

# Conjugal and Ecclesial Communion in Interchurch Marriage

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## 1. Interchurch Marriages – Laboratories of Christian Unity?

While addressing the member churches of the Polish Ecumenical Council, Pope Benedict XVI declared in 2006 that the decision to enter an interchurch marriage “can lead to the formation of a *practical laboratory of unity*”.<sup>1</sup> Is a laboratory not a place where people put all their energy to search for new insights, experimenting with new ideas, new methods, new instruments, and eventually make new and fascinating discoveries which may have the potential to alter previous understanding and practice? So, what the pope seems to suggest is: go and invent, get new ideas, experiment with them, take risks, and although no one knows yet what the solution will be and how to get there, have faith that there is there something worth all the effort – namely the unity of all Christians! But what if our “interchurch researchers” will really get there one day and cry out their *eureka!* – “we have found it!”? Is there any chance that their findings will be hailed, accepted and received in the Catholic church and will ultimately make a difference?

In what follows, I will first summarize the position of the Catholic church with regard to interchurch marriages. I will try to show that the Catholic position imposes the Second Vatican Council’s idea of *real, yet imperfect communion* with the other Christian churches and ecclesial communities onto the conjugal relationship of interchurch couples. In this institutionally oriented approach, couples from different denominations can realize spousal unity only to the extent that the concerned church bodies are willing or able to admit ecclesial communion among their respective communities. It is obvious that “grass-roots” ecumenism is not given much credit in this perspective. The “ecumenism of life”, though, is exactly what interchurch families are increasingly discovering and claiming for themselves. In a second step I will therefore analyse the document *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* that was adopted by their World Gathering in 2003. In what can be qualified as an “experiential” approach, interchurch families admit that their spousal and family union is as imperfect as any

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<sup>1</sup> The text of the speech is available from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060525\\_incontro-ecumenico\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060525_incontro-ecumenico_en.html) (emphasis mine; accessed 10 July 2007).

other on a level of human achievement, but nonetheless realizes true spiritual and conjugal communion across the boundaries of separated churches and therefore cannot be without implications for the ecclesial bodies involved. Whether or not this approach must remain unacceptable for Catholic ecclesiology will be examined in a last part. For that purpose, I make reference to the concept of “domestic church” which Vatican II and post-conciliar theology have retrieved to underline the ecclesial status of marriage and family life. The key idea behind this concept is that conjugal communion is a genuine and legitimate form of ecclesial communion and that, on the basis of baptism, neither form of communion may claim precedence nor take priority over another. If Catholic ecclesiology could agree to apply the concept to interchurch marriages – and there are good reasons to do so –, new perspectives could be opened that would give interchurch families an ecclesial status within the Catholic church and likewise would enable them to become legitimate “builders of Christian unity” whereas to date they are more like pioneers in an unexplored area of ecclesial union which the institutional churches are so far unable to access.

## **2. The Catholic Church’s Perspective on Interchurch Marriages – Real yet Imperfect Communion**

The church’s primordial and pervading perspective on interchurch marriage is what I would call an *institutional* one. By this I mean that the spouses are primarily looked upon as members of the respective faith communities to which they belong. This approach corresponds to a commonly accepted definition of interchurch marriage. “The term ‘mixed marriage’ refers to any marriage between a Catholic and a baptized Christian who is not in full communion with the Catholic Church”, defines the 1993 Ecumenical Directory referring to the Code of Canon Law.<sup>2</sup> As is immediately clear from this definition, the individual spouses are treated here as representatives of the ecclesial communities of which they are members. Consequently, their marital union is subsumed under the category of *ecclesial communion* and falls under the norms and principles established to determine the sort and degree of communion a non-Catholic community may or may not have with the Catholic

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<sup>2</sup> Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (1993), 143 (hereafter referred to as DE); 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 10 July 2007); see also *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1983), can. 1142 (hereafter CIC 1983), available from [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_INDEX.HTM) (accessed 10 July 2007).

church. To determine the ecclesial status of an interchurch marriage, the 1970 *Motu proprio Matrimonia mixta* adopts the terminology which the Second Vatican Council had chosen to describe the Catholic church's relationship toward the separated Christian churches and communities: through marriage and shared faith in Christ and common baptism, a non-Catholic Christian enters into some *real, yet imperfect communion* with the Catholic church.<sup>3</sup> What to a common understanding appears as the joining of two individuals into a lifelong marital commitment becomes the affair of two ecclesial bodies.

