natural that both parents will want to share with their children the treasures of the particular ecclesial communion in which they personally are members. They have to work out how to do this together, stressing unity in diversity rather than treating difference as a threat which will pull them apart. Many interchurch children grow up feeling at home in the traditions of both their parents, and feel themselves privileged rather than confused to have been brought up in this way. ‘I’m lucky, not weird’, said one child in Northern Ireland.

Interchurch spouses can also help to make links between the church communities to which they belong. As they join in the life and worship of their partner’s church, they can come to appreciate the distinctive witness of that community and to feel welcome there. Sometimes they accept a particular office or responsibility in the congregation of their partner’s church, such as teaching the children, leading youth work, singing or belonging to the music group, joining the welcome team. They can become ‘one of us’, not simply ‘one of them’. As mutual understanding grows, prejudices can melt away. When there are important family celebrations, both ministers and both congregations are sometimes invited to participate. On the occasion of a baptism, for example, a shared celebration can demonstrate and make real, in a way that no amount of talking could do, the fact that it is the One Baptism that is celebrated in different communions.

Indeed, the Catholic Church has recognised the mission that interchurch families can be asked to undertake within their church communities. In Cardinal Kasper’s *Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism* (2007), he writes that they can ‘be called upon to play a role in organising or leading ecumenical groups who gather for prayer and the study of Scripture, or for the support of other mixed marriage families; be given a particular responsibility in the preparation of ecumenical prayer services, both during the Week of Prayer and throughout the year; be invited to study and make known the Church’s teaching concerning the promotion of Christian unity and developments resulting from ecumenical dialogue.’

Interchurch families can also, as domestic churches, demonstrate to their church communities the conditions under which growth into unity becomes possible. In marriage their love is not content with a parallel separate existence, but yearns for, and therefore promotes, growth into deeper and deeper unity. Their marriage covenant gives formal expression to this love, and provides a support and framework that encourages it to grow and deepen. Living together under the same roof enables them to share each other's daily life and activity, and get to know one another at a deep level. They share their resources, and make decisions together on how these are to be used for the good of the whole family and of their neighbours. They say they are sorry and ask for forgiveness when things go wrong. The parents share responsibility for their children's education, and celebrate their Christian development (baptism, first communion, confirmation or profession of faith) in as united a way as possible. They are hospitable to others, and sensitive to the needs of each, so that nobody is obliged to act against their conscience. If the churches could assume some of these attitudes and actions, so essential if interchurch families are to flourish, their walk together on the road to Christian unity might become smoother.

### **5. Pastoral understanding for interchurch families**

The particular problems that face interchurch families stem from the fact that the two churches represented in their one domestic church are themselves divided. Happily, since Vatican II the Catholic Church has been committed to promoting Christian unity, and this has made it possible for mixed couples to be seen in a far more positive light than was the case earlier. Instead of being simply dismissed as a problem, they have increasingly been seen as having a potential to contribute to Christian unity. This was already recognised (though hidden in a negative formulation) in the Apostolic Letter *Matrimonia Mixta* issued by Pope Paul VI in 1970: 'Mixed marriages do not, except in some cases, help in re-establishing unity among Christians.' They came to be appreciated as living ecumenism in a particularly intimate way: 'You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity', said Pope John Paul II in 1982. In 2006 Benedict XVI declared that the decision to found a mixed Christian family 'can lead to the formation of a practical laboratory of unity'. Indeed, the *Relatio* of the 2014 Synod on the Family, in its brief reference to mixed Christian marriages, said that they have the potential to foster the spirit of ecumenism (7).

But this does not happen automatically, and in spite of these positive words, there are still areas in which church legislation seems to be pulling the partners in an interchurch marriage apart, rather than strengthening their unity. Interchurch families cannot fulfil their vocation and mission to be a sign and means of visible unity within their churches unless they are welcomed, understood and supported by their extended families, their local congregations and their pastors. The role of the clergy is vital, and many have not been prepared for it. It would be helpful if further education on the pastoral care of interchurch families could be included in all seminaries, especially if some of the input is given by interchurch couples. Where this has been done, it has proved very positive.

