We begin not with a story from an interchurch family, but with a testimony from a priest from Belfast, Northern Ireland, who has considerable pastoral experience of work with interchurch families in a situation where Catholic/Protestant marriages cross not only a religious, but a community divide. He shows how important it is, as a pastor, to be able to accord a 'parity of esteem' to both the church communities represented within an interchurch family. One of the struggles that Roman Catholics in interchurch marriages have is how to balance the ecclesiological stance of their church alongside the psychological equality of their marriage partnership. For ministers too, this can be a problem, and the phrase, 'parity of esteem', that Tom Layden SJ takes from civil society in Ireland, can be very useful for church relationships too.

This link between the interchurch family situation and wider church relationships has been vitally important in associations and groups of interchurch families from the beginning. The desire to relate their marriage to church unity is still there among young couples who know nothing yet of that history. One couple, getting married at the end of the summer, came to the British Association of Interchurch Families recently with a problem over the 'promise'.

'We feel called to making our marriage a true Christian unity marriage', they said, 'not just doing things separately'. A similar concern for unity is expressed by a young Canadian, child of an interchurch family, in this issue (p.8): 'I'm just a building block helping to pave the path to an ecumenical world because together we can make a difference'.

It is simply the being together and doing things together as couples and families that can be so significant for our church communities. It can lead to a new way of relating on the part of those church communities themselves. As Tom Ryan CSP says in his article on interchurch families as sign and summons (p.7): 'Everything that is gained by interchurch families and for interchurch families serves the whole Church.'

It is good to see that recently-published guidelines on eucharistic sharing, one from the Czech Catholic Bishops' Conference and the other from the Australian diocese of Maitland-Newcastle (pp.8-9) have a strong pastoral orientation. They both recognise that in certain cases interchurch families will experience a serious spiritual need for eucharistic sharing on a continuing basis, and that this need can be met. As Cardinal Lehmann said at the end of the German Bishops' spring meeting in February 2002: for some interchurch couples eucharistic sharing 'is not so much a matter of one-off events in the life of the family, such as First Communion, but more a matter of the constant striving of the couple to find their way together'. And he added: 'The pastor who travels with them has a special role to play'.

We end with the story of how John Coventry SJ began his journey with interchurch families. He gave them devoted pastoral understanding and support over thirty years.
Parity of esteem

Fr Tom Layden, SJ contributes the following reflections out of his pastoral experience with interchurch families in Northern Ireland. We are grateful for permission to use extracts from his longer article on ecumenical spirituality that appeared in The Way Supplement 2001. He recounted a conversation with a boy who told him his parents were mixed, and he sometimes went to his mother’s church and at other times to his father’s. He asked how Tom Layden as a priest would feel about him going to his father’s Protestant church on a Sunday? Would he ever go to such a church himself? Would he feel at home there? The writer reflects:

What a difference it would mean for this boy and for his parents if when they attend church they were to hear prayers recited for the bestowal of God’s blessing on the people in the ‘other’ church. It would convey a sense of recognition that between these communities there is a bond of communion in the Spirit uniting them as children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. They are not rivals in competition with each other. While not in any way denying the reality of difference in tradition and divergence in theological understanding, the very fact of praying for the ‘other’ church would signify a conviction that what unites them is infinitely greater than what divides them. When the boy goes to the other church, there is no need for my church to feel that it is losing out. He is going to pray and worship with a community with whom we are deeply (if not fully) connected in our common faith in Christ. Whenever he comes to the church of which I am a member, the other church does not lose out here either. That which unites us with them, namely belief in the Lord’s paschal mystery, the gift of the Spirit in the community, and reverence for the Word of God, is greater than those areas in which our understanding and practice diverge.

What would convince this boy and his family more effectively of growing unity than to see me, an ordained Catholic priest, coming to his father’s church simply to be there as part of the congregation, to join in the hearing of the Word and in the offering of prayer and supplication for the needs of all? And for the minister from his father’s church to occasionally come to share in worship in the Catholic tradition in the measure allowed by conscience and church discipline? While the stated positions of the churches are quite ecumenical, the practice at ground level can be somewhat at variance with this. Ecumenism can be seen as something for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity but as an optional extra for those so inclined for the rest of the year.

In recent years I have in fact adopted the practice as far as possible to attend a service in a Protestant church once weekly. This serves to guard against any narrowing of one’s ecumenical horizons. It would not be possible for everyone, but if we take ecumenism seriously some time needs to be invested in actually being with Christians from other traditions.

A ‘winner takes all’ mentality

The past two generations have seen a tremendous transformation in the manner in which the Christian churches relate one to another. But a certain awkwardness and uneasiness continue to characterise ecumenical relations in particular situations. Nowhere is this sometimes more apparent than in the area of the pastoral care of interchurch marriages.

While we have come a long way from the day of sacrificial weddings in a distant city there is still a certain unevenness in the way in which couples entering an interchurch marriage (and their families) can experience the ministry of their respective churches. In some places the pastoral care is excellent and a spirit of collaboration and mutual respect marks the ministerial approach of the clergy and congregation from both churches. At times some couples encounter difficulties when they come across a ‘winner takes all’ kind of mentality on the part of certain clergy. Such a person wants everything ‘done’ in their own church and is none too anxious to facilitate the attendance or participation of clergy of the other tradition. In such a context it is sometimes said that it is better when ‘the other side’ do not practise their religion because then only one tradition has to be taken into account. This seems a rather lazy attitude revealing a less than fully convinced ecumenical outlook.

The churches can learn from civil society

In church life, we can learn from the political, social and cultural context in which we find ourselves. That context will determine the climate in which we exercise our discipleship and carry out ecclesial ministry. Living here in Northern Ireland, ecumenical ministry acquires its own resonance from the particular history we inherit and the ways in which our polity is currently undergoing change. This is a time of transition in which local politicians are assuming control of areas of government which have been controlled by London during the Troubles. The new style of government here, coming out of the Belfast Agreement of Good Friday, 1998, puts particular emphasis on the concept of parity of esteem. This refers to the need to ensure that the two main political/cultural traditions enjoy the recognition of equality of status at all levels of government. There must be no appearance of domination or subordination.
Both traditions are to be esteemed. The winner does not take all. Everything is to be shared. This concept represents a huge challenge to all participants in public life and to society here in general. Here is something that the nascent civil society can bring to the churches in our practice of ecumenism. In all that we do ecumenically we are called to practice parity of esteem in our dealings with churches of various traditions. What might this mean concretely?

An example: baptism in an interchurch context

I am quite frequently invited to participate in the baptism ceremony for children of an interchurch marriage. Where both partners are practising their faith, I always indicate my strong desire that clergy of the two traditions be present; also that participation be such that everyone will feel at home during the ceremony, feeling that representatives from each tradition have a significant role to play in it. What really helps is when the clergy concerned minister in a collaborative way, working as a team.

