

**SACRAMENTUM CARITATIS**  
*An Apostolic Exhortation issued by Pope Benedict XVI on 22 February 2007  
reflecting the conclusions of the 2005 Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist*

We are looking here at the paragraphs in *Sacramentum Caritatis* that are particularly relevant to interchurch families.

**1. Sacramental sharing**

**The background**

Interchurch families paid close attention to the meeting of the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist, held in Rome 2-29 October 2005. The subject of eucharistic sharing in interchurch families has been a constant concern to such families ever since they began to meet in groups and associations in the 1960s. They were disappointed that the *lineamenta* in preparation for the Synod, published in February 2004, had spoken in a general derogatory way of 'intercommunion', and made no mention of exceptional possibilities of eucharistic sharing in particular cases and under certain conditions according to pastoral judgement. Such exceptional sacramental sharing in the Eucharist has been of transforming spiritual significance as an experience of grace in some interchurch families. They hoped therefore that the Synod would re-affirm the norms that allowed it, and explain the reasons for these exceptions; they hoped also that there would be a specific reference to the needs of some interchurch families.

An international network of interchurch families, which had begun to find a common voice following the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families near Rome in 2003, therefore submitted a response to the *lineamenta* in November 2004 (for the text of this response see *Issues-Reflections-News*, April 2005). This was sent directly to the Synod office. French and Italian interchurch families also sent in separate responses through their Bishops' Conferences.

**The Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church**

When the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod was published in July 2005, there was a section in this working paper headed 'The Eucharist and Intercommunion' (86). This included a statement on the need for the Catholic Church 'to state clearly what stands in the way of full communion and what conditions exist for the reception of communion *in sacris*'. This reference to the possibility of exceptional admission to communion was very welcome. The preceding section, on 'The Eucharist and Ecumenism' (85), said: 'A favourable rapport has also developed between the Church and communities from the Reformation. The relation of these communities to the Sacrament of the Eucharist is proving, in good part, to be a delicate yet promising experience, as indicated in canon law (c.844) and *The Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (129-131). There was no specific reference to those who share the sacraments of baptism and marriage (*Directory* 159-60), but the working document was certainly an advance on the *lineamenta*.

When the Synod of Bishops opened in October 2005, the report of the General Relator, Cardinal Angelo Scola, said that 'intercommunion' must be distinguished from the admission of individuals to communion, which it would be more exact to call eucharistic hospitality. (Roman documents have traditionally not used the term 'eucharistic hospitality', but spoken of 'eucharistic sharing'. The term 'eucharistic hospitality' was not taken up by the Synod). Further reflection was needed on the relationship between eucharistic communion and ecclesial communion.

Very early in the Synod (5 October 2005) Archbishop John Dew of Wellington, New Zealand, spoke of Catholics married to other baptised Christians. 'We acknowledge them to be baptised in Christ in the sacrament of marriage, but not in the reception of the Eucharist', he said. Apart from this reference specifically to interchurch families, there were a number of interventions by Bishops on the subject of eucharistic sharing, some wanting this to be allowed more freely, and others fearful of anything that might weaken the Catholic position on the close relationship between ecclesial and eucharistic communion.

Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian unity, made a particularly important speech. We give it in full.

### **Cardinal Kasper's intervention, 8 October 2005**

'I am referring to chapters 86 and 87 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* and to the theme: The Eucharist and Ecumenism. I am thankful for what has been said in these chapters, and in the General Report, about the Eucharist as a sacrament of unity. I would like, first of all, to underline what has already been said in the Synod Hall about eucharistic ecclesiology, which is of great importance for the ecumenical movement.

'The theme 'Eucharist and Unity' goes back to what St Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians: 'And as there is one loaf, so we, although there are many of us, are one single body, for we all share in the one loaf' (I Cor.10:17). This assertion 'one loaf – one body' and 'participation in the single chalice', which means 'communion in the single body', modelled the entire tradition of the Church in the Orient and in the West. We find this first of all in St Augustine and once again in St Thomas Aquinas. For Thomas, the 'res', that is, the species and the goal of the Eucharist is not the real presence of Christ, which Thomas no doubt teaches, but for him the real presence is only 'res et sacramentum' that is, an intermediate reality. The 'res' the goal of the Eucharist is the unity of the Church.

