

THE INTERCHURCH COUPLE: WITNESS TO COMMUNION WITHIN DIVISION

I. INTRODUCTION

It was Holy Saturday. Traditionally, in the Greek Orthodox Church, members come before dawn on this day to receive communion. The church was overflowing, even in the parking lot. The priest had been feeding communion to the people for a couple of hours; many of them, people he hadn't seen in church since the previous Easter. He observed a man and woman approaching together with their three children. The man told him how much they wanted to receive communion as a family, and that they'd all kept the fast, though his wife was Catholic, he and the children Orthodox. The priest explained he could not give the wife communion. Visibly upset, the man declined to receive at all since his wife could not, and the family left together, unfed. The priest found himself wishing they hadn't told him she was not Orthodox.

In another church on another day in the same city, a man and woman were coming with her parents to Catholic Mass. The couple was there to meet with the priest, who was to marry them; the fiancée and her family were Protestant. The couple remembers the priest's handing them, with little introduction, "the red book" which contained rules for reception of communion and celebration of Mass, without any word of welcome. The man in the couple, a lifelong Catholic, remained in the pew with his fiancée's family during communion, and they all left together, unfed¹.

What are these couples carrying in such moments of silent tragedy? Why does their desire to remain together trump their desire to receive communion? By their union, which includes belonging to two separated Christian communities, they carry in a special way the wound of Christian division and the reality of the "real, but imperfect communion" among Christian communities. A prime work of the modern ecumenical movement has been to remind churches not to be content with the present situation of division, but to remember it is scandalous and painful. For interchurch couples, it may be harder to forget the pain of division than to remember it. Here is at once a pastoral need, all too often unmet, and a hidden resource which may also be an agent of urgency and transformation in the quest for full, visible Christian unity.

This paper draws on three sources to examine the interchurch couple as domestic witness to communion among divided churches: first, reflections of interchurch couples themselves²;

¹ Interchurch couple questionnaire, completed February 2010. This questionnaire, designed by the author, was completed by ten couples, of whom nine were in interchurch marriages and the tenth in a same-church marriage. The two members of the couple each completed her or his own questionnaire; it was up to them whether to write them together or separately, and whether to read each other's. It consisted of five parts: information about the couple themselves (including religion(s), education, children, previous marriages or long-term relationships); scaling questions (including on how religious they see themselves as being, whether they feel their being interchurch had a negative influence on their marriage, whether their church attendance and religious participation improved through their marriage); questions for written response, about their faith and church lives and their understanding of communion; and about their marriage relationship and its changes over time, especially in regard to faith and church; and finally, an invitation for comments.

² For the purposes of this paper, I am referring to married, heterosexual couples. The important question of children in an interchurch couple will not be dealt with in this paper, but discussion will be restricted solely to the relationship between the spouses.

second, contributions of couple-dynamic studies in family-systems theory, through therapist David Schnarch³; third, some basic concepts of Catholic communion ecclesiology, through the work of Walter Kasper and Jean-Marie Tillard⁴.

II. COUPLE DYNAMICS AND COMMUNION

When two people marry, as priest-psychiatrist Dr. George Freemesser observed, two universes collide⁵. When two Christians of different denominations marry, do two churches collide? The couple find themselves simultaneously in communion (through the marriage) and out of communion (ecclesially). The couple sets out on a dangerous journey in little-charted waters, but they also are explorers whose adventures and discoveries can change and benefit their communities. As a theologian and therapist, I find it blindingly clear: Christian couples must work out the meaning of communion, not in the universal or the abstract but in the practical, earthly experience of day-to-day life in all its aspects, one day at a time. Even in their struggles and failures along the way, they can be witnesses and teachers, not to mention cross-bearers, and pilgrims who make the path by walking it.

Without using the term “communion”, couple sex therapist David Schnarch describes the healthy marital relationship: as both wife and husband gradually let go their fear of being flawed or unworthy, they learn to “hold on to themselves”, rather than depending on the other for identity and self-worth. Ironically, the more they are able to let their weaknesses and vulnerabilities become part of the relationship, the more they are strengthened as a couple. Schnarch sees “differentiation” as the goal and work of couple life: “the process by which we become more uniquely ourselves by maintaining ourselves in relationship with those we love” – not a trait, but a lifelong process of “taking our own shape”⁶. Couples are often undifferentiated as individuals, which may lead to their being fused or disconnected as a couple⁷. They become frustrated and lonely, either losing self in favour of the other, or ignoring the other in favour of self. Schnarch believes self is developed in relation to the other. Differentiation means finding a real meeting-place that involves the essence of each person, spirit and body, such that neither is forgotten, ignored nor absorbed into the other but both are truly present in their differentness; a

