In this issue we bring you news of the part that interchurch families played at the Jubilee Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare in December 1998, and explain something of the situation of interchurch families in Zimbabwe. Those of us who went from England and from Australia were amazed to discover that in Zimbabwe the issue for interchurch families is not about baptism, sharing communion and so on, but whether a wife should be forced to belong to the church of her husband when she marries. It is a reminder of the social and cultural differences that affect interchurch family life. Yet there are also, of course, even deeper underlying convictions and aspirations that unite interchurch families all over the world.

The publication in October 1998 of One Bread One Body, with its norms on eucharistic sharing, has been a major event for interchurch families in England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland. In this number of Interchurch Families we give a shortened version of a commentary on the document that is published elsewhere. We shall need to return again and again to the issues that have been raised by One Bread One Body; it opens up the possibility of a process of on-going dialogue between interchurch families and our bishops and church leaders, pastors and communities. For our part, AIF is committed to carrying this dialogue forward.

Here I would simply like to refer to the question of reciprocity. Our bishops have made it clear that Catholics are not authorised to receive communion from ministers whose orders are not recognised by the Roman Catholic Church. This is entirely consonant with general church law as it stands at the present time. The question that this raises for some interchurch families is one of conscience. There is a short section on authority and conscience in the recently-published agreed statement by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, The Gift of Authority, (49) that is important for interchurch families. Those called to the ministry of authority "must ... duly respect the consciences of those they are called to serve."

This is a difficult and painful area for some interchurch families. Of course there are Roman Catholics who want to share communion with their spouses in the church of their spouse. Marriage is about mutuality. This has to remain a matter for the conscience of the individual Roman Catholic. Some Catholics married to other Christians will decide in one way, some in another. Some will decide differently on different occasions. There are no right answers. I have myself been greatly cheered since I was told of some advice given by the late Oliver Tomkins, Anglican Bishop of Bristol, to a Catholic priest who was debating whether or not he should receive communion at an Anglican celebration in a certain situation. Oliver Tomkins said something like this: "Well, if you do receive, you will be witnessing to the unity we have already been given in Christ. If you do not receive, you will be witnessing to the great work of reconciliation that is still to be achieved. And both are Gospel witnesses."

Both are Gospel witnesses.

Ruth Reardon
A spring meeting at Heythrop College, a Jesuit-run college which is a constituent college of the University of London, has become a tradition in the Association of Interchurch Families. It began when the London group of AIF was welcomed to meet at Heythrop in the 1970’s by Fr John Coventry SJ, then a member of the Heythrop teaching staff. This meeting developed later into a national meeting for the whole Association. One of its traditions, as at the Swanwick annual conference, was the celebration of the eucharist, sometimes by Fr John Coventry or Fr Joe Laishley SJ, and sometimes by an Anglican or Free Church minister.

In 1999 there were two things that were different about the Heythrop meeting. First of all, we combined it with the First John Coventry Memorial Lecture. Fr Michael Hurley SJ came from Ireland to give a public lecture in the afternoon of 6th March 1999 on “The New Millennium: an Ecumenical Second Spring”. The text will be published in One in Christ.

The meeting was chaired by Lord Runcie, former Archbishop of Canterbury, and attracted an audience of 180 people, a good proportion of whom were not members of AIF.

(Next year, the Second John Coventry Memorial Lecture, to be held on 4th March 2000, will be addressed by Dr Mary Tanner on the subject of Anglican-Roman Catholic relations, and will be chaired by Bishop Cormac Murphy O’Connor.)

Secondly, we were feeling the loss of Fr John Coventry, and Fr Joe Laishley was not well enough to be with us. We wanted to keep the tradition of a Heythrop meeting for members of AIF by arranging a morning session for ourselves, followed by a eucharist. We were immensely grateful to Fr Robert Murray SJ for celebrating mid-day mass for us, and for linking the celebration with our memories of Fr John. We are equally grateful to him for allowing us to print the text of his homily here, together with his opening words.

Greetings to you all. Several couples among you are my very old friends, but for others I must introduce myself – Fr Robert Murray, former lecturer in Heythrop College, now a Fellow of it; formerly a member of English ARC and someone deeply committed to the principles of AIF, as well as to those of Fr Michael Hurley’s great foundation, the Irish School of Ecumenics. This is, I think, the first year that your annual meeting at Heythrop has not been blessed by the presence of Fr John Coventry, and I know you are all missing him. I miss him too, as my one-time Provincial superior and an old friend, but I hope we shall all feel his spiritual presence with us today.

As a priest of the same Church functioning in public, I have to make a statement, as he used to, about sharing communion at this altar, and all the more so now that the Roman Catholic bishops of England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland have issued a teaching document about the principles relating eucharistic communion to ecclesial communion. The practical rulings in this document have disappointed the hopes of many, above all in AIF. This is not the place to discuss this.

Let me just say that I believe the principles are right, but the application of them is subject to pastoral decision, and there is some recognition that there are more than occasional pastoral situations where great spiritual need of shared communion is experienced. Priests who minister to interchurch families know well how deeply they can experience this need, though situations can differ according to the denominational affiliations involved.

In my place here and now I may not offer a general invitation to non-Roman Catholics, but I ask you to exercise your own spiritual discernment. For my part, I believe it is a deeper law for me not to turn away, but to welcome, anyone who approaches this altar out of evident love for our Lord. Of course, the option also remains to come for a blessing if that is preferred, or even to remain in your place.


Homily
We have just heard the story of how Peter was taught, first by a vision and then by an evident outpouring of the Holy Spirit on non-Jews, that God could override what Jews understood to be the basic principles constituting God’s covenant people. Then we heard how Jesus spoke of the gift of the Holy Spirit to a woman of the hated neighbour people, the Samaritans, and taught her that the worship which is pleasing to God transcends conflicting traditions about holy places.

I have chosen these readings because I wanted to say that I believe that AIF is a special work of God, not only for you whom it immediately concerns and sustains, but as having a special word to the churches, and as I thought about Bible
passages that could underpin this idea, these two stories, different as they are, came into my mind. I expect that many of you have already guessed what way they were pointing. All the better: if God’s word speaks to you directly, there is less need for me to hold forth. But perhaps a few words may help.

Like Jesus, the disciples were all Jews. Jesus had yielded just two or three times to the faith of non-Jews pleading for healing, but his firm principle was that he was “sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. The disciples gradually grew in understanding of who and what Jesus must be, yet even after Pentecost their horizons did not at first reach beyond the Jewish people, whose identity was established by matrilineal descent (you are a Jew if your mother was a Jew) and by all males bearing the sign of circumcision, while their behaviour and relationships were governed by distinctions of purity and impurity between peoples, just as the totally distinguished between “clean” and “unclean” animals, birds and fish.

And then this amazing thing happened to Peter. On the subject of “clean” and “unclean”, God broke through Peter’s defences by means of a vision, but it could only be later that he realised that it wasn’t just about what you could eat, but about who could receive Christ’s gifts, Jew or non-Jew. On this subject, God did not give either a vision or a message, but an act of such power and clarity that there could be no argument or discussion: before Peter could even begin to outline the fundamentals of the Gospel of Jesus, gentiles had been granted the same unmistakable signs of the Spirit’s coming to them, as the apostles had experienced on the day of Pentecost. Peter could only say, “Can anyone stand in the way of these being baptised, who have received the Spirit just as we did?” (Acts 10: 47), and later, to the Jerusalem church, “who was I to stand in the way of God?” (Acts 11: 17). This story speaks powerfully to me, in a way applicable to various situations of inhibition or impasse in the Church today. I offer it for your reflection in your own situations.

