

## Interchurch Families – A Test Case for the “Domestic Church”

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In the growing body of theological and spiritual literature on marriage and the family in recent years there is hardly any publication which does not explicitly refer to the “domestic church”. Christian families are said to be or called to become “little churches of and in the home”. Authors providing popular spiritual guidance seem to ally themselves with highly respected theological scholars, and even the most recent magisterial teaching of the Roman Catholic Church has assumed a leading position in propagating the term and concept. In spite of, or should one rather say because of, this broad interest, the concept itself still today dwells in a “doctrinal vacuum”, as Michal A. Fahey stated already in the 1990’s.<sup>1</sup> What is perhaps more alarming, however, is that one does not see how this concept could be translated into the concrete situation in which families and the Christian church(es) find themselves at present. Instead, with regard to an emerging theology of the family just as within the realm of ecclesiology, the “domestic church” does not represent much more than a pious metaphor “to restore spiritual dignity to real families”<sup>2</sup> on the one side and a marginal, exotic note in ecclesiological treatises on the other. In this paper I propose to retrieve the significance and potential of this theological concept and to discover a concrete field of its application by looking at the situation of a significant number of couples and their families which are interchurch, that is, in which each spouse belongs to a different Christian denomination or church.

In a first step, I will briefly summarize the shortcomings of the term “domestic church” with regard both to its theoretical foundation and its practical utility while recovering its potential value for ecclesiology and the theology of marriage and the family alike. The second section zooms in on the particular situation of interchurch families which is often characterized by divided or even contrasting loyalties to the marriage partner and to the church of origin respectively. Recent empirical research indicates that if these divisive allegiances are to be harmonized, interchurch couples need specific hermeneutical skills. Some basic criteria for an “interchurch hermeneutics” will be elaborated with the help of the 2003 Rome document “Interchurch Families and Christian Unity” in which interchurch families worldwide have portrayed themselves and witnessed to their experiences in creating a shared religious practice. On the basis of this experiential evidence I will then argue that by accommodating and balancing both the claims of the partner and of the church, interchurch couples form small Christian communities which constantly define themselves in critical and constructive reference to the larger church communities to which the partners belong. Conversely, the churches concerned are led to acknowledge forms of Christian communities which are not in line with the prevailing understanding of ecclesial communion and therefore continually question these standard models. The small unit of the interchurch family and the larger church thus appear as two distinct *loci* of Christian practice and community which are mutually interacting with and impacting each other. In this way, interchurch families can also serve as an exemplary model for same-church families to understand and live their domestic life as an ecclesial reality and likewise as a roadmap for the divided churches on their search for forms of church unity.

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<sup>1</sup> M.A. FAHEY, *The Christian Family as Domestic Church at Vatican II*, in L.S. CAHILL, D. MIETH (eds.), *The Family*, in *Concilium* (1995/4) 85-92, at p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> A. THATCHER, *Theology for Parents*, in *INTAMS Review* 13 (2007) 64-74, at p. 64.

## 1. The Family – a “Domestic Church”?

The vision of the Christian family as “domestic church” is an ancient one in both West and East, shared by patristic fathers such as Augustine and John Chrysostom.<sup>3</sup> While always having occupied a prominent position in Eastern theology and liturgy,<sup>4</sup> it has become familiar in the Roman Catholic Church only since it was used in two texts of Vatican II.<sup>5</sup> In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, the council fathers develop the idea of the church as “people of God” and indicate in chapter 11 how the sacraments constitute a perfect illustration of its priestly character. This is also the case for the sacrament of marriage, out of which the family comes forth which

is, so to speak, the domestic church (*velut Ecclesia domestica*). In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children (LG, 11).

The Decree on the apostolate of the laity *Apostolicam actuositatem* puts the family in a broader social context in which its mission is “to be the primary living cell of society (*prima et vitalis cellula societatis*)”. It can only fulfil this task

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 (*tamquam domesticum sanctuarium ecclesiae*); 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).