What interchurch families need above all is a pastoral understanding that will focus on building up their marriage in respect for the unity and equality of the partners. In some parts of the world, for example in Africa, this may mean opposing the social pressure for a woman to be obliged to join the church of her husband – and this not only when it is the wife who is the Catholic. In other parts of the world it may mean extending more generously the provisions for eucharistic sharing in the case of some interchurch spouses. In his final address to the 2014 Synod, Pope Francis spoke of the year ahead as one in which 'to find concrete solutions to so many difficulties and innumerable challenges

that families must confront; to give answers to the many discouragements that surround and suffocate families.’ It is as a small contribution to that work that the Interchurch Families International Network would like to refer especially to particular pastoral issues that affect interchurch and mixed families.

#### **6. *The need for marriage preparation adapted to interchurch and mixed partners***

In the past interchurch couples were treated as a problem when they presented themselves for marriage, unless they were prepared to accept without demur all the conditions laid down by the Catholic Church: the Catholic was to work for the ‘conversion’ of his or her partner, and both were to promise that all the children of the marriage would be brought up as Catholics. Even so, the wedding would be a second-class affair, taking place in the sacristy without music or flowers. Those days have gone. But some Catholic pastors still prefer to be faced with a non-practising Christian who will not cause difficulties rather than a devout Anglican or Lutheran. It is a problem to many pastors when they meet with prospective partners whose expectations, particularly over such issues as the religious upbringing of children and admission to communion, seem to conflict with existing church law and existing pastoral norms. If they react by presenting the Church’s position in an authoritarian and unsympathetic way, the couple will feel unwelcome and may be turned away from the Church. Listening and trying to understand is crucial. Only after that can the Church’s position be explained in a way that will help the couple to realise that getting married across denominational boundaries may not be quite as straightforward as they may have thought.

It is not easy, and sometimes impossible because of distance, for the pastors of both communities to come together with the couple before a marriage to exercise joint pastoral care. Where it is possible, it is the ideal, and will reassure the couple that both their churches are involved in their marriage, and are concerned for the good of their future family. It will often benefit not only the couple and their families of origin, but also the ecumenical relationship of the two pastors.

Much marriage preparation nowadays is undertaken by lay married couples, who sometimes work according to a syllabus prepared at national or diocesan level. It is important that the needs of interchurch and mixed couples should be specifically addressed. It is even better, of course, if this can be done in the context of local churches working together in joint preparation for marriage. One of the most helpful ways of preparing for an interchurch marriage has proved to be the opportunity to talk with married couples who are further ahead on the road, and if prospective partners can be put in touch with groups of such couples this should be done.

Interchurch couples are increasingly involved in marriage preparation themselves, either in ecumenical or denominational contexts. Since so many couples who present themselves for marriage in some parts of the world are mixed couples, an interchurch family presence on the marriage preparation team has often proved very valuable. It can give mixed couples of many different kinds the feeling that they will not be regarded as second class marriages, and can open up wide discussion on how to cope with major differences in marriage and family life. It can witness to the importance of not allowing religion and spirituality to become a no-go area between the couple and in the family, and thus impoverishing relationships which could, rather, be immensely enriched by sharing on a deep level.



Like other married couples, interchurch couples also need to be sustained and encouraged in the years following their marriage. Interchurch family groups are a lifeline for some couples, and groups are very grateful for the support both of their Catholic priests and also of pastors from other churches. In such groups mutual support can be given, experiences can be shared, interchurch family spirituality can be developed, the challenges of interchurch parenting can be discussed, the fruits of ecumenical dialogue can be received, and the vocation and mission of interchurch families can be explored together. Interchurch children too can share their experiences and develop their faith journeys with their peers, and as they grow older, can reflect with the adults on their situation; in their turn they can take on a teaching role, to the great benefit of their parents. They have much to teach their parents, their extended families, and their churches. Teenagers claim that it is not they who are confused: 'It is you of former generations who have been confused in accepting and perpetuating the divisions of the churches. Christ willed only one Church.'