How does this perspective determine the Catholic church's attitude toward interchurch marriages? A first observation is related to the role of shared faith in Christ and its expression in baptism. Undoubtedly, the council's recognition of common baptism as "a sacramental bond of unity"<sup>4</sup> has paved the way for a more welcoming attitude toward interchurch marriages. "Neither in doctrine nor in law", insists MM, "does the Church place on the same level a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic, and one between a Catholic and an unbaptized person" (Introduction). If one asks, however, what implications common baptism has on the conjugal relationship of interchurch couples, the official documents remain largely silent. According to MM, through baptism the non-Catholic spouse is "brought into a certain...communion with the Catholic church" (ibid.). This is true, however, for all non-Catholic baptized, whether they are married with a Catholic or not. We may conclude from here that in terms of communion, the marriage of an interdenominational couple does not add anything in particular to what can be lived in any ecumenical relationship between Catholics and any other non-Catholic persons. This would in any case confirm our initial presumption that the official stance regards interchurch marriages as ordinary cases of inter-church relations to which the current norms for ecclesial communion are to be applied. But we can also reverse the argument and conclude that in the Catholic view common baptism does not have any effect on the marital union of an interchurch couple that would allow for a deeper communion than that achievable between persons who have been baptized into different

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<sup>3</sup> "Neither in doctrine nor in law does the Church place on the same level a marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic, and one between a Catholic and an unbaptized person for, as the Second Vatican Council declared, men who, though they are not Catholics, 'believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church.'" Paul VI, *Motu proprio 'Matrimonia mixta'* (1970), Introduction (hereafter MM); available from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_motu-proprio\\_19700331\\_matrimonia-mixta\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19700331_matrimonia-mixta_en.html) (accessed 10 July 2007).

<sup>4</sup> *Decree on Ecumenism 'Unitatis redintegratio'*, 22; available from [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html) (accessed 10 July 2007).

particular churches. In both respects, the dominating institutional perspective prevents any further insight into the particularity of an ecumenical relationship in which the partners are not only united through common baptism, but in which such unity finds an additional expression in the bond of marriage.

A second observation is due to the fact that the Catholic church regards interchurch marriages as imperfect realizations of communion. Although tone and terminology have changed, the post-conciliar documents keep on pointing to the difficulties and risks of mixed marriages. A first warning is related to religious indifferentism,<sup>5</sup> a second to the harmony of the family itself that may be hazarded by virtue of divergent religious mentalities and differences of opinion in religious and moral question as well as in matters of church discipline.<sup>6</sup> The most urgent and powerful warning, however, is expressed with regard to what the documents interpret as spiritual communion of the married partners. Interchurch marriage is “by its nature an obstacle to the full spiritual communion of the married parties”, as MM puts it bluntly (1) having explained earlier that the church “discourages the contracting of mixed marriages, for she is the most desirous that Catholics be able in matrimony to attain to perfect union of mind and full communion of life” (Introduction). The term “full communion of life” obviously echoes the well-established definition of marriage as “*intima communitas vitae et amoris coniugal*is” in *Gaudium et spes*,<sup>7</sup> and with a similar connotation one reads in the 1993 Ecumenical Directory: “The perfect union of persons and full sharing of life which constitutes the married state are more easily assured when both partners belong to the same faith community” (DE 144).

This wording makes it difficult, if not impossible, to escape the conclusion that in the view of the Catholic church full conjugal communion requires ecclesial communion and that interchurch marriages are likely to miss the requirements of a *totius vitae consortium*<sup>8</sup>. This may seem a harsh conclusion, but it is consistent with an approach that regards the marriage

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<sup>5</sup> The 1993 Ecumenical Directory refers to practical experiences and observations suggesting that “mixed marriages frequently present difficulties for the couples themselves, and for the children born to them, in maintaining their Christian faith and commitment” (DE 144).

