

THE EUCHARIST: SOURCE AND SUMMIT OF THE LIFE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH

A Response to the *Lineamenta* in Preparation for the Synod of Bishops, 2-29 October 2005

30 November 2004

1 A response on behalf of an international interchurch family network

We are responding together to the preparatory paper for the 2005 Synod of Bishops because we as interchurch families believe and experience that the eucharist is central in our marriages and family life.

Who are we? The groups and associations listed below represent marriages in most of which one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Pentecostal, community/new church, Waldensian, United, Baptist, or another kind of Protestant. We also have a few Orthodox within our membership. There are large numbers of mixed Christian marriages within our countries. **Our Associations represent mixed Christian families who feel called to contribute to promoting Christian unity.**

We held our second multi-lingual World Gathering of Interchurch Families near Rome in July 2003. Cardinal Kasper addressed an encouraging Message to this Gathering; it is printed in the *Information Service* of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 2004/I-II, pp.78-79. The Gathering endorsed a paper entitled *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* (the Rome 2003 paper). It is available in English, French, German and Italian. We append a copy to this response, and refer you especially to section D7 on eucharistic sharing.

We represent interchurch family groups in the following countries:

Australia: groups of interchurch families in different states are working together to prepare an International Conference of Interchurch Families to be held in Newcastle, NSW, in August 2005.

Austria: the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft konfessionsverbindender Familien* (ARGE Ökumene).

Britain: the *Association of Interchurch Families* (AIF).

Canada: the *Canadian Association of Interchurch Families* (CAIF).

France: the *Association Française des Foyers Mixtes Interconfessionnels Chrétiens* (AFFMIC).

Germany: the *Netzwerk Ökumene: konfessionsverbindende Paare und Familien*.

Ireland: The *Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association* (NIMMA).

Italy: Groups of *Famiglie miste interconfessionali* meet in Northern Italy, centred on the Pinerolo area.

Switzerland: the *Association des Foyers Interconfessionnels de Suisse* (AFI-CH).

United States of America: The *American Association of Interchurch Families* (AAIF).

We are also in contact with interchurch families in **Belgium, Croatia, Hungary, New Zealand, and Scandinavia.**

2 The Synod of Bishops on Marriage and the Family, 1980

Representatives of Interchurch Families in Australia, the Association of Interchurch Families in England and Wales, the Irish Association of Interchurch Families and the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association met in the English Lake District in May 1980. This Rydal conference addressed a letter to the 1980 Synod of Bishops concerning the pastoral care of interchurch families. One section of this letter dealt with eucharistic communion. It explained that couples who had worked through the tensions of the burdens imposed on their marriage by the divisions between the churches experience a great sorrow when they are unable to express and to build up this unity by sharing in communion at the Eucharist. They feel intensely the 'serious spiritual need' for admission together to communion for which provision seemed to be made in the 1967 Directory. We quote from the letter:

'Couples who have been allowed, sometimes with full episcopal approval, to share in communion together on the basis of a shared eucharistic faith, can testify to the joy and peace and intensification of their desire to increase and deepen unity both in the family and between their churches which this sharing brings with it. Couples who have been refused communion together have to speak of the frustration, the sense of rejection and near despair which can all too easily overcome them in this situation, and may even lead to the danger of falling away from the faith. Our Associations therefore ask for an explicit statement from Roman Catholic authorities that the serious spiritual need of interchurch couples and families constitutes a situation different from that of an individual's separation from the ministry of his own church, but nevertheless laying a claim on the pastoral responsibility of bishops.'

Interchurch families were greatly affirmed by the intervention of Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, then President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, at the 1980 Synod of Bishops on 'Mixed Marriages and their Christian Families' (text in the *Information Service* of the SPCU, 1980/III-IV, pp.116-18). He pointed out that the marriage of two Christians who have been baptised in different churches is a true sacrament and gives rise to a 'domestic church'. The partners are called to a unity that reflects the union of Christ with the Church, and the family is bound to bear witness before the world, a witness based on that 'spiritual union ... which is founded on a common faith and hope, and works through love'. He spoke of 'spiritual communion' as 'an outstanding feature in many mixed families' which 'eventually affects even sacramental life and prompts the partners to ask permission to approach the Holy Eucharist together. For this is a moment at which they keenly feel their division, and also feel keenly their need for the spiritual nourishment that is the Eucharist.' He asked 'whether the time has now come to

study afresh the possibility of admitting non-Catholic partners in mixed marriages to Eucharistic Communion in the Catholic Church, obviously in individual cases and after due examination.’ He listed the conditions for admission given in the 1972 Instruction: eucharistic faith in conformity with that of the Catholic Church, a request made of the non-Catholic’s own accord, the experience of a real need for the sacrament. But, he said, there is a fourth condition: that the non-Catholic be unable for a prolonged period to have recourse to a minister of his own Church, ‘to my mind this condition is less closely connected with eucharistic doctrine and faith’.