Let us turn to the other story, of Jesus and the woman at the well. Jesus had already stepped out of line, both by asking a favour of a Samaritan and by speaking to a woman. But he read her need. (Probably she had been divorced by all those husbands because she could not provide them with a son; now she was living with someone who could love her just for herself, but at the cost of public approval. Probably she had to come to the well alone, in the heat of the day, because she dared not come with the other women in the cool of morning or evening. This interpretation is not mine: a friend heard it from a Caribbean Methodist woman preacher. It cannot be proved, but it immediately struck me as entirely plausible and explaining much.) Jesus read the thirst in her soul — for water, indeed, but for another kind of water, a deeper draught than she had ever known. Gently he demolished her defences, and yet without hurting her, for she immediately and trustfully brought to him a serious religious question that troubled her, about the divided parts of what had once been God’s one covenant people. And Jesus took her seriously, yet offered her a view of God as far above any question of rival holy mountains as his living water is more satisfying than any drink in this world. Incidentally, he slipped in that it is the Jews who are the bearers of God’s plan of salvation, but he said that not to put her down, but to rise above the whole issue between Jews and Samaritans and their ways of worship. Does this story not suggest a message in the situation of ecumenical relationships today? And does it not help us to see the importance of interchurch families as exemplifying a level of Christian unity deeper than denominational divisions?

Finally let me say a few words, not through the parable of these New Testament stories, but directly addressing each couple, each family among you in all your several situations. I speak as if addressing one couple, but it could be any of you. You belong to two Christian traditions which, from original unity in the faith of the undivided Church, have grown apart and no longer hold communion together. And yet, both being already members of Christ through the sacrament of baptism, you have been drawn by God’s gift of love to be united in the further sacrament of Christian marriage. This is discussed sensitively in One Bread, One Body. Yet for many of us the question remains: how can it be Christ’s will for two of his sacraments to unite and yet for a third, which we actually call the sacrament of unity, to divide? Surely the union of hearts and minds in Christ is the good seed which he sows in the field of the world; divisions are the tares sown by the enemy. Christ wants to harvest the fruits of holy lives in full unity, yet, for historical and other reasons, the divisions cannot be violently uprooted without harming the conditions in which growth in grace is fostered in the various denominations.

The bishops recognise that interchurch families are especially important because they exemplify such a degree of mature seriousness in commitment to God’s will and grace, as each partner has experienced it in their respective traditions. Do they not signify even more? Those that I know best seem like a prophetic anticipation of the full union between the Churches for which we hope and pray. Many of us hoped and still hope that interchurch families could be allowed to share in eucharistic communion beyond merely occasional dispensation. Let us all pray for this, and let us all pray for each other. May you all share ever more deeply in your common faith, and point a way for your Churches to follow. Meanwhile, may God’s grace and love sustain you mutually in all you do, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Robert Murray, SJ
The question of interchurch marriage presents itself in very different ways in different cultures. When members of interchurch families from England and Australia went to the Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Harare in December 1998, they were astonished to find that in Zimbabwe the major issue is whether a wife should necessarily be obliged to change to the church of her husband when she marries him. In this article written for Crossroads (Christmas 1998), a pastoral magazine published by the Social Communications Department of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference, Fr Oscar Wermer SJ grapples with the pastoral questions raised by interchurch marriages in that context.

The other day I met a Catholic woman who attended with her Dutch-Reformed husband (both from Masvingo) a memorial mass for a Catholic friend: the wife, who was married in the Reformed Church and is now regarded as a member of that church, asked me afterwards under what conditions she could receive holy communion at Mass, "because I am really a Catholic, I only attend the Reformed Church because of my husband." The husband, who was overhearing the conversation, added, “When we visit my in-laws, we always go to the Catholic church, of course.”

The wife follows her husband
It is very rare in Zimbabwe that a husband and wife who belong to different churches actually live in what used to be called a “mixed” marriage, each attending his/her church and being part of separate church communities. Some husbands who have no church affiliation – either they were never baptised or they have lapsed – do not care about what church their wives attend: many Catholic women are in that situation. But other men, even though they are no longer active members of their churches, take it for granted that their wives attend “their” church. They claim the right to determine their wives’ religion as part of the general “package deal” of marrying a woman by paying roora (Iobola). Just as traditionally the wife has to move from her parents’ home to the home of her husband (and not the other way round), so the wife has to leave her church and join the husband’s church.

Traditional society was uniform
Traditional society was not pluralistic. It was uniform. There were no differences in beliefs or religious practices that had to be tolerated. So tradition does not prepare people for today’s situation where people are divided by different cultural, religious and social backgrounds which call for tolerance and mutual respect. For instance, if a Christian woman goes home to take part in a kuvuva gava ceremony, she may want to express her respect for the dead in her Christian way. But there is no room in a traditional setting for a dissident. Traditional society is all-inclusive: there is no difference between being secular and religious, between believers and unbelievers. You either belong and then you subscribe to all that is being done, or you do not belong at all.

(One is reminded of the principle that determined people’s church affiliation at the time of the Reformation in Europe: Cuius regio, eius religio. [Whoever rules a region also determines its religion.] If the king or prince of a country was Catholic, all his subjects would be Catholics. If he decided to become Protestant, all his people had to become Protestant too.)

This of course works both ways: the Roman Catholic Church gains non-Catholic women who become Catholic because of their Catholic husbands, and loses Catholic women who join their husband’s non-Catholic churches.

When Catholic men finally decide to marry in church, they take it for granted that their wives, now that they are married in the Catholic Church, also continue to worship in the Catholic Church. (Maybe they have been doing this for a long time already, though they never got any instruction nor received holy communion.) Often these husbands expect their wives to be baptised or received into the Catholic Church on the wedding day.

Women are vulnerable
We are normally quite happy about this, or at least condone it, since we assume, not without some reason, that a genuinely “mixed” marriage just does not work and it is better for the children anyhow if the wife follows her Catholic husband. By the same logic, of course, non-Catholic husbands expect their Catholic wives to leave the Catholic Church and join their churches. If wives refuse to do this, they may, in some cases at least, put a heavy strain on their marriages, maybe even causing their break-up. This is why it may not always be very prudent to put pressure on the wife to resist her husband and remain a practising Catholic. If we do not condone this practice, we would have to try and change the thinking of the men; putting the entire burden on the women, who are very vulnerable, would seem to be quite unfair.

It does also happen, of course, that a non-Catholic husband, estranged from his church, eventually decides to follow his wife and children into the Catholic Church. As a non-
practising member of another church he was not much concerned with his wife’s church affiliation and did not force her to convert to his church. Her and the children’s good examples win him over: he no longer wishes to be excluded, as the only one in the family, from what is obviously very important and a source of joy to his loved ones. Often men who enter the Catholic Church through this door prove to be an asset to the Christian community. But such cases are the exception rather than the rule.

A changing climate in a more mobile society

Many men may be said to be claiming the right to determine the religion of their wives, not only for traditional reasons, but also because people in Zimbabwe in general seem to think that, essentially, all churches are more or less the same, “since there is only one God and we are all praying to one and the same God”. And the more churches spring up, the more people seem to think this. That one church has more to offer in terms of schools, health centres and social services than another may still carry some weight. That one church should offer a more complete presentation of the gospel truth than another seems to count for very little with most of our people. They seem to be seekers of social and economic advantages rather than seekers of the truth.

The mushrooming new churches (“new religious movements”) seem to promote a supermarket mentality: you pick and choose your religious affiliation according to utilitarian criteria, the way you choose a social club. You change your religion the way you change your brand of toothpaste, cigarettes or beer. The more churches, sects, movements, “mushrooms”, “ministries”, and so on, there are, the less loyalty to the church you were brought up in seems to count. Geographical mobility also seems to support religious mobility. When you move into a new neighbourhood and a new job you also acquire a new church affiliation, in line with what is fashionable among your new colleagues. And family solidarity demands that if the head of the family changes his church, the rest of the family follow suit.

Freedom of conscience

Can this be condoned? Harmony in the family is a value. Different church affiliations in a marriage add stress to married life which is stressed already by many other factors. This is an important consideration. But it cannot be the only one.