In the past year, I have assisted at baptismal ceremonies in two Anglican churches. On both occasions the Anglican priest and I got together prior to the ceremony to determine how we could best plan the rite so as to ensure appropriate participation in a way in which a proper parity of esteem for both traditions could be shown. Respecting the canonical requirements of both churches we were able to come up with a ‘division of labour’ so that nobody felt left out or overlooked. In one case the Anglican priest said the prayer of blessing over the baptismal water and presided at the baptism, while I proclaimed the Gospel and the prayer of the faithful. I came away from these experiences utterly convinced of the unsurpassable value of time spent in mutual preparation by both clergy in a spirit of co-operative partnership. Furthermore I am equally convinced of the value of putting a high premium on ensuring parity of esteem for both traditions in the way in which such liturgical rites are celebrated.

Not everyone might be comfortable with my taking my cue in this regard from a current value in civic society. It does not mean that it is always right for Christian churches to take the lead from norms in civil society. It is not to gloss over the reality of profound disagreement on matters where the truth is perceived to be at stake. In terms of actual pastoral practice it is a reminder to us that we can disagree without being disagreeable. We may believe a theological position to be untrue but the obligation to treat the holder of that position with respect remains. Is this not the way in which Jesus of Nazareth relates to all who come his way? Was it not his way of giving the same dignity and respect to Samaritan and Roman as to those of his own tradition that marked him out from his contemporaries? Is there not something essentially very Christ-like in this notion of parity of esteem?

Respect for conscience

The principle of showing great respect for the sovereignty of each individual conscience is of paramount importance in the ministry to couples preparing for and involved in an interchurch marriage. Decisions about the church in which the wedding is to take place and about the religious upbringing of children are for the couple to discern and decide upon themselves, taking due cognisance of the expectations of their churches and of the sensitivities of their families, friends, community context etc. The role of clergy is a supportive one, respecting the integrity and judgement of the couple as to what is best for them in their particular circumstances. Respect and support in no way rules out the posing of challenging questions and the willingness to raise another perspective on how they might approach their situation.

A minister or priest in this context has a role comparable to that of the one who gives the Spiritual Exercises. One is called to be present in a discreet, unobtrusive way to the couple, at times pointing out what can lead to consolation and desolation and how to move forward when they find themselves in either position. Like the one who gives the Exercises, the minister/priest does not interfere or pry but realises that the Spirit of God is the real director, the ultimately reliable guide, and endeavours not to get in the way!

Joint pastoral support

As with the baptism of children the ministry of support is ideally and hopefully done in tandem with a minister of another tradition. Both work together to support the couple as they travel along their pilgrim way. The support ministry is a joint effort. One possible comparison might be with the way in which nowadays when involved in a directed retreat one is part of a team which meets daily and which is a support to the directors in their ministry of listening, responding and directing. Those of us who have experience of this know how enriching it can be and how it facilitates better quality direction. In a parallel way, clergy supporting a couple in a mixed marriage should function as a team and their shared ministry in this team should be of assistance to them in arriving at, and remaining in, that place of inner freedom which helps effective ministry to flourish.

If such interchurch ministry is possible against the background of the conflicted situation in Northern Ireland surely it is possible anywhere.

Tom Layden SJ
The international conference of interchurch families held in Edmonton, Canada in July 2001 (see Interchurch Families, 10.1, January 2002) appealed for a ‘pastoral understanding’ for such families that goes beyond ‘pastoral care’. This appeal seems to be clarified by the identification of three phases or paradigms in our understanding of pastoral care quoted in Priests and People August-September 2001, an identification taken from John Patten’s Pastoral Care in Context (Westminster Press, 1993).

The first phase identified, the classical phase, is an entirely clerical model, which stresses pastoral care as direction and guidance given by the Christian minister to a recipient. The second phase is the clinical pastoral paradigm, and stresses counselling skills and the interaction between the minister and the recipient of pastoral care. The third paradigm stresses the communal context; both minister and recipient are members of a community and are operating in an ecclesial and social context. Pastoral care is offered collaboratively, and those who give care are also those who receive care. Not only can the recipients be transformed, but the church too can be transformed by its experience of working with people in particular situations. It is not suggested that each model has been replaced or superseded by the one that follows; they are complementary, and ideally elements from each paradigm should be included when pastoral care is offered.

1. Pastoral care as direction and guidance by a priest
Interchurch families have asked for ‘pastoral care’ adapted to their specific needs for over thirty years. In response the booklet The Joint Pastoral Care of Interchurch Marriages was produced by the Joint Working Group of the British Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church in England, Wales and Scotland as early as 1970. It was updated and expanded in 1994 as Churches Together in Marriage: Pastoral Care of Interchurch Families by Churches Together in England and CY TUN (Churches Together in Wales).

These and similar guidelines from other parts of the world can help clergy to offer pastoral care adapted to the needs of interchurch families, in line with church norms. They encourage Catholic priests to work together with other Christian ministers, where appropriate, in shared celebrations of marriage and baptism. Church norms are, of course, progressively developing and changing, so that pastors need to keep up to date with these changes. For example, in England many couples will not yet know that they can ask the bishop or his delegate for permission for the other Christian parent at a baptism, a first communion or a confirmation to receive communion with their spouse and child. If they are not told, how can they know? Such permission can transform a fraught occasion to an immensely joyful one for some families.

There may of course be times when for all kinds of pastoral reasons – which may not concern only the particular couple who have come – ministers cannot encourage a request. They need then to remember that it may take a lot of courage for some couples to get as far as asking. The way in which a negative response is given can make all the difference. Many couples have said that if a priest shows he really cares about their needs, even though he has to say ‘no’, they are much readier to accept his decision.

Interviewer: Do you think that clergy and ministers giving joint pastoral care to interchurch couples is a good idea?
Interchurch family wife: Well, it’s a good idea. But what often happens in practice is that the couples give joint pastoral care to the clergy.
From a radio interview in the Irish Republic, 1972
2. A counselling approach to pastoral care

But ‘pastoral understanding’ goes further than this. It is not just the application of the current rules and attitudes of the churches, in as caring a spirit as possible. It implies dialogue, listening to interchurch families as they try to express their experience and helping them to make decisions that authentically reflect that experience. It implies an understanding and respect for the conscientious convictions and actions of those couples and families who may feel themselves constrained to go beyond those rules. ‘Going beyond’ has become a much-used phrase by some interchurch families, ever since the late Bishop Francis Thomas of Northampton told a group of them, with reference to eucharistic sharing, that ‘going beyond the rules is not the same thing as going against them’. It is the kind of pastoral care and understanding that couples are able to give to other couples in offering support.

Many couples have of course received such pastoral understanding from Roman Catholic clergy, and it has made all the difference to them. I think of the young north American Lutheran, quietly allowed by a Catholic parish priest to receive communion with his Catholic wife on an on-going basis; he told us at Edmonton that it had ‘lifted a heavy stone off my back’. I think of the English Catholic spouse who was asked by her parish priest whether she received communion in the church of her Anglican partner. When she replied that she did, to her relief the response was not a brusque ‘You shouldn’t do that’, but a gentle ‘I can understand that’. I think of the Australian Catholic wife who in a particular context thought she should tell her bishop that she received communion in her husband’s Anglican church; the response came: ‘I can’t in conscience try to change your conscientious decision’.

