“Although the spouses in a mixed marriage share the sacraments of baptism and marriage, eucharistic sharing can only be exceptional.” (1993 Directory, n.160)

In a developing situation a change in rules normally follows a change in practice. In some places the provision for eucharistic sharing for interchurch families to be found in the 1993 Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism appears to be simply a re-statement of current practice, because there has already been a liberal interpretation of the norms of canon law (Catholic ministers may lawfully admit to communion other Christians who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church if they are judged to be in serious need, make a spontaneous request, share the Catholic eucharistic faith and cannot ask a minister of their own community).

It is the last condition which has often caused difficulty for interchurch families (although the “for a prolonged period” of earlier legislation did not reappear in the Code of Canon Law). But one Catholic parish priest wrote to us suggesting that the tone of the AIF leaflet on Eucharistic Sharing was over-cautious: he obeys canon law to the letter, and it says communion can be given if a minister of the other church is not available. “If you are in a Roman Catholic church it is very unlikely that there will be an Anglican priest or Methodist minister hiding behind a pillar ready to pop out and celebrate the eucharist for you. So no other minister is available, which I think entitles the person to receive communion. That’s the principle I work on at any rate!”

However, in other places the new Ecumenical Directory could make a real difference to interchurch families – see the First Communion stories which follow.

First, Roman Catholic bishops and priests can now be reassured that the exceptions of canon law on admission to communion do apply to mixed marriages, because the Directory explicitly says so. (Some, of course, have been assuming that this is so for some time, but now it is clear for all to see.)

Secondly, since exceptional eucharistic sharing can now become official and known to all, it may become less necessary for interchurch families to make a choice between on the one hand keeping a low profile and receiving communion together discreetly (for the sake of family unity), and on the other playing their full part in the local ecumenical scene (where they may have a lot to offer). This is a choice which many have felt obliged to make. It may perhaps become easier for families to share their real experience with their churches. Let us pray that interchurch families may indeed become more fully “resources and responsibilities in a changing church” in this International Year of the Family 1994.

Perhaps the worst thing that can happen is for interchurch couples and families to come to take their separation at the eucharist for granted, to learn to live with it, to forget how wrong it is simply because it is humanly impossible to live in a permanent state of intense pain.

What interchurch families can do now – and this will surely serve the whole ecumenical movement – is to search out with imagination and persistence those exceptional occasions and situations when they can share communion together in a fully recognised way. They will thus be demonstrating visibly and officially to their respective communities those bonds of imperfect communion which their communities already rejoice to acknowledge between themselves. They will be seen to be a sign and promise calling the churches to grow together into fuller communion.

RR
FIRST HOLY COMMUNION

Mary looked forward to receiving her First Holy Communion in the summer of 1993. In early spring Father, Mother and Mary herself wrote letters to their Catholic bishop asking him to allow Father (an Anglican) to join Mary and her Mother in receiving communion on that joyful family occasion. They received a handwritten reply.

The bishop’s reply

"Please excuse me for writing one letter in answer to three such nice letters. I understand how you feel and I would like to agree to your request but I am sorry that I am not able to do so. You will realise that I do not make the rules about receiving Holy Communion.

"In our view to receive Holy Communion is to express full acceptance of the faith of our church and full belonging. So we see the sharing of Holy Communion as the celebration of full unity. This is the goal for which we are working and praying.

"I know this will be a great disappointment to you all. You will know that a Christian who is not a Roman Catholic can come up at communion time and receive a blessing. In this way you will be spiritually in communion with Our Lord Jesus Christ and each other. I hope you will feel able to accept this practice and so enhance Mary’s happiness on her First Communion Day."

This reply was indeed a great disappointment. After much thought and prayer Mother wrote again to the Bishop.

Mother’s second letter

"You have no doubt gathered from the letter my husband sent you that he shares the Catholic eucharistic faith. He has been receiving a blessing at the altar rails for about twelve years now. (We have been married for twenty years.) We understand that the Second Vatican Council did not rule out sacramental sharing, stating in the Decree on Ecumenism that two principles are involved in this while Christians are not yet fully united in one Church. It should be a sign of the unity of the Church and it should provide a sharing in the means of grace, so that while the first principle generally rules out sharing communion, the second principle sometimes commends it, and what is to be done in concrete cases depends on the local bishop. You do have all the episcopal powers necessary to make exceptions to the normal practice.

"We read in Canon Law that there are various conditions under which a bishop may admit other Christians to communion. There must be a serious need, there must be a spontaneous request, the Christian who asks must be unable to go to a minister of his or her own community, and must share the Catholic eucharistic faith.

"We believe that our case fits the conditions laid down. For the sake of our interchurch marriage we feel a great and urgent need to express our unity as one family in Christ on Mary’s First Holy Communion Day. We are fully aware of the facts why we are unable to share Communion together but we feel very strongly that this is a special needs case. We are a ‘grave and pressing need’.

"We ask and pray that you reconsider our request as it is of the greatest importance to all concerned . . . We know how difficult your position can be and pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to bless you . . .”

The reply was a brief typed note.

The bishop’s second reply

"Thank you for your letter. In referring to the conditions for admission to Holy Communion you have expressed my difficulty, namely that a Christian who asks to be admitted to Holy Communion in our church must not have access to a Minister of his or her own church. This is a condition that is particularly difficult to fulfill in this country since other churches are easy to reach.

"I am sorry to disappoint you again, but the conditions are clearly laid down.”

Another problem

Meanwhile a problem had come up at local level. The parish priest had at first agreed that Mary was ready for her First Communion, and that her mother (a trained RE teacher) could prepare her. Mother decided to use the “Here I Am” syllabus, because it is child-centred and uses the child’s own religious and everyday experiences. Later the parish priest suggested that “Here I Am” was not really good enough, and he could only allow Mary to make her First Communion if her parents promised to bring her to Mass every week. This was a problem, since on alternate Sundays the family worships with the local Anglican church.

Letters and discussions continued. In the end Mary made her First Communion elsewhere – a joyful celebration for all concerned, in spite of the agony beforehand.

But then came the question of Mary continuing to receive communion in her Catholic parish. Mother wrote again to the bishop. It was a very long letter; we give extracts below.

Mother’s third letter

"The point about my husband receiving with me, is that we need to receive together as one family, so the availability of Anglican ministers is of little use.

"We do have another interchurch problem. Our parish priest is aware of the fact that we are a unified domestic church and support both churches on alternate Sundays. We made this decision twenty years ago before we were married. It was the personal view of the late Archbishop Beck that the interchurch child should be brought up in a loving and religious environment according to the dictates of the parents’ consciences taking into regard all the aspects of a truly Christian marriage. He welcomed our marriage; it was ‘the bright light of complete ecumenism’. He gave us full
permission for my husband to receive Holy Communion at our nuptial Mass—prayers and the blessing being given by my father-in-law [an Anglican priest].

“We fully realise the age, range of experience and lack of knowledge on current ecumenical matters of our parish priest. We understand that he thinks he is doing the best and it is what his conscience dictates. He told us that he would give Mary her First Communion only on condition that she must attend a Catholic Mass every Sunday. The Communion syllabus he was using stated this and she would be very confused if she didn’t attend Mass every Sunday. He was also concerned about the religious facts that Mary might be taught at the Anglican church. (We can assure you that the instruction runs parallel to the RC Sunday School.) This would add to her confusion, he insisted. We pointed out that Mary enjoys the fellowship and love of both churches.

“Unfortunately he stated that Mary attending the Anglican church didn’t have any real spiritual value, especially when it came to the Eucharist. The Church of England was ‘going through the motions’ and wasn’t a proper Church at all as there was no direct Apostolic Succession, so the Holy Spirit couldn’t work. This contradicts the 1993 Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism which states (n.107) ‘Catholics ought to show a sincere respect for the liturgical and sacramental discipline of other Churches.’ Our priest finished by saying that the Roman Catholic Church is the only way to salvation, no other way really counts. The 1993 Directory clearly states (n.107 a,b) ‘The Churches not in full communion with the Catholic Church have by no means been deprived of significance and value in the mystery of salvation, for the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as a means of salvation.’ He left us to think the matter over; we must promise to send Mary to Mass or no communion.

