

SHARING COMMUNION: A Fact Sheet

25 March 1995 (open to correction, but accurate to the best of our knowledge and up-dated as and when necessary)

1 AIF has no policy on "intercommunion" Members hold many different views.

(*Journal INTERCHURCH FAMILIES*, editorial, summer 1994).

2 Since 1968 AIF has on many occasions

- expressed to church leaders and communities the serious spiritual need of some interchurch couples and families to share communion;
- pointed to the unique position of interchurch partners who share not only the sacrament of baptism but are united in Christian marriage;
- related sharing communion in such families to the wider question of Christian unity;
- tried to make known the two principles of Vatican II on *communicatio in sacris*;
- monitored the changing rules applying these two principles, to see how far they could be applied to interchurch couples and families;
- shared the experience of families who had been able, or unable, to share communion. (*Sharing Communion*, Ruth Reardon and Melanie Finch, 1983).

3 In 1983 the new Code of Canon Law stated:

- the diocesan bishop or episcopal conference is to judge if there is a "grave and pressing need" for admission to communion by Christians not in full communion with the Catholic Church; if there is, Catholic ministers can give communion to other Christians who
 1. *cannot approach a minister of their own community*
 2. *spontaneously ask*
 3. *demonstrate the Catholic faith in the eucharist and are properly disposed.*

The diocesan bishop or episcopal conference was not to issue general norms without consulting other churches concerned. (c.844) The Code very significantly dropped the words "for a prolonged period" with reference to the unavailability of another minister ("Admission to Communion", INTERCHURCH FAMILIES, Summer 1994) and some bishops in England began to give permission for admission, realising that official admission could now be supported by canon law, and feeling that some interchurch families showed "a grave and pressing need" to share communion.

4 The 1993 *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *sets out two principles*:

1. eucharistic communion is inseparably linked to full ecclesial communion and its visible expression;
2. by baptism other Christians are brought into a real, if imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church.

Therefore, by way of exception and under certain conditions, admission to communion for other Christians may be permitted or even commended (n.129). Diocesan bishops are strongly recommended (taking account of any norms established by episcopal conferences) to establish general norms (in consultation with other churches) for judging situations of grave and pressing need and verifying the conditions given in the Directory.

Catholic ministers are to judge individual cases in accord with these norms, where they exist, otherwise they are to judge according to the norms of the Directory itself (n.130).

It gives conditions for admission (n. 131):

1. inability of the other Christian to have recourse to a minister of his/her own church;
2. he/she is to ask on his/her own initiative;
3. he/she should manifest Catholic faith in the eucharist and be properly disposed.

The Directory specifically refers to eucharistic sharing in the context of mixed marriages between baptised Christians, instancing the wedding (n.159); then states that although spouses share the sacraments of baptism and marriage, eucharistic sharing can only be exceptional and in each case ... (n.160).

THUS: mixed marriages between baptised Christians are recognised on the level of the Roman Catholic Church world-wide as a possible situation of grave and pressing need; AND, since this is a need of the couple, it clearly makes condition 1 irrelevant (see section on "The application of the norms of the Code" in the article "Admission to Communion", INTERCHURCH FAMILIES, Summer 1994).

The three questions which the Catholic minister must ask in each case are therefore:

1. *Is there a real need?*
2. *Has the need been expressed in the form of a request?*
3. *Is there adequate eucharistic faith and proper dispositions'?*

If these three questions are answered in the affirmative in any particular case, it would seem that this case would be "exceptional" in the sense intended by the Directory, and admission can be permitted - or indeed commended. (AIF paper: "Exceptional occasions or exceptional cases?")

5 Episcopal norms required by the *Directory*

So far as we know no episcopal conference has yet responded to the "strong recommendation" of the Directory by establishing local norms. The French bishops, however, have pointed out that they do not need to do so, since their 1983 Note on Eucharistic Hospitality had covered the ground; in this they set out the norms in the Code in a way particularly relevant to the French situation. Their approach in 1983 (ten years before the Directory specifically referred to "exceptional eucharistic sharing" for mixed marriages between baptised Christians) is vindicated by the 1993 Directory (see INTERCHURCH FAMILIES, editorial, "Two by Two", January 1995, which includes a summary of the norms laid down by the French bishops).

The three questions (listed above) which need to be asked in each case of admission to communion can really only be answered in pastoral dialogue with the couple concerned, which is presumably why the Directory states that if the episcopal conference or the local bishop has not set forth these norms in a way particularly relevant to the local situation, Catholic ministers must judge individual cases by the norms of the Directory itself.

This is an entirely new situation; Catholic ministers have the authority to admit; previously they could only "not refuse" (and let it be known that they approved, which some of course were prepared to do.)

6 The present situation in England and Wales on admission to communion

This is very variable. When similar requests go to different bishops at present, they receive quite different answers. Some refuse; others are very happy to give the necessary permission. None will give a general permission for particular occasions; the bishops who admit do so because they are concerned to meet the real and expressed needs of particular couples, as the Directory requires. It is especially difficult for bishops to give permission if the local parish priest is reluctant, but this has happened. Once the bishop has given permission on one occasion, a parish priest who feels the need of the couple or family will often be ready to use his own discretion for the future. Even where he is aware that the bishop disapproves, a parish priest may feel that the need of a couple or family known to him is so great that he is prepared to admit to communion (and the Directory now of course supports this decision, in the absence of episcopal norms). Experience shows that permission is given in response to the expressed need of particular couples; generalisations about the needs of interchurch families are not useful (or true) - it is always better to talk about the needs of "some" interchurch couples and families. The most useful thing may be for particular couples to express their own needs.

7 Reciprocity

So far as Catholics receiving communion in the church of their partner is concerned, there is no change. The Directory repeats that a Catholic "may ask for [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" (n.132). It is no use asking for permission to receive in an Anglican or Free Church, since a Catholic bishop or minister cannot lawfully give it unless their ministers are officially recognised by the Roman Catholic Church. A Catholic who receives communion in the other church accepts responsibility for a conscientious decision made in relation to his/her understanding of the effective reality of the eucharist celebrated in that church, and to the particular circumstances in which

he/she finds him/herself (for an example see "Discerning The Body", INTERCHURCH FAMILIES, Summer 1995).