

**Societas Oecumenica, Prague, 17-22 August 2006**  
**‘Ecumenism of Life as a Challenge to Academic Theology’**

**‘DOUBLE BELONGING’**

My focus is on the experience of interchurch family life as it relates to the coming together of the two church communities of both partners, particularly where one partner is Roman Catholic and the other a member of another communion. I am speaking of a particular kind of ‘mixed marriage’, in which both partners (I quote) ‘retain their original church membership, but so far as they are able they are committed to live, worship and participate in their spouse’s church also. If they have children, as parents they exercise a joint responsibility under God for their religious and spiritual upbringing, and they teach them by word and example to appreciate both their Christian traditions.’ This definition was given in the Rome paper of 2003, which represents the viewpoint of the international network of interchurch families that held a World Gathering near Rome in that year.<sup>i</sup>

The experience of such couples and families is something that we in the interchurch family movement feel we can offer to our churches for their reflection. It is easier for the small ‘community of life and love’ established by marriage (to quote *Gaudium et Spes*) to find a way forward than it is for larger church communities as they come together in the ecumenical movement. Because of their family scale (the ‘domestic church’ which is the subject of another paper to be given at this consultation) they can be ‘practical laboratories of unity’, as Pope Benedict XVI pointed out at Warsaw on his visit to Poland in May 2006.<sup>ii</sup> They ‘live in their marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity’, in the words of Pope John Paul II at York, when he visited Britain in 1982.<sup>iii</sup> So here is the ‘ecumenism of life’ experienced on a very small scale. The present Pope has now asked the churches themselves to work together to encourage the development of such family units, with similar mutual goodwill, understanding and mature faith to that required of interchurch spouses themselves.<sup>iv</sup>

**A language problem**

A phrase that has encapsulated interchurch family experience in their little laboratory/workshops is ‘*double belonging*’. However, it is a phrase that has caused many problems; in fact, when a group from the Interchurch Family International Network visited the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity in Rome in October 2005 we were asked to avoid the term. Of course we do not want to use any terminology that offends others, and makes it impossible for them to hear what we are saying out of our experience. However, we need to work hard to understand both *why* the term causes so much difficulty, and also *how* we can express the reality of our experience in a way that can be heard. So since this Prague Consultation is on ‘Ecumenism of Life as a Challenge to Academic Theology’, I thought it would be good to ask for your help.

Basically, the phrase ‘double belonging’ is intended to express the fact that some interchurch spouses participate together in the life of both the church communities that nourish their one family in such a way that they feel that they belong in some way to both communities. This can be experienced at the level of the local congregations and also of the denominations. It is true in an even fuller sense for the children of such families, who unlike their parents have never had the experience of belonging to a single church only. One might say that their experience of the One Church of Christ has from their earliest years been mediated through two denominationally distinct communities. They have never had an exclusive identity, but rather an enlarged identity from their earliest years.

**Dual upbringing**

In the spring of 1968 this was expressed as a possibility for the future in an editorial in the Catholic ecumenical review *One in Christ*.<sup>v</sup> I quote. ‘This then is the proposal which we put forward for the serious consideration of churches and ecclesial communities which are committed to the ecumenical movement. In such cases children would be jointly baptised; they would join with their parents in family prayers at home, and as they grew older they would be taken to share in the worship of both church-communities, being admitted at the appropriate age to the communion of both churches. Only when they left the parental home ... would they be obliged to make their own decision and settle for membership of one church rather than the other. In their early years they would be, in a sense, members of both churches, because they shared the basic Christian faith and therefore the church-membership of both parents. If the experience of bilingual families is a valid analogy, children should not have too much difficulty in adjusting to two different communities and ‘cultures’ in their early years, and there is a real hope that, whichever community they eventually choose as their own, they would retain the best in both traditions in later years, and thus become particularly instrumental in achieving greater understanding, and in helping to pave the way for eventual reunion.’

This proposal was never accepted in any official way, but a number of couples in different countries managed to arrange a shared celebration of baptism (this became easier over the years), and some a registration of the baptism in both churches. *In their minds* this meant that their children were in some sense members of both churches, and that both communities accepted responsibility for their nurture in Christ. They did not insist – or even expect – that their interpretation of what happened would necessarily be accepted by their churches.