These two seminal texts have been widely welcomed in post-conciliar Roman Catholic theology for marking the beginning of a renewed theological interest in the family which reflects “the need to articulate ordinary family life as a sphere of grace and a medium of encounter between humans and God”.<sup>6</sup> Much more controversial since then have been discussions with regard to the ecclesiological implications of the notion of domestic church and the ecclesial status of the family which the council texts had insinuated but for which they failed to provide theological grounding. The harshest critique of the new parlance came from scholars who pointed out that from a New Testament perspective church does not originate on the basis of blood, kin or any other preferential social relationship, but from God’s call into a new community of discipleship which transcends the boundaries of family, clan or nation.<sup>7</sup> Some theologians and canonists were quick in recalling that for a community to form a “particular” or “local church” as Vatican II had defined it, the proclamation of the Word must be officially authorized and the Eucharist celebrated in union with the bishop – all of which is not realized in the family.<sup>8</sup> Surprisingly, the magisterial teaching strongly insisted on the ecclesial nature of the family. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* of 1981, Pope John Paul II argues that the family shares in a number of ways in the life and mission of

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<sup>3</sup> For a history of the concept’s evolution see M.A. FOLEY, *Toward an Ecclesiology of the ‘Domestic Church’*, in *Eglise et Théologie* 27 (1996) 351-373; F.C. BOURG, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered. Christian Families as Domestic Churches*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2004, pp. 8-16.

<sup>4</sup> See P. EVDOKIMOV, *The Sacrament of Love. The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. A.P. Gythiel and V. Steadman, Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985, pp. 121-123; A.M. STAVROPOULOS, *The Understanding of Marriage in the Orthodox Church*, in: *One in Christ* 15 (1979) 57-63.

<sup>5</sup> See E.P. MASTROIANNI, *Christian Family as Church? Inquiry, Analysis, And Pastoral Implications* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, 1999), pp. 10-53; FAHEY, *The Christian Family as Domestic Church at Vatican II*.

<sup>6</sup> BOURG, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered*, 3. See also A. PEELMAN, *La famille come réalité ecclésiale. Réflexions sur la famille comme facteur de transformation d’une Eglise qui veut renaître à partir de la base*, in *Eglise et Théologie* 12 (1981) 95-114.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. G. LOHFINK, *Die christliche Familie – eine Hauskirche?*, in *Theologische Quartalschrift* 163 (1983) 227-299.

<sup>8</sup> See N. PROVENCHER, *Vers une théologie de la famille. L’église domestique*, in *Eglise et Théologie* 12 (1981) 9-34, at p. 33; J. VRIES, *Die christliche Familie aus kanonistischer Sicht*, in *Iuri Canonico Promovendo. Festschrift für Heribert Schmitz zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. W. AYMANS, K.-T. GERINGER, Regensburg, Friedrich Pustet, 1994, pp. 97-125.

the Church; mainly, its participating in the prophetic, priestly, and kingly mission of Christ witnesses to

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).<sup>9</sup>

Although the official discourse has undoubtedly contributed to keep the ecclesiological interest in the family alive, it has not provided a clear answer to two central questions at the heart of the concept of domestic church, namely what exactly qualifies the family to form the smallest ecclesial unit and what type of family is actually required to fulfil this role.

While baptism is generally accepted as the foundation of the domestic church, theological debate is going on as to what else is required for making the ordinary household a realization of the church. Some theologians consequently derive its ecclesiological title from the marital sacrament and thus follow the line of argument Karl Rahner developed in the 1960’s when he pointed out that being an image of the alliance between Christ and the church, the sacrament of marriage renders the church present in the form of “the smallest of local churches, but a true one, the Church in miniature”.<sup>10</sup> Others emphasize the Christian family’s vocational character which makes it an ecclesial reality only to the extent that it fulfils its mission of evangelization and transmitting the faith.<sup>11</sup> And as these ecclesiological concepts cannot simply bypass the multi-coloured reality of contemporary family life, there is also discussion about which family type counts for domestic church. Whereas for some a normative concept of the family is needed to bring out its authentic theological nature,<sup>12</sup> others opt for recognizing the diversity of contemporary households and trust in the quality of interpersonal relationships lived out in them, whether they are based on marriage or not.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to such diversity regarding the theological concept, reservation and scepticism arise also when it comes to testing its pastoral viability and usefulness. Contemporary families turn out to be fragile, as the alarming statistics about marriage and subsequent family breakdown, the increasing number of single-parent households and the evidence of domestic violence show. Is it realistic then, let alone desirable, to expect a renewal of the ecclesial community by resorting to one of the institutions that is hardly able to resist current trends of social decomposition? Moreover, does one not risk raising one specific family type 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? But even if such a division into first- and second-class families can be avoided, it is likely that today’s families will be altogether overburdened when expected to become “little churches”. Should the church not rather encourage and support family members in their daily needs and

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<sup>9</sup> In line with this vision, the 1993 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sees in the Christian family “a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason it can and should be called a domestic church” (No. 2204). – Authors in particular who see themselves as authentic interpreters of the theological heritage of Pope John Paul II keep to the full ecclesiality of the Christian family, see e.g. M. CARD. OUELLET, *Divine Likeness. Toward a Trinitarian Anthropology of the Family*, Grand Rapids, MI-Cambridge, UK, William B. Eerdmans, 2006, pp. 38-56.

