

INTERCHURCH MARRIAGE—CONJUGAL AND ECCLESIAL COMMUNION IN THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

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PRECIS

The author argues that applying the concept of “domestic church” to interchurch couples would give interchurch families an ecclesial status with the Roman Catholic Church and thereby enable them to become legitimate builders of Christian unity. This approach should prevail over the current understanding that interprets interchurch marriages along the same lines as the Catholic Church understands its relationship with non-Catholic churches: as real but imperfect communion. If one were to give primacy to an experiential approach over the institutional one now operative in the Catholic Church, it would mean that interchurch marriages would not primarily be viewed as victims of divisions but as foretastes of reunion.

Interchurch Marriages—Laboratories of Christian Unity?

A close look at the post-conciliar pronouncements of the Roman Catholic Church on interchurch marriages leaves one with an ambivalent impression. On the one side, respect, appreciation, even encouragement characterize the Magisterium’s teaching when it comes to acknowledging the contribution that interchurch families can make to the search for Christian unity.¹ The 1993 Ecumeni-

¹See, e.g., John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation “Familiaris consortio”* (1981), no. 78 (hereafter, FC): “Marriages between Catholics and other baptized persons . . . contain numerous elements that could well be made good use of and developed, both for their intrinsic value and for the contribution that they can make to the ecumenical movement”; available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio-en.html.

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cal Directory singles them out as potential “builders of unity,”² thus repeating an expression that Pope Paul VI had used earlier in *Evangelii nuntiandi*.³ Pope John Paul II’s memorable phrase, “You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity,” pronounced during his visit to England in 1982,⁴ has since then become a much cherished dictum for interchurch families worldwide. More recently, while addressing the member churches of the Polish Ecumenical Council, Pope Benedict XVI declared that the decision to enter an interchurch marriage “can lead to the formation of a *practical laboratory of unity*.”⁵

One may wonder, however, how seriously such rhetoric is to be taken. Is not a laboratory a place where people put all their energy to search for new insights, experimenting with new ideas, new methods, new instruments, and eventually make new and fascinating discoveries that may have the potential to alter previous understanding and practice? So, what the pope seems to suggest is to go and invent, get new ideas, experiment with them, take risks, and—although no one knows yet what the solution will be and how to get there—have faith that there is there something worth all the effort, namely, the unity of all Christians. But, what if our “interchurch researchers” will really get there one day and cry out their “*eureka!* we have found it!”? Is there any chance that their findings will be hailed, accepted, and received by the official church bodies and ultimately make a difference in their teaching and discipline?

The reason for such skepticism can be found in another layer of the magisterial teaching and legislation that strikes a different tone compared to the rhetoric referred to above. What used to be the tenor of a long-standing doctrinal and pastoral tradition before Vatican II, when the ecclesiastical authority uncompromisingly condemned mixed marriages and dissuaded people from entering into them,⁶ has not completely disappeared from the current teaching. That the Catholic Church accepts interchurch marriages only with some reservation is reflected in a phrase of the Ecumenical Directory wherein it says that “marriage between persons of the same ecclesial Community remains the objective to be recommended and encouraged.”⁷ To substantiate this stance, this and other documents constantly refer to the intrinsic problems and difficulties that impose themselves on the conjugal union if the spouses come from different faith communities. Since there is indeed some evidence that interchurch couples are at a

²Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (1993), no. 66 (hereafter, DE); available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/general-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19930325_directory_en.html.

³Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii nuntiandi”* (1975), no. 71; available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html.

⁴Pope John Paul II, *The Pope in Britain: Collected Homilies and Speeches* (Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1982), p. 30.

⁵Emphasis mine. The text of this speech is available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060525_incontro-ecumenico_en.html.

⁶For a historical overview of the Catholic and Protestant churches’ attitudes toward mixed marriages, see Silvia Hell, *Die konfessionsverschiedene Ehe: Vom Problemfall zum verbindenden Modell* (Freiburg: Herder, 1998).

⁷DE, no. 144.

higher risk of marital instability and of giving up on their religious practice,⁸ the pastoral concern that is expressed in the Church's attitude of reservation should certainly be acknowledged and taken seriously. Apart from these pastoral considerations, however, there is a deeper, theological ground on which the Church's discriminating position against interchurch unions seems justified. It says that marital unions in which one of the spouses is a baptized non-Catholic cannot possibly attain the same degree and intensity of conjugal communion than do same-church Catholic marriages. If, however, marital unity has as its prerequisite ecclesial communion, which the Catholic Church can guarantee only for its full members, as this position upholds, then it is hardly thinkable that interchurch marriages can play any significant role in bringing the separated churches more closely together as the image of the "laboratory for Christian unity" suggests.⁹

In what follows, I will first summarize the position of the Catholic Church with regard to interchurch marriages and focus in particular on the relationship between ecclesial and conjugal communion. It will be shown that the Catholic position imposes the model of *real, yet imperfect communion*, developed by Vatican II to describe the relationship of the Catholic Church toward the other Christian churches, on the conjugal relationship of interchurch couples. In this institutionally oriented approach, couples from different denominations seem to be able to realize spousal unity only to the extent that the concerned church bodies are willing or able to admit ecclesial communion among their respective communities. It is obvious that grassroots ecumenism is not given much credit in this perspective.

The "ecumenism of life," though, is exactly what interchurch families are increasingly discovering and claiming for themselves, as is evident from the document "Interchurch Families and Christian Unity,"¹⁰ adopted by the world gathering of interchurch families in 2003, which I will analyze in a second step. In what can be qualified as an experiential approach, interchurch families admit that their spousal and family union is as imperfect as any other on a level of human achievement, but that such union nonetheless realizes true spiritual and conjugal communion across the boundaries of separated churches and, therefore,

⁸See Center for Marriage and the Family, *Ministry to Interchurch Marriages: A National Study* (Omaha, NE: Creighton University, 1999); Lee M. Williams and Michael G. Lawler, "Marital Satisfaction and Religious Heterogamy: A Comparison of Interchurch and Same-Church Individuals," *Journal of Family Issues* 24 (November, 2003): 1070–1092.

