

## ***Amoris Laetitia: Comments from an Interchurch Family Perspective***

The long-awaited post-synodal apostolic exhortation, on the Joy of Love, was signed by Pope Francis on 19<sup>th</sup> March 2016 and published on 8<sup>th</sup> April in Italian, English, French and German. This is an attempt to assess the importance of this document from the limited perspective of what is of particular interest to interchurch families as such.

### ***Mixed marriages***

There is *one paragraph only* (247) devoted to mixed marriages ('marriages between Catholics and other baptized persons'). This simply repeats para 72 of the Final Report of the 2015 Synod. Under the heading 'certain complex situations', it states that issues involving mixed marriages require particular attention. There are three points. First, mixed marriages have an intrinsic value and can make a contribution to the ecumenical movement. Second, for this purpose there should be cordial co-operation between the Catholic and non-Catholic ministers from the time that preparations for the marriage begin. Then the remaining half of the paragraph is devoted entirely to the question of Eucharistic sharing in such marriages. It repeats what is said in the 1993 PCPCU *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*: a decision as to whether the non-Catholic party may be admitted to communion is to be made in keeping with the general norms, taking into account the particular situation of the reception of the sacrament of matrimony by two baptized Christians. Although the spouses share the sacraments of baptism and matrimony, Eucharistic sharing can only be exceptional and in each case according to the stated norms (159-60).

The contents of para 247 are taken from *Familiaris Consortio* and the 1993 Directory on Ecumenism. In this sense there is nothing new here. However, it can be noted that this section devoted to mixed marriages (between Catholics and other baptized Christians) stands by itself as a positive statement. *Interchurch marriages are clearly distinguished from other kinds of mixed marriage*, as the submission to the 2015 Synod of Bishops from the Interchurch Families International Network (IFIN) had hoped<sup>1</sup>. There are still negative references to marriages with disparity of cult (interreligious marriages), but no longer are mixed marriages lumped together with them as 'leading to critical situations not easily resolved' (248), as they were in the Final Report of the 2015 Synod. Interchurch families are treated as quite distinct from interreligious families and other kinds of mixed families, and *there are no negative references to them in the entire document*.

It is important that a reference to *Eucharistic sharing* in the context of mixed marriages has been included in the document, following its appearance in the Final Report of the 2015 Synod, since the provisions of the 1993 Directory in this regard are not well known and many people even now still regard Eucharistic sharing as 'impossible'. The general norms on Eucharistic sharing (*Directory* 129-131) are often quoted as though there were no specific reference to the particular situation of those who 'share the sacraments of baptism and marriage' later in the document (159-60). Indeed, this was done in the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the 2015 Synod. While there has been no clear official clarification that in some cases exceptional Eucharistic sharing can be *on-going* in a marriage, as IFIN had hoped, that

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<sup>1</sup> The text of the IFIN submission was given in *One in Christ*, 49, 1, 2015, pp.142-160.

pastoral option is still open to those who wish to adopt it. The whole thrust of *Amoris Laetitia* is not to change legislation at this stage but to stress the need for a more sensitive pastoral approach where marriage and family life is concerned.

To sum up:

- 1 It is recognised that interchurch families can *contribute to the ecumenical movement*.
- 2 Catholic and other Christian pastors are *encouraged to work together* in their pastoral care.
- 3 Possibilities for authorised *Eucharistic sharing* exist for those who ‘share the sacraments of baptism and marriage’ which do not yet exist for all Christians.
- 4 Interchurch marriages are *clearly distinguished* from other kinds of mixed marriage, and there are *no negative references* to them anywhere in *Amoris Laetitia*.

For the rest, beyond these specific points, Pope Francis addresses interchurch families and those who endeavour to offer them pastoral care in just the same way that he addresses same-church families and their pastors. They can feel included. Interchurch families are ordinary Christian families too; the only thing that distinguishes them is that they relate as couples and families *both* to the Roman Catholic Church and to another Church or ecclesial community. There is a wealth of pastoral understanding and spiritual enrichment in *Amoris Laetitia* to be absorbed over time. Here I am going to pick out a few of the principles and attitudes which lend themselves to particular application to interchurch families as such, as well as acknowledging that there is so much else in the document that will apply to them as well as to others.

#### *Interchurch marriages are Christian marriages and domestic churches*

‘Christian marriage, as a reflection of the union between Christ and his Church, is fully realized in the union between a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in a free, faithful and exclusive love, who belong to each other until death and are open to the transmission of life, and are consecrated by the sacrament, which grants them the grace to become a domestic church and a leaven of new life for society’ (292). This description of a ‘fully realized’ Christian marriage applies to many interchurch marriages, although some (like some Catholic/Catholic marriages) would find themselves in situations ‘which do not yet or no longer correspond to the Church’s teaching on marriage’(292).

