Knocking at the door

Their theme was the eagerness of our Lord to come in and eat with us all, if only we will open the door and invite him to the Table which is his own. They finished by speaking of the special need of interchurch families to share communion - a "special need which only emphasizes its urgency for all Christian people".

"Sometimes we are asked how we survive. As we end we will make our confession, conscious of our hesitant faith, our weakness, not claiming to suggest a recipe. For years we have been questioning, confused, uncertain, involved in the exhausting conflict between love and law, desire and obedience, generous impulse and human respect. Some twenty years ago we read of a French child, son of an interchurch couple, receiving his First Communion in his Catholic parish. He was perturbed by the thought that his mother, a Protestant, would not be able to share communion with him. Making a decision all by himself, he kept a fragment of the Host he received and brought it unobtrusively to his mother. In our communities we do not want to arouse gossip, criticism, scandal. So when we are together at Mass or the Lord's Supper, we act according to the teaching of that unknown child. The one of us who is a guest in the celebrating community will remain seated and receive a fragment of Bread from the other one who has free access to the Table. We are still finding our way like a child. Christian initiation should never stop. Jesus himself suggested we should become like little children. He knows that this unobtrusive sharing does not mean a weaker witness. It is just that we are trying to find a frail, modest way forward in this time which is still separating us from the day of the common Table of all Christians. ...

"Lord, as the bread we break was formerly spread over the fields as wheat, and gathered together to become one, so may your Church be gathered from the ends of the earth around your one Table."

Gianni and Myriam were asked to address the Italian Secretariat for Ecumenical Activities at its meeting in Mendola, Trent, in August 1995, on the text chosen for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 1996: 

Here I stand, knocking at the door (Rev. 3:14-22).
Occasions or Cases?

I have been moved to put my thoughts on paper in part because of a recent article in one of our Canadian Catholic papers, *The Prairie Messenger*, in which a good article on interchurch marriages was referred to as concerning "interfaith" relationships. Clearly, there is still a great need for education and growth in awareness as to the difference between the two. That aside, however, the main point that persuaded me to write was the fact that, at the workshop which was being reported, people were asking that the bishop should outline occasions or events at which a non-Catholic could receive communion.

I am somewhat concerned that this question should arise in that format. I doubt if any bishop would, or even could, provide such a list, other than, for example, the occasion of a wedding between a Catholic and someone from another Christian tradition. That is not my main concern. Rather it is that I believe such a question is reflective of a cloudy understanding among Catholics of the whole question of admission to communion.

**Cases?**

Such a question asks for a listing of occasions or events. Yet clearly the 1993 *Ecumenical Directory* does not speak of these, but rather of "cases". I am not totally clear about the meaning here, but my thoughts are that the *case* in question is that of the couple, rather than the occasion or event in which the couple find themselves. As such, it makes sense that eucharistic sharing be exceptional. Unless and until the *case* of the couple is such that it meets the conditions specified, there can be no admission to eucharistic sharing.

One of the conditions for eucharistic sharing is that there be a grave need. It is unfortunately true that many couples, even those who share the same Catholic faith, do not experience a grave (i.e. "weighty", "heavy") and need to share the eucharist. How then could a list of occasions or events be given in which eucharistic sharing is allowed, when there is no evidence of need?

(I would like to share here a thought which comes from my Anglican wife Fenella, and which I believe warrants real attention. She had clearly been upset with the use of the word "case", and I could not understand why. As we shared our thoughts, however, the reason became obvious. She was rightly seriously concerned that the use of such a word tends to make us the problem, or the people with a problem. Further, it dehumanizes us, making us something less than we are, and therefore something easier to deal with - or to disregard.

Unfortunately that is, in the present state of the Church's development, the word we live with and so, having expressed that serious misgiving, I will continue.)

At the same time, if I use Fenella and myself as an example, we do find that in our case we experience a grave and pressing need to share the eucharist together. In fact, at those times when she has chosen, for whatever reason, not to receive, I find it profoundly difficult to go up myself to receive. It is extremely difficult for me to receive the sacrament of unity when I know that, for whatever reason, my wife and I are not able to be united at the table. I find myself in the excruciating situation of having one sacrament of unity stand in the way of another, and make the second impossible to be fully lived.

**The conditions**

This would not be so bad or so difficult if it were not for the fact that the conditions for admission are so patently met in my wife:

1. She is unable to have recourse to a minister of her own church at this celebration (I emphasise this, because, even if she could immediately go down the street to "her own" church, the fact is that we are here, now, in this celebration of the eucharist);
2. She would freely come forward to receive (i.e. "ask") of her own initiative; and
3. She clearly manifests Catholic faith in the eucharist, and is properly disposed.

**Enter into dialogue**

Yet, until such times as we believe there is a reasonable hope of having our case heard and favourably responded to, we will not ask permission. It is, after all, much harder for someone to back-track on a decision incorrectly made than to make the correct one in the first place. And so, until we have reasonable assurance that permission would be granted if requested, we will not ask, but simply live with the struggle, choosing to receive together when we believe it is appropriate.

Included in this judgement of appropriateness is not only satisfaction of the three conditions given above. (There may, after all, be times when we sense no grave and pressing need to receive together.) There are also factors such as whether the liturgy (the songs, the prayers, the Scriptures, the homily) evidences an openness, a welcome to us both. And so, we find ourselves listening with a far greater awareness to the liturgy. This has itself been a gift, though sometimes a difficult one, as we come to discover that at times we Catholics have not made the liturgy a true sign of welcome to the people present.

**Responsibility**

I would like here to add something which I think is critically important, namely that in deciding to receive without asking permission, we are to some extent stepping outside the rules of the Church. We recognize we must take responsibility before God for our own decisions. We do so, however, believing that in each case where we do receive, there is good and sufficient reason to justify the action, not that it is simply something we do at whim. And, we recognize that we could be wrong.

For the moment, however, let us put aside Fenella's and my particular circumstances. If my understanding of the word *case* is correct (i.e. to be seen as the couple rather than the occasion), then we should be able to encourage interchurch couples truly to search their hearts, to see if there is reasonable cause to believe that their *case* meets the conditions, and, if so, to enter into dialogue with their pastor and ordinary, until such time as there is reason to believe permission might be granted if requested.

Until then, let us not ask for a list of occasions, but rather act according to the results of our own search, in honesty and integrity before God.

*Ray Temmerman*
Hidden Strength

Share our joy!
Some years ago we printed in the AIF Newsletter the wedding invitation which Sarah and Jim sent out to their friends. They were married in Sarah’s Anglican church with the participation of Jim’s parish priest. They wanted to set their wedding in a eucharistic context within the bounds of what was then possible. Their wedding invitation read:

We hope you can come to share in our joy.
We would love you to join us, if possible, in sharing a eucharist at St Bridget’s at 9.00 a.m. and at All Saints’ at 9.45 a.m.
In this way we will both be able to receive Communion along with members of our families and friends who wish to do so.
This is very important for us and we hope this small, joyful gesture of pilgrimage to one another’s church will bring them closer together.

Very grateful
Recently we have received an update on the family’s journey of faith, and we rejoice that for them it has been possible to live “the hopes” as well as “the difficulties of the path to Christian unity”. Sarah and Jim now write as follows.

We are prompted to share our experiences of preparation and celebration of the eucharist in a two-church situation, both by recent articles in Interchurch Families and by a theme of the 1995 AIF annual conference (Growing in Christ - joint preparation for the sacraments). For most of our married life we have been privileged to live without the recurrent pain of eucharistic division. We are each welcomed, and each accepts, an invitation to share in the Lord’s Supper at the Anglican and Catholic churches we attend on (roughly!) alternate Sundays.

