

Ellen's First Communion

Eleven years ago our elder daughter Ellen unwittingly caused us a number of problems when we were trying to arrange an appropriate celebration of baptism for her. Eventually, we were very happy that her baptism was as 'joint' as we could make it in those days - the celebrant was a Roman Catholic, and the service took place in the Anglican parish church where Chris was the curate. Sarah's birth two years later raised even more difficulties, but these too were happily overcome when our two Bishops assisted at her baptism (there were photographs in the *Church Times* and the *Universe* in April 1982).

In the years since then, our children have been brought up within the practice and traditions of both communions. They are as much at home in one as in the other, and see nothing unusual in their father presiding at the eucharist, or their mother administering the chalice at mass. We consciously made the decision that the desire to receive communion must come from Ellen, and not from us, and we were therefore delighted when she finally raised the subject. Needless to say, her horizons very firmly included her two worshipping communities, and she found it very difficult to understand - or even believe - that one of her churches might expect her to exclude the other. Not only did she wish to receive communion in her two churches (and it has to be remembered that she has *never* had only one), but she was also quite clear that she wished her father and mother to share this day with her.

Occasions such as these can be particularly difficult for a two-church family. How a one-church family would rejoice over a child who asked for communion, and wished to share this important step with her parents! For us, it meant long months of anxiety, of reassurances to Ellen that she was right (even if this meant that the rest of the world had to be wrong), and of careful and considerate negotiation. But it is wonderful to be able to report that, this time, the care and consideration was mutual. We all had to learn to give and take, but we did so in an atmosphere of trust, and even love.

I will not spend too much time on the problems. Chris is an Anglican priest, and a very public figure in our two dioceses, and I myself am not unknown (as our Vicar-General pointed out at a recent AIF meeting!). I am sure that it was very much more difficult for us to be given the permissions we eventually received than it would have been for a more private couple. Also, the fact that I am a eucharistic minister had to be taken into account. Some people have said to me that we succeeded because we know 'the right people'. I had to say that I would gladly have exchanged our fame for their privacy in the course of those six months.

And I want to pay tribute here to my own parish priest, who could not have done more to help us, but helped us most of all by *wanting* to help us. He must have found the situation difficult at times - he is not a Jesuit from a liberal university, but a Catholic priest from Northern Ireland who had to come to terms with his own experiences and traditions. I also want to acknowledge the support and encouragement we received from our two Bishops and my Vicar-General, Mgr David Donnelly. I know that many discussions went on, phone calls were made, and letters were written, as well as the meetings we had ourselves with all these people. And it wasn't easy for any of us. But we all shared the same objective - to do what was best for Ellen. Our Bishops believed in us, believed in our integrity, and our reasons for asking for something that was difficult for them to give. For a long time I felt that the decision could go

either way, but it helped us that we were able to be honest with our Bishops about what that would mean for us. It is very hard to go on being refused by your own church.

As some who read this will know already, Ellen's First Communion mass was celebrated in Chris's Anglican parish church on 10th December 1989. Chris and I read the lessons - which we also chose - and Chris was responsible for the bidding prayers. As a family, the four of us took up the offertory, and that was a very emotional moment for us. I administered the chalice, first to Ellen, and then to Chris, because the Bishop of Brent-wood gave him permission to receive communion on that occasion. The church was full of family and friends. Both sets of grandparents were there - but how sad that only one set could fully share in Ellen's first communion.

There were many representatives of interchurch families, and of our two congregations, all sharing our joy. Ellen received presents which seemed to cover the entire spectrum of christian churchmanship, including, of course, an ASB and a Roman Missal.

As I've already said, there were sadnesses even on a day like that. A member of Chris' congregation said to me "But you don't mean that we won't be able to take communion in our own church?" I had to say that yes, technically I did mean that. Many people found this very hard to come to terms with. After all, Ellen is the vicar's daughter, and it *is* their church. But eventually this same person said to me, "Perhaps it will give us some idea of what you and Chris go through every week." This was the attitude that prevailed, but there was a lump in my throat as I stood in an unfamiliar part of Chris' church - behind the altar rails - and watched friend after friend come to their own communion rail and bow their heads for a blessing from a Catholic priest, while I myself had to pass them by with the chalice.

I don't think anyone there was unmoved. I am unable to believe that what we did could cause 'scandal' to any Christian. I am bewildered by people who suggest that God might not approve. Ellen took another step on her spiritual journey, supported by her family and friends, and everything was just as it should be. I pray that when Sarah, and all the other children of interchurch families, are ready to take that step, the way will not be quite so difficult for their parents.

Mary Bard