(It should be noted that this ‘full realization’ is not a ‘perfect realization’, as Pope Francis is at pains to underline a number of times.)

#### ***Families are not a problem***

Pope Francis understands that Christian families today face many difficult issues and complex situations as they respond to their vocation. He makes it clear that the synodal process has been a beginning, not an ending. There is need for a continuing open discussion of complex doctrinal, moral, spiritual and pastoral questions (2). His focus is clearly on the urgency of developing new pastoral approaches and attitudes. This is not the time to raise canonical questions. Thus it is not surprising that the two issues on which IFIN asked for consideration of a change in the rules (the need for a pre-nuptial ‘promise’ by the Catholic partner, and a further clarification on the norms for Eucharistic sharing) do not figure in *Amoris Laetitia*. It is support for family life that is urgent, and rules can follow later. (In fact,

since Vatican II there has been a gradual change in the norms both in relation to the pre-nuptial promise required for the validity of a mixed marriage, and to Eucharistic sharing for those ‘who share the sacraments of baptism and marriage’; interchurch families hope that this development will be taken further, as soon as possible.)

For the time being Pope Francis asks for patient careful reading of the exhortation, hoping that in this reading all will feel called to love and cherish family life, for ‘families are not a problem, they are first and foremost an opportunity’ (7). The specific opportunity identified in the case of interchurch families is that they can make a contribution to the ecumenical movement (247). As interchurch couples used to assure one another in the early days of the Association of Interchurch Families in the late 1960s, when faced with a difficult problem over getting married or arranging a shared baptism: ‘Our problems are our opportunities!’. Think in terms of pastoral care for *families*, not just for individuals, says Pope Francis. Family units are important in the life of the Church and the world (44).

### ***Each family is unique***

When Pope Francis reflects on the challenges that face pastors, he does so in a very general way, because it is the task of different communities to devise practical and effective initiatives that respect both the Church’s teaching and local problems and needs (199). If families are to fulfil their calling to be ‘joy-filled witnesses as domestic churches’, it is vital that people experience the Gospel of the family as a joy. Pastors ‘are called to help sow seeds, the rest is God’s work’. ‘The Church wishes, with humility and compassion, to reach out to families and to help each family to discover the best way to overcome any obstacles it encounters’. *Each family*: ‘it is not enough to show generic concern for the family in pastoral planning’ (200). There is to be no blanket approach. ‘In the home, decisions cannot be made unilaterally, since each spouse shares responsibility for the family: yet each home is unique and each marriage will find an arrangement that works best’(220).

This is one of the points that IFIN made; there are some issues that are common to interchurch families as such, and a general policy needs to be worked out. But also, each interchurch family is unique. Each has to find a way to live out their ‘two-churchness’ that is right for their particular situation. As interchurch couples have always said: there is no blueprint for an interchurch family. Here pastors may find it helpful ‘with humility and compassion’ (200) to work together with other Christian pastors involved with interchurch couples, as they are encouraged to do. It is not always easy, and it is time-consuming, but there are sometimes considerable ecumenical benefits. As an Irish Catholic priest said in recounting his participation with Anglican priests in shared celebrations of baptism: ‘I came away from these experiences utterly convinced of the unsurpassable value of time spent in mutual preparation by both clergy in a spirit of co-operative partnership.’

### ***Marriage is a vocation***

*Amoris Laetitia* identifies the family as a domestic church, with love at its centre (67). Marriage is a sacrament, a gift ‘given for the sanctification and salvation of the spouses’. ‘Marriage is a vocation, inasmuch as it is a response to a specific call to experience conjugal love as an imperfect sign of the love between Christ and the Church. Consequently, the

decision to marry and to have a family ought to be the fruit of a process of vocational discernment' (72).

Interchurch spouses often have a very strong sense of being *called* to marry one another. It is often a difficult decision to marry someone from another ecclesial communion, sometimes in the face of strong discouragement from communities and families. Many couples have been surprised by the way they have been drawn together in love, often attracted by the deep Christian faith of the other. As one Canadian Catholic wife said: 'God gave me all I had asked for in a spouse – only I had forgotten to say he must be a Catholic'. Similarly a Protestant wife from New Zealand: 'only I didn't ask that he shouldn't be a Roman Catholic'. Interchurch couples are happy when their vocation to form a domestic church, reflecting the love between Christ and the Church, is respected by their communities.

### ***Accompaniment through all the stages of marriage and family life***

Pope Francis stresses the need to accompany married couples and families throughout their lives, to be close to them in all their joys and sorrows, their hopes and hurts – and especially when they are hurting. It is certainly true that pastoral understanding is needed for interchurch families through all the stages of marriage and family life, as IFIN pointed out in its submission to the 2015 Synod. Interchurch couples and families have often been hurt by the way in which they have felt that their church communities have been pulling them apart, rather than supporting their unity.

