

UNITY IN DIFFERENCE

Spiritual Challenges in Interchurch Family Life

Ruth Reardon

In your country, there are many marriages between Catholics and other baptized Christians. Sometimes these couples experience special difficulties. To these families I say: You live in your marriage the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity. Express that hope in prayer together, in the unity of love. Together invite the Holy Spirit of love into your hearts and into your homes. He will help you to grow in trust and understanding.

These were the words that Pope John Paul II addressed to interchurch families during his homily at the Service for the Family held at York in 1982, as part of his visit to Britain. Interchurch family life is a microcosm of the ecumenical movement. Here the married partners are called—like everyone else—to live in love together, open to the work of the Spirit. Interchurch family spirituality, therefore, draws both on marital spirituality and on ecumenical spirituality. The special vocation of interchurch families is to weave the two together.

The fundamental spiritual challenge of an interchurch marriage is for the partners to respond to God's call to be one Church at home, while at the same time remaining faithful members of two Churches (both in the sense of denominations and of local congregations). Many have also taken on the challenge of being as fully related to both their communities, as a couple and as a family, as they possibly can. It is this particular kind of interchurch couple and family that I am considering here. They are consciously 'living the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity', and 'inviting the Holy Spirit of love into their hearts and into their homes'. I am not writing in general terms of all

those who ‘share the sacraments of baptism and marriage’.¹ We know that many of those who ‘share the sacraments of baptism and marriage’ will not be in church on a Sunday, while some others will find it normal for the partners to worship in different Churches. I am writing of those who are worshipping together, at least quite often, and who wish to integrate their children into that dual pattern of worship.

The Context: the Second Vatican Council

This kind of dual pattern only became possible—even conceivable—for Roman Catholics after Vatican II. All Churches have in the past discouraged mixed marriages between Christians of different denominations, to a greater or lesser degree. But some Churches, notably the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches, have forbidden them. How can the members of the one true Church marry heretics? If it is necessary to tolerate the practice, this can only be done on condition that there is pressure on the spouse to convert, and that all the children of the marriage are brought up within the Church of the Catholic or Orthodox parent.

Vatican II created a totally new context

Vatican II created a totally new context for marriages between Roman Catholics and other Christians, moving beyond this restrictive way of thinking. The Roman Catholic Church officially committed itself to the ecumenical movement. Other Christians were given positive recognition: their Christian life was of value; their Christian consciences were to be respected. Their baptism was recognised as valid baptism. They were baptized into Christ, and therefore into the Church of Christ. The Church of Christ was no longer identified exclusively as the Roman Catholic Church. The Holy Spirit had used other Churches and ecclesial communities as means of salvation.

It suddenly became possible to envisage a more equal relationship between Catholics and other Christians—and this was very important when it came to mixed marriages. The partners could no longer be treated as though one of them possessed the whole truth and the other simply had to yield to their demands. At the same time, a real unity in

¹ This phrase is applied to mixed marriages between Christians in the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (Vatican City: Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 1993), often known as the *Ecumenical Directory*, n. 160.

baptism and faith was recognised as possible. It worked both ways. If the Roman Catholic Church could see mixed marriages between baptized Christians in a more positive light, so could other Churches. There was no longer going to be such discouragement for the partners from both their Churches.

The significant breakthrough came in 1970 with the publication of the papal *motu proprio* entitled *Matrimonia mixta*. The Catholic spouse was to promise to avoid dangers to their own faith, but not specifically to try to convert their partner. No longer did both partners have to promise that their children would be brought up as Catholics; the Catholic alone had to promise to do all in his or her power to have all the children baptized and brought up in the Roman Catholic Church.

This change meant that partners who were equally attached to their own Churches, and might well have renounced marriage while the earlier rules were in force, were able to marry. Indeed, they were able to see their marriage as in some small way significant for the coming together of the two church communities that they loved. The *motu proprio* itself allowed that, in some cases, mixed marriages could contribute towards Christian unity.² It became possible for Roman Catholics and other Christians to marry one another with this in mind; it became possible for those already married to assume this as a new mission within their partnership.

