

Are Interchurch Families Domestic Churches?

by Thomes Knieps Port-le-Roi, University of Louvain

1. Preliminary remarks

Let me first say something very briefly about the Interchurch Families International Network (IFIN) which is presently engaged in a process of reflection and study on the theme of “interchurch families as domestic church”.

Despite earlier occasional contacts, a more structured international contact and cooperation between the various national organizations and associations began to take shape in preparation of and during two world gatherings which were held in Geneva in 1998 and in Rome 2003.

A first outcome of shared experiences and reflections across the national boundaries and contexts has been the Rome Paper “Interchurch Families and Christian Unity” adopted by the second world gathering in 2003, in which interchurch families from all over the world have explained how they see themselves by witnessing to their particular experience in and with their respective churches.

In Rome for a meeting with the PCPCU in 2005, representatives of IF associations from around the world agreed to form an umbrella group, Interchurch Families International Network (IFIN). In addition to its main task of facilitating international cooperation and discussion, IFIN has also the intention of acting as a pivot for further theological reflection and study about the particular experiences of IF and the possible contribution they may make to the ecumenical movement.

“Interchurch families as domestic church” is at the moment the primary focus of IFIN’s reflection. For that purpose, two parallel initiatives have been launched:

- first, a working group has been established to devote theological study to the notion of “domestic church” and to explore whether or not the term and concept may be useful to describe the particular situation and the ecclesial status of IF;

- second, within several national associations a sort of consultation process among the member families has been started to find out whether or not the term “domestic church” resonates with the lived experience of IF in their daily doings; to guide that consultation and discussion process we have put two questions to the IF :

How do you as an interchurch family experience unity in your marriage and family life?

How does this affect your understanding of the church(es)?

The first summary report of the outcome has been submitted by the UK AIF. Others are expected to follow from Switzerland and Canada. It is hoped that by integrating both components, theological study and the testimonies of lived experience, we will be able to come to some sort of conclusion (in whatever form) which may be helpful in further profiling the ecumenical relevance of IF on the basis of both their valuable experiences and their theological expertise.

2. The term and concept of “domestic church”

As a description of the Christian family, “domestic church” is a term which has become familiar in the Roman Catholic church since it was brought to usage in two texts of Vatican II:

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, the council fathers develop the idea of the church as “people of God” and indicate for a number of sacraments how they constitute a perfect illustration of the priestly character of this people of God. This is also the case for the sacrament of marriage, out of which the family comes forth:

From the wedlock of Christians there comes the family, in which new citizens of human society are born, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in baptism are made children of God, thus perpetuating the people of God through the centuries. The family is, so to speak, the domestic church. (LG, 11)

In a similar way, in the Decree on the apostolate of the laity, *Apostolicam actuositatem*, we find a paraphrase of the expression *ecclesia domestica* :

The family received from God the mission to be the primary living cell of society. It can fulfil this mission by showing itself, in the mutual loyalty of its members and in shared prayer offered to God, *to be like a domestic sanctuary in the church*; when the whole family is involved together in the liturgy; and when it offers generous hospitality and promotes justice and other good works in the service of the needy. (AA, 11)

Also in more recent magisterial teaching the term is frequently used. E.g. in the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* of 1981, John Paul II sets out to

examine the many profound bonds linking the Church and the Christian family and establishing the family as a "Church in miniature" (*Ecclesia domestica*), (...) in such a way that in its own way the family is a living image and historical representation of the mystery of the Church. (FC, 49)

“Domestic church” is also a prominent theme in Orthodox marriage theology. As one of the highlights of an Orthodox wedding the bride and groom are adorned with crowns; one of the many symbolic meanings attached to these crowns is to remind the spouses of their role as rulers or leaders of their own domestic church.

