

For the November 2015 **AIF News**

### **Synod on the Family, 4-25 October 2015**

In the March *AIF News* I reported that interchurch families hoped to respond to the Synod as an international network, and was able to say at Swanwick that this had been done. I think everyone will have had a chance to see the two documents that the Interchurch Families International Network sent. The first (April) was a substantial response to the theme of the Synod and the *lineamenta* (setting the Synod's agenda), in which we put forward our views on terminology, on the vocation and mission of interchurch families, on the kind of pastoral understanding we would like to ask from the Synod, and the particular pastoral issues we hoped it would discuss. When the *Instrumentum Laboris* (the Synod's working document) came out, we sent a second briefer comment (August) underlining our concerns.

*Here I will try to bring the story up-to-date in a very sketchy and limited way, looking only at what directly affects interchurch families.* I have gleaned what I could from the internet, but make no claim to a complete overview. How far has the Synod responded to the IFIN submissions? First, it must be said that in spite of all our direct and indirect efforts to brief Synod participants about our situation (notably by Paul Docherty on the home front, and Melanie Finch, Thomas Knieps and others at international level), unsurprisingly, very little time was devoted to interchurch families. There were so many vast family issues to be discussed that mixed marriages became side-lined. This is understandable, if disappointing from our point of view.

We were fortunate in that Bishop Tim Thornton of Truro, our AIF Anglican President, was appointed as the Anglican Communion's fraternal delegate at the Synod. When asked how he was preparing for the Synod, he said that as President he had been helped by talking with some of the AIF officers – good publicity for us! (*Tablet*, 3 October)

The Synod lasted for three weeks. One of its strengths was the amount of time the bishops spent in small language groups: four English-speaking, three French, three Italian, two Spanish and one German. Participants had time to get to know one another. Fraternal delegates from other churches, and couples who addressed the bishops, joined these groups; Bishop Tim was in English group C. Each group reported once a week, and these reports were made public; there were few references to interchurch families or interreligious families in the reports, but there were some. In its first report, English group B (Moderator Cardinal Nichols) said that the bishops had shared reflections from their own family experiences: 'Many of our families are of mixed confession or religion, but in all we learned an ability to pray and to reflect upon how the family is central to the transmission of faith in a multiplicity of situations.' (9 October)

An Indian couple from Mumbai were among the Auditors invited to address the Synod; they represented interreligious families. I was sorry to see that no interchurch couple had been invited. However, it turned out that the Hindu husband had been baptised on their silver

wedding anniversary, and this was followed by their grown-up children (who had not been baptised as infants but had attended church with their mother) being baptised as Catholics. So they were not actually an interreligious couple any more. (10 October)

In the middle of the Synod some excitement was caused in England by the publication of a *statement by Archbishop Bernard Longley of Birmingham on Eucharistic communion for interchurch spouses*, dated 13 October. I do not know the precise context in which it was written, but it was formulated in criticism of a statement in the *Instrumentum Laboris* that 'some suggest' that mixed marriages might be regarded as cases of 'grave necessity' to which the provisions of the 1993 Ecumenical Directory for admission to communion could be applied. (In our August IFIN submission to the Synod we had said that we were glad to see the subject had been included in the Synod's agenda, but commented on the unsatisfactory nature of the way in which it had been raised.) The Archbishop clarified the fact that the Directory itself had applied the rules on admission to communion to baptised Christians married to Catholics, although not in a blanket way. *The Tablet* printed extracts from the statement under the heading 'Longley opposes Communion for non-Catholic spouses'. In view of the distress felt by some interchurch families when they read the statement, Paul wrote a letter to *The Tablet* as Chair of the Association, and no doubt will report on this further. *AIF both rejoices in the possibilities for authorised Eucharistic sharing that already exist in Britain, and would like them to be better known, and also points out that a seeming limitation to 'unique occasions' does not satisfy the on-going need felt by some interchurch families.*

