

## **FORTY YEARS OF INTERCHURCH FAMILIES**

The British Association of Interchurch Families celebrated its fortieth anniversary at The Hayes conference centre in Swanwick, Derbyshire over the Bank Holiday weekend, August 23-25 2008. Forty years earlier, in November 1968, the first national conference for mixed marriage couples had gathered at Spode House, the Dominican conference centre in Staffordshire. It was at that first meeting that the term 'interchurch marriages' was coined, to distinguish couples where a Roman Catholic is married to a Christian of another communion and both are committed to their respective churches, from other kinds of mixed marriages. The term has gained acceptance in many parts of the English-speaking world.

The Second Vatican Council had brought the Roman Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement. Pope John XXIII created a Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity early in the preparatory period, observers from other Christian churches were invited to the Council and treated as honoured guests, and the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism was promulgated in 1964. Inevitably the attitude of the Catholic Church to mixed marriages would have to change. In 1963 Dr Visser 't Hooft, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, called mixed marriages and religious liberty test cases of the reality and depth of Catholic commitment to Christian unity. The conciliar Declaration on Religious Liberty was agreed in 1965, and the council fathers debated mixed marriages during the final session, but ran out of time and voted that the practical outcome should be left to the Pope. What was clear was that change was inevitable; in the light of Vatican II no longer could the Catholic partner be exhorted to 'convert' the other, nor the other partner be made to promise not to 'pervert' the Catholic's faith and practice. No longer could both partners be required to promise that all the children of the marriage should be baptised and brought up as Catholics.

The *Eastern Churches Quarterly* changed its name to *One in Christ* in 1965, marking the fact that it was concerned not only with Catholic relations with eastern churches but also with general ecumenism. Spiritual ecumenism and pastoral questions were given particular importance. Even before this the *ECQ* had shown itself concerned with Anglican-Catholic marriages by publishing a dialogue on the subject between Martin Reardon and Fr Henry St John OP in the spring of 1964. The latter raised as a possibility, in cases where both partners were practising, 'educating some of the children in the Catholic faith and others in that of the non-Catholic parent'. But a much bolder proposal was put forward in an editorial in *One in Christ* four years later (no.2, 1968). Here the suggestion was that in some cases it might be possible for parents in a mixed marriage to bring up their children within both their churches, and the children might not need to opt for one or the other until they left home. Responses to the proposal were requested.

In the meantime *One in Christ* had been reporting on the dialogues on mixed marriages that had begun between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches. These had taken place both in the Joint Working Group with the World Council of Churches, and in bilaterals with Methodists and Anglicans, and more locally in a Catholic/Reformed colloquium in the USA. It had published the text of the Instruction *Matrimonii Sacramentum*, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1966, and compared it with both the 1917 Canon Law and with the conciliar *Votum* on mixed marriages. It had studied the way in which the Instruction was being applied in France and in other continental countries, and this was important, as it seemed to be ignored in England. New things were happening elsewhere. There were dispensations for mixed marriages where no promise was made by the non-Catholic partner about the Catholic upbringing of the children, and simply a promise 'to do what was possible' by the Catholic. There were weddings in the other partner's church, weddings in the context of Mass at which the

other Christian partner could receive communion, and joint pastoral care of mixed marriages. But nothing of the kind was happening in England.

This was the climate in which the first Spode meeting took place. The idea of mixed marriage couples getting together came from a Congregational husband who had not spoken to his wife for a week after their baby was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church. His minister referred them to a mixed couple he had heard of: Martin and Ruth Reardon. Martin knew of many cases of difficulty over the promise on the Anglican side, as a member of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Roman Catholic relations. I had been trying hard as a member of the Roman Catholic Ecumenical Commission for England and Wales to work for implementation of the 1966 Instruction in England, together with the Secretary, Fr John Coventry, SJ. (The episcopal chair said it was *impossible* that Catholics would ever be allowed to bring up their children in a non-Catholic church.) We had at Spode 68 a Catholic girl who had married an Anglican priest earlier in the year in an Anglican church because they could not make the promise. They had tried hard to get a dispensation, and since the wedding they had been trying to get a convalidation, but the condition remained that the promise must be made. She had not been able to receive communion for months. But we also had at Spode an Anglican husband who had been given communion in Italy when he married an Italian girl the year before.

