

MIXED MARRIAGES AND INTERCHURCH FAMILIES

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When Roman Catholics talk about “mixed marriages” they are usually thinking of marriages between Catholics and Protestants (although of course the term “mixed marriages” covers interracial and interfaith marriages as well).

In the Association of Interchurch Families we coined the term “interchurch” marriages back in 1968 to refer to those mixed Christian marriages in which both partners are practising members of their respective churches.

This article looks at the realities behind these terms – not so as to “classify” particular marriages into one or other category, but simply better to appreciate the vast complexity of the subject. We are not concerned with tidiness! All marriages are different; every one is unique. We *are* concerned that people who marry across denominational boundaries should be enabled to live a more fully Christian marriage, and that the hindrances which Christian divisions place in the way of this may be overcome as far as possible in each case. In addition to its intrinsic value we believe that this process can contribute to Christian unity.

MIXED MARRIAGES

Mixed marriages celebrated in Roman Catholic churches in England and Wales are very common; 65% of all marriages involve a partner who is not a Catholic. (The Catholic bishops estimated that not more than 10% of these might be called ‘interchurch’.)

These mixed marriages can be of many kinds. Roman Catholics often instinctively think first of a practising Catholic married to a partner baptised in infancy in another church but who is a merely nominal Christian at marriage. The traditional Roman Catholic attitude has been that this kind of marriage will present no problems: the Catholic partner will continue to practise and the non-Catholic will acquiesce in the Catholic baptism and upbringing of the children.

Of course a mixed marriage can just as well be the other way round – a non-practising Catholic marrying a practising Anglican or Free Churchman. Other possibilities are that one or both may practise from time to time; or both may be non-practising.

The specific mandate of AIF is for two-church families — where one Christian family has living relationships with two different churches. These churches are at present divided, but most of them are on a converging path and committed to the search for full visible unity with one another. Here the course which has seemed to many of us to be the most satisfactory (in the thoroughly unsatisfactory situation of church divisions) is to involve

ourselves as a couple in the life of both our churches so far as we can, and to pray and work constantly for all that promotes unity between them, looking forward to unity and anticipating it as far as we are able. However, letters which we receive from readers of women’s magazines, phone calls to area secretaries, and comments which come from the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council’s counsellors involved in marriage preparation work, are increasingly pressing upon us the needs of the “mixed marriage” where only one — or neither — of the partners actually goes to church on Sundays. Of course we cannot draw a hard and fast dividing line between interchurch and mixed marriages. Families change and develop. A mixed marriage can develop into an interchurch family, given stimulus and encouragement at the right time. Sadly, an interchurch family can lapse into a merely mixed marriage, often because at a crucial point in family life the couple are treated as a problem, rebuffed and discouraged. Perhaps at a wedding or at the baptism of a child the pastor never hinted that their situation might offer an opportunity of deepening their relationship in Christ. Instead their situation was presented as so intractable a problem that they could not face it, and they stopped going to church altogether as the easiest way to avoid the problem.

What is the contribution which AIF experience can bring to couples involved in a mixed marriage? It is at the crisis points that they are most likely to approach us. We have had large numbers of letters which say in effect: “Tell us how to arrange our child’s baptism in a way which will keep both sets of grandparents happy.” Sometimes it is clear that neither partner goes to church; sometimes that one or other practises; sometimes we have no idea at all of the degree of commitment of the parents. All that is clear may be that there is a tug-of-war between the grandparents over which family is to lay claim to the child. Or the tug-of-war may in other cases be between largely non-practising parents who want their child baptised but who cannot bear the thought that the baptism should be in any but “my” church.

If we can, we offer them an interchurch couple who will be willing to talk through their situation. We can encourage the couple to think about baptism in relation to the way in which they are intending to bring their child up – to point out that baptism of a child makes Christian sense only if one or both parents intend to take the child to church and to worship with him or her; for in the nurture of a child the example of parents is all important. We can throw out questions for reflection, rather than providing any ‘answers’. And, of course, we can make it clear that there *can* be a two-church approach to Christian upbringing.

