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**Interchurch Families:
Problem to be Solved, or Gift to be Received?**

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“Mixed-Religion” marriages are understood, in Roman Catholic parlance, as those in which a man and a woman from two different Christian traditions, both siblings of Christ through baptism, have their unity enhanced by the sacrament of marriage, becoming a unity so real and so strong that it is indissoluble short of death. Today such marriages are often referred to as ecumenical or inter-denominational marriages.

While such marriages were once forbidden in the Catholic Church, they happened, and continue to happen. Indeed, data gathered in a research project in Canada indicates that, in that country, there are presently more marriages taking place between a Catholic and a baptized person of another Christian tradition than there are between two baptized Catholics.¹ A similar research project in Australia showed conclusively that such marriages now constitute more than 35% of all married couples in the country where at least one spouse is Catholic.² In Germany, we are told, “almost 40% if not more marriages are currently inter-denominational marriages”.³ The data clearly indicates that mixed-religion marriages now form a significant cohort within the Catholic Church.

The question then arises: are such marriages a growing problem to be solved within the churches? Or are they a growing gift from God to be received for the healing of ecclesial disunity? Bernard Prusak has already argued that

The life of ecumenical families should be a contributing, integral component of ecumenical dialogue. They are an experiential resource in which an ecumenical relationship is being lived through the unitive sacramental love of spouses who with their children form an ecumenical “domestic Church”. As the 1993 Pontifical Council’s *Directory* acknowledges, quoting John Paul II’s *Familiaris consortio* (78), these marriages “contain numerous elements that could well be made

¹ R. TEMMERMAN: *A Gift Unopened: A Statistical Analysis of Mixed Religion Marriages in Canada* (2019); available https://irp.cdn-website.com/567e7e57/files/uploaded/A_Gift_Unopened.pdf.

² R. TEMMERMAN: *Gift Under the Southern Cross: Mixed-Religion Marriages as Opportunity for the Church* (2021); available at https://irp.cdn-website.com/567e7e57/files/uploaded/Gift_Under_the_Southern_Cross.pdf.

³ *Walking with Christ – Tracing Unity: Interdenominational marriages and sharing the Eucharist*, 20 Feb 2018, Art 1(2); available at https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/dossiers_2018/Walking-with-Christ_Tracing_Unity_Arbeitsübersetzung-der-Orientierungshilfe_ENG.pdf.

good use of and develop both for their intrinsic value and for the contribution they can make to the ecumenical movement”.⁴

Prusak’s paper explores the issue within the context of formal ecclesial documents, the more global context. This paper will argue that these marriages are, and can be even more so, gift from God for such healing. It will do so, not primarily by expounding on theology, but by looking at the concrete, particular personal lived reality of the couples themselves, out of which the theology arises. In doing so it will take up the model Pope Francis gave in speaking about the early Church: “After discussion and prayer and some bitter disagreement, they pondered the way that God had worked signs and wonders among them...for *God is recognized in the experience of real life.*”⁵

It does so with awareness of a particular form of dialogue, that of Receptive Ecumenism, a term coined by Paul D. Murray. In brief,

[t]he essential principle behind Receptive Ecumenism is that the primary ecumenical responsibility is to ask not “What do the other traditions first need to learn from us?” but “What do we need to learn from them?” The assumption is that if all were asking this question seriously and acting upon it then all would be moving in ways that would both deepen our authentic respective identities and draw us into a more intimate relationship.⁶

Receptive ecumenism has the potential to transform how we listen and relate, as couples and as churches, learning from each other and recognising that we all have gifts to share.

Differentiation

It must be pointed out that what are known as inter-denominational or ecumenical marriages can be divided into two types. The first is where the couple marries across denominational lines, then continues with each spouse in their own tradition on their own, or with one or both spouses ceasing ecclesial participation altogether. Another option is that one or both spouses change tradition to join the other or a third tradition, however that is then no longer an inter-denominational marriage. The second type is the one we are concerned with here, i.e.

⁴ B.R. PRUSAK: “The Ecumenical Household as Domestic Church: Ecclesial Threat or Pastoral Challenge and Even Resource?”, in: T. KNIPEPS-PORT LE ROI/G. MANNION/P. DE MEY (eds.): *The Household of God and Local Households: Revisiting the Domestic Church*, Leuven: Peeters Publisher, 2013, 315-334, 334.

⁵ POPE FRANCIS: *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2020, 82 (emphasis added).