Of course pastoral understanding is not only on the Roman Catholic side. I think of Anglican priests and churchwardens who have been willing for a Catholic priest to celebrate the baptism of an interchurch child in their church building. I think of the Anglican bishop who some months ago was willing to act as a sponsor in a Catholic celebration of confirmation for interchurch children. In such cases Anglican clergy can take a large part in the celebration (reading, homily, prayers etc.), but it is the Catholic who is the chief celebrant. Anglican clergy who have recognised that they cannot expect reciprocity from the Roman Catholic Church at present, but who have nevertheless been willing to do all they can for the pastoral good of interchurch families, have earned the undying gratitude of such families. It isn’t easy to act without reciprocity. Members of the Free Churches in England have of course been giving an example of this to Anglicans for many years.

3. The communal context: challenge and transformation

‘Pastoral understanding’ goes even further than individual pastoral responses to particular couples, however. The theme of the Edmonton conference was ‘Living the Path to Christian Unity’; this picked up the words of Pope John Paul II to interchurch families in York in 1982: ‘You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity’. Some interchurch couples, bound together sacramentally by their marriage covenant, are enriched by their experience of living within two church communities in a way that can lead them to feel that in some sense they belong to both. We are not talking here of canonically recognised membership, but of a real affective bond that links a married partner to the church community of their spouse. How can this ‘affective ecumenism’ become ‘effective ecumenism’, as Pope John Paul II put it to the former Archbishop of Canterbury in Rome in 1989?

‘Pastoral understanding’ of this experience lived by some interchurch families requires a willingness by their churches to listen to it, to be challenged by it, and to consider its wider implications. For until we actually feel we belong to one another in a very real way across denominational boundaries, what hope is there for Christian unity? All the doctrinal agreements in the world won’t get us there by themselves. There is thus a responsibility, shared both by interchurch families and by their communities, to see what this feeling and experience of ‘double belonging’ might mean for church relationships. How can whole church communities put themselves into situations where they might share this sense of belonging together in a more real way than they do at present?

Pastoral understanding implies a two-way process. Interchurch families have to find the courage to share their experience more widely with their pastors and communities, to find ways to explain how each partner has developed a relationship with the church of the other that goes way beyond what most people in their churches have enjoyed. The experience of interchurch children who have been brought up within the life of two church communities goes even further, of course. If we can manage to share this experience in a way that can be understood, and if our churches can listen and respond to this genuine Christian experience, then we shall all move further forward on the path to unity.

The first bilateral report that presented the pastoral care of interchurch families as an ecumenical growth point came from the Roman Catholic/Uniting Church in Australia dialogue in 1999. *Interchurch Marriages: their Ecumenical Challenge and Significance for our Churches:* see *Interchurch Families* 8.1 January 2000, p 13).

The two reports invite comparison. The Catholic/Reformed dialogue began in the USA in 1965 and produced a series of seven reports between 1967 and 1998. This latest comes from the sixth round of the dialogue, and represents three or four years’ work, about half the time-scale of the Australian report. The purpose of this round was to consider marriage and the family, and the members decided to focus on Reformed/Catholic families. The Australian dialogue had produced a report on growing agreement on marriage even before the new team started work on interchurch marriages in 1993. It began by conducting a survey of Catholic and Uniting Church pastors, and by ‘listening to interchurch couples, mostly young, who explained to us the joys, the pains, the satisfactions and the challenges of their relationships’ (p.87). So it is not surprising that the Australian report gives an impression of being more grounded in the actual experience of interchurch family life than the American one.

The two reports cover similar ground. *Resources* devotes chapters to pastoral care, baptism, church, marriage and eucharist. It also includes two appendices, one on practical issues (marriage preparation, family planning, the Catholic promises and canon law, annulment), the other a useful glossary. A great deal of useful work has gone into this publication, and it is to be hoped that it will be taken seriously and put into practice by pastors of both churches in the USA.

There is no definition of an interchurch family, but it is clearly stated that the report envisages ‘only those relationships that remain "interchurch" throughout marriage’. Unless one partner feels particularly called to move to the other church, ‘what we discourage is that either partner cease to practice within his or her church. The ecumenical partnership would cease if one side gives way to the other.’ However, it is assumed that ‘it is usually best for the child to be identified as belonging in one tradition while knowing and valuing both’. ‘Parents are encouraged to baptise children in the church in which they will be raised’, although representatives of the other church are encouraged to attend and ‘even to participate in the liturgy’ (p.8). There is no hint of the assertion in the Australian report that an interchurch family baptism may be seen as a ‘prophetic act which challenges our preconceptions and which allows the Spirit to create a wondrous diversity from our sinful division’ (p.54).

*Resources* starts by saying that ‘interchurch families are a gift both for our churches and for the whole Church of Jesus Christ. The creativity and longing for a unity that can be visibly manifest, often expressed by members of such families, can serve as a witness to the whole Church’ (p.1). ‘By their very relationship to each other and their presence to other Christians, they can become agents of change and promoters of Christian unity’ (p.10). *But how?* There seems to be a rather static approach here, compared with that of the Australian report. In their Baptism and at the Table, ecumenical families make visible in a unique and compelling fashion the reality that ‘we are one, and yet we are not one’ ... Ecumenical families are members of one Body, reconciled in Christ, but as yet unable to express its unity. They become for the wider community of faith a constant reminder, a gentle encourager, and a judge’ (p.31). But do not interchurch families actually *express* and *make visible* the growing unity between their churches, even if only to a very limited degree? When it comes to eucharistic sharing, *Resources* mentions the ‘few occasions’ when a Reformed Christian might be given episcopal permission to receive communion in the Catholic Church, although the other way round would be ‘simply prohibited’ (p.60). The Australian report speaks of the possibility of a ’serious crisis of conscience’, of the ‘sympathetic understanding’ needed from pastors of both churches, since ‘pastoral approaches to eucharistic hospitality form part of a necessary overall joint pastoring for interchurch families’ (p.63). ‘Recent progress in the area of eucharistic hospitality fills us with hope that further progress will continue in the future for the benefit of interchurch couples’ (p.86).

*Resources* speaks mainly of the challenges facing interchurch couples (e.g. pp.1, 30), whereas in the Australian report it is the churches that are challenged, both by the existence of interchurch families and by the need to witness to a world suffering from ‘brokenness, separation and alienation’ (p.53). However, *Resources* issues a challenge to the churches at all levels to ‘be intentional in helping interchurch families to share as fully as possible in church life’ (p.17). This will require from pastors some knowledge of consensus and agreement documents produced by the churches. Congregations too should be offered opportunities to get to know each other and work together, and could jointly sponsor support groups for interchurch families; ‘the American Association of Interchurch Families presents a model’ (p.19). May this be widely put into practice!
Interchurch families: sign and summons

The Revd Thomas Ryan CSP, formerly Director of the Catholic Centre for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations in New York, has been a friend of interchurch families for a long time (see Interchurch Families 4, 1

Catholic priests who were already in ministry in the pre-Vatican II years tell how they have seen wedding ceremonies with interchurch couples move from the rectory, to the sacristy, to the sanctuary of the church where they are now routinely blessed by of

With the Council came an understanding of the one Church of Christ as the communion of all the baptised and the recognition that Christians are already in a real but imperfect unity. One of the goals of the ecumenical movement is to help Christians give a visible expression to their deep koinonia in the Trinitarian life.