**Interchurch families therefore ask for pastoral attention to be given to the way in which interchurch couples are prepared for marriage, and that the contribution that interchurch couples can make to marriage preparation should be valued. They would ask for such care to be extended to the period after their marriage, and for encouragement and support to be given to interchurch family groups.**

#### **7. *The 'promise' required by the Catholic Church before marriage***

The religious and spiritual upbringing of their children is not easy for parents today, and interchurch parents will face challenges that same-church parents do not have. It is right that they should think carefully about them before they marry, and of how they will try to use them as opportunities rather than problems. But experience suggests that it is not wise to press them to make a final decision on the baptism and upbringing of possible future children before marriage. A spouse cannot know how he or she will feel when a baby actually arrives.

Of course an absolute promise by both partners to baptise and bring up all the children as Catholics has not been required by the Catholic Church since 1970. However, the Catholic's obligation to 'make a sincere promise to do all in his or her power so that all offspring are baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church' (CIC 1983, can. 1125 §1), is still interpreted in some places as equivalent to the former promise of both partners. In any case it appears to drive a wedge between the couple, and to envisage a struggle in which the Catholic must do all that is possible to 'win'. Of course interchurch couples are grateful that it is now recognised that the partner who is a member of another church may well feel a conscientious obligation to bring children up in his or her church. It is also pointed out that the unity of the marriage is paramount, and that if this is threatened the Catholic partner will not be penalised if children are brought up in the other church (cf. *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, 142, 148, 150-151).

But couples can still experience the 'promise' as imposing a unilateral demand on a relationship that they are striving to make fully mutual, and many interchurch partners feel that it is unfair and divisive. It can be presented in a way that appears to deny the shared responsibility of parents for the religious upbringing of their children. As such it seems to some Catholics entering marriage to deny the relationship of equality that is required both in ecumenical relationships (*par cum pari*) and in marriage. Unfortunately the intention behind the promise is not always explained to them in a way

they can understand. A refusal to make the promise in these circumstances can lead to Catholics feeling rejected by their Church and to great tensions in family and church relationships.

It can be a bad witness to all who are concerned for the well-being of the couple, many of whom will not be practising Christians. One fiancée realised the scandal of it when she was talking to a friend about the pre-marriage difficulties she was experiencing. 'I'm glad I'm not a Christian if it causes all these problems when you want to get married', said her friend.

In many countries the episcopal conferences have helped by modifying the wording of the promise over the years. In England and Wales the phrase 'as God's law requires' has been replaced by 'within the unity of our partnership'. The Austrian form of the promise includes the word 'conscience'. In Ireland all Catholics getting married have to make a promise about the religious upbringing of their children, whether they are marrying Christians from other churches or not. In France mixed couples can express their intentions about the baptism and upbringing of their future children in their own words.

**Interchurch families would like to ask whether a pre-nuptial 'promise' in any form need be required; might it not be sufficient to remind Catholics of their responsibilities as parents, and ascertain that they seriously desire to share their faith with their children, without requiring that this be expressed in juridical terms?**

#### **8. *The baptism and upbringing of children***

Interchurch parents would ask that the sometimes difficult decisions that they have to make about their children's upbringing should be respected and supported by their pastors, even if they cannot always be fully approved. What many want – as do many of their children as they grow older – is that the stages of Christian initiation should be celebrated as far as possible as ecumenical events in which both churches play at least some recognisable part. If both their pastors take part in the celebration of their wedding, it seems natural that both should come together in celebrating the birth and baptism of their child. Only one minister normally performs the actual baptism, but the other can share in various parts of the rite, and the couple are able to feel that both their churches are supporting them as parents. Sometimes the fact of the baptism is recorded in the registers of the two churches of the parents, which gives them a similar reassurance. In some countries a common Certificate of Christian Baptism has been produced listing the churches that have agreed to accept it as evidence of Christian baptism. It is difficult to over-estimate the joy that a shared celebration of baptism can bring to some couples, their wider families, their friends, and to their pastors and congregations as well. As a priest from Northern Ireland reflected after he had taken part in two recent shared celebrations of baptism in interchurch families: 'I came away from these experiences utterly convinced of the unsurpassable value of time spent in mutual preparation by both clergy in a spirit of co-operative partnership.'