³ Christian theology is an ancient, highly-developed discipline; couple dynamic theory, by comparison, has hardly yet come to birth. Moreover, psychological and therapeutic schools of thought and practice have often worked independently of, if not in hostility to, religious and theological studies. This paper cannot review the development of couple theory, nor the place of Schnarch’s work within it. However, since Schnarch himself willingly embraces “spirituality” as an essential dimension of couple life including sexuality, and even draws on theological concepts to explain why this is so, his approach to couple theory has a capacity for dialogue with theology, specifically (in this paper) with communion ecclesiology.

⁴ We will not be able to touch here on communion ecclesiology as it has developed in Orthodox thought, where it is a central concept, nor in Protestant and ecumenical work.

⁵ Personal comment to author.

⁶ D. SCHNARCH, *Passionate Marriage: Love, Sex, and Intimacy in Emotionally Committed Relationships*, New York, Henry Holt, 1997, p. 51.

⁷ Schnarch suggests that his understanding of differentiation is comparable to Carl Jung’s concept of individuation. The term “differentiation” tends to be adopted by couple and family theory.

reality that the couple does not create, but enters into; by which healing and transformation take place⁸.

Several elements of Schnarch's non-religious approach to couple dynamics are relevant to our concept of communion. First, he sees the relationship as involving both flesh and spirit⁹. For example, he finds that often couples do not wish to be "seen" by each other, literally and figuratively; the barrier is not perceived lack of desirability in the partner, but rather in the self. The spouses prefer to hide themselves, even in physical intimacy; hence they never really meet, and become frustrated, angry or despondent – or one of the spouses may look outside the marriage for intimacy. A common Schnarch intervention is to encourage them to keep their eyes open in physical intimacy, starting with kissing. The spouses thereby become more comfortable in themselves, and less imprisoned by distorted self-image, fear of rejection, and lack of self-worth. Thus the barrier becomes a doorway, the capacity for an "I-Thou" relationship dramatically increased, and the couple's sexual life becomes a means of interpersonal communication rather than a place of mutual hiding and wounding¹⁰.

Second, couple communion involves every aspect of life. Schnarch finds that, by hearing about their sexual dynamics, he can understand their relational dynamics, in all its dimensions: the inter-personal dynamics are reflected in the sexual dynamic. For the couple in difficulty, this may feel like the problem, as their troubles seem to show up everywhere and they can find fewer and fewer ways to escape. For the therapist, however, it means the couple is more likely to seek healing, and allow it to touch their whole lives, which become the field of work and potential transformation.

Thus, Schnarch's approach takes the mystery of communion into the earthiness of daily life. In marriage, the transcendent and interpersonal dimensions can seem swallowed up by the practical, the very sphere in which couples must live¹¹, leaving no time or energy to focus on the couple relationship. A key element of the therapeutic process is simply that it carves out a sacred space for the couple's life of communion *ad intra*, and opens it *ad extra* by inviting the therapist into that communion¹². Communion is bigger than the couple – not that which they create, but that in which they partake.

Fourth, this work of communion is a lifetime process. Schnarch likes to ask, in public lectures, "At what age do men/women reach their sexual prime?" noting that eventually someone will answer, "sixty" – because a person more self-possessed and able to disclose is a person more capable of profound intimacy¹³. Finally, Schnarch works not by avoiding tensions and conflicts,

⁸ The implication that sin is present is touched upon, but undeveloped by Schnarch.

⁹ Though this may seem self-evident, sometimes couples live as though they were connected only in the flesh. And conversely, at least one spouse has said to me directly, "no, marriage is not about the flesh at all".

¹⁰ Note that couples who self-present for therapy have already, by that fact, shown a willingness and capacity for healing and relationship as a couple. Note also that factors such as domestic violence, abuse and addiction tend to take priority over couple therapy; in other words, those problems must be addressed before the process of couple therapy, especially such as practiced by Schnarch, can begin.

¹¹ At the simplest but most common level, couples often find their best, if not all, energy goes to children, work, household or financial duties, and seems to drain away energy that might go towards personal or mutual engagement.

¹² As the controversial psychiatrist and recanting-psychiatrist R.D. Laing observed succinctly in regard to the therapeutic process, "it's about communion, isn't it?" Spoken in 1989 documentary produced by Third Mind Productions and associates, entitled "Did You Use To Be R.D. Laing?"