⁶ “Receptive Ecumenism”, Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham UK; available at <https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/catholic-studies/research/constructive-catholic-theology-/receptive-ecumenism/>.

An interchurch family includes a husband and wife who come from two different church traditions (often a Roman Catholic married to a Christian of another communion). Both of them 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.⁷

The Data

The data used in this paper is published on the website of the Interchurch Families International Network.⁸ It was originally used in a thesis⁹ comparing the life of the *domestic church* with the *marks* of the Church. The same data will now be viewed in response to the new methodology given above.¹⁰ That research was carried out as a qualitative process, giving participants free range to response to a variety of questions posed to them. The survey questions were on topics familiar to the couples, quite possibly the subject of discussion around their dining tables and in their congregations. In other words, the topics focused on their lived reality. Included were questions concerning the “marks” of the church, elements of *koinonia*, and funeral preparations.

The people surveyed were identified as interchurch couples, registered either for the American Association of Interchurch Families biennial conference (Louisville, KY, 2008), or the 2008 British Association of Interchurch Families annual conference, Swanwick, England. The Canadian couples to whom surveys were sent were all personally known to me.

Of fifty-three survey questionnaires distributed to interchurch couples in Canada, the USA and the United Kingdom, a total of twenty-four (45%) were returned: five (21%) from the American Association, nineteen (79%) from participants at the United Kingdom Association's conference at Swanwick, and none from Canadians (0%). Of the responding couples, twenty had a total of 51 children, while three had no children. One respondent was an adult child of an interchurch couple, who offered to fill in the survey as well. While this was not part of the original survey methodology, I accepted the offer as a way of comparing the parents' perception of what their children received and lived with the child's perception of the same reality.

For the purposes of this study, we will review every fourth response, in numerical order, to ensure that the data is not selectively used to support the argument. Each Respondent case will begin with the initial approaches to marriage. This is found in their answer to Question #3, “*What*

⁷ ASSOCIATION OF INTERCHURCH FAMILIES: *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity: Rome 2003*, London, 2003, 1.

⁸ R. TEMMERMAN: *Interchurch Families as Domestic Church: Familial Experiences and Ecclesial Opportunities – Data*, 2011; available at <https://irp.cdn-website.com/567e7e57/files/uploaded/STMResearchData.pdf>.

⁹ R. TEMMERMAN: *Interchurch Families as Domestic Church: Familial Experiences and Ecclesial Opportunities*, 2011; available at <https://irp.cdn-website.com/567e7e57/files/uploaded/Thesis-InterchurchFamiliesAsDomesticChurch.pdf>.

¹⁰ The data will be referenced throughout this paper. When a quote is given from the research data, it will be referenced with Respondent and Question number(s), e.g. “R1058, Q4”.

expectations did you have in being married to someone of another Christian tradition?” That will be followed by the situation as it existed at the time of the survey, as found under Question #19, *“Why do you continue to live an interchurch family life...rather than one of you becoming a member of the other’s tradition or both of you becoming together members of another tradition?”* For context, the number of years the couple have been married (Question #1) will be included, i.e. the time between the approach to marriage and the survey. The lived experiences of the journey between the two times will be explored through the responses to various other questions. Finally, I will provide an observation of their specific data. Readers are encouraged to read the full data set, as there is far more information of interest than can be used here.

Let the Dialogue Begin

Every dialogue must begin somewhere – and that somewhere may be quite different from the “somewhere” of the dialogue’s most recent situation. As we progress through these cases, it is worth noting the variety of approaches and expectations couples had before entering into an interchurch marriage.

R1041

The Catholic husband thought he “would still be free to share and practice my Catholic faith”, while his Presbyterian wife “thought we would have more problems than we actually had. Expected to learn more about his faith tradition and I did” (R1041, Q3).

Married 15 years at the time of the survey, the husband says “I believe in the tenets of my Catholic faith”, while the wife says “the Catholic tradition is too restrictive for me” (R1041, Q19). Regardless, as we will see, the couple remain committed to their interchurch relationship and participation in both churches.