<sup>10</sup> K. RAHNER, *The Church and the Sacraments*, New York, Herder & Herder, 1963, pp. 111f.; see for a similar view MASTROIANNI, *Christian Family as Church?*; the “marriage or baptism” issue is discussed at some length in BOURG, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered*, pp. 69-80.

<sup>11</sup> See C. WATKINS, *Traditio – The Ordinary Handling of Holy Things. Reflections de doctrina christiana from an Ecclesiology Ordered to Baptism*, in *New Blackfriars* 87 (2006) 166-183.

<sup>12</sup> See J.C. Atkinson, *Family as Domestic Church. Developmental Trajectory, Legitimacy, and Problems of Appropriation*, in *Theological Studies* 66 (2005) 592-604.

<sup>13</sup> See J. HEANEY-HUNTER, *The Domestic Church. Guiding Beliefs and Daily Practices*, in *Christian Marriage and Family. Contemporary Theological and Pastoral Perspectives*, ed. M. G. LAWLER, W.P. ROBERTS, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 1996, pp. 59-78; also BOURG, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered*, esp. pp. 81-92.

sorrows instead of asking of them ever more commitment with regard to transmitting the faith and to serving as the last remaining bulwark of Christianity in a secularized context?

As heavily as these inherent difficulties and external threats may weigh on the concept of domestic church, they do not take away its potential for reorientation in ecclesiological thinking. As one author has unmistakably put it, the term domestic church

suggests a calling into question of (modern) conventional ways of working with church as organisational, political, structural, institutional. At the same time, the domestic church's emphasis on the sanctity of household relationships, with their particular, every-day ties, duties and responsibilities refers us to a primary discipline of affection or *agape* which challenges the pastorally burdensome emphasis on church as *koinonia*, interpreted practically as "community", "fellowship", and the like. Discussion of the "domestic church" recalls our thinking to the ways in which all Church activity – liturgy, order, governance, and, of course, teaching – is to be ordered to the living of Baptism...And this baptismal living is – for the most part – done "in ordinary". The nurturing of and equipping for this baptismal vocation in ordinary is, perhaps, *the* way of understanding the Church's life and purpose, and the end to which all teaching in the Christian community is directed.<sup>14</sup>

One of the shortcomings of the term domestic church so far has been that couples have found themselves trying to model themselves on what is commonly understood by church and have not been encouraged to recognize the proper theological status of their own experience, which is a gift – and sometimes a critical gift – to the larger church. If the ecclesiological "challenge to the organisational centre from the margins"<sup>15</sup> is to lead into renewed perspectives in ecclesiology, concrete examples of "good practice" in the domestic church will be needed. As we will see, interchurch families can play a prominent role in this.

## 2. Challenges and Rewards of Interchurch Families

During a joint Protestant-Roman Catholic conference on interchurch marriage in Germany in 1987, Catholic moral theologian Franz Böckle replied to the question of how partners in mixed marriages can share a faith life "as good and as bad as all others in today's entirely secularized society. This is, I believe, the great problem: that we all have difficulties with our faith."<sup>16</sup> Interchurch couples are indeed no better than other spouses in leading a Christian life. There is plenty of evidence today that religious practice in families is decreasing altogether. Without any further specification, the term "interchurch marriage" refers to couples with different denominational affiliations but for the most part no or little faith practice following from their nominal belonging. However, interconfessional spouses are confronted with additional challenges which same-church couples are not or are to a much lesser degree. And that is what makes their case so interesting for our purposes in this paper.

### *Loyalties Divided between Partner and Church*

"How can interchurch spouses share their faith without drifting away from their church?" Focussing in his answer on the second part of the question, Böckle's Protestant counterpart at the above mentioned German conference replied:

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<sup>14</sup> WATKINS, *Traditio – The Ordinary Handling of Holy Things*, p. 169.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>16</sup> F. BÖCKLE, *Wie können konfessionsverschiedene Eheleute gemeinsam glauben, ohne sich ihrer Kirche zu entfremden?*, in ID. ET AL., *Die konfessionsverschiedene Ehe. Problem für Millionen – Herausforderung für die Ökumene*, Regensburg, Friedrich Pustet, 1988, pp. 113-125, at p. 113 (my translation).