Freedom of conscience and freedom of religion are guaranteed as basic human rights. If a woman was brought up in the Catholic Church and has identified with her Catholic religion, she has a right that her conscience and religious adherence be respected. The same, or course, applies to a Methodist woman married to a Catholic.

Christian disunity is experienced most painfully in marriage and family life. In many parts of the world, couples of “mixed religion” try to come to grips with this problem: while respecting the different religion of the spouse they yet wish to preserve love and unity.

An ecumenical approach

In ecumenical relationships between the Catholic Church and the Churches of the Reformation, we stress that there is far more uniting than separating us. This must become practical in a “mixed marriage” which we might more suitably call an “ecumenical marriage”.

The Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, published in 1993 by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, says that in preparing a “mixed couple for their wedding the priest or deacon should stress the positive aspects of what the couple share together as Christians in the life of grace, in faith, hope and love, along with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit” (n.148). This Ecumenical Directory continues: “In the interest of greater understanding and unity, both parties should learn more about their partner’s religious convictions and the teaching and religious practices of the Church or ecclesial Community to which he or she belongs. To help them live the Christian inheritance they have in common, they should be reminded that prayer together is essential for their spiritual harmony and that reading and study of the Sacred Scriptures are especially important” (n.149).

While for simple demographic reasons “mixed marriages” will be inevitable (only one in ten Zimbabweans is a Catholic), it might be just as well to let the faithful know that the law of the Church says that Catholics are to marry Catholics and that “mixed marriages” should be the exception rather than the rule. This exception needs a dispensation which is given on condition that “he/she is prepared to avoid the dangers of abandoning the faith and to promise sincerely to do all in his/her power to see that the children of the marriage be baptised and educated in the Catholic Church” (n.150).

Again, while dispensations for marriages between Catholics and Christians of the “mainline churches” (Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and so on) will have to be given without any hesitation, Catholics ought to be warned against marrying active members of “new religious movements” that are positively hostile to the Catholic Church (e.g. ZAOGA, Adventists, and so on). (Pastors know, of course, the old proverb, Mwen sa mati anomer en inodada, and will not be surprised if their advice is not heeded. But they will also know from bitter experience that quite often people disregarding their advice will suffer …)

There can be little doubt that many young women first get married (romans) and only afterwards find out about the church affiliation, if any, of their husbands. A Catholic girl should, of course, find out about her future husband’s religion, whether he is prepared to marry her in the Catholic Church and have the children brought up Catholics, before she accepts him. Then her position is relatively strong. Afterwards it is quite weak, and he can dictate to her what he wants her to do.

Christian divisions are the real problem

The Catholic Church recognises both the freedom of conscience of the woman, on the one hand, and importance of the couple being united as far as possible in all things, on the other. The Ecumenical Directory of 1993 says, “In carrying out this duty of transmitting the Catholic faith to the children, the Catholic parent will do so with respect for the religious freedom and conscience of the other parent and with due regard for the unity and permanence of the marriage and for the maintenance of the communion of the family” (n.151).
It sounds like trying to square the circle: if you respect freedom of religion you neglect the “unity and communion” of the marriage. If you have primarily regard for the latter, you easily disregard the former. So long as the Body of Christ is visibly split into so many churches, communions and “ministries”, we shall not be able to offer a simple and clear-cut solution.

Pastoral advice
What then can we tell a “mixed” young couple? First, that while one is a Catholic and the other, let us say, a member of the Reformed Church, they are both Christians. Common family prayer and reading together the Holy Scriptures should form a solid enough basis for their marriage. Secondly, precisely as Christians they must respect their mutual freedom of conscience. A true Christian who is aware that we must all follow the voice of our conscience and the promptings of the Holy Spirit will not force his spouse to do something against her conscience and will not impose his will on her. If the Methodist bride of a Catholic bridegroom says she wants to be a Catholic, we should make sure that she is saying so willingly and not under duress. Otherwise our admonishing the Catholic bride of a Methodist that she should not abandon her faith cannot be said to be based on respect for the freedom of conscience and religion.

“Ecumenical couples” in some places try to solve their problem by taking turns attending services in their respective churches: this Sunday we go “Catholic”, next Sunday we go “Anglican”, or whatever the case may be. Then very soon the question of receiving holy communion comes up. Can the whole family receive holy communion this Sunday in the Catholic church and next Sunday in the Anglican church? It seems a neat solution to a vexing problem. The bishops of the British Isles in their common statement One Bread One Body have stated that this is not acceptable.

Does this mean we just have to ignore the non-Catholic spouse (and possibly children) who come with their Catholic mother/father to mass? One possible answer would be to let the non-Catholic spouse or child come forward with the Catholic spouse and give them a special blessing: this gesture would avoid the pretence that our unity is already complete while yet expressing that there is after all some bond of union between us however imperfect.

Oskar Wermter, SJ

World Council of Churches 8th Assembly

Under the title Journeying Together Towards Jubilee, Martin Conway has written a report of the meeting of the World Council of Churches in its 8th and 50th Anniversary Assembly, Harare, Zimbabwe, 3-14 December 1998. Martin was an interpreter at the Harare Assembly, which is the sixth Assembly he has attended. He is an Anglican married to a Methodist, and a member of the Association of Interchurch Families. Until recently he was President of the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham.

Like the report that he wrote of the WCC Assembly held at Canberra, eight years ago, Journeying Together Towards Jubilee is packed with information in a very readable form. Its 64 pages of text, illustrated with photographs, are good value at £2.50 (+50p pp) from Martin Conway at 303 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 2AQ.

The Anglican Bishop of Southwark, the Rt Revd Tom Butler, writes in his foreword: “The campus was criss-crossed with trenches dug to accommodate computer communication cables. This produced a challenge for Assembly participants - one could often set off towards one venue but arrive at another with surprising results! I confidently expect, even hope, that readers of this booklet will find themselves engaging on a similar journey and meet with similar surprises”.

Return to Journal index
On the eve of the WCC Harare Assembly the five of us who had come to represent interchurch families all spoke at a Catholic church near the university, at a meeting arranged by a friend of ours, Fr Pat Kinna, the parish priest. Our other two presentations were held in the course of the Assembly. We also set up an exhibition and information stand, to which many visitors came.

Two of them were Zimbabweans: Mrs Chifamba, a secretary in the Sociology Department of the University of Zimbabwe, and Champion Chisaka, who works for Mambo Press, a Catholic organisation. They were both excited by what they learned about interchurch families; it was a new idea to them both that it might be possible to hold together two church traditions in one family, and they were keen to start something in Zimbabwe. Champion had done a good deal of education work through women’s groups. “Women are not the property of men!” he said. Champion begged us to give him an ATF shirt. Resplendent in Leé’s red shirt and armed with some ATF literature and overwhelming enthusiasm, he went off to do his own thing. He was very keen to spread the news countrywide by means of women’s groups. Perhaps he knows the way to do it in Africa!

Mrs Chifamba was more conventional. She was brought up in a Roman Catholic but, when she got married, in accordance with African custom, she had to take on the denomination of her husband. She obviously misses being able to worship in the way in which she was brought up and saw an opportunity for African wives in interchurch families. She was filled with enthusiasm and was determined to start a group in Zimbabwe, if at all possible. Mr Chifamba is an Anglican. He was overseas at the time of the Assembly, but gave his support on the phone. Her father-in-law has also supported her. Without their backing she would be able to do nothing.

Arranging a meeting

We were staying on for a short while after the Assembly ended, so following it we agreed to go and speak at two Anglican churches, one near Mrs Chifamba’s home and one at Chitungwiza, a town adjoining Harare. Naturally Mrs Chifamba had to obtain permission from the Anglican priests in both churches, but she knew them well and was convinced that they would both welcome us. However, it was not going to be that easy. The Anglican priests (both Shonas) were very hesitant. The request, they said, would have to work its way up through all the channels from the parish council to ‘higher authorities’ before they could consider letting us come to talk to anyone. What the ‘higher authorities’ said, if anything, we do not know, but we suspect the whole thing was more to do with their perception of the possible undermining of African culture and male dominance than anything else. We never received an invitation despite the many efforts made by Mrs Chifamba.

