

Eucharistic Division: The Cost in Human Terms

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"Bishop, *why* can't my mother receive communion with my father?" was the inconveniently direct question asked by the ten-year old daughter of an interchurch family.

Not an easy question for a bishop to be faced with when he is greeting the congregation after a parish visitation, especially if he has just been exhorting the man Catholic congregation to work for unity with other Christians of the area.

For here is a family where husband and wife are united not only in christian faith and baptism, but also in marriage. They have a mission to nurture and evangelise their children in the faith of Christ. They are called to demonstrate to their children in their daily lives the reconciling power of God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. They are a "domestic church". Yet here they are coming together to celebrate the eucharist, the effective sign of that reconciling power, and they are torn apart at the moment of communion by church discipline. In this respect their witness to their children is compelled to be one of disunity, not of reconciliation. It is the particularly painful situation familiar to so many interchurch families who worship together Sunday by Sunday in the two churches to which mother and father belong.

More than two-thirds of all man Catholics who marry in England and Wales marry someone who is not a Roman Catholic. These marriages are called "mixed marriages". but in England many of those involved prefer the term "interchurch marriages" - a term coined by the Association of Interchurch Families in 1968 to describe a mixed marriage in which each partner is a practising Christian, usually one a Roman Catholic and the other a Christian of another tradition. The Catholic bishops of England and Wales estimate that perhaps one in ten of "mixed" marriages is "interchurch" in this sense. It is these interchurch families who exemplify the human cost of eucharistic division.

We write here from the background of Britain and Ireland, although similar experiences are common in many parts of the world. There is no lack of evidence of the pain felt many interchurch families who find themselves unable to receive communion together. "The longest journey of my life" is how one Irish Catholic husband described his walk up to the altar for communion while his wife stayed behind in the pew.

As early as 1971 the Association of Interchurch Families approached the Roman Catholic bishops of England and Wales, asking them to consider the urgent need felt by a growing number of interchurch families to have access to the eucharist *as families*. The Dublin International Consultation on Mixed Marriage in 1974 recorded "the widespread hope that partners in an interchurch marriage should be permitted a measure of continuing sharing in the eucharist".

More recently, two surveys of the experience of English interchurch families have been made, and the results published in the book *Sharing Communion: an Appeal to the Churches by Interchurch Families* by Ruth Reardon and Melanie Finch (Collins, 1983) and *Whom God hath Joined* by Mary Bard (McCrimmons, 1987).

These surveys give plenty of evidence of the sorrow, pain, bewilderment, frustration and sense of rejection and near despair felt by interchurch partners when they cannot receive communion together. Conversely, there is plenty of evidence of the joy and peace which they experience when they *are* able to receive communion together, especially if they feel they have the blessing of their churches. Families are increasingly judging that it is *right* for them to receive communion together, and that to refrain from doing so is not only painful but *wrong*. Happily there are more and more opportunities for families to come together to the table of the Lord. But in very many circumstances they still find themselves unable to do what they believe to be right. And even when they can, there is often the uncomfortable feeling that they are doing something underhand, something they need to be discreet about, something of which many of their fellow-christians (though clearly a diminishing number) would disapprove.

Sin-bearers

When they are refused the eucharistic food which they need to share together in order to nourish and build up their christian life as a couple and as a family, interchurch families are bearing the sin of christian disunity. They are paying the cost of the man-made barriers which have been set up between denominations which all claim to share - more or less fully - in the reality of the One Church of Christ.

In this - without either any fault or merit of their own, but simply because of the situation in which they find themselves - they stand in solidarity with that great company of the poor and the marginalised who are onlookers at the great feast of life to which God has invited all human beings.

There are of course many differences between the situation of the hungry and oppressed of the world, and that of interchurch families in the church. We would not want to press the comparison too far. But there is a real analogy, and it seems to be useful for our purpose here in considering "the human cost of eucharistic division".

In the world God has created, all are invited to the feast of life since an abundance of food for all is provided. But so many people cannot share in that feast and receive the sustenance they need because they are trapped in situations of injustice, oppression and poverty which are of human making. They are paying the price for over-sufficiency in the rich countries of the world. The poor and the oppressed are sin-bearers for the world's injustice, for the human dividing lines which people have set up between rich and poor, powerful and powerless.

None of us should forget them when we come to the sacrament of healing and forgiveness, to share the eucharistic bread which is the sign of reconciliation and unity between human beings as well as between God and humankind, the sign that life is offered to all, and that this life is for sharing.