The path of our two older daughters, Catherine and Anna, to joint preparation for communion was much smoothed by the decision of the Anglican diocese to allow children from about the age of eight to receive the eucharist. They may, however, feel that their route was made more complicated, since this meant that they attended parish-based preparation courses in both churches.

The courses were to a certain extent complementary. The Catholic one consisted of monthly meetings over several months, with parallel parents’ groups; the Anglican preparation was concentrated during Lent. Interestingly, at the time Catherine was involved, the Anglican parish was using a Catholic programme for initiation to the eucharist.

So, on two separate occasions, two years apart, we have been involved as a family, including the extended family, in a First Communion at the Easter Vigil in the Anglican parish, followed a few weeks later by First Communion in our Catholic church. Clergy from both churches have always been aware of and highly supportive of our family in sharing communion, and for this we are very grateful.

For us, the eucharist is what binds and strengthens us as a couple and a family, and gives us any hidden strength we may have in order to bear Christ’s love into our beautiful but broken world.
A SOURCE OF JOY

Ut Unum Sint and interchurch families

Many interchurch families will give a heartfelt welcome to the Encyclical Letter Ut Unum Sint on Communion to Ecumenism, in which Pope John Paul II re-echoes the "impassioned commitment" made by the Second Vatican Council to the call for Christian unity. They will be grateful for the urgency with which he calls for continued progress along the path of unity and communion, "a path which is difficult but so full of joy". This sense of urgency is shared by those interchurch couples who find that church divisions hinder them in their mission as partners and as parents, and who live in their marriage this difficult but joyful path to unity.

There is one passage in the encyclical which will cause them special joy. It reads:

45. Certainly, due to disagreements in matters of faith, it is not yet possible to celebrate together the same Eucharistic Liturgy. And yet we do have a burning desire to join in celebrating the one Eucharist of the Lord, and this desire itself is already a common prayer of praise, a single supplication. Together we speak to the Father and increasingly we do so "with one heart". At times it seems that we are closer to being able finally to seal this "real although not yet full" communion. A century ago who could even have imagined such a thing?

46. In this context, it is a source of joy to note that Catholic ministers are able, in certain particular cases, to administer the sacraments of the Eucharist, Penance and Anointing of the Sick to Christians who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church but who greatly desire to receive these sacraments, freely request them and manifest the faith which the Catholic Church professes with regard to these sacraments. Conversely, in specific cases and in particular circumstances, Catholics too can request these same sacraments from ministers of Churches in which these sacraments are valid.

Even half a century ago, who could have imagined such a thing? The last papal encyclical on ecumenism, Mortalium Animos (1928), warned Catholics against anything to do with the movement for reunion. It seems to me amazing, not that the Catholic Church has been so slow in moving towards sharing eucharistic communion, but that such a dramatic change has come about in such a relatively short time.

Exceptional sharing of communion on the way to full visible unity

It is in the context of "a burning desire to join in celebrating the one Eucharist of the Lord" that Pope John Paul expresses his joy that Catholic ministers are able to administer eucharistic communion to other Christians. In relating this joyful possibility to the desire to celebrate together the one Eucharist of the Lord, and to the fact that Christians are coming "closer to being able finally to seal their real although not yet full communion", Pope John Paul is highlighting the passage in the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism (n.8) which states that sharing communion is not to be used indiscriminately as a means for the restoration of Christian unity, explaining that since communion signifies the unity of the Church, sharing communion is usually ruled out; nevertheless, as it also provides a sharing in the means of grace, the gaining of a needed grace sometimes commends it.

Much has been written during the three decades which have passed since the Council promulgated its Decree on Ecumenism about the meaning of that short passage, and about how its provisions might be applied in practice. Theological reflection will no doubt continue for a long time. Meanwhile the canonists got to work, and the provisional legislation which appeared during the 'sixties and 'seventies was summed up in the new Code of Canon Law in 1983 (can.844). Circumstances of need for eucharistic sharing were identified, and Catholic ministers could admit other Christians to communion under certain conditions. More recently, the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism was issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in 1993, and moved forward once more in specifically identifying mixed marriages between baptized Christians as a possible circumstance of need to which the provisions of the Code on admission to communion can be applied (nn.129-132 and nn. 159-60).

Joy and simplicity

Interchurch families have been grateful for all the progress which has been made over these thirty years. But there is a special note about the encyclical Ut Unum Sint, because it is a personal and pastoral letter from Pope John Paul II, who has often made it clear in his actions and words that he cares very deeply both about families and about Christian unity. He has also made it clear that he understands the relationship between interchurch families who share both the sacraments of baptism and marriage (domestic churches), and the coming together on a wider scale of the churches and Christian communities to manifest to the world the visible unity of the Church. "You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity", he said at York in 1982.

Those words immediately struck a chord with couples who care deeply both about building up the unity of their married family life, and also about their loyalty to the two churches (denominations, local communities) represented in their marriage. They were grateful for the recognition that this dual loyalty affects profoundly their whole lives. There will be an inevitable tension so long as the two churches to which they are committed individually - and therefore also as a couple - remain divided. Wise pastoral care will help them to deal with the tension as positively as possible (Catechism, 1636).
One of the most painful signs of tension comes when they are separated at the eucharist; they deeply feel the need to receive communion together as their spiritual food. They feel saddened and frustrated when this is not possible. They will therefore warm to the expression of emotion in the encyclical: Pope John Paul II declares his own joy that admission to Catholic communion is possible for other Christians in certain particular cases. There is also a directness here, a simplicity about his presentation of the circumstances and conditions for this admission to eucharistic communion which is refreshing, and which will in turn bring joy to others who share his burning desire.

Let us examine his words in greater detail.

“Certain particular cases”

Who are these “certain particular cases”? Danger of death, persecution, imprisonment, have been recognised as situations of urgent need since 1967, situations in which Catholic ministers can administer the eucharist to other Christians in particular cases which fulfil certain conditions. The 1983 Code of Canon Law states that episcopal conferences or diocesan bishops are able to identify additional situations of grave and pressing need in which Catholic ministers can admit other Christians to communion, and some have done so. The French Episcopal Conference did so in 1983, identifying “certain foyers mixtes and some long-lasting ecumenical groups”. Where a need is identified, Catholic ministers may lawfully administer communion to other Christians who cannot approach a minister of their own community and who spontaneously request it, provided they demonstrate the Catholic faith in the eucharist and are properly disposed. The theological basis for such canonically approved action in exceptional cases is the Catholic teaching that baptism brings the fullness of life in Christ, while the eucharist is a spiritual food for the baptized, enabling them to live the life of Christ, to be incorporated more fully into him and to share more intensely in the Mystery of Christ (Ecumenical Directory, 1993, n.129).

In 1993 the Ecumenical Directory specifically recognised mixed marriages between baptised Christians as a situation of need; this recognition has been given at the level of the Catholic Church worldwide, and does not now depend on the judgement of the local episcopal conference or diocesan bishop. The theological rationale for identifying theirs as a situation of need where it may be possible to admit the other Christian partner to communion is the fact that such couples are not only united sacramentally in baptism but are also united by the sacrament of marriage. However, “although they (the partners in a mixed marriage between baptised Christians) share the sacraments of baptism and marriage, eucharistic sharing can only be exceptional, and in each case” the conditions for admission must be observed (n.160).

When the Directory first came out, most commentators read the “exceptional” as meaning “occasional”. Further reflection has led to a questioning of this reading. Rome has repeatedly refused to accept lists of occasions which would have a general application (e.g. the reaction to the list issued by the Bishop of Superior, Wisconsin, in 1973 following the Instruction of June 1972; the SPCU Interpretative Note of October 1973 read: “The Instruction speaks of particular cases, which are to be examined individually. Hence a general regulation cannot be issued which makes a category out of an individual case, nor is it possible to legitimate on the basis of epitekeia by turning this latter into a general rule”). The exceptions to the general rule, then, must be dealt with case by case.

