Towards Rome 2003

INTERCHURCH FAMILIES PREPARATORY PAPER FOR ROME 2003

A INTRODUCTION

We believe that, as interchurch families, we have a significant and unique contribution to make to our churches' growth in visible Christian unity. Many people in our churches have told us that we are pioneers. As two baptised Christians who are members of two different, and as yet separated Christian traditions, we have come together in the covenant of marriage to form one Christian family. As we grow into that unity, we begin and continue to share in the life and worship of each other's church communities. We develop a love and understanding not only of one another, but also of the churches that have given each of us our religious and spiritual identity. In this way interchurch families can become both a sign of unity and a means to grow towards unity. We believe that interchurch families can form a connective tissue helping in a small way to bring our churches together in the one Body of Christ.

B HOW INTERCHURCH FAMILIES SEE THEMSELVES

In order to witness to our experience, we have to try to explain how we see ourselves. What is an interchurch family?

B1 Mixed marriages and interchurch families

An interchurch family includes a husband and wife who come from two different church traditions (often a Roman Catholic married to a Christian of another communion). Both of them retain their original church membership, but so far as they are able they are committed to live, worship and participate in their spouse's church also. If they have children, as parents they exercise a joint responsibility under God for their religious and spiritual upbringing, and they teach them by word and example to appreciate both their Christian traditions. It is such interchurch families that we represent in this paper.

This paper has been prepared for those who will be involved in any way with the World Gathering of Interchurch Families that will take place at the Monde Migliore Centre near Rome, 24-28 July 2003. It is the work of representatives of associations, networks and groups of interchurch families in various countries: English-speaking groups in Britain and Ireland, Australia, Canada and the United States; French-speaking groups in France and Switzerland; German-speaking groups in Germany and Austria, together with Italian groups. Some of these associations and groups were founded in the 1960's; others have been formed more recently.

In different countries and in different languages we tend to describe ourselves differently. In Italian-speaking regions we are 'famiglie miste interconfessionali'; in French-speaking regions 'foyers mixtes'; in German-speaking regions 'konfessionsverbindende Familien'; in English-speaking regions 'interchurch families' or 'mixed marriages'. These different names however describe very similar realities and experiences.

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"You live in your marriage the hopes and the difficulties of the path to Christian unity." Pape John Paul II, York, 1982
There is however no blueprint for such an interchurch family. Each one is unique, and makes its own conscientious decision about the extent and manner in which it will live out its two-church character, sharing in the richness of the traditions of both communities.

There are of course many other mixed marriages that do not, or do not yet aspire to such an interchurch relationship. It may be that one or both partners do not attend church worship and are nominal in their church affiliation. It may be that one or both partners practise their Christian faith but have decided to worship entirely separately within their respective church communities. These mixed marriages cannot properly be described as interchurch in a full sense. Some have been discouraged from becoming more fully interchurch – or even from practising altogether – by the difficulties they have encountered from relatives, congregations and ministers without ecumenical understanding or commitment. Such mixed marriages can be regarded as potential interchurch families. One of the aims of associations and groups of interchurch families around the world is to encourage other mixed Christian marriages, who would like to become more fully and intentionally interchurch marriages, that this is possible and can be deeply enriching.

B 2 The marriage covenant between two baptised Christians

When two Christians from different ecclesial communions come together in marriage they already have in common a vast and very rich resource as children of the one Father, disciples of the one Lord Jesus Christ, and recipients of the gift of the Holy Spirit. They also share the sacrament of baptism that is mutually recognised by most churches (although there are exceptions). In marriage they bind themselves in a life-long covenant to love and serve one another to what becomes their shared journey together to the kingdom of heaven.

In addition to this common heritage they also come to marriage with distinct identities. One partner is male and the other female. Each partner has been brought up in a different family with its own particular ethos and traditions. This is true of all marriages between Christians.

What is distinctive in an interchurch marriage is that the Christian identity of each partner has been formed in a different ecclesial communion, with its own particular traditions of spirituality, worship, teaching and authority. By ‘ecclesial communion’ we mean those autonomous, international or national churches that are variously described as ‘denominations’, ‘confessions’, ‘communions’ or ‘churches’. They are not at present in full communion with one another, and some of them do not at present recognise others as being, in the full sense, church.

In this situation of diversity and inequality the married partners are called to treat each other as equal persons with equal rights and a shared responsibility for their family life. As husband and wife begin to live and grow together they have to forge their own particular family traditions, which may incorporate much of the traditions of the two families in which they were brought up, but now fused into a new pattern. This bringing together of two family traditions will inevitably include Christian spiritual traditions that formerly were distinctive of one or other ecclesial communion. Some particular ecclesial traditions on the other hand may not be incorporated as being unacceptable to one (or both) of the partners. In this spiritual mutuality a new interchurch family grows and is enriched, renewed and purified.

B 3 The ‘church-belonging’ of an interchurch family

Like every other Christian family, an interchurch family represents the Body of Christ in the home, and can, therefore, be described as a domestic church. However, although it is one church at home, the partners remain faithful members of two as yet divided church congregations in their neighbourhood, and two as yet divided ecclesial communions in the world. As marriage partners they want to share all that is of value in each other’s lives, and as Christian marriage partners this includes especially the riches of their respective ecclesial communions. This cannot include what some ecclesial communities define as formal and canonical church membership, since this is not permitted or allowed for in many churches, although there are exceptions.

Where possible, interchurch family partners join in the life and worship of their partner’s church as well as in that of their own. In doing this many, probably most, interchurch family partners come to appreciate the distinctive witness of their partner’s church community and begin to feel welcome and at home in it. They often find themselves accepted as part of the fellowship of the community that worships and belongs together there, as well as remaining a full member of their own church.

Indeed some have accepted a particular office or responsibility in the congregation of their partner’s church (e.g. teaching the children, leading youth work, singing or playing music, joining the welcome team). Interchurch families describe their experience of participating in the life of two ecclesial communions as ‘double belonging’, ‘double insertion’, ‘double character’ (‘double référence’) – or, as a Polish bishop suggested, ‘double solidarity’. We recognise that this description cannot be understood as a canonical category of dual membership, but as a lived reality of experience.

Interchurch families have also been careful to avoid becoming what some have described as a ‘third church’. When interchurch families meet together and worship together this is not in order to establish a new Catholic/Protestant church. Interchurch family partners, by their own self-definition, retain their own church affiliations and so ‘live in their marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity’ (Pope John Paul II, 1982).

B 4 The ‘church-belonging’ of interchurch family children

The primary responsibility for the Christian upbringing and education of children rests with their parents. They are together their first teachers. It is natural that both parents will want to share with their children the treasures of the particular ecclesial communion in which they personally are members.

There is therefore a substantially different experience of ‘double belonging’ (or whatever it is called) felt by the
partners in an interchurch marriage from that felt by their children. For the most part the parents of an interchurch family started by belonging to one ecclesial communion and have had to make a conscious choice to experience regularly the life and worship of their partner’s church. They continue to feel themselves rooted in one tradition. Their children however will normally have been brought up to feel at home in the traditions of both their parents. This may be the case when their parents made a clear decision to have their children formally baptised and brought up in one church rather than the other. It is even more likely where they did their best to bring them up in both communities, inviting the ministers of both churches to share to some extent in their baptism, and later, perhaps, encouraging the children to attend catechism classes or religious education programmes in both churches. These children, of course, like their parents, cannot as yet have formal and canonical membership of two ecclesial communities, but it can be very difficult for them to make a decision to be confirmed or to make a personal profession of faith in one church rather than the other. To make such a choice can feel like cutting themselves off from one of their parents and from one of the church communities in which they feel their have their roots and to which they belong. It may also seem to them like going against the Holy Spirit who is the creator of unity and not of discord.

