

Ecumenism and Interchurch Families

CTSA, June 10, 2005
 St. Louis, Missouri
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The subject of interchurch families is important for ecumenism and worthy of theological reflection. To the extent that we think the faith¹ within a particular ecclesial communion, a couple who takes their Christian and ecclesial commitments seriously will inevitably theologize about their distinctive situation in life. It is also fortuitous, perhaps even providential, that the increase in numbers of interchurch couples due to social, cultural and demographic trends (at least in the West) coincided with the rise of the ecumenical movement with ecumenism emerging as a theological imperative in many churches.² To the extent that such reflection is intentional it inevitably raises the question of how interchurch couples and families advance the cause of Christian unity as well as eliciting from churches pastoral responses to their distinctive needs.

Before proceeding it is worth noting my own situation of life in an interchurch family. For the record I met my wife, Lee Coppernoll, while we were both enrolled in the Master of Divinity program at Union Theological Seminary in New York. She was considering ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church, the communion in which she was raised. During the course of my M. Div. degree I returned to the Catholic Church in which I was raised, the story of which is not immediately relevant to our subject. I went on to do a Ph.D in systematic theology and she, deciding against pastoral ministry, ended up working at the national level of her church directing their young adult mission program. We got married, have two children—both being raised Catholic as we decided before the wedding—and have been respectively active in each of our communions. Four years ago Lee was received into the Episcopal Church and serves on the vestry of her parish. If her ecclesial journey took her from Epworth to Canterbury I am fairly safe in saying that I don't think Rome is on her horizon. I have taught at three Catholic institutions of higher education, been active in parish life, now serving on the parish council of the Cathedral parish in the

¹ I take “thinking the faith” from Douglas John Hall. See his *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 57-66.

² Endorsed by Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint* (henceforth *UUS*) as follows: “The Catholic Church embraces with hope the commitment to ecumenism as a duty of the Christian conscience enlightened by faith and guided by love” (# 9).

Archdiocese of Milwaukee, and have been involved directly in ecumenical work. I serve on five bilateral dialogues: the archdiocesan one with United Methodists; the Catholic/Reformed and the Catholic/Evangelical dialogues for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops; and the Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue and the Catholic/Seventh Day Adventist Consultation (now in abeyance) for the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. For the pontifical council I was also a member of their delegation to the World Council of Churches Assembly in Harare in 1998. More than this, on the ground specifics for instance, I will mention as the paper progresses.

I note the several dialogues I serve on simply to make an initial point, one that can be easily passed over in discussions on ecumenism. Ostensibly, the goal of ecumenical dialogue is full communion, the means by which Christian unity would be realized. As Pope John Paul II put it: “Ecumenism is directed precisely to making the partial communion existing between Christians grow toward full communion in truth and charity” (*UUS* 14). In reality, or I should say at this historical moment, that is not always the case. For example, while full communion is clearly on the agenda for Catholic bilateral dialogues with the Orthodox Churches, the Anglican Communion, and with the Lutheran and Reformed communities; this is not the case with Pentecostals. The first such dialogue with classical Pentecostals stated that “mutual understanding” in “theologies and spiritual practice rather than organic or structural unity” were the “special object” of those bilateral conversations.³

The real though imperfect communion that obtains between all baptized Christians may, depending on the configuration of the interchurch couple, entail various degrees of spiritual and ecclesial communion. This will affect not only prospects for future unity—something that may or may not be realized in our lifetime—but more importantly, it will shape the type of Christian life shared by spouses in the present. There is no question, for instance, that my wife and I share more in terms of liturgical sensibilities after she became an Episcopalian than when she was a United Methodist. If she had been Baptist or Pentecostal that dimension of our marriage—living the liturgical year for instance—would be considerably diminished. The communion in Christ that shapes our life together would at the very least be different. Therefore, while we may affirm general ecumenical principles for an interchurch family the

specifics of their shared traditions will influence not only life together but also the contributions they can make to their respective communions.

With this in mind I would like to recall some points I made when given the opportunity to reflect on our interchurch family several years ago for the National Workshop on Christian Unity. They were as follows:

- Be aware of the working of the Spirit.
- Discover who you are as a couple and how each of you is a member of your own communion and tradition.
- Determine your relationship to your own tradition.
- Discover your relationship to your spouse's tradition.
- Work on common rituals, prayer, and other ways of discipleship and being together in Christ.
- In remaining open to the Spirit be prepared for surprises.
- Envision your interchurch marriage as a gift and a vocation.