This reference to the family as church, however, seems to be far less familiar in the churches of the Reformation. One has to go back long into history to find at least some metaphorical reference to the church-like character of the family. In his commentary on one of St Paul’s “house church” texts (1 Cor 16,19), John Calvin remarks:

“What a wonderful thing to put on record, that the name ‘church’ is applied to a single family, and yet it is fitting that all the families of believers should be organized in such a way as to be so many little churches”. (John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*)

So, one has to be aware that the idea of the family as “domestic church” is at present mainly located in RC and Orthodox theology, but even within RC theology it seems far from being commonly accepted. One of the reasons why theologians have their reservations with regard to making the family an image or even a realization of the church has to do with the fact that already the early Christian tradition had an ambiguous relationship to the family.

Already in the NT we find two divergent, if not opposing, attitudes towards the family. On the one side, there is a strand which upholds that all kinds of blood and kin relationships or any other preferential social relationship are irrelevant, if not an impediment, for those following Christ. Family relations are explicitly relativized by the Jesus himself when he responds to his mother and brothers who are looking for him

Who are my mother and my brothers?’³⁴ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’³⁵ Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’ (Mc 3,33-35)

Even more rigid is Jesus’ command in the Gospel of Luke where the terms of discipleship require that

²⁶Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. (Lk 14,26)

On the other side, however, such anti-family tendencies of the Jesus-movement are counterbalanced by a different stance adopted by later Christian communities. The Pastoral Letters e.g. see a quite natural and altogether unproblematic analogy between the family and the church. The author of 1 Timothy describes the bishop as someone who

must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way – for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God’s church? (1 Tim 3,4f.)

This view in which the church is regarded as a household, is also reflected in several patristic texts; at the end of the fourth century, John Chrysostom e.g. states

If we regulate our households [properly]...we will also be fit to oversee the church, for indeed the household is a little church. (John Chrysostom, *Homily on Eph. 20*)

For us today it seems much more problematic to take the family as an image for what the church as a whole might be like. Contemporary families have turned out to be fragile and prone to the influences of a growing individualization and pluralization, as the alarming statistics about marriage and subsequent family breakdown, the increasing number of single parenthood and the evidence of domestic violence show. So, is it realistic, let be desirable, to expect a renewal of the church(es) by resorting to one of the institutions which is hardly able to resist the present trends of social decomposition?

Moreover, do we not risk to raise only a specific type and ideal of family to the dignity of emulating the characteristics of the church, while others which do not fully correspond to that ideal are left to further disregard or even discrimination? One may become particularly suspicious here with regard to the RC church’s explicit preference for the family which is based on life-long marriage.

But even if such a division into first- and second class families could be avoided, do we not ask too much of contemporary families and put an additional burden on their shoulders when expecting them to become “churches in miniature”? Is it not high time for the churches to encourage and support

families in their daily needs and sorrows instead of asking of them evermore engagement with regard to the transmission of faith and to serving as the last remaining bulwark of Christianity in a context of growing secularization?

As we can see, the concept of “domestic church”, although promoted by the official teaching of the RC church, is all but an indisputable one. But if that is so already for same-church families, what could be its usefulness for interchurch families?

3. Interchurch families as “domestic churches”?

If one asks interchurch families these days how they see themselves, they most likely will respond that they are just the same as any other Christian couple and family. What used to be rare and exceptional cases for the longest time in the history of Christianity, have become almost normal in many regions where sometimes up to half of all marriages are concluded between spouses of different Christian traditions. Interchurch couples have greatly profited from the rapprochement of the churches as a fruit of the ecumenical movement which has brought about considerable legal and pastoral accommodation for their specific situation. Particularly within the younger generations, previously clearly defined denominational identities have lost their relevance in the daily living together. Thus, as a first statement in the summary report of the above mentioned consultation process in the UK, interchurch families declare that

We are just the same as other couples and families, united by our faith in Christ and our commitment to one another in marriage. We share our lives, our activities, our interests. We work to understand one another and to communicate with one another. We strive for sensitivity and we forgive one another when we fail. We laugh together, and we share one another’s sorrows. We respect one another. We grow in love for one another. As parents we do our best to share our faith in Christ with our children. As families we are different from one another, as all families are.