It is partly for this reason that very many ministers and some interchurch family parents counsel that the decision about the ecclesial communion of which the child will become a member is taken before baptism to avoid confusion later on. Such a choice need not prevent the young people from making their own decisions when they have grown older. However, we need to listen to the words of some of our teenage young people who say: ‘It is not we who are confused in refusing to choose one church or the other. It is you of former generations who have been confused in accepting and perpetuating the divisions of the churches. Christ willed only one church.’

B 5 Authority and conscience in interchurch families

Interchurch families are by definition bridge-builders. They are concerned not to cause scandal (in the deepest sense of turning others from the way of faith), but to work in harmony with the ministers and congregations where they worship, in response to Christ’s prayer that they all may be one. They often find themselves therefore in the tension between the ‘already’ of the unity of their domestic church and the ‘not yet’ of the continuing separation of the two church communities of which they are members. There can be a clash between what they wish to do and judge to be right for their family life and its unity, and the (often conflicting) attitudes and rules of their respective two ecclesial communions. There can be a tension, for example, between their authority and responsibility for the Christian education of their children, and the authority and leadership of their two churches for the teaching and governance of their respective communities.

It is not always easy in these circumstances for interchurch families to distinguish between what they want, or what they would find easier for themselves, and what God is calling them to do through an informed conscience. Many of the rules and attitudes of our institutional churches were formed before the ecumenical movement acquired momentum and they fail to take it fully into account. Interchurch families gratefully recognise the principle that to go beyond the rules is not always to go against them. They have been particularly grateful when the concerns and needs of interchurch families have been taken into account by the churches, as, for example, in the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, 1993. We also recognise the reason for insisting that the norms should be applied to particular pastoral cases, since, as we have already noted, not all ‘mixed marriages’ have the same concerns, church practice and aims as those who can be described as more fully ‘interchurch’.

C THE CONTRIBUTION OF INTERCHURCH FAMILIES TO CHRISTIAN UNITY

In his testament Cardinal Mercier wrote: ‘In order to unite with one another, we must love one another; in order to love one another we must know one another; in order to know one another we must go and meet one another.’ Interchurch families in particular know the truth of these words.

C 1 Interchurch spouses live in one another’s traditions

The gifts given to all married couples are mutual love, a marriage covenant that supports it and helps it to grow, and a mutual knowledge that can be discovered only through living together in the closest proximity over a very long period. The further gift given to interchurch couples is their mutual insertion and participation in the life of their two church communities. The value of this experience is inestimable.

When an interchurch couple first meets, the two individuals often share the mutual ignorance and prejudice of their fellow church members. They can easily assume that the differences and tensions between their two ecclesial communions, which have been causes of separation in the past, are irreconcilable. But because they love and respect one another, and try to forgive each other’s weaknesses, they soon grow to love and respect each other’s churches. By learning to live in the traditions of one another’s churches they realise that all differences are not church dividing, but many are complementary and can lead to the enrichment of diversity.

The partners start with two separate identities. They retain these all their lives, but by living together and mutual sharing they gradually build upon these a new family identity that their children inherit. This common identity will be rooted in God the Holy Trinity, the source and pattern of all loving relationships in Christian family life. It will include elements, traditions, attitudes and practices that they have found valuable and helpful from both their ecclesial communions. They may or may not have theological expertise, but their concrete experience of the life and worship of each other’s local communities is likely to be unsurpassed.

C 2 Growing mutual understanding

The committed mutual love of the partners encourages them
to explore each other’s church communities. This leads to a growing understanding between them, and includes their respective ways of worship, church life, doctrine, spirituality, authority and ethics. This can, and often does become both a mutual appreciation of the positive gifts of each other’s churches and a mutual understanding of their weaknesses.

It can also go much deeper. This immersion in the ethos of a partner’s community can enable a spouse to evaluate the other church in terms of its own language and ways of thought, action and being. The churches at large have failed to receive the convergence and consensus texts hammered out in recent decades by their officially-appointed theologians. Separated Christians have read these texts in the light of their own values, emphases, use of language and structure of thought inherited from their own church’s history. These come from a past polemical age in which one church often defined itself by what another was not.

Interchurch families learn concretely that the same truth can be expressed in a variety of forms, and that very often the more ways in which it is expressed, the deeper we can penetrate into its reality. They have the time and disposition to learn that what at first appears to one partner to be wholly unacceptable in the other’s church community, may have a positive aspect when seen from a different point of view. They learn that ecclesial communions that are not in serious dialogue with one another, but still have a polemical mentality, are very likely to be right in what they affirm about themselves and wrong in what they deny about others.

C 3 Interchurch families as signs to the churches on their way towards unity

The very existence of interchurch families provides a visible sign of unity to their churches. Interchurch families claim no credit for this. Interchurch couples do not get married in order to provide such a sign!

In the past mixed marriage was such a sensitive point of dispute in relations between churches that saw themselves as over against one another that it was considered to be a countersign to true unity. The developing understanding of many churches that they are already in real but not fully realised communion (koinonia) has helped them to see interchurch families more positively, as a sign of God’s grace, a gift to the churches on their way to unity.

Among the characteristics of Christian family life that interchurch families offer as a visible sign to the churches on their own pilgrimage towards closer unity, are the following:

i A love that is not simply content with a parallel separate existence, but which yearns for, and therefore promotes, growth into deeper and deeper unity.

ii The marriage covenant which gives formal expression to this love, and provides a support and framework that encourages it to grow.

iii Actual living together under the same roof, which enables the couple to enter into each other’s everyday life and activity, to get to know one another at a deep level.

iv Sharing resources, and making decisions together on how they are to be employed in careful stewardship for the benefit of the whole family and their neighbours.

v Mutual penitence and forgiveness when things go wrong.

vi Sharing responsibility for the children’s education, and celebrating their Christian development (baptism, first communion, confirmation or profession of faith) in as united a way as possible.

vii Being hospitable to others, and sensitive to the particular needs of each, so that nobody is obliged to act against their conscience.

Interchurch families invite the churches to reflect upon these signs and to consider how to take them, mutatis mutandis, into their relationships with one another.

C 4 The practical engagement of interchurch families as a means of bringing their churches closer together

Because interchurch couples love one another and bring up their children in that love, they are deeply motivated to enter into one another’s church traditions and so to contribute to the healing of the divisions between their churches and to their growth into unity. They do this in several ways.

First of all, they meet members of their partner’s church community, and so an inter-personal bridge of understanding and trust is gradually built up. Moreover members of their partner’s congregation discover that someone who is a member of another ecclesial communion is happy to worship with them and become part of their community to the extent that this is permissible. They become also one of ‘us’, believing much as we do, not simply one of ‘them’. Indeed, spouses quite often hold some office or responsibility in their partner’s church.

Secondly, they become ambassadors whose voice can be heard and understood by their friends in the other community. A Baptist wife, for example, can explain to members of her husband’s Catholic congregation what Baptists believe about baptism, and vice versa. Because of their presence, those who preach have to be careful not to caricature the belief and practice of the other ecclesial communion.

