

Spiritual Ecumenism in Interchurch Marital Spirituality

Ruth Reardon

1. At the Intersection of Marital Spirituality and Spiritual Ecumenism

"That they may be one ... that the world may believe." (Jn 17:21) This prayer of Jesus for his disciples is central to marital spirituality as well as to spiritual ecumenism. It is a prayer particularly dear to the hearts of many interchurch spouses, who are united by their baptism and their marriage, but who are nurtured in their life together by two distinct church communities which are not yet fully in communion with one another.

The term "interchurch marriage" is usually applied to marriages where one partner is a Roman Catholic and the other a member of another Christian communion. "You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity", Pope John Paul II told them at York in 1982. "Express that hope in prayer together, in the unity of love", he continued. "Together invite the Holy Spirit of love into your hearts and into your homes. He will help you to grow in trust and understanding."¹ Interchurch spouses, then, *live* the ecumenical journey to which their churches are committed, with all its hopes and difficulties; theirs is an "ecumenism of life", to adopt a phrase often used by Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.² In this journey the partners are totally dependent upon the Holy Spirit, who brings love, trust and understanding into their hearts, their homes and their lives.

A spirituality for interchurch marriages therefore takes with equal seriousness both marital spirituality and spiritual ecumenism, and tries to weave them together into a single whole. In the sections that follow I am particularly indebted to the brief outline of the spirituality of marriage by Professor Gisbert Greshake that appeared in the *INTAMS review* in 1996, and to the outline of ecumenical spirituality presented to the 2003 Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity by Bishop Kurt Koch.³ I have sought to see how the headings that these two authors use relate to one another and reflect a common approach that will necessarily be taken by anyone working on interchurch family spirituality.

The gift and call of the Holy Spirit

The ecumenical movement is "fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit." It is the Spirit who "brings about the wonderful communion of the faithful and joins them together so intimately in Christ that He is the principle of the Church's unity". Unity is not something we achieve; it

¹ John Paul II, *The Pope in Britain: Collected Homilies and Speeches* (Slough: St Paul, 1982), 30.

² See his report to the 2003 Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) Plenary: "The ecumenical movement has reached an intermediate phase of *good relations* and *ecclesial communio* that is much deeper if not yet complete. We are now dealing with an ecumenism of life; it is a matter of giving shape to this intermediate situation and imbuing it with life." (Walter Kasper, "Title," *PCPCU Information Service* 1-2 (2004): 29.

³ Gisbert Greshake, "L'unique esprit et les multiples spiritualités: Que signifie dans ce contexte la 'spiritualité du mariage?'," *INTAMS review* 2 (1996): 142-150; Kurt Koch, "Rediscovering the Soul of the whole Ecumenical Movement (UR 8): Necessity and Perspectives of an Ecumenical Spirituality", *PCPCU Information Service* 115 (2004): 31-39.

"transcends human powers and gifts." That is why Jesus taught us to pray for unity. It is why the Second Vatican Council, at the end of its Decree on Ecumenism, "placed its hope entirely in the prayer of Christ for the Church, in the love of the Father for us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. 'And hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured forth in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.' (Rom 5:5)"⁴

What is true of the whole Church is also true of the "domestic church", the "church in the home", the "little church" of the couple and family. The Holy Spirit, who is poured forth in baptism on the individual Christian, is poured forth on the couple together in their marriage, so that they become "a specific revelation and realisation of ecclesial communion."⁵ The Holy Spirit who is poured out in marriage "offers Christian couples the gift of a new communion of love that is the living and real image of that unique unity which makes of the Church the indivisible Mystical Body of the Lord Jesus."⁶