A Vocation to Share the Sacraments of Baptism and Marriage

Christian marriage in its fullness is lived as a response to God's call to a man and a woman to weave together their baptismal lives in the new life of the married relationship. As with baptism, marriage is a once-for-all sacrament, but the call is a continuing one that requires a response day by day.

A man and a woman are called into a relationship of reciprocal love that both gives of self and welcomes the other. It is a relationship that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is caught up into the love of the Trinity and becomes a sign of the love with which Christ loves the Church (Ephesians 5).

² It expressed this in a negative form: 'Mixed marriages ... do not, except in some cases, help in re-establishing unity among Christians'. Text taken from the edition published by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1970), introduction, paragraph b).

Carlo Rochetta has pointed out that the sacrament of marriage is a baptismal con-vocation that finds its meaning and fulfilment in the eucharist:

Through their marriage the spouses participate no longer as individuals, but as a couple, in the paschal event which realises the covenant of Christ with the Church The spouses surrender themselves, as a couple, to the dynamism of the paschal process, so that the whole of their conjugal existence becomes a paschal event The meaning of the matrimonial event is revealed and accomplished, in a perennial manner, by the mystery of the eucharist In the mutual gift of one to the other, the spouses agree to put into practice a reciprocal donation modelled exactly upon that of Christ in the eucharist, and thus they manifest and realise, for their own part, the mystery of the Church as the bride of Christ There is therefore a two-fold relationship: the eucharist is a sacramental manifestation of the essence of Christian marriage, while Christian marriage represents a form of 'realised eucharist'.³

In the 1960s young people wanting to marry did not have the benefit of this kind of post-Vatican II reflection. They were able to understand, however, that a call to share the sacrament of marriage, as well as that of baptism, needed to be a very clear one if they might never be able to share the sacrament of the eucharist together. For many it was not an easy or a quick decision. There was a sense that there was something very special about this call, and that it was linked to the growing together of the Church communities to which the partners respectively belonged.

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'Before we married we were quite ordinary Christians', wrote one Anglican husband, who was married in 1967. Afterwards, he explained, there was a feeling of being something quite special as a couple, a sense of having a particular ecumenical vocation. This couple had married in the bride's church in Italy, and the Anglican bridegroom had been given permission to receive communion at the wedding. He told his story at the first nationwide meeting of interchurch couples in England, held at Spode House in 1968, to the

³ Carlo Rochetta, 'Marriage as a Sacrament: Towards a New Theological Conceptualisation', *Intams Review*, 2 (1996), 5-22, here 9.

amazement of the little group gathered there. The final point of the 1968 Spode statement read:

Mixed marriage couples are very conscious that doctrinal agreements between Churches are not the only way in which we can progress in Christian unity. These are important, but they can only be an attempt to formulate lived Christian experience as divided Christians are drawn together into that communion of love with which the Father loves the Son, with which Christ loves the Church. It is not surprising therefore that it should be given to some mixed marriage couples and families to experience the reality of Christian unity in a way which has not yet been experienced by all the members of their Churches. The question must be raised of the relationship of this lived experience to eucharistic communion.⁴

Together in a Reciprocal Partnership

Interchurch families have been conscious of their lived experience as something unique, and of their need to articulate it and make sense of it. They have found that few who have not been members of interchurch families can readily understand it. But the little group that gathered at Spode House in 1968 was fortunate in having among them Fr John Coventry SJ, then secretary of the recently-formed Catholic Bishops' Ecumenical Commission for England and Wales. He both understood and supported these couples, and indeed encouraged and accompanied them until his death in 1998. As a pastor, he wanted to respond to their felt needs. As a theologian, he believed that theology sprang from Christian experience, and as an ecumenist he saw that the experience of these couples had something to offer the theologians—a raw material to be shaped and used.

