

Toward a Language of Faithful Possibilities: Interchurch Families and Receptive Ecumenism

Riccardo Larini, in his presentation at the first Conference on Receptive Ecumenism, held in Durham, England, in 2006, said. “Whenever two different Christian communities meet, what actually occurs is the encounter between different cultural-linguistic worlds.”¹

We interchurch couples find ourselves squarely situated in that statement. We come together in love, and find ourselves in an encounter between different cultural-linguistic worlds. It is in this concrete circumstance that we experience the call, and discover our vocation, to the work of receptive ecumenism, a work which remains part and parcel of our lives 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year, for as long as we live. Rejection or discouragement of the vocation can lead to disastrous consequences for our lives of faith, and even our marriages. Entry into that vocation, grounded in our firm and abiding love for each other, and especially if supported by those around, can bear the most wondrous fruit, for ourselves, our families, our churches, and our world. We discover and receive not only the gift the other brings and is, but the gift we bring and are, in new and wondrous ways.

But to return to the concept of cultural-linguistic worlds... When my wife and I married, I a Roman Catholic and she an Anglican, we discovered that while our faith was in the same Lord, our language of faith seemed to differ from that of the other. Indeed it was so. Over time, we had to listen, learn, come to understand each other’s language. Then we found we had to go beyond, to develop a new language, because neither the language that fit beautifully the world of her tradition, nor the language that fit, equally beautifully, the world of my tradition, fit *our* world. Let me give you one simple reason why that might be. From canon 1060 of the 1917 Code of Canon Law expressly forbidding any and all mixed marriages², we now have some 50% of all marriages in our Catholic diocese denoted as ‘mixed’. This is a new situation, one which calls for a new way of thinking, and a new language to make sense of that experience.

We find ourselves living a tension not of our own making, but very real nonetheless. The scriptures proclaim³, our churches believe and teach⁴, and we experience and believe, that in marriage we two become *one*, a unity so real, so profound, that it is recognized as being indissoluble. Then we find ourselves facing the neuralgic question: where does that *one* made so by God take and eat, take and drink? Phrased in the language of negation, if one/half of that *one* is not welcome to receive at *this* Eucharistic celebration in *this* place, how can the other half of that *one* be welcome, and receive? Do we live faithfully the unity of our marriage, and forego the Eucharist? Or do we divide, go to our respective churches to receive the great sacrament of unity – and in dividing, deny the unity of our marriage?

We are called to be God’s sacrament of love for each other and, as *one*, for the world. And yet, our churches find themselves seemingly unable to enable us to receive and respond to what Professor Peter Ochs, speaking at the 2nd Conference on Receptive Ecumenism in Durham, 2009, aptly described as God’s attractive energy, the Eucharist.

If God attracts us, calls us forward as *one*, how can we not be welcomed and enabled to respond?

I turn now to a linguistic issue: in the English-speaking world, we use the phrase ‘double-belonging’. This sense of belonging to the Body of Christ through two local churches becomes, over time, a very powerful and beautiful reality. Yet, with some validity, the Catholic Church has great difficulty with the term, as it seems to imply a sense of belonging to two Churches, when in fact there is only one Church, no matter how many different expressions there may be of it. The French at times use the term ‘double insertion’, which to some extent attempts to address this concern by suggesting that there is one reality into which we are inserted, though through two different insertions; but frankly, it doesn’t have the same linguistic sense in English.

We find ourselves today, like the early Church, attempting to develop a language which makes faith sense of a very real experience in a new and ever-growing situation, a language which speaks of living *today* in our marriages the unity for which Christ prayed⁵, even while that unity remains still in the making.

This language which we are moving toward must be faithful to the apostolic tradition. Yet it must be open to new possibilities consonant with the new situation.

And so I invite you, wherever you are, to take part, with friends or alone, in a ‘blue-sky’ exercise. In response to the steps below, ‘write words’ in the vast expanse of clear blue sky. Most of our words will disperse, drift away, and exist no more. Hopefully some will touch others, begin to form clouds, and eventually bring life-giving moisture to the parched earth below.

I invite you to do three things:

1. First, share with us what you have received from interchurch families, in what you may have seen, heard or read.
2. Then, I invite you to share words or concepts that may spring to mind which give form to that experience, help to speak of it, make sense of it.
3. Finally, let us trust the Spirit of God to inspire us to hear and receive from the other, that together we may open doors to new and faithful possibilities.

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¹ Riccardo Larini, “Text and Contexts – Hermeneutical Reflections on Receptive Ecumenism” *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul D. Murray, 89-101. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press Inc. 2008

² Bp Mark Ouellet, speaking at the 10th international conference of interchurch families, Edmonton, Canada, 2001. <http://www.interchurchfamilies.org/confer/caif/ouellet-e.shtm>

³ Gen 2:24, Mt 19:6, Mk 10:8

⁴ cf Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part Two, Section Two, Chapter Three, Article 7

⁵ Jn 17:21