

German Bishops Summary of the Guidance on the Eucharist

By Ruth Reardon

WALKING WITH CHRIST – TRACING UNITY Interdenominational marriages and sharing in the Eucharist

The text is presented as an **Aid to Orientation**

1 We are encouraged by the spirit of ecumenism (1)

The Bishops begin by recalling the ecumenical service held in Lund, Sweden, on 31 October 2016, to commemorate 500 years since the beginning of the Reformation. They quoted from the Joint Statement made there by Pope Francis and the President of the Lutheran World Federation: 'Many members of our communities yearn to receive the Eucharist at one table, as the concrete expression of full unity. We experience the pain of those who share their whole lives, but cannot share God's redeeming presence at the Eucharistic table. We acknowledge our joint pastoral responsibility to respond to the spiritual thirst and hunger of our people to be one in Christ. We long for this wound in the Body of Christ to be healed. This is the goal of our ecumenical endeavours, which we wish to advance, also by renewing our commitment to theological dialogue.' The German Bishops are in heartfelt agreement, and want actively to take a step forward.

We wish to provide interdenominational marriages with pastoral support (2-4)

If married couples share their faith in Christ, their marriage joins together the denominations. [Translator's note: 'konfessionsverbindend' used in this document stresses communion in faith; the translation uses 'interdenominational' in this sense.] Many such couples speak of a strong longing to receive the Eucharist together. We recalled the suffering of interdenominational spouses who, according to Catholic teaching, are usually not allowed to approach the Lord's table together, in our Joint Statement for 2017 with the Evangelical Church in Germany, *Healing of Memories - Witnessing to Jesus Christ*. We said Holy Communion must not be functionalised as a means to an end of ecumenical rapprochement. We said ecumenism must not be reduced to the single issue of table fellowship. But 'in a given case, one conceivable pastoral criterion might be a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and a life led in solidarity with the Catholic Church'. We want to strengthen couples' shared faith and promote the religious upbringing of their children.

We take the Pope's encouragement seriously (5)

We are in solidarity with Pope Francis who said to a Protestant wife in the Lutheran church in Rome in November 2015: 'Speak to the Lord and go forward'. There is no general solution, so long as the communion of churches is not discerned as being such that the Eucharist can be celebrated together. But for the salvation of souls, Catholic teaching is that there are exceptions to the rule, special paths for individual believers. Where there is shared faith, the church wants to nurture its growth.

We are exercising our responsibility as Bishops (6-9)

This was given to us at Vatican II (Decree on Ecumenism, 8); we are to take practical decisions, unless other provision is made by the Bishops' Conference or the Holy See. We will show how spouses can reach a conscientious decision that can be expressed publicly, and might involve receiving Holy Communion. We will show those in pastoral ministry how to advise couples who ask for help. Many couples and ministers, in what is for them an urgent situation, have sought their own path. We do not say this is irresponsible, but it may lead to new hurts, and the path we are describing is designed to strengthen their marriage. We are not saying that a Catholic spouse may join their partner in taking Protestant communion. We need further work here. The work of ecumenical dialogues has produced substantial fruit; we have hope for the future. Here we are providing orientation on how in particular cases a path may be opened up, based on responsible personal decisions and recognised by the Church, for spouses to participate fully in the Eucharist. We want to help them to reach or clarify their decision in the course of the pastoral conversation to which we invite them. Pope Francis has reminded us that 'we have been called to form consciences, not to replace them'. (*Amoris Laetitia*, 37)