¹³ SCHNARCH, *Passionate Marriage*, pp. 75-76.

but by entering into them (even amplifying them) so as to discover the teaching hidden within them. Therefore he also emphasizes the power of long-term commitment, which gives the couple the space and context to stay with conflicts, rather than running from them, as couples are so creative at finding ways to do.

III. COUPLE COMMUNION AND COMMUNION ECCLESIOLOGY

If the mystery of marriage *ad intra* can be said to be the mystery of communion lived out within a couple, how is this communion expressed *ad extra*, in the larger context in which the couple lives¹⁴? For the Christian couple, the *ad extra* includes the larger reality of church communion. When both spouses are baptized into the Catholic Church, according to Catholic ecclesiology, their larger context is full communion with the perfect communion of the Church¹⁵. When the spouses are baptized into different Christian churches, the larger context is, at best, one of “real but imperfect communion”¹⁶. These separated Christian communities are challenged and potentially enriched by the *ad intra* of the couple’s shared life. Walter Kasper reminds us that, in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, though other images may seem to predominate, all of them are based on communion ecclesiology¹⁷.

First, communion implies both a “vertical” and a “horizontal” dimension, that is, humanity in communion with God and therefore in communion with one another. The horizontal dimension includes mission to humanity and creation, and continuity with the apostles and all generations. Second, it is worked out in day-to-day existence. Kasper observes that “ecumenism of love” and “ecumenism of truth” must be complemented by “ecumenism of life”, that is, the way we live in the world. Though he does not mention the life of the interchurch couple, theirs is a prime place in which communion between churches unfolds in day-to-day living, and thereby opens new ways of receiving each other in love and truth. “We cannot share the Eucharistic bread without also sharing our daily bread”, says Kasper. The interchurch couple shares daily bread; can that bring their churches closer to sharing the Eucharistic bread? One Catholic-Protestant couple noted that they have become the first interchurch couple, in their parish, to be part of the baptismal and adult baptism preparation teams: “we are very blessed”, they write; “ ... what we have is very special [to share these denominations]”¹⁸.

¹⁴ Schnarch himself does not particularly engage this question, focusing mainly on the relationship. Though his purpose is not to consider the effect on the larger community of couples who undertake this process, he does mention leading couple retreats and illustrates ways in which couples can benefit from each other’s witness and experience. And by entering into the therapeutic relationship, the couple is opening its relationship beyond itself.

¹⁵ This is to speak in conceptual terms. The couple’s lived experience of Catholic life may not always be one of perfect communion; but they may be fed together at the same Table.

¹⁶ Again, this is speaking conceptually. They may in fact experience deep connection with their churches and between themselves in their church commitment.

¹⁷ Kasper also recalls that the extraordinary Synod of Bishops of 1985 calls communion ecclesiology, centered on Eucharist, the “basic and central idea” of Vatican II. W. KASPER, *Communio: The Guiding Concept of Catholic Ecumenical Theology*, in his *That They May All Be One: The Call to Unity*, London – New York, Burns & Oates, 2004, p. 58. Tillard likewise notes that communion ecclesiology, though rarely mentioned explicitly, is “perceptible everywhere” in Vatican II; J.-M. TILLARD, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R.C. De Peaux, Collegeville MN, Liturgical Press, 1987, p. xi.

¹⁸ Interchurch couple questionnaire, completed February 2010.

As Jean-Marie Tillard observes, communion is an interpersonal reality – by opening oneself to others, one enters into one’s own character as image and likeness of God, and so can enter into communion with the other¹⁹. And it is an ecclesial reality – the communion among local churches realizes the full ecclesial nature of each local church²⁰. Communion is of the essence of the church, not additional to it: “humanity is truly itself only in communion”²¹, says Tillard, and by the church’s life in communion each baptized person enters into reconciliation and salvation.

Tillard is strongly aware of sin, weakness, poverty, and misery as part of the real human context, including the ecclesial context²². True communion does not reject the other in his weakness and sinfulness, but rather reaches into poverty and so transforms it. It is communion “in the victory over hatred”²³. The isolation, misery, and even non-existence of humanity are taken up into salvation. Ecclesial communion itself has always been marked by tension and conflict²⁴; it is an eschatological reality experienced already in the here-and-now but not yet fully.