Thirdly, because of their motivation interchurch couples are more likely than single-church couples to keep abreast of developing dialogue between their two churches, and can share this with others in their separate congregations. At a time when ecumenical leaders complain that the convergence dialogue reports are not being received by their churches, their contribution can be invaluable.

Fourthly, interchurch family members are proportionately far more active in ecumenical structures such as Councils of Churches and bilateral committees than one-church family members.

Fifthly, and perhaps most significantly, when an interchurch family has an important celebration, they will often invite both ministers and both congregations to participate. This can be a catalyst that moves others to see the importance and the joy of Christian unity. It can happen, for example, at their wedding, at a baptism or dedication of a child, a first communion, a young person’s confirmation or profession of faith, a wedding anniversary, a funeral. In these and many other small ways interchurch families can contribute to the formation of a connective tissue which supports, connects and heals parts of the Christian body that have been cut or broken in our sinful divisions.
D PASTORAL CARE AND UNDERSTANDING

Leaders of our churches have emphasised that growth in the visible unity of the Church of Christ is not an optional extra but integral to the life of every Christian. Interchurch families cannot fulfill their vocation to be a sign and means of visible unity within their churches unless they are welcomed, understood and supported by their extended families, their local congregations and their pastors.

D 1 Pastoral understanding

In the past interchurch families were often treated as a problem. This was particularly true on the part of those called upon to exercise pastoral care. Pastors are called to exercise oversight over their own flock, applying the teaching, rules, values and attitudes of their own ecclesial communion. In interchurch couples they found partners or prospective partners from different churches, whose expectations, particularly over such issues as the religious upbringing of the children and admission to communion, often appeared to conflict with their own church’s law or pastoral norms. Interchurch families presented problems that were ultimately insoluble, short of the reunion of their churches.

In the face of this some pastors presented their own church’s rules in an unsympathetic, offhand and unhelpful manner. As a result many couples turned away from the churches. Happily an increasing number of pastors are now sympathetic and begin by trying to understand the hopes and expectations of couples and then to do what they can, within the discipline and self-understanding of their own churches, to meet the couples’ needs. Even when the ultimate decision (for example over admission to communion) may be negative, it is striking how much difference sympathetic listening and understanding by the pastor can make to a couple. It can be the crucial factor that enables the couple to continue to worship (and become a truly interchurch couple) or, if it is lacking, drives them away from the church altogether.

If interchurch couples are received in each other’s churches with an understanding welcome, then their interchurch character and commitment can become a gift and visible sign of hope for their churches on their path to unity.

D 2 Pastoral policies that welcome, respect and liberate interchurch families

Interchurch families look for ways to participate in the life of their two communities so that their own two-church gift and calling may be recognised, respected and welcomed. This is not simply for the benefit of the interchurch family itself, but also for the life of their two ecclesial communities. The regular attendance of a spouse in his or her partner’s church life should not be interpreted as a step on the road to his or her ‘conversion’, let alone be used as an opportunity for proselytism. Partners should be welcomed and respected for what they are, and neither cold-shouldered as a foreign species, nor overwhelmed immediately with requests as if they were ecumenical experts.

In our church life the disciplines and traditions that structure our respective communities frequently create points of tension for interchurch families. Interchurch partners want to participate in the life and activity of their spouse’s church to the extent that time and conscience permit, and certainly do not wish to cause scandal and problems.

We invite the churches to explore ways in which we can contribute positively to our church communities, and ways in which we can be nurtured by them as together we journey towards deeper unity. As a contribution to this dialogue we raise the following issues.

D 3 Joint pastoral care

Interchurch families recognise that in the busyness and complexity of contemporary society it is not always easy or possible for the pastors of both their church communities to meet together with them and exercise pastoral care jointly. This may be particularly difficult during marriage preparation when the two partners come from widely separated places. Nevertheless, wherever and wherever it is possible, it remains the ideal. Experience shows that where this happens it can benefit not only the family but also the ecumenical relationship of the two pastors.

It should of course be care and not simply pastoral instruction directed at the couple from the point of view of the discipline of one or other church. Care has to take account of the situation of the couple and their freedom of conscience both as individuals and as a couple having to make decisions together.

Because of the couples’ mutual responsibility, pastoral care which concerns both partners or their children should be exercised with both of them present and, when appropriate, their children, and not through one of them as intermediary to the others.

D 4 Marriage preparation

Most churches arrange some form of marriage preparation for couples intending to marry. Originally this was organised by churches of particular ecclesial communions only for those to be married in their own churches. The general character of such preparation is similar in many church communities, although there are different emphases, and obviously there needs to be relevant preparation for the particular wedding service of the church where it is to take place.

However, the rapid increase in the number of mixed marriages between Christians of different ecclesial communions in the last century has meant that these now exceed the number of marriages between same-church couples in some places.

There is an obvious advantage for mixed marriages if much of this marriage preparation is done jointly by the local churches working together. The local churches also find it helpful to share resources in this way, using both lay people and ministers who can focus on their respective expertise. In some places interchurch couples help in this marriage preparation.
D 5 Bringing up children in an interchurch family
One of the most difficult responsibilities for parents to fulfill well in modern society is the religious and spiritual upbringing of their children. For interchurch families there are added challenges and it is right that prospective partners should be faced with them before they marry. Experience suggests, however, that they should not be pressed to make a final decision on the baptism and religious upbringing of future children before marriage. It is not unusual for one or both partners to change their minds on this when children arrive. A decision taken in abstract before marriage can appear quite different when there is a real baby in a particular environment some years later.

We are glad that many churches are increasingly ready to respect the conscientious decisions made by the parents together. Interchurch families are grateful for the changes made in Roman Catholic canon law and its application since the Second Vatican Council on the nature of the promise to be made on the religious education of the children. They are also grateful for those guidelines that stress that the promise is not an absolute one, and that the partner who is a member of another church may also feel a conscientious obligation to bring children up in his or her church. It is also pointed out that the unity of the marriage is paramount, and that if this is threatened the Catholic partner will not be penalised if children are brought up in the other church.

Despite these changes, however, the issue of the children’s religious upbringing is too often still presented in a confrontational way. We question whether the use of the word ‘promise’ is helpful. It seems to many interchurch families that the most that should be required is that the pastor should ascertain that the partner who is a member of their church seriously desires to share his or her faith with his or her children. The decision about baptism and religious upbringing should be left with the parents in their own decision based on their own experience during their upbringing.

Christian initiation is a developing process understood differently in different ecclesial communions and often marked by the stages of baptism, profession of faith or confirmation, and first communion. What many interchurch parents – and many of their children as they grow older – want is that these stages should be marked as far as possible as ecumenical events in which both churches play at least some recognisable part. They know that there is already partial communion (koinonia) between their two churches, and they hope this will progress to full communion in their lifetime.

D 6 Shared celebrations of marriage, baptism, first communion, confirmation and funerals
One of the most encouraging developments for interchurch couples in recent decades has been the increasing willingness of pastors of all churches to share publicly together in interchurch family weddings. This has been helped by the western church’s understanding that the ministers of marriage are the partners themselves, and that the pastor’s primary role is as a witness and leader of prayer on behalf of the church. This helps towards the positive recognition of the marriage by the two church communities concerned, and provides a precedent for other shared celebrations in the future.