(Even with a couple in front of you it is all too easy to offer your ‘answer’ before really listening to what the question is, and *whose* problem it is – that of the couple, or

that of their parents. We need to be constantly alert to sort out the situations in which we are being asked for *information* from those in which we are really being asked for *counselling*. It is all too easy simply to hand out *advice!*)

A two-church approach

Where one partner is more committed than the other, the normal advice given is that the child should be brought up in the church of the 'practising' parent, and that, if possible, the 'nominal' parent should be encouraged to join the church of the practising partner. This advice is sometimes followed with success. The experience of AIF, however, points in another direction. We tend to meet more often the couples for whom this advice has *not* worked. Experience shows that the 'nominal' Christian is sometimes more confirmed and entrenched exclusively in his or her own tradition, than the 'practising' Christian. It is often more likely that a 'nominal' Christian will become a 'practising' Christian in the tradition in which he or she was brought up, than if an attempt is made to 'convert' him or her to another tradition. AIF would want to suggest the possibility of a two-church rather than necessarily only a one-church approach: that the road to becoming a more fully Christian family is not simply by one partner changing his allegiance to the church of the other (although of course in some cases it may very well be). It is usually better to build on what is already there, even if sometimes it seems very little. This is how Fr John Coventry puts it in his CTS booklet on *Mixed Marriages Between Christians*: "Supposing you are the Catholic girl, and he says he is 'not religious'. There is quite possibly far more than meets the eye: he may not have been a churchgoer since childhood, but more will have brushed off on him than he realises; he will share a lot of attitudes that in fact come from the Christian climate in which he grew up; he may, in ways he doesn't perhaps realise himself, be looking for God and vaguely realising his need of God; he may not be quite as satisfied as he seems on the surface with the more obvious round of human life. Supposing he is nominally Church of England, might it not be possible for you to help him to become a *better Anglican*? That may well be the first thing to think about, to pray about, to act gently and sensibly about. Not about his becoming a Catholic. This is not the time or the setting . . . The first step may very well be to get him to go and see (or go with him to see) a minister of his own church. Whatever else, try not just to accept the position that what means so much to you means absolutely nothing to him. Try not to accept 'no communication' in an area where you are most deeply yourself: that would make your marriage so much the poorer, so much less of a real union. Unions are always between people, who are different anyway."

One family's story

Similarly with a baptism, where one partner is more practising than the other, AIF would suggest the possibility of a two-church approach, since the upbringing of the child is in any case a *shared responsibility* of the two parents. This is how it is

working out in one case, in which the Anglican wife is helping her husband to become a *better Catholic*, and the marriage is developing harmoniously. The story is told from her point of view. She wrote to AIF after our address had been given in one of the women's magazines: "We married four and a half years ago in my local church. Our problem arose after the birth of our son – obviously about his upbringing. I had assumed, being the only member of the family to attend church regularly every Sunday, that it would be my responsibility, but my husband, who only attends church very infrequently - about 3-4 times a year - believes that Catholicism is the only 'true' religion and that it is better for the child to go to his church occasionally when he can find the time. He is adamant and refuses any discussion at all. The result is that at five months old my son has still not been baptised and it is causing me a lot of grief. It is useless now to wish it had all been arranged before the marriage but at the time it did not seem necessary. My biggest worry is that if a solution is not forthcoming my child may be deprived of a sound religious upbringing for the sake of harmony within my marriage."

A letter and some AIF literature were sent, and (unusually) a reply came back: "I have found them both exciting and challenging and at the very least I can now see that I am not alone and my problems are not insoluble."

Two years later we were surprised and pleased to receive another letter, and learn the story of how the family had moved forward. This is what had happened: "We met with a great deal of scepticism and in some cases open hostility — especially from grandparents as we began our attempt to worship as a family by visiting each other's churches on alternate Sundays — but our perseverance has led to a softening of attitudes all round, including those of our own clergy who were initially 'disapproving' to say the least. Basically both said: 'Don't baptize — wait — he/she will see sense. You'll win.' It seemed that a total victory for one or the other was vital. Fortunately this view rather united us and strengthened the determination to be a family."

The Roman Catholic priest was extremely concerned — even bogged down — with the terms of the marriage dispensation, i.e. all children of the marriage must be baptized and brought up in the Catholic faith, but as his predecessor had refused even to speak to me at all before my marriage, because we'd opted for an Anglican service, I did not feel that this was a valid argument. I certainly had not been aware of this agreement.

It was when we had reached a stage of almost total noncommunication and the marriage was in real danger of collapsing that more constructive advice was forthcoming.