2 Christ's love urges us (10-20)

This section explains the Catholic view of the intrinsic unity of Eucharistic communion and church communion, and then works through the relevant documents since Vatican II. I can't go into all the details here, I am just putting brief reminders (but we still have a lot of information sheets from past years, now on line). The Catholic Church emphasises the central importance of the Eucharist as 'fountain', 'source', 'summit' of Christian life. Eucharistic practice and piety has been renewed through liturgical reform. Ecumenically there has been a learning process on all sides. The Bishops' paper is underpinned theologically by the Decree on Ecumenism, 8 (Eucharistic sharing is not a means to be used indiscriminately; two principles involved). Catholic theology of the Eucharist is shaped by Paul (1 Cor 10:16-17). Without the Eucharist there is no church; without the church performing her Lord's mission in the Holy Spirit, there is no Eucharist. Eucharistic communion and church communion belong together. Church communion is founded on baptism, but this is the beginning leading to a complete profession of faith, incorporation in the system of salvation willed by Christ, finally ingrafting in Eucharistic communion (22). Nurturing growth in faith is therefore a major task. Where conditions are conducive, Eucharistic communion is an important expression and a strong driver of this growth. Where such conditions are not yet in place, full Eucharistic *communio* is the goal of ecumenism. The *Code of Canon Law* (1983) 844, 4: danger of death or in judgement of diocesan bishop or bishops' conference, other grave necessity/ Catholic ministers licitly administer if: can't approach minister of own community; ask of own accord, manifest Catholic faith in sacrament, properly disposed. *Ecumenical Directory* (1993): primary concern is to uphold marriage and family (151). Although sharing in baptism and marriage, Eucharistic sharing can only be exceptional; in each case refer to norms (cf 125, 130-2). *Ut Unum Sint* (1995): 'source of joy' / 'greatly desire' / omits condition of own minister (as does Catechism (1994). *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003): intention to meet grave spiritual need of individual believer (45). The Bishops judge that a grave spiritual need can arise when husband and wife long to

share Holy Communion but can see no way to satisfy this longing with the church's blessing. A marriage founded on Christ's love of the church might even be jeopardised (Eph 5:32). Providing help is a pastoral ministry that strengthens the marriage bond and supports people's salvation. In *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) Pope Francis appreciates interdenominational marriages lived in faith, and repeats the *Directory* referring to exceptional cases of need for communion (247). In general he emphasises the formation of conscience, and encourages responsible personal and pastoral discernment in particular cases (300).

3 The ministry of Jesus Christ guides us (21)

General permission for all non-Catholic spouses is not possible; the individual must reach a personal, conscientious decision after due consideration in conversation with their pastor or another pastoral minister. It requires a firm commitment to the life of the church. The pastoral conversation can find a good solution for each individual case. It can also provide a place where penance and reconciliation can be discussed.

We wish to strengthen sacramental life within marriage and the family (22-27)

Marriage and family life is a gifted way of following Jesus. There is an intrinsic link between Eucharist and marriage. *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2005): 'The Eucharist, as the sacrament of charity, has a particular relationship with the love of man and woman united in marriage' (27). The denominational schism of the church of Jesus Christ (which is no fault of the spouses), may cause interdenominational partners (with responsibility for each other and the faith of their children) to experience their inability to live in the fully visible unity of the church as a situation of grave need. It is sometimes perceived as an exclusion, which hurts the couple's relationship with the church. There is a risk they may lose touch with the church. Receiving Holy Communion is not the only way for non-Catholic Christians to share in the Catholic Eucharist as believers. We respect and encourage those who celebrate the Word of God, pray together, experience 'spiritual communion, receive a personal blessing. However, when in some cases 'grave spiritual need' for Holy Communion can be addressed positively, couples may come to know that church-dividing obstacles do not break their marriage bond, and enable them to experience fully their unity.

We will nurture marriage and the family as 'small-sized Churches' (28-30)

The Bishops refer to the house churches in the New Testament, then continue to *Lumen Gentium's* 'domestic church' (11) and *Familiaris Consortio's* (1981) 'small-scale Church', 'little church, ecclesiola' (48, 86). No church, they say, can exist without the Eucharist, quoting *Amoris Laetitia*: 'The Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive needed to live the marriage covenant each day as a "domestic church" (318). This is applied to the need to deepen conjugal communion by celebrating the Eucharist together in faith in interdenominational marriages: a sacramental power to strengthen the mutual love of the spouses and their ability to raise their children together in faith. The church must do all it can.

