

## *Ecumenism and Interchurch Families: CTSA 2005: Janice Thompson*

As part of an interchurch family, I am excited and challenged by the opportunity to be a part of this panel. For years my husband and I have struggled with the rules that each of our two churches impose on the ways we are able to worship together and the ways we are able to celebrate or mourn major family events in our two communities (Anglican and Roman Catholic). We thought that our theological training would ease many of the difficulties but our experience of trying to make it work brought painful problems that we never anticipated. I am not surprised that the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University found that inter-church couples felt a markedly lower sense of belonging to a church community and had lower church attendance than same-church couples. And yet, we aren't here to examine inter-church families as a problem, but as playing a special role in the healing and resurrection of the "body" of the church ecumenical. In my brief talk here today, I would first like to explore this idea of the inter-church family as "body," and then to reflect on how the experiences of such families shape the hope for the resurrection of the body of the whole church.

Let me begin by briefly commenting on my own experience. My husband and I understood the issues of Eucharistic sharing and we agreed that making communion a part of our wedding ceremony would be more a painful symbol of division than communion. But the division continued to bother both of us, so I requested and received permission from the local Roman Catholic bishop to receive the Eucharist at a mass with my husband before the wedding, according to the guidelines set forth in the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*.<sup>1</sup> However, at the last minute a Catholic member of my husband's family objected. The bishop then suggested that my actions appeared to be producing more division more than unity; he recommended I withdraw my request, so I did. I have never since requested nor have I ever received communion in the Roman Catholic Church (although I have spent the past 10 years studying and teaching Catholic Systematic Theology). I was stunned by how hurt I was by the whole

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<sup>1</sup> Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, paragraph 133-134. "...in general the Catholic church permits access to its Eucharistic communion and to the sacraments of penance and anointing of the sick, only to those who share its oneness in faith, worship, and ecclesial life. For the same reasons, it also recognizes that in certain circumstances, by way of exception, and under certain conditions, access to these sacraments may be permitted, or even commended, for Christians of other Churches and ecclesial Communities.

experience. The ecumenical documents I had studied gave me little solace at that point. The one person who did the most to offer healing was my husband, who followed me up to communion in the Anglican church for the first time the following Sunday.

Living an inter-church marriage can feel like having no place in the church. But this should not be the case, for as both *Lumen Gentium* and *Familiaris Consortio* affirm, the family itself is a “domestic church” and thus functions as “a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion.”<sup>2</sup> As a domestic church the family serves as a “school of deeper humanity,” it both “builds up” and points towards the kind of “community of life and love” that will be fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup> Walter Kasper, in his address to the Association of Interchurch Families emphasizes that interchurch families – those where the spouses come from different church traditions, which they both retain even as they try to participate as much as possible in their partner’s tradition – similarly live as domestic churches, but in the midst of the problem of the divisions within Christianity.<sup>4</sup> This affirmation is important and needs to be developed. Like other theologies that begin to listen to “grassroots” experiences of church and faith, instead of reminding the inter-church family of all the ways its ecclesial life is a problem, this affirmation upholds the inter-church family and its particular experience as itself an embodiment of church.

I believe that the idea of the family as a particular embodiment of the Christian community has great potential for the ecumenical life and hopes of the church. Specifically, using the language of body and embodiment helps reconnect the ecumenical dialogues to the language of experience. Inter-church families experience their struggle to be church together particularly by learning to understand each other’s different memories or pasts in different ecclesial communities, and by sharing each other’s eschatological hopes for a fully healed and resurrected human community. At the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families in Rome 2003, inter-church families used the analogy of healing the body to describe their particular calling and contribution to the work of connecting the divided church traditions as they affirmed that interchurch families “can contribute 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.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, paragraph 21.

<sup>3</sup> FC, pp. 21, 50, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Message of Walter Kasper to the 2<sup>nd</sup> International

<sup>5</sup> “Interchurch Families and Christian Unity,” the Second world Gathering of Interchurch Families, Rome 2003, C,4.

For me, part of why I cannot seem to leave my own church, as much as I love and learn from the Catholic Church, is because it is the church that brought me into the Christian community, the church that has sustained me in it, and the church where generations of my family are rooted. I have a past with my church, a past that has been richly valuable to me, and a past that is still a source of present strength. My husband is similarly tied to his church. In the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, the Catholic Church affirmed that the Spirit of Christ uses the churches and Ecclesial Communities that are not in full communion with the Catholic Church as means of salvation.<sup>6</sup> Further, dialogues like the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) have made impressive statements of agreement on baptism, Eucharist, orders, and authority. In particular, as Anglicans and Catholics strive towards a shared understanding of Christ's "real presence" in the Eucharist, we must remember to emphasize not only how the body of Christ is made present in the Eucharist, but how that real presence is actually embodied in the community. This is particularly important in response to documents like *Dominus Iesus*, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000, that upset many Anglicans and Protestants by offering so little positive recognition of their ecclesial reality.<sup>7</sup>

Inter-church families encounter this on the parish level. Members of different denominations can be surprisingly insular, ignorant and judgmental about each other. I remember attending one RCIA class where the instructor commented that Protestants do not attach much significance to the elements of the Eucharist and therefore they are not bothered if they drop them or step on them during communion. Interchurch families have identified their particular ability to address such situations, to form "inter-personal bridges of understanding and trust" and to act as "ambassadors" between the two communities.<sup>8</sup> Because of our commitment to each other, my husband and I have learned to be far more patient and forgiving of each other's church communities when we run into problems, much like we have to be patient with our in-laws. Inter-church families need pastoral support in such situations, but they also should be invited to correct such misunderstandings and to bring richer understandings to both communities. We need to learn each other's different stories and histories better, our different ways of remembering and experiencing the common story and history of Jesus Christ that we all share in order to more fully embody

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<sup>6</sup> *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, paragraph 18.

<sup>7</sup> See Francis A. Sullivan, "The Impact of *Dominus Iesus* on Ecumenism," *America* 183/13, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, C,4.

and heal the church. The more we come to understand each other's particular ways of embodying Christ in an ecclesial community, the more we begin to share a present and a future.

The domestic church is embodied in inter-church families, especially in the way that they grow to understand each other's different experiences of church and as they begin to build their marriage and family into a community of life, love, and faith. However, inter-church families in particular are constantly reminded that the present community of Christ's church is "not yet" what should be. Again, they need pastoral support so that this is not merely interpreted as a general sense of dissatisfaction, such as the kind that Creighton University's Center for Marriage and Family has shown leads such families away from church life. The church in general needs a stronger sense of the eschatological. Even as we try to emphasize how inter-church families embody the church and how they can help form "connective tissues" between divided ecclesial communities, our hope in such healing further directs our hope towards the transformation and fulfillment – the resurrection – of this community.

The baptism of our first child was difficult. Baptisms are supposed to be about an entry into the Christian community, but our son's baptism in the Catholic Church – a private one to avoid the problem of the Eucharist – felt like an awkward fit. At the funeral for our second child, an infant daughter, we still had to face the not-so-pastoral "you aren't going to try anything too ecumenical are you?" questions, but by then such issues were old hat. Since our daughter's death we are all the more aware that the bonds of our family go beyond what we can see. At her funeral the issue wasn't who was or was not excluded, but about a community of people who believed in a God and a human community where even a baby girl no one had met belonged – a community where she would be remembered and hoped for. We are waiting for a world where there is justice and love, where lives are not cut short and human communities are not divided. This hope shapes my family, my theology, and my experience of church. It is when I remember that even the church is broken and in need of healing that I am able to stand with the church – my church and my husband's – and live and work in light of the hope and vision of its ultimate resurrection.

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