But maybe interchurch families have a special reason and calling to remember the hungry and the oppressed, the marginalised and the victims of injustice when they come to the eucharist, because they experience so sharply in their own lives the results of the human divisions in Christ's church which, alas, mirror the human divisions in God's world. They too are hungry to share the eucharistic bread at the Lord's table, just as those others are hungry for bread and justice at the feast of life. They are sin-bearers too. Within the church, they stand for those who suffer because of manmade divisions in the world.

Sin and Disunity

Sin and division are human realities. Their price has to be paid.

Eucharistic division is only a part - a reflection - of the price which must be paid for divisions within the christian family. These divisions obscure God's reconciling love, and make the mission of the church more difficult. The church which is called to be the sign of that love cannot be a clear sign to the world. This is the great price which has to be paid for division.

The eucharist is the sign of the unity of the church in Christ. Eucharistic division simply mirrors the disunity of the christian family; it is a sign of that disunity.

We need to stress the link between eucharistic communion and the unity of the church. Those who are reluctant to extend any eucharistic sharing until Christians are visibly one are making a vital point without unity, eucharistic communion is an empty sign. It is essential to take what they are saying seriously.

In the west, this attitude is particularly associated with the Roman Catholic Church. It is true that the Second Vatican Council in its Decree on Ecumenism gave weight *both* to the traditional position that eucharistic sharing is a sign of unity achieved and therefore generally forbidden, *and* to the fact that since the eucharist is a means of grace it can on occasion be used as a means to help towards the restoration of unity among Christians. But in practice, church discipline since

Vatican II has stressed the first aspect of the relationship between eucharist and unity (at least where the western churches are concerned), and has interpreted the second in very individualistic terms.

Thus it is possible in cases of pressing need for individuals to be admitted to communion in the Roman Catholic Church if the non-Catholic Christian professes a eucharistic faith in conformity with that of the Catholic church and asks for communion of his own accord. These conditions are met in many interchurch families. There is a further condition, however: that the non-Catholic Christian cannot approach a minister of his own community. This seems to rule out interchurch families - although as Cardinal Willebrands, then President of the Secretariat for promoting Christian Unity, said at the Synod of Bishops in 1980 when he urged the bishops to consider afresh the question of admission to eucharistic communion for the non-Catholic partner in a mixed marriage, "this condition is less closely connected with eucharistic doctrine and faith". But at present the rules have to be stretched a little (and are so stretched, of course, in a number of places) to accommodate interchurch families.

It is not surprising that since Vatican II the first and traditional position has been stressed. The second, that the eucharist is a means of grace and so eucharistic sharing can be used on occasion to further unity, is a relatively new insight. But no one should argue as though the "on occasion" did not exist, and interchurch families would plead for further consideration of its application to their situation.

Communion and Unity

Juggling with notions of the eucharist as "end" and "means" in relation to the unity of the church has not been very fruitful for interchurch families, and it may be more helpful to think in terms of communion and unity. An ecclesiology based on the notion of "communion" has been making headway in recent years, thanks largely to the work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. It is helping to overcome the polarisation of proponents of "end" and "means" in relation to eucharistic sharing and church unity. We all too easily think of "end" and "means" in terms of *either / or*, rather than in those of the *both and* of Vatican II.

If we focus on the meaning of "communion", it is easier to think in terms of a sliding scale; there are degrees of communion. There can be imperfect communion which is still communion.

Indeed, the perfect communion to which we are called is none other than the life of God, Father, Son and Spirit, in a relationship of love. It is that same unity of love which binds Christ and his church: God's unity, binding christian people together as they share through Christ in the unity of Persons in the Trinity. This is the fulness of communion. It is only when Christians fully live this unity that we shall be fully in communion with one another.

We do not live fully that communion in the life of the Trinity within any of our churches and ecclesial communities. Yet, within our church communities we receive communion together as a sign of unity, an effective sign which helps us to grow in unity. So we are 'in full communion' with each other and yet that communion is imperfect because we do not yet live out the full reality of our communion in the life of God. There is sufficient unity already for our communion together to be no empty sign, and in the eucharist we express our desire to grow into deeper unity with God and with one another.

In this perspective it can make sense for churches which are not yet 'in full communion' with each other, but are nevertheless in a partial and imperfect way 'in communion' through the faith and baptism which they profess, to accept that on certain occasions and for certain people eucharistic communion between members of divided church communities may be an authentic sign of the unity we already share as well as the expression of a longing to grow towards that fuller unity to which we are all called. It is not good enough to say: no, the churches are not in canonical communion with each other, but they are in spiritual communion, and then think we can come to a final and fixed position on the expression of that spiritual communion in sacramental and canonical terms. There must always be movement here, pushing back the limits of the possible - and this inevitably happens first in a fragmentary and untidy way.