<sup>6</sup> “There is often a difference of opinion on the sacramental nature of matrimony, on the special significance of marriage celebrated within the Church, on the interpretation of certain moral principles pertaining to marriage and the family, on the extent to which obedience is due the Catholic Church, and on the competence that belongs to ecclesiastical authority” (MM, Introduction).

<sup>7</sup> *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World ‘Gaudium et spes’*, 48; available from [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) (accessed 10 July 2007).

<sup>8</sup> See CIC 1983, can. 1055 § 1.

between two Christians from different denominations exclusively as a matter of ecclesial belonging. In this perspective, the difficulties of mixed marriage “arise from the fact that the separation of Christians has not yet been overcome”.<sup>9</sup> And they will not disappear unless the full visible unity of all Christians has been re-established – or, put differently, unless all marriages are same-church marriages. One may wonder how long interchurch families will have to wait for that *sanatio in radice* of their conjugal relationship by means of the churches. The more important question in theological terms, however, is whether this position is in tune with the current theology of marriage. Ultimately, MM also concedes that “there exists in a marriage between baptized persons, since such a marriage is a true sacrament, a certain communion of spiritual benefits which is lacking in a marriage entered into by a baptized person and one who is not baptized” (Introduction).

### **3. How Interchurch Families See Themselves - Living in Imperfect yet Real Communion**

The Document “Interchurch Families and Christian Unity” that was adopted by the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families in 2003<sup>10</sup> in no way ignores or underestimates different church membership: interchurch partners “remain faithful members of two as yet divided church congregations in their neighbourhood, and two as yet divided ecclesial communions in the world” (B3). They have to live out what is called their “two-church character” (B1) and do not want to establish a “third church” alongside the institutional churches. While acknowledging in a realistic way that they are inescapably part of the bigger scenario of the divided Christian communities, the paper opts though for an inside perspective and focuses on the conjugal and family project that is at the basis of an interchurch marriage. As the partners “have come together in the covenant of marriage to form one Christian family”, they quite naturally also “grow into that unity” (A). It is precisely in describing that process of growth into communion and what it entails for the church communities involved that interchurch families provide a rich and compelling reading of their life and of the rapprochement they bring about between their respective congregations.

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<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1995, no. 1634; available from <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/INDEX.HTM> (accessed 10 July 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Available from [http://www.interchurchfamilies.org/confer/rome2003/documents/roma2003\\_en.pdf](http://www.interchurchfamilies.org/confer/rome2003/documents/roma2003_en.pdf) (accessed 10 July 2007). In the following, references to this document are given by indicating the main sections and its internal numbering (e.g. B1).

A key principle in this reading is what I would call a “marital hermeneutic” and is introduced as follows:

“The gifts given to all married couples are mutual love, a marriage covenant that supports it and helps it to grow, and a mutual knowledge that can be discovered only through living together in the closest proximity over a very long period...The partners start with two separate identities. They retain these all their lives, but by living together and mutual sharing they gradually build upon these a new family identity that their children inherit” (C1).

The latter is not less, but all the more true if the partners’ religious and spiritual identity has been formed in different faith communities with diverging traditions of worship, spirituality, teaching and authority. Forging a new pattern of Christian family life interchurch spouses become a “visible sign of unity” (C3), first by virtue of their marital union and second by a particular attitude of spiritual mutuality which brings also their communities of origin closer together. We will briefly look into both components in turn.

The Rome document does not cast any doubt on the full interpersonal communion that interchurch marriages are able to realize. In a short, but comprehensive account the cornerstones of the Christian ethos of marriage are exposed and claimed for its interchurch variant.<sup>11</sup> They include: - a mutual love that strives for deeper unity, - its formal expression in the marital covenant that “provides a support and framework”, - the “actual living together under the same roof” enabling the couple to enter into each other’s life and to know each other profoundly, - the sharing of resources for the benefit of the whole family, - the practicing of mutual forgiveness, - shared responsibility for the education of the children, and - a spirit of hospitality and sensitivity for the needs of others. One may regret that the document fails to refer to the conjugal union as an image of Christ’s unity with his church. Rooted in Holy Scriptures (Eph 5,21-33) and part of the common theological tradition of all Christian churches, this idea would have persuaded Catholics more easily that what is described here in terms of marital communion converges with the anthropological underpinnings that Catholic theology requires for sacramental marriage.