Most churches that practise infant baptism recognise one another’s baptisms, but surprisingly few celebrations of baptism take place with ministers and members of different ecclesial communions sharing together in them. Most of these shared celebrations are of the baptism of children of interchurch families. Normally only one minister will perform the actual baptism, but the minister of the other church may perform other parts of the rite. Sometimes the fact of the baptism is recorded in the registers of the two churches of the parents. In some countries a Certificate of Christian Baptism has been produced listing the churches that have agreed to accept it as evidence of Christian baptism.

Because the mutual recognition of baptism is so fundamental to the ecumenical movement, interchurch families would like to see the churches build on this foundation. Despite the obvious practical problems, could not churches of different traditions share more frequent celebrations in which they baptise others beside interchurch families? Could these celebrations also be occasions when all Christians re-affirm their baptismal promises together?

There is also an increasing number of marriages between members of churches that baptise believers only and those that also baptise infants. Some of these interchurch families would like to see shared services in which they could give public thanks for the birth of their children, pray for their upbringing in the life of their two church communities, and dedicate themselves anew to God for this purpose. There are significant examples in early church history and also today of Christian parents delaying the baptism of their children until they were of age to make their own personal profession of faith, and though unusual it may be permitted, even encouraged, in such families.

Because of the fact that not all churches recognise the validity of one another’s ministries, there is not a general mutual recognition of confirmation. In some countries this presents some interchurch family young people with a considerable challenge. Even if it is not permissible to have a joint confirmation, it should be possible for the minister and community of one church to take a significant role in a confirmation in the other church.

Even where eucharistic sharing is only permitted on special occasions, there is often a deep spiritual need for the parent of one church to be admitted to communion in the other when a child of an interchurch family receives first communion. Both parents will have helped to prepare the child for this occasion, and some children will feel hesitant and unsupported if both parents are not able to receive communion with them. The catechesis of the eucharist presented to our children tells them that Jesus calls them to his table, and so they rightly question why their baptised parent from another ecclesial communion is excluded. It is at such times that the scandal (in the New Testament sense) of our divided churches becomes all too apparent to our children and can be a stumbling-block to them. Their questions do not go away, of course, once the ceremony is over.
Funerals are other occasions when the bereaved interchurch family has a deep spiritual need for the ministers and congregations of the two churches to come together to give thanks for the life of the partner or parent who has died, to commend him or her to God, and also to minister to those left behind.

**D 7 Eucharistic sharing**

In the past most ecclesial communions have limited eucharistic sharing to their own members, or at most to members of those church communities whose beliefs and practices were substantially similar to their own. Gradually, however, most Protestant and Anglican churches have, with various limitations, permitted other Christians to receive communion with them. Many interchurch families, particularly where one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other partner a member of another Christian community, experience a serious spiritual need to receive communion together in order to strengthen the spiritual unity of their domestic church. Because such families already share the sacraments of baptism and marriage, the Roman Catholic Church has begun, in the years following the Second Vatican Council, to recognise some such families as being in possible need of eucharistic sharing. Such eucharistic sharing in the Roman Catholic Church remains exceptional, and is permitted only under certain conditions and in particular cases.

Not all partners in interchurch marriages wish to share communion in each other’s churches. Some have very different eucharistic beliefs which they fear would be compromised if they received communion in their partner’s church. Some may think of communion as expressing a spiritual relationship between an individual and God without any particular communal significance. But many interchurch families not only wish to share communion, but feel a serious spiritual need to do so. Though grateful for any occasion on which they may share communion together, many feel the need for eucharistic sharing every time they are at mass together.

Some Roman Catholic authorities have recognised this need and are finding ways to respond to it. In other places Roman Catholic authorities have confined such sharing not only to particular families, but also to particular occasions, apparently on the grounds that it would not otherwise be ‘exceptional’. However, many interchurch families would plead that they are exceptional as cases, and that they do not additionally have to be confined to rare occasions.

The Roman Catholic Church does not however give permission to Roman Catholics to receive communion in other ecclesial communions whose ministry it does not regard as valid. For this reason it is not able to give permission even in particular cases or on particular occasions. Christians of other ecclesial communions who are concerned for Christian unity will recognise that progress towards it will not be helped by expecting Roman Catholic bishops and priests to give such permissions.

On the other hand it is not excluded that Catholic spouses in an interchurch marriage, following their own consciences, and recognising the fruitfulness of the ministry and sacraments of their spouse’s church, could find in their own particular situations reasons that make such sharing of eucharistic communion spiritually necessary. Such sharing would not observe the norm that confines eucharistic sharing of communion to ecclesial communion, but it would not jeopardise membership of their own church, nor be regarded as a denial of the faith of that church. Interchurch families have been particularly happy when Catholic bishops have made this situation clear, and would appreciate other Catholic bishops doing the same.

**E CONCLUSION**

Interchurch families are greatly encouraged when their ecclesial communications see them not as problems, but as pioneers of Christian unity. They are called to witness by their lives, their actions and their words to the fundamental and growing unity of all Christian people, and to share a common life in the Church for the reconciliation of our churches.

**NOTES**

B 3 ‘Domestic church’: see Vatican II Lumen Gentium, 11. Dr Konrad Raiser in an address to the first world gathering of interchurch families in Geneva in 1998 referred to them as ‘household churches’.

B 4 Line 1 see Vatican II Gravissimum Educationis, 3, followed by Familiaris Consortius.

C Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines, presided over the Malines Conferences between members of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, 1921–1925.


C 3 5th para. ‘Mixed marriages, so often regarded as a problem, can rather be seen as the connective tissue par excellence between separate Christian communities. Then the partners deserve to be given all possible pastoral help to share as fully as possible in the life of both communities in which they are involved, and so bring these together.’ The Unity of the Church: The Goal and the Way, Faith and Order, Acrea 1974.


D 7 para 2. Vatican II Unitatis Redintegratio, 8, Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism nn 131, 159, 160


D 7 para 6. The same Note quotes the Synod of the German Dioceses of Wurzburg in 1976.
INTERCHURCH FAMILIES AROUND THE WORLD

BRITAIN

The annual conference of the British AIF was held 28-30 August at Swanwick, Derbyshire, on the theme of ‘Vision for the Future’. It worked on how the Association needs to develop, and what human and other resources are available, in the light of responses to a questionnaire that had previously been sent to all members. After thirty-four years on the job Martin Reardon handed over as Anglican co-chair to Chris Bard, and was elected a President of the Association. The completion of an embroidered wall-hanging of the Interchurch families triptych, made at Turvey Abbey, was celebrated there in a service of dedication and blessing on 10th August, and hung at Swanwick during the conference.

A particularly impressive celebration of baptism was held for two interchurch family children, Bethanie and Grace-Marie, on 29th September 2002. It took place in the Catholic church where the family worships, which, most unusually, has a baptistery designed for baptism by immersion. The ceremony was shared by the Catholic priest and the family’s Anglican minister. Bethanie at six was old enough to answer for herself before she stepped down into the baptistery, and her resounding ‘Yes’ to the questions she was asked will long stay in the memories of those present. Two-year old Grace-Marie followed her sister joyfully into the water, and the large congregation of Catholics, Anglicans, other Christians and AIF members rejoiced with the family.