“We wrote back within 48 hours stating we were unable to make this promise and give a cast-iron guarantee that Mary attend Mass every Sunday as we are an interchurch family. We earnestly prayed about this painful situation. We consulted our clergy friends who offered to put an end to Mary’s spiritual suffering by giving her First Communion earlier this month. A fortnight ago we told our parish priest that Mary had made her First Communion and asked him if he would give her communion. He was very sure and told us it wasn’t up to him but up to you. He would come round and give us his verdict. We are patiently awaiting his visit.

“We have brought up Mary in a good, Catholic, and ecumenical atmosphere, to the best of our ability and we do our utmost to be supportive and informative parents giving her an enriched and positive Christian upbringing. The demands our parish priest makes on us he doesn’t impose on the average Catholic family. We feel it would be too much of a strain on Mary to see other children receiving their First Communion and not be allowed to communicate herself.

“We are praying for our parish priest and you, of course, are always remembered in our prayers, especially by our ecumenical prayer group . . .”

The bishop replied quickly, as the First Communion Mass would soon be taking place. He said that he had spoken to the parish priest on the telephone.

The bishop’s third reply

“I understand that Mary has already made her First Communion before the rest of the children . . .

“I believe that you receive Anglican communion on occasion and this is against our eucharistic discipline, which sees the reception of Holy Communion as an indication of full acceptance and full belonging. As you know we relate Holy Communion to being in full communion ecclesiastically. There is imperfect communion between our Churches as you mentioned in your letter.

“It is a difficult situation and I know you want to do what is right and what is best for Mary. If your parish priest agrees, I think Mary could go to Communion with the others and you could continue your discussions with him about the future.”

Mother telephoned the parish priest who came round to talk. The parents asked if he had come to a decision. He seemed unhappy that the bishop had left the decision to him. There was long discussion about the Anglican Church and about Father’s eucharistic faith. Finally he spoke of the “compassion that Christ had on the cross to forgive our sins” and “family commitment” and agreed that Mary should receive communion—a decision which left the parents “very joyful but totally exhausted”. Mary continues to receive communion in the Catholic parish, and a special house mass was celebrated by a priest friend for godparents and others who could not get to Mary’s First Communion.
AN INTERCHURCH FAMILY IN THE COUNTRY

We have been “rural” Christians for most of our married life. English village life has many joys, but also frustrations; for us, not least those caused by our continuing allegiance to two churches, often geographically far apart.

Our first village
At the beginning of our married life we were part of a small group of committed people trying to continue prayer and fellowship in an Anglican parish church where the vicar was on the point of retirement. Sunday worship was not a high point of the week, but the fellowship group was one of the best we have ever joined. The Catholic church in the village was strong but isolated, with few links with other churches. We attended both churches regularly, but felt we had to keep our heads down with the rather traditional priest.

Our second village
Our move to another village brought hope. Both vicar and priest were more supportive. We became involved in both churches in the way many interchurch families do – I found myself on many Sundays ringing the bells at the Anglican church at the top of the hill, then driving hurriedly down the hill to play the organ for mass! Ecumenical work in the village was encouraging; the congregations did plenty of liaising, and we were fully involved. We were still unable to worship together with complete freedom – Richard was welcomed for a fellowship group in an Anglican parish church where the vicar was elderly and tired, and six groups in church.

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Keeping our heads down
We started attending another Catholic church, and settled, in a big congregation where it was easy to remain incognito. The priest was willing to offer communion to non-Catholic partners in our situation, so long as it was discreet, so Richard started receiving, which proved a great strength to us both. The arrival of a new priest, who found time to visit, added an actual invitation to share, and an explicit assumption that our children would grow up to share in both communities. Our children were baptised in both churches, and to count our blessings. But how could we contribute our real family experience to our respective church communities? Talk of “double belonging” made us wonder where we had gone wrong – I didn’t always feel I “belonged” in my own church, let alone in two.

As the children grew older, they entered the Anglican Sunday school with many of their village friends. Their attendance at mass was spasmodic – Saturday evenings were rather late, early Sunday mornings too early and too much since they came also to Sunday school. Sometimes Jonathan would ask to come to mass with me, and when he was able to promise to behave, at about four, it became a privilege for him. A couple of years later we started to attend mass occasionally as a family on Saturdays, and on Sundays in the holidays when the village Sunday school closed down. The children settled well, but knowing few members of the Catholic congregation, and the irregularity of the children’s attendance, meant that they had little sense of Catholic identity. Worship at the Anglican church was beginning to seem monotonous to me, and not really enough for when the children were older.

Discussion and prayer
All this cost us much prayer and concern. We tackled it together, but we didn’t always see eye to eye on the solutions, either for our congregations or for our family. We have worked
with others for many years to build up the worship and fellowship life of the village church, with some results, but it is an uphill struggle. I was keen to draw on our Catholic church and also agreed that if it did not seem to be practical or desirable, we would not make the children go through with it. The prayers became more intense, and we were enormously grateful for prayers of godparents and other Christian friends.

After a year of attending mass together regularly, we asked our priest to come to discuss with us what would be appropriate. Jonathan was by now ten, and Laura eight. Children in the First Communion class were generally a year or two younger, and there was always the need to go twice to church. They were beginning to notice other interchurch friends receiving communion, and had close Catholic friends in the village, so their comments gave us our opportunity. We made it clear that if they were to make their First Communion in the Catholic church they would first have to spend time attending worship and really understanding what it was all about. As a couple, we had no disagreement about communion for young children, and also agreed that if it did not seem to be practical or desirable, we would not make the children go through with it. The preparations became more intense, and we were enormously grateful for prayers of godparents and other Christian friends.

Preparation for First Communion

The preparation course the class used was one designed for children in forces’ schools abroad. On the whole, we found it too. It became rare for us all to attend church together — we had no disagreement about communion for young children, and really understood what it was all about. As a couple, we worked through these doubts in prayer during the week. Richard came to feel that he could comfortably receive communion after all and, united with the family liturgy of Sunday morning mass week by week, we were pleased we had waited till they were older to start the preparation — we would never have gone so deeply into some of the ideas if they had been six or seven.

Meanwhile, our vicar had also been encouraging, and the Anglican church leader, the school teacher, thought their involvement of the children in mass, especially on feast days. We had to start to talk to each other about what was going to happen as the children fast approached First Holy Communion age — indeed, Jonathan was so tall that he was often offered communion, to his embarrassment. The main practical problem was that the Catholic Sunday school was held on Sunday mornings as an evening, which meant that the children would have to change completely from Anglican Sunday school to the Catholic one. so we should be less able to worship as a family, as Richard would often need to be at the village church for various duties.

We became more regular at attending mass together, and started praying hard for guidance. We talked the children quite carefully through the need to go twice to church. They were beginning to notice other interchurch friends receiving communion, and had close Catholic friends in the village, so their comments gave us our opportunity. We made it clear that if they were to make their First Communion in the Catholic church they would first have to spend time attending worship and really understanding what it was all about. As a couple, we had no disagreement about communion for young children, and also agreed that if it did not seem to be practical or desirable, we would not make the children go through with it. The preparations became more intense, and we were enormously grateful for prayers of godparents and other Christian friends.

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The week before the First Communion mass, our priest had the children for a whole day. The theme of the liturgy was to be “The Bread of Life”, so they made bread and prepared prayers concerned with feeding the hungry. The whole congregation had been involved in praying for the children; their photographs were displayed and the First Communion mass became a community occasion in a wonderful way, as well as a family and personal one. The twenty-six children did readings, prayers, songs, homily, and the offertory, all up round the altar, participating as fully as possible. The practical problems of offering communion under both kinds to a large congregation had been resolved, and we felt deeply moved. The whole congregation had been resolved, and we felt deeply moved.