Undaunted, she arranged for us to meet, in town after work, a group of couples from her church. Just trying to make practical arrangements was a nightmare. The telephone system was chaotic. Mrs Chifamba said we would never get through to her at the university. She was right: we never were able to. She was not on the phone at home and the public phones were also not an option. To find out what was happening and what arrangements we could make, we always had to borrow a car and drive up to the university, seek out our friend wherever she was on the campus, and try to find out how plans were progressing. Once we even had to persuade our brother-in-law to drive us out to Mrs Chifamba’s home on the outskirts of town to deliver a message.

Who would conduct the funerals of the children?

The day came and ten of us, eight Zimbabweans and ourselves, met in a large hotel in town. What a delightful group of people they were! They themselves were mostly Anglicans, but were enlightened to the needs of wives who may not be happy at giving up their own familiar denomination. (How ashamed we felt that our culture had brought divided Christianity to Africa.) Despite their disadvantages, the women of Africa are a great force and generally very capable. One woman suggested that we should open with a prayer, which we did (and ended with the Grace), much to the astonishment of the waiters and the other hotel guests. To our astonishment, after the introductions, the members of the group all whipped out notebooks and pens and asked us what the ‘aims and objectives’ of interchurch families were and how many times a year they should have meetings. We tried to suggest that it was not quite like that, and perhaps they could start with finding out how many interchurch couples there were in their congregations and what they felt their needs were. The whole concept was obviously appealing but foreign to them. “We shall need a lot of help,” they said.

From the experience of AIF in England, we felt it was essential that any potential group had some support from the clergy. We approached several of the people we knew, but while welcoming the idea most of them said they were fully stretched and could not take on anything else. AIDS is causing such havoc in Zimbabwe that the clergy are very hard-pressed, with numerous deaths and funerals every week, families to support, orphans, sick people with HIV, and so on. One of the questions concerning the children of interchurch couples was: “Who would conduct the funerals of the children if they were brought up in two churches?” Two of the clergy felt they could offer very limited support.

Encouragingly, the group we met was clear that interdenominational families did have needs, but they were less clear about how a group should operate. They wanted time to study the packs and literature before deciding whether it would be possible for them to go any further. Mrs Chifamba agreed to be the co-ordinator in the short term, but she felt that, once the university opened again with a double intake of students, she would not be able to cope with anything extra. (The students were sent home last year because of student riots and protests.) There is the potential for an interchurch families group starting in Zimbabwe, but it will not be easy as they face difficulties more complex than our own.

Elaine and Les Leach
Padare at Harare

Padare is a Shona word for meeting-place. A new element in the Harare Assembly, never tried by the World Council before, was the invitation to interested groups to put on displays and presentations for the delegates and visitors. Such groups were asked to be ready to explain their work and its relevance to the business of the Assembly. When he came to address the Geneva World Gathering of Interchurch Families in July 1998, the WCC General Secretary, Dr Konrad Raiser, had expressed his hope that interchurch families would have something to contribute. We were there—ready and willing. The Padare was divided into six 'streams'—we were in the church unity stream.

By our presence at Harare we wanted to reinforce one of the recommendations of the outgoing Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. The JWG’s 1998 report recommended as specific priorities for the next period of its mandate four priorities under the title “Issues affecting homo/non”, and under the title “Common concerns facing the WCC and the RCC”. The second of the four priorities given in the first group of issues read: The ecumenical role of interchurch marriages.

The ecclesiological implications of the sacrament of marriage between Christians of different churches and in their family life.

From England came Ruth and Martin Reardon together with Elaine and Les Leach, who had lived in Harare over twenty years earlier, from Australia came Bev Hinks. But interchurch families from all parts of the world were present at Harare in the display which had been painstakingly prepared by Martin in the weeks beforehand—there was a map of the world surrounded by interchurch family photographs, each linked by a thread to its country of origin. Family photographs illustrated, too, the themes of the display: what are interchurch families? —a problem for the churches—a challenge to the churches—an opportunity for the churches—an example for the churches...

The five of us tried to be with the exhibition on a rota basis for the whole week of the Padare—the middle week of the Assembly.

Visitors to the exhibition

People came and went all week. They included:
the General Secretary of the Council of Churches of Malaysia.
He studied theology in Germany and met and married a Catholic from an entirely Catholic village there. Her parents were horrified at her wanting to marry someone from Malaysia but also a Methodist, which they thought of as an extreme Protestant sect. Now however his mother-in-law cuts out ecumenical news from the papers and sends it to him ...
a retired pastor from German-speaking Switzerland who as a young minister was given the task of researching mixed marriages for his Synod in 1964. He discovered that 80% of his church's members were married to Catholics—this led to a change of church policy, once it was realised that cutting them off from church life led to a great loss of numbers. So they worked out a more positive approach.
a sister who is currently the Ecumenical Officer of the Archdiocese of Brisbane. She confirmed that the Brisbane guidelines on admission to communion are working well, and there is no question of withdrawing them, as some people in England have been suggesting.
a Waldensian pastor from Italy who knew about interchurch families from the Marchesellis.
a Church of Christ pastor from Congo who said joint celebrations of marriage are common.
Three small Zimbabwean boys from the Children's Padare. Two Salvation Army, one Catholic, who were fascinated by the AIF poster and imagining one of the couple being Salvation Army and the other Catholic and staying that way when they were married. (Their experience was that a wife takes on her husband's church identity, whether she wants to or not.)

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a Swedish Lutheran Archbishop who has worked on a document on mixed marriages with a Catholic Bishop; it is soon to be published.

the RC Ecumenical Officer from the Sydney diocese who is trying to get some interchurch couples together there.
a Bulgarian professor who already receives Fevers Misses, wants to get Interchurch Families and hopes to get something going in Bulgaria.
a South African theology professor from Pretoria who did a video interview with Martin Reardon which he said would be useful for his students.
a Canadian who teaches at a theological college in Winnipeg who had “never heard of such a thing” as interchurch families and hoped to contact the Temmermanns to enlighten his students ... and lots of others.

Padare presentations

We did two presentations which were sparsely attended but worthwhile. Bishop Mario Conti of Aberdeen, who headed up the Catholic team of delegates observers at the Assembly very kindly agreed to chair the first, and Professor Brian Guybba from Rhodes University, Grahamstown, who helped draw up the Southern African Bishops' presentation of the Ecumenical Directory, which included their guidelines on eucharistic sharing, took part. Bishop Conti is the Scottish bishop who joined the English team working on One Bread One Body. It was interesting to have them both together! Also present...
was a secretary from the university's Sociology Department – nothing to do with the Assembly, but fascinated by our exhibition: she brought her father-in-law to the presentation, and enthusiastically offered to spread the word about interchurch families in Zimbabwe.

The second presentation was at a time when the official delegates were not free to attend, but a larger number of people came, including the outstanding Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama, invited to Harare to address the Assembly. He was particularly attracted, like many of the Africans, by our interchurch families picture, with its vivid symbolism. In our first presentation we had stressed that we hoped the new RC-WCC Joint Working Group would take up the recommended priority for future work of particular interest to us: the ecclesiological significance of interchurch families. Only delegates could influence this, so our second presentation was more informal, starting with selections from the AIF video (the children at the end were a success as usual) and leaving lots of time for questions and discussion.

Two mentions in plenary The first mention of interchurch families in plenary Assembly was a surprise to us – and to the speaker. Fr Tom Strasky CP, a staff member of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in the 1960’s, and a Roman Catholic observer at every WCC Assembly from Uppsala 1968 onwards, now Rector of Tantur in Jerusalem, was one of a panel commenting on the “Common Understanding and Vision” document which was important in the Assembly’s agenda. Interchurch families are “an ecclesiological challenge to the Roman Catholic Church”, he said and commented afterwards: “You must have been praying for me; that wasn’t in my written text. I added it as I went along.”