CANADA

The Saskatoon group of interchurch families celebrated its tenth anniversary with a weekend at Camp Kinasiao, Christopher Lake, Saskatchewan, 19-21 July 2002. This is a Lutheran camp-site, and it was the first time that mass had been celebrated in its chapel. Members from the slightly older Calgary group came to join the Saskatoon group. Bernie and Shirley Karstad handed over as co-chairs of the group to Mark and Colleen Stoecklein. Canadian AIF is mainly a federation of local groups; there was some discussion of whether a more formal national structure should be created. Young people in Saskatoon have been active. On May 21st Monika Stoecklein was confirmed at the age of twelve in a service with her Catholic peers; afterwards the bishop and her Lutheran pastor gave her a special blessing in a brief ceremony as a recognition of her upbringing within the two church communities. Juanita Karstad, who last year affirmed her faith within the Lutheran community, six years after her Catholic confirmation (Interchurch Families 10.2, Summer 2002, p.8), was Monika’s sponsor. Juanita herself, who graduated from high school in June, was given the Christian Service Award, presented each year to a school-leaver who has given outstanding Christian service to school and community. In Juanita’s case it was given for her ecumenical contribution: ‘This year’s recipient represents the future of our faith. She has demonstrated by her actions and words the meaning and hope that lies in the ecumenical example of Jesus and the message of ecumenism put forth by Pope John Paul’.

FRANCE

Two meetings of foyers mixtes were held in 2002, one for the south at Sommières, Nimes 1-2 June, and another for the north at the Centre du Haumont, Lille 12-13 October, where Melanie Finch and Martin and Ruth Reardon from England joined them. Lille prepared for Rome 2003 by taking the theme of ‘double belonging’ (double appartenance). First Fr René Beaufépère OP set the Rome World Gathering in the context of French-speaking interchurch family groups and meetings. In the early 1960’s a group had first met at Lyon; then other local groups began to meet. Later the local groups came together in regional meetings held in different parts of France and also in French-speaking Switzerland. The first ‘national’ meeting was in.
Versailles in 1995, although it was conceived as a francophone conference for all French-speaking interchurch families, rather than as a national French conference. The next stage was Geneva 1998, with its wider vision, more 'catholic', more diverse, making contact with the headquarters of the World Council of Churches. In its turn Rome 2003, still more diverse, would try to make similar links with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. We hope, he said, for closer collaboration with these world bodies charged with working for unity, to understand their perspectives better, and to bring to them our experience of a living dynamic ecumenism.

Lille took an unusual approach to double belonging by asking a sociologist from the university, Bruno Duriez, to introduce the theme of the weekend and to give some reflections at its close. His introduction ranged widely over questions of belonging and identity in many different kinds of social and religious groupings. Then in workshops and plenary sessions couples focused on four topics: Eucharist and Lord’s Supper; one Bible for the churches, Christian initiation for our children; fidelity and freedom. This had been a totally new experience for him, said Bruno Duriez at the end. ‘You are not ordinary Catholics and Protestants. You don’t represent all foyers mixtes’, he said. You are committed, you feel identified with your separate confessions, but you are Christians first, surmounting the differences. I spoke earlier of Catholics and Protestants as two ‘religions’; I accept your ‘one religion, two confessions’. Your children do not want to choose between them; they are in a difficult position. You feel you have a mission to the churches; I heard ‘we’ and ‘the churches’ many times. You have chosen a particular model of life as couples and families: you want to live and practise your faiths together; others are happy to go two separate ways. Bruno Duriez raised a number of questions about community, choice, respect, identity, recognition. His outstanding question was: Who are ‘we’? What are the limits of the ‘we’? What about extreme traditionalist Catholics? What about extreme fundamentalist Protestants?

So who are the ‘we’ who have been caught up in the interchurch family movement, who are preparing to go to the World Gathering of Rome 2003? A leaflet issued by the Lille group explained that the foyers mixtes network based on Lyon exists ‘to allow couples to deepen their faith and to work for Christian unity’. The British Association has defined itself as a support network for couples and families, and as a voice in the churches to express both the kind of pastoral care such families need and also the specific contribution they believe they can make to promoting Christian unity. German-speaking couples call themselves ‘binding-the-churches-together-families’. For all of us the call to ecumenical work is strong, an important part of the definition of who ‘we’ are.

In 2001 the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches in Hungary came to an agreement on the celebration of mixed marriages. This was the first mutually agreed statement in Hungary on the subject of mixed marriages, and as such of considerable ecumenical importance. In 2002 therefore the Hungarian Christian Ecumenical Fellowship (KOT) decided to devote part of its annual conference to an explanation of the document, to a wider consideration of mixed marriages, and to a panel in which interchurch couples themselves spoke of their own experience. Other topics during the three-day conference in Budapest (19-21 September) included shared schools and joint social action.

A Lutheran professor of theology, Károly Hafenscher, spoke first. He pointed out that this was the first agreement on any form of shared worship since the sixteenth century. The wedding would follow the liturgical form of the church in which it takes place, but the service would be shared by priest and pastor. The agreement is an important indication of the common will of the churches to work together. Neighbouring countries had been consulted about their practice, the territories of the former Hungary. It was well known that in Germany and France shared celebrations are common. Now it is urgent to make the possibility better known in Hungary, so that more couples can benefit from it. Of course an agreement on the wedding service is only a beginning, and should be followed up by continuing pastoral care.

A Roman Catholic professor of theology, Attila Puskás, followed. He agreed that ‘ecumenical marriage’ was a better term than ‘mixed marriage’. The most important value for the Roman Catholic Church is the unbreakable unity of marriage and stability of family life; it is for this reason that it is no longer obligatory to bring up the children as Roman Catholics, although the Catholic should do all he or she can for this. Ecumenical weddings should be fraternal events linking the churches together, and occasions to exercise ecumenical sensitivity in respecting different customs (a guest does not re-arrange the furniture). It is often possible, however, to adapt and share (for example, the Roman Catholic can put his hand on the cross, and the Protestant can hold the partner’s hand while he does so). It is important that shared pastoral care should follow the marriage. The Protestant partner can request admission to communion with his partner, for example at Christmas, Easter and other festivals. The Roman Catholic Church prefers that Catholics do not receive communion in their partner’s church (but it is not a sin to do so).

The panel of Catholic/Lutheran and Catholic/Reformed couples, ranging from a recently-married couple to one with six children, spoke in practical terms of the joys and tensions of living an interchurch marriage. They had not met one another before being brought together for the
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**NEW ZEALAND**

**INTERNATIONAL LINKS AND ACTION**

to gain a wider perspective
to share our experience
and encourage one another
to support interchurch families worldwide
to give interchurch families a voice
in the churches at every level

**INTERCHURCH FAMILIES**

In 1993 an agreement on interchurch marriages was made between the Roman Catholic Church and the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church in South India (see Interchurch Families, 2,2 Summer 1994). In December 1994, when the Commission for Dialogue met again, a positive welcome for the agreement on both sides was reported, but it was necessary to make the agreement better known; there had been difficulties because the local clergy were not sufficiently aware of it (Interchurch Families, 4,1 January 1996).