So how are we to distinguish between one case and another? One of the most important texts which can help our understanding of the Catholic position in this matter is the intervention made by Cardinal Willebrands, then President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, to the Synod of Bishops which met in Rome in 1980. In raising the question of admission to communion for the other Christian partner in a mixed marriage between baptized Christians, he said: “I am speaking ... in particular of those mixed marriages in which each partner is professing and living the Christian faith in such a way that both are striving to foster the unity of their conjugal and family life, a unity which ... is based on their baptism too. (Here he was quoting Matrimonia Misti, 1970.) We know that not every mixed marriage attains to this ‘ideal’ - and we must admit with sorrow that this has to be said of many marriages between Catholics too.”

So the Cardinal was raising the question of admission to communion for those particular cases in which couples are trying to build up the unity of their married and family life in the light of their Christian faith. Not all cases of mixed marriages between baptized Christians are striving for this “ideal”. That is presumably why the French Episcopal Conference spoke of “certain foyers mixtes.” In a country such as England, where the proportion of mixed marriages is much higher than it is in France, the number of exceptional cases in which admission to communion can be envisaged may be very small in relation to the total number of marriages between baptized Christians. It is for “certain particular cases” that Pope John Paul II expresses his joy. His words in the encyclical, with its reference to certain particular cases, seem to confirm the view that the “exceptional” of the Directory refers to exceptional cases, that is, to particular couples who fulfill the necessary conditions for admission to communion, rather than to occasions - particular occasions applicable to mixed marriages in general. Then, after speaking of “certain particular cases”, Pope John Paul goes on to list the conditions for admission.

“Christians who greatly desire to receive”

There must be a “great desire” to receive communion. This is more straightforward language than the ‘grave and pressing need’ of the Directory and the Code. You can know you have a great desire to share the Eucharist as a married couple. To assess your “grave and pressing need” is more difficult. Does it mean your marriage is threatened with breakdown? Certainly some couples have stated that the inability to share communion threatens their marriage, but this is not common.

Cardinal Willebrands spoke for a number of couples when he applied to them, at the Synod of Bishops in 1980, the criterion which had been worked out in the Instruction of 1972: “a need for an increase in spiritual life and a need for a deeper involvement in the mystery of the Church and of its unity”. The Cardinal stressed these final words, in the light of what he had been saying about the nature of mixed marriages in which both partners are striving to foster the unity of their conjugal and family life, and the fact that their union is a true sacrament, a “domestic church, ...” somehow called, in a similar way to the Church itself, to become a sign of unity for the world.” It is trying to live that reality, he explained, which “prompts the partners to ask permission to approach the Holy Eucharist together. For this is a moment at which they keenly feel their division, and also feel keenly their need for the spiritual nourishment that is the Eucharist.”
One in Christ

Consultation with the authorities of other churches in their areas has been asked (in consultation with the authorities of other churches in their areas) to set out norms verifying the conditions for admission to communion. The French Episcopal Conference required “a proven spiritual desire”. In the way the French bishops test this desire, they seem, like Cardinal Willebrands, to be asking for a link between the unity of the family, eucharistic communion and the unity and mission of the Church. There must be “deep and continuous bonds of fraternal communion with Catholics”; the other partner must not simply want unity with his or her spouse, but also with the Catholic community. He or she must prove this by his or her behaviour in relation to the community. There must also be “active commitment in the service of the unity which God wills” – a proven desire to pray and work for the unity of the Church. There must be real ecumenical commitment. Couples’ “great desire” to receive communion together is to be verified by their behaviour; there is nothing casual or ill-considered here, but a real desire to match possibilities for admission to couples with a genuine need.

“Freely request”
The desire must come from, and be expressed by, the couple, not the Catholic minister. Communion is not to be offered; it is to be requested. There is no hidden proselytism here; it is a case of respecting a spiritual need expressed by a baptized Christian who intends to remain in communion with another church or community, while yet seeking, by way of exception, communion also with the Catholic Church. It is also a matter of recognising the very great variety of interchurch couples and families and respecting their particular needs. Some will request more frequent admission than others. There is no fixed or rigid mould here, but a case by case decision by the Catholic minister who is in contact with a particular couple.

Manifest the faith the Catholic Church professes with regard to the Eucharist

It does not imply a theological examination, still less a query on whether the other partner “believes in transubstantiation”. Here again is an area where help and guidance can be offered to the pastoral minister. The French Episcopal Conference, with reference to Reformed Christians, asked for “an unambiguous faith in the sacrificial dimension of the memorial, the real presence and the relationship between eucharistic communion and ecclesial communion”. With reference to Anglicans, this condition could perhaps be spelled out by asking whether a couple could identify with the “substantial agreement” expressed in the section on Eucharistic Doctrine of the ARIC Final Report, a section which after clarification has been judged as needing “no further study”.

An omission

It is interesting to note that the other condition for admission to communion given in the Code and the Directory – the inaccessibility of the other Christian minister – is simply omitted from the encyclical. It is the condition which is always fulfilled in the case of interchurch families (or indeed in the case of any group which is recognised as being in a situation of need as a group, as interchurch couples are recognised as being in need as couples). Their need is to share communion at this eucharistic celebration, now, together.

We have to recognise that the possibility of admitting to Catholic communion is not a “source of joy” to all Catholic ministers, as it is to Pope John Paul; it is also a source of anxiety, and even fear. “What will it all lead to?” But it should not now be the couple who have to defend their right to ask. The onus to defend their position is now on those who refuse admission without carefully considering each case of pastoral need which is brought to them. There are understandable hesitations, and we should not underestimate them. But we hope that admission to communion in certain particular cases can come to be seen not as threatening, but as the necessary and joyful next step along the road to that common celebration of the one Eucharist of the Lord when Christians will be visibly one.

Ruth Reardon

This is a slightly edited version of an article which originally appeared in One in Christ, 1995 no.3, pp.280-6. The full text of Cardinal Willebrands’ intervention at the Synod of Bishops in 1980 is printed in One in Christ 1981 no.1, pp.78-81 and is included in the Sharing Communion Pack obtainable from AIF, price £5 (+/p £1). The French text quoted is the Note sur l’hospitalité eucharistique par la commission épiscopale pour l’unité des chrétiens (1983), given in full in Foyers Mixtes, 1986, no.71, pp.36-8. In their presentation of the 1993 Ecumenical Directory from Rome the French bishops state that their Note sur l’hospitalité eucharistique had anticipated the pastoral application of the Code of Canon Law in the Ecumenical Directory and no changes are needed.
A Canadian Association?

For 14 years Fr. Thomas Ryan, CSP, has worked at the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism. He is now moving on to be Director of an ecumenical centre for spirituality which opened in Montreal in September 1994. In the June number of Ecumenism, the quarterly publication of the Centre for Ecumenism, he gave an interview assessing his ten years as Director. One section is devoted to interchurch families, and we reproduce it here.

You seem to have reserved a special place in your heart for interchurch couples and families and what they live. How did this come about?

It's true. They have had a special place in my ministry here. The impetus for my taking a particular interest came from the Anglican-Roman Catholic Bishops' national dialogue. After they issued their Pastoral Guidelines for Intercatholic Marriages between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in Canada in 1986, they asked the members of the AIF Canada dialogue if they could undertake some initiative toward opening a consultation with interchurch couples. As I'm on that dialogue, the members asked if the Centre for Ecumenism could initiate something. So we took it on, with the understanding that a concerted effort would be made to open a dialogue with interested interchurch couples from any churches, not just the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches.

So wherever I had an engagement, I started contacting ecumenical commissions or local councils of churches in advance and asking them if they could organise a listening session with interchurch couples during my visit. The first consultations took place in Edmonton, Calgary, Montreal, Halifax, and Toronto in 1990. Others followed in St John's, Newfoundland; Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island; and Guelph and London, Ontario.