This first proposal was focused entirely on the *children* of interchurch couples. This was explicitly stated in the editorial. I quote again. ‘Clearly the children of mixed marriage homes would be ready to receive communion long before they were ready to make a choice between the two churches. But the *communicatio in sacris* involved would be limited and specific, open only to a relatively small number of individuals in a particular situation, and these individuals would be in a transitional stage between baptism and adult church membership.’ We received a good number of thoughtful comments on this proposal.<sup>vi</sup> Two of the most pertinent queries made were: should you ask children to do what their parents were not doing? and: would the children ever have to choose? In practice, as the years passed, some interchurch families were in the happy position of being able to receive communion all together, and some of the children decided that they did not want to choose. Some were able to make their Christian commitment in the context of both the churches that had nourished their faith.

### **Dual membership or double belonging?**

Even in the early ’seventies this concept of ‘dual membership’ was extended to the whole family, although in a looser sense for the parents than for the children. Already in 1974 Geoffrey Wainwright spoke of ‘dual membership’ at the International Consultation on Mixed Marriage held by the Irish School of Ecumenics in Dublin, referring particularly to the spouses. Certainly it would be an anomaly, he said, but a minor one arising out of the greater anomaly of ecclesiastical disunity.<sup>vii</sup> When this was reported in *Foyers Mixtes*, the review published by Fr René Beaupère in Lyon, ‘dual membership’ was translated as ‘*double appartenance*’.<sup>viii</sup> From then on the term gained currency among interchurch families in France, and a good deal of discussion on its merits took place in the pages of *Foyers Mixtes*. Meanwhile English interchurch families were talking about ‘dual membership’, and Fr John Coventry SJ, co-chair of the British Association, circulated a questionnaire on the subject in preparation for the 1978 annual conference.<sup>ix</sup> Then in 1982 a conference was held at Lyon under the title of ‘*Double Appartenance*’, and in 1983 a whole number of *Foyers Mixtes* was devoted to the topic.<sup>x</sup> When this title was translated back into English it became ‘Double Belonging’.<sup>xi</sup>

When you look back at the literature you see that other terms were also being used in the discussions of the 'seventies and early 'eighties: 'double loyalty', '*double fidélité*'. René Beaupère spoke of 'reciprocal ecclesial hospitality'. In the first instance the movement was coming from the side of the family; in the second from the side of the churches. 'Dual membership' and 'double belonging' were used far more frequently – perhaps because they seemed to express what was being (or could be) experienced both from the side of the family and from that of the churches.

In the 'eighties the British Council of Churches set up a Working Party on 'Christian Initiation and Church Membership', and representatives of the Association of Interchurch Families were asked to attend one of its meetings to speak of their experience. In a written text submitted before the meeting they raised (I quote) 'the underlying questions of double belonging, of dual membership, especially for the children of such families. How can the churches help us to express what is a reality for us: that we are members of one domestic church attached to the one Church of Christ through two different churches, that our children are initiated into the one Church of Christ first and foremost through our one domestic church which draws on two distinct traditions?'<sup>xii</sup>

A Roman Catholic member of the Working Party, Fr Michael Jackson, Secretary of the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenism in England and Wales, took this appeal to heart, and discussed the question of terminology with us. As a result the Association stopped talking about 'dual membership' because of the formal and juridical connotations of the term. We continued to use 'double belonging' as an affective term to describe our experience. As Michael Jackson put it: 'It is the fullest possible active participation (given resources of time, energy and attention) in the spiritual and apostolic lives of each other's church that is the interchurch family's Christian task.'<sup>xiii</sup> A survey undertaken among members of the Association on the subject of 'double belonging' was published in 1987 under the title *Whom God hath Joined*.<sup>xiv</sup>

In 1990 the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales brought out a revised Directory on Mixed Marriages. Their first Directory had appeared in 1970, as an application of the *motu proprio Matrimonia Mixta* that had been issued from Rome in that year. It was first revised in 1977. Each revision involved a softening of the words of the 'promise' that had to be made by the non-Roman Catholic partner before the marriage. But the 1990 revision inserted a paragraph stating that it 'is not possible' for the children of mixed marriages both to be Catholics and to belong to the denomination of their partner. 'It is unrealistic to think of trying to bring up children in two distinct communities... It is necessary for them to belong to one or the other.'<sup>xv</sup> (This 1990 version has recently been reprinted with no changes at all.)

