

**Meeting of representatives of the Interchurch Families International Network
with staff of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity,
Rome, Italy, 18 October 2005**

A group of ten representatives from among interchurch family groups and associations in nine countries¹ met with staff of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity² in Rome at the PCPCU offices on Tuesday 11 October 2005. This meeting developed as a follow-up to the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families that convened in Rome, 24-28 July 2003. Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the PCPCU, had written a letter to the Rome 2003 assembly, encouraging ongoing contacts between the PCPCU and interchurch family associations. An international delegation of some 50 persons from the Rome 2003 assembly then visited the PCPCU offices where they presented the paper *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* adopted at their world gathering. Mgr John Radano briefed the group of visitors on the PCPCU's mission and ongoing work.

The follow up meeting in October 2005 initiated a constructive discussion of substantive theological and pastoral issues of special concern to interchurch families. Topics ranged from PCPCU staff reflections on the paper *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*, to exploring how the norms in the 1993 *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* apply when addressing the particular spiritual needs on interchurch spouses and their children. Representatives narrated their personal stories as those who live 'the hopes and the difficulties of the path to Christian Unity'³, confirming their unique role in the ecumenical movement. Interchurch spouses quoted from Cardinal Kasper's book, *Sacrament of Unity: The Eucharist and the Church*, where they had found images and concepts that resonated with their experience. One pointed to a description in the book of contemporary ecumenism being different from landing a plane on a runway bordered with rows of lights; Cardinal Kasper describes our ecumenical exploration in terms of a man with a single lantern wandering on a railroad track and slowly making progress. Another spoke appreciatively of Cardinal Kasper's endorsement of creativity in pastoral care and ecumenical discipleship.

The discussion was assisted by the presence of the Rev. James Conn, S.J., a canon lawyer from the Gregorianum University in Rome, who emphasized the role of local bishops in discerning cases in the matter of eucharistic sharing. The canonist took care to point out that, to date, no

¹ Interchurch family groups and associations were represented at the meeting by: Annette and Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi (Belgium); Ray Temmerman (Canada); Melanie Finch and Rev Beverley Hollins (England); Julien Vielle (France); Miriam Marcheselli (Italy); Anne Odling-Smee (Northern Ireland); Pastor Jean-Baptiste Lipp (Switzerland); Fr George Kilcourse (USA). Those who contributed to a thorough discussion of the agenda at the plenary preparatory meeting on Monday 10 October, and also took part in the plenary assessment meeting on Wednesday 12 October were: Beverley and Kevin Hincks (Australia); Ruth Reardon (England); Brigitte Vielle, Françoise and Bruno Martin (France); Rudolf Lauber (Germany); Don Mario Polastro (Italy); Rev William Odling-Smee (Northern Ireland); Gisèle Francey (Switzerland). In discerning who among the 20 persons in attendance would participate in the PCPCU meeting, the senior members of the group suggested that younger members, the 'new generation', be given preference.

² The Most Rev Brian Farrell (Secretary, PCPCU), Mgr Eleuterio Fortino and Fr Donald Bolen.

³ Pope John Paul II to interchurch families, York, England, May 1982.

conference of Catholic bishops has submitted for approval by the Holy See guidelines for the general pastoral care of mixed marriages; thus, such guidelines do not exist as binding 'particular law' in any country, and individual bishops are responsible for implementing the norms of the 1993 *Directory* according to their own judgment.

The PCPCU staff warmly welcomed the interchurch family representatives (both Protestant and Catholic), who were encouraged by this experience as serious dialogue partners with genuine gifts to contribute to the Roman Catholic Church. Representatives expressed a strong conviction that the PCPCU had listened attentively to their reflections upon the experience of interchurch families; they were able to voice both positive and negative critiques of their pastoral care. In addition, they described their desire for a relationship that was both reciprocal and dynamic – not merely 'receiving' pastoral care but also developing mutuality because interchurch families have much to 'give' to the Church.

Bishop Farrell made a concluding appeal to interchurch families and their associations to reach out to bishops and priests in making the 1993 *Directory* better known, so that its reception could facilitate responsible pastoral applications to interchurch families, among others. The meeting concluded with mutual expressions of gratitude and hope. Fr George Kilcourse will serve as the liaison between the PCPCU and the groups and associations of interchurch families. Semi-annual correspondence will advise the PCPCU of developments communicated through the Interchurch Families International Network (IFIN). Representatives of IFIN indicated that they looked forward to the next occasion that they are welcomed by the PCPCU for further dialogue and collaboration.

George Kilcourse

25 March 2006

Feast of the Annunciation of the Lord

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