As always the case when you have the opportunity to really listen and enter into the reality of what another is living, compassion and solidarity flow from it. I saw how delighted these couples were to discover others like themselves with whom they could share. I saw how isolated some of them felt, in spite of the fact that there are now more interchurch marriages in most provinces than same-church marriages. I saw how the divisions of our churches lay a heavy burden on unity in their home and family life, particularly where worship patterns and participation in the sacraments are concerned. I don't think that I have ever interacted with a group of church adults and young people? Perhaps this can be on the agenda?

As a result of these consultations, there are now support groups that meet regularly in Calgary and Montreal. Due to Bernard de Margerie's similar efforts, there are also two groups in Saskatoon. We have devoted two issues of our magazine to the concerns of interchurch couples and families, and contributed articles in other magazines as well. I've led workshops for interchurch couples at the last two Canadian Christian Festivals. The groups are now communicating among themselves, and the Centre helped finance one Montreal couple's participation in an international meeting of delegates from Associations of Intercatholic Families held in Ireland last summer. I would love to see more groups spring up, link up with other groups regionally and eventually nationally, to form a Canadian Association of Intercatholic Families. If the couples want it to happen, it will. In every country where such an Association exists, it began with the initiative of a few couples. At the Centre we can play a supportive and enabling role and provide some connective tissue for the groups, but the initiative for a Canadian Association must come from the couples themselves.

A visit from England

In the summer of 1995 a remarkable initiative was taken by Ellen Bard, a 17-year-old "child" of an interchurch family. She was awarded a travel bursary from her school to visit and study interchurch families in Canada (with a top-up from both her Catholic and Anglican bishops and other sources). Her original contact was with the couple from Montreal whom she had met at the Bellinter international conference in 1994; they did much to facilitate her visit, contacting other groups across Canada on her behalf (and they were able to take her to visit the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism on the first morning that Fr Tom Ryan's successor as Director, Fr Philippe Thibodeau, was at his new desk).

Ellen travelled from Montreal to Calgary via Morden and Saskatoon, visiting and publicising interchurch families ("Child of ecumenical era enjoys double belonging" was a newspaper headline in Montreal, and "Shared traditions part of family life" in Saskatoon). She brought back videos which made some of the Canadian families real for participants at the AIF Swanwick conference in August 1995.

Ellen was impressed by the huge size of Canada (as Martin and Ruth Hcrap had been by the size of Australia when they visited interchurch families in Western Australia and Brisbane in 1993) and felt it would be difficult to form one national Association, but her visit in itself created links between the various groups, including interchurch children. Youth contacts are building up - 10-year-old Juanita Karstad from Saskatoon had already contributed an article to the Interdependent, which Ellen edits. Might the Associations be able to foster more of such international links, both between adults and young people? Perhaps this can be on the agenda of the Virginia International Conference in July 1996.

It's been fabulous - we've anticipated Ellen's visit for nearly a year and our hopes and dreams have been surpassed. Would "we" ever come to the point of extending this opportunity? Both those who send and those who receive benefit immeasurably. We need some guidelines, a plan perhaps for exchange and a few $ or $! Joy and Edward Bedford, Montreal...
FINLAND

The Finnish Ecumenical Council is working with and for interchurch families. Information on church policies and legal questions has been collected and distributed to all the churches; a book of articles, information and couples' stories has been published (Ekumeeninen Perhekirja, Helsinki 1995), and a seminar entitled Churches in Solidarity with Married Couples was arranged in the crypt of the Orthodox Cathedral in Helsinki on 10 November 1995.

It was hoped that this seminar would formulate recommendations to be adopted by the churches represented in the Ecumenical Council at its Annual Assembly in 1996.

SOUTH INDIA

The Commission for Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church met in Kerala 5-8 December 1994 and again studied the question of mixed marriages, but came to no conclusion. The Orthodox point of view on "the indissolubility of marriage" was explained; the Catholic view will be presented at the next meeting.

The Commission for Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church met at Kerala on 9 December. The Commission spent the greater part of its time on the issue of the reception, in each church, of the Agreement on Mixed Marriages published on 25 January 1994 (see INTERCHURCH FAMILIES' II, ii, Summer 1994, pp. 6-7). It has received a positive welcome on both sides, and been experienced as a liberation because it respects and enlarges the freedom of choice of these minority groups in regard to marriage and family life. Difficulties have arisen because of lack of awareness of the clergy, and it seems necessary to have in each diocese a small committee or a diocesan delegate responsible for resolving urgent problems.

ENGLAND

Inspired by the efforts of NIMMA in seeking funding to open an office in Belfast and employ a worker, AIF-England has been fortunate in receiving trust funding which allows it to employ a part-time Administrative Officer for two years and to expand and develop its work. The London office continues to offer information and a helpline, and there will be a big effort to strengthen the Local Contact network throughout the country, as well as to develop closer links with other Associations. Please visit the AIF office in Interchurch House if you come to London.

ANGLO-FRENCH COLLABORATION

The office happens to be next to the Eurostar terminal at Waterloo station, just three hours from Paris. Three representatives of AIF England - one a youth representative - took the train to Paris on 4 November for the first meeting of all foyers mixtes francophones, held at Versailles.

The theme: Nous, foyers mixtes, ferments d'unité pour les églises, was chosen to link up with that of the "foyers mixtes anglophones" at Virginia in July 1996: Interchurch Families: Catalysts for Church Unity.

It is clear that although interchurch families worldwide live in very different situations, they have a common task, a double task: to get the progress which has been made in the pastoral care of interchurch families over the past thirty years written more firmly into the structures and disciplines of the churches; and - still more important - to get the churches to recognise the fact of "double belonging" and to tackle together the ecclesiological questions which it raises. We can start by setting ourselves concrete objectives in the timespan of the next four years leading up to the millennium. One landmark will be the international gathering proposed for the summer of 1998, when it is hoped that English-speaking and French-speaking interchurch families will meet together in France, with the two languages given equal consideration.

INTERNATIONAL LINKS AND ACTION

to gain a wider perspective
to share our experience
and encourage one another
to support interchurch families worldwide
to give interchurch families a voice
in the churches at every level
Coppie interconfessionali and foyers mixtes have met together in Northern Italy ever since 1970. Their fourteenth meeting took place in early June 1995 at Torre Pellice near Turin. For the first time a representative from England was present. It all began in the mid 1960s, when Gianni Marcheselli, a Catholic from Milan recently married to Myriam, a member of the Waldensian community, travelled overnight by train across Central Europe because fog prevented his plane from leaving Dusseldorf airport. In the morning he happened to pick up a leaflet left in the train as he slept; it was about a correspondence course in ecumenism run by the Centre St Irene in Lyon. Being interested, he followed this up and came into contact with Fr René Beaupère, who was already involved with meetings of foyers mixtes (see "How things began" in Interchurch Families, Summer 1993, p. 8). One thing led to another, and in 1970 the first meeting of Italian, French and French/Italian-speaking Swiss couples took place at Bobbio Pellice. (The first Franco-Swiss meetings had taken place near Geneva three years earlier.) Meetings continued annually until 1980, then less frequently; the 1995 meeting followed a three-year gap. Not surprisingly, all the Italian interchurch family groups are to be found in northern Italy: Milan, Genoa, Turin, Pinerolo, Torre Pellice.

