

What is the Meaning of Sacrament Here?
The Relationship between Word and Sacrament
in Theology and in the Reality of the Parish

Weekend Conference for Interchurch Couples and Families,
and for those Interested Ecumenically

17-19 February 2006
Haus Höhenblick, Braunfels bei Wetzlar

Organised by the
Netzwerk Ökumene: konfessionsverbindende Paare und Familien in Deutschland

39 adults and 22 children took part in this year's German interchurch families' conference. I was delighted to be able to be with them again, after a gap of two years, and to see how strong they grow. It was good to be present at their sharing with one another and to hear about their developing strategies for communicating within and outside the network about the issues for interchurch families within the divided churches. New families were present, having heard about the network through the stands at the Berlin ecumenical Kirchentag and other outreach organised by the network. The depth of the theological input from the main speakers, and the stimulation to discussion with one another which the whole conference provided, left newcomers saying how deeply the conference had spoken to their situation and that they were thirsty for more.

The introductory session on the Friday evening, the evening of a day when many had worked and then travelled long distances, gave just the right mixture of engaging the imagination without being intellectually taxing. It proved a vibrant way for newcomers and those who already knew one another to exchange new insights and experiences. The children and those who were to look after them first introduced themselves to everyone, then disappeared from the parents' group to enjoy their own session. Those of us who were left were invited to inspect the contents of a trunk marked 'Ecumenism', said to have been found in the Gaukel's attic. We were to choose something from inside the trunk that spoke to our experience of ecumenism in the context of our family life. Everyone in turn then introduced themselves, and spoke of their choice of object and the significance they saw in it for their interchurch journey. Someone chose the climbing rope and rock fixing clamp, speaking of the scaling of the wall between the churches, and the need to make the journey a shared one. Someone chose the 'diabolo' and the way she had discovered within her marriage that the dialogue must swing left, swing right, swing left, swing right, before it can soar into the air. The Roman Catholic speaker was resident for the conference with his wife and family. Both chose the lemon, a symbol for them of the stresses and rewards of being involved in the challenges of ecumenism. The sandpaper was popular, the pain of its abrasion of our roughnesses and the rewards of the smoothness that followed. The session gave people an opening to introduce just what they chose of the ups and downs of their experiences, with simplicity and huge enjoyment as well as the chance to speak from the heart.

One of the wonderful things about the German conferences is the singing. Grace at meals, morning and evening prayers, the music at the Sunday service is in rounds or four part harmony. Everyone is given the music. It seems as though everyone can sight read, sing clearly and in tune. On Saturday morning after breakfast and morning prayer together, we

listened to the two speakers. Professor Paul-Gerhard Nohl, Protestant pastor and theologian, had been in discussion with Dr Rainer Dvorak, Roman Catholic theologian and ecumenist, in preparing their papers, to ensure that their presentations were complementary. The benefit of this was obvious. I can give only the most superficial remarks in relation to the two presentations. They were of a profundity and range that spoke deeply to those present, and the fact that the two speakers had shared in their preparation together added to the depth and relevance for interchurch families.

Professor Nohl gave us an historical overview of the development of the concept of sacrament, the effect of the use of the Latin *Sacramentum*, with its overtones of ritual obligation drawn from Roman military and legal vocabulary against the Greek word *Mysterion*, drawing on concepts from the eastern mystic religions of mystical experience; the influence of Augustine's thought; the development of a great plurality of sacraments in the High Middle Ages; and the tensions within the Catholic Church that had led to the Reformation. But Professor Nohl began by speaking of his own early childhood experiences of a Protestant church that very rarely celebrated the Lord's Supper, contrasting the much more frequent celebrations of today. He referred us to a work by Joseph Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum*, in which Ratzinger links John 19.34 with Genesis 2.21, and sees the symbol of Christ's opening side, its blood and water, as John's expression of the fundamental sacraments of the Church, Baptism and the Eucharist; Christ's side is the sign of openness of the new Christian community, open in its preparedness to live for others. Professor Nohl spoke of the polemic that had marked the Protestant self definition as over against Catholicism, and the complexity of the arguments about the nature of human engagement with the concept of the sacramental, the concept of grace as developed with Latin theological understanding.