A press briefing referred to speeches in the Synod on the complexities of inter-faith, inter-cultural, inter-religious and multiracial marriages. There were no specific references to interchurch marriages, but serious problems related to interreligious marriages in Africa and Asia were mentioned, such as Catholic women who marry Muslims and are obliged to live in a polygamous situation. (15 October)

*The fraternal delegates from other churches were invited to address the Synod for three minutes each.* Dr Robert K. Welsh, of the Disciples of Christ, USA, introduced himself as 'one of those referred to in the working document for this Synod as living in a "mixed marriage", that is I am Protestant, my wife is Roman Catholic'. The working document only described such marriages as presenting problems. 'My hope is that this Synod might also identify "mixed marriages" more positively as "great opportunities" for witnessing to God's gift of oneness in Christ and God's love for all persons – especially for those marriages between persons baptised as Christians.' He spoke of his oldest grandson, now an altar boy. 'My deep regret continues to be that, when I attend Mass with my grandson, I am not allowed to partake of the Eucharist. This is personal, and it's painful. ... I not only experience being excluded from my own human family; I also experience exclusion from the family of the church: the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church that we all confess'. (16 October)

Bishop Tim spoke in more general terms in his Synod intervention. He noted in his blog that he was pleased to hear Cardinal Koch (President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting

Christian Unity) say that the language used about marriages between a Catholic and a Christian from another denomination was too negative and needed to be positive. He was going to say something about this in his small group. (18 October)

*In their third and final group reports, (21 October) there were a number of references to mixed marriages. English group A (Moderator Cardinal Pell) said that for such marriages to succeed, it is important that couples be well-prepared in the Church's teaching before the marriage and accompanied by their faith communities. English group C discussed mixed marriages [between Christians] and marriages with disparity of cult [interreligious marriages]. 'Because these are so different and require such different approaches it would be better if they were dealt with in two separate paragraphs. Some were keen to stress that mixed marriages, while they present challenges, also present great opportunities; and in general we felt that there was a need to speak more positively about both mixed marriages and disparity of cult.'* (Thank you, Bishop Tim!) French group B also said how necessary it is to distinguish carefully between mixed marriage and marriage with disparity of cult. English group D simply said they spent some time talking about mixed marriages and marriages of disparate cult.

The German group (Moderator Cardinal Schönborn) showed its theological acumen in asking that the positive aspects and special calling of interconfessional marriages should be recognised, since the non-Catholic Christian partners are in no way outside the *one* Church, even if they belong to it in an incomplete way. The interconfessional marriage is to be seen as a domestic church, and has a special calling and task which consists in the exchange of gifts within the ecumenism of life.

*So what did the Final Report of the Synod say about mixed marriages? How far has it met our hopes?*

This is only a very preliminary assessment; at the time of writing I have not seen the official English translation of the Final Report, though the Italian text has been released. But there is clearly an advance from the *Lineamenta* and also the *Instrumentum Laboris*. Paragraphs 72, 73 and 74 are devoted to interchurch and interreligious marriages. There is no change of terminology; indeed, the use of 'interreligious' has, strangely, reverted back to 'disparity of cult' (possibly because no alternative to 'mixed marriages' could be agreed?). But *the two kinds of mixed marriage are clearly distinguished*, which is something we had hoped for.

Paragraph 72 deals entirely with mixed marriages (between Christians). The *tone is altogether more positive* than that of the earlier documents – another of our hopes. Without the time to write a new formulation, this positive approach comes from quoting the 1981 apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (78) on the *contribution that such marriages can make to the ecumenical movement*, and the encouragement of *joint pastoral care* by priests and pastors before the wedding.

Then there is also a *reference to Eucharistic sharing* – a subject raised in the April IFIN paper, and included in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, but in a very unsatisfactory form. The Final Report is much better, although again it does not break new ground. It quotes the 1993 Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (159-60). I have been surprised at how often in discussion of Eucharistic sharing the norms given in general for admission to Communion (129-31) are quoted without any seeming recognition that the Directory itself has applied them to those who ‘share the sacraments of baptism and marriage’. (This was done once again in the *Instrumentum Laboris*.) The fact that the Final Report has reaffirmed section 159-60 is therefore important.

