

# What about the children of Interchurch Families?

This question is the most deeply disturbing of all for interchurch couples. Two adults can come together in marriage, each respecting the different beliefs and practices of the other, and not feel obliged to try to change them (although in marriage both partners need to be open to change all the time, of course!). But so far as the children are concerned, a different kind of responsibility is involved. We are much more responsible for the faith of our children than for the faith of our spouse.

From the early years of this century until the 1960s there was little option for a Roman Catholic and a Christian of another communion wanting to marry. Either the non-Roman Catholic partner had to abdicate his/her personal responsibility for sharing the christian faith as he/she understood it with the children, or the Roman Catholic had to face being cut off from his/her church. If the couple could accept neither of these options, they had to renounce the marriage. Many did so.

## A Two-Church option

Progress towards christian unity has made possible for parents of interchurch families (in which one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other a member of a different christian community) an option which simply was not thinkable in earlier times. Why not bring up their children in *both* communions - at present still divided, but clearly converging, and both committed to the one ecumenical movement with full visible unity as its goal? The idea was put forward in print for the first time, so far as we know, in an editorial which appeared in January 1968 in the Catholic ecumenical review *One in Christ*. It was suggested that there should be a joint celebration of baptism, that a child should be brought up within the two communities of his parents, admitted to communion in both at a time which seemed appropriate, and only when he left the shelter of the parental home should he be obliged to make his own decision and settle for membership of one church rather than the other.

## Will children be confused and insecure?

There were many objections to the suggestion, based on the idea that children need to be given a clear identity. They would be confused; they would feel insecure; they would not know where they belonged. "You would be faced with a problem child: "Mummy, am I a Catholic or a Protestant?" wrote Cardinal Heenan in 1970.

All this was theory in 1968. The first gathering of interchurch families which met at Spode House that November discussed the proposal outlined in the editorial, with the help of a Catholic sister who was also a child psychologist working in a Child Guidance Clinic in Liverpool. Sr John SND saw no insuperable difficulties from the psychological point of view, unlike many critics. The important thing in a child's upbringing, she said, is *the harmony and integrity of the parents* however they decide on the details of his religious education; whether they jointly decide to bring him up in one church rather than the other, or whether they decide to bring him up within both church-communities. Their harmony and integrity is what matters most to the child.

Of course not all members of the Association of Interchurch Families have decided to embark on a twochurch upbringing for their children; some believe it would be harmful to the children or impossible for themselves and they have jointly agreed to

bring them up in one church rather than the other. However, a considerable number have set out on a two-church road. For some it has seemed to be the best way of expressing the basic harmony experienced by the two parents in the present state of christian divisions. They want to share with their children the rich inheritance of two traditions rather than just one. It is their way of planning for unity and anticipating it so far as they can at the level of their own family life. It is a venture in faith.

But what of the effect on their children? What problems have they to face?

## A Panel of older children

It was by accident rather than design that AIF prepared for International Youth Year 1985 by asking the young people of interchurch families themselves to share their experiences with the older generation. At the AIF Spode conference in September 1984 a panel of ten of the 'older children' of interchurch families (aged between 29 and 14) responded to questions put to them about their own upbringing and experiences and their reflections upon these.

## A questionnaire to older children

In preparation for this Spode conference a questionnaire had been sent out on the same topic, and 37 older children belonging to 16 families responded to it. The results of this questionnaire were written up in detail before the conference and circulated to those attending it. (A few copies are still available.)

Most of those who replied were born in the decade 1960-70. Certainly they had not all received a two-church upbringing in the sense suggested in the editorial of 1968; some said that they had been brought up in the Roman Catholic Church, and others simply that they had been brought up in both their parents' churches. On the whole this depended on their date of birth, but not in all cases. Some of the families had evidently changed their approach as time went on in line with the development of the ecumenical movement and the parents' understanding of its implications for their own family life.

Certainly it is not possible to draw out any firm conclusions or generalisations as a result of the survey and the panel. It can however be said that by and large the testimony of our 'older children' was of great encouragement to the parents of those who are as yet younger.

## No insecurity

First of all, on the whole these particular children had not experienced any great problems of confusion, or insecurity, or identity crises *as children*. This was true both for children brought up primarily in one church and also for children brought up within two churches. What Sister John said in 1968 seems to have been borne out: that the harmony and integrity of the parents is what matters most to the child.