**Waldensian country**

For many years now the meetings have taken place in the Foresteria Valdese, the Waldensian guest-house in Torre Pellice, a small town which is a focal point for the Waldensian Church, where its Synod meets every summer. It stands at the foot of those mountains where the followers of Waldo, the “Poor Men of Lyons”, took shelter from Catholic persecution from the time of St Francis of Assisi. Pilgrims can visit the secret caves where the Waldensians met for worship, and a small hut where Waldensian preachers were trained, and from which they were sent out to spread the Word until they were martyred. These places are still venerated today. For the Waldensians, the Catholic Church was the “evil church” - the church of the great cathedrals, episcopal palaces, the Crusades, power-seeking - while they themselves represented the “alternative church”, the church of the poor and the Bible. Centuries after Waldo’s death, his followers joined up with the Reformation (in its Calvinist form - Lutherans were thought to have substituted state domination for church domination), persecution continued. The Waldensians received at least moral support from Oliver Cromwell, and John Milton wrote a sonnet to commemorate their massacre by the “bloody Piedmontese” in 1655. The “Glorious Return” by force of arms in 1689 is still celebrated. So is the Act of Emancipation of 1848, there are celebratory bonfires on the hillsides and mountain peaks every 17th February.

In this climate of historical identification with a beleaguered minority church persecuted for its faith, it is not surprising that it is difficult for Waldensians to have a positive view of mixed marriages. They are a serious threat to an historical and cultural identity which has been kept alive in and around the mountains by a physical isolation which is now no longer possible. It is not surprising that at the first meetings of coppie interconfessionali no Waldensian pastor would appear, although Italian Catholic priests were there from the early years - notably Don Mario Polastro, parish priest of Pinerolo for a quarter of a century.

**Diocese of Pinerolo**

The Diocese of Pinerolo has a very high and constantly increasing proportion of mixed marriages compared with Italy in general, and in 1992 the bishop adapted the general directives of the Italian Episcopal Conference (Decreto generale sul matrimonio canonico, 15 November 1990) to the special situation of his diocese, with particular reference to what is required of couples presenting themselves for marriage. The Indicazioni per la Diocesi di Pinerolo are much more pastoral in conception than the Decreto. The general Italian directives, applying the provisions of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, tend to be legalistic in tone; they were inevitably written without much practical pastoral experience of mixed marriages, and they go beyond the requirements of Canon Law: for example, they ask the other Christian partner to sign a document stating that he or she is aware of what the Catholic partner has promised about the upbringing of the children.

The Pinerolo document talks positively of the faith of the Waldensian partner: “When the Code of Canon Law speaks of “danger of abandoning the faith”, we need to clarify. The danger does not occur from the faith of the evangelical (non-Catholic) partner, which may in fact edify and concur with the Catholic partner’s faith. Danger comes where indifference to religion exists. Mixed marriages, if faced responsibly, may provide an occasion for growth in the Christian faith and, sometimes, a stimulus and enrichment for the churches.”

The promise is carefully explained: “The expression “do all that is possible” and “do all in my power” means: I believe my Catholic faith and I want to live it and witness to it faithfully; I will do all that I can, that is possible, for a Catholic baptism for our children and for their education, remembering that my non-Catholic partner also has his/her wishes regarding the evangelical faith. Concretely, as a couple and family, we will make those choices which best express our communion, mindful of the spiritual well-being of our children.”

The Testo Comune

Another attempt to produce guidelines which are more helpful to interconfessional marriages than the 1990 document has been made by a joint Catholic-Waldensian working group on the national level. After four years of work and 21 meetings a study text was agreed on the subject of pastoral care for interchurch families by representatives of the Italian Episcopal Conference and the Synod of the Waldensian and Methodist Church in 1993: the Testo Comune di Studio e di Proposta per un Indirizzo Pastorale dei Matrimoni Interconfessionali (Rome, 8 July 1993). It is far more encouraging and positive about interconfessional marriages than the 1990 text. The first section deals with what can be said in common about marriage: God created man and woman in their difference and in their complementarity for communion; marriage gives a stable form to that communion; it is a sign of the Covenant between God and his people, between Christ and the Church; it is based on conjugal love; it is faithful; it is life-long and open to new life; the family is a basic cell of society and of the Church (it is the place where evangelisation first takes place); interconfessional marriages can build up Christian unity.

The second section deals with differences and divergences, under the headings of sacramentality, indissolubility, procreation, the religious education of children, and practical
questions concerning doctrinal and disciplinary differences. “Christian education”, says the document, “should start in early childhood”. It should not be “agnostic, neutral or conflicting”. There must be “much delicacy and reciprocal understanding”. “The Catholic Church and the Waldensian Church remind each partner about their responsibilities in their communities and regarding their doctrine and disciplines. At the same time, they exclude any form of pressure from one church on the conscience of the other partner (and vice versa). They seek to respect the consequences of the decisions that each partner makes regarding the baptism and religious education of the children.”

The third section gives guidelines for pastoral care, with special reference to marriage preparation, the celebration of the wedding, and continuing pastoral care for the couple.

This text was almost immediately “received” by the Synod of the Waldensian Church (August 1993) and transmitted to the local churches. There has been more delay on the Catholic side, which has not yet officially accepted it, but a positive reaction is hoped for. The churches will have to make a further decision on how and when to put it into effect. In the meantime the Catholic Church is still working with the 1990 text.

**Further reflection**

The Joint Theological Working Group of the Secretariat for Ecumenical Activities (SAE - a lay group which dates from 1954 and which gathers over 600 participants every year for a session of ecumenical formation at Mendola, Trent, in the north-eastern Alps) has produced its own reflections on the Testo Comune. It welcomes the text, hoping that it will be accepted and will modify the 1990 document of the Italian Episcopal Conference. It indicates that differences between Catholics and Waldensians on the sacramental status of marriage are more a question of terminology than of meaning (referring to the theological work done by the Groupe des Bombes in France).

On the question of the promise the document points out that the non-Catholic partner should not be required to sign any document, and underlines parental responsibility for the upbringing of any children. It asks for further work on the ecumenical celebration of baptism and dual registration, on ecumenical catechesis and on eucharistic and ecclesial hospitality. Finally, it refers to the French text Appel à nos Eglises by René Beaupère and Jacques Maury (1993), and asks for further consideration of the status of coppie interconfessionali as “domestic churches”; with all that this implies.

There is thus a great deal of reflection going on in Italy, as in other countries, in the wake of the Catholic bishops’ application of the provisions of the 1983 Code to mixed marriages. Meanwhile, on the ground the situation is very patchy, and (as everywhere else) interchurch family life can flourish or be hindered because of the particular understanding and attitudes of the particular priests and pastors with whom such families are in contact.

**APPEL À NOS EGLISES**

by Fr René Beaupère and Pastor Jacques Maury

Pastor Jacques Maury of the French Reformed Church was a co-chairman of the World Council of Churches/Roman Catholic Church Joint Working Group between 1983 and 1991. Fr René Beaupère, O.P., has been an inspiration and stimulus for the interchurch families movement in France - Joyers miêtres - for 30 years.

In 1993 the two of them came together to see if they could begin a process of response to the recommendation of the 6th report of the WCC/RCC Joint Working Group 1991, which called for “a study of the ecclesiological implications of mixed marriages”. Thus their joint text, Appel à nos Eglises: Implications ecclésiologiques des mariages miêtres was produced, and in the summer of 1993 was sent to the international WCC/RCC Joint Working Group and to various individuals such as the President and Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome and the General Secretary of the WCC. Because the authors were both French, they also sent it to the Joint Catholic/Protestant Committee in France.

At the Torre Pellice meeting of French and Italian couples in July 1995, Fr René Beaupère explained the background.

This was not a text which asked for pastoral help for interchurch couples, so that they might live a little more comfortably in their present situation; it was a text which urged the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches to recognize the need to take seriously the experience of mixed Catholic-Protestant couples and groups of mixed couples, and to spell out the pastoral and canonical consequences of the existence of such couples for the life and the structures of the churches.

This is needed on two levels. The first is practical. Everyone knows that ecumenical developments depend on the commitment of particular bishops, priests, pastors; the situation is very fragile, and if clergy move on things can change overnight. If we don’t manage to translate what has been acquired into the structures and disciplines and canon law of our churches, what has been lived out could disappear from one generation to the next. The experience of mixed marriages between baptised Christians should not therefore remain marginal, but should be written into the life of the churches.