At the sixth meeting of the Commission for Dialogue, held in Kerala in October 2001, an attempt was made to assess the agreements that had been reached, particularly regarding mixed marriages. A mainly positive evaluation was made of the practical application of the Agreement between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church on Interchurch Marriages. However, it still needed to be better known and more consistently applied. In order to spread knowledge and understanding of the Agreement it was decided to re-publish the full text, this time accompanied by a short commentary, in local church publications or as a separate pamphlet (PCPNU Information Service, 108, 2001 TV, p.163).

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in the churches at every level
The Association of Interchurch Families in England (founded 1968) has always wanted to know what was happening to similar families in other countries. In 1969 the second national conference included speakers from Holland and France, priests involved in the pastoral care of interchurch couples.

Rydal 1980
The first English-speaking international conference was held in 1980, at Rydal Hall in the English Lake District. The purpose was consultation between the three interchurch family associations in England, the Irish Republic (founded 1973) and Northern Ireland (1974). A couple from Australia also participated. The conference sent a letter to the Synod of Bishops that met in Rome in 1980 on the subject of Marriage and Family Life, with a copy to Cardinal Wilbrand, President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. Interchurch families were encouraged by the Cardinal's intervention on mixed marriages in the Synod debates. The 1980 meeting showed them that on the international as well as on the national level it was valuable to meet for mutual support, and also to find a common voice.

International conferences in Britain and Ireland, 1982-1994
From then on, English-speaking international conferences were held every two years, and the French *foyers mixtes*, based on Lyon, regularly sent two French couples as participants. The following conferences were held between 1982 and 1994:
1982 at Corrymeela, Northern Ireland, on the theme: *Authority: marriage, baptism, communion*.
1984 at Dunblane, Scotland, again focusing on *Authority: personal and institutional values*.
1986 at Bellinter House, Navan, Irish Republic, on the theme of *Double Belonging*.
1990 at Corrymeela, Northern Ireland, on *Spirituality*.
1992 at Perth, Scotland, on *Telling our story*.
1994 at Bellinter House, Irish Republic, on *The Nurture of Mixed and Interchurch Families*.

Virginia 1996
In 1996, largely thanks to Fr George Kilcourse, who had participated in Lingfield 1988 and subsequent conferences, and had been joined by a few other Americans and a Canadian couple, Joy and Edouard Bizard, the ninth conference moved to the United States. It was held at Norfolk, Virginia, on the theme *Interchurch Families: catalyst for Church Unity*. Some Canadian interchurch families participated.

Meanwhile, the first *francophone* international meeting had been held at Versailles in 1995, and a second at Lyon in 1997. Previously, French-speaking conferences were held regionally in different parts of France, in Switzerland and in Italy (see *Interchurch Families* 2000,10,2, pp.9-16, for the series of Franco-Swiss-Italian conferences held in northern Italy between 1970 and 1999). There was a third *francophone* conference at l'é Rocheton, near Paris, in 2000. A fourth is planned for 2004.

First World Gathering of Interchurch Families, Geneva 1998
Virginia 1996, the first international English-speaking conference held outside Europe, and Lyon 1997, the second *francophone* international conference, were followed in 1998 by the first World Gathering of Interchurch Families, organised in Geneva by French and Swiss *foyers mixtes*. It was the first bi-lingual conference, with French and English on equal terms, and some German used too. The theme was *Interchurch Families and the Churches* (see *Interchurch Families* 1999, 7, 1).

Edmonton 2001
Following Geneva, the French did not wish to commit themselves to a conference in Canada, but French- and English-speaking groups agreed to follow up Geneva 1998 together, with a second world gathering in or near Rome in 2003. The Canadians planning Edmonton 2001 were very ready to provide English-French simultaneous translation, but it was not needed since the Canadian interchurch family groups have as yet no wholly French-speaking couples in membership. Two of the main speakers were, however, French-speaking Canadians, Brother Gilles Bourdeau OFM, Director of the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism in Montreal, and Bishop Marc Ouellet PSS, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Their addresses were given in English.

Edmonton 2001 was thus the tenth in the series of English-speaking international conferences that have brought together interchurch families mainly from Britain and Ireland, North America and Australia. There have regularly been a few others, and Edmonton was enriched by participants from Germany and Austria, besides a Ghanaian priest working in Canada who presented a beautiful Ghanaian cloth to interchurch families worldwide. It was used as an altar-cloth in Edmonton and will go to Rome. The January 2002 number of *Interchurch Families* (10,1) was devoted to the Edmonton conference.

Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families, Rome 2003
As for Geneva 98, we are using in English a direct translation of the French description *Rassemblement Mondial* to distinguish this multilingual gathering from the series of English-speaking international conferences from Rydal to Edmonton. The planning group (Preproma) is working in four languages: English, French, German and Italian; these will be the languages of the conference. The first meeting of the planning group was held in Luserna near Torre Pellice in July 2001 and decided the theme of Rome 2003: *United in baptism and marriage: interchurch families/foyers interconfessionnels/ konfessionsverbindende familien/famiglie miste interconfessionali* – called to a common life in the Church for the reconciliation of our churches.

The second full meeting of Preproma took place in Lyon in July 2002. The four language-group co-ordinators have met several times. A preparatory group has worked on the paper printed in this number of *Interchurch Families* (pp.1-7) by email and postal correspondence, with a final meeting in Zurich in September 2002. The Rome World Gathering will take place in the Better World Centre at Roeca di Papa, 24-28 July 2003.

There is regularly updated information on the interchurch families world web site, (see back cover) and there is a listserv (English) at PREPROMA@topica.com
Eucharistic sharing: further study

A plenary meeting of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) was held in Rome in November 2001. Some of its reports and papers are given in the PCPCU Information Service 100, 2002/1-II. One is entitled 'Theological considerations on the question of eucharistic sharing'. It is not a completed document of the PCPCU, but represents a resource used at the meeting, and illustrates some of the issues before the plenary. Here we can only pick out the references to eucharistic sharing in interchurch families.

Introduction: status quaestionis

The text began by saying that eucharistic hospitality must be set in the context of the Catholic view that ecclesial and eucharistic communion belong inseparably together. The text began by saying that eucharistic hospitality must be set in the context of the Catholic view that ecclesial and eucharistic communion belong inseparably together. It would be helpful to further clarify the situation of grave need as described in the Code of Canon Law and in the Ecumenical Directory, in regard to special situations in the life and faith of Christians (e.g. confessionally mixed marriages) with special consideration of the salus animarum (salvation of souls). Concerning the question, whether the regulations in the Directory are sufficient, or whether an additional amendment ought to be considered, a change of the Directory itself does not seem to be appropriate. Except for 'danger of death' (n.159), the Directory has not indicated any other case of urgent need in a more specific way, because the Code of Canon Law has left the task to verify all other cases of urgent need to the judgement of the bishop or the Bishops' Conference. Bishops should be encouraged to make full use of the space for decision making that is given to them in the Ecumenical Directory.

Points for further discussion

The question of the admission of non-Catholics to Catholic Eucharist is a sensitive, complex and delicate issue in ecumenical relations. On the one side, it concerns individuals asking for admission in specific cases (for example during mixed marriages); on the other; it pertains to communities or even confessions that see a possibility of inter-confessional relations evolving towards a eucharistic communion.

From the list of suggestions made during the discussion:

- Taking ecumenical progress into account, apply the Directory in a more benevolent way: this possibility is foreseen, for example, for bishops in cases of grave necessity for the salus animarum. It is important to understand and apply the norms of Canon Law and of the Directory on the basis of the Decree on Ecumenism (UR) and all conciliar documents.