We invite interdenominational couples to hold a spiritual conversation (31-34)

The Bishops explain how they would like this conversation to be patterned on that of Jesus with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). ('Now they can return to Jerusalem and share their faith in Christ with the entire early church.')

Some spouses do not wish to share the Eucharist for reasons of faith and conscience; others decide to do so. The crucial question is how the Eucharist deepens the bond with Jesus Christ, between the spouses, and strengthens communion within their family. The spouses must discuss it if possible with the children and parents as well. 'There can be no ecumenism without a change of heart' (Decree on Ecumenism, 7) i.e. without turning to God and holding a deep inner conversation. We trust in a conscientious decision by interchurch spouses with heartfelt commitment to a shared life of faith and the religious upbringing of their children. We believe in pastoral care for married couples to deepen their faith. There needs to be a sure way for couples to decide whether the non-Catholic spouse, if a baptised believer, can receive the Eucharist in the Catholic Church. All cases need wise and sensitive pastoral care. We bishops must promote continuous training for pastoral ministers accompanying couples on the way of discernment 'according to the teaching of the church and the guidelines of the bishop' (*Amoris Laetitia* 3000).

4 Belief in the presence of Jesus Christ unites us (35-36)

The Bishops raise the question of Catholic Eucharistic belief, and refer to ecumenical dialogues on the Eucharist that have helped mutual understanding. For the Catholic Church three dimensions of the Eucharist are especially important: communion with Jesus Christ; communion with each other in the whole Church; communion with the world. These are intrinsically linked.

We are in communion with Jesus Christ (37-43)

From its earliest days the Church has come together to celebrate the paschal mystery. We proclaim the death of Christ, and confess the presence of the risen Lord. His salvific presence is real, in the elements of bread and wine. We recall the gift of Jesus' life on the cross, which was symbolically anticipated in the Lord's Last Supper. Wherever the celebration, it is the one bread and chalice of Jesus that are consecrated, the one body and blood of Christ that are eaten and drunk. The Eucharist is a 'meal' because it refers to Jesus' Last Supper and anticipates the banquet in the Kingdom of God. It is a 'sacrifice of praise' that the church offers to God, giving nothing that she has not received and continually receives: herself. It is the 'medicine of immortality', the hope of eternal life. It is a 'viaticum', provision for the earthly pilgrimage, because it is the 'heavenly bread', the 'bread of life' that is Jesus himself. This passage is full of scriptural references.

Bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Body and Blood are given to us so that we ourselves may become transformed into the Body of Christ. We all eat the one bread; this means we are made one. To express this transformation, the Council of Trent spoke of 'transubstantiation'. By eating the body of Christ and drinking the blood of Christ we partake in Christ's body and blood; this is the 'mystery of faith' we confess in celebrating the Eucharist. The Catholic Church believes in the abiding presence of Jesus Christ in the elements of bread and wine. That is why we have Eucharistic adoration,

prolonging and intensifying all that has taken place in the liturgical celebration. That is why the Catholic Church treats the Eucharistic elements with particular reverence. To receive Christ's body and blood, each baptised Christian is required to desire and deepen what is *most conducive* to communion with Jesus Christ (Ignatius of Loyola).

We are in communion with each other and with the whole Church (44-46)

The unity of the church is founded in the covenant that Jesus established through the Last Supper (Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20; I Cor 11:25). It relates not only to the community assembled to celebrate the Eucharist, but also to the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of all ages and places. The earthly Eucharist is a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy in the heavenly Jerusalem, towards which we travel as pilgrims. The prayer for the dead said at every Eucharist expresses the eschatological unity of the whole church, which includes the living and the dead. According to Catholic teaching the celebration of the Eucharist is tied to those ordained in the ministerial priesthood. At every Eucharist we pray for the Pope, the local bishop and for all bishops who together form a college in communion with the Pope, for priests and deacons who work with the bishops, for all who minister in the Church and so contribute to its growth.