I think that all the future developments in the Association of Interchurch Families over the next 40 years were there in embryo at Spode 68. There was the sheer liberation of finding that there were other couples like ourselves – so many had felt isolated, treated as oddities by Catholic clergy if the non-Catholic partner in the marriage was practising in another church. I remember John Coventry's big smile on the first evening when he said: 'They're so pleased to meet one another – we must do this again.' There has been an annual conference ever since, moving to Swanwick in 1987 when Spode House closed. We formed an association for mutual support in 1969, and in 1970 we set up the first area groups, in London, Liverpool and Sheffield. Later we became a support network that could offer information to couples and clergy far beyond our own membership. In the 90s we moved our headquarters out of a private home into an office in London, where we patiently collected papers on different topics into packs that we could dispatch to enquirers – now of course we can use the internet.

Then, there were the canonical questions and how we were going to deal with them, and the underlying issues of conscience and authority which came to have great importance for interchurch families. The question of getting married and the promise dominated Spode 68. John Coventry gave a learned account of how the 1966 Instruction was being applied by some of the bishops in other countries of Europe. In 1970 the papal *motu proprio Matrimonia Mixta* used the experience gained from the 1966 Instruction to extend to the whole Roman Catholic Church the practice of asking only a qualified assurance from the Catholic partner about the Catholic baptism and upbringing of the children (to do all they could). No promise was asked from the other partner. This was an *enormous* change, absolutely crucial for interchurch families. Dispensations from canonical form could be given for the wedding to take place in the church of the non-Catholic partner, and there was provision for weddings to take place in the context of Mass. *One in Christ* studied the different ways in which *Matrimonia Mixta* was applied in different countries.

A very important question raised at Spode 68 was that of the upbringing of children in both churches as suggested in the *One in Christ* editorial of spring 1968, and the underlying issue of double belonging for the whole family. We did not then have the benefit of the responses to the editorial that were later printed in *One in Christ*. However, at Spode 68 a Catholic sister who was a child psychologist envisaged no psychological problems for the children provided the parents

were fully united in their approach – and startled us by suggesting that the children might never need to choose between the churches. And whereas the changes to the promise made in the motu proprio of 1970 envisaged cases in which the children would not be brought up in the Roman Catholic Church but in another church, *Matrimonia Mixta* could actually be used as a basis for dual upbringing. If the Catholic had to do all possible for the baptism and upbringing of the children in his or her own church, well so in conscience did the other partner – and they could do it together, and not in opposition. In the forty years since then we have garnered the reflections of young adults who have had the experience of dual upbringing. They have discovered it to be enriching rather than confusing.

At Spode 68 we had a Bible study on marriage as a covenant relationship, reflecting the love of God for his people, of Christ for his church. It moved right through from the ‘one flesh’ of Genesis to the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation. One family put their talk on family prayers and worship in a mixed marriage on tape for the conference, because one of their five children went down with chicken pox on the very day they were all setting off for Spode. Later we realised that marital spirituality is fundamental for interchurch families – and family spirituality too. We applied the term ‘domestic church’ to interchurch families and are now exploring it further. We also discovered that our experience of cross-frontier marriage was of use in marriage preparation for all kinds of ‘mixed’ marriages, not just for interchurch marriages like ours.

