

The Gifts and Challenges of Interchurch Marriage for Christian Unity

January 25, 2019

Let me begin by thanking Fr. Joseph Hilinski, Ecumenical Officer of the Diocese of Cleveland, for inviting me to be with you this afternoon. I am grateful to him, the Diocese of Cleveland and St. Charles Borromeo Seminary for hosting me.

January 25 is a date that brings great joy to ecumenists. On this day each year, Christians around the globe conclude the annual octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. Jan 25, 2019 is particularly historic because 60 years ago today, Pope St. John XXIII publicly shared his intention to call together the Bishops of the world in what would become known as the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church. From the stunned silence that followed that pronouncement, to the identification of pursuing Christian Unity as one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council, to this very gathering, we remain hopeful of the irrevocable movement to restore the unity that Christ seeks for his Church. I am overjoyed to share this time with you today.

To provide some context of the topic of today's talk, interchurch marriages, let me begin by mentioning that on January 25, 1959, this topic would have been discussed much differently in this place. So, let me provide a bit of history on religiously mixed marriages in the Catholic tradition before turning to the more constructive thoughts to end. The operative Code of Canon Law before Vatican II stated that

most severely does the Church everywhere prohibit marriage to be entered into by two baptized persons, one Catholic and the other belonging to an heretical or schismatic sect; if there is danger of perversion for the Catholic party or the children, the marriage is likewise prohibited by divine law itself.¹

In the strongest possible terms, this canon laid out the Catholic Church's opposition to conjugal unions between Catholics and other Christians. Assuming that one bypasses this strongly worded prohibition and does marry a non-Catholic, "the Catholic party is obliged to strive prudently for the conversion of

¹ *Code of Canon Law of the Roman Catholic Church*, 1917 ed., canon 1060.

the non-Catholic.”² Conversion of the other to the Roman Catholic Church is the key task of the Catholic spouse. For their part, we learn that “Ordinaries and other pastors of souls must discourage the faithful from mixed marriages.”³

Drawing upon this understanding, *Casti connubii* (“On Chaste Marriage”), the 1930 Encyclical of Pius XI, upholds a similar view toward mixed marriages.

They, therefore, who rashly and heedlessly contract mixed marriages, from which the maternal love and providence of the Church dissuades her children for very sound reasons, fail conspicuously in this respect, sometimes with danger to their eternal salvation.⁴

Pius XI further notes that within mixed marriages “deplorable defections” from religion can occur, especially in children of such marriages. Moreover, the possibility of religious indifference is heightened in such “contracts.”⁵

Note that the understanding articulated by Pius XI was that the religion that couples were called to share was Roman Catholicism, not Christianity as such. They are united in their marital life only if they share the same confessional identity as Roman Catholics.⁶

Knowing this historical inheritance, what did the Second Vatican Council have to say about this inherited stance toward mixed marriages, which other Christians found both offensive and indicative of a church that was not open to dialogue? It seems that one can simultaneously argue that Vatican II said very little and that it said a great deal about mixed marriages. In other words, the council documents never directly treated this topic; however, in its ecclesiological perspective, in its identifying the centrality of the ecumenical task, and in its articulation of the importance of religious freedom, this council profoundly re-

² Ibid., canon 1062.

³ Ibid., canon 1064.1.

⁴ Pope Pius XI, *Casti connubii* (On Chaste Marriage), (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1930), §82.

⁵ Ibid., §83.

⁶ See this inherited stance continuing in the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s 1966 “Instruction on Mixed Marriages,” reprinted in *Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Vol. 1, new rev. ed., Austin Flannery, ed., (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Co., 1996), 474-478. They write, “[M]arriage demands the fullest and most perfect agreement between the partners, especially where religion is concerned. ‘The link between souls weakens, or they drift apart, when they cease to be of one mind and heart with regard to the ultimate and highest values—with regard to religious truth and sentiment, that is to say.’ This is why the Catholic Church takes with the utmost seriousness its obligation to guard the faith both of the marriage partners and of their children. It does its best to ensure that Catholics marry Catholics” (§1).

shaped how mixed marriages would be treated canonically, theologically and pastorally for Catholics.