When it comes to spiritual communion, interchurch families report a very particular experience that they characterize as “mutual insertion and participation in the life of their two church communities” (C1). It starts when spouses incorporate attitudes and practices that were formerly distinctive of one or other ecclesial tradition into their new religious identity, but

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<sup>11</sup> See the listing (i-vii) in C3.

gradually engages them in a much more challenging process of mutual exploration and learning. The document describes the various elements and the particular dynamic that are characteristic for this learning process: Thus, initial ignorance and prejudice give way to a growing understanding and a mutual appreciation of each other's way of worship, church life, doctrine, spirituality, authority and ethics. On a more profound level, the "immersion in the ethos of a partner's community can enable a spouse to evaluate the other church in terms of its own language and ways of thought, action and being" (C2), thus making interchurch couples familiar with the basics of an ecumenical hermeneutic. Finally, by their very presence and participation in each other's congregation, interchurch spouses gradually build up an "interpersonal bridge of understanding and trust" (C4) and in this way contribute directly "to the formation of a connective tissue which supports, connects and heals parts of the Christian body that have been cut or broken in our sinful divisions" (ibid.).

As we can see, interchurch couples deem themselves capable of achieving full interpersonal and spiritual communion by virtue of their marital union. Their communion shares in the weaknesses and contingencies that are characteristic on a human level of any intimate community of life and love, be it between partners of one church or of different churches; the divisions on an ecclesial level, however, do not automatically render it more deficient or imperfect than any other union. Committed mutual love, instead, pushes interchurch spouses to develop a love and understanding of each other's churches and to share in the life and worship of each other's faith community. It is this experience that makes them claim "to become both a sign of unity and a means to grow towards unity" (A).

#### **4. A Future Perspective: Interchurch Communion in the Domestic Church**

We can now collect the results of our analysis and roughly summarize the two perspectives on interchurch marriage in the following way. From the magisterial point of view, neither conjugal communion nor the practical and emotional insertion into each other's faith community qualifies interchurch spouses for ecclesial communion. However fulfilling the partnership of life and love may be and however deep the bond with each other's church may be experienced, the partners realize ecclesial communion at best in an initial, yet always deficient way. We find here the main reason why Eucharistic sharing in each other's congregation cannot be admitted on a regular basis since from a Catholic standpoint

Eucharistic communion presupposes full ecclesial communion. In their own perspective, as marriage partners interchurch spouses “want to share all that is of value in each other’s life, and as Christian marriage partners this includes especially the riches of their respective ecclesial [communities]” (B3). To the extent that they are able to do so, they claim to anticipate and prefigure an ecclesial communion that is otherwise not achieved by the official ecclesial bodies. It seems logical that they regard themselves, just like every other Christian family, as “one church at home” or, using a familiar metaphor in Catholic theology, as a “domestic church”.

If one asks whether there is any chance that the Catholic position may take seriously the experience of interchurch families and acknowledge its ecclesiological implications, it is indeed the concept of “domestic church” which seems to indicate a practicable and promising trajectory. Although the more recent magisterial teaching does not use the metaphor when dealing with interchurch marriage, it is not totally absent from that teaching either.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, several scholars refer to the interchurch family unit as the smallest, yet full ecclesial community to justify its admission to Eucharistic communion.<sup>13</sup> The argument then usually runs as follows: Vatican II ecclesiology has defined the church as basic sacrament which realizes itself in its sacramental practice; since all marriages between baptized have to be understood as sacramental, interchurch marriage constitutes church in its smallest possible form and thus qualifies and calls for Eucharistic sharing. Constructive and indispensable as these theological proposals may be, they have two weak points, though, which are closely interrelated. They start from the abstract premise that according to Catholic law marriages between baptized Christians are to be taken without any differentiation as sacraments – a position that is increasingly contested in current Catholic theology of marriage. And, as they are primarily concerned with resolving the question of Eucharistic sharing, they are obliged to

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<sup>12</sup> In MM Paul VI had already observed that “there exists in a marriage between baptized person, since such a marriage is a true sacrament, a certain communion of spiritual benefits” (Introduction). In his 1975 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* he writes that “[a]t different moments in the Church's history and also in the Second Vatican Council, the family has well deserved the beautiful name of ‘domestic Church’”, and then explicitly refers to interchurch marriages: “Families resulting from a mixed marriage also have the duty of proclaiming Christ to the children in the fullness of the consequences of a common Baptism; they have moreover the difficult task of becoming builders of unity.” Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation ‘Evangelii nuntiandi’* (1975), 71; available from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html) (accessed 10 July 2007).