Interchurch families were greatly encouraged, therefore, when the phrase ‘for a prolonged period’ did not appear in the conditions for admission given in the Code of Canon Law in 1983 (can.844); this opened the way for the admission of baptised non-Catholic spouses to communion in the Catholic Church. They were particularly grateful when the 1993 Ecumenical Directory followed this up by identifying those who ‘share the sacraments of baptism and marriage’ as in possible need of eucharistic sharing, at the wedding and more generally (159, 160).

3 Marriage and Eucharist

We would now ask the 2005 Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist to show its concern for the expressed need felt by some interchurch families for eucharistic sharing, just as the 1980 Synod on Marriage and the Family did. The 1980 Synod, in promoting marriage and family life in the Catholic Church, did not forget that mixed Christian families share the same vocation as Catholic families. It was realised that they too need supportive pastoral care, and in particular, that a way must be found to respond to the serious need that some experience to share the Eucharist.

Familiaris Consortio, in affirming the work of the 1980 Synod, spoke constantly of Christian families, and rarely found it necessary to refer specifically to Catholic Christian families. Because of their baptism, mixed Christian spouses too, in their intimate community of conjugal life and love, are caught up into the spousal covenant of Christ with his Church (FC 13). They too are called to experience a new and original communion of which the Holy Spirit is the source; they too constitute a specific epiphany and realisation of ecclesial communion and so should be called a ‘domestic church’ (21). Their little domestic church, too, ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates (52). As parents they too share an ecclesial service of evangelisation and catechesis (53). ‘The Eucharist is the very source of Christian marriage’ for them too. In the Eucharistic Sacrifice they too as ‘Christian spouses encounter the source from which their own marriage covenant flows, is interiorly structured and continuously renewed. ... In the Eucharistic gift of love the Christian family finds its foundation and soul of its “communion” and its “mission”: by partaking in the Eucharistic bread, the different members of the Christian family become one body, which reveals and shares in the wider unity of the Church’ (57).

4 Our request to the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist: Source & Summit of the Church’s Life & Mission

Since the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church has stressed the intimate connection between marriage and the Eucharist. We ask that the 2005 Synod of Bishops will not overlook those mixed couples and families who are in communion with the Catholic Church not only by their baptism but also by their marriage, those for whom the Eucharist is source and summit of their life and mission.

It is with this hope that we are responding to the *lineamenta* published in preparation for the Synod, responding particularly to Question 17 on ‘The Eucharist and Ecclesial Intercommunion’ and to the section from Chapter 3 on ‘The Eucharist: *Signum Unitatis*, 27, 28 and 29.

In particular we would ask for:

- a very clear distinction made between formal ‘intercommunion’ between churches that is not yet possible in Catholic ecclesiology, and exceptional possibilities of eucharistic sharing in particular cases and under certain conditions according to pastoral judgement. This exceptional sacramental sharing in the Eucharist has been of such transforming spiritual significance as an experience of grace to some mixed Christian families that we should not like to see it confused with any generalised ‘intercommunion’.
- an explicit reminder that sometimes admission to communion is to be commended (*Decree on Ecumenism*, 8, *Ecumenical Directory*, 129) and is indeed a ‘source of joy’ to Pope John Paul II and to the Church (*Ut Unum Sint*, 46, repeated in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 46). It is a source of deep joy to some mixed Christian families.
- an explanation of the reasons for which eucharistic sharing is to be commended in some cases for those who ‘share the sacraments of baptism and marriage’ (*Ecumenical Directory*, 160).
- a re-examination of the language used in Question 17 about reciprocity: does not the ‘may not’ of *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 46, imply that reciprocity is not permitted, whereas the ‘cannot’ of Question 17 implies that it is physically or morally impossible? (The *Ecumenical Directory*, 131, says that Catholics may only make a reciprocal request from a minister in whose Church the Eucharist is valid, or from a minister known to be validly ordained according to the Catholic teaching on ordination.)

We are very grateful for an opportunity to make our response to the *lineamenta* in preparation for the 2005 Synod.