Let me unpack these shifts as briefly as I am able. *Lumen gentium* was important for mixed marriages for two main reasons. First, it upheld that the Catholic Church was not to be equated with the one Church of Christ.⁷ This recognition by the Council Fathers profoundly opened up the discussion on mixed marriages because no longer was salvation to be found only within the visible structures of the Catholic Church. Prior to this definition, the only stance that made sense for the Catholic spouse in a mixed marriage to take was to strive to convert the non-Catholic to the one true Church of Christ, seen as the Roman Catholic Church. Anything less was tantamount to damning your spouse to hell. Without diminishing the fact that *Lumen Gentium* articulated that the fullness of the means of salvation are to be found in the Catholic Church, the door was opened to see that Christ could be legitimately encountered in other Christian traditions as well.

Secondly, *Lumen gentium* identified Christian families as “domestic churches.”⁸ Through this specific designation of the Christian family (not specifically Catholic Christian family) as domestic church, one can begin to see the grace-filled place of Christian married life in the overall mission of the Church. While we have yet to unpack fully what is meant by the term domestic church, it is worthwhile to note that when two baptized Christians validly marry, the Catholic Church teaches that a small church of the home is founded. Marriages between Christians and members of other religious traditions, including Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and others, on the other hand, do not usher in a new ecclesiological entity of “domestic church.” More ecclesiological reflection seems warranted to understand the significance of this theological claim for ecumenism and the future of the ecumenical movement.

Another Vatican II document that has obvious ramifications for mixed marriages is *Unitatis redintegratio* (The Decree on Ecumenism). This decree spells out the irrevocable commitment of the Catholic Church to the mission of Christian unity, rooted in the communion we already share.

⁷ LG..

⁸ LG, §11.

The Catholic Church accepts [other Christian churches and ecclesial communities] with respect and affection as brothers. For men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church.⁹

This conciliar Decree does not gloss over differences in worship, belief, or ecclesial structure; however, it stresses a shared element of life in Christ that provides space for interchurch couples (and all Christians) to explore the communion they experience in their Christian homes. It opened up a new theological place from which mixed marriage couples can become viewed as more than just dangers to the eternal salvation for those involved.

While more could be said on this point, for now, it is sufficient to note the drastically changed position of the Catholic Church toward other Christian churches and ecclesial communities coming out of Vatican II. Rather than labeling them as “heretics” and “schismatics” as the 1917 Code of Canon Law did, this document offers terms such as “separated brethren [*sic*],” “ecclesial communities,” and “churches.”¹⁰ This change in language is indicative of a larger shift in Catholic teaching concerning other Christians, built upon deepening ecumenical relations. Amplifying further claims made in *Lumen Gentium*, the council fathers even find that

some, even very many, of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements.¹¹

Before concluding this examination of the Second Vatican Council, let me say that perhaps the most important statement issued by Vatican II affecting

⁹ Vatican II, *Unitatis redintegratio (UR)*, (Washington: USCC, 1964), §3.

¹⁰ One can also find changes in Roman Catholic law as indicative of the change toward mixed marriages in recent times. The 1983 Code of Canon Law differs significantly from the 1917 version regarding mixed marriages. Again, there is a dramatic shift in how the non-Catholic is referenced in the more recent code. “Without the express permission of the competent authority, marriage is prohibited between two baptized persons, one of whom was baptized in the Catholic Church or received into it after baptism and has not defected from it by a formal act, the other of whom belongs to a Church or ecclesial community not in full communion with the Catholic Church” (canon 1124). There is still a prohibition without a dispensation, yet the language in which this code references the non-Catholic reflects the changed ecumenical and ecclesial principles that came out of Vatican II.

¹¹ *UR*, §3.

mixed marriages was *Dignitatis humanae* (Declaration on Religious Liberty). In ways perhaps unforeseen at this time, this declaration paved the way for re-conceiving the role of both Christian parents in making decisions concerning the education and catechesis of their children. *Dignitatis Humanae* states that Religious freedom

means that all men [*sic*] should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his [*sic*] convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in associations with others.”¹²

This religious freedom most essentially extends to the family. “Every family, in that it is a society with its own basic rights, has the right to freely organize its own religious life in the home under the control of the parents.”¹³ These statements serve to remind Catholics that they cannot improperly infringe upon the religious rights of other Christians and non-Christians, especially in the context of the home. After this text, it would only be a short time before the Catholic church would remove the requirement other Christian parents must promise to raise their children Catholic.