Earlier we suggested that there is a certain analogy between interchurch families in the church and the marginalised poor and oppressed in the world. Perhaps we can also discover a fruitful analogy between work for communion and unity in the church, and work for justice and peace in the world.

There is a striking passage in Fr Gerry Hughes' recent book *Walk to Jerusalem - in Search of Peace*. When at last he arrived in Jerusalem the author met Fr Bruno Hussar, the Dominican founder of the village of Neve Shalom - Oasis of Peace - where Jews, Christians and Muslims live together in peace. The village now attracts thousands of Jewish and Arab youngsters who come to listen to one another, understand and enjoy one another's company.

Fr Gerry records Bruno's final remark at the end of his visit: "There are situations where it is impossible to do justice immediately to both sides, and Israel today is one. There are times when we have to learn to live in peace in injustice."

He comments: "I know this statement will make many hackles rise and that it can be misinterpreted to mean that the victims of injustice must accept the injustice meekly and passively. We must hunger and thirst after justice; passive acceptance of injustice has no place in Christian life, but Bruno's comment is a corrective to that other statement, which is also true, but can be misinterpreted, 'There can be no peace without justice.' The statement is frequently misused to justify violence until such time as justice can be enforced. It was through his death on a cross that Jesus reconciled all things. He opposed injustice, but non-violently. When he became the victim of violence from the unjust civil and religious powers of his day, he accepted death on

a cross and prayed for the forgiveness of his enemies. When he arose from the dead, he said to his disciples, 'Peace be with you,' wishing them peace now, not at some future date when all injustice would have been removed from the earth. Trying to live in peace in an unjust situation, we are more likely to reach eventually a more just solution. Trying to bring justice in an unjust situation without trying to live peacefully in the meantime, brings neither peace nor justice."

This insight into the relationship of peace and justice will find an echo within the experience of many interchurch families, as they apply it to eucharistic communion and the unity of the church. They feel that they have to work towards sharing as couples, as families, in eucharistic communion so far as they can, now, in a situation in which their churches are still divided.

They know that immediate and full unity between the churches may be God's will, but it is not yet possible; for one thing, not enough Christians in all our churches really *want* unity enough. They know that their own strongly expressed desire for eucharistic communion together *now* makes many hackles rise; they do not however intend it as an assertion that church unity does not matter - indeed, they are often enough among those who hunger and thirst most after unity. But they may provide a corrective to the assertion, which is also true, that there can be no communion without unity. There is a way of expressing this truth which refuses to allow any value to growing unity and degrees of communion. Interchurch families ask when there is sufficient unity to allow some advance towards eucharistic communion. Interchurch families feel that to live so.. as they can in communion in a situation where their churches have not yet reached unity, may well make those churches more likely to grow into unity. It is no good trying to bring unity to divided churches without trying to advance in communion at the same time.

Death and resurrection

Unity and its expression in communion are God's gift in Christ. It was through his death on a cross that Jesus reconciled all things, restored unity between God and humankind, and brought all human beings into communion with his Father and with one another - that communion which is fore-shadowed, though not fully, in the church. We spoke earlier of interchurch families as sin-bearers, bearing the sin of christian divisions, just as the destitute and oppressed are bearing the sin of unjust man-made barriers. But this is only by analogy. Christ himself is the great sin-bearer, who bears away the sin of the world. He bore our sins in his own body on the cross. He absorbed into himself the effects of sin, his body was broken, he became sin for us. And through his brokenness, God restored unity. The great work of reconciliation is already achieved, through his death and resurrection.

The task of the church is to make known the great work of reconciliation in the world, to make known the life that comes through acceptance of death, the peace that comes through absorbing and transforming the fruits of injustice, the unity that comes through suffering the brokenness.

What is the church asked to do when faced with the poverty, suffering and oppression in the world which are the fruits of injustice? First of all, the call comes to relieve suffering and bring hope to individuals. Secondly, the call comes to work for justice, to combat the unjust structures which institutionalise human greed, our lack of care and concern for one another. For some, the call comes to identify fully with the hungry and the suffering, with the marginalised and the oppressed, even to the point of dying with them.

Is there an analogy here too with what the church is asked to do when faced with the situation of interchurch families?