Alas, on the Assembly’s final day we discovered that two priorities had been identified by the committee responsible for guiding the future work of the ROWCC Joint Working Group, and the ecclesiological significance of interchurch families got no mention. Could anything be done? The group had “endorsed the priorities identified by the Joint Working Group”. So Baroness Kathleen Richardson, leader of the British Methodist delegation, a member of AIF’s Panel of Reference, moved an amendment to add an endorsement of “all” the priorities of the report, saying that her particular concern was that work on interchurch families should be included in the Joint Working Group’s future agenda. The amendment was passed easily; the reason for it may or may not be remembered ...

Fiona Sharwood of Brisbane, daughter of an interchurch family, studied at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Dublin for three months before Christmas 1998; she received grants from both her Catholic and Anglican bishops. We have received news of a small group of interchurch families in Melbourne, co-ordinated by Margy Dahl, a minister in the Uniting Church in Australia and her husband Jeff Wild, executive secretary of the Commission for Ecumenism of the Catholic Archdiocese. The group in Newcastle and Hunter is small but enthusiastic. Bey Hackx has been very active in reporting back from the Harare Assembly.

The Neresheim seminar celebrated its 30 years at the Benedictine Abbey 23-25 April. Pater Beda Muller has been with them from the beginning. Fr René Beaupère from Lyon addressed the conference (in French) and Claire Malone-Lee reported from AIF-England (in German).

The Irish Inter-Church Meeting has published a booklet: Ministration to Interchurch Couples: help for clergy. 32 pp., 1999. £2 from the Inter-Church Centre, 48 Elmwood Avenue, Belfast BT9 6AZ. AIF-Ireland held its annual Family Day in September 1998 on “intercommunion”. The Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association held its annual conference at Carylmeela 16-18 April 1999. Fr Michael Bingham addressed them – long ago Fr John Coventry had been his headmaster!

The Unity, Faith and Order Committee of Action for Churches Together in Scotland is working on a document on “Discipline and Pastoral Care” for interchurch families.
One Bread One Body

A response from an Interchurch Family point of view

One Bread One Body is a document of great importance for interchurch families in Britain and Ireland. What follows is a considerably shortened version of a commentary which appears in One in Christ 1999 no.2. This is a personal contribution by the secretary of the Association of Interchurch Families (England). It is not about “intercommunion”, generalised eucharistic sharing between members of different churches. It is about what is possible now for interchurch families, in terms of the exceptional admission to communion authorised in the Roman Catholic Church by the Code of Canon Law (1983) and the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome (1993).

Much of the criticism directed at One Bread One Body seems, quite unrealistically, to expect local bishops to go beyond the general law of the church.

One Bread One Body, published on 1st October 1998 by the three Catholic Bishops’ Conferences of England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland, offers, as its sub-title states, both “a teaching document on the Eucharist in the life of the Church, and the establishment of general norms on sacramental sharing”.

A comparison

Different diocesan bishops and episcopal conferences have responded differently to the reference in the 1983 Code (can.844, 5) and the 1993 Directory (130) to their producing their own norms on admission to the sacraments. In 1983 The French bishops issued a Note on Eucharistic Hospitality, which they said needed no updating after the appearance of the Ecumenical Directory in 1993. At Easter 1995 the Archbishop of Brisbane issued an attractively produced 8-page booklet entitled Blessed and Broken: Pastoral Guidelines for Eucharistic Hospitality. In February 1997 the German bishops issued a short text on Eucharistic Sharing in Interchurch Marriages and Families. In January 1998 the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference issued a Directory on Eucharism in Southern Africa in the course of which they established their norms on sacramental sharing.

One Bread One Body establishes norms on sacramental sharing in the final section (17 pages) of an 80-page book that sells at £4.95. Here I shall compare it with these other documents, and also with the shorter draft for establishing norms sent out for limited consultation by the bishops of England and Wales in 1996.

The background

Work on establishing norms in response to the 1993 Directory has been going on in England and Wales for a long time. A first draft was prepared by the Bishops’ Committee for Christian Unity and sent to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity for comment. The Council sent back a copy of the French Bishops’ document of 1983 as a better example of the kind of text required. That was in 1994. A second draft was ready by the beginning of 1996. It was expected that the Low Week meeting would approve it; instead it was sent out for limited consultation and deferred until the November meeting. (Parts of this document were used in One Bread One Body.)

At this stage the Association of Interchurch Families in England offered to become involved as a national body in the process. AIF wrote to all the bishops of England and Wales before the November 1996 meeting with two specific requests, and suggested a meeting of interchurch families and bishops. (The requests were that the bishops acknowledge that the Directory had identified interchurch marriages as in possible need of eucharistic sharing; and that they recognise that in some cases that need might be ongoing, not occasional).

In February 1997 eight members of interchurch families and two of the bishops on the drafting group, with the two secretaries respectively of the Bishops’ Committees for Christian Unity and for Marriage and Family Life in England and Wales, had a two-hour meeting. The interchurch families were told that the bishops were starting on a new text and that the process might take two years. They were able to appreciate more directly the problems of the bishops in coming to a common mind on a subject that aroused diverse and deeply felt responses among themselves. They were able to express their own experienced need for eucharistic sharing on a continuing basis, for the sake of strengthening their marriages and family life. They felt that they received a sympathetic hearing, although they would have liked time to discuss with the bishops how the norms might be applied to allow this. There was no suggestion then that the task of establishing norms would be undertaken on a wider basis than that of the Episcopal Conference of England and Wales. So far as I know interchurch families in Ireland and Scotland were not consulted when later the other episcopal conferences joined in the work.

A teaching document

The 1996 draft was short. It introduced the norms on sacramental sharing established by the 1993 Directory and stated the norms that the bishops of England and Wales derived from them.

One Bread One Body has a wider intention. Its “primary purpose is to present the teaching of the Catholic Church on the mystery of the Eucharist.” (2) Its second purpose is “to establish the norms to govern sharing of the sacraments.
between Catholics and other Christians in our countries” (8); norms that “can be developed and changed over time”. The bishops express their “keen desire to safeguard the integrity of the Eucharist” (8); they are concerned that when someone receives a sacrament he or she should understand what the Church means by it. They focus particularly on “the intimate connection between the mystery of the Church and the mystery of the Eucharist.”

“Our Catholic Faith”

Nearly 40 pages, or half of the book, is devoted to a presentation of Catholic eucharistic faith. This work is a real service to ecumenical understanding, and should be widely studied and discussed in ecumenical groups. It should help other Christians to get inside the Catholic perspective, and to see why from that perspective eucharistic sharing is not normally allowed.

It is not possible even to outline this very rich section of the document here, but I should refer to one point that is particularly relevant to interchurch couples. One of the conditions for admitting the other Christian partner to communion is that he or she should “manifest Catholic faith in the eucharist”. Some spouses have been told that they cannot receive communion in the Catholic Church because they do not believe in transubstantiation. This word (an unnecessary source of confusion today, and widely misunderstood by Catholics as well as by other Christians) has been relegated to an explanatory footnote (l 05) and belief in the eucharistic presence of Christ is expounded without using it.

“Our Catholic Faith” explains to other Christians who ask for communion in the Catholic Church what “manifesting Catholic faith in the eucharist” means (114). Other episcopal statements establishing norms on sacramental sharing have tried to do this more briefly. The French bishops in 1983 asked for “an unambiguous faith in the eucharist”. Some spouses have been told that they cannot receive communion in the Catholic Church because they do not believe in transubstantiation. This word (an unnecessary source of confusion today, and widely misunderstood by Catholics as well as by other Christians) has been relegated to an explanatory footnote (l 05) and belief in the eucharistic presence of Christ is expounded without using it.