From liability to gift

It has been a big step for pastoral leaders to move from seeing interchurch couples as risk and liability to seeing them as a ‘domestic church ... called to exercise a prophetic role for our larger church communities’. The bishops encouraged the couples to make their presence felt, asserting that in the unity they live, they ‘are a prophetic sign that the unity of faith and life sought by their families in growing numbers is a force pushing the churches along the road to unity. These couples are on the front lines; there are none who carry the burden of our historical divisions upon their backs as they do.

They stand at the very heart of the conversion which ecumenism requires. As Vatican II requested of us all, they put the truths of their faith in order, so as to unite around a central core of belief, accepting a certain diversity at the periphery. They are a moving force because they already live as reconciled Christians. Everything that is gained by them and for them serves the whole Church.

How can we support them in our parishes? 1) Offer them the opportunity to form an interchurch families support group. 2) Put them in touch with wider support networks, like the American or Canadian Associations of Interchurch Families. 3) Assure that marriage preparation programs in your parish or diocese take their particular needs into account through a special workshop / presentation.

Pastoral nurturing

Interchurch couples represent a growing population. In many dioceses throughout North America, interchurch and interfaith marriages outnumber same-church marriages. How are we nurturing these couples and families and helping them cope constructively with the particular challenges that are theirs?

While canon lawyers and bishops continue to say that ‘double belonging’ is not possible, an increasing number of families know it is. In a very active way, many interchurch partners are participating in the life of both communities, and their children are being nourished within both traditions of their parents. The presence of interchurch families in growing numbers is a force pushing the churches along the road to unity. These couples are on the front lines; there are none who carry the burden of our historical divisions upon their backs as they do.

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INTERCHURCH FAMILIES AROUND THE WORLD

AUSTRALIA

In 1995 Pastoral Guidelines for Eucharistic Hospitality were published by the Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane under the title Blessed and Broken (see Interchurch Families, 4.2 Summer 1996, p.8). They were the first guidelines in an English-speaking country to recognise that some interchurch couples experience a serious spiritual need to share communion on a continuing basis, and that this need may arise on the occasions listed above, and other special occasions known to the family. If this occurs frequently, the non-Catholic spouse may request permission to receive the Eucharist every time she attends Mass with his/her spouse, but joint pastoral care by the clergy of both denominations should be offered to help the person understand the significance of such requests.

Now Bev Hincks of the Newcastle and Hunter interchurch families group reports that her own Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle has followed suit. A great deal of work over a number of years (in which she has participated) has gone into the presentation of these guidelines. The Pastoral Guidelines themselves are contained in a 12-page booklet entitled Real Yet Imperfect. Backing these up is a much longer ‘Companion to the document Real Yet Imperfect’, which covers the whole range of ‘eccumenical and Interfaith Relations within the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle’. This includes quite a lengthy section of ‘recommendations to assist in the pastoral care and spiritual well being of interchurch spouses and their families’. At the launch of the booklets in June 2001 Bev Hincks was asked to give a brief account of how the documents had been put together, and to relate them to guidelines that had already appeared in other parts of the world.

The general guidelines for eucharistic sharing include the statement that: ‘Communicant members of other Christian traditions who manifest Catholic belief in the Eucharist, and who wish to receive may do so on certain occasions by way of exception, provided the conditions for admission are met. Such occasions for individual decision-making may include celebrations of Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion, Nuptial Masses, Ordinations, Ministry to the Sick and Dying, Funeral Masses and special Eucharistic celebrations.’

In the case of interchurch families, ‘their baptismal unity has been further sealed by the Sacrament of Marriage. Both may experience a real need to express that unity whenever they attend Mass together. If this occurs infrequently, both may receive the Eucharist provided that it is the spontaneous desire of the non-Catholic spouse to do so. This need may arise on the occasions listed above, and other special occasions known to the family. If this occurs frequently, the non-Catholic spouse may request permission to receive the Eucharist every time she attends Mass with his/her spouse, but joint pastoral care by the clergy of both denominations should be offered to help the person understand the significance of such requests.’

CANADA

Some time ago we recorded Linda Buchanan’s story of reaffirming her Catholic confirmation ‘in front of my second Christian family’, the United Church of Canada (see Interchurch Families 8.1 January 2000, p.5). Another young Canadian has now taken a similar step. 17-year old Juanita Karstad wrote from Saskatoon: ‘On 4 November 2001 I affirmed my faith in the Lutheran church. This was a special occasion as I have already been confirmed in the Catholic Church six years prior to this event. I know that at this point in time this situation is rare; I hope it will not be so rare in the future. I’m just a building block helping to pave the path to an ecumenical world because together we can make a difference. I have considered myself as belonging to both churches my entire life. There were a few people in the Lutheran church who thought I had given up my Catholicism to become a Lutheran but I straightened them out by telling them I was both. I think that my mission for now is to educate my fellow Christians from both my churches that I belong to both and am still serving the same Lord.’

Juanita reports that when she first consulted her Lutheran pastor he said that this could be possible, and that when she told her Catholic priest of her decision, he said that there would be no problem provided that she would not be confused and disrupted in her faith. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada a decision on confirmation is a matter for the local congregation, and after confirmation it is possible to participate in decision-making and accept responsibilities in the local church. Juanita’s preparation had a special character. Her pastor wrote: ‘In Juanita’s case we established first our common ground in baptism, the scriptures and our shared history. Then we spent the balance of our time in conversation about sacraments, especially the eucharist, worship and church structures. By trusting the instruction that Juanita was already given. I believe that we also honour the tradition she has grown in. The emphasis of the class was not on the differences between our churches, but on the unique gifts that each tradition has to give to the other. Juanita herself in belonging to both becomes a gift unique among us.’
In 2001 the Unity, Faith and Order Commission of Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) produced a 10-page handbook entitled "Marriage Discipline and Pastoral Care: a guide to current practice." It is intended to help those who prepare couples for marriage or who officiate at marriages between Christians of different church traditions. It consists of a contribution from each of the ten member denominations of ACTS describing their current practices in relation to marriage, divorce, and the marriage of divorced persons. "It is particularly important that all clergy involved in an ecumenical marriage can ensure that the husband and wife and both families appreciate the implications of the practice of the respective churches, in such matters as eucharistic sharing or divorce." In spite of the title, the introduction explicitly states that 'this booklet is not itself a pastoral resource for the support and nurture of Christians in such marriages'. However, it also states that: 'Given the societal strains on stable marriage and the frequent reduction of marriage to a mere negotiable contract, all the churches would wish to celebrate the discovery of joy, trust, mutual comfort in vulnerability and shared lifelong learning in faith which characterise many marriages between Christians of different traditions.' Having started on this work, it would be good if ACTS asked its Unity, Faith and Order Commission to carry it further by producing a publication which would be a pastoral resource for the support and nurture of interchurch families in the Scottish situation.