A second visit to the priest confirmed that the marriage should not be put at 'real risk' because of the question of baptism but he still felt that we should just let things drift. The Anglican vicar's view was that because my husband rarely went to church and I was a regular attender we should wait and try to 'get' a pure Anglican baptism, but he was also concerned that the marriage should not be jeopardised.

Both clergy were then invited to read the AIF literature which had been sent to me and on which my husband and I were beginning, hesitantly, to base our hopes. It was at this point that we began our policy of alternating Sunday worship – quite an eye-opener for our conservative village!

I think it was the view of not baptising a child rather than ‘lose’ which angered us both sufficiently to try to move forward together. With the slight thaw in the clergy attitude we began to analyse possibilities. At the risk of causing greater confusion we brought into our discussion the prospect of education and found that whilst I had enjoyed my education at a church school my husband had detested his Catholic education and did not want our son to attend a Catholic school. Inquiries made to local primary schools revealed that the nearest schools were either a joint Anglican-Methodist school or a Catholic school – The local state school was being run down and our son would face a five mile bus journey if we opted for a non-church school. Surprisingly this was the way in. We still decided to opt for joint celebration of baptism and the clergy were approached again. ‘No,’ they said. ‘If he is going to attend an Anglican school then baptise Anglican,’ both said. However, at this stage this did not seem to be what we wanted. We then brought to mind the AIF newsletter which cited the instance of the couple who had their child baptised at an Anglican church and then had a Catholic reception. ‘Wait a little longer’ was the advice from the clergy. ‘No!’ we said. The Anglican vicar was asked if he would baptise our son and sponsor a place at the church school. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘if you *both* sign the relevant documents.’ We went ahead. The priest was asked if he would bless the baptism in the Catholic church. He said he could not refuse. Enthusiasm did not overwhelm us but we were not to be denied. We united these two plans by having both services on the same Sunday, one five minutes after the other.

Our son was baptised when he was a year old. We had a straightforward Anglican baptism with a mixture of Anglican and Roman Catholic godparents (not approved by the vicar but at least accepted!) and the Catholic blessing took the form of the prayers which would normally follow the anointing of the child. A candle was lit and we ended with a recitation of the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. The blessing was so similar to the previous service, it was really amazing!

It was after the ceremony that things really eased. Families were very glad that at least our son had been baptised and more importantly, the marriage was on a stronger footing and looking (as it is!) happy again. They now try to take an interest in how we cope and what happens when we visit the ‘other’ church — but personal preferences of course remain. We do, however, attend all the interdenominational services as a large family. (Previously my mother-in-law would have stuck rigidly to Catholic churches!) The clergy are both relieved that a solution was found and that we continue to attend both churches — although there is a distinct Anglican bias, because my husband is not, at present, as conscientious as I am — but though disappointed at a lack of total

success I do find comfort in the fact that he attends more regularly than he did when I first wrote to you. In fact the parish priest is grateful for the ‘beneficial effect’ I have had.

We are accepted by both churches now as regular welcome visitors, and both clergy visit our home to see us as a couple and not individually. They want to see if it is working – I think they now almost believe they found the solution! The Catholic priest now sends his newsletters to me – in the hope, I think, that I will remind my husband of duties, Holy Days, etc, and surreptitiously, I feel, I am being educated in the basics of the Catholic faith. However, now I am no longer afraid, I find it very interesting and am constantly surprised by the similarities I find. My husband does not take the same trouble to understand my way of faith but the possibility of this increases as our son develops and asks questions. We live in hope!

We would like to thank AIF for our starting point.”

We have given this story in some detail because it shows concretely how one family has become less of a mixed marriage and more of an interchurch family. It also shows how couples can influence their extended families and also their clergy towards a two-church approach - and it must surely be one of the aims of AIF to help clergy and ministers to see that in many cases a two-church approach may be the one which results in strengthening Christian marriage and Christian commitment, whereas a one-church approach may simply undermine them, and drive families away from Christ and his church.

INTERCHURCH FAMILIES

Let us now move to interchurch families, in which both partners are practising and committed Christians belonging to different churches. Within that definition there are obviously *vast* differences between couples. We can find interchurch couples at every point on the ecumenical scale which runs from competition through co-existence to co-operation and commitment.

Competition

We once met an Anglican father who had just taken his two young children to the Family Communion service and heard his story. His had been a ‘mixed marriage’ in which at the time of the wedding his wife had been a devout Roman Catholic and he a nominal Anglican. He had had little problem in agreeing that his children should be brought up as Catholics; the question simply had not seemed to touch him.