*Marriage preparation* begins the process. It 'begins at birth' (208), and interchurch parents too can be aware of this, and consider together how the particular values expressed in their marriage can model a way forward for their children, if and whoever they eventually marry. The more immediate preparation of engaged couples should 'assist them to recognize eventual problems and risks'. 'They should be strongly encouraged to discuss what each expects from marriage, what they understand by love and commitment, what each wants from the other and what kind of life they would like to build together' (209). For interchurch couples this will include discussion of the particular problems and opportunities that will come if they marry across church boundaries, and attempt to live together in their domestic church a unity that their respective communities have not yet achieved. They will need a 'firm resolve' to be willing to 'face eventual sacrifices, problems and situations of conflict' (210). In facing these together their love will be deepened. Couples should be given details of where they can turn for help when problems arrive (211); for interchurch couples that will include information about groups and associations of interchurch families, where these exist.

The *wedding celebration* itself should become a 'profound personal experience' for the couple. 'In the case of two baptized persons, the commitment expressed by the words of consent and the bodily union that consummates the marriage can only be seen as signs of the covenantal love and union between the incarnate Son of God and his Church (213). In an interchurch marriage the two baptized persons who are committing themselves to one another for the whole of their lives come from two church communities; the couple will feel that they are supported by both if the clergy and congregations of both share in the preparation and the liturgical celebration, whichever church building is chosen for the wedding. Because these communities are not in full communion with one another – their communion is real, but not

yet fully realised – they do not normally share Eucharistic communion (*Directory* 129-31). The couple will need to decide whether they want the wedding to be celebrated in the context of a Eucharist. Even if they as a couple may be allowed to receive communion together, they might not wish the congregation and families to be divided, if the same is not true for them. There are many decisions to be made that are specific to an interchurch wedding, so that the marriage liturgy which is ‘a unique event, both a family and a community celebration’ (216) may be as appropriate and joyful as possible for the couple and families involved.

Pope Francis insists on the importance of accompanying couples in the *first years of married life*, when they have to learn that neither is perfect, but each is ‘a work in process’ (218), that they have to negotiate to arrive at win-win situations (220), that God is calling each to help the other to mature (221). It is a time when an interchurch couple need to work out their relations as a couple with both their church communities, and establish a worship pattern and a tradition of family prayer as they ‘dance towards the future’ (219) into which they will be able to integrate a child, the child of them both.

*Amoris Laetitia* speaks of *love and pregnancy*. ‘Children are loved even before they arrive’ (166); ‘for nine months every mother and father dreams about their child ... for Christian married couples, baptism necessarily appears as a part of that dream’ (169). The time of expecting and receiving new life from God is a time of joy for the couple, but for interchurch couples it can also be a time of anxiety. Will their two church communities be willing to rejoice together at the birth of their baby? Will they be willing to join together in a shared celebration of baptism? Will the couple be able to get the baptism registered in both registers – a concrete sign that both communities will take responsibility for supporting them as parents as they bring up their child to the best of their ability? Will they experience a family tug-of-war, as both sets of grandparents try to make exclusive claims on the religious upbringing of their grandchild? Pope Francis advises mothers not to ‘let fears, worries, other people’s comments or problems lessen your joy at being God’s means of bringing a new life to the world. Prepare yourself for the birth of your child, but without obsessing’ (171). It has sometimes been very hard for interchurch mothers not to ‘obsess’.

Both parents are necessary; ‘every child has a right to *receive love from a mother and a father*’ (172). This is not just ‘the love of father and mother as individuals, but also of their mutual love, perceived as the source of one’s life and the solid foundation of the family’. The following words have a particular application to interchurch parents: ‘Together they teach the value of reciprocity, of respect for differences and of being able to give and take’.

Both parents together are the *teachers of their children*. The Church plays an important supporting role, starting with Christian initiation, through welcoming communities, says Pope Francis (84). ‘At the same time I feel it important to reiterate that the overall education of children is a “most serious duty” and at the same time a “primary right” of parents. This is not just a task or a burden, but an essential and inalienable right that parents are called to defend and of which no one may claim to deprive them’. This is said in relation to the claims of the state, but it can also be applied to church authorities. Indeed, for mixed marriages a first recognition of this was made in 1970 when both partners no longer had to promise that all children of their marriage would be baptized and brought up as Roman Catholics. ‘The

Church is called to cooperate with parents through suitable pastoral initiatives, assisting them in the fulfilment of their educational mission. She must always do this by helping them to appreciate their proper role and to realize that by the reception of the sacrament of marriage they become ministers of their children's education' (85). This help is just what IFIN appealed for, taking account of the two-church situation of interchurch families from baptism onwards, as the children grow and develop in their relationship with Christ, experienced through the life and traditions of the two church communities of their parents.