So both ecumenical and marital spirituality alike require on our part openness to, and a total reliance upon, the Spirit who is the bond of unity and love. It is the Holy Spirit who calls the divided church communities into the one ecumenical movement; it is the Spirit who calls two separate persons to become one body in marriage. We can only prepare the way for the work of the Spirit, and learn to recognise the Spirit's gift and action within us and between us. Unity is not something that we do or achieve, either between church communities or married partners; it is something done in us by the Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit initiates the work of ecumenism, we can trust that the Spirit will carry it through to the end. "As the living We between the Father and the Son in the inner life of God, the Holy Spirit also becomes the creative We between the triune God and us Christians and the liberating We between Christians and Christian churches: so that ecumenical relationships too become more spiritual."⁷ It is the same for marriage. For married persons it is "as a couple together that they live the life of the Spirit and find the fullness of their identity in the presence of God. ... God abides *in* the marriage relationship itself, and the communion of the spouses with one another is, at the same time, communion with God."⁸

A Spirituality of Communion

Both ecumenical and marital spirituality are concerned with growing into deeper communion – with realising ever more fully the communion that already exists through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Both are concerned with holding diversity in unity, so that differences are not ironed out but brought together into a greater whole. Both are about valuing diversity, while not allowing differences to harden into division. A new larger identity is to be formed, so that differences remain, but not separation.

⁴ Unitatis Redintegratio, 1, 2, 24; available from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html; accessed 15 February 2007.

⁵ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), 13, 21; available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html; accessed 15 February 2007.

⁶ *Familiaris Consortio*, 19.

⁷ Koch, "Rediscovering the Soul of the whole Ecumenical Movement," 36.

⁸ Monica Sandor, "The Rise of Marital Spirituality", *INTAMS review* 10 (2004): 153-176, here 153-154.

Both speak of a common journey, of travelling together. The starting point is signified by baptism, but baptism "is only a beginning, for it is wholly directed toward the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ."⁹ The ecumenical journey is seen as a movement towards that fullness of faith, church-belonging and eucharistic communion. The separated church communities are called to commit themselves to travel it together. Married partners too are called to travel together; in their marriage they weave their separate baptismal lives into a new reality (a baptismal "con-vocation"¹⁰) in which they are called and committed to bringing one another to that fullness of life in Christ. There is an end to the journey in this world – marriage requires a total and unconditional commitment¹¹, but it is "until death us do part." Ecumenical spirituality means "to grow towards full communion in truth and in love."¹² But already in both there is an anticipation of, and a participation in, what is beyond.

Married couples travel together as disciples of Christ, sharing all that they are and have, but they remain distinct persons. "At the heart of their love both partners have to discover – often painfully – that their partner always remains 'the other', not the product of their dreams and projections, but a person to be respected absolutely in his/her individuality. This often requires long practice and patient perseverance. Marriage as process requires that the two partners talk about their legitimate needs, appreciate one another's desires, recognise and formulate them with clarity, without wounding or dominating."¹³ Equally, "ecumenical spirituality is a shared pilgrimage." It "knows no one-way streets, only two-way traffic.... True ecumenism occurs whenever the particularity and uniqueness of other Christian churches and ecclesial communities become a bridge to mutual understanding rather than a barrier. ... Ecumenical spirituality is therefore at heart a reciprocal exchange of different gifts, in order that the beauty and richness of the Christian faith may be lived more clearly and more credibly."¹⁴

In a spirituality of communion both partners are equal. "The unity of marriage will radiate from the equal personal dignity of husband and wife, a dignity acknowledged by mutual and total love."¹⁵ This links up with the "par cum pari" of the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism – in theological discussions each must "treat with the other on an equal footing."¹⁶ In Northern Ireland the phrase used is "parity of esteem" where Catholic and Protestant communities are concerned – it can refer as well to ecumenical relationships as to marriage.¹⁷

A spirituality of communion means that we are so closely bonded that we become part of one another. Referring to the experience of marriage Mary Anne McPherson Oliver puts it like this. "Though couples do indeed, like celibates, breathe, eat and die alone, they cannot say, in the

⁹ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 22.

¹⁰ Carlo Rocchetta, "Marriage as a Sacrament: Towards a New Theological Conceptualization," *INTAMS review* 2 (1996): 5-22, here 9.