Children take for granted what their parents offer them. "I thought every child was in the same situation until I was about ten", wrote one teenager who had been brought up in both the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. In fact the question: "Mummy, am I a Catholic or a Protestant?" does not seem to have come up from the children themselves. One child was quite taken aback when asked at the age of twelve: "Are you

a Catholic or an Anglican?" (It was a question from the music teacher - a practical question about participation in the choir.) The question had never presented itself as an option before.

One young adult wrote: "I have never considered myself at a disadvantage but rather the opposite - I remember as a child being really proud of being the only Brownie that went to communion." This is a reference to receiving Anglican communion at a younger age than her Anglican contemporaries, because she was already a Catholic communicant; it seemed to cause no problems, and no child in this situation mentioned any. Equally there seem to have been no problems for children who waited to receive communion in the Free Churches until their contemporaries were of an age to do so.

### One parent left out

What did cause a good deal of pain and perplexity to a fair number of children (whether brought up in the Catholic Church or in both churches) was the fact that one parent was not able to be with them on their First Communion day. "It spoiled a special day", said one, and many others agreed. It is perhaps worth noting that in several cases where *both* parents were allowed to receive communion together at their child's First Communion or Catholic confirmation, the children themselves did not spontaneously mention this fact; they simply took it for granted. It was the occasions on which both parents could *not* receive together with them that they pointed to with sorrow and regret.

More generally, the sense of one parent being left out of the family and unfairly pressurised comes across strongly from some of the children brought up wholly or chiefly in the Roman Catholic Church. "I feel my father feels left out." "To this day I don't think I have forgiven the RC Church for its general position on communion in interchurch families, for I saw at first hand the sorrow and pain not being able to receive with my mother and us children caused him and indeed my mother, sorrow and pain because he wasn't there in the pew and at the altar rail with us." One explained that to feel one of the family "Mum had to all but drop her own faith. I found it *wrong*." It is clear that quite a number of children were aware of their parents' problems. "There were great advantages (in an interchurch situation) for me", said one of the older children, "but disadvantages for my parents; it was so hard for **them**."

### Advantages

The majority of young people seem to feel that for them the advantages of their situation outweigh the disadvantages. They assess these mainly in terms of expanded horizons. "It gives you a wider view of the christian religion and you are less blind and more understanding towards other christian traditions and beliefs." "I feel I am less narrow minded, I can see the good and bad points of both churches and through this I can respect and understand people's beliefs and religions." "It saved me from a very narrow Catholic convent upbringing. Catholicism is such a rich and exciting faith - it is a shame that it seemed so narrow at school. It made me know that there are different beliefs - different ways of knowing the same thing -different paths and different ways." "I see myself as a Christian rather than as belonging to one denomination." "You are challenged from both sides, so you have to *think*:" "You see where differences do not come from denominational standpoints - you see the wide spectrum in both churches."

### The problem of belonging

Undeniably, then, there is enrichment, but this can lead to an uncomfortable situation. A nineteen-year-old writes: "Sometimes I feel I am sitting on the fence, not really *belonging* to either church." This problem of 'not really belonging' does not seem to be felt in childhood, but it has come up at two later stages: among the older children who have left home, and

among the adolescents ready to make their own profession of faith.

**Leaving home** "It hits you when you *leave* home; it's not very practical", said one. At that point the need is to find a local christian fellowship within which to grow and mature. A student writes: "In the Catholic chaplaincy at university I found a group of people who were challenging, who were still grappling with the fundamentals/essentials of their own belief or lack of it. If I had found this elsewhere than the Catholic Church I feel I would have gone there - and again when I move from university I shall find the community wherever I go where I can best grow and become close to God, my fellow men and the earth."

Another writes: "Since leaving university the church I have attended has been largely dictated by a combination of convenience (for a while I went to the Presbyterian church in Malawi) and the desire to find a church acceptable to my boyfriend, later my husband. As a result I now usually attend an Anglican church, which though not convenient is acceptable to us both." She would be "reluctant to 'give up' my membership of the Catholic Church", but is "not very worried about denominational labels", and feels that this is a positive result of her unbringing. There are problems, however: "On the other hand I don't really feel 'a Catholic' and although I consider my (local) church to be an Anglican church I am not wholly part of that . . . having been confirmed in the Catholic Church in theory excludes me from a vote on the parish council of 'my' (Anglican) church."

A third gives an account of her search for a local christian community: "I joined the C of E rather than the RC church when I left home because despite three attempts (over three years) of trying to get involved in the RC church no room was made for shift workers and there was very little fellowship (with people of my own age) about. It was the complete opposite in the C of E church near the hospital. As both are christian churches I had no qualms about joining the C of E church and still worshipping at RC and Presbyterian churches at home."