These more or less pastoral admonitions are capable of further theological explication in light of more recent developments especially the Rome 2003 paper entitled *Interchurch Families: United in baptism and marriage called to a common life in the Church for the reconciliation of the churches*.⁴ One of the main points that I draw from that paper is the distinction made between a simple mixed marriage and a truly interchurch relationship. The prescription for an interchurch marriage excludes the following.

It may be that one partner or both do not attend church worship and are nominal in their church affiliation. It may be that one or more partners practise their Christian faith but have decided to worship entirely separately within their respective church communities. These mixed marriages cannot properly be described as interchurch in a full sense.⁵

This in contrast to an interchurch family wherein a “conscientious decision” has been made to affirm the “two-church character” of the marriage by “sharing in the richness of the traditions of both

³ “Final Report of the dialogue between the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church and some classical Pentecostals, 1977-1982,” #2 published in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 12:2 1990, 97.

⁴ Adopted by the Second World Gathering of interchurch families in Rome and published by the British Association of Interchurch Families, London (henceforth referred to as *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*).

communities.”⁶ This latter is more my own experience which is not to exclude the need of pastoral care for those families that have not made such a decision. Nevertheless, it is the “two-church character” of interchurch families that most clearly poses the theological implications for ecumenism.

At this level of engagement an interchurch family envisions itself as existing within the grace of the Holy Spirit’s action that presses toward the fullness of Christian unity. Even here an interchurch family may simply live the gift of their ecumenicity for their two communions, or more actively be apostolic agents of ecclesial reconciliation. The former is the necessary basis of the latter in any case. The transition from a family with special pastoral needs to a family that is a sign and grace for unity marks the ecumenical intentionality of the interchurch family. In this respect the churches may value their presence as an opportunity not only for pastoral care but also be receptive to what the Spirit might offer through them. For those who either formally or informally act as agents of ecumenism their interchurch configuration can indeed become an apostolic vocation, realizing through their life together and ministry the perennial call to unity and full communion.

Even as I advocate the gift and vocation of interchurch families I need to be more specific on what I mean by their contribution. With *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* I agree that they do not become some “third church,” and neither does their “double belonging” violate the integrity of each of their traditions.⁷ I do have serious reservations over Catholics sharing Eucharistic communion in their spouse’s church. The paper does allow for such as a matter of conscience apart from the ecclesial communion that Catholics require or the recognition of the validity of orders and sacraments.⁸ In this respect I do not envision interchurch families proceeding ahead of their respective communions. Part of their ecumenical vocation will embrace the cross in amore direct way as they live the pain of their separation. Therefore, the bulk of my remarks will focus on the “spiritual ecumenism” that the interchurch family enjoys and represents, and how that contributes to the full communion that the churches strive for.

By “spiritual ecumenism” I do not intend to downgrade the organic and structural levels of ecumenism that an interchurch family can contribute to. If anything their witness is an incentive to the

⁵ *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

churches to vigorously pursue the path of Christian unity. Their very presence will challenge their respective communions to consider the ecclesiality of the other tradition including their order and sacraments. All this is to the good. However, it is the present reality of their interchurch relations that will most affect them. Despite the great advances in ecumenism, including the priority given to it by Pope Benedict XVI, I do not anticipate imminent full communion between the Catholic Church and those communions emerging out of the Reformation including the Anglicans. In the meantime my argument is that spiritual ecumenism—understood as the necessary basis for full communion—is not insignificant, especially for interchurch families who for the most part are members of the laity. Let me emphasize that by “spiritual ecumenism” I do not mean the spiritual fellowship of the invisible church that constitutes our unity in Christ as many Evangelicals and Pentecostals would argue. Rather quoting Vatican II’s *Decree on Ecumenism*, it is “the soul of the whole ecumenical movement” involving “change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians.”⁹ In other words, “spiritual ecumenism” is by its nature oriented to full visible communion.

The “spiritual ecumenism” of interchurch families proceeds from the visible nature of the Church enacted in baptism and the marriage covenant. *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* says as much.

When two Christians from different ecclesial communions come together in marriage they already have in common a vast and very rich resource as children of the one Father, disciples of the one Lord Jesus Christ, and recipients of the gift of the Holy Spirit. They also share the sacrament of baptism...In marriage they bind themselves in a life-long covenant to love and serve one another in what becomes their journey to the kingdom of heaven.¹⁰

Baptism as the sacrament of regeneration and incorporation into Christ and the Church is “directed toward the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ.”¹¹ This embraces the life of grace in faith, hope and charity, the interior gifts of the Holy Spirit as well as the visible elements of ecclesial life.¹² The latter according to the *Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms of Ecumenism* “is ordered to the profession of faith, to the full integration into the economy of salvation, and to the Eucharistic

⁹ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 7. *Documents of Vatican II*, Austin P. Flannery, editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988 Revised Edition), 460.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹¹ *Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms of Ecumenism*, 92.

