Sharing communion

Many Christians who work closely with one another across Christian divisions come to feel a longing for some measure of sacramental sharing to express and deepen their sense of unity in Christ. Interchurch families can come to feel this longing in a particularly intense way. We make no apology, therefore, for returning once again to the question of sharing communion.

The English Association of Interchurch Families (and this is presumably true of other associations across the world) holds no position on “intercommunion”. Its members hold many different positions, which is hardly surprising since they belong to different churches with differing theological traditions.

What the Association as such has consistently done, however, for a quarter of a century, ever since the first national gathering of interchurch families in England in 1968, is

1 to hold before the churches the spiritual need of interchurch families to share communion;
2 to point to the unique position of interchurch partners, who not only share the sacrament of baptism but are also united in Christian marriage; and
3 to relate the question of sharing communion in interchurch families to the wider question of Christian unity.

It is with great joy, therefore, that members of the Association see these three points picked up in the 1993 Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, with its provisions for “exceptional eucharistic sharing” for “spouses in a mixed marriage [who] share the sacraments of baptism and marriage” (1993 Directory, n.160).

One of the objectives of the Association in the coming months and years will be to make these provisions of the 1993 Directory better known and better understood within the churches. Some of the material in this number of INTERCHURCH FAMILIES is intended as a contribution towards this process – a process already begun in the previous two numbers.

Ruth Reardon

In this issue: Baptism and ecumenism in interchurch families pp.2-5; Agreement on Interchurch Marriages between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church pp.6-7; Index 1993-94 p.7; Interchurch Families around the World pp.8-9; Admission to Communion: the provisions of the 1993 Directory pp.10-15.

“You live in your marriage the hopes and the difficulties of the path to Christian unity.” Pope John Paul II. York, 1982.
t Andrew’s Shared Church, Cippenham, is now over twenty-three years old, but surprisingly until this year there has never been any attempt to share in the celebration of baptism, the one commonly recognised sacrament. Shared by Anglicans and Roman Catholics, St Andrew’s is a comfortable place of worship for my husband Paul and myself, a place where we can worship together and where we hope the pain of the separation that belonging to two churches sometimes forces on us is understood. We are both actively involved in both congregations, working ecumenically and within our own traditions and contributing our abilities to both. When, in 1993, we announced that our first child was on its way, members of both congregations shared our joy. Joanna was born in October.

Two traditions

We began planning the baptism several months earlier. It was very important to us that both traditions should be equally involved in the service, and so it would need plenty of time to arrange – especially if it was to happen in time for Joanna to fit the family christening gown! In our marriage, both the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions are of equal importance, and we want this to be reflected in Joanna’s upbringing, with the emphasis on belonging to the Body of Christ rather than to a particular church. After all, if she does not grow up to love Jesus then any church membership will be meaningless. So it is important to us that Joanna’s baptism into the Body of Christ involved both our churches. However, although the churches recognise the validity of baptism amongst themselves, the ceremony carries the additional aspect of being an entry into denominational membership.

Like all Catholics marrying members of other churches, before receiving a dispensation to marry me Paul had to make an undertaking “to do all I can within the unity of our partnership to have all the children baptised and brought up in the Catholic Church”. Although this effectively gives Paul a “get-out clause”, I have no such undertaking with the Church of England and so it seemed reasonable to agree on Catholic baptism for Joanna. In the long term, this gives Joanna more options later on when she is old enough to make her own decisions about church membership. However, it was a great relief to me when, in the 1993 Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism the Catholic Church recognised that I too have strong feelings about Joanna’s relationship to my tradition: At the same time, it should be recognised that the non-Catholic partner may feel a like obligation because of his/her own Christian commitment (n. 150).

In August 1993 we approached both the Catholic parish priest and the Anglican vicar. Both priests, quite rightly, prefer public baptism in the context of a regular service. However, if both traditions were to be fully involved in Joanna’s baptism it would have to be a separate service – although we hoped that an open invitation to both congregations would retain the feeling of a family welcome to the church for Joanna. The parish priest delegated preparation of the service to his assistant priest, who arrived to meet us armed with a copy of the Ecumenical Directory.

Many of our ideas came from a baptism service already used by an interchurch family who like us had wanted a Catholic service with lots of Anglican participation, and had liberally mixed parts of both rites. Our priest agreed that it was a good basis for our planning. It was the first time he had seen the Anglican Alternative Service Book, and he was particularly keen on the prayer blessing the waters of baptism, asking us to include it in preference to the Roman Catholic versions, which are much less poetic. After establishing that in order for the service to be seen as Catholic baptism the anointing with oil and with chrism, and the pouring of water, would have to be done by the Catholic priest using Catholic words, we were left to plan a service based on our own preferences; he would then check it over.

To our delight this meant that the questions and promises of the parents and godparents could use the Anglican form, which we preferred. For the rest of the service we looked at the poetry of the words and how meaningful they are to the congregation, as well as trying to keep a quantitative balance between Anglican and Catholic sections. In planning which priest was to lead various parts of the liturgy, we sometimes asked them to lead each other’s traditional words. So, for example, the Anglican priest led the Catholic questions at the entrance (with the Catholic priest joining for the words of welcome), and the Catholic priest asked Anglican questions of the parents and godparents.

A eucharistic context

When the draft service was complete, copies were given to both clergy. The Anglican priest immediately replied that he was happy, while the others spent longer checking the details. We wanted to have the service in a eucharistic context, but were very aware of the divisions that can cause, so we were pleased with our Catholic priest’s suggestion of a communion service. As St Andrew’s has a double tabernacle, it was easy to arrange for the reserved sacrament to be available in both kinds for everybody. Although there was still a Catholic/other Christians division, it was preferable to a divided eucharistic prayer. While we may need to experience the pain of division in order to prevent ecumenical complacency from setting in, a baptismal celebration is not the place for that pain.

With the order of service agreed (and Joanna safely arrived), we had to choose godparents. We felt it important to reflect our double background in our choice of godparents, as well as to ensure that they are firm followers of the Lord who will help us in bringing up Joanna as a Christian. The Ecumenical Directory told us that godparents “do not merely undertake a responsibility for the Christian education of the person being baptised (or confirmed) as a relation or friend; they are also there as representatives of a community of faith, standing as

Joanna is baptised

...
guarantees of the candidate’s faith and desire for ecclesial communion. However, based on the common baptism and because of ties of blood or friendship, a baptised person who belongs to another ecclesial community may be admitted as a witness to the baptism, but only together with a Catholic godparent” (n. 98).

Paul and I found it impossible to accept that of three people making the same undertaking only one could be a godparent, and the other two would be witnesses. Their commitment to Joanna is as great, as is their readiness to bring Joanna to confirmation as a Catholic and so, in our view, all view three are, and will remain, godparents to Joanna.

The baptism itself took place on Sunday, 13 February 1994, and was a lively, happy and thoroughly God-centred service. Three priests were involved; we had invited a friend to preach, a vicar within the Church in Wales. All three worked well together and enjoyed the event. Importantly, some members of the congregation who are not regular churchgoers made a point of telling us that the service was the most enjoyable, most meaningful, most happy, most welcoming or the most easy to understand in their experience. Our witness to others is of vital importance, and we feel that the ecumenical nature of the service was a good witness.

Dual registration
Afterwards, Joanna’s baptism was entered in both the Roman Catholic and Church of England baptismal registers, with notes being made of the ecumenical context of the service. Having the baptism entered in the Anglican register was important to us to underline the double belonging which we practise in our marriage and hope to convey to Joanna as she grows up. It places the baptism in context, and we hope will help Joanna to understand, as she grows to grapple with her own loyalties, what priorities we have. It is not for Paul and me to choose a church for Joanna. With her godparents, we pray that she will choose to follow Christ – for us, that will be wonderful enough.

R Beverly Hollins

Interchurch Families and Christian Unity

Ecumenism – with others
The ecumenical movement which is drawing different Christian communities together is much larger and wider than anything interchurch families themselves can do.