¹¹ Greshake, "L'unique esprit et les multiples spiritualités," 147-148.

¹² John Paul II, *Ut unum sint* (1995), 14, available from http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0221/_INDEX.HTM; accessed 15 February 2007.

¹³ Greshake, "L'unique esprit et les multiples spiritualités," 147.

¹⁴ Koch, "Rediscovering the Soul of the whole Ecumenical Movement," 37.

¹⁵ *Familiaris Consortio*, 19.

¹⁶ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 10.

¹⁷ Tom Layden, "Parity of Esteem," *Interchurch Families*, 10, no .2 (2002): 2-3.

same way that celibates do, that they stand alone before God. ... It is not as though another were always present with the self and God in some eternal triangle, but that the self is in some sense another in addition to being itself. Before God the coupled person stands alone only partially and physically."¹⁸ Referring to the ecumenical experience Pope John Paul II explained:

A spirituality of communion means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore of those 'who are part of me'. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship. A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a 'gift for me'. A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to 'make room' for our brothers and sisters, bearing 'each other's burdens' (Gal.6:2) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy. Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, 'masks' of communion rather than its means of expression and growth.¹⁹

Cardinal Kasper comments on this passage, that although without such a spirituality, institutional ecumenism becomes a machine without a soul, yet 'with such a spirituality of communion the very goal of the ecumenical movement is anticipated. It will not be a uniform church, but a unity within legitimate diversity, a unity according to the model of the Trinity: one God in three persons, existing in an intimate exchange of love.'²⁰

The Trinitarian Model of Unity

Both ecumenical and marital spirituality stress participation in the life of the Holy Trinity, though this is perhaps a more recent stress for the spirituality of marriage. Abbé Paul Couturier²¹ founded the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in its current form in the 1930s. He spoke of Christ praying his prayer for unity to his Father within the hearts and lives of his disciples, who are divided in their church-belonging but already united in that prayer by the power of the Holy Spirit. His insights lay behind the words of the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism when it commended spiritual ecumenism, indicating that union with the Father, the Word and the Spirit is the source of mutual brotherly love. "This change of heart and holiness of life," it continued, "along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name 'spiritual ecumenism'."²² Christ prayed

¹⁸ Mary Anne McPherson Oliver, "Conjugal Spirituality (or Radical Proximity): A New Form on Con-templation," *Spirituality Today* 43 (1991): 53-67, here 54.

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte* (2001), 43; available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte_en.html; accessed 15 February 2007.

²⁰ Walter Kasper, *That They May All Be One: The Call to Unity* (London: Burns & Oates, 2004) 168.

²¹ Geoffrey Curtis, *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ* (Westminster, MD: J.W. Eckenrode, 1964).

²² *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 7-8.

to his Father for his disciples "that they may be one as we are one" – they are to be drawn into the trinitarian life of love between Father, Son and Spirit, into a life of diversity within unity. The Church can only be "an icon of the Trinity" if it understand its unity from an ecumenical perspective as unity in diversity and as diversity in unity. The goal of "visible unity, not a uniform church ... must be fundamental to ecumenical spirituality."²³

There is no direct correlation between the trinitarian heading given in Koch's identification of the characteristics of ecumenical spirituality and any of the sections of Greshake's list of the fundamental components of marital spirituality. *Familiaris Consortio* states that God is love and in himself lives a mystery of personal loving communion; in creating humanity in his own image God inscribed in the humanity of men and women the vocation, capacity and responsibility of love and communion.²⁴ This is not however worked out in terms of married relationships. Jack Dominian makes a brief reference to marriage as reflecting the loving, life-giving relationship at the heart of the Trinity,²⁵ but he and other writers have focused much more on the self-giving love of Christ for the Church when writing on marital spirituality. In his later writings Carlo Rocchetta does however consider one of the actions of the Spirit in marriage as "moulding the marital community as communion in the image of the Trinity."²⁶ Monica Sandor has recently pointed out that an authentic spirituality of marriage "is attuned to the ways in which daily married life mirrors the great life of the triune God." She shows however that this is a more recent theme alongside the more common analogy to the union of Christ and the Church.²⁷