A twenty-year old university student, who has a close relationship with a Baptist youth group as well as being part of a Catholic community, expresses the tensions inherent in her experience, but in the end assumes her two-church situation as her own with all its attendant difficulties. She writes: "It is only over the last two or three years that I've become fully aware of the real importance of the situation . . . The good points first: I can take *nothing* for granted - everything has to be considered carefully. For example, when I mentioned to a friend that I took communion in two churches, she asked how I could, as the two beliefs in this area were so different. I had never really considered the matter, and had to have a long re-think. By having to sort out, so carefully, my own beliefs, I have become far more aware of God, and far closer to him. Secondly, the ability to be able to worship in more than one way brings about a much less limited view of Jesus than approaching him in one set way ever could. The quiet, solemn (though not always) approach of our Catholic church inspires a picture of a God who, though loving, demands reverence - which is right. The Baptists, on the other hand, have a far more lively approach and treat God as an intimate friend -which is also right. The two facets of God are an integral part of him, and it is a gift to me that, by partaking in the worship of different communities, I can see the two views together, and gain a more rounded view of God.

At the moment, though, I feel that the difficulties and hurt dominate, and the good points are outnumbered. The problems arise from the same source as the benefits: from seeing things from different angles and by being brought up to join in more than one church community. When your range of vision has been widened, it is so hard to be satisfied with more limited

spheres. There is so much misunderstanding and bigotry between the churches that hurt, leading to disillusionment, is rife. At a Baptist youth group I was told that 'most Catholic priests are agnostics' and at the Catholic church I have heard a visiting preacher pity those who 'have not chosen *the* faith but have settled for second best: My immediate reaction, in both cases, was to take the defensive, for my love of both the Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches was being threatened.

'As a result of such 'competition' between the churches, I find it impossible to be totally at home in one. I cannot be at ease with all the Catholic beliefs, as I cannot with any church's. I find myself constantly comparing the different approaches. As I cannot, therefore, dedicate myself to one community I envy those who are totally immersed in their own church, having never participated in other services.

"And yet, despite the sense of never quite belonging anywhere, and the pain caused by moving between churches, I don't think I would change my situation for

the world. Through my experiences I have gained a clearer, closer picture of God, and as this is what we are striving for, it is a special gift that I would never reject."

This last statement links up with one made by a teenage -participant in the Spode '84 panel: "I would rather *not* be secure in one church."

### **Professing the Faith**

With the trend towards a later age for confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church, and a corresponding stress on the personal commitment of the candidate, there seem to be increasing problems for the teenagers of two-church families at this stage. Some who have been brought up within two church communities feel that they belong in both, and they want to express this fact in some way when they come to make their own public confession of faith in Christ.

This came out clearly in the 1984 survey: "I would really like to be confirmed in both"; "A joint confirmation, because I don't know which church to choose"; "I would like in the end to be confirmed into all churches, not just one. Perhaps both Anglican and Catholic. I would like to be confirmed as a Christian." It seems clear that in some cases confirmation is being delayed - or rejected - because an adolescent does not want to appear to opt for one church rather than the other.

### **Questions for the Churches**

"I wish we could break down the barriers in order to come together as one church, allowing flexibility for individuals. If everyone 'opts' for a church this will never happen", writes a teenager. Must there be an option? Must there be an option for *these* children, who have come to make their personal commitment to Christ from the experience of life within two church communities? The *One in Christ* editorial of 1968 took it for granted that there would have to be an option at some stage. Interestingly, it was Sr Mary John who challenged that assumption at Spode '68: "I cannot see why he should feel the need for choice. May he not be quite happy to continue attending both?"

So, can there be a joint celebration of confirmation? Can there be dual celebration? Can there be dual membership? These are questions for theologians and pastors to wrestle with (as some are doing) - always remembering that these are only provisional questions, but real questions of real people in this 'in between time' in which the churches together have committed themselves to the road to unity but are still 'in via'.

Can there be some way for young people to express publicly their faith in Christ in a way which is not exclusive? Here the testimony of Stefano and Emanuela

Marcheselli - brother and sister confirmed as Catholic and Protestant respectively, but in such a way that, with the full agreement of the church authorities, it was made clear to all in their local church communities that neither was cutting him/herself off from the life of the 'other' church - is of great interest and significance (see *Interchurch Families* no.13). To quote Stefano: "My choice does not imply separation or detachment - it is a choice which has come to maturity in love, accepting the challenge of a double ecclesial commitment, that is to say, my personal commitment within the two churches, evangelical and catholic."