Spode 68 was itself an exercise in the pastoral care of mixed marriages, in which couples themselves could help and support one another, encouraged by the clergy. A young priest with pastoral experience in a new town talked about the pastoral care of mixed marriages, and what might be possible. Soon after that we had considerable input into the document prepared by the Joint Working Group of the British Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales and in Scotland, entitled *The Joint Pastoral Care of Interchurch Marriages in England, Wales and Scotland*, published in 1971. Twenty years later the Association was involved in preparing the guidelines for the pastoral care of interchurch families, *Churches Together in Marriage*, prepared by the Group for Local Unity of Churches Together in England in 1994. We are still trying to encourage greater pastoral understanding of the need experienced by interchurch families for sacramental sharing – shared celebrations of weddings and baptisms, as well as sharing communion – as an expression and a deepening of their belonging in one ‘domestic church’ which is nourished by two church traditions. Much progress has already been made.

We claimed, in our final statement from Spode 68, that some mixed marriage couples had experienced the reality of Christian unity in a way not yet experienced by all members of their churches. This is still true. A desire to promote Christian unity has been a constant for interchurch families throughout the past forty years. They have a particular incentive to take part in ecumenical work, and many have been found working for unity at local, national and international levels. Their experience of living in one another’s traditions and growing in mutual understanding and love is a particular contribution they can make to the ecumenical movement; they can be signs to the churches on their way towards unity.

Spode 68 produced a final statement, which was sent to the meeting of the Anglican Communion-Roman Catholic Commission on Mixed Marriages that came together at Pineta Saccetti a few days later. It was the first of many papers sent to church leaders and theologians over the years. An outstanding one was that entitled *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* adopted by the Second World Gathering of interchurch families from eleven countries held near Rome in July 2003. A small representative group from associations and groups of interchurch

families including those from North America and Australia went in 2005 to discuss it with some of the staff of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and were much encouraged by their visit. Spode 68 had studied what had become possible in other countries, so far as the promise was concerned. At Spode 1969 we had speakers from France and Holland. In 1970 the joint pastoral care guidelines already mentioned were heavily influenced by some recently produced in France. International English-speaking conferences of interchurch families began in 1980, and the Rome Gathering in 2003 used four official languages. There is now an International Network of Interchurch Families.

English interchurch families were very pleased to have with them at their fortieth anniversary conference at Swanwick representative couples from other countries: from Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Ireland and Switzerland. There has been no large multilingual gathering since Rome 2003, although there was an English-speaking international conference in Australia in 2005, but international networking is carried on not only through the internet but by sending couples to other associations' conferences. Recently a couple from England attended a conference in the Ukraine that was organised by the Ecumenical Institute at Lviv together with French *foyers mixtes*. International groups also get together to plan attendance at ecumenical events such as Assemblies of the World Council of Churches. The latest occasion was the Third European Ecumenical Assembly held at Sibiu in Romania in 2007.

At Swanwick 2008 there were reminiscences from those who had been at Spode in the early days of AIF. There were testimonies from some of those who had contributed more recently to the wider ecumenical movement – as County Ecumenical Officers, on the Roman Catholic/Methodist Committee, as interchurch family representatives in Churches Together in England, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, and so on. Have interchurch families made a difference? Our guest speakers at the conference, Canon Gregory Cameron, Deputy General Secretary of the Anglican Communion, Canon Bob Fyffe, General Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, and Fr Gerry Hughes, SJ, considered this question and seemed to think so. Another speaker was Thomas Knieps Port-le-Roi from Louvain University, who came to update the conference on the current state of the international interchurch families project on the notion of 'domestic church' and its relevance to our situation. Old friends came to join us at the celebration dinner, including Dame Mary Tanner, now a President of the World Council of Churches, and Fr Robert Murray, SJ, as well as some of the 'older children' who no longer come regularly to conferences, but want to remain in contact.

We had much to celebrate at the fortieth anniversary conference at Swanwick. But it was also a time for renewed commitment, for much remains to be done. We yearn for the time when there will be no more interchurch families, because all differences will have been gathered together and lived fully within one communion. Meanwhile, to quote the Rome paper, 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'.

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