Conversion, Forgiveness and Reconciliation

So far we have been considering both ecumenical and married spirituality mainly in terms of the ideal: a response to the call of the Spirit to live in ever-deepening communion modelled on the relationships of love within and between the three Persons of the Trinity. But we do not live in an ideal world, and the reality is that communion is constantly being broken and impaired. The endeavour to live a common life and move forward together on a common journey means accepting the inevitability of many failures and setbacks. God is always faithful to us, but we are constantly breaking faith with God and with one another. We are in constant need therefore of reconciliation with God and with each other. Conflicts and quarrels are part of married life and of the ecumenical journey alike. On-going conversion, repentance and forgiveness are necessary to both.

The Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism speaks of Christ summoning the Church to continual reformation as she goes her pilgrim way,²⁸ and declares that "there can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion."²⁹ Therefore, it continues, "we

²³ Koch, "Rediscovering the Soul of the whole Ecumenical Movement," 37.

²⁴ *Familiaris Consortio*, 11.

²⁵ Jack Dominian, *Marriage, Faith and Love* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), 261.

²⁶ Carlo Rocchetta, "The Holy Spirit and Marriage", *INTAMS review* 4 (1998): 174-186, here 179.

²⁷ Sandor, "The Rise of Marital Spirituality", 163.

²⁸ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

should pray to the Holy Spirit for the grace to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others." We have already seen that "change of heart" is central to spiritual ecumenism, and John Paul II points out that "the entire Decree on Ecumenism is permeated by the spirit of conversion."³⁰ This means acknowledging our own weaknesses and defects, and searching for what steps our own church can take towards others in the current situation rather than demanding of them that they take steps that are not at present practicable for them. Long before he became Pope, Benedict XVI formulated as a rule of ecumenical life "not to seek to impose upon the other anything that at this time threatens him at the core of his Christian identity."³¹ To know what this might be requires recognition of the other as other. It can be a really painful process, and yet at the same time a joyous one. "In my recognition of the other I undergo the pain and the joy of my own change, not in order to assimilate to the other, but in order to empathise with the other."³²

The ecumenical movement came into being because ecclesial communion has been broken, and the brokenness has become institutionalised. Conflict and indifference has already led to separation between Christian groups; the ecumenical effort seeks to receive once more the gift of unity that is God-given and therefore cannot be totally lost. Spiritual ecumenism is concerned with the spiritual conditions necessary for the re-reception of that gift. In a married relationship conflict and indifference can eventually lead to separation and divorce. Marital spirituality is concerned with preserving and deepening the communion that has been given, in spite of the mini-breaks that can occur all the time as two different individuals live their lives together. If the small tensions and hurts are not dealt with, they can become over time enormous problems that the partners can no longer live with together. So there is a constant need to grow in understanding of one another, to repent of and to forgive the inevitable hurts, and to be ready to begin all over again. "This willingness constantly to begin again, to accept one another and support one another, is far more important in the marriage relationship than in the life of an individual who is alone. Thus it would seem to me that to live reconciliation, drawing strength from the cross and resurrection of Christ, is one of the most essential elements of marital spirituality."³³

Living Invisible Things in Visible Signs

The sacramentality of marriage calls the spouses to discover and to live the love of God in loving one another in a special way. Their bodies and their sexuality become a language in which their mutual love is expressed. Thus bodily signs are very important for marital spirituality – and this is what is characteristic of a sacrament. Through these signs the spouses are invited to discover something more profound, something of the love of God. "To discover and live what is invisible in visible signs: this is precisely the spiritual dimension that the spouses live with particular intensity, for they are united in a sacrament – where the visible sign points to an invisible

³⁰ *Ut unum sint*, 35.