**RCC/WCC JOINT WORKING GROUP**

Following the Jubilee Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Harare in 1998 (see *Interchurch Families* 7.2 Summer 1999) the subject of 'the ecclesiological significance of interchurch families' returned to the agenda of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. Martin and Ruth Reardon were asked to address the JWG on this subject when it met at Drumantie in Northern Ireland in May 2001. The Group is taking the question very seriously. Its two co-moderators, Roman Catholic Archbishop Mario Conti of Glasgow and Bishop Jonas Jonson of Strängnäs, of the Swedish Lutheran Church, plan to attend the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families to be held near Rome in July 2003.

At the May 2002 meeting of the JWG in Sweden, papers from three perspectives, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Uniting Church in Australia, were presented and discussed.
Fr John Coventry SJ

and the early days of the
Association of Interchurch Families

The substance of a talk to the British AIF
given at Heythrop College on 2nd March
2002 by Ruth Reardon (Roman Catholic),
who with her husband Martin (Anglican)
and Fr John Coventry SJ, was among the
founder-members of the Association

'A man of action among thinkers'
In his homily at Fr John Coventry's funeral mass in April
1998, Fr Robert Murray called him 'a man of action among
thinkers'. A powerful thinker, he was both analytical and
visionary. I would claim that his field of action was pre­
eminently his work with interchurch families.

He was certainly a brilliant teacher; his students, both
clerical and lay, at Heythrop and elsewhere, remain deeply
in his debt. He gave a great deal of himself to administrative
work, both as Jesuit Provincial (1958-64) and as Master of
St Edmund's College of the University of Cambridge
(1976-85). But he himself described interchurch families, a
few months before he died, as 'my life's devotion'. As Fr
Murray said at his funeral mass: 'If you want to see his
memorial, look around' – indicating the number of
interchurch families present. We were there to express our
grateful heart and our love, because he had laboured so
devotedly for our welfare.

I want to say something about John Coventry as he was in
1968, at the time of the first interchurch families' conference, not long after he had begun to turn his powerful
mind to the pastoral needs of such families. All that he gave
us was there, in embryo, at the beginning, and I would
suggest that the subsequent development of the Association of Interchurch Families has been a long working-out of the
insights already present in the first few years of our
fellowship.

Early influences on John Coventry
John Coventry was born in 1915 and went to the Jesuit
school at Stonyhurst. Among my sources for this talk I have
a brief autobiographical paper that he wrote in 1991,
looking back on his links with interchurch families, 'I had a
very unecumenical upbringing in a Catholic family and
boarding school', he said. He vividly remembered the
response to his mother's request at a possible lodging house
as to the whereabouts of the nearest Catholic church: 'We

don't like Roman Catholics here!' He told how at
seventeen I mounted a soap-box on Saturday evenings at
Ilford Broadway to convince the crowd who gathered of the
Pope's infallibility. Whatever may be the case with the
latter, I certainly knew all the answers!

At the age of 17 John Coventry entered the Jesuit noviciate,
and he was 35 when he finished his formation. It included
four years at Oxford reading classical 'Greats', with a first
in 1942 – an indication of his intellectual stature. He was
ordained priest in 1947 at the age of 32, half-way through
his four years of theological study at Heythrop (old
Heythrop in Oxfordshire). It was in those post-war years
that something very important happened to him, a new
influence that came from continental theology, from which
England had been cut off during the war.

At his funeral we heard how a certain Père Alexandre
Durand, a professor from Lyon, had influenced him.
Durand's teaching on faith, seen primarily not as
intellectual assent to theological propositions but as a
personal act and way of life, was a lasting inspiration to
John Coventry. (Not 'belief that' but 'faith-in' – a personal
The third book written in his student years was the most outstanding: it was entitled *Faith Seeks Understanding*. Dedicated to Père Alexandre Durand, it expounded a theology of faith that the professor from Lyon had opened up for him, faith which sprang from experience of life in Christ. The book received an *imprimatur* and was published, but almost immediately withdrawn from circulation. It was a difficult time for Catholic theologians. In 1950 Pope Pius XII published the encyclical *Humani Generis*, with its warnings about the errors detected in some current theological trends. The Jesuits may have feared that John Coventry, with his forceful clarity of mind and expression, would become an embarrassment. He was an obvious candidate for academic study abroad leading to a doctorate and a post as lecturer at Heythrop, but instead was sent to teach boys at Beaumont College, a Jesuit school near Windsor. Alexandre Durand could never understand why he was not sent to study dogmatic theology at a continental university. It must all have been a very great disappointment to John, but he threw himself into teaching at Beaumont without bitterness or resentment. With hindsight we can recognise that it was a great blessing for us that circumstances led him to develop his talent for putting profound theological thinking into terms meaningful for lay people.

Thirty years later he wrote: ‘I am not an academic theologian in any serious sense: I have lived with them and know the difference. But I have done my best to keep up with what scholars are saying in New Testament studies, systematic theology and philosophy of religion, as well as with the immense struggle towards unity among the English churches. And so I may perhaps without too much conceit offer a message to the scholars too [who] seem to overlook the fact that after Easter Jesus’ disciples experienced most vividly the living presence and continuing action of their Risen Lord among them, and that this was the matrix of all their theologies. There is good reason to hope that we may still be able to do that today, and relate all our thinking to our awareness of the Lord’s gift of his Spirit to us all – i.e. to our experience (*Reconciling*, 1985, Preface). Incidentally, he wrote three books on faith (*The Theology of Faith*, 1968; *Christian Truth*, 1975; and *Faith in Jesus Christ*, 1980) on the same lines as the one suppressed around 1950. They were perfectly acceptable in a post-Vatican II church.

The development of an ecumenist

Something important happened to John Coventry while he was teaching boys at Beaumont in the early ‘fifties. In his 1991 autobiographical paper he wrote: ‘Some 24 years after Iford Broadway, and about four after my ordination, my ecumenical education began. I agreed with the Roman Catholic chaplain of the University of London that I should keep an eye on the Catholic Society of the Royal Holloway College, a college for women at Englefield Green, up the hill from Beaumont College where I was teaching. My ecumenical education began at the hands of the then flourishing Student Christian Movement, who invited me to talk with them.’ He was deeply impressed by some of the students he met. ‘I began to understand’, he wrote ‘that ecumenism is people, people who love the Lord, not ideas or even beliefs, and have tried to translate this faith into practice ever since’. This was the very first beginning of his ecumenical vocation – a real experience of meeting Christians who loved the Lord outside the Roman Catholic Church. His embryonic ecumenism was very mixed up with apologetics in those pre-Vatican II days, however, and

response.) It was like a breath of fresh air after the scholastic theology of the Latin manuals. When some of us were at the World Council of Churches Assembly at Harare in 1998, one of those who visited our interchurch families’ stand was an elderly Jesuit working in Zimbabwe. He claimed responsibility for the meeting of the two men. He himself had been sent to study at Lyon after the war, and discovered that Père Durand, one of his teachers, loved reading Thomas Hardy and had a great desire to visit Hardy country. So he arranged a visit to England for him, and introduced him to the Jesuit provincial, who invited him to go to Heythrop to give some lectures to the theology students. John Coventry was one of them. Père Durand did not get far with his lecture series at Heythrop, I was told. He gave a couple of lectures but was not allowed to give a third, and was denounced to Rome by one of the Heythrop professors. But he had time to enthuse John Coventry.