The children communicate in the village when they are present from the Pacific Mission Institute, Sydney, to the Anglican congregation. Richard was fully involved in the village, and I knew I should be, but was reluctant to return to the still (to me) uninspiring worship. Jonathan was about to start at the Catholic secondary school, and was happy to return to the Anglican youth group on Sundays, although few boys of his age remained in it. Laura was beginning to notice that her friends had left the Anglican Sunday school, and as she had made new ones at the Catholic church she felt like staying there. We could surely not split two and two to attend church on Sundays for any length of time.

Our present pattern is to attend the Saturday evening folk mass together. Our priest and the Sunday school leader, up to now supportive, disapproved of our decision to remove Laura from the Sunday school (Jonathan was too old for it by then), saying that it would make problems with other parents and teachers who felt that we had “used” the Sunday school to “achieve” the First Communions. In a way we had, but this accusation hurt us and made us wish, momentarily, that we had kept our heads down and taken up the suggestion of doing preparation for First Communion at home.

We are all again regular worshipping members of the Anglican church on Sundays, Laura inviting a friend to come with us. The children communicate in the village when they are present from the parishioners, and only go up for a blessing when in the congregation. Richard was fully involved in the village, and I knew I should be, but was reluctant to return to the still (to me) uninspiring worship. Jonathan was about to start at the Catholic secondary school, and was happy to return to the Anglican youth group on Sundays, although few boys of his age remained in it. Laura was beginning to notice that her friends had left the Anglican Sunday school, and as she had made new ones at the Catholic church she felt like staying there. We could surely not split two and two to attend church on Sundays for any length of time.

The basic household of the faith is the family. Hence the significance of the images of “domestic church”, “domestic sanctuary” and “sanctuary of life”. The family is the classic working model of diversity within the unity of love. Today in many families an interchurch diversity is a creative feature. . . For such families evangelising mission will include the eccumenical dimension. Members of interchurch families because of the high level of sharing are eminently suitable for engaging in three of the four forms of dialogue – of life, of action and of religious experience. Some also are equipped to conduct the dialogue of theological exchange.

If we wish to set an Australian agenda I suggest we encourage individual families and groups of families to engage in reflection/action as agents of evangelisation. The Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelisation (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 75). Precisely as domestic churches such families are “temples” of the Holy Spirit. We need to be much more attentive to the sensus fidelium.

Such an agenda includes, but goes beyond, the pastoral care of “mixed” marriages as recommended by the May 1971 Report of the Joint Working Group of the Australian Council of Churches and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. The domestic churches within the household of the faith could be genuine signs and instruments of intimate union with God and of solidarity among the diverse multicultural, multifaith Australians.

FAMILIES AS AGENTS OF EVANGELISM

From an address by Fr Cyril Hally, Columban priest from the Pacific Mission Institute, Sydney, to the Ninth National Meeting of Members of Australian Diocesan Commissions for Ecumenism, held in St John Fisher College, Hobart, 4-6 October 1992.

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MY OTHER PARISH

From an article contributed to the parish magazine of St Bart’s Roman Catholic Church

When the parish family gathered for the 30th Anniversary Mass on 27 September 1992, Fr Robert kindly included those of us in an interchurch situation who regularly attend St Bart’s and a parish of another denomination too. Mike and I are in this situation, and for the last ten years St Bart’s has therefore been “my other parish” with St Mary’s Anglican church in Marshalswick.

In practice, this “double belonging” may require considerable energy! The weekend of Fr Robert’s sermon was not untypical: Friday afternoon and evening saw us sorting and manning tables at St Mary’s jumble sale, and Saturday afternoon visiting the Flower Festival at St Bart’s, with Family Mass there on Sunday morning. We are fortunate in having two such active parishes, but the essential thing for us was that we were together at all these events as a Christian family and not operating separately with denominational barriers between us.

It is not unusual for the “conversion” of one partner to be suggested as a way of solving some of the perceived difficulties, both theological and practical, of a situation such as ours. For many interchurch couples, however, this seems inappropriate; as they are both baptised into the one Christ, there is no necessity to “convert” to Christianity. To change to be “in full communion” with the other church might be an option, but it seems to many that this would be reinforcing denominational barriers and perhaps denying one partner’s deep faith tradition. Interchurch families hope that their experiences will contribute to the spiritual journeys that the denominations are going through, until the churches themselves are brought to full unity in Christ. Our special circumstances were mentioned publicly by Pope John Paul II during his pastoral visit to England and it is perhaps gratifying to know that they are both baptised into the one Christ, and feel at home in two different church traditions, surely there is a wider message there?

On a personal note, I have to admit finding it hard that I cannot be “in full communion” in “my other parish”. We read widely on these matters (most interchurch couples do this) and try to understand and empathise with the issues involved. My intellectual understanding, however, conflicts with what I actually experience, and I have become over the years more and more convinced that this is not the way things are meant to be. I pray that, guided by the Spirit, together we can persevere in our search for the unity that is surely there. Our task must be to find it. Meanwhile, there are two Harvest Festivals to attend to...!

Pam McElroy

Pam was in deep distress at the time of First Communions at St Bart’s in 1993, even though her own daughter was not involved. She and Mike talked to Susan about her First Communion in 1994. They explained the situation as well as they could, and why it might not be possible for Pam to receive communion with her daughter. “That’s not a very good rule,” was Susan’s reaction, “because it doesn’t keep families together.”

FROM PROBLEM TO MISSION

This text by Eric Lombard was read at the Assembly of Christian Churches of Versailles-Le Chesnay in February 1992. The French original appears in Foyers Mixtes, no. 97.

Problem
You may think that to be an interchurch family is a problem. We live it as an opportunity and a mission.

For a long time, being an interchurch family has been regarded as a problem to be resolved:

- Problem of the wedding,
- Problem of baptising the children,
- Problem of Christian education,
- Problem of children shuffled between two churches,
- Problem of lack of communication between the couple,
- Problem of lack of understanding of theological conflicts,
- Problem of being separated on Sundays,
- Problem of feeling excluded from the eucharist,
- Problem of not really belonging in the parishes.

In everything you have to choose, choose one church rather than the other; you have to negotiate.

Opportunity
But not at all! We, interchurch families of Versailles-Le Chesnay, don’t think that our situation as interchurch families is a problem. We live it as an opportunity.

- Opportunity for each of us to rediscover our own faith,
- Opportunity to work out what is important in the customs and traditions of our own church,
- Opportunity to move beyond prejudices,
- Opportunity to live in faith beyond the routine of our own certainties,
- Opportunity to deepen our understanding of the Gospel,
- Opportunity to be committed in parish activities: catechetics, preparation for baptism, commitment within parishes and dioceses,
- Opportunity to grow more open, more tolerant,
- Opportunity to see our children feeling at home in both churches,
- Opportunity to hear one of our daughters say, “Mummy, when I marry, I want to be the opposite of my husband.”

Mission
We believe too that we have a mission – very humble, of course, but prophetic – to serve the unity of the church.

- Mission to encourage meetings between the local churches,
- Mission to remind the members of these churches of the practical points which unite us,
- Mission to go beyond the rules, for example in the field of eucharistic hospitality,
- Mission to help our churches forward on the road to unity.

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A pluralist society
In his recent book *Double Belonging* Fr George Kilcourse, lecturer in theology at Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky, suggests that interchurch marriage questions were addressed later in the U.S. than in Europe because of the immense complexity of the situation. There are so many church groupings that interchurch families are far more diverse.

In the late nineteen-seventies a Central New York Interfaith Marriage Ministry set up by couples included Christian-Jewish marriages as well as mixed Christian marriages. Dr Richard Lawless, Vicar for Education of the Catholic Diocese of Syracuse, NY, tells the story in his book *When Love Unites the Church* (1982), which draws on his own experience of marriage with Liette, an Episcopalian.