As interchurch families, we are very concretely confronted in our family life, our spiritual life, by choices we have to make – really very difficult choices – because of the divisions of the churches. But the root of the problem is exactly that: the churches are divided today, and that division contradicts the heart of the gospel message.

Salvation – God’s love – is for everyone, whatever their background, race, or culture, and not for a small number who have to separate themselves off from everyone else. In reaching out to us God requires us in our turn to recognise everyone as brothers and sisters in Christ – this being so, how much more are we required to acknowledge those who are believing Christians.

It is difficult to conceive how Christians and Christian communities can exclude one another in the very name of Christ. The ecumenical task of coming together is thus required by Christian teaching, by our faith itself.

In the end interchurch families are only a special category of Christians who are confronted more concretely than others by Christian divisions. They are of course grateful for all the help offered “to make life a bit easier for them” – mutual recognition of baptism; of marriage; possibilities of sharing communion ... But this does not go to the root of the problem.

Ecumenism requires on-going personal and community conversion; it is a requirement for every Christian, for every church on pilgrimage, always and endlessly seeking to purify and renew its faith.

Interchurch families are ready to play their part, to contribute to the great task, but side by side with others and in concert with others.

Jean-Robert Baise

The Spring 1994 number of the French review Foyers Mixtes, published at Lyons, is almost entirely devoted to ecumenism. We have translated from it two short articles in which members of interchurch families reflect on the link between such families and the whole movement towards Christian unity.

Ecumenism - not just for us
Ecumenism shouldn’t be something we do on top of everything else (don’t our church leaders at all levels say too often: “With everything I’ve got to do already, I can’t add on ecumenism as well!”). We should be ecumenical in everything we do, not on top of everything else we do. The proof: an interchurch couple doesn’t act ecumenically – it is ecumenical by its very existence. By the strength of its love – and that is important, for without love (without intimate knowledge) there will be no unity; there will still be too much mistrust between our communities.

Ecumenism is not a requirement born of the growing number of mixed couples within our churches – to make their lot a happier one! It is what Christ wants for us (“to be one”) for an immensely important reason – “so that the world may believe”.

The church has a heavy responsibility, for if the world does not believe, Christian divisions must have a share in the reason. Why wear ourselves out in being active witnesses unless the very basis of our activity is that ecumenical spirit which is linked with the conversion, the salvation, of the world?

Intercurch couples don’t want ecumenism just for themselves, but they want to be ecumenical with all their communities in response to that fundamental vocation: “to be one so that the world may believe”.

Sometimes interchurch couples are told that they do wrong in the way that they have to (or allow themselves to) live with regard to church rules (especially over eucharistic sharing). But should we not ask ourselves whether it is rather the churches which do wrong in failing to be ONE even while they make rules for those “exceptional cases” in which eucharistic sharing is allowed?

Françoise Debloek

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A generation ago

My attention was first drawn to the Association of Interchurch Families when, hunting for books for our parish bookstall, I found a copy of Mary Bard’s Whom God Hath Joined. My interest in particular was aroused, for one of my parents is a member of a church belonging (now deceased) of the Anglican Church. Each was a source of strength to their particular church; I had been brought up in both and, looking back, believe I was able to absorb the best from both traditions.

I read Mary’s book on the train home and sought to find out more of the aims and work of the AIF. In so doing I provided AIF material for the bookstall and then, after joining the Association, I began to assess my own experience as a member of an interchurch family, growing up in the ‘forties and ‘fifties.

Family history

The families of both my parents had been Nonconformist at least from the mid-nineteenth century, probably much longer in my father’s paternal family in Scotland, where the evidence from marriage certificates and church magazines indicates that they were also members of the Baptist church. However, my mother had made a particular decision to move away from the Evangelical Nonconformist church attended by her family and became an Anglican at the age of twenty-four, before she became engaged. My father, with his family, belonged to another Nonconformist church in the same city at that time. After my parents were married in my mother’s Anglican parish church early in 1939, they attended a service in the one church in the morning and the other in the evening, and so they intended to continue.

But politics took a hand. My father was called up in 1941 and joined the Army; his intermittent absence during the war and after was inevitable. My mother pushed the little black push-chair and her toddler-aged eldest daughter one and a half miles to the Anglican church on Sunday mornings. The Nonconformist church was a two-bus journey, at a time when no petrol was available for a private car. At Christmas time the two of us, with the latest baby and a Christmas tree, took a taxi, to share our rations with the retired Vicar of my mother’s parish church and his family, neighbours of her youth. The warm impact of Christmas services in the candle-lit, war-time blacked-out chapel of the old people’s hospital, of which he was Master and Chaplain, will always remain.

When my father was demobbed in 1946, the car came off its war-time block and he drove it to the morning service at the nearest Baptist church with members of his increasing family of children. My mother came sometimes, for she greatly admired the minister’s preaching; in fact, this had influenced my father’s post-war choice of church, plus the convenience of its nearness to our home. I joined the Baptist church Brownie pack, attended services there regularly, especially Parade Sundays, or the times when my father put together a small orchestra for a special occasion. I enjoyed many church social events with him; frequently the whole family came too. He taught the older teenagers at the Baptist church Sunday School, thus continuing his family’s tradition. Occasionally he came to the Anglican service, but was rather put off by the fact that we could no longer squeeze the whole family into one parish church pew! (This little village church was later extended and pews became longer.) Since he was happier for us to be able to go to church together, and incidentally so was I, this was a real stumbling block to his regular attendance there. In addition, at that time he was not welcome to receive Communion there with my mother – which, thankfully, has changed now.

My mother continued to go to the parish church, as and when the childhood illnesses of her family allowed, and so did I at times. My mother’s commitment to the parish church increased as time went on and as her duties permitted: she became a member of the Mothers’ Union and was part of an educational think-tank which was established in the parish. She was in charge of the church cleaning and the care of some of the vestments. Sometimes we all helped her with the delivery of parish magazines along our road.

From the age of six to sixteen I also joined the Crusaders (a Bible class for regular Bible study, teaching and discussion, the singing of choruses and hymns) on Sunday afternoons, and thereby became involved with an inter-denominational group quite early; both my parents had been Crusaders, but none of my siblings joined. However, we all went to an inter-denominational Pioneer camp one year when I was eleven and the Christian fellowship I experienced there had a great impact on me. These first years covered a period when I began to understand the concept that an ideal life was one of service, which was illustrated by the example of my parents’ lives, Crusaders, and the promises I made as a Brownie and later as a Guide. Perhaps this sounds a little prosaic today, but the basis was sound.

Baptism and confirmation

Then another phase began. When I was twelve and a Girl Guide in a company attached to another Anglican church, the subject of confirmation classes arose, and with two of my Guide friends I was keen to be involved. This seems like peer pressure and to an extent it was. However, at this moment I was certain that the Anglican church was where I wanted to belong; belonging meant a great deal. I had already affirmed that I accepted Christ as part of my life at my Crusader class, but I cherished the idea that I was now able to follow a path, recognised by my teenage group and the adult world. I understood from my mother that the choice between the two churches was mine, but I did not really understand the nature of that choice; nor, until I had actually made the decision, that my father regretted it. In part his feelings stemmed from the fact that his forebears’ allegiance to
Nonconformity had meant a degree of struggle, possibly economic or educational, although this was not specified; and that members of my mother’s family were Nonconformist (a fact then quite new to me). I was minded to disregard the custom of not drinking alcohol and not wearing make-up, since I could not understand why this should detract from following Christ!

This discovery aroused a certain amount of turmoil within me, which only gradually faded in time. It was only recently that I realised that the Baptist church in question has an open membership and I might have been able to be a member of both this and the parish church. The idea of “double belonging” was not one which I knew to be on offer; now I do not know if I would have taken advantage of it, at that time and at that age. Both in my twelve-year-old understanding and later, I wanted to be identified with the Anglican church, perhaps because this is what had been most familiar to me from earliest childhood. To me, at that time, not yet knowing much about the Reformation, it represented the historical church. This church occupied ancient and architecturally fascinating buildings, full of memorials of former parishioners. Of course, I knew God was everywhere, but these places were especially and tangibly full of the presence of God. The liturgy was so rich and familiar, the gentle discipline of word and action handed down from generation to generation. All this was not greatly questioned by me; I accepted it with much pleasure.