### **The WCC/RCC Joint Working Group**

Meanwhile, in October 1989 the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church called together a small consultation on Mixed Marriages in Geneva. Fr René Beaupère was one of the Catholic representatives, while the World Council of Churches asked Martin Reardon to participate. Thus the experience of *foyers mixtes* and interchurch families was well represented. The consultation reported that (I quote): 'Some families have formulated their sense of double belonging in the following way: that they belong to the one Church of Christ as it exists, however fully or partially, in the Churches of both parents. This concept is no abstraction, but it is expressed concretely by sharing in the life of two local Christian communities, and by trying to bring them closer together. It is as such families push against traditional practice and theology in their exploration of the joint celebration of baptism and their understanding of 'double belonging' that they raise serious ecclesiological questions for

their Churches. The conscientious explorations of new avenues under what is believed to be the guidance of the Spirit should become the raw material for theological reflection by the Churches.’

In its report to the Canberra Assembly of the WCC in 1991, the JWG took up this point. It had run out of time, but stressed the need for the joint pastoral care of interchurch families, and recommended that there should be more study of the ecclesiological implications of mixed marriages. It hoped that the next JWG would study its findings further.<sup>xvi</sup>

René Beaupère was at Canberra and worked hard (with Pastor Jacques Maury, the outgoing co-chair of the JWG) to get this subject on the agenda of the new JWG. Following Canberra they raised the question with a number of church bodies in France (*Appel à nos églises*), and in the later '90s a new term came up in French: ‘*double insertion*’. On the international level, however, the JWG did not follow up the question at all. It passed it on to the next JWG to be appointed after the Harare Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1998, recommending a focus on ‘*The ecumenical role of interchurch marriages. The ecclesiological implications of the sacrament of marriage between Christians of different churches and in their family life*’.<sup>xvii</sup>

In 1992 ‘*double appartenance*’ was included in the Ecumenical Vocabulary published in *Foyers Mixtes*,<sup>xviii</sup> and in the same year Fr George Kilcourse brought out his book on interchurch families, which he entitled *Double Belonging*, in the United States.<sup>xix</sup> It was left to the English-speakers (from Britain and Australia) to go to Harare and try to get the subject picked up again for the attention of the new JWG.<sup>xx</sup>

A number of meetings of this Eighth Working Group in fact had interchurch families on their agenda, but they did not really deal with the ecclesiological question. The one meeting where it was raised was held at Dromantine in Northern Ireland in 2001. In planning this meeting, the Group had decided to ask people with actual experience of interchurch family life to address it; the World Council of Churches asked Martin and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity asked me. So they had a real live interchurch couple there! I described the way in which some interchurch partners and families had been able to participate in the life of both their churches. I said: ‘We have discovered that as couples and families we are able to live an active Christian life within two church communities that are not yet in communion with one another, and that we can belong experientially to both communities in a very real sense. There are many ministries that the other Christian partner can undertake in the Roman Catholic Church, and vice versa: catechism and Sunday School, choir and music group, reader and steward. It is hard work to be an interchurch family relating to both churches, but we have found it a great enrichment to us as couples and families. We believe our experience is worth offering to pastors, theologians, church leaders. It is of course only provisional, while the churches are “on the way” to unity – but an important witness.’ I also spoke of how eucharistic sharing is possible in some cases, and sharing in the process of Christian initiation.

Martin drew out the ecclesiological implications and made five suggestions for the future. His third suggestion was ‘that the experience of “double belonging” of interchurch families be taken more seriously by the churches – that it be taken into the life of the churches, reflected upon and taken into their ecclesiology to the extent that they can, and then taken into their rules and structures.’<sup>xxi</sup>

The Catholic members of the JWG in particular took up the terminology of ‘double belonging’ as seeming to claim too much from the Catholic perspective. They did however try to find a term they could be happier with – ‘double attachment’ was one suggestion. The Archbishop of Lublin, Poland, came up with ‘double solidarity’, which caused considerable laughter. However, the JWG

decided in the end that raising such questions went far beyond their remit. In their 2005 report to the Porto Alegre Assembly they confined themselves to speaking of the complexity and difficulty of the theological issues involved, and reminding the member churches of the WCC and the RCC of their *pastoral* responsibilities towards couples in interchurch marriages.<sup>xxii</sup> The whole question may quietly drop off the JWG's agenda altogether. We hope not.

### **The 'church-belonging' of an interchurch family – a 'double blessing'?**

The 2003 Rome paper noted that interchurch families 'describe their experience of participating in the life of two ecclesial communions as "double belonging", "double insertion", "double character" ("*double référence*") – or, as a Polish bishop suggested, "double solidarity"'. It added: 'We recognise that this description cannot be understood as a canonical category of dual membership, but as a lived reality of experience.'