Certainly, there is no affirmative response to the IFIN question: ‘Could there not be an explicit statement that in particular cases interchurch spouses who express a real need and desire for Eucharistic sharing, and who fulfil the criteria for admission, can be allowed to receive communion alongside their Catholic partners on an on-going basis, whenever they are at mass together?’ But the fact that the bishops re-affirmed Directory 159-60 gives these norms a higher profile, and leaves open the positive interpretation that some bishops have made. It is legitimate for bishops to make an affirmative response to our question (as some have of course done), although it leaves others free to limit lawful admission to particular occasions. If such texts are not reaffirmed, there is a danger that they will be forgotten. When IFIN wrote to the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist in 2005 we asked that there should be a specific mention of the reference to mixed marriages in the norms on Eucharistic sharing, but our plea was unsuccessful at that time. So it is important that the Synod on the Family has now repeated Directory 159-60. The door is open to further advance.

Paragraph 73 focuses entirely on marriages with disparity of cult. Paragraph 74 considers both mixed marriages and marriages with disparity of cult together, and includes marriages of Catholics with non-believers. There is a stress on pastoral care that will focus on positive opportunities as well as the problems that occur throughout such marriages, for example in relation to the religious education of the children, the spouses’ participation in liturgical life, and their sharing of spiritual experience. There should be continuing pastoral care adapted to particular couples; it should not end with the wedding. This too is in line with what we hoped for interchurch families.

We can say that there has been real progress between the *Lineamenta* and the Final Report.

Since the above was written, three of us from AIF were privileged to be at the Lyon conference of the French-speaking interchurch families of France and Switzerland in early November. There we were given a fascinating *view of the synodical process* by *Dr Valérie Duval-Poujol*, who had been the fraternal delegate from the Baptist World Alliance at the 2014 Synod. She spoke of the direct references to mixed marriages, but also underlined the general thrust of the Synod in the positive aspects that will affect interchurch families as well as others. She emphasized Pope Francis’ word ‘mercy’, and the pastoral policy of

‘accompaniment’ which the Synod took up enthusiastically – showing its strong backing for the papal approach. She spoke of ‘synodality’. (In his final blog at the end of the Synod Bishop Tim described this as ‘walking together, listening to the other, attending to the other and not moving to any of the extremes. It is not all change, and it is not no change.’) The third word was ‘discernment’, coming from Pope Francis’ Jesuit background.

Accompaniment and discernment sounded to me very close to what the Edmonton international conference meant when it called for ‘pastoral understanding’ for interchurch families.

Then the methodology of the Synod. It was one of *giving the process time*, not trying to come out with instant answers. Giving time to *listen* to those concerned with the realities of family life. She instanced the time between the 2014 and 2015 Synods; Cardinal Baldisseri had spoken of the large numbers of responses that had come in to the Synod office – 102 from episcopal conferences and 400 others from dioceses, associations and families – during this period; they had been taken seriously. (It made me think it was really worthwhile for IFIN to have formulated and sent in its two responses!) The Synod was concerned with *mission*. Its climate was one in which it was easy to *speak openly and freely*. Its *ecumenical approach* was very clear. *It is the beginning of a process, not an end.*

So what is the next step? *That is up to Pope Francis*, who will write his own authoritative document in the light of the Synod’s discussions and its Final Report, which ended with these words: ‘We, the Synod Fathers, in the course of this Assembly, gathered in unity around

Pope Francis, have felt the affection and the prayer of the whole Church, we have walked as disciples of Emmaus and recognised the presence of Christ in the breaking of bread at the Eucharistic table, in fraternal communion, in the sharing of pastoral experiences. We wish that the fruit of this work, now given into the hands of the Successor of Peter, will give hope and joy to countless families throughout the world, direction to pastors and pastoral workers, and impetus to the work of evangelisation. In bringing this Relatio to a conclusion, we humbly request the Holy Father that he will evaluate this opportunity to offer a document on the family, so that in it, the domestic Church, Christ the light of the world may shine ever more brightly.’

*Ruth Reardon*