I had not been baptised (and I do not think I had had the usual dedication for infants in the Nonconformist church to which my father belonged at my birth). My parents had come to terms with the fact that infant baptism was practised in one tradition, but believer’s baptism in the other. They agreed to wait for the choice of each one of us. With my friends, I followed the course of confirmation classes and was then baptised; two godparents were Anglican, another, my paternal aunt, was a Congregationalist, but I recall no recognition of this event from the Baptist church. I was confirmed during the following week with my friends. It was a very special occasion in my life. After it my allegiance and attendance at church became entirely Anglican; I went with my mother to the Parish Communion and at sixteen I left Crusaders and went also to Evensong with a friend, in our packed village church, where we listened to a young curate who explained his theology in our terms and was very popular with a young congregation. I felt I belonged there and this was wonderful.

My siblings also had experience in both traditions as they grew up, particularly my sisters, who went to our nearest Anglican primary school after the age of seven and belonged to the same Baptist Brownie pack and Anglican Guide company as I had done. My next sister was baptised as a teenager in the Baptist church, and this was a very moving experience for all of us; I do not think there was any acknowledgement of this at the time in the Anglican church. As far as I know, during that period my brother and youngest sister did not take a positive step to belong to either denomination (my brother was away at school), but both were always part of the family who went to the Baptist church and all three attended the Baptist Sunday School. Our joint experience was interdenominational (within the Reformation tradition), and through our marriages it continues to be so. For though we were married in the Anglican parish church (my husband is an Anglican), my brother and next sister chose the Baptist church, and my second sister the Presbyterian church in Canada, to which her husband belonged.

The need to discuss
Personally, I think that my experience serves to illustrate a subtle distinction between an “interchurch” and a “two-church” couple, although my own pattern seems to have been more of first one and then the other rather than a continuous period of “double belonging”. In my case, this actually resulted in more influence from one side than the other. In fact, so far as I was concerned, this became a tug of loyalties. Due to the circumstances of war and separation from my father, I was more aware of my mother’s Anglican loyalties than my father’s Nonconformist ones. Possibly because she had made the choice to become an Anglican as an adult, she could express her thoughts more easily to me. I mention this, not as a criticism, but to point out that an imbalance of views can become a problem. I think it shows how important it is for interchurch parents to discuss, with each of their children, the different stages of commitment in each tradition — certainly in order to help the child’s understanding, but especially to bring these subjects up as part of a family discussion, with both parents contributing.

To summarise, my experience as a member of an interchurch family (both churches being within the Reformation tradition) has taken a course through a number of Baptist or Anglican phases. Only to a certain extent have these run in parallel. A more continuous thread from the ages of six to sixteen was the ambience of the interdenominational Crusaders. I have picked out some of the problems during the time of growing up, but happily, looking back, they seem very transient to me now. If I experienced any difficulties, it was not between the two churches as bodies of people, but rather more on a personal level, in terms of a lack of understanding. In so many ways, I have not had to face the struggles of my friends, who are also interchurch, but where the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions are involved.

An ecumenical family
One of the great advantages of such an upbringing, within both the two churches and the Crusader group, has been that it taught me to respect the customs and beliefs of other traditions within the Christian church (and beyond), whether I share in them or not. This highlights very strongly for me the most important and unifying fact that we all try to follow Christ and understand his humility, but in different ways. Above all, I have always been made welcome in both churches to which my parents belonged and, while I am an Anglican, have been most appreciative of the excellence of the tradition of prayer and preaching which I find in Baptist churches. I still attend with my father when on visits to him, and he comes to the Anglican parish church when here, where he can now receive Communion with us.

I also shared his pleasure when a friend said to him a little while ago, in relation to our family in the widest sense, “You have the most ecumenical family I know!”

Janet Firth
First bilateral agreement on Interchurch marriages

Since the Second Vatican Council the Roman Catholic Church has been in dialogue with a number of other Christian churches and communities at world level; the best-known of these international bilateral dialogues, at any rate in English-speaking countries, is probably ARCIC – the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission.

Although ARCIC produced in 1975 a Report on the Theology of Marriage and its Application to Mixed Marriages entitled Anglican-Roman Catholic Marriage, it has not yet achieved an agreement on interchurch marriages which can be approved by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion.

We give here the text of the agreement, which was published on the final day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 1994.

Agreement between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church on Interchurch marriages

This agreement between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church on interchurch marriages has been prepared taking into account the following elements of the Common Declaration of Pope John Paul II and the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Zakka I Iwas of Antioch, dated 23 June 1984:

1 The common profession of faith between the Pope and the Patriarch on the mystery of the Incarnate Word;
2 the common affirmation of their faith in the mystery of the Church and the sacraments;
3 the possibility given by the declaration for a pastoral collaboration including the mutual admission of the faithful belonging to both churches to the reception of the sacraments of penance, eucharist and anointing of the sick for a grave spiritual need.

Having considered the above mentioned events and declaration, the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church agreed on the following considerations and norms.

As our two churches believe in and confess the mystery of the Church and its sacramental reality, we consider it our duty to specify the areas of agreement in cases of marriages between the members of our two churches.

Man and woman created in the image of God (Gen. 1: 26-27) are called to become sharers of the eternal divine communion. The sacrament of marriage is an image of this divine communion. Marital intimacy and self-effacing sharing are reflections of the deepest inter-personal sharing within the Trinitarian communion. Hence this intimate marital communion is divinely confirmed by Christ with the seal of unity and of indissolubility, and ordered toward the good of the spouses and the generation and education of the offspring.

The first official agreement on this subject is the fruit of the “Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church on Interchurch Marriages”; this dialogue was undertaken “because of the urgency of problems of a pastoral nature”, and the agreement has “been definitively approved by the authorities of both Churches”. It has recently been published in the Information Service of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Vatican City, no. 84, followed by some “Pastoral Guidelines” agreed by some of the Catholic and Syrian Orthodox members of the joint commission and approved by the Kerala Catholic Bishops’ Conference.

He answered, “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh?” What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder. (Mt. 19: 4-6)

Marriage is a great sacrament of divine communion and St Paul compares the mutual relationship of the husband and wife to the mystery of communion between Jesus Christ and his Church (cf. Eph. 5: 21-26; Tit. 2: 3f.; 1 Pet. 3: 1f.; Rev. 18: 7, 21: 2). St Paul calls it a great mystery: “This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church” (Eph. 5: 32). Hence we believe that the sacrament of marriage bearing the image of the eternal divine communion is also an image of the most intimate communion between the Risen Bridegroom with his Bride, the Church.

The Church is the primordial sacrament of the eternal divine communion and, through the celebration of her sacramental mysteries, she deepens her communion with the divine Spouse and enables her members to participate in the divine life.

Our two churches accept the sacredness and indissolubility of the sacramental bond of marriage and consider the conjugal relationship as an expression of the above communion and a means to achieve self-effacing mutual love and freedom from selfishness which was the cause of the fall of humanity.

In this theological perspective, taking into account the question of the marriages between the members of our two churches, we consider it a matter of our pastoral concern to provide the following directives.

Our two churches desire to foster marriages within the same ecclesial communion and consider this the norm. However, we have to accept the pastoral reality that interchurch marriages do take place. When such occasions arise, both churches should facilitate the celebration of the sacrament of matrimony.

Information Service
in either church, allowing the bride/bridegroom the right and freedom to retain her/his own ecclesiical communion, by providing necessary information and documents. On the occasion of these celebrations, the couple as well as their family members belonging to these two churches are allowed to participate in the Holy Eucharist in the church where the sacrament of matrimony is celebrated. We consider it also the great responsibility of the parents to pay special attention to ecclesial formation to their children in full harmony with the tradition of the ecclesial communion to which they have to belong.  

25 January 1994

Pastoral Guidelines

The “Pastoral Guidelines” which follow the text of the Agreement state that “the pastors of both partners are bound in conscience to provide continued pastoral care to interchurch families in such a way as to contribute to their sanctity, unity and harmony.”