³¹ Joseph Ratzinger, "Zum Fortgang der Ökumene: Brief an den Moderator dieses Heftes," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 166, no. 4 (1986): 243-248, quoted in Koch, 39.

³² Jürgen Moltmann, "Die Entdeckung der Anderen: Zur Theorie des kommunikativen Erkennens," *Evangelische Theologie* 50 (1990): 400.

³³ Greshake, "L'unique esprit et les multiples spiritualités," 147.

reality."³⁴ "Where the flesh is one, one is the spirit," as *Familiaris Consortio* quotes from Tertullian.³⁵

There is a parallel stress on the shared sacrament of baptism as a foundation of ecumenical spirituality. Baptism is the visible sign that Christ has received us, and so we in turn are called to receive one another reciprocally as baptised Christians. "Mutual recognition as baptised Christians and reciprocal encouragement to live as baptised Christians is the innermost core of ecumenical spirituality. ... Mutual recognition of baptism demonstrates that, despite the existing divisions, a fundamental communion already exists."³⁶ The whole ecumenical effort is devoted to extending the visible signs of that already existing communion, until finally we shall all be able "to join in celebrating the one eucharist of the Lord"³⁷. The goal is visible unity that can be a sign to the world of God's love for all humankind.

We have to recognise, of course, that visible signs will never be perfect representations of the invisible realities to which they point. Thus both ecumenical spirituality and married life point to a reality beyond themselves and beyond this world; they point forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb when all divisions will be overcome and God will be all in all.

2. The Contribution of Interchurch Couples to Marital Spirituality

So far we have accomplished a brief overview of some of the basic similarities and common approaches between the spirituality of marriage and spiritual ecumenism. A spirituality for interchurch marriage draws on both. The challenge for interchurch families is to *live* the relationship between them – to become "a practical laboratory of unity" in the words of Pope Benedict XVI. In so doing they may perhaps be able to begin to see how far one can contribute to the other.

In other words, how can marital spirituality be applied to the ecumenical journey? And how can ecumenical spirituality make a contribution to marriage? Does the experience of interchurch family living have something to offer to both? Is there something specific that interchurch marital spirituality has to offer to spiritual ecumenism on the one hand, and to a spirituality of marriage on the other?

Very briefly, I would suggest that interchurch family experience underlines the priority of the spiritual both in ecumenism and in marriage. Communion in the Holy Spirit is more important than anything else. To both ecumenism and marriage it brings a trinitarian reference; it strengthens the trinitarian model for marital spirituality. It stresses the centrality of personal relationships in the search for Christian unity, and offers marriage as a model for the ecumenical search. It stresses the value of diversity in marital spirituality, and urges that all opportunities of valuing difference and living it in marriage should be maximised. Unity in diversity and difference lived in unity: this is the contribution of interchurch marriage.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁵ *Familiaris Consortio*, 13.

³⁶ Koch, "Rediscovering the Soul of the whole Ecumenical Movement," 38.

³⁷ *Ut unum sint*, 45.

There are many kinds of interchurch couples – those who "share the sacraments of baptism and marriage," as the 1993 Ecumenical Directory describes them.³⁸ We know that many of these will not be in church on a Sunday, while others will find it normal for the partners to worship in different churches. If I speak of "interchurch spouses" or "interchurch families" without qualification in what follows, I am referring to a *particular kind of interchurch family*. Both husband and wife "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."³⁹