⁹There is an underlying tenor in some magisterial texts saying that interchurch marriages, because they "are a consequence of the division among Christians, do not, except in some cases, help in reestablishing unity among Christians" (Paul VI, *Motu proprio "Matrimonia mixta,"* 1970, introduction, 4th par. [hereafter, MM]; available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19700331_matrimonia-mixta_en.html).

¹⁰National associations of interchurch families saw the light of day in the 1960's, first in France and in the United Kingdom. See Ruth Reardon, "The Association of Interchurch Families: Looking Back and Looking Forward," *INTAMS review* 6 (Autumn, 2000): 183–191. A first international gathering bringing together members of the various national associations and groups was held in 1998 in Geneva; the second meeting, to which we refer here, took place near Rome in 2003. For more information on the international network of interchurch families, see also <http://www.interchurchfamilies.org>. "Interchurch Families and Christian Unity" (hereafter, IFCU) is available at http://www.interchurchfamilies.org/confer/rome2003/documents/roma2003_en.pdf.

that it cannot be without implications for the ecclesial bodies involved. Whether or not this approach must remain unacceptable for Catholic ecclesiology will be examined in a last part. For that purpose I make reference to the concept of “domestic church,” which Vatican II and post-conciliar theology have retrieved to underline the ecclesial status of marriage and family life. The key idea behind this concept is that conjugal communion is a genuine and legitimate form of ecclesial communion and that, on the basis of baptism, neither form of communion may claim precedence nor take priority over another. If Catholic ecclesiology could agree to apply this concept to interchurch marriages—and there are good reasons to do so—then new perspectives could be opened that would give interchurch families an ecclesial status within the Catholic Church and likewise would enable them to become legitimate “builders of Christian unity,” whereas to date they are more like pioneers in an unexplored area of ecclesial union that the institutional churches are so far unable to access.

*The Catholic Church’s Perspective on Interchurch Marriages—
Real yet Imperfect Communion*

The Catholic Magisterium has never undertaken to present a coherent theology of interchurch marriage. The official decrees of Vatican II do not deal with interchurch marriages, and post-conciliar documents usually restrict themselves to offering pastoral considerations and/or issuing legal regulations for what are usually regarded as exceptional or difficult cases.¹¹ As far as doctrinal questions are concerned, the underlying theological vision largely pays tribute to the council’s renewed ecclesiology as mainly expressed in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church¹² and to the guiding principles of ecumenism as presented in the Decree on Ecumenism.¹³ Strikingly, the revised theology of marriage and the family as enshrined in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*¹⁴ does not seem to play any significant role in the church’s treatment of interchurch marriages, as we will see in the following.

The church’s primordial and pervading perspective on interchurch marriage is what I would call an *institutional* one. By this I mean that the spouses are primarily looked upon as members of the respective faith communities to which they belong. This approach corresponds to a commonly accepted definition of interchurch marriage. “The term ‘mixed marriage’ refers to any marriage between a Catholic and a baptized Christian who is not in full communion with the

¹¹In FC, interchurch marriages are dealt with under Section IV, “Pastoral Care of the Family in Difficult Cases” (nos. 77–85).

¹²See Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, “*Lumen gentium*” (hereafter, LG); available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium-en.html.

¹³See Decree on Ecumenism “*Unitatis redintegratio*” (hereafter, UR); available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio-en.html.

¹⁴See Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, “*Gaudium et spes*”; available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207

Catholic Church,” defines the 1993 Ecumenical Directory, referring to the Code of Canon Law.¹⁵ As is immediately clear from this definition, the individual spouses are treated here as representatives of the ecclesial communities of which they are members. Consequently, their marital union is subsumed under the category of *ecclesial communion* and falls under the norms and principles established to determine the sort and degree of communion a non-Catholic community may or may not have with the Catholic Church. The 1970 *Motu proprio* “*Matrimonia mixta*” is the first official document that is most explicit in that regard:

Neither in doctrine nor in law does the Church place on the same level a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic, and one between a Catholic and an unbaptized person for, as the Second Vatican Council declared, men who, though they are not Catholics, “believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church.”¹⁶

To determine the “level on which to place” or, in other words, the ecclesial status of an interchurch marriage, the text adopts the terminology the council Fathers had chosen to describe the Catholic Church’s relationship toward the separated Christian churches and communities. Through marriage and the shared faith in Christ and common baptism, a non-Catholic Christian enters into some *real, yet imperfect communion* with the Catholic Church. What to a common understanding appears as the joining of two individuals into a lifelong marital commitment becomes the affair of two ecclesial bodies. We will briefly look into the council’s understanding of ecclesial communion and then uncover the limits of a conception that regards the marital union primarily or even solely through the lens of ecclesial belonging.

The Decree on Ecumenism affirms a communion that goes beyond denominational boundaries and includes all those who have received baptism: “Whenever the Sacrament of Baptism is duly administered as Our Lord instituted it, and is received with the right dispositions, a person is truly incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ, and reborn to a sharing of the divine life . . . Baptism therefore establishes a sacramental bond of unity which links all who have been reborn by it.”¹⁷ Although one is always baptized into a particular church and through a particular rite, the sacramental act of baptism incorporates the person into the one church of Christ, which has remained intact in its unity in spite of the ecclesial divisions. Even though the baptismal vocation has to be lived out in a particular church, in a particular rite, or in a particular denomination to which one belongs, henceforward, through baptism one becomes a member of the church of Christ, thus entering into communion with God and all

[_gaudium-et-spes_en.html](#).