The couple are “allowed to participate jointly in the eucharistic celebration on special occasions when this joint celebration is socially required”.

A Note on Communion at the Wedding

In two respects interchurch couples in the West will regret that similar possibilities as those envisaged in this Agreement are not yet open to them.

Reciprocity

The Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church is an autonomous church under the authority of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch. It is thus one of those Eastern churches which the Roman Catholic Church recognises as close in faith to itself and “in possession of true sacraments, notably the priesthood and the eucharist” (Decree on Ecumenism, n.14, 15). For this reason the bride and groom are allowed to receive communion together, whether the wedding and wedding eucharist takes place in a Catholic church or in a Malankara Syrian Orthodox church.

With regard to other (non-Eastern) churches and ecclesiastical communities, this kind of reciprocity is not envisaged, since Catholics “may ask for the sacraments only from a minister in whose church these sacraments are valid or from one who is known to be validly ordained according to the Catholic teaching on ordination” (1993 Directory, n.132). Thus the admission of another Christian to Catholic communion at the wedding mass is envisaged (Directory, n.159), but not the other way round.

2. Family members

This document makes explicit provision for the wider family to receive communion together at the wedding, not simply the bride and groom.

Where non-Eastern Christians are concerned, the 1993 Directory makes no mention of family members, but “because of problems concerning eucharistic sharing which may arise from the presence of non-Catholic witnesses and guests” a wedding mass is not encouraged (Directory, n.159). Many couples will judge that if family and guests are unable to share in communion at the wedding, then it is better to celebrate the wedding without a eucharist; other couples will decide differently.

It is noteworthy that the “Pastoral Recommendations for Mixed Marriages between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in France” of June 1980, approved by the French Catholic Bishops, stated that at a wedding “eucharistic hospitality can be requested for the Anglican fiancée and family”.

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INTERCHURCH FAMILIES AROUND THE WORLD

CANADA

In Canada the national Anglican-Roman Catholic (ARC) dialogue served as a catalyst for interchurch family groups. The story is told In March 1993 number of Ecumenism, published by the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism in Montreal.

The annual ARC Bishops’ Dialogue worked over several years on a document which was published in English and French in 1986. Pastoral Guidelines for Interchurch Marriages between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in Canada was compiled by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the House of Bishops of the Anglican Church of Canada. These guidelines included the statement: We strongly encourage the formation of associations of Anglican/Roman Catholic couples, i.e. the Association of Interchurch Families. It would certainly be most helpful for couples of Anglican/Roman Catholic marriages to meet and to share their experience of spiritual growth as well as the challenge of living out their interchurch marriage (article 22).

But how was this to begin?

After further study on support and catechesis for interchurch families (see One in Christ, 1990, no. 3), the members of ARC-Canada requested the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism to see what could be done.

After an abortive attempt to contact couples by a questionnaire sent out through the communications channels of the churches, the Revd Thomas Ryan, Director of the Centre, decided on a more direct approach. As he travelled all over Canada to speak on ecumenism, he began to ask local Ecumenical Officers or Councils of Churches to invite some interchurch couples to come together for an evening during his visit. The first meeting took place in Edmonton, Alberta, in January 1990; the four couples who came had similar reactions to those of interchurch couples in the area. They were “delighted to discover partners all over the world — they were “delighted to discover one another, confessing to feeling very isolated”. A few days later a meeting was held in Calgary in a parish centre shared by Lutherans and Roman Catholics; thirty people came. Similar meetings followed throughout Canada.

The results have been different in different places. In Calgary ten young interchurch couples meet on the last Saturday of every month. They have prepared a leaflet introducing the Calgary Interchurch Marriage Support Group, and their representative Mark Vandevoort reports that they are very busy publicising their existence “in order to help others who may be feeling just as isolated as we were before Fr Tom Ryan’s visit.”

In Halifax the Family Life Office has invited married interchurch couples to give a talk as part of its marriage preparation programme, since over half the engaged couples in the area are from different churches. In Montreal a group meets bi-monthly, it has studied the World Council of Churches’ Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry document as well as the Canadian Council of Churches’ new Initiation into Christ booklet. Craig and Michelle Buchanan are the contact couple. Like the Calgary group, they have prepared a publicity leaflet.

In Charlottetown an Interchurch Marriage Association is being supported by the Christian Council. Fr Bernard Margerie of the Saskatoon Centre for Ecumenism has been in contact with AIF England since 1985. There are now two groups meeting in Saskatoon, one city-wide and the other a group of twelve couples based on Holy Spirit parish. The Canadian Centre for Ecumenism in Montreal is continuing to help by putting the various groups into contact with one another.

Fr Thomas Ryan comments: Whether a Canadian Association develops ultimately on the couples themselves. An office like ours can sow the seeds and play a supporting role, or a local pastoral minister can say, “I’m willing to serve as a chaplain or resource person to a group,” but in the end a network will only come into being if it meets a real need and the couples themselves thus decide to make it happen.

The Centre will continue to support interchurch families nation-wide, and “collaborate with the Canadian Council of Churches and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to develop strategies of support for interchurch couples” (1993 Annual Report).

The Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue in Canada has also studied interchurch marriages and made the following recommendations (1992):

1 Both Churches ought to explore common approaches to preparation and to provision of support for families in interchurch marriages. This would include consideration of admitting spouses and children to communion in both Churches. Responsibility for attendance at Sunday worship in interchurch marriages is a source of tension which should be resolved.

2 Moreover, we need a common approach to baptism in interchurch marriages. This would also encourage the preparation of catechetical materials to be used in common.

3 The Pastoral Guidelines for Interchurch Marriages between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in Canada could be a helpful resource in this area.

AUSTRALIA

The English Association of Interchurch Families has had intermittent contacts with Australia for a long time. The Roman Catholic-Congregational couple whose problem over their baby’s baptism led to the formation of AIF in 1968 emigrated to Australia even before the first national conference took place in England. An Australian couple was present at the first international conference of interchurch families which took place in the English Lake District in 1980. Groups have sprung up and disappeared in various parts of the continent over the years. More recently, two groups have become established.

Perth, Western Australia

Two families, the Whites and the Patons, have been in contact with the English Association for some years. In February 1993 they were visited by Martin and Ruth Reardon from England and gathered together a group of about forty people for a Saturday’s training seminar. Most of these were interchurch couples, but a number of churches sent official representatives, including the Roman Catholic archdiocese. The session ended

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with a decision to start a group in Western Australia. Subsequently this was done under the name of the Interchurch Families Association, Western Australia (IFA WA) - a title chosen because AIF also stands for Australian Imperial Forces! The Archbishop of Perth later appointed a chaplain for the group.

In April-May 1994 Mary Paton was a peace monitor on the Ecumenical Monitoring Program for South Africa, following Ian who went out earlier. She wrote in her report: “The fact that I, an Anglican, was sponsored by Australian Catholic Relief along with my husband (who is a Catholic) made it particularly meaningful for me.”

Brisbane, Queensland
Brother Eric Blumenthal of the Catholic Archdiocesan Commission on Ecumenism has been in contact with English AIF since 1987. It was on the initiative of the Commission that a group of interchurch families (Anglican-Roman Catholic) was formed in Brisbane in 1991, with Monica Sharwood as secretary. The group was more formally reconstituted 1993 as the Interchurch Families Association, Brisbane (IFAB) and sent out a brochure to publicise its existence to parish priests and pastors in the area.

When the National Roman Catholic-Uniting Church Dialogue Group met in Brisbane in November 1993, continuing its work on mixed marriages (see below), it invited two RC/UC couples to talk about their experiences.

IFAB has raised the question of whether the Anglican diocese and the Catholic archdiocese might jointly produce some pastoral guidelines for interchurch families, having studied the guidelines authorised for Catholic-Anglican marriages in Canada.

Moving Together on Marriage
The Roman Catholic-Uniting Church Dialogue Group in Australia has been working for some time on a joint agreement on marriage; it was published in the form of a “work in progress” paper in Pacifica, June 1990, with a request for comments to be sent to the Revd Peter Kenny at the Catholic Theological College in Clayton, Victoria.