The second level is more fundamental. Pastor Maury and Fr Beaupère are convinced that neither the Roman Catholic Church nor the French Reformed Church has yet reflected sufficiently on what it means for their own members to be actively involved also in the life of another church. If things simply happen without drawing out the consequences for the lives of the churches themselves, we may arrive at a chaotic situation, not knowing who is Catholic and who is Protestant. It is not good enough for the churches lazily to repeat those formulae which were true 30 years ago but which are no longer true. What does it mean for a church if those who take part in its life were not baptised in that church, who are “partial” members rather than full members? If we have members who are more or less members, does that not change the nature of the Roman Catholic Church in this place or the French Reformed or Waldensian Church in that place? This is the essential question which Appel à nos Eglises was asking.
The present situation

1. Mixed marriages have increased in numbers so considerably that in some regions, and for minority churches, they are more numerous than one-confessional marriages.

2. In the past, mixed marriages often led to withdrawal from the churches. Today there are many cases in which they lead to deeper spiritual commitment and participation in the life of the churches (often in both churches at once).

Benefits of ecumenism

3. Foyers mixtes have benefited from ecumenism. No longer so sharply disapproved of, their common life has been eased by a number of ecclesiastical measures (even if these are not as well known to ministers and couples as they should be).

For example:

- The pre-marriage commitment about the children’s upbringing is more respectful of the couple’s consciences.
- A minister of the church in which the wedding is not celebrated can take part in the ceremony.
- The same is possible for baptism.
- In France, baptisms can be registered in both churches (cf. Note du Comité mixte catholique-protestant en France sur la célébration eucaristique des baptêmes d’enfants, 1975).

4. All this has helped many couples to respect one another’s faith and to grow in their common faith, minimising differences which seem to them secondary in relation to their fundamental faith in Christ, and thus allowing them to become living witnesses to “the hierarchy of truths” (Decree on Ecumenism, 11).

Catalysts for ecumenism

Problems remain which are also challenges.

5. Having progressed far in their spiritual union, some couples find the continuation of divisions difficult to understand and are increasingly impatient for them to be overcome.

- Eucharistic communion: cannot the admission to communion which is possible in exceptional cases become more widespread? (Cf. in France the Note sur l’hospitalité eucharistique of 1983.) Indeed, we have to recognise that in their regular sharing in the eucharists of their two churches many foyers mixtes go beyond these provisions.

7. Children who have followed an ecumenical catechism have a problem in choosing the church of their definitive membership. Sometimes they want to remain linked to both, and neither knows how to help them.

8. Often the partners are committed in both churches. Even if their participation in one or the other is not of the same order, still they want it recognised in some way. How can a double belonging which is not only “emotional and spiritual” (Note of 1975, no. 17), but is translated into practical service and the willingness of each partner to be challenged by the other church, be recognised in canonical and disciplinary terms? Doctrinal reflection on this is urgent.

9. If ecumenical advances are not given some kind of juridical status, they risk being reversed when there is a change of minister. Would it not be prudent to get some of them translated into church structures (e.g. the status of “guest member” offered by the Reformed parish of the Annunciation, Paris).

10. Examples of commitment: catechists who work in a church other than their own; “lay chaplains” in lycées appointed by a church not their own; consultative (and sometimes voting) members of parish/pastoral/presbyteral councils, synods of another church, etc.

Ecumenical questions

11. This phenomenological approach raises underlying ecumenical questions; the debate on the nature and mission of the Church is seen in an existential way.

12. We are not undertaking this theological exploration; only underlining its urgency. We are convinced that what we have described represents an urgent appeal for full unity, an appeal shot through with suffering, but also with hope. Where reconciliation is lived within mixed couples and families, is it not a manifestation which is partial and provisional - but real - of the unity of the Church? Have we the right to delay recognising this or acting upon it?

13. Is there not an ecclesial reality where men and women pray together, read the Word of God together, often receive communion together, and are committed within their churches and in their witness to society? Is not this the domestic church of the Christian family?

14. How does it change the relationship between two churches if they have members who are “common” or “partially common” to both? How can this be expressed ecclesiologically?

15. This is an appeal for the conversion of the churches, a common conversion in the service of God and neighbour, conversion to the fundamental truth which will lead us to reconciliation. Some foyers mixtes are already “islands of reconciliation” and are developing the potential contained in the mutual recognition of the reality of the one baptism. This is a significant and hopeful reality; the churches should become more aware of it and draw out the consequences for themselves.

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Provisional responses to this Appeal were received from the Catholic Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity and the Lutheran-Reformed Council, as well as from the French Catholic-Protestant Joint Working Group (see Foyers Mixtes, no. 105). The question of whether a Catholic could be a member of the French Reformed Church without breaking his or her links with the Roman Catholic Church was raised at the regional synods of the French Reformed Church in the autumn of 1994 and at the national synod in May 1995. The Catholic dioceses of France are making a survey on the subject of “double belonging”.

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT
(The full text is given in Foyers Mixtes, no. 101)

The authors are not putting forward a thought-out response to the Joint Working Group’s call for a study of these ecclesiological implications of mixed marriages, but are making a contribution based on the experience of Catholic-Protestant marriages in France and Switzerland, and are underlining the urgent need for such a study.

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Growing in Christ

An address to the annual conference of the Association of Interchurch Families, Swansea, August, 1995

The way of love

Love is the key to all our growth in Christ. It seems to me that it must be your greatest asset as you live out your vocation as interchurch families. Your own 1994 response to the Called to be One process made the point: "Falling in love helped us to begin." It has struck me as strange and perhaps a little sad that your leaflets, notepaper and other publications all quote the first part of Pope John Paul’s comment when he visited this country in 1982: "You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity - the negative part - but do not go on to quote the second, more positive, part of his remark: Express that hope in prayer and in the unity of love.

The primacy of love

What is that love? One contemporary ecumenist, echoing the German theologian Martin Buber, has defined it as "the responsibility of an I for a Thou" (William G Steele, “Double in 1982:

Not but waxed lyrical about this union in Colossians 3:16 (“Let the word of Christ in all its richness find a home in you ... with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs to God”) is, two verses later, warning husbands not to be sharp with their wives, and parents not to irritate their children (Colossians 3: 19-21). Yet you know too that the energy is there to sustain your interpersonal growth; it flows from the mutual commitment to love one another in the power of Christ’s unifying love (Joseph Laishley, S.J. AIF Centrepiece on Confirmation, 1981).

It seems to me that this word “love”, so much a part of your vocabulary, is not heard often enough in the ecumenical movement. We talk about accepting each other, respecting the traditions, convictions and consciences of others, about converging, drawing closer in co-operation and commitment, but we seldom seem to talk about loving each other. It was a great Dominican theologian and ecumenist, Yves Congar, who died recently, who wrote in an early work, Divided Christendom (1936), "We have to learn to LOVE these different theologians before we can come to understand them.” He was speaking there about the Orthodox Churches, but it is surely a maxim that must apply to all “others” who are “different” from ourselves. The same writer who defined love as “the responsibility of an I for a Thou”, Fr Billy Steele, ecumenical officer for the Roman Catholic diocese of Leeds, also protested that “the divisions between the churches are scandalous not because division makes for inefficiency and weakness (Jesus died in weakness after all) but because of the lovelessness they portray, a lovelessness which obscures the proclamation of the truth that sets us free” (English ARC paper, 1990).