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“The Eucharist and the Word of God”, before they go on to “The Eucharist as Memorial of Christ’s sacrifice”, “The Eucharist and the presence of Christ”, and “Holy Communion and Full Communion” (on the eucharist/church relationship). They finish with a reference which gives the impression of being added at the last minute, but is important, when they say that the celebration of the eucharist commits us to the poor and should flow into social action (67). The section on “Holy Communion and Full Communion” is of particular concern to them (8).

Holy Communion and Full Communion

For our purpose two sentences seem very important. The bishops say: “We believe that when a person receives Communion at a Eucharistic celebration, he or she should be expressing a deep unity of faith and love with that particular community, and with the wider communion to which that community belongs. Normally when people receive Holy Communion at a Catholic celebration of Mass, they should be saying: ‘We are in full communion with the Catholic Church, united with the bishop of this local community and with the Pope’”(62). What do they require here from Christians of other communions who ask for communion in the Catholic Church? Surely they are asking for a recognition that it is not normal for the Catholic Church to grant such a request; and that where it is granted there needs to be a “deep unity of faith and love” both with the particular Catholic community in which the eucharist is being celebrated, and also with the wider Roman Catholic Church. This is part of what is meant by “manifesting Catholic faith in the eucharist”.

This passage is encouraging for some interchurch families, who may well feel it describes their position. The other Christian spouse cannot say: “I am in full communion with the Catholic Church, united with the bishop of this local community and with the Pope”, because he or she is a loyal member of a Christian communion for which this is not true. Normally he or she would expect to receive eucharistic communion within that ecclesial communion. But in marriage, which is “an intimate community of life and love” (Gaudium et Spes 48) the partners remain different persons but not separate persons. They are brought sacramentally into the one-flesh relationship that represents so close a communion of love that it can be taken as an image of the relationship of love between God and his people, between Christ and the church.

It is the experience of some couples that sharing in that communion of life and love they grow into a “deep unity of faith” as well as of love. Some express this in relation to the “particular (local) community” of their Catholic partner by undertaking ecclesial functions within that parish – in the ministry of welcome, as readers at mass, as members of the choir or music group, as catechists . . . . Some would say that in sharing the whole of their lives they have come to share a “deep unity of faith and love” not only with their Catholic partners but with the whole Roman Catholic Church; indeed, they would happily become Roman Catholics if this could be understood in an inclusive and not an exclusive way, if it did not mean cutting themselves off from their existing communion.

Together yet divided – a linking section

A 10-page section under this title links the eucharistic teaching with the norms set out by the bishops. It is far more problematic from an interchurch family point of view. There are two parts: “The pain of our brokenness”, and “Spiritual need: personal and ecclesial”.

There is a welcome statement that Catholic teaching allows
exceptional eucharistic sharing "when strong desire is accompanied by a shared faith, grave and pressing spiritual need, and at least an implicit desire for communion with the Catholic Church" (77). Certainly some interchurch spouses believe that they fit this description. But while appreciating and welcoming a great deal of what the bishops say, many interchurch families will be utterly dismayed by some of the practical applications which the bishops seem to draw from their statements.

The pain
They talk of the pain of our brokenness, felt particularly when we cannot share eucharistic communion. Taking away the pain does not in itself bring healing (76), and the pain can stimulate us to put our energy into the real healing of our disunity (77). The Catholic bishops in Britain and Ireland "do not judge the celebration of the Eucharist at an ecumenical gathering or event to be a situation in which sacramental sharing might be considered as appropriate in our countries" (78). It would indeed be astounding if they did! Nobody who has tried to get inside the current Catholic position on sacramental sharing would expect them to do so. It would be going beyond anything envisaged by the Code or the Directory.

What the Catholic Church allows and commends is a pastoral response to the expressed serious spiritual need of particular persons. That need may arise not only because an individual Catholic is physically unable to have recourse to his or her own minister; it may arise because of shared bonds of communion with Catholics so strong that they need to be expressed in shared eucharistic communion. In 1983 the French bishops identified "some long-lasting ecumenical groups" as well as "some interchurch families" as in need of sacramental sharing. The 1993 Directory for the first time in any Roman document specifically identified mixed marriages between baptised Christians as a circumstance of need for possible eucharistic sharing (159, 160)...the only additional example given at world level to that of danger of death given in the 1983 Code.

"Long-lasting ecumenical groups" are different from "an ecumenical gathering or event". They are more like interchurch families, if the members share a long-term commitment to one another, if they live together or at least meet together on a continuing basis, if they share in the work of the church together. It is not the pain felt by interchurch families if they cannot receive communion together which is the reason for allowing, even commending, eucharistic sharing in some cases. It is their serious spiritual need. This may be felt as pain, but is a much deeper reality: their need springs from the nature of the marriage commitment itself. "The Eucharist is the very source of Christian marriage. ... In this sacrifice of the New and Eternal Covenant, Christian spouses encounter the source from which their own marriage covenant flows, is interiorly structured and continuously renewed" (Familias Consortio, 57). A number of interchurch families experience this reality, and the serious spiritual need that goes with it.

Mixed marriages
The bishops have strong words to say on the unity of marriage (82). "Inspired by such a vision" they say, quoting a passage from Tertullian, "a couple in a mixed marriage may well have a strong desire to receive Holy Communion together, to be fully united at the Lord's table" (83). But I think this is to turn things the wrong way round. It does not seem to me that usually the vision comes first, and inspires the desire to share communion. Usually the actual experience of sharing in marriage comes first. Because of that lived experience of sharing everything else the partners increasingly recognise their real and genuine need to share Holy Communion – that they simply cannot make Christian sense of their marriage without it.

It is only later, when some interchurch families read Familiias Consortio, for example, that they say: yes! this explains our experience. I remember the amazement of a Methodist wife when she first happened upon Familias Consortio: "But if this is what the Roman Catholic Church really believes about marriage how is it that Catholics can't see we need to share communion?"

Most couples who experience a need for eucharistic sharing find it difficult to express this in words. Their need seems so self-evident to them that they cannot understand why their pastors, in many cases, find it so difficult to grasp. Hence some of the anger, dismay, disappointment, which has greeted the publication of One Bread One Body. This has come particularly from couples who have been experiencing eucharistic sharing, to the great benefit of their marriage and family life, and fear that this necessary support will be withdrawn from them, or will not be available more widely for others. So it is vital for pastors to try to grasp the intensity of the need (not just the pain) which some couples experience, and to understand that this will be expressed in very different and often inadequate ways.

The need
It is the German bishops who have given the most detailed guidance to pastors seeking to discern whether a particular couple is experiencing a real need for eucharistic sharing. They write: "Since pastorally the establishment of objective criteria for "serious need" is extremely difficult, ascertaining such a need can as a rule only be done by the minister concerned. Essentially, this must become clear in pastoral discussion. Does the couple concerned (and any children) experience being separated at the Lord's table as a pressure on their life together? Is it a hindrance to their shared belief? How does it affect them? Does it risk damaging the integrity of their communion in married life and faith?" In more general terms they speak of the need of interchurch couples in this way: "Being separated at the Lord's table may lead to serious risk to the spiritual life and the faith of one or both partners. It may endanger the integrity of the bond that is created in life and faith through marriage. It may lead to an indifference to the sacrament and a distancing from Sunday worship and so from life in the Church. Married partners who are seriously striving to base their married life on religious and spiritual foundations are precisely those who suffer by being separated at the Lord's table."

I think that some interchurch families in our countries would like to ask our bishops to think again about the kind of need for eucharistic sharing they experience. It is far deeper than a question of pain relief.