The couple “Didn’t have children. We attend each other’s church. <Husband> receives communion at my church; I do not receive at his church” (R1041, Q5). In addition to praying and reading Scripture together, they “...attend each other’s church, minister in each other’s denomination as much as possible” (R1041, Q6A). They are “...able to work together and grow in faith, rather than trying to convert each other and being dissatisfied with the other’s faith choice” (R1041, Q6C). They “...speak our mind and allow others to voice their opinions without controversy” (R1041, Q9A). As part of their church involvement, “we have a definite ministry to interchurch couples because of our own positive experiences. We do pre-marriage readiness sessions and workshops” (R1041, Q10A). They have clear differences of opinion in one area. The husband feels Catholics are more open than Protestants, while the Presbyterian wife says “I see it as just the opposite” (R1041, Q13). They go on to say “We feel fortunate that God led us to churches where the people and the pastors are very open to interchurch couples. Both our churches allow us to minister and be a part of active worship” (R1041, Q16). They continue to worship together, be involved in both churches together.

Observation: While this couple indicate areas with differing opinions, they have learned to listen respectfully to each other, hear what the other is saying, and see their learning exercised in ministry to interchurch couples.

R1061

This couple indicated “Not a lot of thought was made concerning religious tradition. I was so comfortable and confident of our sound relationship that there was no need to consider this part of our lives” (R1061, Q3). For them, their relational unity was primary.

After 34 years of marriage, they are able to say “The diversity of thought and tradition that <wife> and I bring to our marriage makes our relationship so much more interesting, dynamic, evolving, and loving than I would have expected based on other non-interchurch marriages that I have known... We would suffer by losing those treasures that have been forming for these last 500 years” (R1061, Q19).

Speaking of their journey, “We pretty much just let things develop. For a few years, we both attended the local Catholic church on Sundays... Later, I would accompany <wife> to her Baptist church on occasions. Then, more and more frequently, I would go to Sunday worship with her (as well as to my own church), as well as other services and events” (R1061, Q5). “We are both involved in the Baptist church, and (to a lesser extent) we are both involved in the Catholic church” (R1061, Q6A). “Joining together in church activities combines our marriage relationship with our spiritual relationship” (R1061, Q6C). “When we married, we knew that we would not remain the same; when we grew and changed, we wanted to grow and change together so that we would continue to be interested in each other as well as ourselves” (R1061, Q6C). “As <wife> became interested in Jungian psychology, so did I. It quickly explained so much about Catholicism and its significance” (R1061, Q7A). “In many ways, though coming from different denominations, we seem to be moving either toward one another or expanding our understanding and appreciation to include the other” (R1061, Q13). The Catholic husband says “I am active in both churches, in a variety of ministries, as the Catholic Ecumenical Representative, and on the Catholic pastoral council.” He says, “I feel like I have had a subtle influence and already am ‘church’ more than I would ever have hoped” (R1061, Q16). Finally, the Baptist wife believes “[t]hat churches must evolve as society evolves – holding the fundamental truths together with discernment in applying and living these truths in an ever-changing society” (R1061, Q17).

Observation: This couple developed an ongoing interest in the experiences of each other, wanting to grow and change together. Their listening to each other in that growth let them either together, or to an expansion of understanding.

R1068

The concerns expressed were “[t]hat there would be difficulties but we would cope with them because we loved one another. Also because we married in 1963 we had hopes that the Vatican Council might change things for the better. <Wife's> initial reaction was to be extremely anxious

because of ‘The Promise’ and my fear that I would not be able to take my children to church with me” (R1068, Q3).

After 45 years, they can say “We feel ‘right’ in our own traditions, and feel we can help Christian Unity by working from them” (R1068, Q19).

This Catholic-Anglican couple, faced by concrete issues, “worked things out for ourselves as the need arose, which was very hard as we felt we were alone, and <husband’s> family were rather suspicious! It was 15 years before we found AIF!” (R1068, Q3; note: AIF is the Association of Interchurch Families). Here we have two specific elements, the need to work things out in the concrete situation at the time, and the need for supportive people and/or groups. This is echoed in another statement, “[w]e simply agreed to respect one another, and each other’s right to their religious tradition. We also agreed not to cross bridges before we came to them” (R1068, Q4). Their practices changed over time: “<Daughter> born 1966 and <Son> born 1969 baptised RC followed by blessing in the Anglican Church. <Daughter> born 1976 had an Interchurch Baptism involving RC and Anglican Ministers” (R1068, Q5). Their children “...continue to think of themselves as ‘Interchurch’, though their involvement is pretty minimal. They participate willingly with us in either church at family occasions ” (R1068, Q6A). Their interchurch reality is carried far and wide: “For over 30 years we have been involved in our local Christian Fellowship and Churches Together and have held many ecumenical meetings of different types in our home. We also produce the Christian Newsletter for our village” (R1068, Q8A). They experience “[t]he joy of sharing the riches of our traditions and of others, and of feeling that we might be making a difference in our churches” (R1068, Q10A). They also face difficulties, “mainly ‘the rules’ and family attitudes to what we were doing” (R1068, Q10B). Even with this, they became “involved for many years in the local ecumenical scene, and most of all through having the privilege of being County Ecumenical Development Officers for Bedfordshire for 6 years” (R1068, Q10B).