A charismatic reality

My dismay at being asked to address this gathering was slightly alleviated by the fact that I received the invitation on the same day as the publication of a document produced by a synod of bishops in the Roman Catholic Church discussing consecrated religious life (Brefeing, Catholic Media Services, 20 October 1994). I was struck by a number of parallels between your situation and ours. The tidy-minded bureaucratic church does in fact find religious orders like my own something of an awkward anomaly. We do not fit precisely into any neat category, and while our presence and participation in the Church are undeniable, and generally reckoned as valuable, our activities and demands often bewilder and irritate the authorities. Bishops treat such problems with formal diplomacy, but the traditional conflict between the parish priest and the superior of the local convent is a familiar standing joke with Roman Catholics.

Cardinal Hume reminded the synod that religious orders are a charismatic reality at the heart of the Church, an element of its intrinsic nature which is both charismatic and institutional. They each exhibit a particular gift of the Holy Spirit, and the Church admits for them a just autonomy of life, government and discipline, so that they can preserve their own nature, purpose and character. Such autonomy is an example of subsidiarity which requires that the affairs of a smaller unit shall not necessarily be taken over by a larger one. Autonomy and dependence are twin dimensions of all groupings within the Church, dimensions to harmonised by charity which is at the heart of the Church’s communion.
For "religious order" read “domestic church” - just as surely a charismatic reality at the heart of the Church, with the same right to preserve its own nature, purpose and character. This view of the domestic church obviously calls for an ecclesiology of communion, which sees the Church as both spiritual and sacramental, charismatic and institutional, held together by partnership and constant mutual dialogue.

A domestic church

Every valid marriage between baptised persons is a true sacrament and so gives rise to a domestic church which is bound to bear witness before the world. A spiritual union founded on common faith and hope working through love, it is called - like the Church universal - to be a sign of unity for the world. Such is your vocation. The Christian family in fact constitutes a specific manifestation of ecclesial communion - that is why it can be called a domestic church (René Beaujart, “Double Belonging”, One in Christ, 1982, no. 1, p.32). It is the basic “household of the faith”, so often alluded to by St Paul in his letters, in which the Church of Christ first took visible form.

For “religious order” read “domestic church” - just as surely a sign of unity for the world. Such is your vocation. The Church does pay lip-service to this notion of the domestic church (Rene Beaupere, “Double Belonging”, 1982, no. 1, p.32). It is the basic “household of the faith”, so often alluded to by St Paul in his letters, in which the Church of Christ first took visible form.

As the first manifestation of the Church, the family is a classic example of diversity within the unity of love. Those early house-churches exhibited far more diversity than does our average contemporary family, for they included not only parents and children but also an extended network of relatives and dependants as well as clients and employees, servants and slaves. And they were distinctly hierarchical! Yet it is clear, above all from St Paul’s letter to Philemon, that in such a household all baptised persons were regarded as equal disciples of Christ, in whom “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free” (Colossians 3: 11).

A spirituality earthed in human experience

The Church does pay lip-service to this notion of the domestic church, but perhaps we need to insist more on the substance and validity of the concept. For a family, in a wide spectrum of its life and activity, and especially for young children growing up, to all intents and purposes the domestic church is the Church. Again Fr Billy Steele emphasises that “when Christ recognises me, and through his Spirit begins to recreate me as his brother, I do not become a monad isolated from all other relationships. If we are already members of one another in our humanity, race, nation and family, in our recreation in Christ this fundamental human characteristic is not destroyed but fulfilled.” As the 1993 Pastoral Letter of the US Bishops put it: “You are the Church in your home.” The household community is the bearer of authentic human and spiritual values - and so of Christian ones, which are recognised and fostered there; these must not be minimised or disregarded in favour of more abstract theological requirements, which can have little impact on children in their earlier years unless they are enfolded in the ordinary domestic virtues. Jesus challenges us to be fully human - the more human we are the closer we come to God in Christ. Real growth consists in meeting the ordinary human challenges which lead us to adulthood, and all our visions need to be earthed in particular situations. We need a spirituality earthed in the human experiences of our time.

Pastoral care for the couple as couple

What is true of any domestic church is equally true of the interchurch family, with the additional characteristic that, in this cell of the Body of Christ, that holy body is made visible in two Christian traditions, not just one. It is a structured expression of Christian love of a type which has, as yet, no parallel in the Church as a whole (Ernest Falardeau, SSS, Interchurch Families, 3,1, January 1995). And the Church as a whole must accommodate itself to recognise and serve the domestic church, and all such similar embodiments of Church; otherwise it becomes too individualistic, or too institutionalistic. It risks becoming either an association of like-minded individuals piously seeking personal salvation, or a bureaucratic institution arranging the externals of life in a tidy but barren manner. It must be a primary task of the Church, at area, parish, district, or diocesan levels, to serve those natural units - the domestic churches, established by God himself. Surely priests and pastors do not confine their care and concern to one half, “their” half, of the interchurch couple. True Christian ministry must serve the couple as a couple, and what is true for the local minister must be true for the Church as a whole.

Fostering the unity of marriage

The primary desire of the interchurch couple must be to foster and preserve the unity of their marriage, it is significant that this is now recognised as the predominant concern of the Roman Catholic Church in its regulations about mixed marriages; the Catholic partner undertakes to do all he or she can “within the unity of our partnership” to bring up the children in the Roman Catholic Church. But unity, whether of the Church as a whole, or of the local church of diocese, area, or circuit, is also a prime concern of church authorities such as bishops. Can some way be found not only to avoid opposing these two frameworks of unity, but actually to yoke them together? There is surely some community of interest between the local church and the domestic church; neither is simply a natural grouping, but both are living cells where Christians meet and share at a deep level in Christ’s name. In some parts of the world the base communities are seen as a quasi-structural mediating stage between the smallest cells in the Body of Christ and the larger structural units. Without necessarily adopting that ecclesiology, there may perhaps be some harmonising lessons we can learn from it. One such could well be a greater appreciation, reverence and respect for the God-given ministry and leadership of baptised lay people.

Exercise your prophetic role

It seems to me that the vocation of the domestic church, and so of the interchurch family, is to live communion for itself and on behalf of the rest of us, just as the offering of the first sheaf sanctified the whole harvest; and then to exercise a prophetic role in demonstrating that possibility of communion to the Church and to the world.

Communicate your characteristic spirituality

You yourselves have constantly begged to be regarded not as a problem but as an opportunity, and have spoken of the opportunities that interchurch marriage provides for spiritual growth. Others have recognised and commented on this, but its real development must come from yourselves. How can you communicate your own characteristic spirituality to the rest of us, so that we can see and appreciate it, just as we can see and appreciate a Benedictine or a Jesuit spirituality, a Methodist, a high Anglican, or an evangelical spirituality? The ecumenical potential of interchurch families was beautifully developed when they were described as “the conjunctive tissue which closes the edges of the wound, heals the sore, repairs the breach of division... Joints are united again, nerves are readjusted, arteries are restored through which flows the life of Christ” (“Double Belonging” by René Beaujart, O.P. in One in Christ, 1982, no.1, p.32). You are this by your very existence; can you reflect on and develop the spirituality implied, in such a way that the rest of us can share it to some degree?
A radically new way of life

You have an obligation to preach the Gospel you have grasped. The Gospel we seek to reflect in all our church traditions is meant for the whole world, and our differences can be seen as a hindrance to that outreach and proclamation. Will you convince the rest of us that they can indeed become an asset as we share our various insights? The Declaration made at Swanwick in 1987 by virtually all the churches in this country was a commitment to establish a radically new style of working, but this demands a shift in thinking, feeling and action at all levels in all churches. Can you, who have established that radically new way of life for yourselves, show the rest of us how we should build on the creative, eccumenical relationships of the many, rather than continuing to rely on the ecumenical activities of the few? (Elizabeth Templeton, CCBI Assembly Report, 1994)

Dialogue of life, action, experience

Communion obviously demands in the first place communication, and we know that in spite of many words this often does not take place: our deeds or our body language contradict or obscure our words. Marriage must be the prime example of non-verbal communication, and someone has pointed out that the interchurch family is the evidently suitable forum for all types of ecumenical dialogue - the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action, the dialogue of religious experience. It is also a highly suitable forum for theological discussion if we take seriously the sensus fidelium, that instinct for the faith implanted in every baptised Christian. But theological or doctrinal consensus is only one aspect of a more comprehensive consensus, a deeper togetherness, a “feeling together” (which is what the Latin word consentire means) that does not rest on doctrinal agreement but on a common participation in Jesus Christ. Can you find ways to share the fruits of your own on-going dialogue more fully with the rest of us?