Exceptional cases or exceptional occasions?
In One Bread One Body it is good to see that the bishops quote a text from the 1993 Directory (160) that was never quoted or even referred to in the 1996 draft. It is a crucial text for interchurch families. It reads: "Although the spouses in a mixed marriage share the sacraments of baptism and marriage, Eucharistic sharing can only be exceptional, and in each case the norms stated above concerning the admission of a non-Catholic Christian to Eucharistic communion, as well as those concerning the participation of a Catholic in Eucharistic communion in another Church, must be observed."
Regrettably, however, the bishops stop their quotation after the word “exceptional”. (13) This gives the impression that the text refers to eucharistic sharing which is “exceptional” in the sense of “occasional”, and this is what is picked up later when the bishops establish their norms, and speak of “unique occasions”. The Directory itself never refers to occasions, nor to occasional eucharistic sharing. It speaks of admission to eucharistic communion as being permitted, or even commended, “in certain circumstances, by way of exception, and under certain conditions” (129). It is at the very least a legitimate reading of the text in n.160 to refer the “exceptional” to the “cases” which follow, when it would mean that eucharistic sharing for spouses in a mixed marriage is possible in exceptional cases where the conditions for admission are fulfilled. Here “cases” is taken to refer to couples, that is, to persons and not to “occasions”. Clearly this is not the only possible reading, since the bishops seem to have taken another one. We must also accept that the provisions of the Code and the Directory are permissive, not prescriptive.

What I am saying is that it is the British and Irish bishops’ choice to speak of “unique occasions”. It is not necessary to speak in terms of “occasional” eucharistic sharing for interchurch families. In terms of the need experienced in interchurch marriages it is a very restrictive reading. Other episcopal conferences have decided differently, recognising that in some cases (obviously not in all) couples have a continuing need for eucharistic sharing. The Brisbane guidelines envisage that a spouse in an interchurch marriage “could well experience a serious spiritual need to receive holy communion each time he or she accompanies the family to a Catholic Mass”; this kind of need can be met by the

Archbishop. The German bishops envisage continuing eucharistic sharing in some cases: “When full sharing in the Eucharist is granted to the partner who is not a Catholic, care must be taken that an individual case such as this does not become a general precedent.” The Southern African bishops write: “A unique situation exists as regards spouses of a mixed marriage who attend Mass together in a Catholic Church. The uniqueness consists in the fact that their baptismal unity in Christ has been still further sealed by the sacramentality of their marriage bond. Hence both may experience a real need for this sacrament. This need is spiritual, and a need for a deeper involvement in the mystery of the Church and of its unity”. The stress is that a need for personal spiritual growth is not enough; it must also be a need to enter more deeply into Christ’s Church.

I would like to point to the use that Cardinal Willebrands made of the same quotation from 1972 when, speaking for the Sacrament of Promoting Christian Unity, he addressed the 1980 Synod of Bishops. He asked them “to study afresh the possibility of admitting the non-Catholic partners in mixed marriages to Eucharistic Communion in the Catholic Church, obviously in individual cases and after due examination.” He pointed out that the Catholic Church “had already recognised the possibility of such admission as long as a number of conditions are fulfilled: 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. This need is described in the following terms: ‘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’. It seems to me that these conditions are often fulfilled in mixed marriages.” He went on to say that the fourth condition, that the non-Catholic Christian is unable for a prolonged period to have recourse to a minister of his own church, was less closely connected with eucharistic doctrine and faith. For interchurch families it was crucial that the “for a prolonged period” was dropped by the 1983 Code; this opened the way for the French bishops to identify “some interchurch families” and “some long-lasting ecumenical groups” as in possible need of eucharistic sharing.

My point here is that our bishops are using the same phrase to describe what they mean by spiritual need, as the one that Cardinal Willebrands used in 1980 to describe the need experienced in some interchurch families.

General Norms and Commentary

The last quarter of One Bread One Body is devoted to the norms established by the three episcopal conferences.

The bishops stress that eucharistic sharing “can only be ‘by way of exception’. The Codes of Canon Law and the Directory do not allow regular reception of Holy Communion by Christians not in full communion with the Catholic Church.” (101) This links up with what they have said earlier: “Whatever exceptional sharing may be possible, only the full reconciliation of Christians can make normal the full sharing of the Sacrament of Unity.” (93) Certainly in the Catholic perspective it can never be “normal” for divided Christians to share eucharistic communion when they are not in ecclesial communion. It cannot be “regular” in the sense of following the rule; it is always going beyond what is normal. That does not mean however that in some
particular cases of need it cannot be frequent, continual, on-going. Other episcopal conferences have shown that in the case of interchurch families it is legitimate to allow for continuing need in some cases. But admission is always to be understood as exceptional, even when it happens frequently, is on-going, “every time the couple is at mass together”.

NORM ON THE ADMISSION of Christians from other faith communities

Admission to Holy Communion and to the sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick may be granted to baptized Christians of other faith communities if there is a danger of death, or if there is some other grave and pressing need. This may at times include those who ask to receive them on a unique occasion for joy or for sorrow in the life of a family or an individual. It is for the diocesan bishop or his delegate to judge the gravity of the need and the exceptional nature of the situation. The conditions of Canon Law must always be fulfilled. The exceptional nature and purpose of the permission should be made clear, and appropriate preparation should be made for the reception of the sacrament.

References are given to the Code and the Directory, and the reader might be forgiven for thinking that the whole of this norm is part of the general norms of the Catholic Church. The sentence I have italicized is not. It is the British and Irish bishops’ own interpretation of the norms. There is no reference to “unique occasions” in the Code or the Directory; these documents do not speak of “occasions” at all (except for a reference to a mixed marriage wedding, Directory 159).

“Unique occasions”

It is the reference to “unique occasions” which has particularly distressed interchurch families who are aware that other episcopal conferences have shown themselves ready to meet continuing need in particular cases. They can feel driven to despair by the spelling out of a “unique occasion” as “an occasion which of its nature is unrepeatable, a ‘one-off’ situation at a given moment which will not come again”, but “may well be associated with the most significant moments of a person’s life, for example, at the moments of Christian initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion), Marriage, Ordination and death” (109).

I quote from two reactions to the idea of “unique occasions”:

This comes from an Anglican wife: “I keep thinking about this ‘unique occasions’ phrase, and from a practical point of view I believe that every time my husband and I go to mass together is a unique occasion. The document speaks of occasions that cannot be recaptured, that cannot come again. No Sunday can be recaptured, surely? Every Sunday has its own readings and character liturgically, every Sunday is an occasion when as a couple we are trying to live out our vocation as servants of Christ in two churches. We’ve put effort into preparing for church, we’ve taken part in the service – it is unique, it cannot be recaptured. To say that only the ‘rite of passage’ type of occasions are special and unique enough for our needs to be recognized is to trivialize the special nature of the Eucharist and the liturgy, and to trivialize the vows of marriage we try to keep day by day, and which (like every married Christian couple) we need the support of the community to keep. I feel almost as though we have been aligned with the ‘unique occasions’ phrase, and from a practical point of view it is envisaged that a mixed marriage will usually be celebrated outside Mass”. We assume that the paragraph should read that a mixed wedding will take place outside of Mass. Sadly, the way it reads is almost too true – our mixed marriage – which is life-long, not the work of half-an-hour – does seem to have to find its sustenance and its celebration outside of Mass.”

The second quotation comes from a Catholic husband. In recent years there have been very happy occasions in some Catholic parishes where an interchurch couple have been able to celebrate a wedding anniversary in a very public way with full episcopal approval for eucharistic sharing. Happy as these occasions are, however, this Catholic husband points out that they do not meet the need of some interchurch couples for continuing eucharistic sharing. He writes: “I find it difficult to accept that the unity of my marriage to my wife should be measured by the quality of our anniversary celebrations. There is a sense in which this focus is appropriate, it is on occasions such as weddings, anniversaries, family gatherings, etc., that the sign value of our marital unity is most clear and vivid. The temptation, however, is to see these visible and vivid occasions as the criteria, rather than as signs pointing to a sacramental reality. This must not be allowed to happen, as the sign cannot be separated from the sacrament. Our Catholic bishop pointed out that, were he to ask a married couple what their marriage was like, they would not focus on the quality of their anniversary celebrations. Rather, he said, they would tell him of their commitment to each other, their care for their children through good times and bad, their mutual love and respect lived out on a daily basis.”