Vocation to Share the Sacraments of Baptism and Marriage

Interchurch spouses usually have a strong sense of vocation, with a firm belief that they have been *called* to marry one another, and that this is an on-going call. Their marriage is greatly strengthened by this conviction. Here is something they can bring to marital spirituality. Because their churches are not in communion with one another they realise before they marry that they will face particular difficulties. It sometimes takes them a long time to make the decision to marry; they realise that they can move forward only if they are convinced that they are called to marry by God. Some Christians are able to switch their church allegiance at this point (or later) for the sake of their married unity. These interchurch partners, however, do not feel called to give up their original church-belonging. Instead, they want to bring together into their marriage all that they are and have through their different church traditions and to share this and live it together. They want their one family – their "domestic church" – to be nourished by both their church communities. They want their marriage to be significant – albeit in a very small way – for the coming together of their churches in the ecumenical process. As the notion of "domestic church" finds its proper place as a theological category in ecclesiology, will interchurch Christian families be appreciated for their ecumenical significance? – asks Florence Bourg in a survey of the literature on "domestic church".⁴⁰

Marriage as a Model for Christian Unity

Marriage is a biblical model for the Church; it stands as a sign of God's love for God's people, for Christ's love for the Church. The married relationship can also be taken as a model for the ecumenical process of growing together as churches and ecclesial communities. The way in

38 Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (1993), 160; available from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_25031993_principles-and-norms-on-ecumenism_en.html; accessed 15 February 2007.

³⁹ *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* (London, Association of Interchurch Families, 2004), 2; available from: http://www.interchurchfamilies.org/confer/rome2003/documents/roma2003_en.pdf; accessed 15 February 2007.

⁴⁰ Florene Caffrey Bourg, "Domestic Church: A Survey of the Literature", *INTAMS review* 7 (2001): 182-193, here 190.

which the spouses grow together in marriage is the same process as that by which the churches grow together towards unity. The spouses live together under one roof in mutual love, growing into an intimate knowledge of one another, within a life-long commitment of faithfulness. They share everything with one another, all that they have been given, and above all, themselves. They practice mutual respect, gratitude and forgiveness. They work hard to understand one another. They share a common mission and ministry. The churches themselves are called to grow into this kind of relationship, so that they are able to re-receive God's gift of unity.

In interchurch families things can go a little faster; indeed they have to, for theirs is a shorter time-span and they are pushed into making decisions with an urgency unknown to the churches. Yet God's time for us all is *now*, and churches, like married partners, move backward if they are not taking whatever forward steps they can at any particular time. The contribution that interchurch families can make to Christian unity has been spelled out in the central section of a paper adopted by the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families held near Rome in 2003. They live in one another's traditions, and they grow in mutual understanding as they learn to see things from another point of view. They are visible signs of unity to their churches, and family celebrations with ministers and congregations from both their church communities participating, can be "catalysts that move others to see the importance and the joy of Christian unity."⁴¹

Their ability to anticipate, in a certain sense, a unity that their churches have not yet realised can of course be experienced by the churches as a threat to their identity. But this is common to all cross-frontier marriages; they are inevitably subversive, a threat to the identity of their distinct communities, and the stronger the sense of self-identity in a particular community, the greater appears the threat. So the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, as well as some of the smaller Protestant communities who hardly regard other Christians as true Christians at all, have the greatest problems with mixed marriages, and surround them with restrictive laws. Interchurch families struggle to understand the values behind these norms, and how they may be applied in a way that supports the married partnership rather than dividing the spouses.

Living Diversity in Communion

So far the interchurch family movement has given far more thought to the contribution that interchurch marriages can make to spiritual ecumenism, to the ecumenical journey, than it has to the contribution it might make to the spirituality of marriage. There is much reflection to be done here. Can the two-church element in such marriages, as interchurch couples experience it, throw light in some way on the Christian vocation of marriage?

In 1992 a conference was held in Northern Ireland organised by the Commission on Marriage and Interpersonal Relations of the International Union of Family Organisations; it brought together members of thirty-seven organisations from eighteen countries to study "Marriage across Frontiers." Participants looked at marriages which cross national, ethnic and faith frontiers of all kinds. Every marriage of course crosses frontiers of gender and family culture. But one of the findings of the conference was that differences of nationality, ethnicity and religion can highlight collective aspects of the nature of marriage which are easily overlooked, especially by cultures which stress the value of individual choice. Thus studying

⁴¹ *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*, 6-9.

them can contribute to our understanding of marriage itself. The chairman's report concluded that "the essence of the meeting will have been lost if this report encourages cross-frontier marriages to be separated from other marriages and regarded as problematic or especially vulnerable. One of the valuable outcomes of the meeting was the insight that they enrich our understanding of marriage as a whole."⁴² So may it not be that the study of interchurch marital spirituality will contribute to our understanding of the spirituality of marriage?