These aspects of communion ecclesiology have echoes in Schnarch’s exposition of couple relations: as involving every aspect of life, flesh and spirit; as participation in a bigger reality; as a lifelong process; as embracing both strength and weakness, beauty and uncomeliness; as accepting and transforming tensions, sadness and misery. However, communion, in its Scriptural and theological foundations and in its sacramentality, refers not only to “togetherness” or “community” but to participation in the life of the divine Trinity – a key patristic concept²⁵. And “the summit of communion is participation in the Eucharist”²⁶. By this participation, we are brought into the reconciliation and re-creation accomplished in the crucifixion and resurrection. How much do couples, struggling to live the daily life of communion, need to hear and receive this horizon of Hope! Our North American context of rampant individualism, isolation, violence, loneliness, and despair is witnessed by statistics on suicide rates, numbers taking anti-depressant medications, domestic abuse, abuse of substances such as alcohol and drugs (legal or illegal). Christians who marry dare to defy these statistics and this fragmentation by committing their lives to faith that communion can take flesh in our world. Asked if she had any fears about marrying someone of a different denomination, a Catholic who married a Protestant responded: “No major fears. I had trust in my mate and our relationship”²⁷. How much do interchurch couples, carrying a legacy of schism and division they did not create, need the larger church communion to acknowledge their special role and breathe back a witness that communion is real and possible – not a theory, but a present experience.

IV. COUPLE COMMUNION AND IMPERFECT CHURCH COMMUNION

¹⁹ TILLARD, *Church of Churches*, p. 31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²² “It is a question of Christ who is in *communion* with human misery and in whom God himself is in *communion* with human misery.” TILLARD, *Church of Churches*, p. 30.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁵ KASPER, *That They May All Be One*, p. 56.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁷ Interchurch couple questionnaire, completed February 2010.

Christian theology thus opens out a whole new horizon for the couple, unveiling the nature of reality as participation in the life of the Trinity, and Christian marriage as a particular, and particularly significant, way of working out that participation already on earth, awaiting the “not yet”. The interchurch couples can become instruments of interchurch communion. Another Protestant-Catholic couple writes that they have been enriched by participating in each other’s liturgical services but “doing so also regularly confirms that we have chosen the denomination that suits us best”; husband deeply living the Catholic tradition, wife deeply living as a United Church of Canada member, and having the courage to receive deeply each other’s traditions and, especially, each other’s love of their own tradition²⁸.

Ecumenical work, too, has highlighted communion theology. Kasper notes that the ecumenical dialogues of the past thirty-five years have, without preconceived plan, centered on communion, adding that the distinction today is not between communion and non-communion – we are already in communion through Christ – but rather, between full and incomplete communion²⁹. The “real but imperfect communion” which Vatican II and subsequent Catholic teaching have acknowledged between the Catholic Church and other Christian churches is a place of hope and life; but it can also be a painful and dangerous place, especially in the most profound moment of ecclesial communion, namely Eucharist itself. Interchurch relations have continued and developed even though it is often in this deepest expression of communion that the unyielding nature of church division is experienced most powerfully³⁰. Interchurch couples, like the two described in our introduction, may be unprepared for the power of that sword of division which runs right through their couple. The primitive sense of Christian marriage was an initially legal contract, sealed in the couple’s reception of communion together with blessing of the Bishop at the next Sunday’s Eucharist. Today, our churches’ differing understandings of communion is one of the fundamental church divides. No wonder the *ad extra* of separation and division may weigh heavily on the interchurch couple’s life. One Catholic-Protestant couple described church as “the box” – subsequently expanded to “the concrete box”. The Orthodox wife in an Orthodox-Protestant couple writes: “[My husband] also feels an outsider because of his ignorance about Orthodoxy (he just hasn’t shown interest in learning although he is very generous about participating with me) and because he is excluded from the Eucharist which has always been important to both of us for spiritual nourishment and communion with God. This is very hard for him and for me”³¹.

²⁸ Interchurch couple questionnaire, completed February 2010.

²⁹ KASPER, *That They May All Be One*, p. 51.

³⁰ Often, though, the ecumenical solution is not to talk about it. For example, the Canadian Council of Churches welcomed the Canadian Catholic Church into membership in the 1980s. The then-president of the Council wrote to the then-president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, asking what the Council could do to make Catholic representatives comfortable to participate in ecumenical Eucharistic celebrations, which accompanied Council gatherings. Suffice to say that by the 1990s, the practice of ecumenical Eucharist ceased, and since then communion has rarely been a subject of direct discussion. Omitting the practice eased the participation of several member churches, not only the Catholic; but is also a source of sadness, as witnessed recently by a long-time Council member’s wistful recollection of shared Eucharist at Council meetings. (If it seems odd that our churches should be satisfied to interact without reference to that which is most precious to us, we might take comfort in knowing this is a not uncommon couple solution to their inability to be united in the deepest moments of family life.)