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Peter Neuner, *Geeint im Leben – getrennt im Bekenntnis? Die konfessionsverschiedene Ehe; Lehre – Probleme – Chancen* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1989), 110f.; Id., “Ein katholischer Vorschlag zur Eucharistiegemeinschaft,” in *Stimmen der Zeit* 211 (1993), 443-450; Georg Hintzen/Peter Neuner, “Eucharistiegemeinschaft für konfessionsverschiedene Ehen?,” in *Stimmen der Zeit* 211 (1993), 831-840; Ernest R. Falardeau, “The Church, the Eucharist and the Family,” in *One in Christ* 33 (1997), 20-30; Ladislav M. Örsy, “Interchurch Marriages and the Eucharist,” in: *Doctrine and Life* 47 (1997), 10-13.

claim a true ecclesial status for the domestic interchurch unit, but look for its grounding to an abstract idea of “domestic church” rather than substantiate it in the lived experience of the conjugal communion. Herein lies a challenge for future theological exploration for which the experiential basis provided by interchurch families is of particular relevance. It is beyond the scope of this paper to anticipate that theological work. I do hope, however, that the analysis of the Rome Paper and its confrontation with the official stance of the Catholic church has marked out some lines along which the endeavour has to be undertaken. As far as Catholic ecclesiology is concerned, the concept of “domestic church” which Vatican II has retrieved from patristic precedents to describe the ecclesial status of the conjugal and family unit,<sup>14</sup> may still today dwell in a “doctrinal vacuum”, as M.A. Fahey stated a decade ago.<sup>15</sup> Two major lines, however, seem to have taken shape in Catholic ecclesiology and marriage theology so far: First, with regard to the way in which language is being used in the magisterial texts, the use of the word “church” in relation to the domestic unit based in marriage is not simply metaphorical, but indicates an analogical relationship between church and the marital home. The image of church being drawn in here does not just reflect specific aspects of domestic life, but something more fundamental is being said here about the day to day living of marriage so as to inform us of its sacramental nature and its ecclesiological reality. Marriage and family life becomes revelatory of community with Christ, which is church.

Secondly, the way in which recent magisterial texts refer to “domestic church” allows for an ecclesiological hermeneutic which, instead of interpreting domestic Christian living from ecclesiological reflection, allows the ordinary and immediate experience of communion in Christ to inform the ecclesial doctrine. Traditionally “too much emphasis has been placed on the first of the options and couples have found themselves trying to model themselves on what they understand by church and have not been encouraged to recognize the proper theological and sacramental status of their own experience which is a gift (and sometimes a critical gift) to that larger church...That being said the relationship between domestic church and ‘Church’ would seem to be a mutually informative one; and, whilst some attention needs to be given to the balance of this mutuality, this implies for systematic consideration that the

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<sup>14</sup> See *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church ‘Lumen gentium’*, 11; available from [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html) (accessed 10 July 2007); *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity ‘Apostolicam actuositatem’*, 11; available from [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651118\\_apostolicam-actuositatem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html) (accessed 10 July 2007).

<sup>15</sup> See Michael A. Fahey, “The Christian Family as Domestic Church at Vatican II,” in: Lisa S. Cahill/Dietmar Mieth (eds.), *The Family*, in *Concilium* 1995/4, 85-92, 91. For a comprehensive account on origins, development and theology of the “domestic church” see Florence C. Bourg: *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Churches* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

relationship can be ‘worked both ways’ fruitfully and appropriately.”<sup>16</sup> Not much imagination is required to capture the implications of such a dual ecclesiology for the future position of the Catholic church on interchurch marriage.

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<sup>16</sup> Claire Watkins, “Some thoughts on ‘domestic church’ (ecclesiola) from an ecclesiological and laicological perspective” (unpublished paper, 1996), 1f.