

Spiritual Ecumenism: a *vademecum* from Cardinal Kasper

The following text is taken from *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism* written by Cardinal Walter Kasper, with extensive contributions by Mgr Johan Bonny and Mgr Donald Bolen (New City Press, NY 2007, 96 pp.).

Mixed Marriage Families

'Marriages between Catholics and other baptized persons have their own particular nature, but they contain numerous elements that could well be made good use of and developed, both for their intrinsic value and for the contribution that they can make to the ecumenical movement. This is particularly true when both parties are faithful to their religious duties. Their common Baptism and the dynamism of grace provide the spouses in these marriages with the basis and motivation for expressing their unity in the sphere of moral and spiritual values'.³⁹

39. Mixed marriage families are an ever present reality in many parts of the world. While not turning a blind eye to the challenges faced by mixed marriage couples, the Catholic Church looks to them also in terms of their intrinsic value and invites reflection on the contributions they can make to their respective communities, as they live out their Christian discipleship faithfully and creatively.⁴⁰ Mixed marriage families have indeed something to offer in terms of an ecumenical exchange of gifts.

40. Pastoral guidelines and norms have been laid down by the Church regarding the preparation and celebration of mixed marriages, the sharing in sacramental life, the responsibilities of parents for the upbringing of the children, and the responsibilities of the local Ordinary and ministers, responding to the pastoral needs of mixed marriage families.⁴¹ Faithfulness to these guidelines and norms will at times mean that mixed marriage families will feel more intensely the pain of division between the communities to which they belong. That same faithfulness, however, will also help them to take part more fully and personally in the quest for restored communion between these communities. The particular experiences of mixed marriage families should be given due pastoral consideration both in terms of the gifts and challenges they bring to their communities.

In the local Church, mixed marriage families can

- be encouraged, as a couple or family, to pray and to ponder the Scriptures, as a way of nourishing their spiritual life;⁴²
- be ministered to by dioceses or local communities, particularly in the period of marriage preparation, through programmes which help these couples to better understand their partner's religious convictions and deepen their shared Christian inheritance;⁴³
- be called upon to play a role in organising or leading ecumenical groups who gather for prayer and the study of Scriptures, 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 for Christian Unity 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.

³⁹ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Familiaris Consortio*, n.78.

⁴⁰ Cf. CCC, n.1633-1637.

⁴¹ CIC, can.1124-1129; CCEO, can.813-816; Directory, n.143-160.

⁴² Cf. Directory, n.149.

⁴³ Cf. Directory, n.149; cf. Bibliography: Ecumenical documents on the sacraments.

The background to this passage

The 2003 Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity focused on the theme of 'spiritual ecumenism'. The bishops requested that a brief *Vademecum* or Handbook be produced, inviting those who have special responsibility in promoting Christian unity to deepen the spiritual roots of ecumenism and offering suggestions to this end. After considerable work in Rome and consultation with ecumenical bodies around the world this has now been done, and the Handbook from which the passage above has been taken was published early in 2007.

Besides a Preface, a Conclusion and a Bibliography, there are three main sections in the book:

1 Deepening Christian Faith

This contains sections on 'The Word of God in Sacred Scripture' and 'Witnesses to the Word of God'.

2. Prayer and Worship

There are five sections here: 'The Lord's Prayer'; 'Personal Prayer'; 'Prayer in Common'; 'Sacramental Celebrations', and 'The Liturgical year'.

3. 'Diakonia' and Witness

The six sections here are entitled 'Parishes and Local Communities', 'Communities of Religious Life'; 'Monastic Communities'; 'Ecclesial Communities or Movements'; 'Young People' and 'Pastoral Ministers'.

It is interesting that, unlike the Pontifical Council's 1993 Directory, which has a quite separate section on 'Mixed Marriages' following sections on 'The Sacrament of Baptism' and 'Sharing Spiritual Activities and Resources', this Handbook puts its paragraphs on 'Mixed Marriage Families' firmly in the section on 'Sacramental Celebrations'. Since the sacraments, besides being 'an expression of the Church's unity in faith, in worship and in apostolic ministry' are 'also a source of the Church's unity and a means for building it up', they 'have their place in spiritual ecumenism'. After this introduction, the section starts with 'Baptism', continues with 'Eucharist', and follows with 'Mixed Marriage Families' before ending with 'Sacraments of Healing'.

It is important for interchurch families that the sacramental reality of their marriages and family life is affirmed and underlined in this way. The 1993 Directory states that interchurch partners 'share the sacraments of baptism and marriage' (160). This phrase is not repeated in the Handbook, but the positioning of the section reaffirms this reality. A future task will be to draw out more fully the relationship between marital spirituality and spiritual ecumenism. This should allow us to penetrate more deeply into the meaning of 'living in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity' (John Paul II, 1982) and the interchurch family as a 'practical laboratory of unity' (Benedict XVI, 2006).