When it comes to confirmation, it is possible for the minister and congregation of one church to take a significant role in a confirmation in another church. This is very important to some interchurch children, who have experienced their Christian nurture within two church communities. Some have arranged a Profession of Faith in which they can witness for themselves to the commitment they are making to Christ in the context of the two communities which have shared in their journey of faith.

The family life of interchurch families is immeasurably strengthened when they know they have the support of both their pastors and their two congregations.

When a family member dies, whether a spouse, parent or child, the family equally needs this kind of support. Some interchurch family funerals have given a particularly poignant and joyful witness to Christian unity and shared resurrection hope, as well as being a great comfort to the family members grieving the loss and celebrating the life of a much-loved partner, parent, child or relative.

**Interchurch families would therefore ask for respect for parental decisions on the baptism and upbringing of their children, and support for the whole family unit as they seek to walk forward together in growing unity.**

### **9. *The experienced need for on-going eucharistic sharing in some interchurch families***

For some interchurch parents, it is the time when their child comes to receive First Communion that has been a culminating point in their desire to receive communion together. They may have longed to share communion together as a married couple, but when a child questions why their baptised parent from another community will be excluded, or hesitates to receive communion at all if both parents cannot receive with him or her, the pain is compounded and their dilemma seems to have no answer. They realise that they cannot fully witness to their child what they are actually living in the unity of their domestic church. The scandal of our divided churches becomes all too apparent to the child and can become a stumbling block. They try to explain the situation as best they can. 'I don't think that's a very good rule', responded one child to her Anglican mother, 'because it tears families apart'. One Italian couple was very moved by the story of a French child, distressed that his Protestant mother was not receiving communion with him at his First Communion, who kept part of the host he had received for himself and brought it to his mother for her to share. For twenty years, when the Italian couple were at mass together, they acted 'according to the teaching of that unknown child'. Stories of a young child who has spontaneously divided his or her host to share with a mother have come from different countries and continents.

Interchurch families are grateful that exceptional eucharistic sharing is now recognised as appropriate in the case of some of those couples and families who 'share the sacraments of baptism and marriage'; the other baptised spouse can be admitted to communion where there is a real need and desire, a free request, and Catholic eucharistic faith. But there is a general uneasiness about the present situation, because there is so much diversity of practice, from country to country, from diocese to diocese, from parish to parish. Some interchurch spouses who express their spiritual need and desire for eucharistic sharing are still told this is not possible. Others to their great joy are admitted to communion on an on-going basis. Yet others are told that they can be admitted only on rare occasions, and that some occasions are not 'exceptional' enough. This can be a real cause of scandal in some congregations.

Official and unofficial permissions are given at all levels and decisions are made that cannot be talked about. This is a bad witness. Interchurch families often find it difficult to speak about their experiences openly, for fear of compromising others. They feel they must protect clergy whose pastoral concern sometimes leads them to go beyond the letter of the law, at least as it is interpreted where they live. Interchurch families would like more freedom to witness to the joy of eucharistic

sharing together, allowed because of their serious need and desire in their privileged situation of commitment to one another in their domestic church.