We are in communion with the whole world (47-50)

Those who celebrate the Eucharist do so not only for themselves but also for the salvation of the world (cf I Jn 2:2). Christ's commitment for all on the cross becomes symbolically present. The prayer of intercession opens our eyes to the joys and cares, the misery and hope of other people, and to the integrity of creation. Eucharist and *diaconia* belong together; the Lord's Supper fosters solidarity with the poor (cf I Cor 11: 17-34; Jas 2: 1-13). Christ ministers to us, so we are obliged to minister to all, to those to whom his mission brought him. It is more than ethics; it is a ministry of salvation. It grows from the gift of reconciliation itself, and therefore itself performs the ministry of reconciliation. The sacramental celebration is closely linked with the church's engagement in the world, especially with the poorest. Whoever receives the body of Christ is called to serve peace; to promote the freedom and unity of humankind. We are aware of our weakness. We begin each celebration by confessing our sins before God and our fellows. In case of grave trespass the sacrament of penance must precede the sacrament of Eucharist. We know we only respond to the Eucharist when we give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, when we welcome strangers and the homeless, clothe the naked, tend the sick and visit the incarcerated – because only then do we encounter Christ (cf Mt 25:35-40). Yet just because we fail, we continue to celebrate the promise of transformation anew. We are among those most in need of compassion; we experience it in Jesus Christ in its purest form when we celebrate the Eucharist.

5 Unity in Christ is a source of joy to us (51-58)

For most people, it is in marriage that they choose to live in thanksgiving for the peace Christ gives his people (cf Eph 2:14). We know many marriages break up. We thank all who take care of the children. Here we are speaking of those who share their lives and faith in interdenominational marriages, those who entered what used to be called 'mixed marriage'.

We are glad this derogatory terminology has changed. A marriage of this kind lived in faith is a 'domestic church' in intrinsic communion with the Eucharist. Regular participation in the Eucharist is a source and zenith of conjugal communion for those who share the Eucharistic belief of the Catholic Church. The children are involved as their age and faith dictates. Nothing is automatic. Sound pastoral care is important for all married couples. We invite all interdenominational couples to a conversation which follows their own conscience as well as preserves the unity of the church. We invite all those who have not received communion together because they thought the rules forbade it. We invite all those who have received together for a long time, so that they can clarify their practice in an atmosphere of trust. We are inviting them to follow their own consciences. It is important to serve freedom of conscience, responsibility of faith and peace in the church. If it emerges that a Protestant wife or husband is unable to share the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist as we present it, we invite them to stay with us on the path of living and learning together in search of deeper unity. 'Spiritual communion' and asking a blessing can be steps along this path. All those who in conversation have concluded they affirm the faith of the Catholic Church and are in 'grave spiritual need' of sharing the Eucharist, may do so. Anyone who receives Holy Communion is receiving the same body of Christ as everyone else. The Catholic Church is in a communion with other churches and ecclesial communities which is real, if incomplete. An interdenominational couple sharing the Eucharist after making a personal conscientious decision and longing for the unity of the church becomes both sign and stimulus in the search for full communion among Christians. The question of interdenominational married couples receiving Holy Communion together is an important pastoral issue. Spouses are committed to one another in life-long marriage in faith. They can be strengthened in their marriage and family life when they not only share their faith but also are joined together at the Lord's table. For the Catholic Church it will be a 'source of joy' (*Ut unum sint*, 46) to administer the sacrament of the Eucharist to them. We German bishops wish to share in this joy, and therefore expressly welcome all those who follow this path.

Annex: Guidance on holding a conversation

We German bishops invite interdenominational married couples to share in a pastoral conversation to clarify whether or not a Protestant wife or husband may receive Holy Communion in the Catholic Church. This conversation should be offered by a pastor/priest or other designated pastoral minister.

