

"Mixed Marriages and their Christian Families"

Cardinal Willebrands' speech to the Synod of Bishops, 1980

(This text is crucial for an understanding of the provisions of the Code of Canon Law of 1983 on admission to communion (Can.844 dropped the phrase "for a prolonged period" from the condition that the non-Catholic Christian could not have recourse to a minister of his own church) and of the pastoral application of the Code in the Directory issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in 1993.)

The Instrumentum Laboris rightly draws attention to the need for a sincere dialogue with Christian families themselves (n.90). Among Christian families there are many which are joined in what we usually call mixed marriages. This is why it is necessary for the Synod also to bear in mind another dialogue, namely the theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches and ecclesial Communities.

Two Joint Commissions - one with the Anglican Communion, the other with the Lutheran and Reformed Churches - have dealt with the Theology of Marriage and the Problems of Mixed Marriages. Both Commissions have prepared reports. From these it is clear that these Churches are already in agreement with us on many elements of the fundamental doctrine concerning marriage and the Christian family: -

a) In particular it is clear that, although these Churches do not call matrimony a sacrament of the New Law, they do acknowledge it to be a sacred reality, a state instituted by the Creator and renewed in Christ as a mystery of the new covenant in Christ with the Church; indeed they admit that it is promised a special grace by Christ. They certainly do not regard matrimony as a merely civil matter.

b) It is also clear that they admit the principle of indissolubility, as taught by Christ our Lord, even though their practice in difficult cases, especially regarding divorce, is very different from ours.

The Orthodox Churches are in total agreement with us about the sacramentality and indissolubility of marriage, although, for different reasons, they admit in certain circumstances the possibility of divorce and so of a new marriage.

Furthermore it is clear from our dialogues that the social and moral problems that beset the Christian family today are felt equally by all Christian Churches and Communities. The Synod should be able to speak of these problems in such a way as will make it easier for other Christians to join their voices with ours to give a common witness to these values which are so endangered today.

It is in light of all this that we should give careful attention to mixed marriages (The more so since such marriages are explicitly treated of in only one paragraph, n.90, of the *Instrumentum Laboris*). I am speaking of the marriage of a Catholic with a baptized member of another Church or ecclesial community, and particularly of those mixed marriages in which each partner is professing and living the Christian faith in such a way that both are striving to foster 'the unity of their conjugal and family life, a unity which is based on their baptism too' (*Matr.Mixta* n.14). We know that not every mixed marriage attains to this "ideal" (and we must admit with sorrow that this has to be said of many marriages between Catholics too). It is hoped that this Synod will not content itself with stating the well known difficulties involved in mixed marriages, but that it will fulfil its pastoral duty in a positive way by addressing to them an evangelical message that will give them new heart and new hope.

We have already seen that the number of mixed marriages is very large. Throughout the world one in every twelve of the marriages solemnised in the Catholic Church is celebrated with a dispensation either from the impediment of mixed religion or from that of disparity of cult. In many countries and dioceses at least one in two marriages of Catholics are with a baptized member of another Church or ecclesial Community.

The Church teaches that every valid marriage between baptized persons is a true sacrament which gives rise to 'a certain communion of spiritual benefits' (*Matr.Mixta*, Proem.). The difference between such marriage and one with a non-baptized person is far from being a merely juridical one; it rests upon a fundamental truth of Catholic doctrine concerning baptism. So it is that the *Instrumentum Laboris*, especially in its doctrinal section, can speak primarily of the *Christian* family and has only more rarely to restrict its teaching to the *Catholic Christian* family. Therefore it can be said of the marriage of two Christians who have been baptized in different Churches, as it is of a marriage between two Christians, that their union is a true sacrament and gives rise to a 'domestic church'; that the partners are called to a unity which reflects the union of Christ with the Church; that the family, as a family, is bound to bear witness before the world, a witness based on that 'spiritual union which is founded on a common faith and hope, and works through love'. Thus 'the family itself, as a little church, is somehow called, in a similar way to the Church itself, to become a sign of unity for the world' (*Instr.Lab.* 85.).

There are many foundations for such witness. The partners are one in believing marriage to be holy in Christ and in the Church, and therefore indissoluble; in their family life they profess the value of the Christian virtues. Both partners have rights, and duties regarding the religious education of their children, as Pope Paul VI reminded us in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* when he said: 'Families resulting from a mixed marriage also have the duty of proclaiming Christ to the children in the fulness of the consequences of a common baptism; they have moreover the difficult task of becoming *'builders of unity'*' (*Ev.Nunt.* 71). The family is also called to help their neighbours in their need, and to do so for Christian motives. Their family life should be nourished by truly Christian prayer, by meditation on the Word of God, by a spirituality which runs through their whole family life.