Observation: This couple agreed to respect the other and each other’s right to that person’s religious tradition. This was not a case of trying to “convert” the other. Equally worthy of note is the couple’s feeling of being alone, not having others who could understand and walk with them in their journey. That included family attitudes to what they were doing. Since their discovery of the Association of Interchurch Families (AIF), their involvement has burgeoned, reaching out ecumenically both locally and beyond.

R1072

This couple said of their time before marriage, “[i]t mattered little; at the time, we were not active in our denominations” (R1072, Q3).

The response 37 years later appeared to them self-evident: “How does one stop being English/a cyclist/a Bristol Rovers supporter/a Beatles fan? This isn’t a matter of intellectual choice, it’s in one’s blood.” The Catholic husband continued, admitting he “did try abandoning the RC church for a few years after our marriage, but couldn’t make the break” (R1072, Q19).

While not active, the couple quickly found that at least some elements were important, some of them being more familial than doctrinal: “Where to get married (and the consequences of the RC

parents' declining to attend); general attitudes to 'life'. ...we married in (her) church without the RC parents being there (we re-married later in the RC church after realising that Church (capital 'c') did matter (mainly to the RC parents))" (R1072, Q4). Later, "when we began to go to church again – four years after marrying – we attended both churches each week, then changed to alternate weeks, then to attending only our 'own' church, with occasional attendances at each other's. Eucharist; we generally observe the (RC) 'rules'" (R1072, Q5). Determining the appropriate course of action according to concrete situations continued with the baptism of their children: "both were joint services, the older one in the RC church and the younger in the CofE one" (R1072, Q5). The impact on their children has been both positive and negative. On the one hand, "it has added to their sense of bewilderment about God, the world and people; it has diluted their 'attachment' to either church" (R1072, Q14). On the other, it has improved their children's understanding "[b]y being more ecumenically-aware, less insular, and more welcoming (especially eucharistically)" (R1072, Q16). For the couple themselves, today "[w]e have moved from a 'confirmation classes' level of understanding to a more adult understanding, and to being committed members rather than merely nominal ones. Being in 2 churches, we have had to think about, articulate and discuss a whole spectrum of aspects of Christianity and life" (R1072, Q17). Observation: Here was a couple who began their marriage with little to no sense that religious participation mattered. By the time of the survey, religious participation was part and parcel of who they were – and participation in two churches has called them to broaden their understanding of Christianity and life. Through participation in both churches, there was a growth in learning, and in articulation of that learning.

R1079

This couple indicated "[i]t was a daunting prospect; it took us a long time to decide to marry" (R1079, Q3). 40 years later, their response to Q19 was clear and concise: "We were called to live in an interchurch marriage, and we have never been called to change to a single church allegiance." (R1079, Q19). Approaching marriage, "[w]e knew it was important to worship together in both churches. At that time eucharistic sharing did not seem possible – at best a very remote possibility. Bringing up children together did not seem feasible" (R1079, Q4). "We had shared celebrations of baptism – the first in Belgium, but the second we were able to arrange in England. The children received their First Communion together in the Catholic Church, and soon after in the Church of England" (R1079, Q5). Of their relationship with their children and their churches, they said "[w]e wanted to share what we experienced" (R1079, Q8C). They did so "[i]n words and writing, in being faithful members of our own churches, and as far as possible of each other's" (R1079, Q9A). Asked how the churches could help, they say "[b]y learning to respect our experience of being church, and allowing it to impact on their own understandings of unity" (R1079, Q16). In turn, the couple have gained "[m]ore awareness of how hard it is for churches (institutions) to change, the need for 'patient endurance'" (R1079, Q17).

Observation: This couple presents a challenge to the churches. How does one accept a deeply and faithfully lived reality when it doesn't appear to "match" what the church holds? How does the

church allow its understanding of unity to grow? It appears interchurch families may be well placed to show how to exercise “patient endurance” and thereby lead their churches to this same patient endurance in hope of unity. In short, these couples have something to offer their churches, something for the healing of ecclesial disunity.