¹⁵DE 143, referring to the 1983 *Codex Iuris Canonici* (hereafter, CIC 1983), can. 1124; available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104_INDEX.HTM.

¹⁶MM, introduction, 8th par.; the quote is from UR, no. 3.

¹⁷UR, no. 22.

members.¹⁸ This church of Christ, however, is not only an invisible or spiritual one; it takes concrete shape in this world, foremost in the Catholic Church, but also in a variety of other ecclesial communities that the council has explicitly recognized as its visible expressions:

. . . some and even very many of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, and visible elements too. All of these, which come from Christ and lead back to Christ, belong by right to the one Church of Christ.¹⁹

Pre-conciliar ecclesiology and legislation also presumed that all baptized were sacramentally incorporated into the body of Christ and had become members of the one church of Christ but insisted at the same time that the church of Christ was identical with the Roman Catholic Church. Consequently, non-Catholic baptized were to be regarded as heretics or schismatics who had severed themselves from Christ's church. Vatican II corrected this view with a stroke of the pen by changing from "is" to "subsists in" to describe the connection between the church of Christ and the Catholic Church.²⁰ Giving up on the absolute and exclusive identification enabled the Catholic Church to revise its relation to the other Christian churches and to acknowledge that they have an ecclesial status. The key term the council Fathers used to do so was "*communio*."

If the members of the one church of Christ have communion with God and among themselves through the sacramental bond of baptism, then it is evident that such communion persists also among the visible ecclesial bodies in which the church of Christ finds its expression. As we have seen, the conciliar documents recognize such an existing communion between the Christian churches in

¹⁸Georg Gänswein, *Kirchengliedschaft—Vom Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil zum Codex Iuris Canonici: Die Rezeption der konziliaren Aussagen über die Kirchengliederung in das nachkonziliare Gesetzbuch der Lateinischen Kirche*. Münchener Theologische Studien 47 (St. Ottilien: EOS, 1995), pp. 23–24, suggests distinguishing between "church belonging" (*Kirchengliederung*) and "church membership" (*Kirchengliedschaft*). While the latter describes the baptized person's incorporation into the church of Christ, the former refers to the particular church in which such incorporation is lived out.

¹⁹UR, no. 3. A similar idea is expressed in LG, no. 8: ". . . many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its [the Catholic Church's] visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity." See also LG, no. 15.

²⁰See LG, no. 8: "This Church [of Christ] constituted and organized in the world as a society, *subsists in* the Catholic Church." The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has recently undertaken to clarify the authentic meaning of some ecclesiological expressions used by the Magisterium and underlined that the terminological change from "*est*" to "*subsistit in*" does not imply any discontinuity with previous teaching; see *Responses to Some Questions regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church*, 2007 (available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_respnsa-quaestiones_en.html). See also Alexandra von Teuffenbach, *Die Bedeutung des subsistit in (LG 8): Zum Selbstverständnis der katholischen Kirche* (Munich: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2002); and Francis A. Sullivan, "Quaestio disputata: A Response to Karl Becker, S.J., on the Meaning of *subsistit in*," *Theological Studies* 67 (June, 2006): 395–409.

principle, but they differentiate as to its degree. Those in “full” or “perfect” communion (*communio plena*)²¹ are those who belong to the Catholic Church and

who, possessing the Spirit of Christ accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and are united with her as part of her visible bodily structure and through her with Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. The bonds which bind men to the Church in a visible way are profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical government and communion.²²

As the council uses the notion of communion in an extensive, rather than exclusive, way, it leaves room for gradation by which closer and looser grades of communion can be achieved. It is in this way that we have to understand the passage from the Decree on Ecumenism quoted in “*Matrimonia mixta*” in which it is stated that the non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities and their members “are in communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect.”²³ Answering to the question why baptism, which “establishes a sacramental bond of unity,” allows at the same time for different, more or less perfect grades of communion, the Decree continues that “of itself Baptism is only a beginning, an inauguration wholly directed toward the fullness of life in Christ. Baptism, therefore, envisages a complete profession of faith, complete incorporation in the system of salvation such as Christ willed it to be, and finally complete ingrafting in eucharistic communion.”²⁴

In this and the previously quoted passage from *Lumen gentium* the conciliar documents indicate what is needed for full communion and what, accordingly, stands in the way of perfect unity. In a nutshell, the obstacles are situated in the realms of doctrine (complete profession of faith), sacramental practice (sharing in the system and means of salvation, especially eucharistic communion), and church discipline and structure (integration into the church’s bodily structure and government). Consequently, discrepancies in these fields remain the biggest stumbling blocks on the way to Christian unity, at least from a Catholic point of view. Before we take a look into how they also affect the Catholic Church’s position on interchurch marriages, we should bear in mind, however, the council Fathers’ insistence that, despite all obstacles to full ecclesial communion, “it remains true that all who have been justified by faith in Baptism are members of Christ’s body, and have a right to be called Christian, and so are correctly accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church.”²⁵ As we have seen, “*Matrimonia mixta*” also explicitly uses the conciliar concept of real, though imperfect communion to characterize the marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic partner. I have indicated the underlying institutional perspective that regards the spouses first and foremost as members of their respec-

²¹ See UR, nos. 3, 4, 14, and 17.

²² LG, no. 14.

²³ UR, no. 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 3.

tive ecclesial communities. I will have to analyze in greater detail now how this perspective determines the Catholic Church's attitude toward interchurch marriages.