'This view was renewed in Vatican Council II, which rediscovered the church as communion, through the common participation in the sole Baptism and the sole Eucharistic bread. On this point, we agree with the Oriental Churches; the Communities that belong to the Reformation had the same concept at their origins, they have only recently abandoned this. Therefore, the Catholic concept of the intimate link between Eucharistic communion and ecclesial communion is not – as some would tend to believe – a vague anti-ecumenical concept, but an ecumenical concept per se.

'However, because of this reason, the terminology, which unfortunately is found also in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, that speaks about 'intercommunion', is ambiguous and in itself contradictory. It should be avoided, since there is not an 'inter' communion, that is a 'between' two communions (two Communities), but rather a communion in the communion of the one body of Christ, which is the Church.

'There is another weak point in the *Instrumentum Laboris*. It mentions '*communicatio in sacris*' only with reference to one principle, whereas Vatican Council II talks about two principles: the unity of the Church and participation in the means of grace. It asserts that the unity of the Church, for the most part, forbids the access of a non-Catholic to the Eucharist, but participation in the means of grace sometimes recommends the admission of a non-Catholic to the Eucharist (*Unitatio redintegratio* 8: cf Ecumenical Directory, 129). For that reason Pope John wrote that it was to him a 'reason for joy' that Catholic ministers in certain particular cases could administer the Sacraments of the Eucharist, Penance and Extreme Unction to the sick to other Christians (encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, 46: encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 46).

'These formulations – 'recommend', 'reason for joy' – mean that this is not merely a concession or exception, but a possibility founded on the Christian concept of every human person, that is on the uniqueness of every person and the uniqueness of every situation of salvation. The human person is never a case of general principle. Canon Law respects this uniqueness of every person. On the basis of and within the limitations of universal law, in certain determinate and particular cases – where the possibility of scandal is remote – it gives way, not to private conscience, but to a canonical act of admission by the competent Bishop. To express this in a better way, it gives room for spiritual discernment, for prudential judgement and the pastoral wisdom of the Bishop (cf CIC can.844).

'As for the criteria for such decisions, we have a development since the publication of the two Codes of Canon Law. The criteria as listed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (n.1394-1401) and in the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (n.293) concerning the ecclesial communities, are four: a grave necessity, spontaneous request (of their own will), required dispositions and manifestation of the Catholic faith regarding the Sacrament. Personally, I am convinced that with these criteria the truly pastoral problems may be resolved in a positive way.

'Because these questions in many countries are of great pastoral importance, I wish to recommend that they be included in the final text or in the propositions.'

## **The Propositions of the Synod**

From the middle of October the Synod considered successive drafts of the set of Propositions it was to pass to Pope Benedict XVI as representing the work of the Synod. The Bishops got together in language groups to work on the texts. One of these groups, English Group C, reported that: 'The question of ecumenical relations in the matter of eucharistic hospitality was also discussed. Our group is proposing that a thorough study be made in regard to the Catholic practice of eucharistic hospitality in order to help local churches overcome the confusion that currently exists among clergy and faithful' (*National Catholic Reporter*, 15 October 2005).

The Propositions received their final vote on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, and were published by Pope Benedict XVI on the following day, the final day of the Synod. (This had never happened before, and it was done in an unofficial Italian translation of the Latin original.)

Proposition 41 is headed: *Admission of Non-Catholic Faithful to Communion*. It reads:

'Based on the communion of all Christians, which the one Baptism already keeps active, though not yet in a complete manner, separation before the Lord's banquet is justly experienced as something painful. Both within the Catholic Church as well as by our non-Catholic brothers and sisters, there often arises as a consequence the urgent request for the possibility of Eucharistic Communion between Catholic Christians and others. It must be clarified that the Eucharist does not only signify our personal communion with Jesus Christ, but above all the full communion of the Church.

'Therefore, we ask non-Catholic Christians to understand and respect the fact that for us, according to biblically based tradition, Eucharistic Communion and ecclesial communion are closely linked; therefore, Eucharistic Communion with non-Catholic Christians is not generally possible. Even more does an ecumenical concelebration have to be excluded. It should also be clarified that, in view of personal salvation, the admission of non-Catholic Christians to the Eucharist, to the sacrament of penance and to the anointing of the sick, in special individual situations, under precise conditions, is possible and even recommended (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 8, 15; Ecumenical Directory 129-31; Code of Canon Law 844, 3-4; Code of the Eastern Churches 671, 4; encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint*, 46; encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 46).

