

Loving the universal Church through a spouse's church

by Pastor Jean-Baptiste Lipp

The context from which I speak is that of being both a Pastor of the Reformed Church in Switzerland and also a member of an interconfessional family. My wife is a practising Catholic, and with our three children our religious life is shared within our two churches.

Through the centuries Switzerland has learned peaceful confessional co-existence, and the two majority Christian confessions are on an equal footing. At the national level, they are more or less equal in strength. In spite of a difficult ecumenical summer, following the publication of recent Roman documents, our churches know that it is in their interest to work together.

I come from the Canton of Vaud, where the two main Protestant churches – the established church and the free church – came together to form one body in the mid-1960s. My father came from the free church, my mother from the established church. In the Canton of Vaud the ecumenical climate is such that recently the Cathedral of Lausanne was loaned by the Protestants to Christians of other confessions, and notably for the celebration of the Roman Catholic mass. In addition an ecumenical celebration takes place there each month, for which the member-churches of the Council of Christian Churches in the Canton of Vaud are responsible in turn. Various ecumenical groups are also invited to lead it, such as the *foyers mixtes*, who did so in September 2006...

I must explain why I, a Pastor, am committed to the movement of the *foyers mixtes*, or rather as we call them today *foyers interconfessionnelles* (since it is not all mixed marriages – far from it – who practice in both their churches). To do so I need to quote two phrases that have left their mark on me. They both date from the late 1980s, one when I was on the threshold of my married life, and the other on the threshold of my life as a Pastor in my church.

When I was on the point of becoming a probationer Pastor, I got to know my future wife, and we talked together of our links with our respective churches. Dominique said to me: *'I love my church.'* This 'declaration of love' for the church that had led her to faith and offered her spiritual nourishment deeply impressed me! And the further we have travelled together, the more I have learned to respect, and even to love, my wife's *'I love my church'*. Still, it was clear to me that while marrying a Catholic in a Catholic parish church, I was not marrying the Catholic Church. This was a position that I had to defend in 1987 when I went before the ordination board. They had a double anxiety about my case. Not only were we married in the Catholic church (anxiety in spite of the presence of my Pastor at the ceremony), but also I was intending to serve in the Reformed parish in Fribourg, the capital of a Canton with a Catholic majority. However, it seemed to me very clear that I could have a greater confidence in my relations with the Catholic Church, thanks to Dominique's attachment to her church. Together, we were going to live the joys and the sorrows of the other's church, that other church that little by little was to become our own too ...

I also remember what was said by my sponsor for ordination, Bernard Reymond, a liberal theologian and professor of pastoral theology at the University of Lausanne. When I asked his advice as to my participation from time to time at mass and the eucharist, in company with my spouse, he replied: *'Be careful, because you, as a Pastor, are a representative figure'*. I realised on the one hand that my Fribourg parishioners saw no problem with this occasional participation, and on the other hand that more and more couples are confessionally mixed (25% in the Canton de Vaud). So it seemed clear to me that the point about a 'representative figure' could – indeed should – be reversed. It should be reversed so that I could be at the service of the new socio-ecclesial reality that we are experiencing. I could become a representative figure for increasing numbers of parishioners, refusing to accept the current idea that the mixed confessionality of our family is simply a private matter ...

Thus I have called my presentation 'Loving the universal Church through the church of a spouse'. For basically, ecumenism can be compared to the life of a couple. To make progress, it needs committed

partners. But commitment requires certain conditions: mutual knowledge, recognition, dialogue, respect, and even ... love. Ecumenical living certainly has something in common with the life of a couple. And yet, during a recent weekend conference of Swiss *foyers mixtes*, a group reflected that *'We love one another, but we belong to churches that do not love one another!'*

'We love one another, but we belong to churches that do not love one another!' The sentence is shocking, perhaps unjust. But it reflects how many interconfessional couples feel. (I pay tribute, in passing, to the happy expression of our Austrian friends on the subject of the particular contribution made by the *'Konfessionsverbindenden Familien'* to the ecumenical movement: *'Wir haben die Kompetenz der Betroffenen!'*. That is: 'We have the authority of those who are affected!') If the churches do not always love one another, or do not show it enough, they know all the same that they are called to love one another more, and to keep together. This is so even in times of ecumenical bad weather and storms (as was the case in the summer of 2007 in Switzerland!).