One of the problems of interchurch couples is that of living together in love in an equal partnership, especially if either of the groups from which they come feels superior to the other. Sometimes, of course, society decides that they cannot do so. In parts of Africa it is such an established social custom for the woman to take on the identity of the man whom she marries that both Catholic and Protestant wives have long been obliged to 'convert' to their husbands'

⁴The complete Spode statement is found in *One in Christ*, 2 (1969), 202-204, here 204.

Church.⁵ Sometimes society proposes its own solutions. In nineteenth-century Ireland it was a firmly established custom for the girls of a mixed-marriage family to belong to the Church of their mother, and the boys to that of their father.

In terms of their religious identity, Catholics and Protestants who want to marry do come from unequal backgrounds. Even after Vatican II and *Matrimonia mixta*, the fact remains that the Roman Catholic Church understands itself to be 'the Church' in a way that Protestant and Anglican Churches would never claim to be. Can the married partners therefore really live together on an equal footing, in religious terms?

A similar problem faced the French priest Abbé Paul Couturier in the 1930s: how could Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Christians really pray together? He grasped the importance of common prayer for unity across all the divided Christian traditions. How would this be possible? At that time, Catholics had an Octave of Prayer for the Unity of all Christians around the See of Peter. Only Roman Catholics could really participate in such prayer, together with a few high Anglicans who were already convinced of the central role of the papacy. How could all Christians pray together on equal terms? His formula, 'prayer for the unity that Christ wills, to come as he wills it', made it possible for all Christians everywhere to pray together, both during the Week of Prayer and throughout the rest of the year. They might differ in doctrine and theology, but they could be united at a deeper level in Christ's own prayer for unity. They could already pray together in psychological equality, even though some made ecclesiological claims that would seem to exclude others. All were united in the love of Christ and the desire to do his will. By a great movement of common prayer, they could grow together in holiness. It was difficult for many Roman Catholics to accept Paul Couturier's intuition during his lifetime, but the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism recognised this 'spiritual ecumenism' as the heart of the whole ecumenical movement.⁶

⁵ Oskar Wermter, 'Interchurch Marriage and Freedom of Conscience in Zimbabwe', and Elaine and Les Leach, 'Interchurch Families in Zimbabwe', in *Interchurch Families*, 7/2 (Summer 1999), 4-7.

⁶ *Unitatis redintegratio*, n.8.



Interchurch Families: A Triptych, by Sr Regina OSB

*The sacraments of baptism and marriage; the family as domestic Church;
the final marriage supper of the Lamb*

The Decree also recognised that this psychological equality was necessary in theological work, where representatives from different Churches needed to be able to treat each other on an equal footing—*par cum pari*.⁷ Fr Tom Layden SJ has suggested that a phrase which has become current in civil society in Northern Ireland in recent years, ‘parity of esteem’, should be applied to church relations in Northern Ireland, and specifically to the Churches’ attitudes to ministering to mixed marriages.⁸ Pope John Paul II has recently applied the phrase ‘relations of parity and reciprocity’ to global solidarity;⁹ it could equally well be applied to interchurch couples.

Marriage requires a relationship of parity and reciprocity. It was this that Fr John Coventry grasped at Spode in 1968, where the two big questions being asked by couples were about the upbringing of children, and about unity in worship for couples and families. On the first, he spent time showing that the provisions of the Instruction *Matrimonii sacramentum* of 1966 allowed for the recognition of a much more equal responsibility between interchurch parents; this was

⁷ *Unitatis redintegratio*, n.9.

⁸ Tom Layden, ‘The Church and the Churches’, *The Way Supplement*, 101 (Summer 2001), 98-108.