The couple must *'leave' their own parents* (not abandoning or ignoring them), in order to create together a *new* home that 'will be a true hearth, a place of security, hope and future plans, and the couple can truly become 'one flesh' (190). Neither can simply expect to reproduce the pattern of their own upbringing – certainly not in an interchurch marriage. 'Both spouses need to make the effort to grow in trust and communication. Marriage challenges husbands and wives to find new ways of being sons and daughters'. It is a cause for joy when an interchurch marriage is the occasion for one or both families of origin to be drawn into a concern for Christian unity that they might never have known without that experience.

In a section on *crises, worries and difficulties*, Pope Francis points out that crises can become opportunities (232) – many interchurch couples have discovered this. Facing them together has ensured deeper communication, and pastors can encourage this process (234). For interchurch couples this means that church divisions must not be allowed to drive an unnecessary wedge between the couple; pastoral care needs to concentrate on supporting the unity of the marriage in whatever ways are possible. For all marriages, forgiveness and reconciliation are basic, and separation must only be considered as a last resort. Accompaniment must continue after separation and divorce. It is here, under the heading 'Certain complex situations' that we find paragraph 247 on mixed marriages, followed by a paragraph on marriages with disparity of cult (which includes a reference to marriages in which one partner is a Catholic and the other a non-believer), and consideration of the problems that arise when persons in a complex marital situation wish to be baptized, families whose members experience same-sex attraction, and single-parent families (248-52). All need pastoral accompaniment.

Pope Francis speaks of the challenge of *the death of a loved one*. 'To turn our backs on a grieving family would show a lack of mercy' (253). The death of an interchurch spouse, or that of a child, is a time when it is particularly valuable for the pastors and communities of both churches to show their loving concern for the remaining spouse, or for the grieving parents. Interchurch families have felt joyful gratitude when both have come together to celebrate the life of a spouse or a child who has meant so much to them. A funeral can be a final act of ecumenical witness, and a great comfort to those left behind.

### ***Discernment***

The need for wise discernment to guide couples and families through the complexities of their experiences today is central to the thinking of Pope Francis. Sometimes this means that pastors should stand back, and allow space for couples to make their own discernment in their particular circumstances. It is not helpful 'to try to impose rules by sheer authority' (35).

Pastors themselves ‘need a healthy dose of self-criticism’ (36). ‘We find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them’ (37). Jesus himself ‘never failed to show compassion’ (38). So often interchurch couples have been grateful to pastors who have offered them this kind of respect and support. ‘I don’t think it’s a good idea’, said one parish priest to a couple who explained to him how they intended to bring up their children. ‘I don’t see how it will work. But if that’s what you’ve decided together to do in conscience, I shall do all I can to support you.’

The Church’s way ‘is to pour out the balm of God’s mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart.’ We need ‘to avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations, and to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition’ (269). Each person should be helped ‘to find his or her proper way of participating in the ecclesial community and thus to experience being touched by unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous mercy. No one can be condemned for ever, because that is not the logic of the Gospel! Here I am not speaking only of the divorced and re-married, but of everyone, in whatever situation they find themselves’ (297). Interchurch families can feel themselves included too, and there is quite a lot in chapter 8 (‘Accompanying, discerning and integrating weakness’) referring to the Church’s care for the divorced and remarried that can be applied to them.

Pope Francis notes the immense variety of concrete situations of the divorced and remarried, so that ‘neither the Synod nor this Exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases. What is possible is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases’ (300). (Footnote 336 adds that ‘this is also the case with regard to sacramental discipline, since discernment can recognise that in a particular situation no grave fault exists’. ‘Priests have the duty to accompany the divorced and remarried in helping them to understand their situation according to the teaching of the Church and the guidelines of their bishop’. ... ‘What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment which guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God’. There can be a ‘grave danger of misunderstandings’, but ‘when a responsible and tactful person, who does not presume to put his or her own desires ahead of the common good of the Church, meets with a pastor capable of acknowledging the seriousness of the matter before him, there can be no risk that a specific discernment may lead people to think that the Church maintains a double standard (300). ‘General rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations. At the same time, it must be said that, precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule (304). But rules are not ‘stones to throw at people’s lives’. Pastors must not close their hearts and hide behind the Church’s teachings, judging difficult cases and wounded families with superiority and superficiality. By thinking that everything is black and white, pastors sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth. People need the Church’s help to grow in the life of grace and charity (305). Here is a second footnote (351) which says that in certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments. Pope Francis adds a reminder, taken from *Evangelii*

*Gaudium*, that ‘the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak’.