The document pointed out that since the 1977 Pastoral Statement on Mixed Marriages issued by the Australian Roman Catholic bishops, the challenges of marriage preparation and pastoral care have increased.

In a small pamphlet, Moving Together on Marriage, issued for wide circulation as a result of the work of the Dialogue Group, the points it made about interchurch families in the longer statement are summarised thus:

1 We should as churches try to minimise our divisions which “put asunder” those whom God has joined in marriage.

2 Co-operation has grown between Roman Catholic and Uniting Church clergy both in preparing couples for interchurch marriages and in pastoral care after marriage.

3 Our churches’ recognition of each other’s baptism may reduce family tension over who a child should be baptised.

4 Marriage raises two urgent issues: shared Holy Communion for couples from our two churches and confirmation for their children. But we are not agreed on how to resolve tensions between the spiritual unity of the family and the internal unity of our churches.

5 Ecumenical trust may have reached a point where we can pay serious attention to removing barriers to a married couple’s unity in Christ.

New Zealand
Mgr Brian Arahill from Auckland was present at the 1988 International Conference of Interchurch Families held at Lingfield, Sussex, England. Soon afterwards he became parish priest of St Michael’s, Remuera, Auckland. By 1992 a group of Anglican-Roman Catholic couples was meeting in Remuera, with Margaret McLean as secretary, and had asked to be recognised as an AIF sister-association. Martin and Ruth Reardon visited the group in March 1993. At a special session with interchurch children, some of them signed up to be pen-friends with interchurch children in England.

United States
The National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States has issued a pastoral message to families to mark the 1994 International Year of the Family. It is entitled Follow the Way of Love, and has had wide publicity. It can be obtained in the form of a 32-page booklet published by the United States Catholic Conference, Washington, DC.

Throughout the message the American bishops speak of “the Christian family” and not an exclusively Roman Catholic vision of family. It is “the vocation of every Christian to follow the way of love, even as Christ loved you (Ephesians 5:2)” and “the message is addressed primarily to Catholic families but is intended also for all who can use it to strengthen their families”.

“...You are the Church in your Home” say the bishops, and spell out something of what this means in terms of faith and love, fostering intimacy, evangelising and educating, praying and serving, forgiving and celebrating, welcoming strangers, acting justly and affirming life... “No domestic church does all this perfectly. But neither does any parish or diocesan church. A family is holy not because it is perfect but because God’s grace is at work in it, helping it to set out anew every day on the way of love.”

There are messages to different kinds of families - one-parent families, step-families and so on - all seen in terms of the positive things they each have to offer. Mixed marriages too get a mention: “Families arising from an interreligious marriage give witness to the universality of God’s love which overcomes all division. When family members respect one another’s different religious beliefs and practices, they testify to our deeper unity as a human family called to live in peace with one another.”

The message does not refer to the specific issues which are of concern to interchurch families, but contains much on family dynamics and the way families grow in mutual respect which is of interest to them. The bishops promise to include “interfaith families” (amongst other kinds of families) more deliberately within the scope of their pastoral care. The bibliography includes the 1993 Directory for its “important directives on mixed marriages”.

The bishops ask families to respond to this message by reflecting on it and by telling their stories. The Ark, a publication of the American Association of Interchurch Families, is encouraging interchurch couples to reply to the American bishops’ invitation to “develop a partnership with families within the Church” by writing to the NCCB Committee on Marriage and the Family (Spring 1994).
Admission to communion in the Roman Catholic Church for partners in Interchurch Families

The provisions of the directory for the application of principles and norms on ecumenism issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 1993

Part One: A change in the law and clarification on how the law can be applied to Interchurch Families

Recently, having moved into a new Catholic diocese, I was re-commissioned as a special minister of the eucharist. Before we were commissioned our bishop set the present-day need for lay eucharistic ministers in its historical context.

It takes a long time

When church historians look back at the twentieth century, they said, they might well call it "the century of communion". At the beginning of the century Catholics received communion rarely – maybe three times a year. Then Pope Pius X spoke of communion as "our daily bread", and also said that children should be able to receive communion as soon as they could understand that it is the Body of Christ: that is, communion should be received early and often – even daily. But there was little change for a long time. (When the bishop was young, he joined the Guild of the Blessed Sacrament which worked hard to encourage people to receive communion once a month; at that time, nobody except the clergy ever received communion at the mid-morning sung mass.) Later Pope Pius XII realised that the fasting rules hindered frequent communion, and the process of relaxing the rules began. (The bishop said that when as a newly-ordained priest he gave his mother permission to drink a cup of tea before his first mass, and still take communion, the parish priest had not been entirely happy about it.) It took a long time before large numbers began receiving communion at all masses; when they did, and especially after Vatican II reintroduced communion under both kinds for the laity, then special ministers were needed.

Pastoral and liturgical change takes a long time. It is not surprising therefore that admission to communion for interchurch families has taken a long time – almost thirty years between the Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council and the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism issued in 1993.

Vatican II on sacramental sharing

This is what the Second Vatican Council said in 1964 about sacramental sharing:

As for communicatio in sacris, however, it may not be regarded as a means to be used indiscriminately for the restoration of unity among Christians. Such communication in sacris depends chiefly on two principles: it should signify the unity of the church; it should provide a sharing in the means of grace. The fact that it should signify unity generally rules out communication in sacris. Yet the earning of a needed grace sometimes commends it. The practical course to be adopted, after due regard has been given to all the circumstances of time, place and personage, is left to the prudent decision of the local episcopal authority, unless the Bishops' Conference according to its own statutes, or the Holy See, has determined otherwise.

In the longer perspective outlined above, it seems unsurprising that it has taken a long time for the Vatican II statement on sacramental sharing quoted here to bring about the kind of change in the rules on admission to communion (so important for interchurch families) that we see in the 1993 Directory. Nor is it surprising that there are those (like the reluctant parish priest quoted above) who are hesitant to accept that a new pastoral policy is possible, even desirable, more than thirty years later.

Because the new Directory is very little known yet, either among Roman Catholics or in other churches, it seems important to set it in its historical context and in particular to study exactly how it has changed the situation, especially since some people are saying that it has changed nothing.

The norms of the Code of Canon Law

It is of course perfectly true to say that the Directory has not changed the substance of the norms laid down in the Code of Canon Law (1983); it is a Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, and what it has done is to clarify the application of those norms.

We refer here in particular to canons 844, which sets down the rule that Catholic ministers may lawfully administer the sacraments only to Catholic members of Christ's faithful, who equally may lawfully receive them only from Catholic ministers, and then goes on to deal with the exceptions.

The exceptions: Catholics in need may lawfully receive the sacraments of penance, the eucharist and anointing of the sick from non-Catholic ministers in whose churches these sacraments are valid; and Catholic ministers may lawfully administer these sacraments to members of the eastern churches not in full communion with the Catholic Church if they spontaneously ask for them and are properly disposed.

However, for members of non-eastern churches there are stricter conditions: If there is a danger of death or if, in the judgment of the diocesan Bishop or the Episcopal Conference, there is some other grave or pressing need, Catholic ministers may lawfully administer these sacraments to other Christians not in full communion with the Catholic Church, who cannot approach a minister of their own community and who spontaneously ask for them, provided that they demonstrate the Catholic faith in respect of these sacraments and are properly disposed.

In all these cases the diocesan Bishop or the Episcopal Conference is not to issue general norms except after...
consultation with the competent authority, at least at the local level, of the non-Catholic church or community concerned.

Between the Council and the Code
The Ecumenical Directory of 1967, issued by the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, made the first attempt to express in terms of law what the principles laid down in the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism might mean in practice, so far as western Christians are concerned (n.55). It allowed access to the sacraments in danger of death or in urgent need (during persecution, in prisons) if the separated brother has no access to a minister of his own community and spontaneously asks a Catholic priest for the sacraments – so long as he declares a faith in those sacraments in harmony with that of the church, and is rightly disposed. In other cases the judge of this urgent necessity must be the diocesan bishop or the Episcopal Conference. A Catholic in similar circumstances may not ask for these sacraments except from a minister who has been validly ordained.