But when the first child arrived he suddenly realised the enormity of what he had done. He simply could not accept Catholic baptism. He insisted on Anglican baptism and from that time on returned to the practice of his faith, taking his children with him to church as soon as they were old enough.

It was clearly a unilateral decision which he had imposed on his wife to her great sorrow. The marriage had survived

–but only at the cost of the couple avoiding any discussion of religion. When his wife took the children to visit their grandparents in Ireland he supposed that she took them with her to the Catholic church, but he preferred not to inquire. He felt that it would be too dangerous to the marriage ever to speak of the matter again.

Co-existence

Some couples simply agree to differ. There is no competition in the family, but a peaceful co-existence. Division between the churches is taken for granted. For instance, we received this letter from a Catholic wife in an interchurch family:

“I just cannot understand why couples, having married, cannot live tolerantly respecting each other’s beliefs.

I think that it is only by each party’s being absolutely frank beforehand that this state can be achieved. We each have accepted that the other attends his own church and receives that church’s sacraments. Our two children were brought up and educated as Catholics. Through marriage, our son has lapsed and I have had to accept that and to go through the painful experience of his being married in the Church of England. Thankfully our daughter has remained a staunch Catholic.

Replying to criticisms of the Catholic Church from a great friend of mine, my husband replied: ‘If you don’t like the rules, you don’t join the club’, which sums up our attitude.”

Neither of these two couples, representing ‘competition’ and ‘co-existence’ respectively, would feel any need for the Association of Interchurch Families –the first because the rift between husband and wife is so deep that it would be felt to be too painful and potentially destructive to discuss religious belonging openly, and the second because if the churches are simply accepted as a set of co-existing ‘clubs’, each with its own static life-style and rules, there is no incentive to work for unity.

Co-operation

Probably almost all AIF couples would find themselves somewhere in the co-operation/commitment area. Co-operation is the stage beloved by church authorities, particularly if the co-operation leans in a direction of which they approve. As the Catholic Episcopal Conference of England and Wales states in its *Directory*: “There is a wide field of positive co-operation in the Catholic education of his child open to the conscientious non-Catholic parent who is also a Christian. Such parents will normally find themselves at one with their Catholic partners in believing, and therefore at ease in together presenting to their children nearly all of what is fundamental to the Catholic faith. ... We think that many parents of differing Christian traditions who face their responsibility for the spiritual formation of their children

will discover that the field in which they can co-operate is much wider than they at first imagined.”

Commitment

But if the co-operation is pushed as far as it can go, and the partners co-operate as equals within a commitment to unity, i.e. if they have a fully two-church approach, greater problems arise –but also, some would suggest, greater opportunities. These are the families which experience themselves as a *domestic church*, sacramentally united by their marriage: their problem is that their particular family unit in Christ is attached to two different churches, at present divided (although now recognising themselves to be on a converging path towards unity). They feel called to hold within their family unit this double loyalty to both traditions to which they are attached, accepting all the tensions involved while divisions continue, and praying and working constantly for all that promotes unity.

Interchurch families of this kind “live in their marriages the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity”, to quote John Paul II at York. They bring a sense of urgency to the ecumenical movement, because they have only a decade or two to nurture their children in the one faith of Christ. Christian divisions make it so much more difficult for them to do this.

But many do testify to a joyful experience of duality in unity, outweighing all the problems and hurts. Thus they are raising not only questions of eucharistic hospitality, but underlying questions of double belonging, of ‘reciprocal ecclesial hospitality’, of dual membership, especially for the children of such families. They are putting questions to the churches, and are ready to be questioned in their turn.

The role of AIF

Our primary preoccupation must be to help couples to retain and deepen their own faith with their children. We shall want to help them resist the temptation to solve their problems by one or both partners ceasing to practise their faith.

There is clearly a vast range of choice open to any couple marrying across denominational boundaries as to how they retain and deepen their Christian faith.

What we can hope to do in AIF is perhaps to help to clarify with particular couples what the options are; it is up to each couple to decide its own path. We need to be sensitive to how severely restricted the options are, in practice, for some couples at any particular point in time, given their particular situation and outlook. But life is never static. Attitudes can and do change. There is scope for all marriages across denominational boundaries to become more fully and deeply Christian marriages. Let us therefore help one another in the Association of Interchurch Families, and other couples as far as we can, to grow towards full maturity in Christ.