Pope Francis assures his readers that ‘to show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing anything less than what Jesus offers to the human being. Today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus prevent their breakdown’ (307). This might well be applied to the fears of those who are worried that any extension of exceptional Eucharistic sharing might undermine the Catholic witness to the close bond between ecclesial and Eucharistic communion. There is no reason for it to do so. Indeed, an understanding of an interchurch family as a domestic church should in itself be a strong support to that witness. Reflecting on the way that family members need to relate to one another if they are to grow in love and joy as a domestic church, can also be a stimulus for church communities, as they reflect on the way in which they need to relate to one another if they are to grow together into unity.

Pope Francis can ‘understand those who prefer a more rigorous pastoral care which leaves no room for confusion’. But ‘Jesus expects us to stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune, and instead enter into the reality of other people’s lives and to know the power of tenderness. Whenever we do so, our lives become wonderfully complicated’ (308). ‘The Bride of Christ must pattern her behaviour after the Son of God who goes out to everyone without exception. He loves them all. On the basis of this realization, it will become possible for the balm of mercy to reach everyone, as a sign that the kingdom of God is already present in our midst’ (309). ‘At times we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems’ (310). At times we find it hard to make room for God’s unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel’ (311). We need to avoid a ‘cold bureaucratic morality’ in dealing with sensitive issues, but to practise ‘a pastoral discernment filled with merciful love, which is ever ready to understand, forgive, accompany, hope, and above all integrate.’ ‘I encourage the faithful who find themselves in complicated situations to speak confidently with their pastors or with other lay people whose lives are committed to the Lord. ... I also encourage the Church’s pastors to listen to them with sensitivity and serenity, with a sincere desire to understand their plight and their point of view, in order to help them live better lives and to recognize their proper place in the Church’ (312).

### ***Training in ministry for marriage and family life***

It is not always easy for interchurch families to ‘speak confidently with their pastors’; many have tried it and have met with such discouragement and incomprehension that they have felt unable to try again. When they talk with other interchurch couples, however, they learn of the wide spectrum of pastoral responses that exist. The Synod on the Family identified the need for ‘a more adequate formation ... of priests, deacons, men and women religious, catechists and other pastoral workers’ and *Amoris Laetitia* took up this theme, saying that ‘ordained ministers often lack the training needed to deal with the complex problems currently facing

families' (203). The IFIN submission to the Synod pointed out that it would be helpful if further education on the pastoral care of interchurch families could be included in all seminaries, especially if some of the input is given by interchurch couples. Where this has been done, it has proved very positive.

***Interchurch families, Christian unity and the Eucharist***

There are many references in *Amoris Laetitia* to the link between the sacrament of marriage and the sacrament of the Eucharist, between family life and sharing in the Eucharist. In the opening chapter, 'inspired by the Scriptures, to set a proper tone' (6), there are two references to the close relationship of Eucharistic communion to the family life of the home. The first is to the New Testament texts that speak of 'the churches that meet in homes; a family's living space could turn into a domestic church, a setting for the Eucharist, the presence of Christ seated at its table' (15). The second is a reference to the family becoming 'a union of persons in the image of the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. ... The family is called to join in daily prayer, to read the Word of God and to share in Eucharistic communion, and thus to grow in love and become ever more fully a temple in which the Spirit dwells' (29). Families are not just collections of individuals when it comes to Eucharistic communion; they are families, domestic churches who need to *share* Eucharistic communion. This is felt deeply by some interchurch families. Family spirituality, prayer and participation in the Sunday Eucharist is important, and it is valuable to celebrate the Eucharist for families, especially on wedding anniversaries (223).

Besides a number of references to the family as a union of persons in the image of the Trinity, *Amoris Laetitia* also focuses on marriage as a sign of the love between Christ and his Church. The mutual belonging of the spouses is a real representation, through the sacramental sign, of the same relationship between Christ and the Church' (72). 'Christian marriage is a sign of how much Christ loved his Church in the covenant sealed on the Cross, yet it also makes that love present in the communion of the spouses. By becoming one flesh, they embody the espousal of our human nature by the Son of God. That is why, in the joys of their love and family life, he gives them here on earth a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb. Even though the analogy between the human couple of husband and wife and that of Christ and his Church, is "imperfect", it inspires us to beg the Lord to bestow on every married couple an outpouring of his divine love' (73).