Dr Dvorak, originally a student of the Old Testament, later studying Tübingen, now working in Würzburg, began with the traditional, pre Vatican II experience of presence at the Mass, with all its colour, scent, deacons robed as servers. He spoke of how Protestants used to present themselves as having no liturgy, and of how now, as preaching takes on more and more significance in the Catholic Church, so colour and Eucharistic celebration is enjoyed increasingly in the Protestant parishes. He spoke of the Quaker experience, the complete absence of dogma, of language about sacrament, and yet the sense that the Word of God becomes accessible to all when an inner light shines on it, in a silence that can be accessible to all. He spoke of the new understanding of word and sacrament, growing from the Second Vatican Council, from the understanding that it is the whole of the parish that celebrates together. He spoke of growing understanding of the role of preacher as a bridge, offering to listeners a dialogue with the text, linked to the life of the community, linked to the preacher's own experiences; the image of Jacob wrestling with the angel of God, the communication of a sense of wonder through engagement with the Word of God. This was in contrast to the old understanding of Roman Catholic preaching as context free. He spoke of the new Roman Catholic discovery of the Bible as a journey now shared and enriched by engagement with Protestants. On sacramental understanding, Dr Dvorak noted the growing understanding as the Church as a visible and invisible sacramental presence, the body of Christ, which is at the same time the mystery of God. The sacraments are at the basis of the Church. Rahner's thinking on this was foundation for the second Vatican Council. As the Church is the continuing presence of Christ, the sense that one must seek for an explicit founding of a particular sacrament in the words of Christ is understood differently. So in the letter of Peter in which healing is described, one sees the Church already at work, sacramentally. He spoke of the developing concept of grace as something personal, a communication between a person

and God, and people with one another. The problem with sharing communion he presented briefly towards the end of his analysis as hanging on differing understandings of church. Questions would have flowed in plenty but time was running out.

Saturday after lunch it was possible to hear a recording of the radio broadcast given by the Network on the pastoral problems of interchurch families, co-ordinated by the Beyers and involving other interchurch families. Then there was a choice of workshops. One led by the Beyers was to continue to explore the themes of the conference through discussion. The Beckers and the Hubers offered a workshop taking a creative approach to the conference theme. Gudrun Steineck was to run a musical workshop, listening to musical settings of the *Sanctus* from around the world, and taking part in singing the *Sanctus* as liturgical dance. I took part in the creative workshop, which moved between acting out the language of gestures and their use in the course of celebrating the Eucharist; choosing and putting our liturgical gestures together to express our reactions to aspects of our divided/united situation at the Eucharist; thinking of the patterns of behaviour and the words used at the distribution of Holy Communion. We were moved by suggestions which were made by members of the group for words they would like to use, for instance, *break with me the bread of life, share with me the cup of hope*, and *the Word of unity, shared out for you*. We made models, using a great range of mostly edible creative materials, to represent our positive and negative reactions to being divided at the Eucharist, models that could be photographed, made in the end from those of the materials that we hadn't already eaten as part of the 'creative process'; the workshop was interspersed with learning to sing in English in four part harmony *Let us break bread together on our knees*. The workshops reported back in plenary, and Gudrun taught us all to sing the *Sanctus* in three concentric circles, singing in canon and moving in opposite directions. This was a lovely experience, taken up in the celebration on Sunday.

In the evening the Network reports were given. The higher profile given to interchurch families through the Network presence at the Kirchentags was good to hear, and also of their plans for future events. Finally, by the time all the important business of the Network had been done for the day, and people could relax, I was invited to give a brief report of Michael's and my walk from Braintree to Rome. It was splendid to hear afterwards from members of the group of their own walking experiences, and to share travellers' tales with them.

The Sunday morning family service included an acted Word search by the children, who presented us with a text from John's gospel. Professor Nohl preached on 1 John 3,2, 'And yet it doth not yet appear what we shall be', and spoke of daring to be other than we have become accustomed to being. At the final session people spoke of what they had especially appreciated at the conference, and the Saturday's presentations by the speakers won high acclaim, as well as the excellence of the overall organisation, introductory session, prayer times and workshops. Newcomers to the conference spoke of their appreciation of the welcome they had received, and the rapid realisation of a sense of shared concerns. Dr Dvorak told us that had found the experience of the weekend the best possible preparation for his plans for ecumenical marriage preparation in Würzburg. There were calls for suggestions for future conference themes, the voting being almost unanimous for a conference on forms of devotion, on the different traditions of spiritual formation. The early church as portrayed in the New Testament and its relationship to church divisions won votes too, as did a conference on ecclesiology.

Next year's conference is to be in Thüringen, in the former East Germany, from 16-18 March. I am most grateful for the opportunity to have been with German interchurch families at their 2006 conference.

Claire Malone-Lee

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