¹² *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3. *Documents of Vatican II*, 455.

communion.”¹³ For the interchurch family the grace and fruits of baptism cannot be underestimated. The same is true for the covenant of marriage.

“Christian marriage and the Christian family build up the Church.”¹⁴ They do so as a communion of persons in which the natural relations of affectivity, intimacy and commitment are suffused and sustained by the grace of Christ. John Paul II touched upon the spiritual dimension of marriage and family in his account of the sacramental efficacy of marriage as “memorial, actuation and prophecy.” It is worth quoting in full.

As a memorial, the sacrament gives them [the spouses] the grace and duty of commemorating the great works of God and of bearing witness to them before their children. As actuation, it gives them the grace and duty of putting into practice in the present, towards each other and their children, the demands of love which forgives and redeems. As prophecy, it gives them the grace and duty of living and bearing witness to the hope of the future encounter with Christ.¹⁵

When this becomes a lived reality it is fair to say with *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* that the “very existence of interchurch families provides a *visible sign* of unity to their churches.”¹⁶ They also become as it were a “Church in miniature,” a domestic church (*Ecclesia domestica*) in which “in its own way the family is a living image and historical representation of the mystery of the Church.”¹⁷

Granted that these are largely Catholic perspectives. In the U.S. Catholic/Reformed Dialogue that produced *Interchurch Families: Resources for Ecumenical Hope*¹⁸ we discovered that Catholic terms and concepts did not necessarily resonate with our Reformed colleagues. This was true not only with the terminology of “domestic church” to describe the family but perhaps more importantly in our respective understandings of marriage. The difference is best seen in how each tradition understands the nature of the marriage covenant, something they hold in common with however some nuanced distinctions. Again, it is

¹³ *Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms of Ecumenism*, 92.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*, 7.

¹⁷ *Familiaris Consortio*, 49.

¹⁸ *Interchurch Families: Resources for Ecumenical Hope Catholic/Reformed Dialogue in the United States*. Edited by John C. Bush & Patrick R. Cooney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox; Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002).

worth quoting in full as this bears on the relationship between visible and invisible elements of ecclesial communion.

For Reformed Christians, “the essence of marriage is a covenanted commitment that has its foundation in the faithfulness of God’s love.” While the Catholic Church affirms that it is a covenanted commitment, it adds that “the sacrament of marriage is the specific source and original means of sanctification for Christian married couples and families. It takes up again and makes specific the sanctifying grace of Baptism.” These theological insights provide the basis in both communities of faith for the development and nurture of marital and familial spirituality and piety.¹⁹

I remember during the dialogue how foreign it was to their own way of thinking for my Reformed colleagues to consider the Catholic position that marriage, because of its sacramentality, is a means of sanctification for the spouses. While we share covenantal understandings of marriage, and remembering that covenantal notions are not absent from baptism, one cannot underestimate that in the case of a Catholic spouse the visible sacramental dimensions of shared life will also be an important factor. The “spiritual ecumenism” of the interchurch couple will even within the family be marked by the different sensibilities of their respective communions.

I raise this not to address at the moment the difficulties of sacramental sharing, a major issue in the road toward full ecclesial communion. Rather in addressing the “spiritual ecumenism” that interchurch families embody and are witnesses of, it is necessary to examine the configuration of their spirituality. Sacramentality informs the piety and spirituality of interchurch spouses differently by virtue of their respective Christian formations. Catholics are more sacramentally dense in their spirituality than some other communions irrespective of issues of Eucharistic hospitality. Imagine, for example, a marriage between a Catholic and a Plymouth Brethren Christian. Both practice weekly Lord’s Supper and have closed tables to used the latter’s theological vernacular. Nevertheless, the difference in sacramental sensibility is enormous although both might possess a Christocentric piety. Their intramural “spiritual ecumenism” might shaped more by Bible study and extemporaneous prayer than liturgical prayer and the experience of being fed at the Eucharistic table even if separately. Unless, of course, one spouse moves

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

closer to the other by living in their tradition as *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* exhorts. An illustration from my own interchurch narrative may help.