The theme of 'imperfect' love is referred to again in a meditation on one of the phrases in the Pauline hymn to love in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13: *love endures all things*. Although 'the grace of the sacrament of marriage is intended before all else to perfect the couple's love' (89), 'we encounter problems whenever we think that relationships or people ought to be perfect, or when we put ourselves at the centre and expect things to turn out our way (92). 'Love does not have to be perfect for us to value it. The other person loves me as best they can, with all their limits, but the fact that love is imperfect does not mean it is untrue or unreal' (113). This is a reminder of how the 1993 Ecumenical Directory described the way in which members of other Churches and ecclesial Communities are brought by baptism into a 'a real, even if imperfect' communion with the Catholic Church (Directory, 129) – a communion that is real, even if not fully realized, as the phrase can be translated.

Another reminder of the relationship between married love and ecumenical relationships between churches and ecclesial communities comes in the section ‘Growing in conjugal love’. Married sacramental love ‘is an “affective union”, spiritual and sacrificial, which combines the warmth of friendship and erotic passion, and endures long after emotions and passion subside’ (120). This recalls the meeting of Pope John Paul II and the Archbishop of Canterbury when the Pope said to Archbishop Runcie that ‘affective communion’ leads to ‘effective communion’. Much of this section of *Amoris Laetitia* can be applied to church relationship as well as to marriage. ‘God makes of two spouses one single existence’ (121). However, ‘there is no need to lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and the Church, for marriage as a sign entails a dynamic process ... one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God’ (122). Other examples: a faithful covenant that entails no going back (123); sharing everything in mutual respect (125); joy growing through the free exchange of gifts (129); joy also growing through pain and sorrow and shared effort (130); a shared commitment to deeper growth together for the sake of society as a whole (131); definitive commitment made publicly (132); authentic dialogue that takes time (136-7); ‘unity in diversity’ or ‘reconciled diversity’, freeing ourselves from feeling that we all have to be alike, and a recognition that many disagreements are not about important things (139); reciprocal submission (156); a shared and lasting life project; living as one (163). A daily effort is needed, and the grace of the Holy Spirit who confirms, directs and transforms (164).

The concluding sentences of the last chapter of *Amoris Laetitia*, on the spirituality of marriage and the family, can equally well be applied to the ecumenical process. ‘Families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love. This is a never-ending vocation born of the full communion of the Trinity, the profound unity between Christ and his Church, the loving community which is the Holy Family of Nazareth, and the pure fraternity existing among the saints of heaven.’ We have not yet arrived, we cannot ask for perfection; that is for the Kingdom to come. This perspective will keep us from judging others harshly. We are striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families. ‘Let us make this journey as families, let us keep walking together. What we have been promised is greater than we can imagine. May we never lose heart because of our limitations, or ever stop seeking that fullness of love and communion which God holds out before us’ (325). Interchurch families will want to add: let us make this journey as Churches and ecclesial Communities too, let us keep walking together.

This final section on the spirituality of marriage and the family also stresses the need for Eucharistic sharing in their walk together. ‘The family’s communal journey of prayer culminates by sharing together in the Eucharist, especially in the context of the Sunday rest. Jesus knocks on the door of families, to share with them the Eucharistic supper (cf Rev 3:20). There, spouses can always seal anew the paschal covenant which united them and which ought to reflect the covenant which God sealed with mankind in the cross. The Eucharist is the sacrament of the new covenant, where Christ’s redemptive love is carried out (cf Lk 22:20). The close bond between married life and the Eucharist thus becomes all the more clear. For the food of the Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive needed to live the marriage covenant each day as a “domestic church”.’ (318)

That necessary ‘sharing together in the Eucharist’ is difficult for the domestic churches that are interchurch families, so long as the Church communities to which they belong are not in communion with one another. Many have shared as far as they can without receiving communion together, but they know that this is not enough. They can be powerful witnesses to an underlying unity when they are able to share the Eucharist fully (although exceptionally) across church divisions. ‘The married couple are a permanent reminder for the Church of what took place on the cross; they are for one another and for their children witnesses of the salvation in which they share through the sacrament’ [of marriage]’ (72).

Sometimes it is the children themselves who take the initiative. When children are lovingly helped to ‘grow in freedom, maturity, overall discipline and real autonomy’ (261), they ‘will surprise us with ideas and projects born of that freedom, which challenge us to rethink our own ideas. This is a good thing’ (262). There is the child who looks up at the bishop when he visits the parish and asks: ‘Why can’t my Mummy receive communion with my Daddy?’ There is the son who is reluctant to receive his First Communion if his father is not able to receive alongside him. There is the child who breaks her Host in two in order to carry half back to her mother and share it with her. There is the child who observes: ‘I don’t think that’s a very good rule, because it breaks up families.’