Such spiritual communion, an outstanding feature in many mixed families too, eventually affects even sacramental life and prompts the partners to ask permission to approach the Holy Eucharist together. For this is a moment at which they keenly feel their division, and also feel keenly their need for the spiritual nourishment that is the Eucharist. In the dialogue with other Churches and ecclesial Communities we have spoken of doctrine about the Eucharist and the Church, and of the relationship between the mystery

of the Eucharist and that of the Church. This dialogue is not yet complete, but the differences seem to be less, particularly between Catholics and Anglicans. Christian life in marriage and in the education of children can lead towards unity. Therefore I wish to ask whether the time has now come to study afresh the possibility of admitting the non-Catholic partners in mixed marriages to Eucharist Communion in the Catholic Church, obviously in individual cases and after due examination. The Catholic Church, in the Instruction of June 1972, has already recognized the possibility of such admission as long as a number of conditions are fulfilled: it is required that the non-Catholic Christian should profess a eucharistic faith in conformity with that of the Catholic Church; that he should ask for Communion of his own accord; and that he should experience a real need for this sacrament. This need is described in the following terms: - 'A need for an increase in spiritual life and a need for a deeper involvement into the mystery of the Church *and of its unity*' (IV,2: AAS LXIV 523a.) It seems to me that these conditions are often fulfilled in mixed marriages. But there is a fourth condition: it is required that the non-Catholic Christian be able for a prolonged period to have recourse to a minister of his own Church. To my mind this condition is less closely connected with eucharistic doctrine and faith. Such a study will also need to study the pressures for 'reciprocity' (that is, allowing the Catholic partner to approach the Eucharist of another Church): the Catholic Church cannot grant such reciprocity in the case of those Churches which we believe, 'especially because of the lack (defectus) of the sacrament of Orders, have not preserved the genuine and total reality of the Eucharistic mystery' (Unit.Red. 22). This is a serious difficulty, but it should not prevent the undertaking of this study.

Between the Catholic Church and other Churches the degrees of communion vary. The Orthodox Churches 'are joined to us in a very close relationship' (Matr.Mixta, 'Proem) and this 'almost total communion' had found initial expression in the legislation of the Decree *Crescens Matrimoniorum*. The Churches that take their origin from the Reformation are established in a real, though not perfect, communion with the Catholic Church (cfr.Unit.Red. 3). This communion should find expression in our pastoral practice regarding family life. The Catholic Church cannot acknowledge mixed marriages to be the *ordinary* means for the restoration of unity among Christians (Instr.Lab. 90), but it should show a real 'solicitude' for mixed families. For a mixed marriage that is inspired by a Christian spirit can do much to further the unity of Christians.

Over and above the witness given by families themselves, we should also consider the common witness that Christian Churches and Communities should give on behalf of Christian marriage and the Christian family. As I have already said, our dialogue has shown some convergences in doctrine; and, despite serious differences on some moral issues, on others there is no disagreement between us. The way is thus open to a common witness on behalf of Christian marriage, a witness already called for by Pope Paul VI and the Archbishop of Canterbury in their Common Declaration of 1977 (AAS LXIX 287-8).

An important way of giving such witness is through the pastoral care, wherever possible the *joint* pastoral care, of mixed marriages. This has been widely accepted in principle (a principle stated in norm 14 of *Matrimonia Mixta*), but much remains to be done to put this principle into practice, particularly as regards preparation for marriage and also the provision of proper help in the first years of family life. It is to be hoped that this Synod will urge priests to take this duty very seriously and to seek suitable collaboration with ministers of other Churches. Above all, the parish communities from which mixed marriage partners come can give them enormous help in strengthening their family unity and in making their own

contribution to the life and unity of the Church. Pastoral care, skilfully given, can help to allay the unnecessary suspicions and friction which can arise in this connection.

Finally, you will note that the words 'unio' and 'communio' occur on almost every page of our Instrumentum Laboris. As is obvious, these refer first and foremost to the unity of the family itself. But when we find these words in the context of mixed marriages we may also see a reference to the overall quest for Christian unity. 'The family can respond to the desire of the Lord "that they may be one".' (Instr. Lab. 52).

+ *Johannes Cardinal Willebrands*