In the mid-sixties some bishops (notably in Italy) had already given permission for a non-Catholic partner to receive communion at a wedding mass, and the Dutch Episcopal Conference judged, in the year following the appearance of the 1967 Ecumenical Directory, that a wedding mass was an occasion which came into the category of the Directory’s “urgent necessity”. (For full documentation on eucharistic sharing in the period between Vatican II and the publication of the Code of Canon Law, see the Appendix to Sharing Communion, edited by Melanie Finch and Ruth Reardon, Collins, 1983, pp. 105-42 – out of print, but still available from AIF.)

It was not long, however, before warnings came from the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity against extending the “urgent necessity” of the 1967 Directory too widely, and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales quoted these in its 1970 Directory concerning Mixed Marriages, in order to justify its statement that “at present intercommunion is not allowed on the occasion of a mixed marriage”.

“For a prolonged period”
Two years later the Instruction Concerning Particular Cases when other Christians may be admitted to Eucharistic Communion in the Catholic Church, issued by the Secretariat on the authority of Pope Paul VI in 1972, sent a mixed message to interchurch families. On the one hand, “urgent need” became “serious spiritual need”, defined as “a need for an increase in spiritual life and a need for a deeper involvement in the mystery of the church and its unity” (which seemed to express very well the kind of need felt by a number of interchurch couples and families to receive communion together), and it was stressed that Catholic bishops had “fairly wide discretionary power” in admitting other Christians to communion. On the other hand, a clause was slipped in which qualified the inability to have access to another minister; those could be admitted to communion who experience a serious spiritual need and who for a prolonged period are unable to have recourse to a minister of their own community.

Not all bishops took this clause literally, and at least two, the Bishop of Strasbourg and the Bishop of Superior, Wisconsin, used the wide discretionary powers allowed them by the June 1972 Instruction to indicate that they would admit the non-Catholic partner in an interchurch family to communion on certain occasions. But once again these initiatives were frowned upon by the Secretariat; in an Interpretative Note of October 1973 it repeated the conditions for admission laid down (including the words “for a prolonged period”) and observed that so far as admission to communion is concerned, “an objective, pastorally responsible examination does not allow any of the conditions to be ignored”.

The Note was a great disappointment to interchurch families. Following the initiatives of the Bishops of Strasbourg and Superior, which had seemed to them so hopeful, such stress on the need to observe all the conditions laid down in the Instruction seemed to interchurch families to imply that the words “for a prolonged period” effectively excluded the other Christian partner in an interchurch family from admission to Catholic communion.

The Synod of Bishops
Interchurch families continued to lay their serious spiritual need before church authorities, and in some places admission of the other partner to Catholic communion on an informal basis went ahead. It was not until 1980, however, that there seemed to be much movement on an official level. Interchurch families were heartened in 1980 by a powerful speech made by Cardinal Willebrands, President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, to the Synod of Bishops which met in Rome that autumn to consider the subject of marriage and family life.

Cardinal Willebrands addressed the Synod on the topic of “Mixed Marriages and their Christian Families”. In the course of his address he spoke of the need experienced in mixed families for eucharistic sharing, and he spoke too of the dialogue with other churches and ecclesial communities which had considered the doctrine of the eucharist and of the church, and the relationship between the mystery of the eucharist and that of the church.

Christian life in marriage and in the education of children can lead towards unity, he said; therefore he wished to ask for a fresh study of the possibility of admitting the non-Catholic partners in mixed marriages to eucharistic communion in the Catholic Church. The 1972 Instruction had recognised the possibility of such admission so long as a number of conditions are fulfilled. The Cardinal listed them: “It is required that the non-Catholic Christian should profess a eucharistic faith in conformity with that of the Catholic Church; that he should ask for communion of his own accord; and that he should experience a real need for this sacrament”, and added: “It seems to me that these conditions are often fulfilled in mixed marriages.” The following two sentences were crucial: “But there is a fourth condition: it is required that the non-Catholic Christian 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.”

It was a clear indication that the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity judged that the time had come for a new initiative on eucharistic sharing in interchurch families.
The question was not explicitly taken up by the Bishops at the Synod, but the Cardinal’s words seemed to have had considerable effect when the new Code of Canon Law was published in 1983. To the joy of interchurch families the words “for a prolonged period” had been dropped.

The application of the norms of the Code
The dropping of the words “for a prolonged period” seemed very significant for interchurch families, since their need is to receive communion together, and the availability of another minister somewhere else is not relevant.

Over the following ten years the way has been open for Catholic bishops to apply the “grave and pressing need” referred to in the Code to the situation of interchurch families, when other Christian partners “cannot approach a minister of their own community” precisely because their need is to receive communion on this occasion, at this mass, with their Catholic partner. It is the need of the couple as such that has been recognised, and a growing number of bishops have realised that they do have the authority to admit the other Christian partner in an interchurch marriage to communion, and have been willing to exercise it when convinced that the need of interchurch families to receive communion together is indeed “grave and pressing”.

The 1993 Directory makes it quite clear that their interpretation is correct. It specifically refers to mixed marriages in the context of admission to communion. It is clear that communion can be given at the wedding (n.159) and other “exceptional sharing” is envisaged (n.160). The Directory is not changing the substance of the norms in canon law, but showing how they can be applied.

There should be no room for the argument which still says: “But they can approach a minister of their own community – there are plenty around.” It would be nonsense to say that another minister is available on the wedding day, once it is recognised that the need is to receive communion together at the wedding. It is the same with other exceptional occasions. After all, mixed marriages usually take place in regions where other ministers are available; numbers of mixed marriages in totally Catholic regions would be negligible, already covered by the unavailability of a minister, and simply not worth mentioning in the Directory.

This understanding is confirmed by what was said at the press conference in Rome which introduced the new Directory. Mgr Eleuterio Fortino, undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), said that while the Directory cannot and did not expand the possibilities presented by canon law, it is saying: “Apply the norms, but in a benevolent way.” The secretary of the PCPCU, Bishop Pierre Duprey, commented that “If two people share ties of communion not only in baptism, but also the ties of another sacrament, that of matrimony, this opens the way to other prospects.”

This point has been laboured because admission to communion is so important for so many interchurch families. Of course bishops are not obliged to admit to communion, but they should no longer say that they cannot do so. It is important that it should be recognised by those who administer the law and by the whole Catholic community that there has been a change in the law (following Vatican II) and that the new rules on admission to communion can be applied to interchurch families.

Who is to decide when this is done?
The Directory states that it is strongly recommended that the diocesan Bishop, taking into account any norms . . . established . . . by the Episcopal Conference . . . , establish general norms for judging situations of grave and pressing need”. Canon law has already stated that these general norms are to be established only after consultation with at least the local competent authority of the other interested church or ecclesial community.

There is a new provision giving guidance to Catholic ministers: they will judge individual cases and administer these sacraments only in accord with these established norms, where they exist. Otherwise they will judge according to the norms of this Directory (n.130).

The following section repeats the conditions: the sacraments may be administered to a baptised person in the circumstances referred to above (n.130) if that person be unable to have recourse for the sacrament desired to a minister of his or her own church or ecclesial community, ask for the sacrament of his or her own initiative, manifest Catholic faith in this sacrament and be properly disposed.

PART TWO: The reasoning behind the change
It is important to understand how the change in the law and the clarification of its application to interchurch families has taken place without compromising Catholic principles. Thus it is necessary to study the reasoning with which the 1993 Directory introduces its section on “Sharing Sacramental Life with Christians of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities” (n.129). There is a considerable development here from the short passage in which the Decree on Ecumenism set down the “two principles” (quoted above) on which sacramental sharing is to be based. To understand this we need to go back over the ground we have already covered and look at the stages of development from this point of view.