Three books

There are stories of how, while still a student, John wrote his first three books during the rather dull lectures that could not engage his attention. The first three subjects he chose to write about were significant for what he gave to interchurch families later. There was a book on the mass, first published in 1950, called *The Breaking of Bread* – an unusual title to be given to a Catholic publication in those days. The eucharist was a central focus for John throughout his life, and he was able because of his own deep love for the mass to understand the great need of interchurch families for eucharistic sharing long before this became more widely appreciated. He had also researched the history of the eucharist, and knew what he was talking about when it came to eucharistic doctrine. More than thirty years later he wrote a brief Centrepiece for AIF on Eucharistic Belief (*reprinted in Interchurch Families* 5:2 Summer 1997) to show how far he thought couples were misunderstanding one another or the doctrine of their own church, rather than disagreeing. The way he dealt with questions of Presence and Sacrifice, out of a deep understanding of the history and theology of the eucharist, has been a great help to interchurch families.

A second book was entitled *Morals and Independence: an Introduction to Ethics*, published in 1949 with an introduction by Professor Donald MacKinnon. John was already preoccupied with Christian behaviour, the relationship between human happiness, moral judgement, authority, freedom and responsibility. Professor MacKinnon said he quarrelled with the author on many points but, he wrote: ‘As I read his book, again and again I was conscious how effectively and subtly the argument opened up the great questions. . . . The reader isn’t given the impression of a spurious simplicity, as if moral philosophy were something he could take easily in pills’. He hoped readers would be many in number, as curious and argumentative as John Coventry would like them to be. Later John was to apply a mind that had reflected deeply on the ‘great questions’ of morality and ethics to the situation of interchurch families in all its complexity. He delighted to find some of us both ‘curious and argumentative’. Since Fr John died, AIF has reflected on questions of authority and responsibility as we participated in the ‘Authority and Governance’ study (*Interchurch Families*, 8:2 Summer 2000, pp.14-15; 9:2 Summer 2001, pp.12-15). I hope we have done this in a way faithful to his teaching. I quote from a text in the last book he published, in 1995:

‘A mature person has a greater responsibility than that of keeping rules laid down by authority he or she has the responsibility of making decisions.’ (*Our God Regen*, p.84).

The development of an ecumenist
continued to be for a long time. Indeed, he wrote (1991): ‘My first idea of an ecumenical panel was to stand up and continue the same apologetnic line of the superiority of the “true Church” (a phrase dropped by Vatican II).’

John Coventry was Provincial of the Jesuits from 1958-1964. In 1964 he was sent to teach at Heythrop, although lacking the usual academic qualifications for such a post. A year or so later the Catholic bishops asked him to be Secretary of the new Ecumenical Commission for England and Wales (ECEW) that they were setting up in the wake of the Council. His ecumenical conversion was extremely rapid. The present Archbishop of Canterbury said in a sermon he preached in Luxembourg around the time that John died: ‘Ecumenical vision must be anchored in a confident, open Christian faith’, and I thought how much that applied to John. He had a very confident faith. It was a very personal faith, rooted in prayer and his own relationship with God in Christ. It was also the faith of the Church, based on the experience of the first disciples and re-echoed down through the centuries. John had a deep love for the Catholic Church, which had brought him to faith in Christ. At the same time his was also a very open faith – open to integrating new Christian experience. So ecumenism could take root very quickly.

He was Secretary of the Ecumenical Commission for only three years, from 1967-1970. He had many responsibilities at Heythrop. He was Secretary of the Ecumenical Commission in 1970, a constituent college of the University of London and moving there. At the same time he put enormous energy into ecumenical work, driving at speed around the country to ecumenical meetings in a small car he was allowed to use for the purpose, and setting up structures, national and diocesan, to promote ecumenism in the Roman Catholic Church. In those few years he became the face of the Roman Catholic Church for many other Christians, and they liked it. Kenneth Sansbury, an Anglican bishop then General Secretary of the British Council of Churches, paid tribute to him in 1970. First, for his personal faith: ‘One cannot be in his presence for long without being aware that here is someone whose life is hid with Christ in God. It is when one sees the presence of the Christ one so feebly tries to serve in a person belonging to another Communion that one knows the meaning of Christian unity at its deepest level.’ Second, for his complete loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church: ‘With patience, courtesy and charity he makes the Roman Catholic position clear – and the rest of us respect him for so doing. Those who suspect that ecumenism means relativism can rest assured that Fr John has never been guilty of that error.’ Third, for his passionate desire for the healing of Christian divisions, and his commitment to the ‘long, difficult road’ ahead: ‘It involves taking other Christian Communions with full seriousness, being sensitive at the points where deep-held convictions can be hurt. It means being entirely loyal to his own Church, yet when a decree or a presentation is patient of a wider or a narrower interpretation, opting for the wider and more generous’. Added to this was ‘Fr John’s humanity, his friendliness, his ability to get alongside other people, his delightful sense of humour’. (One in Christ, 1970, 4, p.394)

It was perhaps John Coventry’s ‘wider and more generous interpretation’ and his readiness to act on it that so much alarmed the English bishops and led to his replacement as Secretary of the Ecumenical Commission in 1970 by a diocesan priest – over whom they could exercise greater control. It was another very great disappointment for John Coventry, although he never complained, and remained a loyal and hard-working member of the Ecumenical Commission for many years. Later he recalled (in the 1991 paper): ‘I soon lost episcopal favour and ceased to be Secretary of the Ecumenical Commission after only three years, but Ruth and I remained on it for many years (she was then Editor of One in Christ) as “expert members”. So at AIF meetings we passed resolutions asking the Commission to do this and that; then Ruth and I changed hats and fielded the resolutions at Commission meetings.’

Mixed marriages and the eucharist
There are two things I want to recall from those few years when he was ECEW Secretary. At Ecumenical Commission meetings he and I began to raise the question of mixed marriages, and especially that of the promise to baptise and bring up all the children as Roman Catholics. This was an absolute promise that Roman Catholic canon law required of both partners in those days, if the marriage was to be recognised by the Catholic Church. The question had been debated at the Second Vatican Council, and it was clear that a majority of the Council fathers wanted change, but how precisely this was to happen was left to the Pope. In 1966 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued an Instruction, Marraini Sacramentum; this said that difficult cases in which the other partner was not willing to make the promise were to be referred to Rome. Gradually the way in which Rome was resolving these cases began to become known: from reported replies a pattern became clear. Even where it seemed virtually certain that children would be brought up in the church of the other partner, a dispensation for the marriage was always given provided the Catholic partner sincerely promised to do all he or she could for the Catholic upbringing of the children.

No promise was required from the other partner. What concerned us was that all the reported cases were coming from continental countries; none from England. It appeared to us that our Bishops did not want to refer such cases to Rome. When we raised the question in the Ecumenical Commission the Bishop who chaired it told us that it was impossible that Rome would allow children of a mixed marriage to be brought up in the church of the other partner. Yet we were collecting all this incontrovertible evidence of what was actually happening in other countries whose bishops sent requests for dispensations to Rome. (In 1970 of course the papal motu proprio made this approach into law for the whole Roman Catholic Church.) We had some very difficult moments in ECEW meetings. I do not know how far it was John Coventry’s willingness to question the English refusal to accept – even to consider – Rome’s gentler approach on mixed marriages that caused his dismissal as Secretary of the Ecumenical Commission, but it must have contributed.