As I mentioned earlier my wife, Lee, moved from the United Methodist Church into the Episcopal Church several years ago. Her reasons were mainly liturgical. She will confess that being married to a Catholic has given her a greater appreciation for the Eucharist thus leading her to desire a weekly Eucharist with a more sacramental sense of liturgical order than she was experiencing in her Methodist congregation, where in fact she had headed the worship committee. She grew in this even though she did not receive communion in the Catholic Church—I more frequently (usually regularly) worshipped with her than she with me. Needless to say I was delighted with her move. The *Book of Common Prayer* is very rich in its liturgical traditions and I have learned to appreciate the Episcopal sense of decorum in worship—not stuffiness (and hers is not a high church parish)—something I often feel is lacking in many a Catholic liturgy. This, by the way, is not to denigrate United Methodist worship. They too have a very good book of worship; it simply (for the liturgically minded) is not used as much in many of their congregations. All of this is to say that even though we have lived together this transition in her ecclesial life, and by observation she has moved closer to me than I to her, we still do not have the same sacramental sensibilities, at least as far as I can tell. Lee still appreciates that her church was once called the Protestant Episcopal Church and the day she makes the sign of the cross will be the day that our respective pieties and spiritualities will be more in sync with one another. I think what I am trying to illustrate is that the sacramentals of the Catholic tradition have formed my piety in a sacramental and liturgical tradition similar to that of my wife's, but yet still remain foreign to her.

I have shared this to state the following as a principle. The gift of interchurch families who live a common life and marriage covenant will still embrace difference; and that too is a witness to the churches. My pastoral points earlier basically try to orient to the couple to discovering and living with integrity both their commonalities and differences. For us it meant for many years that I did double duty so to speak, attending her church and mine on Sundays. I like to worship so that was no problem. It has become more difficult in the last year because of logistics with growing children and health issues. But I still delight in worshipping with her. I do believe that by my presence in her parish I am a witness to ecumenism as they observe my prayer and, I also should say, my non-reception of communion.

We have also been blessed in the last decade to be a part of a small faith community where as Catholics and Episcopalians we share prayer, faith and discernment together. This is a Christian Life Community, a Catholic Ignatian based ecclesial movement. Something similar may be of great value for interchurch couples and is another avenue of ecumenism as well.

I would like to close by emphasizing three aspects of ecumenism, including “spiritual ecumenism” that are essential for the fruitfulness of interchurch families. I take them from *Ut Unum Sint*. They are renewal and conversion, the fundamental importance of doctrine, and the primacy of prayer. First, renewal and prayer.

Two of my original pastoral points had to do with the work of the Spirit: be open to the Spirit and be prepared for the surprises of the Spirit. Most ecumenists and certainly John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* recognize that the unity we seek is one bestowed by the Holy Spirit.²⁰ As such it requires interior conversion and a change of heart.²¹ For the interchurch family and their witness, as well as the particular configuration of their vocation, openness to the Spirit and intimacy with Christ becomes the practicum of ecumenism. By seeing the richness they embody the churches will be more and more enticed to further ecumenical progress.

Ecumenism cannot bypass communion in truth.²² Therefore, the fundamental importance of doctrine weighs heavily even for the interchurch family. As a Faith & Order sort of person myself I tend to think this is the real stuff of ecumenism especially if one envisions doctrine as formative for Christian life. This has recently become a source of great pain even in my own family. The developments in the Episcopal Church surrounding the consecration of Gene Robinson to the episcopate have not only disrupted ecumenical relations with the Catholic and Orthodox Churches especially, but may prove church-dividing within the Anglican Communion itself. In an interchurch family what your communion does can indeed affect the ecumenical nature of ones relationship. What for her church is a matter of discipline is for my church a matter of doctrine. In the interests of full disclosure my wife supported the move and thinks like many Episcopalians that it is a new work of the Spirit. For the life of me I don’t understand how the Episcopal Church makes its decisions—they seem to do things that contradict their present teaching and

²⁰ *Ut Unum Sint*, 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

then expect everything to fall in place. I also tend to think the action undermines the Gospel. So you see, this makes for a very interesting interchurch relationship.

Finally, to quote *Ut Unun Sint*, “*fellowship in prayer leads people to look at the Church and Christianity in a new way.*”²³ The primacy of prayer facilitates both conversion of life and doctrinal convergence. It increases love, which as John Paul II said, “is the great undercurrent which gives life and adds vigor to the movement toward unity.”²⁴ An interchurch family knows the importance of love. It is perhaps here in lives of sanctity and in the communion of love that the Church can discover its future.

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[IFIR](#) Volume 5.8, November 2006

²² Ibid., 19.

²³ Ibid., 23.

²⁴ Ibid, 21.