It has been repeated often enough: the ecumenical movement is irreversible. But we have to choose between an irreversibility that comes from reason and an irreversibility that stems from love Using the metaphor of marriage, I would put it like this, on the European level: the churches can no longer 'divorce' from their ecumenical Charter. They have signed it! And do we need a reminder that the pastoral care of the churches for mixed marriages is an explicit commitment of the Charta Oecumenica? In fact, in section 4 it is stated that 'Couples in interdenominational marriages especially should be supported in experiencing ecumenism in their daily lives'. We were glad to hear the message of our friend Cardinal Walter Kasper, in the plenary session this morning: 'We have stretched out our hands to each other and do not want to let them go again.' The churches have held out their hands to each other; fine. So have mixed couples! Should we not think – and more seriously than ever before – of these two realities together, and do so on the pastoral, spiritual and theological levels?

Whenever the churches are tempted to halt or turn back, interconfessional families are faced with the prospect of continuing their ecumenical journey alone. In this situation they are strongly tempted to be discouraged, to distance themselves from one or other of their churches, if indeed it is not from both of them! I would like to defend the idea that the love of committed mixed couples and the mutual love of the churches for one another are more strongly linked than might have been thought. There is a link of solidarity, an interdependence between the family cell and the big ecclesial bodies to which we belong by our baptism. This relationship can be expressed in four simple phrases:

1. The husband loves his church;
2. The wife loves her church;
3. The husband loves his wife, and the wife loves her husband;
4. But what about the love that the husband has for the church of his wife (and vice versa)??

We dare to believe, when we try to draw out the inescapable consequences of the teaching of our churches on marriage and family life, that a link exists between the macrocosm of ecumenism (local, national, international), and the microcosm of interconfessional families. Of course it would be very practical for the churches if all the mixed couples simplified their mixedness. And most of them do. Here, it is the case of the partner who changes his or her confession. There, it is that of the partner who renounces the task of passing on his or her faith to the children. Sometimes it is the mother's confession that is deemed more important. Sometimes the Prussian model is followed But is it really acceptable to renounce such a responsibility?

In practice, one has to be glad when one of the two partners is practising, and wants to pass on the faith to the children. But in a Christian family the churches expect the commitment of both parents, not the disengagement of one of them – see the promises made at baptism. The need for the commitment of both parents is taken seriously by committed mixed couples. It is not enough for them to be mixed sociologically, statistically or culturally; they intend to remain faithful to, linked with, both their churches and to love them both, without any exclusion. As time passes, they will learn to love both their own church and that of their partner at the same time. As the years go on, they will pass on the love of the one and of the other church to their children

To finish, how can I define interconfessional families? A number of images have been used by these families, or by the ministers who accompany or advise them. As we know, images have both their strengths and their weaknesses. Here are a few:

1. **Footbridges.** That is the image chosen by the young Association of Interconfessional Families of Switzerland (AFI-CH). The foot-bridge has a lot in common with the weightier structure of a bridge, but it is more fragile. However, the function of a footbridge is to link together two banks, sometimes over a very deep ditch. Thinking of bridges, my wife and I stopped for a while at Budapest, en route between Lausanne and Sibiu. We saw in the guide-book that there are eight bridges which link together the two ancient cities of Buda and Pest, signifying both their unity and their difference. Do our churches realise that they are linked together like Buda and Pest, by a growing number of families who are footbridges?
2. **Islands.** Sometimes they are seen as islands of reconciliation. That is good, but in the long term an island risks being considered isolated, in an exceptional situation. Have the churches realised how much population movements have broken up their traditional lands? Have they understood the great opportunity they have if there is a real pastoral encouragement for mixed marriages to become interconfessional families?
3. **Explorers.** This image has its possibilities. But are we as explorers really considered to be such by the groups to which we belong? The role of the explorer is to be a kind of go-between for the territory that is being explored and the land occupied by the group. When we see the number of people at this hearing (the representatives of Associations of Interchurch Families and a few sympathisers) we may well doubt it! The churches, our churches, are they seriously interested in thinking of us as explorers of new possibilities? In the excellent letter that he sent to the 300 participants in the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families at Rocca di Papa in 2003, Cardinal Kasper wrote to us: 'We have much to learn from your experience'. But where are the places of real sharing? Where is the real interest of church leaders, at the level of national conferences, of dioceses, of parishes?
4. **Domestic church.** The term is patristic, a promising one for a better recognition of interconfessional families, especially for the thorny question of eucharistic hospitality. At the First World Gathering of Interchurch Families in July 1998 at Geneva, the then Secretary-General of the World Council of Churches, Konrad Raiser, encouraged us to explore this traditional term in order to get a better recognition of the reality of who we are. In the informal meeting that some of us had at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity at Rome in October 2005, our hosts listened to us carefully and warmly encouraged us to explore that paradigm, rather than the problematic one of 'double belonging'. As a result we have decided to study 'domestic church' as a theme for our ongoing theological reflection, both in our national associations and in our international network. For an update I hand over to my neighbour, Thomas Knieps Port-le-Roi, Professor at the University of Louvain and a committed member of our movement.

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