

# Conscientious Decisions

Admission to communion in the Roman Catholic Church for the other Christian partner in an interchurch family is canonically permissible in certain circumstances and by way of exception (although it has to be said that not everybody knows this yet).

The *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in 1993, specifically recognized mixed marriage between baptized Christians as an instance of the "grave and pressing need" required by the Code of Canon Law for exceptional admission to communion (159, 160). The unique situation of interchurch families, united sacramentally by marriage as well as by baptism, is indicated by the fact that, apart from danger of death, it is the *only specific instance of need* which is given in the Directory (although other possible instances are not of course excluded).

We hope that all Catholic ministers will soon be aware that admission to communion is not only "permitted" but "commended" in certain circumstances and by way of exception (129), and that the just assessment of particular cases is what the Directory requires of them (130). They should be aware that the need of some interchurch couples to share communion is specifically recognized at the level of the Catholic Church world-wide. The onus is now on those who refuse admission without carefully considering each case of pastoral need brought to them to defend their own conscientious decisions.

## Reciprocity

When it comes to reciprocity the situation is very different. The Directory makes it clear that a Catholic may lawfully receive communion "only from a minister in whose Church (the eucharist is) valid, or from one who is known to be validly ordained according to the Catholic teaching on ordination" (132). This means that from the Roman Catholic point of view Catholic-Orthodox partners may receive communion together in both churches. (There is more caution on the Orthodox side, but for the first bilateral agreement on this subject, between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church, see *Interchurch Families*, 1994, no.2, pp.6-7). However, a Catholic married to an Anglican or a Lutheran or a member of a Free Church is forbidden to ask for communion in the church or ecclesial community of his or her partner (unless the minister is known to be validly ordained from the Roman Catholic point of view), although that church may be willing to offer it.

There are difficult decisions to be made, and we all need to respect the very different decisions which will be conscientiously made by particular couples in particular contexts. In this field as in others, however, we can share our experience as interchurch families, and our reflections upon that experience. Some of the articles in this number contribute to that sharing and reflection.

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