R1085

The Catholic husband said “[b]ecause I had been accepted and not excluded from anything by <wife's> church, I was not going to have problems with them. It was more what the Catholics were agitated about”. His spouse anticipated “that I would continue my involvement in my own church as before but would learn something of the Catholic Church” (R1085, Q3).

After 32 years of marriage, the husband indicates that “We both believe slightly differently. We are both Christian. We like it the way it is”, while his wife says she remains where she is out of “Habit _ My refusal to be told what to believe and who is and who isn’t allowed at the Lord’s Table” (R1085, Q19).

They faced challenges in their early marriage. As the husband says, “[t]his was in the days when <my wife> had to consent, or at least not object, to my bringing up the children as catholic. My mother was worried enough about it for all of us. We decided to worship at both churches. Eucharist was not open for discussion in the Catholic Church” (R1085, Q4). The wife, aware of differences, thought that “they would be brought up Catholic but as a Mother I would have some input” (R1085, Q4). They worshipped in both churches, baptized their children Catholic, then had a blessing at the United Reformed church. They found the AIF because of preparations for First Communion (cf. R1085, Q5). As for their religious practice, “[w]e do things together. We do not put a ‘denomination’ tag on our family life – we have unity embedded, it is not an ‘add on’” (R1085, Q6A). The wife enjoys worship experiences, but also says it’s “[d]ifficult going to mass with the boys and not being able to share the Eucharist” (R1085, Q10A, 10B). There is an awareness of “how much...we’ve learnt through the marriage and how much...the churches and understanding have changed in 32 years anyway” (R1085, Q17).

Observation: Here we have themes of acceptance, inclusion, learning. There is also clear indication that the churches have changed, demonstrating that change, even within churches, can and does happen. They were helped in First Communion preparation through discovering AIF – once again an indication that finding oneself no longer alone is a huge help to continuing the journey of faith while remaining true to one’s own tradition and learning from the other.

What Have We Learned?

Through the concrete lived realities of interchurch families, a number of which have been together for 50 years or more, we have seen that, regardless of their starting point, their move to become truly interchurch has brought them into a lived, practical ecumenism. Each of these responses indicate a clear experience of the value of true interchurch life. That value is experienced not only

in the domestic church itself, but within the wider community of churches/traditions and the Church.

These couples do not “have everything together”. As Martin Reardon said, addressing church representatives present at the 1998 international conference of interchurch families in Geneva,

You help us because there is no solution to our difficulties until our churches are united. We can help you by reminding you and our churches that Christian relationships (God's love for us, our love for God, and our love for one another in Christ) are at the heart of the ecumenical movement - just as love is at the heart of marriage and family life.¹¹

They have learned to listen to and receive from each other, learned to value the gift the other brings to the domestic church and indeed the Church at all levels. They have enough “together” that they can and do form models for other inter-denominational couples in our churches, and indeed for the churches themselves on the path to full Christian unity. This is a gift to be recognized, welcomed, encouraged, and built upon.

Implications

The questions raised by the late Richard Gaillardetz, responding to the notification of Sr Margaret Farley R.S.M. by the Congregation (now Dicastery) for the Doctrine of the Faith, are worth noting.

What would happen if the magisterium were to view theologians as serving the teaching office of the church by challenging faulty arguments, raising difficult questions and proposing alternative frameworks for the church’s prayerful discernment? What would happen if theologians and the rest of the faithful were to attend seriously to official magisterial teaching with an attitude of respect but with a determination to test its adequacy in the light of their own insight and intuitions? Perhaps the church would become a more authentic school of humble Christian discipleship, one better equipped to offer the world the liberating message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.¹²

It appears, in the final report from the recent Synod on Synodality, that such questions are now being called forth for real discernment. That report clearly indicates that interchurch families

¹¹ M. REARDON: *Address at Morning Worship*, Geneva, 1998; available at <https://www.interchurchfamilies.org/address-at-morning-worship-geneva-1998>.

