

## INTERCHURCH MARRIAGE AND ECUMENISM: AN INTRODUCTION

**M**IXED-RELIGION MARRIAGE has become a fact and an established practice in many parts of the world. According to recent research, in Canada for example, more marriages are contracted between a Catholic and a baptized person of another Christian tradition than between two baptized Catholics. The situation is similar in Germany and Australia, where inter-denominational marriages make up close to 40% of marriages. A cursory look at the current situation shows already that denominational boundaries, which long served as pillars of church identity in the respective Christian communities, have become more and more blurred. Inter-denominational and, to extend the reach, interreligious marriages increasingly find their place in society. However, there is more to it than that. To “overcome boundaries” – to use the terminology of modern phrasing and thinking – is no longer limited to setting aside exclusive allegiance to one’s own denomination or religion: it concerns all aspects of life. More and more people marry across different languages, cultures, traditions, customs, and life experiences – and religion is just one dimension of human life. None of these well-established social, cultural, and religious identity markers present an obstacle today for intimate relationships. Communication across different languages can be easily achieved: you can learn the other language or find in English an accessible medium. Immersing oneself in a different culture can seem to be exotic or thrilling. And different religious traditions are no longer seen as obstacles to romantic involvement or a shared life, even if the two have fundamentally different world views and ethics. In a nutshell, the fact or custom of limiting marriage to members of the same group, whether cultural, ethnic, or religious, seems to have lost its significance and value. “Endogamous” constellations become less attractive.

Whether “pushing the boundaries” can be a sign of, and catalyst for, more harmony and peace in intimate relationships is a question which is difficult, if not impossible, to answer. Looking at religious belonging may provide a helpful perspective. Societies that are explicitly modern and characterized by world experience, modernity, globality, and digitality are currently experiencing an incessant process of secularization and de-churching. This does not mean that modernity equals secularization and thus would signal the end of Christianity, but it requires a nuanced evaluation. Take, for example, the case of “interchurch marriages”. The prohibition of “mixed marriages” which prevailed for centuries in the different churches, especially in the Roman Catholic church, was slowly attenuated before and after the Second Vatican Council. This marked the beginning of a generation of pioneers who fought, although with constant pushback, to give to spouses from different Christian traditions a legitimate and worthy place in the communities of the faithful. Half a century later, however, we realize that the initial burst of progress and enthusiasm in the search for Christian unity

is now only remembered as a “golden age” of ecumenism: Christians of a younger generation are hardly motivated by ecumenical concerns; the procrustean bed of dogmas and disciplines against which the previous generation had struggled has lost its importance today: confessional identity and denominational separation are seen as much less serious.

Secularism is of course a creeping tendency, and it forms a massive threat for the Christian churches. But it would be shortsighted and even counterproductive to believe that the restoration of doctrinal orthodoxy is the only way to ensure the survival of Christian belief. A small portion of Christians may be inclined to follow fundamentalist and rigorist ideas, but this is not an option for spouses who live in an interdenominational marriage. Is the waning of confessional identity an expression of reducing doctrines to window-dressing and of moral laxism? It is not. It is high time to revisit the topic of ecumenism now almost sixty years after the council. In the post-conciliar period, Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis have rightly appreciated interchurch spouses as “laboratories of Christian unity”, but here again it seems that the step from an ideal vision to the reality of Christian unity is bigger than some churchmen continue to maintain. It is up to us to make this step, and we can do that! However, we should not fall back on the illusion which we have cherished for a long time, namely that Christian unity must first be defined doctrinally and accepted legally by all Christian churches and communities before the idea of reunification can take shape. This long prevailing procedure is illusive and even destructive for a Christianity which now lives in a secularized world. Christian unity can no longer be achieved by way of ortho-theory – but only in ortho-practice. Interchurch spouses who have received the same baptism, have strengthened their intimate union in the sacrament of marriage, and live their belief in Christian commitment, *are still living Christian unity* – at times more vividly than those who pretend that only an affiliation and adherence to their own church can ensure the credibility of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. When the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Kurt Koch, argues that the final target of ecumenism, which is the fullness of unity of the churches, is still “lacking clarity” in ecumenical conversations, he misunderstands not only the situation the Christian churches are in today but also the theological hermeneutics which Pope Francis has reminded us of by referring the process of synodality:<sup>1</sup> the “dynamics of the common way” is not a secondary, although inevitable, instrumental means but an essential part of the target.

All the articles and contributions to this special theme issue of our journal express, for their part, that ecumenism is not a marginal topic that can be postponed for future resolution but rather concerns the core of a Christian belief that is exposed to an increasing process of secularization. *Diane and Greg A. Ryan* argue that interchurch marriages have long been recognized by those close to them as sites where ecumenical learning can occur. This lived experience has often contrasted with church traditions who struggled to accommodate them pastorally

1 “Mehr Klarheit über das ökumenische Ziel’: Ein Gespräch mit Kardinal Kurt Koch über das neue deutsche Ökumene-Papier”, in: *Communio* 2024; available at [www.herder.de/communio/theologie/ein-gespraech-mit-kardinal-kurt-koch-ueber-das-neue-deutsche-oekumene-papier](http://www.herder.de/communio/theologie/ein-gespraech-mit-kardinal-kurt-koch-ueber-das-neue-deutsche-oekumene-papier).

and theologically, let alone value them as pioneers. In the Catholic church, there is a gradual maturing of theological reflection, particularly regarding their ecclesiological significance as domestic churches. The article explores the emerging field of “Receptive Ecumenism”, which has generated theological and practical literature, including proposals that this is often a practice of interchurch families. This movement opens up both pastoral and theological opportunities for fruitful recognition of interchurch marriages on a more substantively theological basis than previous papal observations. At the heart of this article lies the importance of attending to realities regarding such ecumenical marriages as sites of possible theological disclosure about the church, especially when understood as synodal in the modern Catholic sense.