Traditionally the Catholic norms for Eucharistic sharing have allowed for the needs of individual Christians, but not for those of mixed families *as families*. The 1993 Ecumenical Directory broke new ground when it referred to those who ‘share the sacraments of baptism and marriage’ as in possible need of Eucharistic sharing – but much more work needs to be done in relation to spouses and to families. It needs to take account of the fact that ‘the family’s communal journey of prayer culminates by sharing together in the Eucharist, especially in the context of the Sunday rest’, and that ‘the food of the Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive needed to live the marriage covenant each day as a “domestic church”.’ ‘Each day’; it is not a question of rare occasions; marriage is an on-going commitment and needs on-going sustenance.

‘The Church is a family of families, constantly enriched by the lives of all those domestic churches. In virtue of the sacrament of matrimony, every family becomes, in effect, a good for the Church’ (87). ‘The experience of love in families is a perennial source of strength for the life of the Church’ (88). May interchurch families become an ecumenical good; may the love that unites them be recognized as an ecumenical strength.

### ***Personal reflections on a puzzle***

On 15<sup>th</sup> November 2015 Pope Francis visited the Lutheran church in Rome, and his address was followed by a question-and-answer session. A Lutheran wife, Anke de Bernardinis, married to a Catholic, raised the question of sharing communion. Ever since I read his answer (appended below), I have been puzzled by his statement that ‘I would never dare give permission to do this because I do not have the authority.’ I would have thought that in terms of canon law and the 1993 Ecumenical Directory he could have done precisely that (obviously after pastoral dialogue) as Bishop of Rome. But having now read *Amoris Laetitia*, it seems to me that it makes sense to read the answer in the light of the Exhortation.

*Amoris Laetitia* shows Pope Francis as not interested in changing rules and regulations, or in the minutiae of their interpretation, but rather in setting out a renewed vision of marriage and family life, based on love, and inculcating a whole new pastoral approach, based on accompaniment and discernment. As we have seen, he envisions an inclusive Church, and leaves it to bishops, priests, parishes, ministers for marriage and family life, to work out and implement pastoral policies, to show compassion and welcome to all. He trusts families to exercise their own discernment.

Right at the beginning of *Amoris Laetitia*, he repeats a phrase that he used in *Evangelii Gaudium*, ‘time is greater than space’ (3), and later he repeats it again, adding that ‘it is more important to start processes than to dominate spaces’ (261). More explanation was given in *Evangelii Gaudium*, where Pope Francis says that this approach ‘enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. It invites us to accept the tension between fullness and limitation, and to give priority to time.’ He explains what he means: ‘Giving priority to space means madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion; it is to crystallize processes and presume to hold them back. Giving priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces. Time governs spaces, illumines them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return. What we need then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events. Without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* 223).

So the whole thrust of *Amoris Laetitia* is to encourage, at every level of the Church’s life, actions that will initiate or contribute to processes leading to positive developments in marriage and family life. With respect to mixed marriages, the process has already begun. Law has changed, and it can change further. Already bishops are free to admit interchurch spouses to communion together, in particular cases. Some bishops and priests want to do so, others do not. Some want to limit admission to rare occasions; others feel that this does not take account of the nature of marriage. May it not be that Pope Francis does not wish to pursue the question at the level that might risk ‘crystallizing’ it too soon (the level of law) but to encourage actions that will open up fruitful possibilities for the future? Always to be done with love, humility and patient discernment, as he constantly indicates.

This attitude is at work in his answer to Anke de Bernardinis. He refuses to answer the question in terms of ‘criteria for admission’. He muses over some theological questions in his own mind. Jesus said ‘Do this in memory of me’; we do the same thing. Is Eucharistic sharing a final sign of unity or a way to move towards it? The marriage supper of the Lamb will be the perfect banquet at the end of time, but in this imperfect world is not the Lord’s Supper food for the journey? We share a common baptism, so we have to walk together. An interchurch family may share in that walking together even more deeply than others, because it is also a conjugal journey, a family journey of love and faith. There are shared failures and the need for forgiveness; this is the same for both partners, although they may express and seek it in different ways. They pray together, and their baptismal bond becomes stronger.

They teach their children who Jesus is and why he came – and it is the same message, whether it is expressed in Lutheran or Catholic terms. So what about the Supper?