The 1964 Decree
The passage on sacramental sharing in the Decree on Ecumenism was both startlingly new and very brief. Inevitably there was a great deal of confusion about what it could mean. One of the problems with its formulation was its use of the word “means”. It could be argued (and was so argued) that the Decree was entering into the debate on “intercommunion”; that “intercommunion” could be seen as a means to be used (with discrimination) for the restoration of Christian unity; that the “means of grace” includes the “grace of unity”, so sacramental sharing can sometimes be a means to unity. This was felt by many Roman Catholics to be a threat to the Catholic understanding of the Church.

The 1967 Ecumenical Directory
Three years later the Ecumenical Directory practically repeated the Decree, but there was a significant change in the text of the word “sources” to replace “means”: Since
the sacraments are both signs of unity and sources of grace the church can, for adequate reasons, allow access to these sacraments to a separated brother (n.55). This was already a clear attempt to get away from the argument about the eucharist as a ‘sign of’ unity and a ‘means to’ unity.

The 1972 Instruction
The 1972 Instruction on Admission to Communion moved away altogether from the ‘two principles’ of the 1964 Decree by speaking of one ‘principle’ but of two ‘governing ideas’ which would safeguard simultaneously the integrity of ecclesial communion and the good of souls (n.4).

The ‘principle’ (the first ‘governing idea’) was set out first: (a) The strict relationship between the mystery of the church and the mystery of the eucharist can never be altered, whatever pastoral measures we may be led to take in given cases. Of its very nature celebration of the eucharist signifies the fullness of profession of faith and the fullness of ecclesial communion. This principle must not be obscured and must remain our guide in this field.

The second ‘governing idea’ was then presented as in no way obscuring this ‘principle’: (b) The principle will not be obscured if admission to Catholic eucharistic communion is confined to particular cases of those Christians who have a faith in the sacrament in conformity with that of the church, who experience a serious spiritual need for the eucharistic sustenance, who for a prolonged period are unable to have recourse to a minister of their own community and who ask for the sacrament of their own accord; all this provided that they have proper dispositions and lead lives worthy of a Christian. This spiritual need should be understood in the sense defined above: a need for an increase in spiritual life and a need for a deeper involvement in the mystery of the church and its unity.

The 1972 Instruction seemed to imply that the “two principles” of the 1964 Decree were not to be taken on the same level. The first was the true Catholic “principle”; the second was not to be placed on the same ecclesial level (as had sometimes been argued on the basis of the Decree). In the light of the Instruction the “means of grace” was to be referred to the spiritual needs of Christians cut off from the ministrations of their own churches — a pastoral provision rather than an ecclesial principle.

The 1993 Ecumenical Directory
The new Directory represents a considerable development in its explanation of why the Catholic Church judges that this sacramental sharing is not generally possible but is sometimes to be commended (n.129).

The same concern as that expressed in the 1972 Instruction, that church and eucharist should not be separated, comes across in the 1993 Directory. The fact that the eucharist is both “sign” and “source” (and means) of unity becomes a single principle: A sacrament is an act of Christ and of the Church through the Spirit. Its celebration in a concrete community is the sign of the reality of its unity in faith, worship and community life. As well as being signs, sacraments — most specially the eucharist — are sources of the unity of the Christian community and of spiritual life, and are means for building them up. Thus eucharistic communion is inseparably linked to full ecclesial communion and its visible expression.

Baptism and eucharist
Then a second, different sacramental principle is introduced: At the same time, the Catholic Church teaches that by baptism members of other churches and ecclesial communities are brought into a real, even if imperfect communion with the Catholic Church and that “baptism, which constitutes the sacramental bond of unity existing among all who through it are reborn... is directly directed toward the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ”. The eucharist is, for the baptised, a spiritual food which enables them to overcome sin and to live the very life of Christ, to be incorporated more profoundly in him and share more intensely in the whole economy of the mystery of Christ.

This paragraph has introduced a second ecclesial principle: the fact that Christian baptism — wherever it is celebrated — is “wholly directed” to full ecclesial communion.

The section concludes: It is in the light of these two basic principles, which must always be taken into account together, that in general the Catholic Church permits access to its eucharistic communion and to the sacraments of penance and anointing of the sick, only to those who share its oneness in faith, worship and ecclesial life. For the same reasons, it also recognises that in certain circumstances, by way of exception, and under certain conditions, access to these sacraments may be permitted, or even commended, for Christians of other churches and ecclesial communities (n. 129).

PART THREE: The spiritual needs of the couple and family

I began this study with our bishop’s historical introduction explaining the relatively recent need to commission special ministers of the eucharist. Another element in the “century of communion” which historians will mention (but which the bishop didn’t as it wasn’t relevant to his purpose) is the rediscovery of the corporate nature of communion. At the beginning of the twentieth century individual Catholics were encouraged to make their individual communions — a “God and me” perspective. The liturgical movement has emphasised that the community is united in communion — a corporate perspective which says that “we are in communion with God and with one another”. This has particular importance for interchurch families. When the Catholic Church emphasises the corporate nature of communion for the local congregation, it also emphasises the importance of the family, the domestic church, receiving communion together.

A corporate perspective
As interchurch families, like other Christian families, are influenced by this perspective, so they increasingly feel their need, as a domestic church, to receive communion together and so to affirm sacramentally their unity as couples and families in Christ.

It is perhaps difficult for those not personally involved to understand the depth of this need. Sometimes a reaction which goes beyond pain — a kind of spiritual outrage at
the fundamental wrongness of it which seems to go to the depths of one’s being – wells up in interchurch partners when refused communion together. It might happen on the occasion of the First Communion of a child whom both partners have nurtured in the love of Christ; it might happen at Christmas or at Easter or on a wedding anniversary. It often takes a lot of courage for couples to ask for admission to communion; the sense of rejection if refused is difficult to put into words. However, their spiritual need has come to be recognised over the years by some bishops and other pastors who have done all that they could within the limits of the possibilities open to them to minister to the needs of such families.

**United in baptism and marriage**

The needs of these families have never entirely fitted into the perspective of individual Christians cut off from the ministers of their own communities. In their case, it has not been just a question of the needs of an individual. Cardinal Willebrands recognised this when he made his speech to the Synod of Bishops in 1980 when he put forward the need of the couple to receive communion together.

His first appeal was to baptism and to the sacramental union of two baptised Christians: “The Church teaches that every valid marriage between baptised persons is a true sacrament which gives rise to a certain communion of spiritual benefits. . . . It can be said of the marriage of two Christians who have been baptised in different churches, as it is of a marriage between two Catholics, that their union is a true sacrament and gives rise to a ‘domestic church’; that the partners are called to a unity which reflects the union of Christ with the Church; that the family, as a 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’. Thus ‘the family itself, as a little church, is somehow called in a similar way to the Church itself, to become a sign of unity for the world’” (here the Cardinal is quoting from the Synod’s working paper).

The Cardinal went on to speak of the need felt by interchurch partners to receive communion together: “Spiritual communion, an outstanding feature in many mixed families, 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 of the spiritual nourishment that is the eucharist.” He set this felt need against the background of the dialogue taking place with other churches and ecclesial communities on the doctrine of the eucharist and the church, and of the relationship between the mystery of the eucharist and that of the church – a dialogue “not yet complete, but the differences seem to be less”. It was in this context that he made his statement about the “fourth condition . . . that the non-Catholic Christian be unable for a prolonged period to have recourse to a minister of his own church . . . is less closely connected with eucharistic doctrine and faith.”

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**Official eucharistic sharing for interchurch families**

As we have seen, in dropping the fourth condition (or rather, the phrase “for a prolonged period” within it) the Code of Canon Law left the way open for the concept of “spiritual need” to be applied to interchurch families, and it has been acknowledged that some bishops and pastors have already done this.

The 1993 Directory has confirmed this application at the level of the universal church.

It is in its section on mixed marriages that the Directory specifically refers to the possibility of the non-Catholic partner sharing communion at the wedding – the decision on this must take into account the particular situation of the reception of the sacrament of Christian marriage by two baptized persons (n.159). There is also the general statement which explains that although the spouses in a mixed marriage share the sacraments of baptism and marriage, eucharistic sharing can only be exceptional (n.160). Here the focus is not just on the needs of an individual, but (as Cardinal Willebrands had asked in 1980) on the needs of the couple. Of course interchurch families feel an on-going week-by-week need to share communion, but it is a great sign of hope that it is now clearly allowable (and indeed commendable) for Catholic pastors to meet this need on occasion.

