

Instrumentum Laboris of the 2015 Synod on the Family *Brief comments in the light of the Response to the Lineamenta submitted by the Interchurch Families International Network*

In Part I (Challenges), Chapter III (Inclusion), it is good to see a positive reference to mixed [Christian] marriages and interreligious marriages carried over from the lineamenta. Such marriages have ‘the possibility of fostering the spirit of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue’ (28). It would be good if this point could be followed up elsewhere in the document, showing how this possibility could be encouraged by wise pastoral understanding.

Terminology

It is good to see that the Instrumentum Laboris has now devoted a dedicated section to marriages between Catholics and others. The title that has been given to it is ‘*Mixed Marriages and Marriages of Disparity of Cult*’ (126-8). This raises again the question of terminology. In the lineamenta the term ‘disparity of cult’ was replaced by the expression ‘interreligious marriage’, which seemed very helpful. On the whole ‘interreligious marriage’ is still used in the text of the Instrumentum Laboris, so it is puzzling why ‘disparity of cult’ now appears in the heading (and in a reference to such marriages in 57). We would like to suggest that it would be preferable for ‘interreligious marriage’ to be used consistently.

We would also repeat our hope that more consideration is given *to the term used for mixed marriages between baptised Christians*. (‘Mixed marriage’ is a very general term, including interreligious marriage, interracial marriage, and other kinds of mixity.) If ‘interchurch marriage’ is thought to be too ambiguous (although it has become common currency in many English-speaking countries), the terminology of 73 might be used; this refers to weddings where there may be ‘people who belong to other Christian denominations or religions’. ‘Interdenominational marriage’ might be a suitable term in English, and ‘interconfessional marriage’ in some other languages (konfessionsverbindende Familien, foyers mixtes interconfessionnels, famiglie miste interconfessionali’).

Legislation

The Instrumentum Laboris excludes consideration of ‘the legislative level’(127). However, there remains a question here, as to whether the pre-marital promise on the part of the Catholic partner does not appear to drive an unnecessary wedge between the two partners, using legislation for what might better be dealt with at a pastoral level. This affects both interreligious and interchurch couples.

Fostering ecumenism or interreligious dialogue

It is good to see that there is a focus on pastoral questions which arise throughout the marriage (127), rather than only on getting married. However, it is discouraging to see these presented only as ‘a series of problems to be confronted’. Could they not also be presented as a series of opportunities to be lived? For those couples who want their marriages to contribute in some small way to the work of ecumenism or interreligious dialogue, these are great opportunities to share their positive experiences with other members of their respective religious communities.

A distinction between interchurch and interreligious families

Interchurch families and interreligious families will be able to make their contribution in different ways, and we would like to raise the question of whether the text distinguishes

sufficiently between them. It is good to see the reference to ‘sharing spiritual experiences with a spouse belonging to another religion or an unbeliever’ (127), but this sits uneasily in the same sentence that refers to ‘participation in liturgical life’ with a spouse who is a baptised Christian. (It is almost as though spiritual experience is not needed if you have liturgical life.) It is certainly necessary to ‘develop adequate pastoral care for families of marriages of disparity of cult’ (57); it is equally necessary for interchurch families.

Marriages between Catholics and other baptised Christians are sacramental marriages, and what is said in Part II, ‘The Discernment of the Family Vocation’ applies to them. Indeed, interchurch families may bring their own particular contribution. For instance, in the ‘The Word of God in the Family’, it is judged that ‘Catholic families still lack a direct contact with the Bible’(38). Catholics married to other Christians have sometimes come to a greater appreciation of the role of Scripture in their family life than they would otherwise have had. Some couples have fostered local ecumenical groups for Bible study and prayer. The celebration of interchurch wedding anniversaries (42) have been joyful occasions to affirm ecumenically that ‘if a marriage is grounded in Christ, permanently living together as a couple is not only possible but also a beautiful experience’. Interchurch families share in ‘the missionary dimension of the family as a domestic Church’(48), and this has a particular ecumenical significance for them and their communities. It is as true of interchurch families as of Catholic families that ‘the primacy of grace is fully manifested when the family renders an account of its faith and the married couple actually live their marriage as a vocation’(75).

A positive approach

The Instrumentum Laboris calls for ‘formulating a policy of behaviour [a code of conduct?] in which neither spouse would impede the journey of faith of the other’(127). This seems to be a very negative formulation, especially in view of what was said earlier in terms of ‘a symphony of differences’(83) and ‘the art of accompaniment’(109-11). Could it not be put more positively by calling both spouses to work together actively for the strengthening of one another’s faith? Many interchurch spouses have found their faith strengthened greatly by the ‘exchange of gifts’ and the ‘receptive ecumenism’ they have experienced in their marriage.

Eucharistic sharing

It is good to see the reference in 128 to the possible need of a baptised Christian married to a Catholic to receive communion with their spouse. But this seems to be presented very tentatively, since the Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism itself applies the norms to those who ‘share the sacraments of baptism and marriage’, and a number of episcopal conferences and bishops have made their own applications. Marriage is concerned with on-going commitment. Could there not be an explicit statement that in particular cases interchurch spouses who express a real need and desire for Eucharistic sharing, and who fulfil the criteria for admission, can be allowed to receive communion alongside their Catholic partners on an on-going basis, whenever they are at mass together?

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