¹² Quoted in J.T. KEANE: “When the Vatican investigated Margaret Farley for her book on Catholic sexual ethics”, in: *America*, 28 Nov 2023; available at https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2023/11/28/cbc-column-margaret-farley-246600?utm_source=piano&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=35405&pnespid=5rdgEHtIMboFhevG9j23HoOKoQ_hUsAoJOegwbN18BNmnqjLfTOJISJuNVWIZGVyhahT.WZV.

have a unique place in the Church, saying “[m]arriages between Christians who belong to different Churches or ecclesial communities (inter-church marriages) may constitute realities in which the wisdom of communion can mature, and it is possible to evangelize each other”.¹³ The report goes on to say:

We need to examine the issue of Eucharistic hospitality (*Communicatio in sacris*) from theological, canonical and pastoral perspectives in light of the link between sacramental and ecclesial communion. This issue is of particular importance to inter-church couples. It raises the need for a broader reflection on inter-church marriages.¹⁴

This is not the language of a Church fearful of the potential dangers of mixed-religion marriages. Rather, the language suggests openness, an awareness that all is not yet known, along with a willingness to explore and learn, without fear, what the Spirit may be saying to the Church. Massimo Faggioli, giving an English translation from the *motu proprio Ad theologiam promovendam* (as yet available only in Italian), says that Pope Francis has indicated that theology must develop “in a culture of dialogue and encounter between different traditions and different branches of knowledge, between different Christian confessions and different religions, openly discussing with everyone, believers and non-believers”.¹⁵ Faggioli further quotes Pope Francis as saying “[t]he theologian cannot help but experience fraternity and communion firsthand, at the service of evangelization and to reach everyone's heart [...]. It is therefore important that there exist places, including institutional ones, in which to live and experience collegiality and theological fraternity.”

In the same article, Faggioli also states that “professional theologians work in institutions that are more and more part of a system dominated by technocrats and managers”. If *Ad theologiam promovendam* indeed calls for something less systematic, less technocratic, it is worth exploring the experience of interchurch families, as it provides concrete lived experience from which theologies may grow. Similarly, Tiziana Campisi writes that the Pope has indicated what is needed is “a fundamentally contextual theology capable of reading and interpreting the Gospel in the conditions in which men and women live daily, in different geographical, social, and cultural

¹³ XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS (First Session October 4-29): *Synthesis Report*, Vatican City, 2023, 7f.; available at <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>.

¹⁴ XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS: *Synthesis Report*, 7i.

¹⁵ M. FAGGIOLI: “Francis calls Catholic theologians to a ‘cultural revolution’”, in: *La Croix International*, 16 Nov 2023; available at <https://international.la-croix.com/news/signs-of-the-times/francis-calls-catholic-theologians-to-a-cultural-revolution/18701>.

environments”.¹⁶ The interchurch family is such a space, truly “a practical laboratory of Christian unity”.¹⁷

Conclusions

Mixed-religion married couples form a significant cohort within their churches. The spouses in such marriages are either distancing themselves from worship participation, worshipping separately in their respective churches, or together in both churches. That latter group form the subset known as interchurch families. These couples have learned to live what is referred to as receptive ecumenism, where people listen to and learn 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 also led them to become involved ecumenically, loving the other while remaining faithful to who each is. In case after case, the move from lived reality to reality as gift came about when the couples discovered others around them living the same reality, found they were not alone but encouraged to be, and to celebrate, who they were before God. In the process, they have become a model for the relationship between churches on the journey toward the healing of ecclesial disunity.

These couples and their families should be seen for what they are, potential gift to their churches and the Church for the healing of disunity. To develop that gift, help it bear fruit, such couples should be called forth, invited to tell their stories of receiving the gift of each other, of listening and discovering and growing in faith, so that together we may both encourage them in their faith, and learn from them of the richness and goodness and mercy of a God who provides, then uses, all manner of gift so that all may be one.

How might we work toward this? The response of one couple, speaking about what they found joyful, offers a way forward. “Joyful: our membership of AIF which has brought us into a community of like-minded Christians who will understand and support us non-judgmentally in what we do.” (C1067, Q10A). Encouraging and learning from interchurch couples, and walking with them in the questions and discernment, will enable them to do the same for others, beginning with the large cohort of couples in mixed-religion marriages, as well as with their churches. Drawing forth such a gift will be good, for the Church and for the world.

¹⁶ T. CAMPISI: “Pope: Theology must interpret the Gospel for today’s world”, in: *Vatican News*, 1 Nov 2023; available at <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-11/pope-francis-motu-proprio-pontifical-theology-academy.html>.

¹⁷ POPE BENEDICT XVI: *Pastoral Visit of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI in Poland*, 2006; available at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060525_incontro-ecumenico.html.