

INTERCHURCH MARRIAGE

A workshop on interchurch marriage probed the theological significance of the experience of interchurch marriage for both ecclesiology and the ecumenical movement.

Brief presentations were given by three speakers: Joan M. McGuire (Director of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, Archdiocese of Chicago), Michael Lawler (Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska), and George Kilcourse (Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky). A long and lively discussion among the twenty-five participants followed.

McGuire focused on "ecumenical families," defining them as families where each spouse "is a baptized and committed or believing member of a different Christian denomination." She argued that such families can be seen as "the model for an ecumenical Church." The challenge for theologians, she pointed out, is "to appropriate an ecumenical ecclesiology from the experiences of ecumenical families which could provide a theological foundation for an ecumenical Church." She cited papal and episcopal teaching that sees ecumenical families as a model for Christian unity, and that recognizes "the division of the Church, not the marriage of two Christians, . . . as the problem."

McGuire drew several parallels between ecumenical marriages and the coming united Church. McGuire noted that the "oneness in Christ through baptism" has not been adequately received, particularly as it characterizes two Christians also united in Christian marriage. Further, the theology and experience of marriage might serve as a model for an "ecumenical church." Today many hope that a concept of marriage where the woman becomes her husband's property and is completely absorbed into his family is fading; it is replaced by an understanding of marriage "as a covenant between equal persons, both of whom retain their personal identity while they also both assume the identity of a couple." So also, she argued, in the coming unity of the Church, rather than absorption of one denomination by the other, "denominations, like spouses, should retain their identity while in visible and transforming communion with another." In fact, ecumenical families live such visible communion and can model it for others. Truly ecumenical marriages could be "an extraordinary witness and means of church transformation." Finally, she pointed out, just as marriage is a relationship of not only the two married persons but also their whole, extended families, so also, "unless one completely separates persons from their religious identity when two people are united, not only the two families but also the two denominations are joined." Ecumenical marriages allow us to nurture love and respect toward the other denomination until "it must eventually be ritualized through recognition of full communion."

Lawler also focused on "ecumenical marriage," the marriage between baptized spouses of different Christian communions, emphasizing that it should be understood in the positive context of the search for Christian unity and of Vatican's II's recognition of the ecclesial status and true baptism of other Christian communions. Such a positive context allows a shift in attitude toward such marriages, once viewed so negatively in theology and in canon law. Lawler cited episcopal and papal teaching that understands "the efforts of such couples to achieve union in faith are a participation in the broader efforts toward union among the divided Christian churches." Not every marriage between two Christians of different confessions is an ecumenical marriage, he noted. "An ecumenical marriage . . . is one in which the spouses share a common Christian faith in one God, one Christ, one Spirit, one baptism. It is a marriage in which the spouses intend to grow together in that faith, though each in good conscience intends also to continue to belong to a different Christian church. . . . Such a marriage can be exemplary for every other kind of Christian marriage."

Lawler encouraged his hearers to think of ecumenical marriages "as gifts and challenges to the union of the Church." If the family is a little church, a domestic church as Vatican II taught, then it is "an image and representation of the universal Church of Christ." But partners in an ecumenical marriage "can achieve a communion that is doubly rooted," he pointed out: "first, in their marital covenant to become one body . . . secondly, in their baptismal covenant to become one Christ." This loving communion exceeds the communion achieved by Christian congregations, and it "far exceeds the communion achieved between their churches." He continued, "The loving reconciliation, healing of divisions, trust and mutual respect achieved in ecumenical marriage, in spite of conscientiously different confessions, is a gift to all the churches and a challenge to them to do the same." In addition, married Christians should reflect on the context of grace in which faith places their marriage, rather than characterizing it primarily in legal terms. "When an ecumenical family, a little, domestic Christian church, lives in and out of that grace, it becomes a sign and an instrument of grace for the rest of us . . . a sacrament."

Kilcourse reflected on the experience of "interchurch marriage," in which each spouse "participates in his or her respective church, and to various degrees in the partner's church;" both spouses as well "take an active role in the religious education of their children, who often claim a 'double belonging'." Such interchurch couples and families "personify the ecumenical reality through new paradigms," Kilcourse noted, paradigms which "the institutional church has yet failed to implement or, too often, even to imagine." They "live out the implications of the Second Vatican Council's ecclesiology and ecumenical principles," he argued, "while at the same time giving us an *unexpected* portrait of the emerging 'domestic church'."

Noting the significant change Vatican II introduced in its teaching that "The Church of Christ *subsists in* the Roman Catholic Church," as well as its teaching

on the degrees of fullness of communion possible among Christians, Kilcourse argued that such ecclesiology "finds expression in the lived experiences of interchurch couples," who "recognize that their churches and ecclesial traditions are different without necessarily being divisive." But he wondered whether official Church policies "adequately interpret their experiences or take their close communion of marriage seriously by relating it to the conciliar teaching on degrees of communion." He asked, "Does the Church of Christ *subsist* in a truly interchurch marriage *more fully* and *more perfectly* than in other mixed marriages? Or . . . even . . . than in a particular, canonically regular marriage between two Roman Catholics?" If so, "what possibilities for visible unity in sacramental sharing ought the churches extend to interchurch spouses and their children?" In fact, he suggested, perhaps such practical responses to interchurch families are an example of the institutional conversion to which the churches are called in the dynamic of their search for greater unity. Finally, Kilcourse noted the conciliar and papal teaching on the family as domestic church. In light of this teaching and changes in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, he asked, "what new policies for sacramental sharing in interchurch families are now appropriate?" Interchurch couples encounter "repeated obstacles, even humiliations" in the practice of their faith. "Why are they still made to feel as if this is a failure of their marriage and not a defect or failure in the church or its pastoral ministers?" In fact, interchurch families receive from the Holy Spirit the restlessness that characterizes the hunger for full communion.

In the discussion that followed, participants focused on the reasons for more frequent marriage breakdown among mixed marriages, the question of eucharistic hospitality for interchurch families, pastoral care for interchurch couples, the importance of sharing noneucharistic forms of prayer in interchurch families, and the pain experienced by interchurch couples. At the end of the workshop, one participant stated, "I think there is need of a Copernican revolution in our approach to interchurch marriage." On that note, the workshop concluded.

MARGARET O'GARA
University of St. Michael's College
Toronto