It went on to explain that there is 'a substantially different experience of "double belonging" (or whatever it is called) felt by the partners in an interchurch marriage from that felt by their children. For the most part the parents of an interchurch family started by belonging to one ecclesial communion and have had to make a conscious choice to experience regularly the life and worship of their partner's church. They continue to feel themselves rooted in one tradition. Their children however will normally have been brought up to feel at home in the traditions of both their parents.' It is recognised that, like their parents, they 'cannot as yet have formal and canonical membership of two ecclesial communities, but it can be very difficult for them to make a decision to be confirmed or to make a personal profession of faith in one church rather than the other. ... We need to listen to the words of some of our teenage young people who say: "It is not we who are confused in refusing to choose one church or the other. It is you of former generations who have been confused in accepting and perpetuating the divisions of the churches. Christ willed only one church".'<sup>xxiii</sup>

In a message of greeting to the Second World Gathering of interchurch families, the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke of 'your children as being doubly blessed, as they grow up able to draw on the strengths and wisdom of not one, but two Christian traditions'.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **An appeal to the *Societas Oecumenica***

So here is my appeal to you. It is not just a question of terminology, although we are constantly thinking of new words to use. We need some kind of real breakthrough to express how the mutuality and reciprocity of marriage can be lived in an interchurch family – like the *par cum pari* of the Decree on Ecumenism, but related to life, not just to theological exchange. Abbé Paul Couturier did this in relation to prayer for unity, wrestling with the question of how do you take divisions into your prayer: do you pray that everyone will be converted to your perspective? (the Paul Wattson Octave assumed a particular perspective). Paul Couturier realised that we could already be truly united in prayer in spite of ecclesial differences because we can *all* pray together for the unity that Christ wills, to come as he wills it.

But prayer is incarnated in action. So how do you take divisions into your marriage and live them together? How can two ecclesiologies live together in one marriage? Does it matter if you have different understandings of actions that you can agree on together? Interchurch families have some experience of living these questions. Our question to theologians and pastors is: can you, will you, take interchurch family experience into your ecclesiology?

**Ruth Reardon**

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- <sup>i</sup> *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity: a paper adopted by the Second World Gathering of interchurch families from eleven countries held in Rome in July 2003*, Association of Interchurch Families, London, 2004.
- <sup>ii</sup> *One in Christ*, 41, 2, 2006, p.86.
- <sup>iii</sup> *The Pope in Britain*, CTS, London, pp.185-6.
- <sup>iv</sup> The Warsaw text, quoted in *One in Christ*: see note ii.
- <sup>v</sup> *One in Christ*, 4, 2, 1968, pp.130-35.
- <sup>vi</sup> *One in Christ*, 5, 1, 1969, pp.64-105.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Beyond Tolerance*, ed. Michael Hurley, SJ, 1975, p.107.
- <sup>viii</sup> 'Echoes de Grande-Bretagne', in *Foyers Mixtes*, April-June 1976, 31.
- <sup>ix</sup> John Coventry, SJ, Centrepiece on First Communion, in *Interchurch Families Newsletter*, 5, Summer 1981.
- <sup>x</sup> *Foyers Mixtes*, April-June 1983, 59.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Interchurch Families Newsletter*, 8, January 1983.
- <sup>xii</sup> *Interchurch Families Newsletter*, 16, Winter 1986-7.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Centrepiece on 'Dual Membership or Double Belonging?' by Michael Jackson, in *Newsletter* 16: see note xii.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Whom God hath Joined* by Mary Bard, McCrimmons, Essex, 1987.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Mixed Marriages: the Revised Directory promulgated by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1990*, CTS, London, p.16.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Foyers Mixtes*, October-December 1990, 89.
- <sup>xvii</sup> 'Prospects for the Future (1998-2005): Issues affecting Koinonia', in *Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches: Seventh Report*, WCC, Geneva, 1998, p.23.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Foyers Mixtes*, January-March 1992, 95.
- <sup>xix</sup> George Kilcourse, *Double Belonging: Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*, Paulist Press, New York, 1992.
- <sup>xx</sup> 'Padare at Harare' in *Interchurch Families Journal*, 7, 2, Summer 1999, p.9.
- <sup>xxi</sup> The JWG did not wish these and the other Dromantine texts on mixed marriages to be published.
- <sup>xxii</sup> 'Collaboration through the JWG: Interchurch marriages', in *Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches: Eighth Report 1999-2005*, WCC, Geneva, 2005, p.23.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*, pp.4-5.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Interchurch Families Journal*, 12, 1, January 2004, p.4.