Holding a good conversation

There are no fixed rules. It requires an open mind, discretion and a relationship of trust. Without prayer it cannot be productive. It presupposes the inner freedom of the participants, including their attitudes to their own habits and desires. It needs mutual respect and humility, love of the church and the Eucharist. It should support a decision that serves freedom of conscience, the truth of faith, and the unity of the church. Ignatius of Loyola advises taking important decisions in conversation with Christ. Christ himself shows the way (*Spiritual Exercises* 15). The most important attitude is hope of *magis*: that which is *most conducive* to communion with God (23).

Discovering faith in prayer

Cardinal Schönborn of Vienna offered a simple orientation: 'Whoever can say Amen to the Eucharistic Prayer with an honest heart, can also receive the fruit of this Eucharistic prayer, Holy Communion, with an honest heart.' Referring to the Eucharistic Prayer is a good way of discussing what the church believes when celebrating the Eucharist. The conversation is not an examination; it is to clarify the personal situation of the individual concerned.

... in communion with Jesus Christ

In Eucharistic Prayer II the priest prays to God the Father on behalf of the congregation: 'May all of us who share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit.' This expresses the mystery of the Eucharist: unity with Jesus Christ that God the Father gives us through the Holy Spirit. It is a sacrament, a visible sign that unites us with God, mediates the salvation given in Christ. It is filled with the Holy Spirit, whom we ask to transform the offerings of bread and wine, and ourselves too. Jesus Christ is present; it is he himself we receive when we eat the host, the body of Christ, and drink from the chalice, the blood of Christ.

... in communion with each other and with the whole church

In Eucharistic Prayer II the priest continues: 'Lord, remember your Church throughout the world; make us grow in love, together with N. our Pope, N. our bishop, and all the clergy. Remember N. whom you have called from this life. Remember our brothers and sisters who have gone to their rest in the hope of rising again: bring them and all the departed into the light of your presence.' We celebrate the Eucharist in communion with the living and the dead, so we pray for the dead. It is always the one Eucharist of Jesus Christ. We pray for the Pope and bishops, because they serve the unity of the church that grows from its unity with Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.; for priests and deacons who work together with the bishop, in communion with all who minister to build the church. In *Amoris Laetitia* (15) Pope Francis reminds us of an image of the church in the home, which would be appropriate for any house of God. 'We can never forget the image found in the Book of Revelation, where the Lord says: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev 3:20). Here we see a home filled with the presence of God, common prayer and every blessing.

... in communion with the whole world

In Eucharistic Prayer II the priest ends with: 'Have mercy on us all; make us worthy to share eternal life with Mary, the virgin Mother of God, with the apostles, and with all the saints who have done your will throughout the ages. May we praise you in union with them, and give you glory through your Son, Jesus Christ.' We pray for the salvation of the world brought by Jesus. We pray on behalf of those unable to pray. We open our hearts for all creatures that suffer, We become attentive to all signs from creation that show us the way to God. The Church's mission stands in continuity with the mission of Christ.

Coming to a good decision

A trustful conversation should lead to a conscientious decision that is in harmony with the church's teaching and practice. In the conversation it may become clear that it is better not to receive communion, because the Eucharistic belief is not fully shared, and another form of participation in Mass would be more appropriate. It is then important to continue walking

along this path with Christ so that unity in faith grows. In this case the individual may ask a blessing by crossing their hands in front of their chest, or placing their right hand on their left shoulder. Asking a blessing is itself an expression of faith. It says, the Catholic Church is also a blessing for me, even though I cannot partake of Holy Communion, because I do not share the Eucharistic belief or do not experience a profound longing to receive the Eucharist. Nevertheless I would like to be blessed, so that I myself may be a blessing for others. This too may be an appropriate and faith-nurturing way to share in the celebration of the Eucharist and develop a more intimate communion with the body of Christ. Yet it may also be that the hunger for the bread of life can be satisfied by receiving Holy Communion in the Catholic Church. It will then be a joy to administer and receive the Eucharist – in communion with the whole church.