- The admission of non-Catholics to the eucharist under specific circumstances, foreseen by Vatican Council II, eastern and western canon law, and the Ecumenical Directory, should not be based on a continuing legislation of 'exceptions'. Exception presupposes a justification and an a priori theological possibility.

- What is needed is a new new catechesis of eucharist rather than casuistry. This requires a theology of the eucharist and of the church which would take into account theological, pastoral and spiritual aspects, which ought to be dealt with together.

Editorial note

There are some positive points for interchurch families to note. What seems to be at issue here, so far as interchurch families are concerned, is on-going eucharistic sharing in some cases ('all of the life'; 'during mixed marriages'). Following the Directory's reference to those 'who share the sacraments of baptism and marriage' (159, 160), bishops and Episcopal Conferences who have made their own applications of the Code do not seem in doubt that they can, even should, apply the possibility of admission to communion to spouses in interchurch marriages, at least on an occasional basis. It is clear that they are able to make further applications if they wish to do so (as some have done, both in relation to interchurch families and to others in need of admission). The PCPCU does not wish for further legislation giving lists of possibilities. It is enough to make it clear that the existing legislation is there to be applied. It is suggested that it be applied 'in a more benevolent way' than has in general so far occurred. Exceptions to the general rule are already theologically justified; what has to be done now is to identify serious need. Bishops are encouraged to do this. The reference to interpretation of canon law and the Directory on the basis of the Decree on Ecumenism and all the Second Vatican Council documents can be understood as taking seriously the fact that sacramental sharing is sometimes to be commended (UR 8); the corporate stress of the Constitution on the Liturgy; what Gaudium et Spes says about marriage as a communion of life and love (48); and Lumen Gentium's use of the term 'domestic church' (11). Moving on from exceptional cases of (individual) need to a new catechesis of eucharist in which theological, pastoral and spiritual aspects are dealt with together, is to be warmly welcomed. Here interchurch families can justly feel they have a contribution to make.
En route for Rome 2003

From a homily given by Fr René Beaupère OP to the Preprona committee meeting at the Centre St Irénée, Lyon, 7 July 2002; the Gospel of the day was Matthew 11:25-30

These three sentences have been put together by the author. In the first Jesus rejoices and gives thanks. How strange to rejoice in his own failure in respect of the Jewish intelligentsia – the ‘wise and understanding’ of our text. But his joy is justified by his success with the ‘babes’, the little ones open to receive his message. The next phrase could have come from John, on the relationship between the Father and the Son. And the Son can make known the Father to those whom he chooses – and we are included. The first two sentences are found in Luke’s Gospel too; the third is only in Matthew. Weary and over-burdened people are called to rest – but is it really to rest, if they are called to wear a yoke!

There seems to be a link between these three apparently diverse sayings of Jesus. They are all addressed to the little ones, and by one who presents himself to us as little too, not as a teacher, a professor, a rabbi, but as one who is gentle and whose heart is humble.

Let us look a little more closely before we see what this message might mean for Rome 2003. It was not that Jesus was more naturally sympathetic, closer to the little ones than to the elite. But in his experience of failure with the latter and success with the former, Jesus understood how this corresponded with the work that he was doing in his Father’s service.

Over-burdened
In our final verses Jesus is not speaking to all the little ones, but picking out especially those who are tired out by the burdens they carry, feeling their strength ebbing away. In this context I do not think that Jesus is just speaking of the general burdens of life, but rather of Jewish legalism. He is criticising a religious attitude that imposes a moral discipline systematically and mechanically without making known, with it, the joy of salvation.

The call to ‘Come to me’ is full of joy, urgent and personalised. We move from obedience to the law (to whatever degree it may be internalised) to a personal meeting.

A yoke that lightens the burden
But ‘come to him’ to receive a yoke to wear? Do not be deceived by the moral overtones that the word ‘yoke’ has acquired. For a yoke allows a burden to be more easily borne by spreading the weight out more widely.

So what does this mean in the perspective of Rome 2003? We are weary; the ecumenical road seems interminable; we are worn out by the rules that weigh us down. But Jesus calls: ‘Come to me’. We may not immediately discover that all is joy, but we shall come to understand, like Georges Bernanos’ country priest, that all is grace. And that this grace can and must shine in the world through the life of the mystical Body of which we are all members, Christ being the head, and also, if I may say so, the heart.

1. Above all and always to come to Jesus and to come back to him. To turn towards his face. Rather than seeking first to apply rules or law, whether of Sinai or the Beatitudes, Christianity is a religion of persons and faces. Or rather, not a religion but a discovery: travelling with the Brother who leads us to the Father – along with all our brothers and sisters. In a year’s time, at Rocco di Papa, shall we help one another to discover more fully the face of our Risen Lord?

2. I love the image of the yoke that lightens the burden by spreading it out and sharing it. We know that couples, yoked together, are better able to assume family responsibilities than those – sadly a large number today – who are single parents. Will the days at Rome help couples to share their daily tasks – human and spiritual – and thus joyfully to find them lighter?

3. And couples yoked together lead me of course to think of our dis-united, un-yoked churches. Next July, thanks to the conjunctive tissue of interchurch families, will the churches be able to take a step forward towards the unity that will bring the Gospel to the world?

Let us go forward so resolutely in this perspective, rather than being fixated by the yokes that legalists impose on us, or which we think they impose, that there will be a turning again, a conversion towards the face of Jesus present among us.

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Shutting out or welcoming in?

IT IS
THE
LORD!

A homily on Peter the rock, given by Fr Robert Murray SJ at the annual conference of the British Association of Interchurch Families, Swanwick, 25 August 2002. It leaves interchurch families with a question as they go to Rome: can we best help the ‘holders of the keys’ to use them less for shutting people out and more for welcoming them in?

Introduction
I am very happy to stand here again to celebrate the Catholic Eucharist for you this Sunday morning. On previous occasions I have chosen passages for our readings which suggested to me thoughts relevant to your situations as members of interchurch families. As a rule, however, I think that on Sundays it is good for a preacher to keep to what has been laid down; this can save us from preachers who forever ride their hobby-horses, bypassing the tricky bits of God’s word. But given this principle, I must confess to a little inward groan when I realised that the gospel for today is the passage in St Matthew which has long been interpreted in the Catholic Church to justify a theory of centralised authority that many Christians find unacceptable.

However, I have decided that today it would be failing in my responsibility to you, members of interchurch families, to skirt this particular ‘Rock’ which looms up in front of us.

But before I start the Mass, let me renew the statement that I have made each time, just as John Coventry used to do before me. I do hold to the Catholic principle that eucharistic communion and communion between churches belong together, express each other and build each other up. Consequently, in my place as a representative I may not, here and now, utter a general invitation to those not in communion with the Roman Catholic Church to receive Holy Communion. None the less, for my part, I believe that the degree of sacramental union which exists in every interchurch marriage makes it a deeper law for me not to turn away, but to welcome sincerely and warmly, all of you who believe that Jesus, who joined you in Christian marriage, is inviting you to approach this altar with faith and love.

So I ask you to exercise your own spiritual discernment as mature Christians, remembering the two sacraments of Christian life which already unite you in Christ. Of course, any of you also remain free just to come for a blessing for yourselves and your children, if that is preferred, or even to remain in your places. But if you come, from my heart I would want such a blessing to express nothing less than a prayer that spiritually it may be for you a sharing in the fullness of communion.