We should not underestimate the magnitude of the step which has been taken by the 1993 Directory with reference to interchurch families. It is still a question of the admission of an individual Christian from another church to Catholic communion, as allowed in canon law. But the context is one of a baptised couple united by the sacrament of Christian marriage – a couple and family already experiencing Christian unity as a “domestic church” and needing to affirm and build up their corporate unity in Christ, as “a sign of unity for the world”.

Some interchurch families in their particular situation and with their particular needs, and those who have ministered to them in those needs, have made use of the concepts of “going beyond the law, not going against it” and “anticipatory obedience” for a long time – but an adaptive pastoral approach and the acceptance of personal responsibility for one’s actions are in anticipation of a change in law, not a substitute for it. Others would in any case think it wrong to change their practice before the law changes.

Law is not the most important level of the church’s life, but it is nonetheless important. Changes in the law and its application express deeper changes in understanding and attitudes – and they also contribute to such changes.

We can rejoice wholeheartedly, then, in the change in the law and in its application which has taken place in the past ten years.
Fears and dangers

Many interchurch partners have consistently put forward their deep spiritual need to share communion, and it has been their duty and responsibility to do so for the good of their families. But it is also necessary for them to understand the fears which will make some people continue to be resistant to such change. Whatever our own personal attitudes to “intercommunion” in the general sense, it is very important to be able to understand the Catholic fear of “obscuring the relationship between the mystery of the church and the mystery of the eucharist” – after all, a strong sense of this relationship is one of the positive contributions which the Catholic Church makes within the whole ecumenical movement.

With every change for the better there are corresponding dangers. The bishop referred to earlier turned to consider these as he ended his historical survey. Of course it is good that people come frequently to communion, and that they receive communion under both kinds; they should be encouraged to do so. But he quoted the old adage that “familiarity breeds contempt”, and exhorted us as eucharistic ministers to try by our actions and words to do all we could to preserve the proper respect for the eucharistic species. The parish priest mentioned above was presumably influenced by the fear that, if you allowed people to drink a cup of tea before receiving communion, their proper respect for the sacrament would be eroded, thus he was hesitant over the relaxation of the rules on fasting before communion.

In a country where there are many mixed marriages there is a fear of “opening the floodgates”, and although this does not justify the withholding of much-needed spiritual nourishment from interchurch families, it is a fear which is understandable. There is also a fear of hindering, rather than helping forward, the ecumenical movement as a whole. This was expressed by the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales in its reply to the National Pastoral Congress in 1980: Concern for families where the parents are of different churches led Congress delegates to ask not for “intercommunion” but that non-Catholic partners whose eucharistic faith agrees with that of the Catholic Church might on certain occasions be welcomed to receive holy communion. . . . In our present circumstances it is necessary to realise that it could be counterproductive to use what is the perfect symbol of unity achieved as a means of achieving it. This could defeat indefinitely the full corporate union for which we are fighting. We kept it as necessary in the review; but, while fully sensitive to the pain such exclusion can cause, we are unable to compromise these principles.

At the time it seemed puzzling – and indeed intensely disappointing – that the “at present intercommunion is not allowed” of 1970 had become “we are unable to compromise these principles” in 1980. In the longer perspective of this study, it is less puzzling. It is clear that what is really alarming from the Catholic point of view is the sort of pressure towards “intercommunion” which would leave the denominations as they are. We need to realise that there will be lingering fears and anxieties, even though the theological reasoning set out in the 1993 Directory, as well as its reassurance that the need for eucharistic sharing in an interchurch family can legitimately be met on occasion, now offers a way forward.

Something which interchurch families can do is to be careful of their terminology, realising that the use of certain terms arouses quite unnecessary fears. Thus we can agree that “intercommunion” is not a particularly helpful term to use; it can be gratuitously offensive to some people and can obscure what interchurch families are talking about when they ask for admission to communion as couples and as families.

“Intercommunion” is strictly speaking a word to be used for a relationship between churches. Nor is it helpful to talk of eucharistic sharing in terms of a “sign of” or a “means to” unity; this can only polarise a debate which has largely passed beyond that kind of terminology. Admission to communion for interchurch families is a pastoral measure for the good of the couple and family. Certainly it is a pastoral measure which is made possible in the context of a developing relationship between the churches, but it does not weaken the witness of the Catholic Church to the strong link between the mystery of the church and the mystery of the eucharist.

Hope for the future

Living in an interchurch family gives plenty of opportunity for the development of sensitivity to the concerns and fears of the “other” church.

Remarkable evidence of how this has happened in one family can be seen in the video recently made by the Association of Interchurch Families. There is an interview with a couple where the husband is a Roman Catholic and the wife is an elder in the United Reformed Church. Their local Catholic bishop has admitted this United Reformed wife and mother to communion on the occasion of her elder son’s First Communion. She is asked how she will feel in the future when she is not able to receive communion with her family. This is her reply.

“I think I shall feel a great sense of hope. It sounds unusual to say that, but this was a very special occasion. The bishop made it clear to us that this was a special occasion and he was in no position to be able to offer communion to me on every single occasion. I understand that. Of course we would like to think that we will be able to go on and receive communion in other situations of pastoral need – and we would like to create lots of situations of pastoral need for that to happen. But I don’t look forward with great pessimism. I look forward with optimism to a growing towards each other, and an understanding not just from the Catholic Church’s point of view, but from the Protestant churches’ point of view that there is a lot more to this than just saying, ‘yes, you can share communion’. We’ve got a long road to travel down and we’ve got to walk along it together, and there are lots of other issues that we need to share – as well as First Communions and sharing communion – in the future.”

Ruth Reardon

There is to be no harsh uniformity of discipline which would refuse exceptions even when these are possible and desirable.

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,
- baptism 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 who care for their welfare world-wide. It warmly welcomes contributions and editorial help from all parts of the world.

The annual subscription (Europe) to INTERCHURCH FAMILIES is £4 (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 £7 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 in the churches. Most members are interchurch couples and families; some are individuals who wish to further the Association’s work.

Mutual support
AIF began in 1968 as a mutual support group, formed by couples who had found that the exchange of experience with others in similar situations could help each find its own way forward. There are local AIF groups throughout England. A national conference is held every year at Swanwick in Derbyshire.

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 who are 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. 28381) dependent on the subscriptions of members and the donations of others who wish to support it.

Presidents are:
- the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, the Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council, Dr Kenneth Greet, Bishop Alastair Haggart.

Members receive the Journal, AIF News and Notes and The Interdependent (written by and for interchurch children).

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-Irenée, 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 (SIAF), 28 Galston Court, Low Waters, Hamilton, ML3 7YH
- USA American AIF (AAIF), c/o Kentuckiana Community, 1115 South 4th, Louisville, KY 40203
- Canada Calgary Interchurch Marriage Support Group, 131 Bedfield CI.NE, Calgary, Alberta T1K 3L1
- Australian AIF, c/o Foyers Mixtes, Centre St-Irenée, Lyon 69002
- Irish AIF, c/o Irish School of Ecumenics, Milltown Park, Dublin
- Scottish AIF (SIAF), 28 Galston Court, Low Waters, Hamilton, ML3 7YH
- Canadian Interchurch Families Association, (Western Australia) (IFAWA), 62 Tweeddale Road, Applecross, Western Australia 6153
- Australian Interchurch Families Association (New Zealand), 15 Kelvin Road, Remuera, Auckland 5
- American AIF (AAIF), c/o Kentuckiana Community, 1115 South 4th, Louisville, KY 40203
- Canadian Interchurch Families Association (Western Australia), c/o Corrymeela House, 8 Upper Crescent, Belfast, BT7 1NT
- Scottish AIF (SIAF), 28 Galston Court, Low Waters, Hamilton, ML3 7YH
- Canadian Interchurch Families Association (Montreal), 123 Arrowhead Cr., Pointe Claire, Quebec, H9R 3V4
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