A first observation is related to the role of shared faith in Christ and its expression in baptism. Undoubtedly, the council's recognition of common baptism as "a sacramental bond of unity"²⁶ and "foundation of communion among all Christians"²⁷ has paved the way for a more welcoming attitude toward interchurch marriages. "Neither in doctrine nor in law," insists the above-quoted introduction to "*Matrimonia mixta*," "does the Church place on the same level a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic, and one between a Catholic and an unbaptized person." If one asks, however, what implications common baptism has on the conjugal relationship of interchurch couples, the official documents remain largely silent.²⁸ According to "*Matrimonia mixta*," through baptism the non-Catholic spouse is "brought into a certain . . . communion with the Catholic church." This is true, however, for all non-Catholic baptized, whether they are married to a Catholic or not. We may conclude from here that, in terms of communion, the marriage of an interdenominational couple does not add anything in particular to what can be lived in any ecumenical relationship between Catholics and any other non-Catholic persons. This would in any case confirm our initial presumption that the official stance regards interchurch marriages as ordinary cases of interchurch relations to which the current norms for ecclesial communion are to be applied. But, we can also reverse the argument and conclude that in the Catholic view common baptism does not have any effect on the marital union of an interchurch couple that would allow for a deeper communion than that achievable between persons who have been baptized into different denominational churches. In both respects, the dominating institutional perspective prevents any further insight into the particularity of an ecumenical relationship in which the partners are not only united through common baptism, but in which such unity finds an additional expression in the bond of marriage.

The question arises of whether this approach is the only possible one on the ground of Catholic doctrine. It seems to me that it is not. There is a broad agreement among the Christian churches that baptism is a basic bond of unity by which all Christians are incorporated into the one body of Christ, thus being united with Christ and with each other.²⁹ As we have seen, the texts of Vatican II fully endorse this view, which belongs to the uncontested *depositum* of current

²⁶Ibid., no. 22.

²⁷Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of the Decisions of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican Concerning Ecumenical Matters*, 1967, no. 11 (in *Information Service*, 1967/2, p. 7).

²⁸FC, no. 78, contains the vague statement that "common Baptism and the dynamism of grace provide the spouses in these [interchurch] marriages with the basis and motivation for expressing their unity in the sphere of moral and spiritual values."

²⁹The Lima Document formulates: "Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place. Our common baptism, which unites us to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity" (*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 [Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982], no. 6; available at http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/FO1982_111_en.pdf).

Catholic teaching.³⁰ Likewise, the Catholic Church recognizes that the big scandal of the division of Christianity lies in that such indestructible unity does not find its visible expression,³¹ since under the present conditions baptism incorporates a person into one of the denominational churches that are separated and do not have a visible unity.³² There is solid theological ground and good reason to argue that the marital union between two baptized Christians who belong to different communities is a visible manifestation of, and gives shape to, that indestructible unity of Christians that is willed and maintained by Christ in spite of the ecclesial divisions. The ecclesiological issue at stake here is whether one is willing to recognize forms of visible unity that are not modelled upon the structural components of coherence that characterize social institutions. The magisterial position sees in common baptism only the remote beginning of a unity, which for its full visible expression requires complete profession of faith, full communion in sacramental practice, and complete incorporation into ecclesiastical structures—all elements that have a strong institutional connotation.³³ The interpersonal communion of marriage, however, provides a complementary model of unity reflecting in a visible way that Christians are united with Christ and with each other.

A second observation is due to the fact that the Catholic Church in its doctrinal and legal stance distinguishes between marriages of Catholics and Eastern Christians and those contracted between a Catholic and a Protestant partner. If further evidence were needed as to the Church's guiding principle in its approach to interchurch marriages, it is to be found here. Already "*Matrimonia mixta*" had taken up the idea of higher or lower degrees that was implied in the council's nuanced teaching of "real, yet imperfect communion." After emphasizing the particularity of marriages between baptized Christians, the text immediately (albeit in a somewhat cryptic manner) states that Eastern Christians "are joined to us in a very close relationship,"³⁴ thus suggesting a more distanced relationship with the churches of the Reformation. This position on the level of ecclesiology finds its corresponding expression in the legal prescriptions for interchurch marriages. Thus, while for a marriage of a Catholic with a Protestant partner the canonical form has to be respected for validity of marriage, the

³⁰See, e.g., UR, no. 22; and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1992, no. 1271 (hereafter, CCC), available from http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM. The Final Report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on the *Theology of Marriage and its Application to Mixed Marriages*, 1975, explicitly records "as a fundamental principle of our discussions 'that Holy Baptism itself confers Christian status and is the indestructible bond of union between all Christians and Christ and so of Christians with one another,' and that 'this baptismal unity remains firm despite all ecclesiastical division'" (*Anglican-Roman Catholic Marriage: The Report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on the Theology of Marriage and Its Application to Mixed Marriage*, no. 15; available at http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/arcic/doc/e_arcic_classific.html).

³¹See, e.g., John Paul II's Encyclical, "*Ut unum sint*" (1995), no. 6 (available at http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0221/_INDEX.HTM).

³²See DE, no. 97.

³³See in particular UR, no. 22, and LG, no. 14. The criteria named here for ecclesial unity clearly go back to the three *vincula* (*symbolicum, liturgicum, sociale vel hierarchicum*) formulated by Robert Bellarmine.

³⁴MM, introduction, 9th par.

mixed Catholic-Orthodox couple may validly contract marriage in the presence of an Orthodox minister; the canonical form is required here only for liceity.³⁵

More relevant, at least in the perception of interchurch families and of a broad public, are the norms regulating eucharistic sharing. Here, the 1993 Ecumenical Directory simply refers to the directions that regulate the sharing of sacramental practice among the Christian churches in general and clearly distinguish, as to the administering and receiving of the sacraments of penance, the eucharist, and anointing of the sick, between the Eastern and the “other” churches.³⁶ Whoever is familiar with the ongoing theological discussions on eucharistic sharing³⁷ will notice, however, how problematic it is to apply to interchurch families the norms that govern the relationships between ecclesial bodies in principle. All efforts to adapt the ecclesial practice in this regard come down to the request that the ecclesiastical authorities may recognize what is the particular situation and the “spiritual need” in which interchurch couples, for the most part mixed Catholic-Protestant couples, find themselves when being prevented from sharing the eucharist in their respective communities.