³¹ Questionnaire completed by wife in interchurch couple, February 2010.

For example, a Catholic-Orthodox couple each remained active in their own churches' liturgical and community life, leaving little time to visit each other's. As a result, she had little inner experience of Orthodoxy, and always felt alien in his church; he, meanwhile, came to Catholic liturgy only as a visitor and outsider, even to his Catholic children. A Protestant-Catholic couple found it difficult to discern which was interpersonal and which was interchurch in their relationship: for him, attending Bible study regularly was essential, but when she went for his sake she could not feel part of the process; for her, attending liturgy was indispensable, but when he went for her sake he could not experience the closeness to God that he found in studying the Scriptures. Did the churches' disconnection pry them apart, or did it only highlight a gap that already existed between them? Was it a personal difference, a church difference, or some of both? They continued to attend their own church activities separately, but wistfully. If the churches' division is not actually a negative influence in such instances, at least it fails to be a positive one; as one husband expressed it, their couple is affected "not so much negatively (because I have made our relationship the top priority, and rightly so), but rather for the lack of a positive (the chance to share more together)"³².

Nonetheless, much has changed, and rapidly, in regard to our view of interchurch couples. Growing up on the Canadian prairies in the 1930s, my mother, raised Catholic by her Catholic mother, spent her childhood praying that her Lutheran father would not go to hell. Though her family suffered from the centripetal forces of their respective churches, the centrifugal force of their married life – and their shared love of Christ – held them together; the pain of their ecclesial non-communication was eased by the communion of faith they lived in their understanding and in their way of life. Many couples who completed the questionnaire emphasized that the couple relationship itself provided the solid base that helped them carry the church division. This affirmation is a positive witness for the strength of couple communion; but it implicitly asks the churches what they are doing to help couples carry the burden they did not seek out. Why is it that therapists working in the secular world are doing the work of assisting couples to live in communion, whereas the churches seem at times to forget that when it blesses a couples' marriage, it makes a commitment to that couple; for an interchurch couple, two churches commit to the couple, and thereby in some way to one another – or at least, to the one Christ who unites them.

V. CONCLUSION

These couples mostly come together with the blessing of both church communities, who nevertheless may fail to help when the couple finds itself in difficulties or even on the verge of dissolution, and may lose the benefit of their witness and experience. The secular world of couple therapy has begun to probe ways in which couple communion can break, and has sought ways to help heal the brokenness and open out a life of more profound communion than the couple knew before. As one couple told me, after engaging in the therapeutic process: "We have discovered a connection between us we'd never experienced in our fifteen years together". If the Christian marriage opens the couple to the ultimate horizon of participation in the divine life as the real

³² Couple interview, conducted February 28, 2010.

meaning of communion, cannot our Christian churches even more deeply find ways to assist couples in healing where they have broken, and learn from couples who are working out communion in the most intimate aspects of human life? Can our imperfect communion be made fuller and more complete by receiving the lived witness of interchurch couples?

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THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD AND
LOCAL HOUSEHOLDS

REVISITING THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

THOMAS KNIEPS-PORT LE ROI – GERARD MANNION – PETER DE MEY



Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi
Gerard Mannion
Peter De Mey (eds.)

The Household of God and Local Households Revisiting the Domestic Church

In the growing body of theological and spiritual literature on the family over recent years there is hardly any publication that does not explicitly refer to the “domestic church”. In spite of this broad interest, however, the concept itself today still remains

unclear. Where the model of the “church in miniature” is not used to further align the family with the hierarchical ecclesiastical institution, it simply serves as a pious metaphor to instil some spiritual dignity to the Christian household. Likewise, theological treatises insist that the church is not a family and so the domestic church has remained a marginal and exotic note in ecclesiology as well. One may wonder, however, whether small communities, as families are, have indeed so little to tell the “new family of God” to which Christ has called his disciples to belong. Can the churches afford to neglect the specific competences that families have when it comes to serving and sharing with each other, to dealing with differences and otherness of its members (be they related to gender, age, ethnicity, or religious conviction), and to encountering God in ordinary life with its everyday ties, duties and responsibilities? This volume is intended to critically revisit the notion of domestic church and to explore both its pitfalls and potential for the life of the churches and of families.

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