**ARC marriages**
The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) was mirrored in the United States by ARC/USA. Its first twelve-year report, *Where We Are: a Challenge for the Future*, called for some decisive action to follow on from its Agreed Statements. A Joint Committee of Episcopal and Roman Catholic Diocesan Ecumenical Officers (EDEO/NADEO) got to work by encouraging and evaluating the "ARC Covenants" which were linking some of the parishes of the two communions.

In the early nineteen-eighties they followed up this work with parish covenants by starting to look at the lived experience of "ARC couples", and brought out several booklets (ARC Marriages, Pastoral Care for ARC Couples) and ARC Baptisms for the use of those concerned with the pastoral care of Episcopal-Roman Catholic families. George Kilcourse was involved in this work at national level, and then in the production of Episcopal-Roman Catholic Marriage Guidelines for the Archdiocese of Louisville and the Diocese of Kentucky in 1985. The two Dioceses of Albany (Roman Catholic and Episcopal) had already brought out a booklet Pastoral Considerations: Episcopal-Roman Catholic Marriages in 1982.

**A Lutheran-Catholic group**
It was the celebration of the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 1980 that led to the formation of a group of Lutheran-Catholic couples in Milwaukee. Three pastors in Brookfield, Wisconsin agreed that a good way of getting Lutherans and Catholics to know each other better would be to start with couples who were partners in interchurch marriages. Thus "Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Couples" (their logo LCDC formed into the early Christian fish symbol) was born. The group is still going today, and draws from nine congregations in and around Milwaukee. Martin and Ruth Reardon were able to take greetings from English AIF when they visited the group at the home of Ronn and Jacquie Rieger in September 1993.

**Ecumenical marriages**
When it was not a case of bilateral guidelines or groups, the preferred term to distinguish mixed Christian marriages from interfaith marriages was for a time "ecumenical marriages". Working with a sociologist at Bellarmine College, George Kilcourse produced a survey called *Ministry to Ecumenical Marriages* for the Archdiocese of Louisville in 1983, while in 1987 NADEO published his *Ecumenical Marriage: an Orientation Booklet for Engaged Couples, Families, Pastoral Ministers, Religious Educators*.

In preparation for this booklet, pilot groups of "ecumenical couples" had been established (or discovered) in five cities in the United States, some of them bilateral (Lutheran-Roman Catholic, Episcopal-Roman Catholic), some multilateral, and had used the AIF (England) publication, *Two-Church Families* as a catalyst for discussion and reflection. "Unlike England", wrote Fr Kilcourse, "we do not have a single, dominant bilateral model for ecumenical families. And in some significant ways the inherited wounds and attitudes of divisiveness reflected in Two-Church Families are not nearly as deep or scarred in our nation where religious pluralism and ecumenical cooperation flourish."

**Orthodox Family Ministries**
In North America the Orthodox-Roman Catholic dialogue had a primarily pastoral focus, and included consideration of mixed marriages and interchurch families. Joint statements were followed up between 1985 and 1990 by the national Office of Family and Pastoral Ministries of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, whose Director at that time was Fr Gregory Wingenbach. Guidelines published included *Marriage in the Orthodox Church* (1987) and *Two . . . Yet One in Christ* (1989).

**An American AIF**
In 1988 George Kilcourse was present at the fifth International Conference of Interchurch Families at Lingfield, England and made personal contact (correspondence began long before) with interchurch family movements in Britain and France. He was able to announce the good news of the imminent establishment of an American Association of Interchurch Families (AAIF). The Louisville group, along with other groups with whom he was in contact when preparing *Ecumenical Marriage*, had unanimously agreed to launch a U.S. network of interchurch families. NADEO gave a grant for the publication of the first two issues of *The Ark*. AAIF's newsletter, and these issues (multiple copies) were distributed through all the Catholic Diocesan Ecumenical Officers. Three couples from Milwaukee, Tidewell, and Louisville addressed the Ecumenical Officers at the NADEO National Workshop on Christian Unity at Indianapolis in 1989.
The Louisville group of interchurch families provided the editorial and design staff for *The Ark*, which first appeared in 1989. They worked closely with Dr Gregory Wingenbach, who in 1990 became Director of the Kentuckiana Interfaith Community in Louisville, and in 1992 *The Ark* became a pull-out from KIC’s newspaper, *Horizon*. An interchurch couple from Louisville, Pete and Mary Jane Glauber, with their three children, were present at the sixth International Conference of Interchurch Families at Corrymeela, Northern Ireland, as were Fr Gregory and George Kilcourse.

**Roman Catholic/Southern Baptist couples**

ARC couples have not been the only ones to get bilateral attention. In parts of the south a high proportion of mixed marriages involve Roman Catholics and Baptists, and in 1990 two sets of guidelines were issued for those involved in preparing such couples for marriage: *Southern Baptist-Roman Catholic Interchurch Marriage Guidelines Recommended for the Archdiocese of Louisville and the Long Run Baptist Association and Ecumenical Marriages: a Handbook for Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists in Virginia*, the latter sponsored by the Virginia Baptist General Board and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

The Louisville Guidelines were shorter, and were sent out by the Louisville Diocesan Ecumenical Commission to the Association on a trial basis. The dialogue team which prepared them committed themselves both to recruit Southern Baptist-Roman Catholic couples to join them in “peer ministry” programs of marriage preparation, and also to act as facilitators for couples who wished to assess their marriage, at six or eighteen month intervals after their wedding, at a brief interchurch marriage workshop. The Virginia handbook was issued by the Diocese of Richmond and the Baptist Association of Virginia in a more finished form; it included a commendation of AAIF as a resource body.

**Family Life Ministries**

Many of the initiatives described above came from the ecumenical side; more recently those concerned with marriage and family life have entered the field. In the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, Ohio, the Office for Marriage and Family Concerns worked with the Interfaith Commission to produce *Guidelines for Interfaith Marriages in 1985*: these were concerned with both ecumenical and interreligious marriages.

In 1988 the Archdiocese of Omaha, Nebraska, issued *Preparing for an Ecumenical Marriage*, a text developed by the staff of the Family Life Office specifically for interdenominational couples, and expanded more recently with a section on parents and family members. This was offered as a supplementary program to the standard marriage preparation. However, Omaha did not adopt the Association on a trial basis. The dialogue team which prepared them committed themselves both to recruit Southern Baptist-Roman Catholic couples to join them in “peer ministry” programs of marriage preparation, and also to act as facilitators for couples who wished to assess their marriage, at six or eighteen month intervals after their wedding, at a brief interchurch marriage workshop. The Virginia handbook was issued by the Diocese of Richmond and the Baptist Association of Virginia in a more finished form; it included a commendation of AAIF as a resource body.

**CHURCHES TOGETHER FOR MARRIAGE**

Interchurch and mixed couples would be helped by seeing the churches working together in marriage preparation and support. If the churches could come together for marriage, they would both be supporting interchurch families and fulfilling a mission which is of great urgency today. This is the conclusion which the Group for Local Unity of Churches Together in England reached in its report which is due to be published in 1994, the International Year of the Family.

Starting from the other end, beginning not from a concern for Christian unity but for the survival of marriage, a similar plea for the churches to get together for marriage preparation and support has recently been made in the United States (see *Marriage Savers*, by Michael McManus, Zondervan, 1993). In some parts of the United States local churches have covenanted together in a Community Marriage Policy, agreeing on minimum standards for the preparation and support of marriage, in church – any church.

They have drawn on the best experience right across the denominations, and agreed to use it together, in a common policy.

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MAKING A MARRIAGE: SEEKING UNITY


The Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, together with the Anglican Bishop of Lewes and the Methodist Chairman of the London South-West District, formed a church leaders’ panel to answer questions, while a panel of three interchurch couples shared the joys and difficulties of living their marriage and bringing up their families within two church communities.

Director of the Board of Social Responsibility in the Anglican Diocese of Guildford.