'The Synod insists that the conditions expressed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1398-1401) and its Compendium (293) be observed.'

## **Sacramentum Caritatis**

The post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, dated 22 February 2007, was issued by Pope Benedict XVI in March. We give here the text of section 56.

'56. The subject of participation in the Eucharist inevitably raises the question of Christians belonging to Churches or Ecclesial Communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church. In this regard, it must be said that the intrinsic link between the Eucharist and the Church's unity inspires us to long for the day when we will be able to celebrate the Holy Eucharist together with all believers in Christ, and in this way to express visibly the fullness of unity that Christ willed for his disciples (cf. Jn 17:21). On the other hand, the respect we owe to the sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood prevents us from making it a mere "means" to be used indiscriminately in order to attain that unity. (172) The Eucharist in fact not only manifests our personal communion with Jesus Christ, but also implies full communio with the Church. This is the reason why, sadly albeit not without hope, we ask Christians who are not Catholic to understand and respect our conviction, which is grounded in the Bible and Tradition. We hold that eucharistic communion and ecclesial communion are so linked as to make it generally impossible for non-Catholic Christians to receive the former without enjoying the latter. There would be even less sense in actually concelebrating with ministers of Churches or ecclesial communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church. Yet it remains true that, for the sake of their eternal salvation, individual non-Catholic Christians can be admitted to the Eucharist, the sacrament of Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick. But this is possible only in specific, exceptional situations and requires that certain precisely defined conditions be met (173). These are clearly indicated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (174) and in its Compendium (175). Everyone is obliged to observe these norms faithfully.'

The relevant notes for this section read as follows:

(172) Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint* (25 May 1995), 8: AAS 87 (1995), 925-926.

(173) Cf. *Propositio* 41: Second Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8, 15: John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint* (25 May 1995), 46: AAS 87 (1995), 948; Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (17 April 2003), 45-46: AAS 95 (2003), 463-464, *Code of Canon Law*, can.844, 3-4; *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, can.671, 3-4; Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (25 March 1993), 125, 129-131: AAS 85 (1993), 1087, 1088-1089.

(174) Cf. Nos.1398-1401.

(175) Cf. No.293.

### **From an interchurch family perspective**

The 1980 Synod of Bishops on Marriage and the Family did a very great deal for interchurch families. Cardinal Willebrands, then President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, specifically called for attention to be given to the need of some mixed marriage couples for eucharistic sharing. He pointed out that one of the conditions then in force for admission did not have the theological weight of the others. It was the condition that the non-Catholic Christian who asked for admission did not have access to his own minister 'for a prolonged period'. This was the condition that could seem effectively to exclude interchurch spouses from eucharistic sharing (none of the other conditions automatically did so). When the Code of Canon Law appeared in 1983 it was a cause of great rejoicing to interchurch families that the phrase 'for a prolonged period' had been dropped. It was simply a matter of those 'who cannot approach a minister of their own community'. It looked like a direct answer to Cardinal Willebrand's intervention. Before the Code interchurch families had to point out that since their need for eucharistic sharing is the need of *the couple*, the 'access for a prolonged period' condition was *not relevant* to them. After the Code, they could for the same reason explain that the 'access' condition was *always fulfilled* in a request from an interchurch couple.

There seems to have been little specific mention of interchurch families in the 2005 Synod on the Eucharist. But there is a very important point relevant to their needs to be noted. In Cardinal Kasper's intervention (see the text above) he spoke of 'development' since the Code, and referred to the criteria for admission to communion as those listed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Compendium to the Catechism. *Here the condition about not being able to approach his/her own minister has been dropped altogether.*