In a third and final reflection I want to ask in what way the Catholic Church regards interchurch marriages as imperfect realizations of communion. That it does so is not only a logical consequence of the ecclesiological principle that it applies to interchurch marriages, but it finds its explicit expression also in the major documents. Although tone and terminology have changed, the post-conciliar documents keep on pointing to the difficulties and risks of mixed marriages.³⁸ We may differentiate between three different levels on which a certain reluctance seems appropriate. The first one betrays the unease of an institution that is concerned about the integrity and loyalty of its members. According to “*Matrimonia mixta*,” “the fulfillment of the Gospel teachings is more difficult” for interchurch spouses, “especially with regard to those matters which concern Christian worship and the education of the children.”³⁹ The traditional concern

³⁵See CIC 1983, can. 1127, §1.

³⁶See DE, nos. 129–136; and CIC 1983, can. 844.

³⁷See, e.g., Peter Neuner, “Ein katholischer Vorschlag zur Eucharistiegemeinschaft,” *Stimmen der Zeit* 211 (July, 1993): 443–450; Georg Hintzen and Peter Neuner, “Eucharistiegemeinschaft für konfessionsverschiedene Ehen?” *Stimmen der Zeit* 211 (December, 1993): 831–840; Ernest R. Falardeau, “The Church, the Eucharist, and the Family,” *One in Christ*, vol. 33, no. 1 (1997), pp. 20–30; Thomas J. Scirghi, “One Body, Two Churches: Sharing the Eucharist in an Interchurch Marriage,” *The Jurist*, vol. 59, no. 2 (1999), pp. 432–447; and Jeffrey Vanderwilt, “Eucharistic Sharing: Revising the Question,” *Theological Studies* 63 (December, 2002): 826–839.

³⁸An unambiguous warning against interchurch marriages from a Catholic point of view is also expressed in the Final Report of the Roman Catholic-Lutheran-Reformed Study Commission on *The Theology of Marriage and the Problem of Mixed Marriage*, 1976, no. 70 (available at http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/news_file/30.pdf): “The Catholic Church, like other churches, for that matter, advises against mixed marriages insofar as they can easily cause difficulties in families, since in such cases living together can endanger the faith, and divisions in the faith can create problems in married life.” It has to be added, however, that while this reluctant or even disapproving attitude is still characteristic for the documents of the Roman Magisterium, several national bishops’ conference have adopted over the last decennia a much more welcoming and approving stance with regard to interchurch marriages; see the study of respective documents of the Roman Catholic Church in Germany in Uwe Bögershausen, *Die konfessionsverbindende Ehe als Lehr- und Lernprozess* (Mainz: Grünewald, 2001), pp. 102–138.

³⁹MM, introduction, 4th par.

here has been that the Catholic spouses give up on their private and public worshiping and do not take seriously the Catholic education of their offspring. The post-conciliar documents suggest a more positive reading when they place the risk in both spouses and caution against religious indifference in general. In this sense, the Ecumenical Directory refers to practical experiences and observations suggesting that “mixed marriages frequently present difficulties for the couples themselves, and for the children born to them, in maintaining their Christian faith and commitment.”⁴⁰

On a different level, the documents are anxious about the harmony of the family itself that may be hazarded by virtue of divergent religious mentalities and differences of opinion in religious and moral questions as well as in matters of church discipline.⁴¹ The most urgent and powerful warning, however, is expressed with regard to what the documents interpret as spiritual communion of the married partners. Interchurch marriage “is by its nature an obstacle to the full spiritual communion of the married parties,” as “*Matrimonia mixta*” puts it bluntly,⁴² having explained earlier that the church “discourages the contracting of mixed marriages, for she is the most desirous that Catholics be able in matrimony to attain to perfect union of mind and full communion of life.”⁴³ The term “full communion of life” obviously echoes the well-known definition of marriage as “*intima communitas vitae et amoris coniugal*is” in *Gaudium et spes*,⁴⁴ and with a similar connotation one reads in the 1993 Ecumenical Directory: “The perfect union of persons and full sharing of life which constitutes the married state are more easily assured when both partners belong to the same faith community.”⁴⁵

This wording makes it difficult, if not impossible, to escape the conclusion that in the view of the Catholic Church full conjugal communion requires ecclesial communion and that interchurch marriages are likely to miss the requirements of a *totius vitae consortium*.⁴⁶ This may seem a harsh conclusion, but it is consistent with an approach that regards the marriage between two Christians from different denominations exclusively as a matter of ecclesial belonging. In this perspective, the difficulties of mixed marriage “arise from the fact that the separation of Christians has not yet been overcome.”⁴⁷ They will not disappear unless the full visible unity of all Christians has been re-established, or, put differently, unless all marriages are same-church marriages. One may wonder how

⁴⁰DE, no. 144.

⁴¹“There is often a difference of opinion on the sacramental nature of matrimony, on the special significance of marriage celebrated within the Church, on the interpretation of certain moral principles pertaining to marriage and the family, on the extent to which obedience is due the Catholic Church, and on the competence that belongs to ecclesiastical authority” (MM, introduction, 10th par.).

⁴²MM, no. 1.

⁴³MM, introduction, 5th par..

⁴⁴No. 48.

⁴⁵DE, no. 144.

⁴⁶CIC 1983, can. 1055 §1. See Karl-Theodor Geringer, “Die konfessionsverschiedene Ehe im kanonischen Recht,” in Franz Böckle et al., eds., *Die konfessionsverschiedene Ehe: Problem für Millionen—Herausforderung für die Ökumene* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1988), p. 69.