Spiritual osmosis

It has been said that an interchurch family is a sort of communicatio in sacris, an exchange of sacred realities, where both partners share together in the gifts and riches received from each church, and further, where each accepts responsibility for the values and principles championed by the other community. This can suggest to the rest of us that unity will not be forged by a carefully balanced assembly of structures but rather by a sort of spiritual osmosis, which would allow us all to absorb the Spirit offered to us in the lives of others, to allow the truly evangelical values carried in the life of another community to penetrate our own ecclesial cell. Presumably this happens among you: can you teach the rest of us how to appreciate and share in the process?

Personal and relational communion

The contemporary family is no longer hierarchically structured (though I am not trying to undermine parental authority). Roles and relationships within it are seen rather in terms of personal characteristics and needs. Our archetypal example of ecumenism - the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit - is one in which the personal and relational dimension is not just primary, but in fact constitutes the very essence, as far as we can grasp this. And there multiplicity is perfectly ordered and held together by giving and receiving love. Should we not learn from the interchurch family that the personal and relational aspects of ecumenism must precede the organisational, that growth in institutional unity can only spring out of growth in personal communion? The full, visible unity of the Church does require canonical bonds of communion, but such visible and canonical bonds are but the sign and guarantee, not the source or cause, of unity.

Unity in difference

You can teach us about unity encompassing diversity; you can teach us, too, about the reality and cost of diversity. St Paul told the Colossians, “There is now neither Jew nor Greek, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or freeman.” We do believe this, desperately, and hang on to that belief by the skin of our teeth. We know that differences are transcended by our new identity as Christians, but clearly they do not go away. If we could really live together in communion, bearing the cost of difference, as you do, never again saying to one another, “I have no need of you”, we should have come to a deeper level of communion with a God who suffers (Mary Tanner, Without a vision the people die, Irish School of Ecumenics, 1993).

Even that 1994 synod of bishops recognised that in a church which defines itself as communion, this diversity-in-unity must be lived at the affective level. Lingering suspicions of each other have to be banished; rivalries between different vocations among the people of God can have no place where we are all Christians, supposedly partners in ministry. You, the interchurch family, the smallest unit of Churches Together, embody for us the relativity of difference as you demonstrate that unity is possible, despite the real and sometimes agonising differences that do not disappear. You remind us that the domestic churches of the New Testament exhibited a variety of ecclesiologies which were not harmoniously reducible to one tidy model, and that diversity, and even denominational barriers, do not inhibit grace.

Into the hands of God

You experience the pain of diversity most keenly in the area of sacramental life, and your responsibilities as parents underlie your on-going need for full communion, expressed in eucharistic sharing.

The present limited pastoral provision for this, at least as far as the Roman Catholic Church is concerned, represents the current understanding of partial but imperfect communion between our churches. Your grave and pressing need is recognised by the permission for, and even encouragement of, the admission under certain conditions of non-Roman Catholics, especially marriage partners, to the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic Church, because you are in a fuller degree of communion with each other than are the churches you represent.

But even you are not yet in perfect communion while you preserve your loyalty to distinct church communities. Even you, as well as your churches, are still on the journey, a journey the stages of which are liturgically as well as personally mapped out. Our present, limited, sacramental sharing reflects this theology of stages of communion (cf. Code of Canon Law, 844, and Directory ... on Ecumenism, 129, 159, 48). Marriage can now be ecumenically celebrated in either church, but not in both, and its primacy over any undertakings about the upbringing of the children is recognised. In one sense baptism has an absolute dimension:
it is baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ as well as baptism into a visible community. But it is into a visible community, and as such the beginning of a process rather than an isolated event. We agree that Christian initiation is an ongoing process, but the churches to which you adhere are not always in agreement about the liturgical shape of that process. Should infants be baptised? Or should conscious, responsible believers seek baptism for themselves? If baptism is given in infancy, how do we each understand confirmation? And how do we handle the questions about membership of the visible church that this raises?

If you commit yourselves to a two-church upbringing for your family, you commit yourself to growth in knowledge and understanding of your partner’s church and all it stands for. You yourselves are still on the ecumenical journey, however far ahead you may be of your respective churches. And a journey allows for dynamic changes; it allows for patterns of companionship to alter and merge. Some of your publications record the experience of those who have found themselves growing in their “interchurch vocation”.

You insist that your need is great, and that the timespan available for your journey as parents, the childhood years of your children, is so much more limited than that seemingly available to the Church at large. Is this really true? While the rest of us cannot fully understand your pain and frustration, we can sympathise; but must we not also gently say, “Remember, you do not have to do it all!” As long as you continue to put your best foot forward, you can leave the end of the journey, even the journey of your own family, in the hands of God.

**Wounded and blessed**

The repeated conflict you encounter between institutional theory and your own experience prompts you to be continually pushing at the boundaries, sacramental, canonical, social, and in so doing you discover truths and principles which can be applied elsewhere. Don’t stop! Accept your prophetic vocation, with the sobering realisation that the prophetic gift is never easily handled, either by those to whom it is given, or those to whom it is addressed. This was the burden of the contribution made to that 1994 synod by the head of my own order, Fr Timothy Radcliffe, the Master General of the Dominicans. He said:

If we respond wholeheartedly there will inevitably be moments of tension. Any renewal, any bold experiment, will often be seen as initially threatening or suspect. (When the Dominicans arrived in the University of Paris in the thirteenth century, the troops had to be called out to protect them from the diocesan clergy!) Our challenge is to discover how we can live these moments of tension fruitfully, as part of our journey to the Kingdom, as building up the Body of Christ rather than tearing it apart. Difficulties must be overcome by a sincere dialogue in charity. ... True charity heals us of fear ... fear is corrosive of all communion. Too often in the Church we are afraid, afraid of debate. There is no need for fear. ... The mystery of our communion in the Spirit does not mean seamless unanimity. ... Dialogue requires of us mutual esteem, reverence and harmony. ... It is fruitful if it is the struggle to learn from each other. The medieaval disputation, as practised by such as St Thomas Aquinas, was based on the assumption that one’s opponent is always, in some sense, right. It is easy to identify another person’s errors, but do I have the courage to hear what he may teach me? The struggle of true dialogue is like Jacob wrestling with the angel - it leaves us wounded and blessed.

Sr Mary Cecily Boulding, O.P.

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**Recommendations** from Churches Together in Marriage: Pastoral Care of Interchurch Families, Churches Together in England and CYTUN, 1994

2 That the churches explore together the extent to which the sense of dual commitment/double belonging experienced by some interchurch families can be recognised pastorally and given formal expression in church discipline and structures.

3 That the churches look together at the "double belonging" experienced by some interchurch children and address the ecclesiological questions which this raises.
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,
- ecumenical commissions,
- 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 it is 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 £5 sterling or £15 for three years, and should be sent to the English Association at the address below. For other parts of the world the annual subscription (airmail printed rate) is £7 or £20 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 $15 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 encouragement**

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. 283811) dependent on the contributions of members and the donations of others who wish to support its work.

**Presidents**

The 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).

Details of membership, resources (publications, leaflets, AIF video), and a constantly up-dated list of Local Contacts throughout England are available on request to the Association at its London address.