Matthew 16:13-20
Peter the rock
What exactly happened between Jesus and Simon Peter at Caesarea Philippi? Why do I ask? Well, as soon as you compare the accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke, you see the problem. Jesus has led his disciples to a quiet place apart, by the springs of the Jordan. He had tried to arrange this kind of retreat before, but five thousand or more people forced him to change his plan. But he did need to have quiet training sessions with this group which he had chosen, though the kind of messianic expectations which they held made them sadly unresponsive to his attempts to teach them to understand what he knew was his vocation. So here they are together, and Luke, characteristically, tells us that Jesus spent some time in prayer before he put the question to the disciples: ‘Who do people think the Son of Man is?’ (By now they must have got used to this way of his to refer to himself, though they must have found it rather puzzling.) As for his question, they were ready enough to tell Jesus what other people were saying, but as soon as he asked them to speak for themselves, they all left it to Simon. Or was it just typical of Simon’s brashness, that he jumped in first? Anyway, he answered, ‘I believe you are the longed-for Messiah, the one anointed by God’. Mark says that Peter said ‘the Christ’: Luke, ‘the Christ of God’; only Matthew says that he added ‘the Son of the Living God’, and that Jesus answered, solemnly addressing him as Simon bar-Jonah, assuring him that he had spoken by divine revelation, and explaining what he meant by giving him that symbolic name Kepha, Petros, the rock on which he would build his Church.

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A puzzle

But how can we tell how much Peter could have understood by ‘Messiah’ and ‘Son of God’ at that stage? The question is sharpened if we bring in John’s Gospel, which records confessions of faith in Jesus’ special relationship to God much earlier, by Nathaniel at his first meeting with Jesus, ‘You are the Son of God . . . , the King of Israel’ (John 1:49) and by Peter himself after Jesus’ sermon in Capernaum, when many were drifting away: ‘. . . we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God’ (John 6:69). There were so many current notions of Messiah, as an anointed saviour to be sent by God: a king of David’s line, a heavenly high priest like Melchizedek, a new prophet like Moses. ‘Son of God’ was an ancient title of the Davidic kings (Psalms 2 and 110). On this occasion Peter had really made a confession of faith so deep and so divinely inspired, how could Mark and Luke have left it out? And why did Jesus tell the disciples to keep it secret? Matthew, Mark and Luke all make this episode the turning-point at which Jesus began to try to get it into the disciples’ heads that his way was not to be one of earthly power and glory, but that of the Suffering Servant, to be realised by a shameful death. Glorification would follow, but in a way they could not imagine. These three gospels all make it clear that the disciples simply could not take this message in, and none makes it clearer that Mark’s, which according to early tradition contains Peter’s own teaching: I suspect that it reflects Peter’s humility after he had been broken and remade. But at this stage, at Caesarea Philippi, Peter reacted to Jesus’ prediction of his suffering with breathtaking presumption. He might as well not have been listening; I imagine him feeling that Jesus, for all his wonderful qualities, was capable of lapsing into moments of depression in which the great Peter must cheer him up and assure him of his support. Jesus’ response was devastating: ‘Get behind me, you satan! Your ideas don’t come from God; only from your human blindness’. In Mark’s gospel this episode comes immediately after Peter’s brief confession of faith. Can Jesus’ congratulation of Peter as having spoken through divine illumination, which Matthew alone places just after that confession, really fit in there?

A post-resurrection saying?

In asking this I do not (like many scholars today) question the authenticity of the words, but I do suggest that they belong somewhere else in the gospel tradition. The most probable context is after the resurrection. Luke tells how on that evening the disciples told the pair just returned from Emmaus ‘The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon’ (Lk 24:34). Only John tells how the risen Jesus, again using the solemn address ‘Simon bar Jonah’, commissioned him to be Shepherd of his sheep in his stead, after he had made him utter a threefold confession of humble love, to heal his broken self-esteem (Jn 21:15-19). Mark’s gospel is the only one which nowhere has a saying of Jesus commissioning Peter with a leading role. If Mark is Peter’s gospel, this makes it all the more strange; it is not contrary to humility to record one’s credentials. The manuscript evidence for the ending of Mark shows signs of mutilation and clumsy efforts at mending. Is it not likely that it originally contained words of Jesus restoring and re-confirming Peter? The Matthaean ‘Thou art Peter’ may be a ‘floating’ saying of Jesus (like many others which occur in different contexts in the gospels), and I believe it is probable that a lost ending of Mark underlies it.

Be this as it may, what a wonderful character study the New Testament gives us of Simon Peter, this man of gigantic potential yet crippled by his self-image, who had to be broken and mended before he could fulfill what Jesus saw in him! With such patterns of discipleship and spiritual growth before us, how could it have come about that Christians in subsequent ages could so institutionalise the apostolic ministry, and forge the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven into the instruments of all-too-worldly power? Jesus spoke so plainly about such power: You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you: but whoever would be great among you must be your servant . . . (Matthew 20:25-26).

Not to exclude, but to welcome

And Peter, the broken, penitent and re-made Peter, recreated by the Holy Spirit, really learned that lesson. A vision taught him that he must ‘use the keys’ no longer to exclude, but to welcome, gentiles into the Church (Acts 10:9-16). And to some of those whom the apostles had appointed to serve in the Church, Peter wrote: I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow-elder . . . , tend the flock of God that is your charge, not just because you are obliged but willingly, not for shame but eagerly; not lording it over those in your charge but being examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:1-3).

Speaking as one who was led, fifty-five years ago, into the Roman communion, yet without losing my appreciation of the Congregationalism in which I was brought up, I feel acutely what we Catholics have to weep for, in the abuses of ecclesiastical power down the ages. But I rejoice in the expressions and acts of repentance, led by successive popes, which have multiplied so wonderfully since the second Vatican Council. Yet I am aware how many of you have been hurt by words and actions by holders of authority which was given to the apostles, as St Paul says, ‘not for breaking down but for building up’ (2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10). By your prayer, and your witness to what your families are, beacons lighting the way to future reunion of all Christians, you can help the ‘holders of the keys’ to use them less for shutting people out and more for welcoming them in.
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 and understanding 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 undertakes all its activities with prayer and worship

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

** both in the sense of denominations and local congregations.

The British Association is a registered charity (no. 233811) 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, Canon Martin and 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:

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AROUND THE WORLD

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 Temmerman of Morden, Canada. It is to be found at http://www.aif.org and a listserve at aifv@mylist.net

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES

Germany
Different understandings of ministry: hindrance or challenge for us?
Bug Rothenzs
14-16 February 2003

Switzerland
20th rencontre foyers mixtes de Suisse romande
Délémont (Saint-François)
8-9 March 2003

Northern Ireland
United in baptism and marriage
Derrynord College, Drraperstown
5-6 April 2003

ROME 2003
Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families
UNITED IN BAPTISM AND MARRIAGE
Interchurch families — called to a common life in the Church for the reconciliation of our churches
Istituto Mondo Migliore
Rocca di Papa
nr. Rome
24-28 July 2003

Britain
Christian initiation in interchurch families
Swanwick, Derbyshire
23-25 August 2003

France
4th rencontre francophone
Rundshof, Mulhouse
22-23 May 2004