Following the call of Pope Francis, *Clare Watkins* also reflects on the particular gifts to synodality that interchurch families might bring. Despite the emphasis in the documents concerning synodality on the necessity of a diversity of voices, emphasizing the need for ecumenical and “less-churchy” perspectives to be included, these voices have proved difficult to include in synodal processes. Arguing that interchurch families are sites of living faith which are already formed in many of the practices and virtues associated with synodality, Watkins explores what particular lessons might be learned from such “domestic churches” under the three key headings: Communion, Participation, and Mission. Under each heading particular insights from the sacramental and ecumenical lives of interchurch families are suggested, demonstrating what powerful and needed gifts such families might have for today’s synodal “journeying together”.

*Francesco Pesce* calls into question the position that a difference in faith impedes the harmony of spouses – a judgment which reigned in the Catholic church until the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, the harmonization of differences is a huge and constant task of every couple, but fostering the unity of conjugal life and family is not only and not mainly a matter of faith; it bears on a whole range of relational, sexual, psychological, social, and economic dimensions. The challenge of harmonizing the many differences, among which faith is only one aspect, must be approached from the unity that spouses already experience in their lives. And that also has implications for eucharist sharing: since the language of “the common bed” sheds light on understanding “the common table”, the difference of faith is no longer an insurmountable obstacle for a harmonious, united marriage.

*Daniel J. Olson* takes a close look at the situation of interchurch families in the USA. Their pastoral needs and gifts need the attention of the institutional US Catholic church to provide them with the necessary helps to foster their indispensable gifts for a synodal church committed to missionary discipleship in an increasingly secularized American context. Given their experience, interchurch families are positioned as key actors in a post-pandemic US Catholic church called to walk with other Christians and all people of good will. For this giftedness to be effectual, however, nothing less is required than a systemic ecclesial commitment to developing pastoral resources for their unique needs alongside a re-conception of ecclesial belonging and sacramental participation for interchurch families at the parish level.

New studies on church membership in German-speaking countries show that only a small number of the baptized today wish to maintain ties with their

particular confessional tradition. The number of professing Christians is decreasing, which raises the question of whether Christian families that bring together two different denominations could provide an impetus for strengthening the ecumenical communion of the one Christian faith. Referring to two new documents, one from the German Bishops' Conference and the other from the Ecumenical Working Group of Protestant and Catholic theologians, *Dorothea Sattler* recognizes a paradigm shift from a focus on full church communion at every level of the church's structure to a differentiated appreciation of the realities of people's lives. Pastoral care for marriages aims today above all at assisting relationships to be as happy and successful as possible.

An Asian perspective on interchurch and interfaith marriage is provided by *Vimal Tirimanna*. He argues that, realistically speaking, mixed marriages have come to stay in our contemporary world, thanks mainly to the phenomena of globalization and mass migration. This reality brings with it the indispensable need for pastoral care to be rendered to such mixed marriage families, particularly in the diverse Asian contexts, keeping in mind some of the challenges they pose. It is only then that mixed marriages would bear not only their innate fruits but also would invariably serve as a fitting platform for ecumenical and interreligious dialogues, both in Asia and all over the world.

*Ray Temmerman* demonstrates that interdenominational married couples form a significant cohort within their churches. These couples have learned to live what is referred to as receptive ecumenism, listening to and learning from each other the gift the other brings to the relationship. They have also discovered that living in this way has strengthened their relationship. It has led them to become involved ecumenically, loving the other while remaining faithful to who each one is. In case after case, this came about as the couples discovered others around them living the same reality, found they were not alone, and were encouraged to be, and to celebrate, who they were before God. In the process, they have become a model for the relationship between churches, a potential gift to their churches on the journey toward the healing of ecclesial disunity. To develop that gift, help it bear fruit, such couples should be called forth, invited to tell their stories, so that together we may learn of the richness and goodness and mercy of a God who provides, then uses, all manner of gifts so that all may be one.

*Doral Hayes* offers an ethnographic theological reflection on an experience that every interchurch family faces, namely that of a close family funeral and specifically the challenges around eucharistic sharing for those in such families. Written following the death of the writer's father-in-law, it offers a theological reflection on how the ecumenical protocols were understood and responded to. This is not an argument for an extension of eucharistic sharing but a reflection on what could make the experience of a family funeral better for those in interchurch families. After consideration of the specific needs of those in interchurch families with regard to eucharistic sharing, and the particular challenges that this can present within the English context, Hayes expands on several different themes. These include the journey from death to the funeral for the family, the power held by clergy, the importance of pastoral understanding and connection, and the difference that good ecumenical hospitality can make within the funeral service itself.

The last two articles are bound together in the practical experiences and journeys of two other interchurch couples, one within an Orthodox-Catholic environment, the other within a Catholic-Pentecostal environment. These contributions, each in their own way, show that interchurch families constitute a “laboratory of Christian unity”, a place where “receptive ecumenism” is a daily practice, a gift for the churches on the journey to full ecclesial unity – and one which calls for the development of resources to call forth the gift for the good of the whole church.

THOMAS KNIEPS-PORT LE ROI & RAY TEMMERMAN