...in one word: “badly”. Either one becomes alienated in marriage in order to be loyal to one’s church – or one loosens the relationship to the church in order to realize a lasting communion of marriage and family life – or one partner drags the other along to his/her faith and congregation. And here again are two possibilities: one spouse agrees easily and out of free will to be drawn over or s/he becomes resigned to the banal truism that in the end we all have the same God...One spouse hopes that the other church will provide him/her with a new home; the other knows that it will not; and therefore s/he switches over willy-nilly. The exception proves the rule.<sup>17</sup>

The scenario of interchurch spouses being divided in their loyalties to one’s partner on the one side and to one’s church on the other which is described here, corresponds undoubtedly to the experience of numerous couples.<sup>18</sup> Although there is not much empirical research available to verify the dilemma interchurch marriages may find themselves in, the existing literature has identified two issues on which interchurch couples are likely to differ from same-church couples: religious practice and marital quality.

Sociological research up to the 1980’s seemed to substantiate the churches’ constant warning that marriage with a partner from a different denomination leads into religious indifferentism and lowers the couples’ church involvement.<sup>19</sup> Petersen, however, noted in 1986 that religiosity in these earlier studies was based primarily on the frequency of church attendance; he did not find any relationship between interchurch marriage and other measures of religiosity.<sup>20</sup> A 1995 study of the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University on marriage preparation in the Catholic church in the US found that individuals in interchurch marriages were less likely to participate in church activities or the sacraments and equally less likely than those in same-church marriages to experience a strong sense of religious belonging. The study suggested that interchurch couples might be more at risk for drifting away from church practice.<sup>21</sup> More recent research has drawn a more nuanced picture. Based on a US national sample of Catholic and Protestant homogamous and heterogamous marriages Williams and Lawler corroborated other research according to which interchurch respondents reported lower levels of religiosity than same-church respondents on a number of religious variables and were less likely to emphasize religion in raising their children.<sup>22</sup> While the findings showed that interchurch individuals already came into marriage with a weaker sense of denominational identity, no evidence was found for an overall decline of church attendance during their marriage.<sup>23</sup> The only area where interchurch respondents were more at risk for drifting from church involvement than same-church respondents was in terms of change to no religious affiliation.

Ambiguous as these findings may be, they appear in new light when one considers whether interchurch individuals on average are more likely to drift away from their partners. Studies over the past decades have provided consistent evidence that marriages in which

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<sup>17</sup> J. LELL, *Wie können konfessionsverschiedene Eheleute gemeinsam glauben, ohne sich ihrer Kirche zu entfremden?*, in F. BÖCKLE ET AL., *Die konfessionsverschiedene Ehe*, pp. 103-111, at p. 103 (my translation).

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. the personal testimonies of interchurch marriages on the website of the Association of Interchurch Families, available from <http://www.interchurchfamilies.org/> (accessed 29 October 2007).

<sup>19</sup> For an overview on the literature see L.R. PETERSEN, *Interfaith Marriage and Religious Commitment among Catholics*, in *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 48 (1986) 725-735.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> CENTER FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY, *Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church. Getting it Right*, Omaha, NE, Creighton University, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> L.M. WILLIAMS, M.G. LAWLER, *Religious Heterogamy and Religiosity. A Comparison of Interchurch and Same-Church Individuals*, in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40 (2001) 465-478; see also CENTER FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY, *Ministry to Interchurch Marriages. A National Study*, Omaha, NE, Creighton University, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> “IC (= interchurch, TK) respondents had lower church attendance than SC (= same-church, TK) respondents at engagement, and their attendance remained lower, but the *change* in church attendance over time for the two groups was not significantly different.” *Ibid.*, p. 476.