They feel that their ecumenical witness is hindered in the present situation, either because they are bearing the crushing burden of being unable to share communion except on rare occasions, or because they are unable to share openly their joy at being able to receive communion together. Some feel that they have to make a choice on the one hand between keeping a low profile locally and receiving communion together discreetly, for the sake of family unity, and on the other playing a full part in the local ecumenical scene – where they may have a great deal to offer. All Christians are called to suffer on account of the divisions that are contrary to the will of Christ, but if growing understanding between the churches can help to avoid unnecessary suffering and enable a stronger witness from interchurch families, is this not to be celebrated with joy? The witness of truly interchurch families is a living gift offered to the churches by those who have experienced sacramental communion in both baptism and marriage (and in the Eucharist where possible), through which Christ builds up their domestic church. Their witness to spiritual ecumenism and ecumenical reception is vital. The loss is great when they feel they must remain quiet about their situation.

Not all partners in interchurch marriages wish to share communion; they may have very different eucharistic beliefs or think of communion as an individual relationship with God. But for those who do so desire, sharing communion can transform their life and witness. Indeed, the urgent need for on-going eucharistic sharing may well be felt most by those ‘exceptional cases’ who in their mixed marriages ‘help in re-establishing unity among Christians’ (*Matrimonia Mixta*). Christian marriage is not a series of special occasions, but an on-going daily commitment to becoming ever more fully an intimate community of life and love, a domestic church. Exceptional eucharistic sharing is needed throughout an interchurch marriage to sustain this communion in Christ, to express and to deepen it. As one interchurch couple put it: ‘For us, the Eucharist is what binds and strengthens us as a couple and a family, and gives us any hidden strength we may have in order to bear Christ’s love into our beautiful but broken world.’ Recognising the need for on-going eucharistic sharing in those interchurch families who deeply desire it would be a clear sign of the importance that the Catholic Church attaches to the marriage covenant and to supporting marriage and family life.

**Interchurch families would therefore ask for an explicit statement that interchurch spouses who express a real need and desire for eucharistic sharing, and who fulfil the criteria for admission, can be allowed to receive communion alongside their Catholic partners on an on-going basis, whenever they are at mass together.**

**10. *The pastoral care that is prepared to welcome interchurch families as a unit, while respecting the fact that they also have loyalties to another ecclesial community***

If interchurch families are received in each other’s churches with an understanding welcome, then their interchurch character and commitment can become a gift and a visible sign of hope for their churches on their path to unity. In 2006 Pope Benedict XVI stressed the responsibilities of their respective church communities, if interchurch homes were to be able to be authentic ‘laboratories of unity’. These communities would need ‘mutual goodwill, understanding and maturity in faith’, he said, with ‘full respect for the rights and responsibilities of the spouses for the faith formation of their own family and the education of their children’.

Interchurch families are greatly encouraged when their ecclesial communions see them not as problems, but as pioneers of Christian unity. They bring both gifts and challenges to their churches; both are to be welcomed. Interchurch families are called to witness by their lives, their actions and their words to the fundamental and growing unity of all Christian people, and to share a common life in the Church for the reconciliation of our churches. They need pastoral understanding and support to liberate them to give this witness to the best of their ability. When they receive such understanding they are encouraged in faithfulness to their vocation, and in their witness to Christian unity. They are also strengthened in their mission to those 'mixed marriage' couples who feel rejected by the Catholic Church.

Pope John Paul II said that 'the Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realisation of ecclesial communion' (*Familiaris Consortio*, 21). As interchurch families are welcomed in their family units into both their communities, the gift of ecclesial communion which they reveal and realise will become more evident, and they will become more effectively a connective tissue helping in a small way to bring the churches together in the one Body of Christ.

**Interchurch families ask for the kind of pastoral understanding that will welcome them as family units, while at the same time recognising that they also have loyalties to another ecclesial community, and respecting their particular ecumenical vocation and mission.**

**April 6, 2015**

**Interchurch Families International Network**

c/o Prof. Thomas Knieps  
Faculty of Theology and Religious Study  
Catholic University Leuven  
St. Michielsstraat 4 - Bus 3101  
B-3000 Leuven  
Belgium  
[Thomas.knieps@theo.kuleuven.be](mailto:Thomas.knieps@theo.kuleuven.be)