

# **The Household of God and Local Households** **Revisiting the Domestic Church**

**International Conference**  
**Catholic University Leuven, Belgium**  
**10 – 13 March 2010**

I am ill at ease with academic theology, as I find I can rarely follow theological lectures, and they often seem to be about something very remote from the everyday practice of our Christian faith. But Martin Reardon once told us 'we are all theologians', and that helped me to realise that theology is somewhat like the grammar of a language or the theory of music, teasing out and explaining patterns and structures which make the practice clearer to others and help us too to develop our faith in conjunction with our minds. So Richard and I were drawn to attend this conference for several reasons, but mostly because it was organised by Professor Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi, a friend and member of the Interchurch Families International Network (IFIN). In 2008 Thomas had addressed us at the annual conference of the Association of Interchurch Families GB, at which IFIN members from several other countries were visitors. Following conversations, Thomas suggested organising an academic conference at the International Academy of Marital Spirituality, attached to the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, where he holds the Chair for the Study of Marriage and Spirituality in the Theology Department, to help us reflect together and with others on the subject of the Family as Domestic Church. This subject had been suggested to us during our visit to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) at the Vatican in 2005, our second visit there, the first being during the Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families held in Rome in 2003, when we offered to the Council the 'Rome document'. Several groups and associations connected with IFIN have carried out surveys among their members since then on this subject, but this was an opportunity to pool our ideas and share them with others in the Church. It took place in a Catholic University, but by no means all the participants came from that tradition.

We felt that the presence at the conference of a good number of IFIN members might focus the attention of the academics who were there on the practical realities of living an ecumenical marriage and family life day by day, and that this would give their discourse some richer substance. At the same time they could help us to grasp better the sense the Church has of the sacrament of marriage and its value in the life of the Church, and to understand more clearly the background against which documents and guidelines of the Church are issued. This might help us to demonstrate more effectively to the Church how an interchurch marriage where both spouses live in a covenant of unity can be a vocation to both practical and spiritual ecumenism. In fact, we were seeking to join together our little pictures with the bigger picture.

It was especially good to find that the conference did not only attract theologians and other academics, but also many practitioners in diverse fields of marriage and family life, as well as in other fields of work and study. So we didn't feel too much our lack of intellectual training and sophistication! Well done, Thomas, for drawing such a wide variety of folk from so many different spheres together. IFIN members attended from nine countries as far apart as Australia, Canada and Germany, although some only for a day or so. It gave us the opportunity to talk about further work together, we were able to inform each other about how things are going in our own countries, and to discuss how best to respond to the encouragement of the PCPCU to keep them in touch with our ongoing experience. We have sent an international report to the Council regularly since we were there, Fr George Kilcourse, Pastoral Advisor to the American Association of Interchurch Families visited them a little while ago. It has been suggested that we should request another small group visit there, perhaps following the retirement of Cardinal Kasper, and also that we might return to the World Council of Churches in Geneva which represents the Orthodox and Protestant churches, where our first world gathering took place in 2001. Meanwhile work will continue on this subject of the Family as Domestic Church and the working out of that in the everyday lives of interchurch families. We need to keep this dialogue going!

The conference programme was very intense: three plenary sessions per day with the presentation of two substantial papers each session followed by discussion, and a further late session where shorter papers were presented in a number of different groups. Many choices were available during this later session, but we only had the chance of attending one such 'workshop' on each of two days. This enabled presentations by and discussion with such participants as doctoral students and some of those working on the ground in various fields of marriage and family life. As on each day one of the workshops contained papers presented by members of IFIN, (Fr George Kilcourse from the USA, Pastor Jean-Baptiste Lipp from Switzerland and Ray Temmerman from Canada), our loyalties were tested, but I took the opportunity on one day to attend a session where a fairly small group of us heard about work on improving collaboration and communication amongst families in England, enabling deeper spirituality and dialogue between spouses in Poland, and support work amongst families not fully engaging with the Church's concept of marriage in South Africa. This was a good opportunity to talk freely about the different experiences of those in the group, which included folk of several nationalities.

Not unexpectedly, Richard and I connected much more with these smaller group sessions and with informal discussion over coffee and meals than with the longer more academic sessions, but we did find that in many cases we were after all able to follow the complex reasoning and thought which we met in the lecture theatre. We went to all the sessions and didn't fall asleep or snore in any of them! And we also often found it interesting when a presentation was enlarged and sometimes challenged in the discussions following. I suppose the real measure of such sessions and those amateurs like us who attend them is whether we feel an impulse to take some notes, and then whether we can retain and relate a bit of what we have heard afterwards. I am looking at my notes, and I do remember some ideas which struck me, but I think I am going to leave it to others more experienced than we are in this sort of gathering to sum up in a more coherent manner those very theoretical bits!

There were two striking and contrasting aspects of the conference for me. One was the new experience of meeting people from several continents and Christian traditions who engage in such theological discourse and study as part of their everyday lives, and this helped me to sense more fully how this too is part of the Church's mission and witness, though at times it seemed quite dry and often irrelevant to our own everyday lives as a couple and family. The other was that when we actually heard speakers respond especially to quite focused questions from members of IFIN, or met them at our AIF display or over the coffee table, they mostly showed interest in our work and expressed a deep appreciation of the witness of interchurch families themselves. So that taught us something, and I hope we informed them effectively too, and we hope that will count in future. We certainly made contacts which we hope will be ongoing. It was also very encouraging to find quite a wide spread of ages there, including many of Thomas's students. There was a simple and prayerful ecumenical service towards the end of the conference which included a small choir of students who sang beautifully, which was held in the church where Father Damian of Molokai is buried. Leuven is a beautiful historic university town and well worth a visit.

The conference seemed to us to be a very successful event, and our thanks go to Thomas and his assistant Dominique for all the organisation. We look forward to seeing the papers and other work on this subject published eventually. Please pray for future work among the members of IFIN, reflecting on our experience in order to help others to discern the unity which we find in our marriages and in fact frequently across our church communities, so as to enable the multifarious parts of the universal Church to draw more closely together, indeed truly to be Christ's Body.

Melanie Finch  
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