Marriage Doctrine: finding common ground

Marriage belongs in the natural order – the order of creation. Marriage is a creation ordinance, yet we need to be careful not to say “therefore each person should marry”.

Monogamous marriage requires mutual commitment to the relationship and its duties, fidelity to one partner, and the permanence which ensures security for partners and offspring. The Christian doctrine of marriage builds on these characteristics. Marriages are by intention lifelong; no marriage ought to be dissolved. Jesus spoke of the laws of divorce as a temporal relationship and its duties, fidelity to one partner, and the Monogamous marriage requires mutual commitment to the permanence which ensures security for partners and offspring. The Church has consistently maintained that marriages should not be dissolved, and the Middle Ages the Catholic theologians went further and argued that a marriage properly made between baptised Christians cannot be dissolved. One divergence we can see in our traditions is between the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

The churches across the traditions sometimes speak of the doctrine of marriage builds on these characteristics. Marriages are by intention lifelong; no marriage ought to be dissolved, and the Middle Ages the Catholic theologians went further and argued that a marriage properly made between baptised Christians cannot be dissolved. One divergence we can see in our traditions is between the Catholic and Orthodox churches. In the Catholic Church, a marriage is said to have been dissolved when a society gives scope for men and women to enjoy the company of their own sex. I say “may work better” because much depends on the way single-sex groups behave; marriages, all marriages, can become afflicted by loneliness; when they increase a person’s sense of worth without denigrating those who are different. Tribal kinship is a great resource: tribalism is a destructive force.

One kinship: God in the midst

The experience of many interchurch couples indicates the chauvinism, the tribalism of our Christian traditions. The Anglican theologian David Jenkins expounded this theme in a bracing way [The Contradiction of Christianity, SCM Press, 1976] twenty years ago, and I suggest that it may help us to recognise a purpose in the struggle of interchurch marriage. There is still much in the institutional form of our church life, and in the conveyed attitudes of our denominations, that is a defence against knowing the truth. The truth is, “God with us”, and in the process that untruth is defended from the Spirit that leads us into all truth. The intimacy of marriage, the bond between parent and child, both allow the unguarded moment in which we human creatures know “the One who is in the midst of us”. That is the potential of marriage as a means of God’s grace; it discloses the truth. Now as I learn about the trials to which people are put in maintaining and expressing these singularities, I hear a voice at the back of my mind saying, “Well, so what? Isn’t this the kind of testing that all marriages face, as each partner brings her or his convictions and habits of kinship to their life together? But then we interchurch couples have to cope with loyalty to two sets of values, two familiar patterns of living. That struggle is not just a little modern difficulty; it is natural to marriage. Husbands and wives do not just fit each other like pieces in a jigsaw. It is a cause of inconvenience and pleasure in marriage that spouses choose each other with their obvious differences.

These differences, when valued, assist the making of a marriage. A person who has arrived at a sustainable level of maturity and self-worth will confidently maintain his or her individuality in relationships, that personal strength in each person is an asset in marriage, and it is devalued when partners deny that individuality. “One flesh, separate persons” (the title of an early book by Robin Skinner) is a key phrase in an understanding of how marriages work. Interchurch marriage, which is the basis of marriage as a relationship (and of friendship), is all the stronger when partners respect their need to go apart and enjoy the very things that emphasise the difference between them. And so relations between the sexes may work better when a society gives scope for men and women to enjoy the company of their own sex. I say “may work better” because much depends on the way single-sex groups behave. Chauvinism causes poor relations between the sexes, just as racism engenders strife between peoples. Where those women’s and men’s activities are a strength, where national celebrations are wholesome, is when they increase a person’s sense of worth without denigrating those who are different. Tribal kinship is a great resource: tribalism is a destructive force.

Two churches, two individuals

An “interchurch” marriage is the union of two baptised Christians of different traditions, with each spouse (i) actively involved in his or her church (and to various degrees in one another’s church) and (ii) taking a conscientious role in the religious education of his or her children. Such marriages are also called ecumenical and “two-church”, and they are distinguishable to a degree from those which involve partners from different churches with both either nominal adherents or one partner committed and practising but the other not (for the present at least). The important point is that there are no blueprints; marriages, all marriages, can become afflicted by the blight of idealism, and stunted by a pre-occupation with being normal. What we must recognise is the experience of a couple saying together, “there are two churches in our marriage and we both want to express that truthfully.”

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What is particular about an interchurch marriage is that in the church where each spouse is looking for reassurance and affirmation as they risk this journey in marriage, as they nourish their children by giving themselves, there they can find themselves most alone. And they want to say to their churches, “You ought to be with us, not making things harder for us. In our marriage, you can not see the coming together of our two churches? Can you not see the kinship that will supplant our tribalism? We want to bring up our children to regard and value both traditions of Christian faith; why will you not let us celebrate it. It is the burden of that which can make getting married such a hassle.

Two-church couples seem to have more hassle than most. And that is true as the partners themselves have all the right questions that is most discouraging. It would be overstating it to say that interchurch partners have chosen their partners out of a desire for ecumenism; rather, the experience of their marriages fosters the urgency of ecumenism.

Who prepares whom for pilgrimage?

Having spent some years learning about how the churches and the clergy engage in marriage preparation, and having tried to write and say a bit about it all, I have now reached a stage of thinking that most of the time we are not very good at it. I think that most of the time we are not very good at it. I think we ought to ask the couples themselves to do it, While we might be earnestly wanting to induce them into this holy estate of marriage, equipped with all the survival skills they can carry, I think the partners themselves may be more preoccupied with preparing their families and the church for their marriage. For that is the point, is it not? This couple is not about to enter on a new relationship; it is a relationship they already enjoy. What they need to do is to tell everyone else to take it seriously, because that is what they want to do. And so the preparation that is needed is for the families, and everyone else affected, to adjust to that, get used to the idea, and come and celebrate it. It is the burden of that which can make getting married such a hassle.

Scenes from a marriage: glimpses of the Church

Here are some of the things I see and hear happening in marriage. I see a man and a woman deepening their friendship and consciously searching for each other, looking at each other and enjoying each other. And then I see a man and a woman, both avoiding each other’s eyes, gazing with a mixture of fear and fantasy at the people around them. I hear a wife and a husband discussing with strength and feeling the way they need to manage their resources and each make sacrifices, and coming to a decision they will both respect. And I see a wife and a husband each competing with the other for their share of the family means, each controlling what they have acquired. I perceive a spouse who is learning what the other believes to be precious and is growing to value that same thing. But I also see a spouse who is afraid of the other and finds precious and will not let that spouse speak of it, enjoy it, or share it.

And in these scenes I catch sight of the little church. I feel at ease with two friends who can so act together that others feel safe and welcome in their presence; friends whose hospitality and charity is such that a community is the better for their being there. I see a man and a woman full of the will to make a good life together for all their family; each becoming aware of what matters most in that enterprise. But they do not always see the same priorities. They are learning how to say what they feel and believe in, to each other; and because neither mocks the other, they do not have to defend their views, only explain them the better, knowing that the other is listening.

Now I would expect to notice glimpses of these things in a conversation with any couple. And part of a preparation to marry might be for the couple themselves to affirm such of these strengths and virtues as they see for themselves and to bring them to the wedding feast like bread and wine. But I also glimpse some of these things in the habits of church life; it does not require much imagination to look at those scenes from a marriage and recognise them as pictures of our churches in their relationships with their neighbours. And that is the point: how can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into the pit? As churches we are learning to be good partners in pilgrimage; let us engage with those who are the little church, the domestic church. In making marriage they are seeking unity, and are exposing the tribalism of our churches.

From a report of the day by Elaine Gibbs, Co-ordinator for Marriage and Family Life in the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton

Church leaders panel

The question which occupied the panel for most of the time was that of “intercommunion” and for many of those present the pain which they felt was eloquently expressed by a Methodist participant. He had received communion together with his Catholic wife at their wedding but never since in the Catholic Church. His “understanding” of communion he felt might be at one with that of his wife, so why could he not receive communion with her? In reply Bishop Cormac explained the principles which underlay the discipline of the Catholic Church regarding admission to communion as outlined in the recent Ecumenical Directory. As Bishop he would apply these with particular concern for the situation of interchurch families.