The other point I want to pick out from those three years is something that happened when John Coventry, as Secretary of the Ecumenical Commission for England and Wales, was appointed as a Roman Catholic observer at the Lambeth Conference of the Bishops of the Anglican Communion in 1968. He said his daily mass as usual each morning before he set out. He was also present at the eucharistic celebrations of the Lambeth Conference. (This was something very new for Catholics in those days.) One day, he said, he had a sudden conviction that what the bishops were doing at the eucharist was the same thing that he had been doing before he set out. It was another moment of ecumenical conversion. There are other Christians besides Roman Catholics who love the Lord. And now: a conviction that there are other churches besides the Roman Catholic Church that celebrate the eucharist. He began to...
think out what this meant in terms of Catholic theology and the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church. It didn’t mean that all the big ecumenical questions were resolved. But it meant that he saw them in a new light.

Spode 1968
That was the same year in which we had our first Spode meeting, from which we date the beginning of the Association of Interchurch Families. The small meeting of couples held in our house in Sheffield in the spring of 1968 had decided on a national conference, and left Martin and me to organise it. We felt we needed the presence of a Catholic priest. Who could we ask to come? The answer was obvious. And from that first Spode meeting in 1968 until his death in 1998 John Coventry missed only one annual conference. To interchurch families he became ‘our’ Fr John.

What was it that held him for those thirty years? What bound him to us with such strong cords of pastoral love and understanding? I think it was his conviction that Christian experience is central in Christian faith. Faith is not about propositions, but about persons responding to God in Christ. Ecumenism is not primarily about doctrinal agreements, but about people coming together in Christ. Here at Spode were people who were experiencing the effects of Christian divisions in their lives in an unparalleled way, but in spite of that – or perhaps because of it – they also had an experience of unity that was way beyond the grasp of most Christians. This was especially true of Roman Catholics to whom the whole concept of Christian unity was so new at that time. As a thinker, he was able to translate this experience into theological terminology that would build on and contribute to the Catholic tradition and to Catholic ecumenism. As a pastor, he was able to grasp the deep needs of interchurch couples and find ways to meet them – basically within the existing structures and canons but always going beyond them in such a way as, eventually, to change them. ‘A man of action among thinkers.’

In his three years as Secretary of the Ecumenical Commission, he had become passionately concerned for Christian unity. In interchurch families he saw grass-roots ecumenism involving Roman Catholics in a way that went far beyond the usual Catholic involvement in those days, and raised the kind of questions that he knew would eventually need to be faced by the churches. So he threw in his lot with us. Later he wrote (1991): ‘I cannot begin to say how much I have learned from AIF meetings, national and regional, over the years. It is the concrete relationships, hopes, pains, partial achievements, tragic and comic and tragi-comic situations, which constitute the growth of the actual on-the-ground Christians into unity. In early AIF meetings there was so much aggro against Catholics. I was there to be shot at, publicly and in more personal conversations, and to try to explain if not defend the often indefensible. I was there to write, to put into words and get heard and published, the varied experience of couples. I was there as a one-person referral point for advice, for going round a “white list” of priests all over England who would handle people sympathetically. I was a “poison pen” redrafting behind the scenes letters for couples to send to bishops, in order to keep up the pressure on them. … To be fair, the intricacies of two-church life are as subtle and varied as all personal relations, and Catholic parish clergy understandably took time to get used to the truly interchurch couple and to distinguish them from the large numbers of “merely mixed” marriages they met with. But the climate changed in time and is still changing. And AIF did a lot to change it.’ As a former Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, said when he chaired the first John Coventry Memorial Lecture, John was innovative, risk-taking, and had a high doctrine of AIF.

Already there was a lot of variety in the experiences of couples present at Spode 1968. One Catholic wife was not married in the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church – she had married in an Anglican church without a dispensation because she and her Anglican partner refused to make the promise, and she had not received communion since the wedding. We knew that she would have received a dispensation if her bishop had sent the case to Rome with a positive request. An Anglican husband who had been married that summer in Italy had actually been given permission to share communion at the wedding in his wife’s church. Earlier in the year Martin and I had written an article in the Catholic ecumenical review One in Christ suggesting the possibility of the joint upbringing of children in both the churches of their parents – a startlingly new proposal at that time. There were several engaged couples. There were three children under three, and a teenager who looked after them. There were two couples whose children had grown up. I have often recalled John Coventry’s big smile on the first evening when he said: ‘They’re so pleased to meet; we must do this again.’ From that moment he realised the value of the pastoral care that couples could give to couples.

Children and worship
The two big questions that came up at Spode 68 were the upbringing of the children and unity in worship for couples and families. Fr John saw that it was good for families to worship together and to bring up their children together, but that in an ecumenical perspective this couldn’t go on being a one-sided process, the Catholic partner couldn’t continue for ever claiming exclusive rights in the marriage. But how
could this be reconciled with the conviction of the Roman Catholic Church that it was ‘church’ in a way that other churches and ecclesial communities weren’t? That was certainly a conviction that Fr John firmly held. This was the real nub of the problem, for a Catholic. How to reconcile equality in marriage with the doctrinal position of the Roman Catholic Church.

John Coventry came to a very practical resolution in terms of the conference worship at Spode 68. We had said beforehand that it would be possible for conference members to attend Catholic mass and Anglican Holy Communion on the Sunday. Detailed plans were left until we met. What Fr John proposed was that since Saturday evening mass had come in on the continent and fulfilled their Sunday obligation for Catholics there (although this hadn’t reached England yet) he should celebrate Sunday mass on Saturday evening. Then there should be an Anglican celebration on Sunday morning, and all conference members should attend both. It was a revolutionary proposal that set a pattern for future meetings. Catholics found themselves expected to attend the church worship of their partners as well as their own; it was surprising and liberating to find this attitude in a Catholic priest, and to find that he was also prepared to be present. Fr John was sure that the worship of other churches was authentic worship and Catholic spouses should take it seriously. It is difficult to convey today how new that attitude was in 1968. Catholics were free to attend early mass on Sunday in the Dominican priory church, but there was no expectation that they should do so. They were free to make their own decisions.

Fr John’s attitude was equally liberating for the other Christians in the group. Memory is not always reliable, but I think that it was from the very first Spode that Fr John used the formula that became known to many of us in later years. ‘I am not in the happy position of my colleague in being able to invite you all to communion, the rules of my church do not allow it’, he would begin. (In 1968 Martin had asked and received permission from the local Anglican bishop to admit members of the Free Churches to communion; after 1972 it was not necessary to ask annually for permission for the occasion, because the general rules of the Church of England had changed.) ‘However’, Fr John would continue, ‘I have been taught not to refuse anyone unless they are a notorious public sinner’. He made it clear that if in the context of marriage to a Catholic other Christians felt it right to come forward for communion, he would welcome them. They were free to come.