Pope Francis recalls a great friend of his, an Episcopalian bishop, who accompanied his wife and children to Mass on Sundays before going to worship with his community. We know that he was deeply affected by the fact that the family did not receive communion together. The great friend was Tony Palmer, a bishop of the Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches. He first met Archbishop Bergoglio in 2006 in Buenos Aires, where he was on a joint mission with the head of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Italy to bring Catholics and evangelicals together. When they met, the Cardinal was especially interested to learn that he had a Catholic wife and children. Palmer explained that it worked well – they were complementary in their diversity – but there was a problem. ‘I told him that since I led my family back to the Catholic Church, I am not allowed to take communion. I have to stay in the benches on Sunday morning. So my kids come back after taking communion and say, “Dad, why would you join us to a church that separates a family?” When he heard this, Palmer said, Bergoglio’s ‘heart broke – his eyes filled with tears.’<sup>2</sup>

Then Pope Francis gave his reply to Anke. ‘I respond to your question only with a question: how can I participate with my husband, so that the Lord’s Supper may accompany me on my path? It is a problem to which each person must respond.’ We believe the Lord is present. ‘Life is greater than explanations and interpretations. Always refer to baptism: “one faith, one baptism, one Lord”, as Paul tells us, and take the outcome from there. I would never dare to give permission for this because I do not have the authority. One baptism, one Lord, one faith. Speak with the Lord and go forward. I do not dare say any more.’

‘Go forward’ – not expressly to receive communion, but not specifically for a blessing either, nor to witness to the pain of division. It is up to ‘each person’ to make their prayerful discernment in any particular circumstance. In the context of his reflections Pope Francis’ answer can be read as an encouragement to Anke de Bernardinis to go forward to receive communion as food for the journey so that those who already share baptism and their family journey of love and faith should share the nourishment they need for their further journey.

Does this leave interchurch families where we were before? Does *Amoris Laetitia* leave the Church where we were before? There has been no change in legislation. But the entirely new insistence on discernment by couples and families and their pastoral accompaniment by parishes, priests and bishops may in time create an entirely new climate of pastoral understanding that will lead to a new flourishing of the domestic churches that contribute to as well as receive from the life of the Church.

*Ruth Reardon*

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<sup>2</sup> The story of the friendship is told by Austen Ivereigh in *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope*, 2014, and also in an article in the *Boston Globe*, 7 August 2014.

**Appendix: an extract from the question-and-answer session that took place when Pope Francis visited the Lutheran Church in Rome, 15 November 2015**

*Then Anke de Bernardinis, the wife of a Roman Catholic, expressed sorrow at “not being able to partake together in the Lord’s Supper” and asked: “What more can we do to reach communion on this point?”.*

Thank you, Ma’am. Regarding the question on sharing the Lord’s Supper, it is not easy for me to answer you, especially in front of a theologian like Cardinal Kasper! I’m afraid! I think the Lord gave us [the answer] when he gave us this command: “Do this in memory of me”. And when we share in, remember and emulate the Lord’s Supper, we do the same thing that the Lord Jesus did. And the Lord’s Supper will be, the final banquet will there be in the New Jerusalem, but this will be the last. Instead on the journey, I wonder — and I don’t know how to answer, but I am making your question my own — I ask myself: “Is sharing the Lord’s Supper the end of a journey or is it the viaticum for walking together? I leave the question to the theologians, to those who understand. It is true that in a certain sense sharing is saying that there are no differences between us, that we have the same doctrine — I underline the word, a difficult word to understand — but I ask myself: don’t we have the same Baptism? And if we have the same Baptism, we have to walk together. You are a witness to an even profound journey because it is a conjugal journey, truly a family journey, of human love and of shared faith. We have the same Baptism. When you feel you are a sinner — I too feel I am quite a sinner — when your husband feels he is a sinner, you go before the Lord and ask forgiveness; your husband does the same and goes to the priest and requests absolution. They are ways of keeping Baptism alive. When you pray together, that Baptism grows, it becomes strong; when you teach your children who Jesus is, why Jesus came, what Jesus did, you do the same, whether in Lutheran or Catholic terms, but it is the same. The question: and the Supper? There are questions to which only if one is honest with oneself and with the few theological “lights” that I have, one must respond the same, you see. “This is my Body, this is my Blood”, said the Lord, “do this in memory of me”, and this is a viaticum which helps us to journey. I had a great friendship with an Episcopalian bishop, 48 years old, married with two children, and he had this concern: a Catholic wife, Catholic children, and he a bishop. He accompanied his wife and children to Mass on Sundays and then went to worship with his community. It was a step of participating in the Lord’s Supper. Then he passed on, the Lord called him, a just man. I respond to your question only with a question: how can I participate with my husband, so that the Lord’s Supper may accompany me on my path? It is a problem to which each person must respond. A pastor friend of mine said to me: “We believe that the Lord is present there. He is present. You believe that the Lord is present. So what is the difference?” — “Well, there are explanations, interpretations...”. Life is greater than explanations and interpretations. Always refer to Baptism: “One faith, one baptism, one Lord”, as Paul tells us, and take the outcome from there. I would never dare give permission to do this because I do not have the authority. One Baptism, one Lord, one faith. Speak with the Lord and go forward. I do not dare say more. (*Translation given on the Vatican website*)