This is very relevant to interchurch families. The 1993 Ecumenical Directory identified those who 'share the sacraments of baptism and marriage' as in possible need of eucharistic sharing. No longer could it be said that it is impossible to admit interchurch spouses. But even without the 'prolonged period' phrase, the condition has still been used by some authorities to deny the possibility of eucharistic sharing except on the occasion of specific celebrations that take place in the Catholic Church – such as weddings, baptisms, First Communions, funerals. At other times, it is argued, the non-Catholic Christian in the marriage is able to have recourse to his own minister. But since *Sacramentum Caritatis* clearly cites the Catechism as the source for 'the precisely defined 'conditions' for admission, it is now more difficult to say that it is impossible to admit interchurch spouses except on such occasions. (The British Association of Interchurch Families immediately noticed the significance of the omission of the 'access to own minister' clause when the papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* came out in 1995 [see 'A Source of Joy' in *Interchurch Families* vol. 4, no.1, Jan.1996, pp.4-6]. Somehow it was never noticed that the Catechism had omitted it a year or so before!)

Below are the relevant texts from both the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) and from the *Compendium* (2005).

## **Catechism and Compendium**

The *Catechism* states:

'1401. When, in the Ordinary's judgement, a grave necessity arises, Catholic ministers may give the sacraments of Eucharist, Penance, and Anointing of the Sick to other Christians not in full communion with the Catholic Church, who ask for them of their own will, provided they give evidence of holding the Catholic faith regarding these sacraments and possess the required dispositions.'

The *Compendium* gives us this question and answer:

293. When is it possible to give Holy Communion to other Christians?

Catholic ministers may give Holy Communion licitly to members of the Oriental Churches which are not in full communion with the Catholic Church whenever they ask for it of their own will and possess the required dispositions. Catholic ministers may licitly give Holy Communion to members of other ecclesial communities only if, in grave necessity, they ask for it of their own will, possess the required dispositions, and give evidence of holding the Catholic faith regarding the sacrament.

'Personally I am convinced', said Cardinal Kasper to the Synod, 'that with these criteria the truly pastoral problems may be resolved in a positive way.' Interchurch family experience, shared on an international level, bears this out. In some places these criteria have been applied in a positive way for the good of interchurch families (and in so doing have helped to contribute to Christian unity). In other places there is still much educational work to be done before this happens. Hearts and minds have to be convinced before all the possibilities opened up by the developing norms are appreciated and put into practice.

Especially in view of their disappointment in reading the *lineamenta* preparing the Synod, interchurch families will be grateful to Cardinal Kasper for his recommendation to the Synod that these criteria should be included in its final text. They are grateful to the Synod for accepting this recommendation, and to Pope Benedict XVI for incorporating it into *Sacramentum Caritatis*.

## **2. Marriage and Eucharist**

So far as the need of some interchurch families for eucharistic sharing is concerned, a great deal hinges on a deepening understanding of the nature of marriage between Christians, and its relation to the eucharist. We conclude, therefore, with the quotation of a passage from *Sacramentum Caritatis* relating to marriage.

'27. The Eucharist, as the sacrament of charity, has a particular relationship with the love of man and woman united in marriage (*Familiaris Consortio*, 57). Pope John Paul II frequently spoke of the nuptial character of the Eucharist and its special relationship with the sacrament of Matrimony: "The Eucharist is the sacrament of our redemption. It is the sacrament of the Bridegroom and the Bride" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 26). Moreover, "the entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. Already Baptism, the entry into the People of God, is a nuptial mystery; it is so to speak the nuptial bath which precedes the wedding feast, the Eucharist" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1617). The Eucharist inexhaustibly strengthens the indissoluble unity and love of every Christian marriage. By the power of the sacrament, the marriage bond is intrinsically linked to the eucharistic unity of Christ the Bridegroom and his Bride, the Church (cf Eph.5:31-32). The mutual consent that husband and wife exchange in Christ, which establishes them as a community of life and love, also has a eucharistic dimension. Indeed, in the theology of Saint Paul, conjugal love is a sacramental sign of Christ's love for his Church, a love culminating in the Cross, the expression of his "marriage" with humanity and at the same time the origin and heart of the Eucharist. For this reason the Church manifests her particular spiritual closeness to all those who have built their family on the sacrament of Matrimony (*Proposito* 8). The family – the domestic Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 11) – is a primary sphere of the Church's life, especially because of its decisive role in the Christian education of children (*Proposito* 8).'

*Ruth Reardon*

Return to [April 2007 IFIR](#)