husband and wife hold similar religious beliefs and participate jointly in religious practice report higher marital quality.<sup>24</sup> As interchurch couples usually report greater religious differences and less joint religious activities than same-church couples, one may assume that they score lower in marital satisfaction. Williams and Lawler, however, found no significant differences in marital satisfaction between interchurch and same-church respondents when putting different denominational affiliation in line with other socio-demographic or heterogamous variables such as ethnical, age or educational heterogamy.<sup>25</sup> They concluded that there is no relationship between religious heterogamy and marital satisfaction if religious heterogamy is measured in terms of different church belonging. The picture changed completely, however, when perceived religious differences concerning a number of topics (e.g. religious beliefs, importance of prayer and of church attendance, etc.) and joint religious activity were included in the analysis. Both became significant predictors of marital satisfaction, but in the positive direction more joint religious activities and fewer perceived religious differences were associated with greater marital satisfaction. “This suggests there may be unique benefits or advantages to being interchurch in addition to its potential disadvantages...Those interchurch couples who successfully find a way to deal with their religious differences and fashion a joint religious life may enjoy marital benefits not available to same-church couples.”<sup>26</sup>

A first conclusion which may be drawn from these findings is that religious differences matter the more important religion is to the individual or couple. Interchurch individuals for whom religiosity does not mean much are obviously not very likely to withdraw even further from church practice (and if they do, they may lose religious affiliation altogether); nor will they easily drift away from partner for purely religious reasons. Low religiosity may therefore contribute to religious factors having less influence, either positively or negatively, on the marriage. High religiosity, by contrast, is found to aggravate religious differences as the reported higher level of disagreement over the religious upbringing of children in religiously active interchurch couples in the study of Williams and Lawler has shown, and will probably put these couples at greater risk for marital problems.<sup>27</sup> However, religion can not only be a “divisive force” in marriage, it can also be a “cohesive or bonding force”<sup>28</sup> as evidenced by the positive marital outcomes when the spouses manage to cope with their religious disparities and create a shared religious life. This suggests, and herein lies a second conclusion, “that it is not religious differences per se that are problematic, but how they are managed”.<sup>29</sup> In other words, interchurch individuals who do not want their religious beliefs and practices to have a negative effect on the quality of their marriage “need the ability to communicate with and mutually respect one another while exploring their differences”<sup>30</sup> – including the religious ones. And yet, religious communication and mutual respect are just two components out of a still broader range of skills and attitudes which interchurch couples have to develop in order to share their religious life and enjoy relational satisfaction.

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<sup>24</sup> See K.T. CURTIS, C.G. ELLISON, *Religious Heterogamy and Marital Conflict. Findings from the National Survey of Families and Households*, in *Journal of Family Issues* 23 (2002) 551-576; S.M. MYERS, *Religious Homogamy and Marital Quality. Historical and Generational Patterns, 1980-1997*, in *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68 (2006) 292-304.

<sup>25</sup> L.M. WILLIAMS, M.G. LAWLER, *Marital Satisfaction and Religious Heterogamy. A Comparison of Interchurch and Same-Church Individuals*, in *Journal of Family Issues* 24 (2003) 1070-1092.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1088.

<sup>27</sup> WILLIAMS, LAWLER, *Marital Satisfaction and Religious Heterogamy*, could not prove, however, a negative association between disagreement over religious upbringing and marital satisfaction (*ibid.* 1090).

<sup>28</sup> CENTER FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY, *Ministry to Interchurch Marriages*, p. 144.

<sup>29</sup> WILLIAMS, LAWLER, *Marital Satisfaction and Religious Heterogamy*, p. 1089.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Williams and Lawler had already found that the rewards of a successful interchurch marriage included learning greater acceptance of diverse religious traditions, enlarging the social network through being connected to two congregations, and developing greater intimacy and spiritual growth through exploring religious differences.<sup>31</sup> A first-hand account of the challenging, but also rewarding, aspects of an interchurch existence is offered in a position paper entitled “Interchurch Families and Christian Unity” that was adopted by the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families near Rome in 2003.<sup>32</sup> Summarizing the experiences of interchurch families worldwide who worship and participate in both spouses’ churches, the document underlines the pioneering, bridge-building function of these families for the Christian churches in their search for unity. Included in this paper is a narrative description of a specific learning process interconfessional couples and their families go through when building up a shared religious life. By focusing on some major stages of this learning process in a systematic way, I will filter out four hermeneutical competences in particular which enable interchurch couples to make a positive use of their religious differences.<sup>33</sup>

In its second part entitled “The Contribution of Interchurch Families to Christian Unity”, the Rome document starts out to describe the initial phase of an interchurch marriage:

When an interchurch couple first meets, the two individuals often share the mutual ignorance and prejudice of their fellow church members. They can easily assume that the differences and tension between their two ecclesial communions, which have been causes of separation in the past, are irreconcilable. But because they love and respect one another, and try to forgive each other’s weaknesses, they soon grow to love and respect each other’s churches. (C 1)

It is important to note that this approach conceives of the loving relationship as embracing the partners not only in their personal characteristics but also in their social connectedness and thus also as bound up with a religious community. The document explicitly points out that “as marriage partners they (= interchurch couples, TK) want to share all that is of value in each other’s lives, and as Christian marriage partners this includes especially the riches of their respective ecclesial communions” (B 2). Thus, in a process of exploring and of getting to know the other in his/her ecclesial involvement, ignorance and prejudice toward the other church are said to be overcome and mutual respect to take place. Likewise, the process of exploration pertains also to the partner’s church community in its concrete reality including “ways of worship, church life, doctrine, spirituality, authority, and ethics” (C 2). This can lead to “a mutual appreciation of the positive gifts of each other’s churches and a mutual understanding of their weaknesses” (C 2). We find here a first basic criterion for a specific “interchurch hermeneutics” which is to *improve knowledge and gain understanding of and respect for the other and his/her religious affiliation*.

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<sup>31</sup> L.M. WILLIAMS, M.G. LAWLER, *The Challenges and Rewards of Interchurch Marriages. A Qualitative Study*, in *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 19 (2000) 205-218.

<sup>32</sup> Available from [http://www.interchurchfamilies.org/confer/rome2003/documents/roma2003\\_en.pdf](http://www.interchurchfamilies.org/confer/rome2003/documents/roma2003_en.pdf) (accessed 31 October 2007). In the following, references to this document are given by indicating the main sections and its internal numbering (e.g. C 1).

<sup>33</sup> Similar to my approach is U. BÖGERSHAUSEN, *Die konfessionsverbindende Ehe als Lehr- und Lernprozeß*, Mainz, Grünewald, 2001, who examines in his practical-theological study the paradigmatic learning process towards a dialogical identity which interchurch marriages have to undergo in a way similar to the local congregation and the larger church. Bögershausen derives the criteria for this learning process from James F. Fowler’s “faith-stage theory” (see J.F. FOWLER, *Stages of Faith*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1981); they include: –mutually assuming the other’s perspective, –being able to reflect on one’s own and the other’s thinking, –developing one’s own capacity for ethical judgement, –developing dialogical cognition. As will be shown, these criteria overlap to a large degree with the hermeneutical competences that we retrieve from the Rome document.

A further stage is reached when in that same spirit and practice of “mutual immersion and participation in the life of their two church communities” (C 1) the spouses are enabled “to evaluate the other church in terms of its own language and ways of thought, action and being” (C 2). The document distances itself from a form of perception and judgement that is determined by one’s “own values, emphases, use of language and structure of thought” and has been characteristic for a past polemical mentality “in which one church often defined itself by what another was not”. Interchurch couples who are able to *overcome such “cognitive egocentrism” and empathize with the other and the other’s church by assuming his/her perspective* witness to a second hermeneutical skill.

A third competence emerges when interchurch families report on their coming to understand “that the same truth can be expressed in a variety of forms, and that very often the more ways in which it is expressed, the deeper we penetrate into its reality” (C 2). Through their way of living in each other’s religious tradition “they realize that all differences are not church dividing, but many are complementary and can lead to the enrichment of diversity” (C 1). What is described here is the cognitive ability to *transcend one’s own and the other’s position and attain a meta-level of perspective from which initially perceived divergences appear reconcilable and new sense is generated*. The relevance of this ability can hardly be overestimated when interchurch families are to develop a shared religiosity rather than leading a religious life in parallel. To do so, a fourth and final competence is needed which leaves the realm of pure cognition and turns into practice.

What is meant here is the capacity for *self-conscious ethical decision-making and action*. Interpersonal identity development requires that a person who has got insight into the relativity of his/her own and the other’s perspective is able to suspend and revise his/her previous reliance on and trust in external sources of authority and the value systems connected to them. Successful interchurch families will automatically develop a critical judgement vis-à-vis particular beliefs and practices of the denominational churches if they are to construct a shared religious identity. The Rome document welcomes this last competence, albeit with a certain reluctance, for instance when interchurch couples are granted the right “to forge their own particular family traditions which may incorporate much of the [Christian spiritual] traditions of the two families in which they were brought up, but now fused into a new pattern” (B 2). The search for a new interchurch identity is legitimate, provided that interchurch families “avoid becoming what some have described as a ‘third church’” beside the two existing ecclesial bodies the spouses are affiliated with (B 3). It is taken into account, however, that “(t)here can be a clash between what they [= interchurch families, TK] wish to do and judge to be right for their family life and its unity, and the (often conflicting) attitudes and rules of their respective two ecclesial communions” (B 5). In cases of conflict, they are referred to “an informed conscience” by which may be revealed what “God is calling them to do” while the principle is recognized “that to go beyond the rules is not always to go against them” (B 5).