⁴⁷CCC, no. 1634.

long interchurch families will have to wait for the *sanatio in radice* of their conjugal relationship by means of the churches. The more important question in theological terms, however, is whether this position is in tune with the current theology of marriage. Ultimately, “*Matrimonia mixta*” also concedes that “there exists in a marriage between baptized persons, since such a marriage is a true sacrament, a certain communion of spiritual benefits which is lacking in a marriage entered into by a baptized person and one who is not baptized.”⁴⁸

*How Interchurch Families See Themselves—
Living in Imperfect yet Real Communion*

It is true that interchurch “spouses risk experiencing the tragedy of Christian disunity even in the heart of their own home.”⁴⁹ It is, however, not less true that there are also interchurch families who experience in their sharing of love and life an interpersonal and spiritual unity that gives a foretaste of what it could be like when the ecclesial divisions will be overcome. Thanks to various groups of interchurch families in many countries, these experiences have been given a clear voice over the last decades. A milestone in the process of becoming aware of and raising consciousness for their special situation is the document “Interchurch Families and Christian Unity: Rome 2003” that was adopted by the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families held near Rome in 2003.⁵⁰ In this document, interchurch families from all over the world explained how they see themselves by witnessing to their particular experience. I will briefly show how much their experiential approach differs from the perspective adopted by the official Church.

In their self-portrait interchurch couples describe themselves as spouses “who come from two different church traditions (often a Roman Catholic married to a Christian of another communion)” whereby “[b]oth 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.”⁵¹ The document in no way ignores or underestimates different church membership: Interchurch “partners remain faithful members of two as yet divided church congregations in their neighbourhood, and two as yet divided ecclesial communions in the world.”⁵² They have to live out what is called their “two-church character”⁵³ and do not want to establish a “third

⁴⁸MM, introduction, 9th par.

⁴⁹CCC, no. 1634.

⁵⁰See note 10, above.

⁵¹IFCU, B,1.

⁵²Ibid., B,3. At variance with the terminology I have used so far, the document uses the term “ecclesial communion” to denote “those autonomous, international or national churches that are variously described as ‘denominations’, ‘confessions’, ‘communions’ or ‘churches’” (B,2).

⁵³Ibid., B,1.

church” alongside the institutional churches.⁵⁴ While acknowledging in a realistic way that they are inescapably part of the bigger scenario of the divided Christian communities, the document opts for an inside perspective and focuses on the conjugal and family project that is at the basis of an interchurch marriage.⁵⁵ As the partners “have come together in the covenant of marriage to form one Christian family,” they quite naturally also “grow into that unity.”⁵⁶ It is precisely in describing that process of growth into communion and what it entails for the church communities involved that interchurch families provide a rich and compelling reading of their lives and of the rapprochement they bring about between their respective congregations.

A key principle in this reading is what I would call a “marital hermeneutic” and is introduced as follows:

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 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.⁵⁷

The latter is not less, but all the more, true if the partners’ religious and spiritual identity has been formed in different faith communities with diverging traditions of worship, spirituality, teaching, and authority. Forging a new pattern of Christian family life, interchurch spouses become a “visible sign of unity,”⁵⁸ first by virtue of their marital union and second by a particular attitude of spiritual mutuality that also brings their communities of origin closer together. We will briefly look into both components in turn.

The Rome document does not cast any doubt on the full interpersonal communion that interchurch marriages are able to realize. In a short but comprehensive account, the cornerstones of the Christian ethos of marriage are exposed and claimed for its interchurch variant. They include: a mutual love that strives for deeper unity; its formal expression in the marital covenant that “provides a support and framework”; the “[a]ctual living together under the same roof,” enabling “the couple to enter into each other’s . . . life” and to know each other profoundly; the sharing of resources for the benefit of the whole family; the practicing of mutual forgiveness; shared responsibility for the education of the children; and a spirit of hospitality and sensitivity for the needs of others.⁵⁹ One

⁵⁴For further reading, see George Kilcourse, *Double Belonging: Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992).

⁵⁵Calling interchurch families a “*visible sign* of unity” to the churches, the document underlines that “[i]nterchurch couples do not get married in order to provide such a sign!” (IFCU, C,3; emphasis in original).

⁵⁶IFCU, A (Introduction).

⁵⁷Ibid., C,1.

⁵⁸Ibid., C,3.

⁵⁹See *ibid.*

may regret that the document fails to refer to the conjugal union as an image of Christ's unity with the church. Rooted in Holy Scripture (Eph. 5:21–33) and part of the common theological tradition of all Christian churches, this idea would have persuaded Catholics more easily that what is described here in terms of marital communion converges with the anthropological underpinnings that Catholic theology requires for sacramental marriage.

When it comes to spiritual communion, interchurch families report a very particular experience that they characterize as “mutual insertion and participation in the life of their two church communities.”⁶⁰ It starts when spouses incorporate attitudes and practices that were formerly distinctive of one or another ecclesial tradition into their new religious identity, but gradually they become engaged in a much more challenging process of mutual exploration and learning.⁶¹ The document describes the various elements and the particular dynamic that are characteristic for this learning process: Initial ignorance and prejudice give way to a growing understanding and a mutual appreciation of each other's way of worship, church life, doctrine, spirituality, authority, and ethics. On a more profound level, the “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,”⁶² thus making interchurch couples familiar with the basics of an ecumenical hermeneutic. Finally, by their very presence and participation in each other's congregation, interchurch spouses gradually build up an “inter-personal bridge of understanding and trust,” thereby contributing directly “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.”⁶³

As we have seen, interchurch couples deem themselves capable of achieving full interpersonal and spiritual communion by virtue of their marital union. Their communion shares in the weaknesses and contingencies that are characteristic on a human level of any intimate community of life and love, be it between partners of one church or of different churches; the divisions on an ecclesial level, however, do not *eo ipso* render it more deficient or imperfect than any other union. Rather, committed mutual love pushes interchurch spouses to develop a love and understanding of each other's churches and to share in the life and worship of each other's faith community. It is this experience that makes them claim to “become both a sign of unity and a means to grow towards unity.”⁶⁴

A New Perspective: Interchurch Communion in the Domestic Church

⁶⁰Ibid., C,1.