For the time being, however, there are a number of things to welcome that are new in this text, so far as official documents are concerned.

a. 'faithfully and creatively'

Where this phrase is used, a reference is given to *Familiaris Consortio* n.78 (1981). 'Faith' and 'faithful' appear several times in this section of the encyclical, which notes that interchurch couples can make a contribution to the ecumenical movement, 'particularly when both parties are faithful to their religious duties'. The Handbook, however, speaks of mixed marriage couples living out their Christian discipleship *faithfully and creatively*. This phrase goes beyond anything that is said in *Familiaris Consortio* or the 1993 Directory, but appeared in the Message addressed by Cardinal Kasper to the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families held near Rome in 2003. Its repetition here encourages interchurch families in their conviction that for them faithfulness does not mean a slavish conformity to the past, but building on the heritage of the past to seek new ways of expressing their unity in Christ in their 'domestic churches'. Such new ways must always be tested by the wider church community, but because they are new they cannot of their nature always be approved in advance – this is surely the significance of Pope Benedict's 'laboratories of unity'.

b. ‘an ecumenical exchange of gifts’

This phrase also comes from Cardinal Kasper’s 2003 Message: ‘You place in common what you have received from your respective communities, and learn from each other the way in which each lives in fidelity to Christ. You are uniquely situated to help the churches better see the authentic gifts which are to be found in and received from each other.’ Looking more deeply, and remembering that the gifts given by the Risen Lord to his Church were *people*, (*Ephesians 4:7-13*) we might see interchurch families themselves as the ecumenical ‘gifts’ – couples and families living as one so far as they can within the two communities which have nurtured their faith. This, above all, is how they ‘bring both gifts and challenges to their communities’.

c. ‘mixed marriage family support groups’

Interchurch family associations and groups have existed since the 1960s, but this is the first time that they have received this kind of encouragement in a document put out by the President of the PCPCU. The Rome paper ‘Interchurch Families and Christian Unity’ adopted by the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families in 2003, noted that ‘some mixed marriages have been discouraged from becoming more fully interchurch – or even from practising altogether – by the difficulties they have encountered from relatives, congregations and ministers without ecumenical understanding and commitment’. ‘Such mixed marriages’, it said, ‘can be regarded as potential interchurch families’. It stated that ‘one of the aims of associations and groups of interchurch families around the world is to encourage other mixed Christian marriages, who would like to become more fully and intentionally interchurch marriages, that this is possible and can be deeply enriching.’ An international group of interchurch families visited the Pontifical Council in 2005 as a follow-up to the Rome Gathering. One of the questions they asked was whether the Council recognised a value in associations of interchurch families, and if so, whether they could be encouraged in regions where they do not yet exist. This section of the Handbook gives a clear answer.

d. ‘be encouraged to ... play a role ... be given responsibility ... be invited to make known’

Everything mentioned in this section has already taken place in some parts of the world, but it has usually been done on the initiative of interchurch families themselves. In many places they have been in the forefront of local ecumenical activities. There is a development here, however, in the sense that bishops and those responsible for promoting Christian unity are now being asked to *invite* this kind of co-operation in ecumenical work from interchurch families. Such families are to receive *active encouragement* to carry out these tasks. It is particularly noteworthy that they are to be invited ‘to study and make known the Church’s teaching concerning the promotion of Christian unity and developments resulting from ecumenical dialogue’. They certainly have an incentive to do this, since they feel that they often suffer in their family lives from ignorance of ecumenical developments by pastors who may be very well-meaning but simply do not know what is ecumenically possible. This document gives them a certain recognised responsibility here that is welcome, although it is not always easy to see how to carry it out.

e. ‘the pain of division’

Previously the word ‘need’ has always been used by Roman documents to refer to eucharistic sharing in interchurch families. ‘Pain’ was used in the British and Irish Bishops’ document *One Bread One Body*, and it is repeated in this text from Cardinal Kasper’s 2003 Address (where it referred especially to eucharistic sharing). It is linked here, however, in a more general way to ‘faithfulness to the guidelines and norms laid down by the Church regarding mixed marriages’. It is not entirely clear what is meant. In any case it is important to bear in mind the point made by Cardinal Kasper in 2003: ‘The pain arises not from the current norms, but from the fact that the separation of Christians has not yet been overcome’. It is faithfulness to the will of Christ and to his prayer for unity that will impel interchurch families ‘to take part more fully and personally in the quest for restored communion between the communities to which they belong’, bringing their particular ‘gifts and challenges’.

Ruth Reardon

Return to [April 2007 IFIR](#)