Is not the first call to relieve suffering so far as possible? This is a call for a truly pastoral approach to interchurch families. Their job, like that of all christian families, is to live a reconciled family life, to nurture their children in love and unity, to help them to grow in faith and in response to God's call to them. How can they do this properly without sharing in eucharistic communion? For them it is an *urgent* question; they have so little time, as couples and as families. Must the relief of their suffering, must their freedom to fulfil the task God has assigned to them be delayed until the churches have finally accepted the healing of all their divisions? Is not the urgency of this pastoral task a stimulus for the churches to relate the situation of interchurch families to the growing communion - imperfect but real - between them, and to apply its fruits to this particular group of Christians who in their family life are already nourished by more than one church tradition?

Suffering is not good in itself; it is to be relieved wherever possible. It is hardly a christian response to say to the hungry and oppressed: we sympathise with you but we cannot help you because your suffering is necessary to show how unjust the world still is. Rather, we held that the relief of suffering brings a sign of christian hope in an unjust world. Yet interchurch families are often offered the first response: we sympathise with you, but your suffering is necessary to show how disunited the disciples of Christ still are.

Secondly, the call comes to work for unity, to replace the denominational structures which institutionalise division by structures which foster unity. The pain of interchurch families who have to pay the cost of eucharistic division simply highlights the wider christian predicament - the cost the church has to pay for divisions between denominations: its mission to the world cannot properly be carried out because its function as a sign of God's reconciling love is obscured. This is the basic question for the churches: the urgency' with which they pursue their reconciling mission in the world. They might even be helped to see this more clearly, to grow in a sense of urgency, if they try to stand with interchurch families and see how they can best help them to undertake their christian mission within their own family life.

For interchurch families themselves there is the third way of living the resurrection even now. They will struggle all they can to make known their urgent pastoral needs to their church authorities, and sometimes they will be heard. They will work for structures of unity from within

their denominations with all the energy at their disposal, and sometimes they will see signs of coming together which will cheer their hearts. But in the end some of them will be left only with the third way, the way of suffering, the way of identification with the cross - and for all of them there will be elements of this way on their family journeys.

Yet here too there is a parallel with the experience of the suffering peoples of the world. In *The Crucified Peoples* Jon Sobrino writes from the experience of El Salvador: "Are these people already living the resurrection? Of course the new heaven and the new earth God wants for them are still long way off. They have far more cross than resurrection in their lives. But they also have some resurrection - and we say this with all due respect and in fear and trembling. In the midst of slavery there is already *freedom*, not liberal freedom or the freedom which claims to guarantee human rights. But there is freedom at a deeper level. There is freedom to decide, to commit oneself and to struggle for liberation. There is the height of human freedom when - like Christ - these people do not have their lives taken from them but give them freely and generously ... They are passing from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom. In the midst of injustice there is *love*, forgiveness, reconciliation, fellowship, signs of God's kingdom ... There is the *joy* of knowing they are people and a people, and that as Christians they are God's children and God's people. They can call God Father because they feel him near. They feel close to well-known people like Archbishop Romero...and to others less well known, many brothers and sisters, and so they feel they are not alone and that God is near. Freedom, love and joy are signs of the risen Lord... Scandalously, but as predicted by the christian paradox, there are already signs of the resurrection among the crucified peoples."

This passage too will strike an echo in the hearts of some interchurch couples, The parallel should not be pressed too far. On the whole interchurch families have a choice unlike the crucified peoples of central America. The easiest escape route is to abandon the churches altogether, and not a few are driven to this. Or they can become one-church families - and for some this seems to be the only way forward, indeed the right way forward for them, But for others, who *freely choose* to remain two-church families because God seems to be calling them to do so, there is an experience of resurrection even in the midst of all the hurts and conflicts involved.

In their marriages they "live the *hope*, as well as the difficulties, of the path to christian unity", as Pope John Paul II told them at York in 1982. In their families they know the enrichment which comes from living two church traditions; they are not totally destroyed by the tensions but know something of the newness and release of *life* which can be given in this context. They have the deep *joy* of sharing in fellowship with others whose experience echoes their own, who are equally hurt by the way in which many of their fellow-Christians see their separation at the eucharist for granted; in this close fellowship they know that they are not alone, and that Jesus stands in their midst. They hang on to both traditions represented in their families because they know this is the way forward to unity - to embrace diversity within reconciled relationships.

They do this in some sense for their churches, anticipating and pioneering that greater unity to which all are called. They do it in *love*; indeed it is only possible because they love one another. But in love they experience that it *is* possible.

They offer this resurrection experience of duality in unity to their churches, and pray that it may somehow be used, in God's providence, for the unity of Christ's church, for the peace of God's world.

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