**Freedom**

This was the amazing gift he gave us: freedom to make our own decisions. He had worked out a way by which we could have that freedom to decide for ourselves – a way that was fully within the Catholic tradition. In later occasions he repeated his formula in the presence of Catholic bishops at Spode, and they made no objection. But it was not just that he had a way of dealing with canon law and church documents that always produced ‘a wider and more generous interpretation’, to quote Bishop Sansbury. It was that his theology was deeply rooted in Catholic tradition, he knew that he stood within the tradition, he had this ‘confident open faith’ that allowed him to act on what he believed, however much he was slapped down for it.

And he was; this was a recurrent pattern in his life. But he was never embittered. He never lost his intense love for, and his deep loyalty to, the Roman Catholic Church.

He trusted us to make our own responsible decisions in our particular situations; he trusted the work of the Spirit in us. Of course there was development over the years, but this came out of his original insights. The question of reciprocity was not an easy one for Roman Catholics, since although admission to communion was officially allowed in the Roman Catholic Church in certain circumstances, Catholic in similar circumstances were only permitted to receive communion where the orders of the celebrant were valid. We learned from Fr John a way of thinking about validity, put in its simplest terms, it means that the Catholic Church recognises something – orders, sacraments, eucharist, marriage etc – as authentic, something it can guarantee as a channel of grace. It cannot however guarantee a negative. Clearly the Holy Spirit has used the ministries of other churches, although the Roman Catholic Church does not recognise them as valid. This understanding was helpful to Catholics in making decisions that vitally affected their married lives. Fr John always felt that reciprocity was important. For him, Christian experience was central in Christian faith – but particular experience always had to be tested against tradition, and approached with rigorous theological methodology.

After he died, a memorial service was held at St Edmund’s College, Cambridge, where he had been Master 1976-1985. The homily was given by the (now retired) bishop who had been appointed in 1970 as chair of the Roman Catholic Ecumenical Commission after the bishops decided John Coventry should no longer be Secretary. He recalled how he himself had been somewhat afraid of John, who with his immense intelligence, seemed to be following a line of his own. But, he said in 1998, he now knew ‘it was the line of the church’. He wrote later that he grew to love and respect John, but that ‘I never probed deep enough into his deep soul to find why he was happy with the freedom of the AIF’.

**Freedom.** I think it was his immense confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit that led John Coventry beyond accepted formulations and behaviour. I would like to quote from a letter written by one of his students to The Tablet after his death. ‘In one conversation I had with him, I posed the question of what he would do if it were physically impossible to attend mass, but possible to receive the sacrament at an Anglican eucharist. His answer rather took me aback. “I have been in the position”, he said, “of being able to attend mass, and have nevertheless received the sacrament at an Anglican eucharist”. I asked him how he could square this with the fact that the Church did not
accept the validity of Anglican orders, and his reply was, “So, you doubt the power of the Holy Spirit, do you?”.

The belief that the Holy Spirit has worked through the ministries and structures of other churches is not, of course, by itself a sufficient reason for intercommunion. This depends on relationships between churches. Fr John could see that it would be a very long time before the Roman Catholic Church would be able to enter into relationships with Reformation churches and ecclesial communities that would allow generalised intercommunion. In the meantime, the needs of interchurch families for reciprocal eucharistic sharing were urgent. He set forward a possible pastoral approach in an article in One in Christ in 1971. It was written to help other priests to work out a pastoral policy in a situation where unofficial intercommunion involving Catholics was happening. It concluded: “The couples or the groups could be asked to realise that official approval of eucharistic sharing in their case is not yet to be expected; it would be tantamount to generalising their personal Christian relationship and declaring that it existed between their churches, when it does not. At the same time they could be urged, in forming their own decisions, to consider very carefully how they can best make their personally discovered and created Christian communion one that is fruitful for bringing their respective churches closer, and so ensure that it is not taken right out of and isolated from their loyalty to their own churches, and thus rendered barren.” He was asking for freedom - but freedom with responsibility, the responsibility of keeping close to the church communities to which individuals belonged. He wanted both to help couples and families on their way to God together, but also to make their experience fruitful for the whole Church and for Christian unity. I think we can say that the record of interchurch families in working with Councils of Churches and Churches Together at all levels has been a good one.

The Church and Christian unity
Fr John held strongly to the Catholic conviction that the church is a visible community, and that to be a Christian you must belong to the community. He would have nothing to do with the idea that a child could be baptised or brought up as ‘just a Christian’. Thus (working with a Vatican II ecclesiology) he came up with his remarkable formula: interchurch parents were asking for ‘baptism into the Church of Christ as it exists in the two churches of the parents’. This didn’t mean that you were obliged to think of the two church communities as equal in a theological sense. The Catholic was free to believe that the Roman Catholic Church was ‘more church’ than that of his partner. But it meant that in the marriage there was a psychological equality, an equality of responsibility. This is an insight that is very important for the participation of Catholics in the ecumenical movement, applied to the ‘little church’ of the family.

Fr John loved to help at the baptisms of our children, and to watch them as they grew up. It was he who won the book token offered for the best title for ‘The A4 Piece of Paper’ that our teenagers began to produce in the early 1990’s, coming up with The Interdependent. The title fitted in with his early insights about the help we all need from one another. Nothing ever phased him. There is the story of the child of four or five who had been clamouring for months to take her first communion, not wishing to be left behind her elder brother. She escaped from her parents and was first in the queue. Afterwards the parents asked if he knew she hadn’t received her first communion. Fr John replied with a smile: ‘Well, she has now!’ I think he would be proud of our young people. The shared celebration of confirmation and the joint service of affirmation that took place last year would delight him. They show that some of our young people are carrying on the tradition of commitment to the Church of Christ as it exists in the two churches in which they have been brought up. I hope that our church communities will be able to listen to interchurch families as we talk of our experience of ‘double belonging’. Fr John did so much to make that experience possible, and to give us a language in which to express it.
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 interchurch families, in the context of the wider ecumenical movement.

The views expressed in the journal are not necessarily those of the Association of Interchurch Families.

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The British Association is a registered charity (no. 283811) dependent on members' contributions and the donations of others who support its work. Friends of Interchurch Families give regular support.

Presidents are: the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, the Free Churches Moderator, Dr Kenneth Greet, Dr Ruth Reardon.

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

Association of Interchurch Families
Inter-Church House, 35-41 Lower Marsh, London, SE1 7SA
Tel. 020 7523 2152 Fax 020 7928 0010
E-mail aif@msn.com

In all its activities, the Association of Interchurch Families is working to strengthen marriage and family life and to promote Christian unity.

It offers a support network for interchurch families* for partners and parents, for growing children and young adults - and an information service to all concerned for their welfare (clergy and ministers, relatives and others).

It gives interchurch families a voice in the churches: this is done by articulating the experience of these families in all their diversity, by focusing attention on interchurch couples' need for pastoral care which takes seriously both their marriage commitment to one another and the fact that two churches are represented in their family; by affirming at local, national and global level the gifts of interchurch families and their potential as a catalyst for wider church unity.

It undergirds all its activities with prayer and worship.

* where the partners belong to different denominations - often a Roman Catholic and a Christian of another communion.

The British Association of Interchurch Families is linked with other associations and groups of interchurch families around the world.

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

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