

## ECUMENISM AND INTERCHURCH FAMILIES

Topic: Resurrecting the Body Ecumenical  
 Convener: George Kilcourse, Jr., Bellarmine University  
 Presenters: Janice Thompson, University of Notre Dame  
 Ralph Del Colle, Marquette University  
 Respondents: Joan McGuire, Director of the Office of Ecumenism  
 and Interreligious Affairs, Archdiocese of Chicago  
 Thomas P. Rausch, Loyola Marymount University

Ralph Del Colle developed the theological imperative of ecumenism and growth “toward full communion in truth and charity” in the context of his marriage to an Episcopalian wife. He drew from Vatican Council II teachings, the 1993 *Directory for the Application of the Principles and Norms of Ecumenism*, John Paul II’s encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint.*, and “Interchurch Families and Christian Unity,” the 2003 Rome paper of the World Gathering of Interchurch Families. The bulk of his remarks focused upon spiritual ecumenism. He forthrightly voiced his “serious reservations over Catholics sharing Eucharistic communion in their spouse’s church.” In support of his thesis, Del Colle pointed out that Catholics are “more sacramentally dense in their spirituality” than other Christians, a fact that poses for him an “enormous” difference. Even though his wife is an Episcopalian, he finds that “we still do not have the same sacramental sensibilities.” Identifying three aspects of ecumenism found in *UUS* (renewal and conversion, the fundamental importance of doctrine, and the primacy of prayer), Del Colle concluded that “Ecumenism cannot bypass communion in truth.” He offered the example of developments surrounding the consecration of Gene Robinson to the episcopate as disruptive of ecumenical relations and potentially church-dividing within the Anglican Communion: “What for her [his wife’s] church is a matter of discipline is for my church a matter of doctrine.”

Janice Thompson admitted in her reflections both a challenge and opportunity. She and her husband “have struggled with the rules that each of our two churches impose on the way we are able to worship together and the ways we are able to celebrate or mourn major family events in our two communities.” The Anglican in an interchurch marriage, Thompson insisted on the “special role” she plays “in the healing and resurrection of the ‘body’ of the church ecumenical.” Her initiative and success in receiving the local Roman Catholic bishop’s permission for Eucharistic sharing with her husband at Mass on their wedding day (before the Marriage liturgy) met resistance from a Catholic in her husband’s family. The bishop then asked whether her actions appeared to produce more division than unity. She described being “stunned” and “hurt” by the experience; however, the following Sunday her Catholic husband did the most to offer healing by following her for the first time to communion in the Anglican Church.

Thompson reflected on the affirmations of *Lumen Gentium* and *Familiaris Consortio*: the family is a “domestic church” and “a specific revelation and realiza-

tion of ecclesial *communio*,” upholding interchurch family experience as itself an embodiment of church. She singled out the analogy of interchurch families as “connective tissue” to heal the body as articulated at the Rome 2003 Gathering of Interchurch Families—a description of their vocation vis-à-vis divided churches. She described interchurch couples as “interpersonal bridges of understanding and trust” to correct misunderstandings and bring richer understandings to their respective churches: “Because of our commitment to each other, my husband and I have learned to be far more patient and forgiving of each other’s church communities when we run into problems, much like we have to be patient with our in-laws.”

Joan McGuire remarked how Ralph Del Colle and Janice Thompson witness in their lives and reflections to ecumenical principles of self-revelation, distinctions between not only ecumenical relations but also liturgical and nonliturgical Protestant practices, and the necessity of partners to continue loving and communicating when they differ in beliefs and forms of worship. The presentations on spiritual ecumenism, the body ecumenical, and the domestic church suggested to her that a new interchurch “BEM” study on Baptism, Eucharist, and Marriage is opportune. Aware of the difficulties that interchurch children may experience, McGuire, nevertheless, asked if children raised in one church with a deep appreciation of another church might not result in a generation of well qualified ecumenical dialogue partners. She also expressed hope in actions beneficial to interchurch families from Pope Benedict XVI and Cardinal Walter Kasper, theologians who have lived in countries with many interchurch families.

Thomas Rausch pointed out how Janice Thompson’s paper “lifts up the pain” experienced in interchurch marriages. He insisted that her in-law who “blew the whistle” on Eucharistic sharing on their wedding day did not understand where the Catholic Church is on this exceptional practice. Rausch remarked that the metaphor of interchurch families as “a connective tissue” between divided churches (“Interchurch Families and Christian Unity,” The Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families, Rome, July 2003) suggests a more organic model of unity. He affirmed Del Colle’s description of Pentecostals as not seeking intercommunion; yet many Pentecostals, Rausch replied, are willing to recognize the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and some want Eucharistic hospitality. He emphasized the difference between a simply “mixed marriage” and a truly conscientious interchurch marriage. Referring to Del Colle’s Episcopalian wife, he admitted that the ordination of Gene Robinson as bishop in the Episcopal Church presents a difficult case. Yet in the Roman Catholic Church, Rausch remarked, there is also division on this issue (especially among younger Catholics).

On the question of intercommunion and Eucharistic hospitality, Rausch found Vatican Council II ambiguous but also noted that the council did not absolutely forbid *communio in sacris*. He distinguished terms to ask that the Catholic Church reflect on catholicity—not seeing it as “full” or “perfect” communion, but as “universal” vs. “particular.” Such inclusiveness in the church’s catholicity would acknowledge all expressions of Christ, even if not full or complete. He recommended recognizing the ecclesial status of other churches on the basis of creeds,

consensus statements on justification, etc. He pointed to ecumenical communities living together (such as Taize and covenant relationships) as signs of growing communion. What is to prevent the Roman Catholic Church from recognizing occasionally discreet Eucharistic sharing? Rausch advised that we “push the envelope” because (1) sacramental marriage is a true communion in Christ that merits Eucharistic expression, and (2) discreet permission for Eucharistic sharing in the case of interchurch families who already share faith and life is most appropriate. He cited the February 2005 article in *The Tablet*, reporting that Swiss bishops have secured Vatican permission for Eucharistic sharing at the marriage liturgies of interchurch couples.

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