### **Questions for ourselves**

What interchurch parents will welcome is the evidence that many of our older children are convinced that their christian commitment transcends the fact of being a Catholic or an Anglican or a Methodist or whatever. But how is their christian commitment related to the denominations as they are? How is it related to the unity in Christ to which all are called? Is that call being recognised'?

Fr Michael Hurley pointed out at Spode House in 1984 that there is a hint in what our children have written of the idea that one church is as good as another, that they are equally valid, so it doesn't really matter which one you belong to. "No church is 'better' than another"; "I find the religions equally valid." This he saw as an acceptance of denominationalism rather than a commitment to unity. Does a two-church upbringing lead to indifference'?

Interestingly enough, these and similar quotations came from children who had been brought up clearly as Roman Catholics, although one parent was a Christian of another tradition. Children brought up in two churches seem (in our admittedly very small survey) to see their experience in terms of *enrichment* rather than of *indifferentism*. This was put succinctly by Stefano Marcheselli: "The confusion which people fear has become for me a stimulating enrichment."

A second point which Fr Hurley made was related to the strong desire expressed by some of the adolescents for confirmation 'as a Christian', and the fear that confirmation celebrated in one denomination would simply make the candidate a member of that denomination. One wanted to be confirmed "if I could be just a 'Christian' -- not to have to opt for one type of Christianity -- I would prefer to be confirmed purely as a Christian, rather than as a Catholic or Methodist", and another: "if confirmed as a *Christian* rather than into a particular denomination." Again, Fr Hurley suggested, this showed a retreat into denominationalism, for "should we not understand every process of christian initiation as bringing the candidate into the *Church of God wherever it exists*?" What a joint celebration can add is that it shows what is actually happening in every other case. But understanding the reality is more important than the form of the ceremony.

True -- but perhaps a very adult way of looking at things! A member of the Spode '84 panel in her mid-20s, confirmed at eight, could say: "To me confirmation didn't make me a Roman Catholic." She had by then invested what had happened to her as a child with a wider significance. But what comes across both in our survey and in the attitudes expressed by the French and Italian adolescents quoted in *Interchurch Families* no. 13. is that some of the young people themselves, coming later to confirmation, are very keen that other people shall *see* what they mean when they make their public profession of faith in Christ, and *understand* by the ceremony itself that it is within and through two church communities that they have come to this point, and

that they cannot cut themselves off -- or even appear to cut themselves off - from one of them. "I wanted witnesses to see what I was doing", said Etienne; "I wanted both churches to know that I was making my profession of faith as a Christian, as a Catholic and as a Protestant."

Some young people want to make their position crystal clear at the time when they come to make their own public profession of faith. If they are not allowed to do this, they would rather not be confirmed.

On the other hand, we have a case in England of a child being confirmed in the Catholic Church, and the Sunday afterwards being admitted to church membership in her local United Reformed church. This was done with URC knowledge and approval, but it was felt that the Catholic authorities would not understand, so they had not been told. For this family, it seemed the right way forward. The Revd Raymond George suggested something similar at Spode in 1985: a Methodist minister might witness a confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church, and accepting this as confirmation subsequently admit the candidate to full membership in the Methodist Church. Admittedly an anomaly -- but the greater anomaly is our disunity, and we have to put up with lesser anomalies at the present time. An Anglican bishop present agreed that this would be a practical way forward. Perhaps the Catholic authorities might come to accept this *de facto*, respecting individual consciences, even if they could not yet approve.

There are various possibilities; there is no ideal solution short of church unity. Our children inherit this situation, although

happily the healing process is continually advancing. It is for them to hasten this process as and when they can.

The parental role becomes a background one: respect for their children's own decisions, whatever they are; support where it is needed and wanted. Parents who have held on together to two traditions because they feel that both enshrine christian values which the other does not yet so fully embrace, values which are meant to be lived in unity, may well be encouraged and cheered if their children -- all or any -- in spite of all the difficulties and pain involved in a two-church situation, can assume it as -- in the words of one of them "a special gift that I would never reject". But they will be under no illusion that they have handed on an easy or a comfortable task. As Gianni and Myriam Marcheselli wrote: "From now on it is our two adolescents who are bearing the burden. They have set out on a long, hard road. Belonging to the today of our divided churches, it is their task to live already in the tornorrows of- God."

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