(Report on the AIF groups, Spring 2007, by Ruth Reardon)

What is, however, particular to their situation is that they come from two different churches that are not in communion with one another, and that they try to be loyal to both in their marriages and family lives. Herein lies indeed a very specific experience and achievement which interchurch families have witnessed to in the Rome 2003 Paper “Interchurch Families and Christian Unity”. They characterize their spiritual communion as “mutual insertion and participation in the life of their two church communities” (C1). It starts when spouses incorporate attitudes and practices that were formerly

distinctive of one or other ecclesial tradition into their new religious identity, but gradually engages them in a much more challenging process of mutual exploration and learning. The document describes the various elements and the particular dynamic that are characteristic for this learning process: Thus, initial ignorance and prejudice give way to a growing understanding and a mutual appreciation of each other's way of worship, church life, doctrine, spirituality, authority and ethics. On a more profound level, the "immersion in the ethos of a partner's community can enable a spouse to evaluate the other church in terms of its own language and ways of thought, action and being" (C2). Finally, by their very presence and participation in each other's congregation, interchurch families gradually build up an "inter-personal bridge of understanding and trust" (C4) and in this way contribute directly "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" (ibid.). This specific experience makes them claim "to become both a sign of unity and a means to grow towards unity" (A) and thus to anticipate and prefigure an ecclesial communion that is otherwise not achieved by the official ecclesial bodies.

It is exactly this connection between and overlapping of the most ordinary interpersonal communion in marriage and family life in all its positive and negative aspects on the one side and the extraordinary and totally unparalleled ecclesial communion, that bringing together of two separated church communities, on the other side which makes me think that interchurch families are in a position to blow new life into the concept of "domestic church".

One of the problems of the concept of domestic church when used in a same-church context is that families find themselves trying to model themselves on what they understand by church or on what theologically is understood by church. They are not encouraged to recognize the proper theological status of their own experience which is a gift (and sometimes a critical gift) to that larger church. Interchurch families, however, do not have a blueprint of what the unity of the church of Christ should look like; and yet they anticipate that unity, give it a visible, albeit inchoative, outlook in the very particular way they live their spousal and familial relationships within and across the divided ecclesial bodies they belong to.

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It will require much more theological reflection to fathom the ecclesiological implications of what interchurch families are already living and witnessing to as "domestic churches". One clear message of their testimony, however, is that the churches need to relate to one another in the way that

interchurch couples do, if they really want to grow into unity. In the UK report, some suggestions have been formulated in this regard:

Love one another – in a real and deep and lasting way. Do separate churches really do this?

Get to know one another at a deep level: work at communicating, listening, sharing, praying.

Put faith in Christ first, more important than our differences.

Focus on what unites, learn to recognise and overcome intolerance, prejudice, tribalism, to distinguish essentials from non-essentials, to correct the myths in all churches about the others.

Be committed to unity, and be prepared to go through a painful process out of disunity because **we have to** find a way forward together.

Stay with it, in spite of frustrations and impatience: it takes a long time, but change does happen.

Believe that divisions can be overcome because unity is God's gift to us in Christ. But don't expect that we can receive perfect unity.

In God's eyes we are one; it is people who introduce divisions.

Experience differences as enrichment, value and love the differences, see all that is good in the other. Look at differences together, not from opposite sides.

Be ready to change; institutions tend to be slower than married partners to realise they need to change, if the relationship is to progress. Sticking points can become growing points.

Difference and change need not be threatening if we love one another.

Be open to valuing and liking what your partner likes, though you do not have to like it all. We can disagree without falling apart.

Welcome differences as a stimulus to develop our own faith understanding, to look deeper.

Develop an inclusive attitude, hospitable and welcoming. Do well what you do well, and join in with others when they do things better.

Spend time in other churches; this is valuable for both you and the host community. You will understand more; they will have to watch what they say when they realise you are there.

Think of the 'other' in terms of who they are, not in terms of who you are (e.g. why use the blanket term 'non-Catholics').

Be convinced that unity really matters now. Responsibility for our children gives interchurch families a sense of urgency about unity. Cannot the churches feel more urgently their pastoral responsibilities for these children, and their urgent need to witness to the world that unity with God and with one another that Christ came to demonstrate and to share with us, the unity for which he prayed. (*Report on the AIF groups, Spring 2007, by Ruth Reardon*)

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