Methodist Chairman Martin Broadbent expressed his sympathy with people in this situation; he had had to come to terms with and resolve his feelings upon his own marriage to a Catholic 30 years earlier. Painful times had also been times of growth. He thought it very important that Protestants should understand the Roman Catholic attitude to the eucharist; he had recently come to value the Roman Catholic stress on eucharistic communion as a sign of the unity of the Church. On eucharistic belief he said that if transubstantiation means that “God comes to us in the eucharist and joins his Life with ours”, then he accepts it. Charles Wesley wrote:

“They life infuse into the bread Thy power into the wine.”

Anglican Bishop Ian Cundy said that the churches have much to learn from interchurch families: “You throw up in stark relief our problem – that we are divided.”

The lay panel

“What is the importance of accepting and valuing what my partner finds precious in his/her faith?”, was one of the questions tackled by the panel. It is a good question for churches together in pilgrimage to address, since church unity, like marriage, is about relationships.
Kentuld, and author of concrete opportunities for pastoral care of interchurch families.

When any couple announces their engagement to their parents, the moment contains an element of suspense. In the case of interchurch couples who conscientiously intend to maintain their distinctive church identities, parents can easily hoist red flags.

One woman recently described her father’s immediate reaction, voiced in the hearing of her fiancé: “We’d hoped you would marry a nice Catholic man!” The wounds from such a thoughtless remark can colour the couple’s future relationship with this father-in-law. Imagine how this son-in-law will feel when confronted with the decision to accept Christmas dinner invitations with his own family or his wife’s.

The engagement of a couple proves a “teachable moment”. When surprised by an interchurch marriage, parents turn to pastoral ministers for orientation and answers. The tone and content of these conversations can teach and retool parents who carry pre-ecumenical attitudes and concepts. We can remind them that since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics fully recognise the baptism of other Christians. Because marriage is a covenant of faith between two baptised persons, Catholics call an interchurch marriage a complete sacrament. There is nothing lacking or inferior about an interchurch family. It is indeed a valid, sacramental marriage.

Ministry to parents of engaged interchurch couples

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Joint marriage preparation

More and more, Catholic marriage preparation affords an alternative to the classical series of instructions offered to hundreds of assembled couples. Parishes are training people to minister in couple-to-couple programmes. Engaged Encounter programmes provide another intimate alternative. It is time for Catholics to examine their consciences. Have they structured the programming and the personnel for these teams with an interchurch sensitivity? What experience (and credibility) would veteran interchurch couples as leaders bring to the growing numbers of engaged interchurch couples who attend these programmes? Could married ministers from other churches also prove to be a resource? (Some of them are also interchurch spouses.)

One of my students, a college senior who is a Roman Catholic, reflected about her Baptist fiancé’s experience. They approached the marriage preparation programme sponsored by the archdiocese, only for her to discover his anxiety about this Catholic requirement. “I had to give him a sedative each night before we went,” she told me.

The thresholds are not easy to cross. Other churches may not require formal marriage preparation, so Catholics need to take some initiative in dispelling denominational stereotypes, and to be inclusive and nonthreatening to other Christians who are about to enter a marriage covenant with a Roman Catholic.

Therefore, I propose the ecumenical axiom: we do not need to invent new ecumenical structures but to make more ecumenical our existing structures. Perhaps the ideal would be to offer joint marriage preparation with other churches. Although we have only begun to consider this possibility, the logistics seem staggering. On the local level there are successful instances of two pastors or two pastoral ministers jointly meeting with engaged interchurch couples. I qualify this model as “perhaps” ideal because it depends on how ecumenically informed and pastorally sensitive the ministers are.

Let me illustrate. Often the interchurch couple is prepared for marriage with this opening question: “How are you going to resolve the question of the religious identity of your children?” The first intellectual or reflective move of too many pastors and pastoral ministers (even in joint sessions) is not that these two persons share a common faith as Christians, but that they belong to two different “denominations”. Is it not more the concern of the pastoral minister to ask: “Are you in love?”

“Do you see Christ’s presence and your faith in this covenantal relationship?” To our peril, Catholic practice is sometimes guided more by considerations of discipline, authority, and jurisdiction, than by a mystagogical, sacramental sensibility. We need to remind ourselves to begin with the symbol of unity, for that and nothing extrinsic is the starting point and sure source in marriage preparation.

The registration process and empowerment

When couples first present themselves at the rectory or church office to register their membership, the registration forms rarely accommodate their identity as an interchurch family. They remain hidden, even unknown in parishes and congregations.

One woman voiced the frustration of trying to live as an interchurch family when the Episcopal priest greeted her and her two daughters one morning after the liturgy. She and her Catholic husband went to their separate churches on Sundays and then met for family brunch. She took the preschool girls to the Episcopal church because they offered excellent religious education classes, while the Catholic parish had only a makeshift nursery.

“Why don’t you join us for our widows and widowers dinner?” the Episcopal priest asked her. “My husband’s not dead,” she exclaimed, “he’s just a Roman Catholic.”
One of the most concrete initial steps a parish staff member can take to welcome an interchurch couple or family is to acknowledge the fact on the parish records. I recently had the good luck to find a parish whose database could identify interchurch couples. Imagine how easy this made inviting churches will need to know to what extent a partner is acknowledged on the parish records. I recently had the freedom to join committees or serve in various parishes. Do they have an open invitation to socialise whenever their husband or wife is invited to a parish event? What expectations of time, talent, and treasure do we have for interchurch couples and families who have a commitment to the spouse’s church as well? How positively we answer tells whether we recognise the empowerment of interchurch spouses that is grounded in a common baptism.

Catechesis and sacraments with interchurch children

One of the red flags grandparents often see for interchurch marriage is the question of the religious identity of their grandchildren. Without proper catechesis, the celebration of the baptism of an interchurch couple’s child can become a literal tug of war. Sometimes parents postpone baptism to avoid the issue. But to fail to initiate and religiously educate a child borders on child neglect. Pastors and pastoral staff need to help parents and grandparents realise that baptism is the starting point for Christian unity. Of its very nature, baptism is ecumenical because it implies a relationship with every other baptised person (past, present and future). While we celebrate baptisms in particular churches, with the ritual and presider of another church, it is both the sign and the means of unity. The Second Vatican Council taught that it is both the sign and the means of unity (UR 8). A child is rightly vexed upon learning that a Methodist parent will not receive the Eucharist at her First Communion in the Catholic Church: “Doesn’t Jesus call us to be one as a family? Doesn’t Jesus make us one in the Eucharist? Then why does the church want to divide my family?” Pastors and parish ministers can prudently appeal to the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law (Canon 844), reinforced by the 1993 Ecumenical Directory (n.160), and raise the question with the local bishop (or the pastor, if there are no explicit diocesan guidelines): what about limited eucharistic sharing in interchurch families for this occasion?

The entire process of religious education deserves new consideration in the light of interchurch family experience. We now enjoy our second generation of ecumenical Vacation-Bible-School-educated youth. It is a natural next step to imagine joint religious education programmes for children in interchurch families: for example, Episcopal-Catholic, Baptist-Catholic, and Lutheran-Catholic education.

Recognising interchurch families as the “domestic church”

As the church has grown more knowledgeable about family systems, we have had to ask ourselves what it means for a truly interchurch family to be a “domestic church”. Undoubtedly, when that term auditioned at the Second Vatican Council (Lumen gentium 11) few, if any, people imagined that twenty-five years later Catholics would be considering this phenomenal new interchurch reality as a growing sector of the domestic church.

Today we are faced with a contradiction. Catholic teaching has accelerated the emphasis on the family as the domestic church. But Catholic pastoral care has virtually ignored interchurch families, sometimes even placing obstacles in the way of their ecclesial life.