All interchurch couples are different, unique. But early in their relationship interchurch partners often find that religious differences loom large – for their communities and families, even if not so much for them as a couple. They realise that they talk with one another a great deal about this, and often believe that they communicate much sooner on a deeper spiritual level than they would if they had been thinking of marrying someone in their own church, whose church-belonging and background could be taken for granted. As they struggle to discover where they differ, and where they simply misunderstand one another, they come to a conviction that they cannot differ at the most fundamental level, where their life is hidden with Christ in God.

They often find that when they struggle to communicate they are expressing the same spiritual realities but from different perspectives, with different emphases and with different language. This is a source of great joy and enrichment. They find that it enhances their own understanding of their own tradition. You often hear interchurch partners say that they are *better* Catholics/Anglicans/Methodists etc. than they would be if they had married someone of their own tradition. They have had to go so much more deeply into understanding their own beliefs and practices in order to explain them to their partner. It takes them together to the heart of their faith. This does not rule out personal preferences in styles of expression or worship – just as these exist in one-church families. These do not need to be divisive. I can think of one Catholic family which attends a solemn high mass one week, because that is what the husband likes to do, and a guitar mass the next, because that is what the wife prefers.

There is not only a desire to understand, but also a firm intention to share the riches of both traditions in their family life, so far as they are able. A rhythm of prayer, Bible-reading and simple home liturgies will be worked out differently by different couples. On more public occasions a double loyalty begets a double blessing, as for example when the partners have worked together to create something new for their wedding service, for their child's blessing or baptism, drawing on both traditions and with the participation of both extended families, ministers and communities. They cannot imagine how a one-church ceremony would mean quite as much to them. They share together in public worship in both communities as far as they can. This inevitably raises the question of eucharistic sharing, which for some spouses is as important as their sexual union in expressing their married commitment. It is equally an expression of an invisible reality in a visible sign. There is a witness that has come quite independently from different parts of the world – interchurch spouses who have held hands at the eucharist after communion, when they have not been able to share it together, a physical sign of their shared communion in the Spirit. They continue even when they find themselves able to share communion, a sign of their shared thanksgiving. For some couples eucharistic sharing is possible most of the time; for others it is limited to rare occasions. This is a central concern for many interchurch families, but at the end of the day the *most* important thing is that they share

⁴² Christopher Clulow, "Marriage across Frontiers: National, Ethnic and Religious Differences in Partnership," *Sexual and Marital therapy* 8, no. 1 (1993): 81-87 (also published in *Catholic Marriage Advisory Council Bulletin*, 33, no. 129 (1993): 9-12).

communion in the Spirit, who continues to be with them as they live together their ordinary everyday lives. This conviction strengthens them to give what is sometimes an amazing quality of support to one another in their respective church loyalties.

Thus a strength of vocation, a depth of communication, a breadth of sharing, and a dependable mutual support in the partners' diversity are particular notes of interchurch marital spirituality that can perhaps contribute to our understanding of the spirituality of marriage.

Suggestions for further reading:

The main sources at present are interchurch family reviews such as *Foyers Mixtes* published in Lyon, France, and *Interchurch Families*, London (Newsletter from 1982; Journal from 1993). Some of the articles published between 1984 and 1999 have been brought together in a pack entitled *Spirituality for Interchurch Couples and Families* available from the Association of Interchurch Families, London. Most of these can be found on the Interchurch Families international web-site: www.interchurchfamilies.org. Later articles can also be found there.

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