

Sharing Communion in Interchurch Families:

EXCEPTIONAL OCCASIONS or EXCEPTIONAL CASES?

The Directory makes it clear that communion can be given to a baptized Christian marrying a Roman Catholic at the wedding mass, if there is one (n.159).

The next norm reads: "Although the spouses in a mixed marriage share the sacraments of baptism and marriage, eucharistic sharing can only be exceptional and in each case ..." (n.160). When the text first came out, many people read "exceptional" in the sense of "occasional". Longer reflection, however, suggests that this was a mis-reading.

Rome has consistently refused to accept lists of occasions which would have a general application (e.g. the reaction to the list issued by the Bishop of Superior, Wisconsin, in 1973 following the Instruction of June 1972; the SPCU *Interpretative Note* of October 1973 read: "The Instruction speaks of particular cases, which are to be examined individually. Hence a general regulation cannot be issued which makes a category out of an exceptional case, nor is it possible to legitimate on the basis of *epikeia* by turning this latter into a general rule").

To understand this "exceptional" admission of particular cases referred to in n.160, we need to refer back to the "exceptional" of n.129. Here "exceptional" admission (the French text in AAS uses the adjective as in n.160) may be permitted - or indeed commended - under certain conditions.

There must be a situation of "grave and pressing need" (n.130), and the Directory itself by its reference to them has identified mixed marriages between baptised Christians as a possible situation of such need. The two conditions for admission relevant to mixed marriages are: there must be a request for admission; there must be Catholic faith in the sacrament and the proper dispositions (n.131).

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.

These questions can really only be answered in pastoral dialogue with the couple concerned, which is presumably why the Directory says that if the episcopal conference or the local bishop has not set forth these norms in a way particularly relevant to the local situation (as the French bishops did in their 1983 Note on Eucharistic Hospitality), Catholic ministers must judge individual cases by the norms of the Directory itself.

Clearly it is only a minority of cases of mixed marriages between baptised Christians in which the need to share communion will be experienced and expressed, but where it is experienced, it is felt deeply and it is felt often. This reading of the Directory answers some of the problems which are sometimes raised - e.g. two remarks made by members of a Diocesan Ecumenical Commission which discussed the subject recently: one member said: "There seems no obvious need or desire for shared communion in most mixed marriages"; another said: "Why can't they receive communion together every week in view of their special need?" If we read the Directory in the sense of exceptional *cases* rather than exceptional *occasions*, the points made by both would seem to be met.