Alert ministers will help interchurch families to cultivate rhythms of prayer and spirituality in their daily life. They will encourage spouses and children to respect and to become the beneficiaries of both traditions practised in the family. Children can experience their parents’ churches as different without those differences bringing divisiveness. The ecumenical movement’s theme of “unity in diversity” will model for the family a new cohesiveness, the most necessary element identified by family ministry practitioners. As nowhere else, the foundations for their future ecclesial life will be found in their unique domestic church as truly interchurch families.

At the grassroots, interchurch couples and their families witness to the fact that denominational boundaries do not inhibit grace or the celebration of love as a commitment of faith. Pastors and parish staff members are in a unique position to respond to this manifestation of the Spirit.

George Kilcourse

The test of our catechesis comes with the ongoing religious education of interchurch children. By the time of First Communion, the child has matured to religious responsibility. All Catholic catechesis tells a child that the Eucharist is the sacrament of unity. The Second Vatican Council taught that it is both the sign and the means of unity (UR 8). A child is rightly vexed upon learning that a Methodist parent will not receive the Eucharist at her First Communion in the Catholic Church: “Doesn’t Jesus call us to be one as a family? Doesn’t Jesus make us one in the Eucharist? Then why does the church want to divide my family?” Pastors and parish ministers can prudently appeal to the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law (Canon 844), reinforced by the 1993 Ecumenical Directory (n.160), and raise the question with the local bishop (or the pastor, if there are no explicit diocesan guidelines): what about limited eucharistic sharing in interchurch families for this occasion?

The entire process of religious education deserves new consideration in the light of interchurch family experience. We now enjoy our second generation of ecumenical Vacation-Bible-School-educated youth. It is a natural next step to imagine joint religious education programmes for children in interchurch families: for example, Episcopal-Catholic, Baptist-Catholic, and Lutheran-Catholic education.

Recognising interchurch families as the “domestic church”

As the church has grown more knowledgeable about family systems, we have had to ask ourselves what it means for a truly interchurch family to be a “domestic church”. Undoubtedly, when that term auditioned at the Second Vatican Council (Lumen gentium 11) few, if any, people imagined that twenty-five years later Catholics would be considering this phenomenal new interchurch reality as a growing sector of the domestic church.

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George Kilcourse
CHALLENGES TO JESUS

The theme of the Swanwick 1993 Annual Conference of the English Association of Interchurch Families was “Challenges”. Fr Bernard Brady, a priest of the diocese of Nottingham, formerly Catholic chaplain to Nottingham University and now engaged in counselling work, was asked to speak on “Challenges to Jesus”, in order to help participants reflect on how they, as interchurch families, should respond to challenges.

Brian Thorne is a person-centred therapist who has written a beautiful book about Jesus called Behold the Man (1991; London: Darton, Longman and Todd), in which he uses the Passion story to illustrate the personality of Jesus. I am greatly indebted to it for some of the ideas I venture to offer you in this paper.

My own interest in the world of counselling and therapy now occupies me full time. I work at a therapeutic centre which specialises in men and women of faith who are troubled or who are in pain. I work also in the secular world of counselling where I continually see good people who are distant from the churches, but who are seeking a spirituality.

The challenges to Jesus, therefore, will be much influenced by how I understand personality, and as Jesus was human, his personality will have developed along the same lines as yours and mine.

First, a little theology.

Christ a man

The present Pope speaks unambiguously of Christ as a man, so putting aside the theology which used to tell us that, while Jesus had a human nature, he could not strictly be called a man, since the subject of his being is the second person of the Trinity. This led to a one-sided picture of Jesus which I think has done great harm in its time to our spirituality, especially with its emphasis on an overly spiritual understanding of it, and an unconscious down-playing of our physicality. This can be seen most clearly in our attitude to sensuality and loss of the sheer pleasure and delight of our bodies. Christian attacks on permissiveness seem to be based on the Manichean heresy of the inherent sinfulness of the flesh, on the rejection of passion, and of the erotic, a violent separation of soul and body which is alien to the New Testament. This, I may add, is not confined to men and women and children of faith, but is also found in the secular world. Therapists meet deformed humanity every day of the week.

Fr Edward Yarnold, SJ, in his book, The Second Gift – a study of Grace, argues strongly that Jesus must have had a normal human psychology, otherwise how could he be a model for us? The choices that Jesus needed to make are similar to the choices that other men and women have made and still make, which are the options for truth, integrity, and justice. None of these choices is made without suffering and anxiety.

Mary Christians are happy to think of Jesus as a man until they realise more clearly that this implies seeing him as someone who thinks the way we think, and feels the way we feel.

If Jesus had a genuine human psychology, then he had to learn about himself, just as we do, through love, crises, experience of life.

Life stages

Let us look at the three basic stages of life.

(i) Infancy and childhood – you do not have to go all the way with Freud to accept the crucial bonding links between a baby and its mother, and later its father. If a baby does not get its needs met – to be warm, dry, fed, touched, loved – then many would argue that the formation of the ability to trust is greatly impaired. When that child senses the panic of its parents at suddenly becoming refugees in another land and culture, the later normality of Jesus pays great credit to the “good-enough”, to use D.W. Winnicott’s phrase, the “good-enough” parenting of Joseph and Mary.

As the child grows, so it experiences its first glimpses of sexuality – the little boy loving his mother and seeing his father as a rival. I wonder how old Jesus was when Joseph died? Psychologists tell us that the ability to trust develops at this stage. If children’s early emotional growth is stunted, then they may find it difficult to trust either their family or people outside it, with painful consequences for later relationships.

Clearly Jesus had a loving childhood, as we can see from the relationships of love and friendship which he formed in his adult life.

(ii) Adolescence brings many challenges to young people - the challenge to independence, the challenge of an awakened sexuality, the body in some turmoil, the need for peer group support, the struggle with authority.

Jesus leaves his parents in great sadness and worry when he stays behind after their journey to Jerusalem. How often do parents say, “Tell me where you are going.” Is there a touch of rebellion in the words of Jesus when asked about causing his father’s worry: “I must be about my Father’s business.” Taking on the Temple authorities, testing himself the way children or rebellious teenagers.

Once his parents had respected that degree of needed independence, Jesus learnt how to respect the authority of others – “and Jesus was subject to them”.

The challenge to interchurch families is how to assert your needs, your sensitivities, to the Hierarchy, saying that you too must be about your Father’s business. It means doing so assertively, and without aggression, enabling others to hear your pain and what you have to say to them. Avoiding the dialogue of the deaf is one mark of adulthood.

(iii) Jesus was around thirty when he decided that it was to be now or never. In my understanding, to be adult is to live in the here and now, to own and express emotions and feelings which
I actually experience now. It sounds easy enough to do, yet in practice I find it quite difficult.

Challenges
Perhaps our greatest challenge in adulthood is to be at ease with the concept of intimacy — that ability to be at one with someone, while still retaining the separateness, which together constitute our sense of who we are, our identity.

Piers Paolo Pasolini, an Italian Marxist, created the best filmed life of Christ that I have ever seen, using only St Matthew’s Gospel, and he caught something of the human question — who am I, and what am I about?

Jesus, very quickly in the Gospel, goes into the wilderness for forty days, to find out, perhaps, his answers to those questions: who am I, and what am I about? The wilderness is inside us — a sense of isolation, a love which is not returned, envy of the successful, boring work. God is not always there for us — we have grey, depressed feelings, real insecurity.

In the desert experience Jesus meets the challenge of evil and its attractiveness. Evil is powerful only when one is attracted to it. Hugh Montefiore, when Bishop of Birmingham, aroused a storm of protest when in a much misquoted sermon he raised the possibility of Jesus being homosexual. Did Jesus experience sexual attraction? I hope so. He could hardly be human without this fundamental experience. We call the person without feelings a psychopath, and they can be dangerous people. Choosing not to exercise his sexuality would have required repeated decisions, and in my experience they are seldom all in the right direction.