⁶¹The specific learning process that is characteristic for interchurch families is addressed in Bögershausen, *Die konfessionsverbindende Ehe*; see also Placido Sgroi, “Le coppie e le famiglie interconfessionali: problema o risorsa del cammino ecumenico?” *Studi Ecumenici* 22 (January–June, 2004): 191–213.

⁶²IFCU, C,2.

⁶³Ibid., C,4.

⁶⁴Ibid., A.

We can now collect the results of our analysis and roughly summarize the two perspectives on interchurch marriage in the following way. From the official point of view, neither conjugal communion nor the practical and emotional insertion into each other's faith community qualifies interchurch spouses for ecclesial communion. However fulfilling the partnership of life and love may be and however deep the bond with each other's church may be experienced, the partners realize ecclesial communion at best in an initial, yet always deficient way. We find here the main theological reason why eucharistic sharing in each other's congregation cannot be admitted on a regular basis, since from a Catholic standpoint eucharistic communion presupposes full ecclesial communion.⁶⁵ From their own perspective as marriage partners, however, interchurch spouses "want to share all that is of value in each other's life, and as Christian marriage partners this includes especially the riches of their respective ecclesial [communities]."⁶⁶ To the extent that they are able to do so, they claim to anticipate and prefigure an ecclesial communion that is otherwise not achieved by the official ecclesial bodies. It seems logical that they regard themselves, just as every other Christian family, as "one church at home" or, using an increasingly familiar metaphor in Catholic theology, as a "domestic church."⁶⁷ If one asks whether there is any chance that the Catholic position may take seriously the experience of interchurch families and attend to its ecclesiological implications, it is indeed the concept of domestic church that seems to indicate an alternative approach to that offered by the official standpoint.

The vision of the Christian family as "domestic church" is an ancient one in both West and East, shared by patristic Fathers such as Augustine and John Chrysostom.⁶⁸ While always having occupied a prominent position in Eastern theology and liturgy,⁶⁹ it has become familiar in the Catholic Church only since it was used by Vatican II in *Lumen gentium* and in the decree on the apostolate of the laity.⁷⁰ These two seed texts have been widely welcomed in post-conciliar Roman Catholic theology for marking the beginning of a renewed theological interest in the family that reflects "the need to articulate ordinary family life as a sphere of grace and a medium of encounter between humans and God."⁷¹ Much

⁶⁵See DE, no. 129.

⁶⁶IFCU, B.3.

⁶⁷See *ibid.*

⁶⁸For a general overview of the concept, see Michael A. Fahey, "The Christian Family as Domestic Church at Vatican II," in Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, *The Family*, Concilium (1995/4), pp. 85–92; Mary Anne Foley, "Toward an Ecclesiology of the 'Domestic Church,'" *Eglise et Théologie* 27 (October, 1996): 351–373; Ennio P. Mastroianni, "Christian Family as Church? Inquiry, Analysis, and Pastoral Implications" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, 1999); and Florence C. Bourg, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Churches* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

⁶⁹See Paul Evdokimov, *Sacrement de l'amour: Le mystère conjugal à la lumière de la tradition orthodoxe* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1988), pp. 168–171; and A. M. Stavropoulos, "The Understanding of Marriage in the Orthodox Church," *One in Christ*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1979), pp. 57–63.

⁷⁰See LG, no. 11; and Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity "*Apostolicam actuositatem*," no. 11 (available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html).

⁷¹Bourg, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered*, p. 3. See also Achiel Peelman, "La famille come

more controversial since then have been discussions with regard to the ecclesiological implications of the notion of domestic church and to the ecclesial status of the family, which the council texts had insinuated but for which they failed to provide theological grounding. The harshest critique of the new parlance came from scholars who pointed out that from a New Testament perspective church does not originate on the basis of blood, kin, or any other preferential social relationship but from God's call into a new community of discipleship that transcends the boundaries of family, clan, or nation.⁷² Some theologians and canonists were quick in recalling that, for a community to form a "particular" or "local church" as defined by Vatican II, the proclamation of the Word must be officially authorized and the eucharist celebrated in union with the bishop—all of which is not realized in the family.⁷³ Surprisingly, the magisterial teaching strongly insisted on the ecclesial nature of the family. In his Apostolic Exhortation "*Familiaris consortio*," John Paul II argued that the family shares in a number of ways in the life and mission of the Church; furthermore, it "constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason . . . it can and should be called 'the domestic Church.'"⁷⁴

Although the official discourse has undoubtedly contributed to keeping alive the ecclesiological interest in the family, it has not provided a clear answer to two central questions at the heart of the concept of domestic church—namely, what exactly qualifies the family to form the smallest ecclesial unit, and what type of family is actually required to fulfill this role. While baptism is generally accepted as the foundation of the domestic church, theological debate is going on as to what else is required for making the ordinary household a realization of the church. Some theologians consequently derive its ecclesiological title from the marital sacrament and thus follow the line of argument Karl Rahner had already developed in the 1960's when he pointed out that, being an image of the alliance between Christ and the church, the sacrament of marriage renders the church present in the form of "the smallest of local churches, but a true one, the Church in miniature."⁷⁵ Others emphasize the Christian family's vocational character, which makes it an ecclesial reality only to the extent that it fulfills its mission of evangelization and transmission of faith.⁷⁶ Since these ecclesiological

réalité ecclésiale: Réflexions sur la famille comme facteur de transformation d'une Eglise qui veut renaitre à partir de la base," *Eglise et Théologie* 12 (January, 1981): 95–114.

⁷²See, e.g., Gerhard Lohfink, "Die christliche Familie—eine Hauskirche?" *Theologische Quartalschrift*, vol. 163, no. 3 (1983), pp. 227–229.