Continuing need

The drafters assure us that it is not the intention of One Bread One Body to be more restrictive than the Directory. At first this seems hard to believe, when we read what other episcopal conferences have written, and how they have specifically allowed for continuing eucharistic sharing in certain particular cases. However, a comparison with the 1996 draft is illuminating. The 1996 draft read: “The sacraments of Penance, Eucharistic Communion and the Anointing of the Sick may be granted to those who ask to receive them on a unique occasion for joy or for sorrow in the life of a family or of an individual.” A “unique occasion” was spelled out as “an occasion which of its nature is unrepeatable (eg a wedding or a funeral).”

One Bread One Body, however, states that “other Christians may be admitted to the sacraments of Holy Communion, Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick “if there is a danger of death, or if there is some other grave and pressing need. This may at times include those who ask to receive them on a unique occasion for joy or for sorrow ...” (106). The words italicized here are an addition to the norm that are of the greatest significance. They show that admission need not necessarily be limited to unique occasions. There is a further significant change to be noted. The 1996 draft read: “The
Directory envisages that in certain cases of mixed marriages a grave and pressing need might on occasion be experienced. It is significant that in One Bread One Body the "on occasion" is omitted. It is quite possible for a British or Irish bishop, therefore, to envisage a continuing need in the case of some interchurch families. He will still be within the norms of One Bread One Body in doing so. We hope that bishops and their delegates will increasingly come to understand the pastoral need of some couples.

Interchurch families, therefore, may not need to be too despondent at the identification of a few examples of "occasions" of need. These include the wedding (110, 111), which is important to some couples, although many others would decide not to celebrate a eucharist at their wedding if eucharistic sharing was not extended to families as well as spouses. It is also envisaged that requests "may come from the parent of a child to be baptized during Mass, or receiving First Holy Communion or Confirmation; the parent or wife of someone being ordained; the intimate family of the deceased at a Funeral Mass" (112). While admission on this kind of occasion has been widely practised in some places for some time, in others it is an enormous step forward to have such occasions identified. Not long ago communion was refused to the great distress of an Anglican bridegroom; "It is not possible", said the bishop. One parent was told by the bishop: "A first Communion is not exceptional enough." In the week that One Bread One Body appeared communion for a Methodist wife was refused at her husband's mother's funeral, although previously in her own parish she had been admitted to communion at a mass during which marriage vows were renewed.

The situation is very uneven so far as eucharistic sharing is concerned. The bishops have made a great effort to speak collectively, however, and it is a great step forward that they have all agreed as a body, and at the level of the three episcopal conferences, to examine particular cases, even if on very limited occasions. Those who wish to take a less limited approach are free to do so.

When the conditions for admission are given, following the Code and Directory (114, 115), it is particularly noteworthy that nowhere is it said that the condition about a person being "unable to approach a minister of his or her community for the sacrament desired" is applicable to a spouse in an interchurch family. Since the grave and pressing need for admission is that of the couple, it would indeed seem logical that in the case of an interchurch marriage this condition is always fulfilled. But this condition has been used so often, and so recently, as a reason for refusing interchurch spouses that it is very good to see it is not used in that way in One Bread One Body.

NORM ON CATHOLICS approaching ministers of other Churches and ecclesial communities

116 Whenever necessity requires or a genuine spiritual advantage commends it, and provided the danger of error or indifferentism is avoided, Christ's faithful for whom it is physically or morally impossible to approach a Catholic minister may lawfully receive Holy Communion, and the sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick, from ministers in other faith communities whose sacraments are accepted as valid by the Catholic Church.

It is not possible to deal adequately with this norm and the commentary on it here, nor with the whole question of reciprocity, although it is of course one that is very important for some interchurch families. The Association of Interchurch Families has never asked the Bishops of England and Wales to give permission for reciprocal eucharistic sharing, knowing that they could not go beyond the general law of the Catholic Church. The link between reciprocity and ordination which is accepted as valid by the Catholic Church has been repeated in all official documents since the Code. It is no use asking for a permission that cannot be given. The most that the bishops could do is what the French bishops did in 1983, quoting a German text of 1976. They said they could not give their approval, but that they recognized that a Catholic, following his or her conscience, might in a particular situation find that it was spiritually necessary for him or her to receive communion at a Protestant celebration of the Lord's Supper.

This recognition of conscience is important. Earlier in the document the British and Irish bishops seem to envisage interchurch families when they refer to "Catholics who do not see the difficulty in receiving the Eucharist of another Christian denomination; some have alternated, for example, between receiving communion at Catholic and Anglican Sunday services" (98). For many Catholic partners in interchurch families, however, there is great difficulty in this practice. They know that they are doing something that is forbidden by their church. They may judge that in their own particular circumstances it is something that in conscience they must do, for the sake of their marriage and family life, and they know that Catholic teaching obliges them to follow their conscience. But they also know that they are doing something that will be misunderstood by many of their fellow-Catholics; it is something they feel cannot be done openly in many cases. For some couples there is inevitably difficulty and pain here that needs to be recognized.

It is important too that ministers of other churches, especially Anglicans, recognize the nature and status of the tradition in the Roman Catholic Church which says that a Catholic must follow his or her conscience, even if it leads to disobeying church law. Otherwise with a straightforward Anglo-Saxon approach some can say to Catholic partners (it has happened): "I cannot give you communion because by asking for it you are not in good standing in your own church". The British and Irish bishops have never said that a Catholic who receives communion in another church has, by that act, excommunicated himself or herself.

'May we all be one'

In a final section the bishops explain the link between their norms and their desire for full visible unity. It is not the norms that cause division; they are the consequence of dissunity. (118, 119)

Many interchurch families would want to reaffirm their commitment to full visible unity. They do not believe that continuing eucharistic sharing for some interchurch families would be to the detriment of that greater goal. Rather, it would be a legitimate stage on the way. The final paragraph of the "initial response" of the Association of Interchurch Families to One Bread One Body reads: "We join with our Bishops in their commitment to our common pilgrim path towards reconciliation and full visible unity as Christians. (120) Merely to be able to drop in to one another's churches for communion would not satisfy those interchurch couples who in their marriages have committed themselves to share everything with each other. Such families pray that their churches will come to a full visible unity comparable to the marriage "partnership of the whole of life"."(79)

Ruth Reardon
**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,
- baptismal 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 any way responsible for the pastoral care of mixed marriages 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 £1.5 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 $1.5 to cover bank charges.)

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**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. An annual 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 introduction 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 contributions of members and the donations of others who wish to support its work.

**Presidents are:**

- the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Moderator of the Free Church Council, Dr Kenneth Greet

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.

**AROUND THE WORLD**

The Conference of Associations of Interchurch Families in Britain and Ireland includes the four English, Scottish and Irish sister-associations, who are together a "body in association" with Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. AIF is also linked with other associations and groups of interchurch families around the world.

A constantly-updated list of contact addresses for English-speaking, French-speaking and German-speaking interchurch families in different parts of the world is available on request to AIF-England at its London address.

A web-site for interchurch families worldwide is run by Ray Temmerman of Morden, Canada. It is to be found at http://www.aifw.org/aif/aif.htm

**NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES**

**American AIF**

Creighton University, Omaha 9-11 July 1999

**Italian-French-Swiss**

The domestic church of the family Torre Pellice, near Turin 9-12 July 1999

**England**

Growing in Love and Unity – 30 years of AIF: Swanwick, 25-30 August 1999

**Germany**

Dornstadt, 28-10 September 1999

**Ireland**

Annual Family Day Conference Dundrum, 18 September 1999

**Austria**

Two churches – one way to salvation Puchberg, Wels, 22-24 October 1999

**France**

Third Meeting of foyers mixtes francophones Paris region. 2000

**Canada**

English-speaking international conference early August, 2001

**Rome**

Second World Gathering/ Rassemblement Mondial Rome 2003