To be attracted by good things, physical, sexual, or intellectual, is no imperfection; the imperfection occurs when we follow the attraction away from the right path.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus must have felt the pull of the easy option — and he made a fully human decision to do what he knew to be right. Just as in the desert experience he resisted the temptations to be a different sort of Messiah, one that would have gained him much support, political and economic, yet he chose to be a suffering Messiah. He would be a King of a very different sort.

Jesus did not know whether or not his decision was the right one — it is what we often call faith. The challenge of faith is that we never really know.

The challenge to bring up children in different traditions, not knowing what to do for the best, yet trusting that it will come right.

The challenge to speak a message of God’s love for everyone, and not just for the orthodox believers who have sufficient money to be able to keep the Mosaic Law — no wonder Jesus attracted the publican, the tax collector, and the prostitute. He gave them a choice, a hope, which they could not find in the Law. Those of you who have struggled with the Canon Law may sense the attraction also.

The challenge of loneliness, and the deep fear of abandonment which lies behind it; and how real that fear must have been for Jesus, for it breaks out of him with that great cry from the Cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In loneliness we are painfully aware of what we do not have. The challenge of choice — choosing to follow a particular way when there were many other options, choosing his followers, and getting it nearly right.

The challenge of being a miracle-worker and guru, with all the subtle temptations of power and status that go with it.

The challenge of sexuality and how to express it. A Christian critique of the degrading of the flesh and of sexuality is undoubtedly needed, but only because we hold that flesh is sacred, and not through fear.

The challenge of not projecting anger on to others when really it belongs to us — the anger of confronting the institutional Church and not blaming others for our pain.

The challenge of living on the edges — interchurch families can identify with that. When Jesus cured the leper, it was Jesus who had to live outside the towns, while the ex-leper could live with people again. If you free and heal people, it can be the healer who pays the price.

The challenge of living in the family of the Church, both on a global level and a parochial one, where we can see all the shortcomings of our fellow Christians. Sharing the same faith can mean mixing with people who are very different in attitude from ourselves, and the temptation to scapegoat is strong. There can be a lot of cruelty and lack of love in the family.

The challenge to be fully human
Jesus remains a unique model for us precisely because of his humanity. In his inner core he always retained trust in himself and in God, he always clung to his own identity; he remained a man in control of himself, despite all his enemies could do.

Georges Bernanos wrote Diary of a Country Priest, a novel which made me think hard about my choice for priesthood. In it he wrote: “My parish is eaten up by boredom — boredom is eating them up under our eyes, and there is nothing we can do about it.”

Yet Jesus offers a different vision — a challenge to be fully human, and the more human we are the closer we come to God. Meeting challenges openly, honestly, is what adulthood is about — it is what humanity is about — it is the challenge that men and women of faith cannot avoid if they are to remain faithful.

May I end by quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a great opponent of Nazism: “God will give us all the strength we need to resist in all times of distress. But he never gives it in advance, lest we rely on ourselves and not on him alone.”

Bernard Brady
THE JOURNAL

INTERCHURCH FAMILIES is a twice-yearly journal which discusses the theological and pastoral issues raised by the existence of interchurch families (especially families in which one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other a Christian of another communion). It shares the experience of these families with a wider public, and helps readers keep abreast of developments which concern mixed marriages and interchurch families, in the context of the wider ecumenical movement.

Pastoral care

It is addressed to:
- interchurch couples,
- clergy and ministers,
- theological students and seminarians,
- relatives and godparents,
- marriage counsellors and teachers,
- marriage preparation teams,
- those preparing children for First Communion and Confirmation,
- in fact, to all who are or expect to be in any way responsible for the pastoral care of mixed marriages and interchurch families in all their variety.

Towards Christian unity

The journal is also addressed to:
- ecumenical officers,
- ecumenical commissions,
- local groupings of churches,
- in fact, to all concerned with the movement towards Christian unity, for in interchurch families the pain of Christian division and the celebration of Christian unity is focused at its most local level. An interchurch family is a "domestic church", and interchurch families are the smallest units of "Churches Together".

The journal is published by the English Association of Interchurch Families, but it intends to serve the needs of English-speaking interchurch families and all those who care for their welfare world-wide. It warmly welcomes contributions and editorial assistance from all parts of the world.

The annual subscription (Europe) to INTERCHURCH FAMILIES is £4 sterling (two copies p.a. £7.50) or £12 for three years, and should be sent to the London address below.

For other parts of the world the annual subscription (airmail printed rate) is £6 or £17 for three years, to be paid by cheque or money order expressed in sterling and drawn on a British bank. (If payment is made in US dollars, add $10 to cover bank charges.)

THE ASSOCIATION

The Association of Interchurch Families (AIF) offers a support network for interchurch families and mixed marriages and a voice for such families. Most members are interchurch couples and families. Membership is also open to interested individuals who wish to further the Association’s work.

Mutual support

AIF began in 1968 as a mutual support group, formed by interchurch couples who had discovered that the exchange of experience with others in similar situations could help each couple find its own way forward. There are local AIF groups throughout England. A national conference is held annually at Swanwick, Derbyshire, and occasional regional conferences held.

An Association for others

The support network which AIF offers extends far beyond its own members. Many interchurch and mixed couples find information and a listening ear a great help in times of crisis. One of the Association’s most important tasks is to build up a support network of informed people ready to respond to enquirers.

Commitment to change

AIF members are also ready to work for increased understanding by all churches of the pastoral needs of interchurch and mixed marriage families, at local, diocesan, national and international level, as their own circumstances allow. The Association is committed to the movement for Christian unity; interchurch families suffer because of Christian divisions, but they also have particular incentives and special opportunities to work for the healing of those divisions. AIF is a "body in association" with Churches Together in England, and members will work for unity within their own families and at whatever level they can.

The Association is a registered charity (no. 283811) which depends on the subscriptions of its members and the donations of others who wish to support its work. Its Presidents are the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal Archbishops of Westminster, the Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council, the Revd Dr Kenneth Greet and Bishop Alastair Haggart.

Members receive the Journal, and also the occasional AIF News and Notes and The Interdependent (written by and for interchurch children). Details of AIF membership, a resources list (publications, leaflets, AIF video) and a constantly up-dated list of AIF Local Contacts throughout England are available on request.

AROUND THE WORLD

The Conference of Associations of Interchurch Families in Britain and Ireland includes the four English, Scottish and Irish sister-associations. It is a "body in association" with the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland.

AIF is also linked with other associations and groups of interchurch families around the world. Some contact addresses are:

France
- Foyers Mixtes Centre St-lrèneé, Lyon 69002

Irish Republic
- Irish AIF c/o Irish School of Ecumenics, Milltown Park, Dublin

Northern Ireland
- Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA), c/o Corrymeela House, 8 Upper Crescent, Belfast, BT7 1NT

Scotland
- Scottish AIF (SAIF) 28 Galston Court, Low Waters, Hamilton, ML3 7YH

USA
- American AIF (AAIF), c/o Kentuckiana Community, 1115 South 4th, Louisville, KY 40203

Canada
- Association of Interchurch Families in Montreal, 123 Arrowhead Cr., Pointe Claire, Quebec, H9R 3V4

Australia

- Interchurch Families Association (Western Australia) (IFAWA), 62 Tweedale Road, Applecross, Western Australia 6153

- Interchurch Families Association, Brisbane (IFAB), 409 Upper Cornwall Street, Coorparoo, Queensland 4151

New Zealand
- Association of Interchurch Families (New Zealand) 15 Kelvin Road, Remuera, Auckland 5

EIGHTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF ASSOCIATIONS OF INTERCHURCH FAMILIES

at Bellinter House, Navan, near Dublin
22-24 July 1994
Theme: The Nurture of Mixed and Interchurch Families: Ecumenical Approaches
Details from Irish AIF (for address see above)

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