⁹ In his message to the Caritas International Assembly, July 2003.

confirmed in the *motu proprio* of 1970. Many years later, the 1993 *Ecumenical Directory* explicitly recognised that the non-Catholic parent might feel a similar obligation to that of the Catholic.¹⁰ On the second question, he saw that it was good for married couples to worship together. He made it clear that he could not invite spouses who were not Roman Catholics to receive communion at mass; but neither did he feel obliged to refuse them if they presented themselves. If, in the context of marriage to a Catholic, they felt a need to come forward for communion, he would welcome them. They were free to come. He also made it clear that he expected Catholics to be present at the worship of their partners, something startlingly new in England in 1968. The experience of the need for reciprocal sharing of the eucharist came a little later. Many years passed before the 1993 *Ecumenical Directory* identified those who 'share the sacraments of baptism and marriage' as in possible need of eucharistic sharing, and allowed admission to communion for the other partner in certain cases and under certain conditions. Reciprocity was only to be practised when the orders of the celebrating minister were recognised by the Roman Catholic Church.¹¹

Freedom with Responsibility

Effectively, what Fr Coventry was offering to interchurch couples at Spode in 1968 was the freedom to make their own decisions in the light of their own Christian experience. But he asked them,

... to realise that official approval of eucharistic sharing in their case is not yet to be expected; it would be tantamount to generalising their personal Christian relationship and declaring that it existed between their Churches, when it does not.

He urged them,

... in forming their own decisions, to consider very carefully how they can best make their personally discovered and created Christian communion one that is fruitful for bringing their respective Churches closer, and so ensure that it is not taken right

¹⁰ *Ecumenical Directory*, n. 150.

¹¹ *Ecumenical Directory*, n. 160.

out of and isolated from their loyalty to their own Churches, and thus rendered barren.¹²

He was offering the freedom that would help couples and families on their way to God together, but he was also asking them to be responsible about making their experience fruitful for the whole Church and for Christian unity.

Exercising freedom responsibly is not always comfortable. For interchurch families it has meant going beyond what most people in the Churches have thought is permissible, even possible. However, as the late Bishop Francis Thomas of Northampton once told a group of them, 'going beyond the law is not necessarily going against it'. In many interchurch families there has been a constant struggle to decide when it is appropriate to use the freedom to 'go beyond the law', especially in the matter of eucharistic sharing, and when it is not. Every family is unique. Different decisions are made in apparently similar circumstances. There is an enormous amount of pain involved. But the pain is there to signal a real need. It is one of the specific notes of marital spirituality that the spouses are called 'to discover and live invisible things in visible signs'.¹³ Thus they experience the hurt in a particularly intense way; sharing eucharistic communion really matters to them because it is so fundamentally linked with their vocation to marriage. One of the worst things that can happen to interchurch couples is that the division between their Churches ceases to hurt because it ceases to matter.

When Fr Ladislav Örsy SJ addressed the international conference of interchurch families held in Virginia in 1996, he addressed this question of pain:

When I go back and people say: what did you see? I shall say: I saw the Church alive. Even *pain* speaks of *life*. Only living people can feel pain.

There are three integrities to be respected, he said, as God's saving action is brought into the domestic church. We must respect the integrity of God's saving action; this has absolute priority. We must

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¹² John Coventry, 'Ecclesial and Individual Intercommunion', *One in Christ* (1971), 1-6.

¹³ Gisbert Greshake, 'L'unique Éprit et les multiples spiritualités: que signifie dans ce contexte la "spiritualité du mariage"?' *Intams Review*, 2 (1996), 142-150, here 148.

respect the integrity of persons, letting them go at their own pace, as God does. Finally, we must respect the integrity of communities divided by historical circumstances, who make rules to protect their understanding of the Word and their identity; they too have to go at their own pace. These three integrities have to be in a unique balance in every single case—each situation is unique because it is concrete, particular and personal. Such balances can never be determined by law. In this complexity, said Fr Örsy, when we refuse conflict but strive for harmony and healing, suffering may become our daily nourishment. But suffering has meaning: this is a Christian insight. It goes so much against our nature that there was only one way of proclaiming it: God on the Cross. No great things are done without suffering. We may see a shortcut and not be able to take it because there are too many people in the way; it is no solution simply to push them aside.¹⁴