⁷³See Normand Provencher, "Vers une théologie de la famille: L'église domestique," *Eglise et Théologie* 12 (January, 1981): 33; Jan Vries, "Die christliche Familie aus kanonistischer Sicht," in Winfried Aymans and Karl-Theodor Geringer, eds., *Iuri Canonico Promovendo: Festschrift für Heribert Schmitz zum 65. Geburtstag* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1994), pp. 97–125.

⁷⁴FC, no. 21. Authors in particular who see themselves as authentic interpreters of the theological heritage of Pope John Paul II keep to the full ecclesiality of the Christian family; see, e.g., Marc Cardinal Ouellet, *Divine Likeness: Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), pp. 38–56.

⁷⁵Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963), pp. 111–112; for a similar view, see Mastroianni, *Christian Family as Church? The "marriage or baptism" issue is discussed at some length in Bourq, Where Two or Three Are Gathered*, pp. 69–80.

⁷⁶See Clare Watkins, "Traditio—The Ordinary Handling of Holy Things: Reflections de *doctrina christiana* from an Ecclesiology Ordered to Baptism," *New Blackfriars* 87 (March, 2006):

concepts cannot simply bypass the multi-colored reality of contemporary family life, there is also discussion about which family type counts for domestic church. Whereas for some a normative concept of the family is needed to bring out its authentic theological nature,⁷⁷ others opt for recognizing the diversity of contemporary households and trust in the quality of interpersonal relationships lived out in them, whether they are based on marriage or not.⁷⁸

Notwithstanding these doctrinal inconsistencies, the concept of domestic church has a great potential to inspire ecclesiological thinking in a fresh way. As one author has unmistakably put it, the term “domestic church”

suggests a calling into question of (modern) conventional ways of working with church as organisational, political, structural, institutional. At the same time, the domestic church’s emphasis on the sanctity of household relationships, with their particular, every-day ties, duties and responsibilities refers us to a primary discipline of affection or *agape* which challenges the pastorally burdensome emphasis on church as *koinonia*, interpreted practically as “community”, “fellowship”, and the like. Discussion of the “domestic church” recalls our thinking to the ways in which all church activity—liturgy, order, governance, and, of course, teaching—is to be ordered to the living of baptism. And this baptismal living is—for the most part—done “in ordinary”. The nurturing of and equipping for this baptismal vocation in ordinary is, perhaps, *the* way of understanding the church’s life and purpose, and the end to which all teaching in the Christian community is directed.”⁷⁹

From a practical point of view, a major shortcoming of the concept of domestic church so far has been that couples have found themselves trying to model themselves on what is commonly understood by church and have not been encouraged to recognize the proper theological status of their own experience, which is a gift—and sometimes a critical gift—to the larger church. If the ecclesiological “challenge to the (organisational) centre from the margins”⁸⁰ is to lead into renewed perspectives in ecclesiology, concrete examples of “good practice” in the domestic church will be needed. Sharing in a common baptismal vocation and in what the Catholic tradition regards as the “sacramental” bond of marriage, interchurch couples provide such examples just as same-church spouses do. Moreover, they may even play a prominent role in this regard. As we have seen, interchurch couples build their marital and spiritual communion by drawing on the respective ecclesial traditions by which the spouses have been shaped, to which they remain attached, and from which they continue to receive spiritual nourishment. Yet, their shared religious profile is not just the sum of two previously distinct confessional identities but a genuine creation of their

166–183.

⁷⁷See Joseph C. Atkinson, “Family as Domestic Church: Developmental Trajectory, Legitimacy, and Problems of Appropriation,” *Theological Studies* 66 (September, 2005): 592–604.

⁷⁸See, e.g., Joanne Heaney-Hunter, “The Domestic Church: Guiding Beliefs and Daily Practices,” in Michael G. Lawler and William P. Roberts, eds., *Christian Marriage and Family: Contemporary Theological and Pastoral Perspectives* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), pp. 59–78; also see Bourg, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered*, especially pp. 81–92.

⁷⁹Watkins, “Traditio,” p. 169, emphasis in original.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, p. 177.

own. The learning process by which they accede to such a new spousal and religious identity draws its creative force from a constant interaction between the ecclesial communities to which both spouses adhere and the couple's specific spiritual needs to which these communities as separated entities are often unable fully to respond.⁸¹

The larger church communities as well as the small unit of the interchurch family thus appear to be distinct yet interrelated actors who mutually receive from and give to each other in terms of religious practice and ecclesial communion. Their relationship would seem to be mutually informative and also one in which the large church cannot do without the smallest unit and *vice versa*. The case of interchurch families reminds every Christian family not to build their domestic communities alongside or even in opposition to the existing ecclesial communities. Just as interchurch families should not establish a fictive "third church," the domestic unit is not served if detached from the ecclesial realities, however unappealing they may appear. Likewise, the confessional churches are called upon to trust in the unity-building capacity of interchurch and same-church families alike, even if they do not correspond to the standard models of unity that prevail in the official ecclesiological discourses.

Whereas the same-church family is easily downgraded to becoming a prolongation of the large church into its marginal edges, the "little church" in the interchurch scenario has a genuine and irreplaceable part to play in bringing about the smallest possible but real ecclesial community in the face of the divided Christian churches. The kind of ecclesial unity it expresses and realizes has no equivalent in the larger churches;⁸² that is why interchurch couples can rightly be called "builders of unity" in an area that is largely uncharted terrain for the confessional churches.

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⁸¹For a further elaboration, see Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi, "Interchurch Families—A Test Case for the Domestic Church," in Peter De Mey and Minna Hietamäki, eds., *Believing in Community: Ecumenical Reflections on the Church* (Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming in 2009).

⁸²Sgroi speaks in this context of a "*novum ecclesiale*" (Sgroi, "Le coppie e le famiglie interconfessionali," p. 210).