It is not the place here to spell out in greater detail how these fundamental criteria of what could legitimately be called an “ecumenical hermeneutics” may shape the various fields of religious practice in interchurch families, starting from the traditionally tricky issues such as the church wedding, sharing of the Eucharist and religious upbringing of the children up to the more ordinary facets of an everyday faith life and spirituality.<sup>34</sup> It might have become obvious, however, that such hermeneutical competences appear as an indispensable tool for interchurch individuals to strike a balance between their loving commitment to the partner on the one side and allegiance to their own church community on the other. The intrinsic connection between partnership quality and religious involvement draws our attention to the

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<sup>34</sup> For a more detailed account on the various ranges of religious practice in interchurch families see BÖGERSHAUSEN, *Die konfessionsverbindende Ehe als Lehr- und Lernprozeß*, p. 185-318.

fact that satisfying spousal community in the interchurch family cannot be achieved by ignoring or putting aside religious differences but only by working them through. Interchurch families are therefore not only more likely than same-church families to deal explicitly with religious and spiritual issues; they also build up a visible spiritual community of its own right and shape. To the extent that this new religious identity is nurtured by and interacts with two ecclesial communities, it has in itself an ecclesial character. From here, new light can be shed on the idea of domestic church.

### 3. Conclusion: The Interchurch Family as Domestic Church

We have seen so far how vital it is for interchurch couples to create a shared religious identity and life. Their new religious profile is not a creation *ex nihilo* since it remains tributary to the two ecclesial traditions by which the spouses have been shaped, to which they remain attached and from which they continue to receive spiritual inspiration. It is new and original, however, insofar as it cannot simply be understood as the sum of two previously distinct confessional identities. The learning process by which interchurch marriages accede to a new identity draws its creative potential from a constant interaction between the ecclesial communities to which both spouses adhere and the couple's specific spiritual needs to which these communities as separated entities are unable to fully respond. The larger church communities as well as the small unit of the interchurch family thus appear as distinct, yet interrelated actors who mutually receive from and give to each other in term of religious practice and ecclesial community. Whereas the same-church family is easily downgraded to becoming a prolongation of the large church into its marginal edges, the "little church" in this interchurch scenario has an active and irreplaceable part to play in bringing about the smallest possible ecclesial community. The kind of ecclesial unity it expresses and realizes has no equivalent in the larger churches<sup>35</sup>; that is why interchurch couples can rightly be called "builders of unity"<sup>36</sup> in an area which is largely uncharted terrain for the confessional churches.

If the term "domestic church" stands for an ecclesiology in which the relationship between the larger church and its smallest unity works in both directions fruitfully and appropriately, the case of interchurch families contains a significant reminder in both directions as well. It reminds interchurch families, and with them every Christian family, not to build their domestic communities alongside or even in opposition to the real ecclesial communities. Just as interchurch families should not establish a fictive "third church", the domestic church is not served if detached from the ecclesial realities, however unappealing they may appear. Likewise, the confessional churches are called upon to trust in the unity-building capacity of interchurch and same-church families alike even if they do not correspond to the standard models of unity that prevail in the official ecclesiological discourses. Rather than insisting on the observance of particular confessional practices, the churches should encourage couples and families, whether interchurch or same-church, to find some form of shared religious practice. Otherwise, the warning against religious indifferentism, so often addressed to interchurch marriages, could become a self-fulfilling prophecy also on a broader scale.

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<sup>35</sup> P. SGROI, *Le coppie e le famiglie interconfessionali: problema o risorsa del cammino ecumenico*, in *Studi Ecumenici* 22 (2004) 191-213, speaks in this context of a "novum ecclesiale" (210).

<sup>36</sup> Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (1993), 66; available from [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/general-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_19930325\\_directory\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/general-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19930325_directory_en.html) (accessed 29 October 2007).

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