Using freedom responsibly for the healing of church divisions, expressing both the joy and hope of unity and the difficulties and pain of the road still to be travelled—this is the spiritual challenge for interchurch families. And this must be done without anger or resentment, fear or shame. A lot of the anxiety about what to do in particular circumstances can be dissolved by the advice of the late Oliver Tomkins, Bishop of Bristol. He was speaking to a Catholic priest who was debating whether or not he should receive communion at an Anglican celebration in a certain situation. ‘Well, if you do receive’, said Oliver Tomkins, ‘you will be witnessing to the unity we have already been given in Christ. If you do not receive, you will be witnessing to the great work of reconciliation that is still to be achieved. *And both are Gospel witnesses.*’¹⁵

Unity in the One Church of Christ

Like all Christians, interchurch families live in the tension of the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’. They are called to do so particularly in the context of Christian divisions. Abbé Paul Couturier saw that all Christians who prayed in Christ’s prayer that they should all be one were already united at a deep level in Christ. And if in Christ, then they were already united in a profound way in the Church of Christ.

¹⁴ ‘Interchurch Marriages and Reception of the Eucharist’, *Interchurch Families*, 5/1 (January 1997), 11.

¹⁵ Editorial, *Interchurch Families*, 7/2 (Summer 1999), 1.

One of the gifts of Fr John Coventry to interchurch families was to help them to begin to make this unity visible in the baptism of their children. Working with a Vatican II ecclesiology he arrived at this remarkable formula: what interchurch parents were asking for their children is 'baptism into the Church of Christ as it exists in the two Churches of the parents'. This did not mean that they were obliged to think of the two Churches as equal in the theological sense. The Catholic was free to believe that the Roman Catholic Church is 'more church' than that of their partner, for example, and the Protestant was free to see the reformed Churches as more faithful to the New Testament. But they and their children were already one in a very fundamental way in the Church of Christ, and there was a psychological equality between them, an equal parental responsibility.

It is this fundamental reality of experienced unity in the one Church of Christ that is the most important thing for interchurch families. It is a gift they have received in the context of their marriage. Marriage is a vocation to live 'communion in difference' through the Holy Spirit who,

... is in Himself the personal *synthesis* of the 'communion in difference' subsisting in the Trinity The Spirit is poured out on the spouses so that they may be in a position to realise themselves in a communion that avoids two potential but opposite dangers: that of eliminating differences, beginning with the man-woman specificity, or that of sharpening the differences and so shattering the communion. The Spirit wants to mould the marital community as communion in the image of the Trinity, in such a way that the man-woman bipolarity is concretised in a dimension of unity and communion which respects and values its particular qualities and leads to that 'one flesh' which is the profound meaning of marriage. The same applies to the differences in the personalities of the two spouses. It is not a question of eliminating differences arising from the good and distinctive characteristics unique to each partner, but of realising a positive dialectic that makes it possible to bring them into a lived experience of growth and reciprocal appreciation.¹⁶

Between the Churches, differences have been sharpened and communion has been impaired. There is still an underlying

¹⁶ Carlo Rochetta, 'The Holy Spirit and Marriage', *Intams Review*, 4 (1998), 174-186, here 179.

communion that is indeed real, but it is not fully realised.¹⁷ In marriage, spouses can come closer to realising it than their Churches have yet done corporately. They can enter experientially and deeply into one another's traditions, and find their own Christian identity confirmed and enriched in the process.

They have tried to describe their experience as couples and families by using the term 'double belonging'—not claiming dual membership in any canonical sense, but expressing the fact that they have come to feel at home and indeed to be at home in both communities. This sense of double belonging lies behind shared celebrations of baptism for the children of interchurch families. It is why interchurch families also share eucharistic communion when this is possible. It is why some of the children of interchurch families strongly desire to complete their Christian initiation in the context of both the Church communities of their parents.

In all these ways, interchurch families have accepted the challenge of trying to express the invisible things that they have discovered in their lives together in visible signs. They are living the hopes, as well as the difficulties, of the path to Christian unity.

Ruth Slade (a Roman Catholic laywoman) married Martin Reardon (an Anglican priest) in 1964. In 1968 they became founder-members of the Association of Interchurch Families, and Ruth was Secretary until 2000.

¹⁷ *Ecumenical Directory*, n. 129.