In 1970, Pope St. Paul VI issued the influential letter *Matrimonia mixta* (Apostolic Letter on Mixed Marriage). This *motu proprio* was a necessary culmination of the renewed theology articulated at the Second Vatican Council.¹⁴ Its point of departure is the growing awareness that adults have the freedom to contract marriages with those with whom they have developed a particular, exclusive relationship. As the theology of Vatican II outlined,¹⁵ from the Roman Catholic point of view a valid marriage between two baptized Christians is a sacramental marriage. While many other Christian communities do not view marriage as a sacrament of Christ’s Church, the Roman Catholic teaching

¹² Vatican II, *Dignitatis humanae* (DH), (Washington: USCC, 1965), §2.

¹³ DH §5.

¹⁴ It must be noted that the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s 1966 “Instruction of Mixed Marriages” was in many ways the foundation for *Matrimonia mixta*. Among other developments, this document was the first to allow mixed marriages to be celebrated before either a Catholic or a non-Catholic minister, with the stipulation that only one such minister performed the appropriate rites. It had the stated intention “to meet the needs of the faithful in our day and to promote cordial relations between Catholics and non-Catholics.” *Matrimonia mixta*, however, is often regarded as the watershed document that asserted official Church teaching concerning mixed marriages.

¹⁵ See LG, §11.

regarding the sacramentality of mixed marriages remains central to Catholic theology and, consequently, pastoral practice.

Another significant development found in this document is the fact that Catholics can now be married in another Christian community, by a pastor/minister of another Christian denomination, while still retaining a valid sacramental marriage. This practice, however, must coincide with a dispensation from the local bishop for such an event to occur validly from a Catholic perspective.¹⁶ Given that a valid marriage has taken place, this sacramental marriage is viewed as binding on both parties and is not to be repeated.

While *Matrimonia mixta* marks a new era in how the Roman Catholic Church views mixed marriages, there is still a wary tone in the document. “The Church is indeed aware that mixed marriages, precisely because they admit of differences of religion and are a consequence of the division among Christians, do not, except in some cases, help in re-establishing unity among Christians.”¹⁷ St. Paul VI points out “inherent difficulties” in mixed marriages due to the perception that a “certain division is introduced into the living cell of the Church,”¹⁸ thus making them a difficult place to fulfill gospel teachings in a unified manner. He also notes that

in the family itself the fulfillment of the gospel teachings is more difficult because of diversities in matters of religion, especially with regard to those matters which concern Christian worship and the education of children. For these reasons the Church, conscious of her duty, discourages the contracting of mixed marriages, for she is most desirous that Catholics be able in matrimony to attain the perfect union of mind and full communion of life.¹⁹

¹⁶ *MM*, 512

¹⁷ *MM*, 508. Writing in 1974, John E. Lynch, “Mixed Marriages,” notes that the implementation of *Matrimonia mixta* had already yielded much ecumenical fruit (643). While stating this, however, he writes later that there is a mixed response among Protestants to this text. The fact that the couple still needs to go through the Roman Catholic hierarchy to achieve canonical form is particularly disturbing to other Christians (647). Also, the continued presence of the “promises” made by the Catholic strike some as odd in light of the marital promises made by the couple (648-50).

¹⁸ *MM*, 508.

¹⁹ *MM*, 508-509. It is unclear what exactly the “duty” of the Church is in this case. It seems that one can either infer that the duty is to keep Catholics within the boundaries of the Church or that the duty is to preserve union in

Along these lines, the Catholic has the duty of preserving her own faith and is never permitted to expose herself to the proximate danger of losing it. Furthermore, the Catholic partner in a mixed marriage is obliged not only to remain steadfast in the faith, but also to do everything in his power to ensure that the children be baptized and brought up in the same faith and receive all those aids to eternal salvation which the Catholic Church provides for her sons and daughters.²⁰

Despite the insistence on keeping these pledges and promises as part of the process to receive a dispensation, it is significant that the non-Catholic Christian no longer needs to make a similar pledge concerning the rearing of the children in the Catholic faith. They do, however, need to be made aware of the Catholic's pledge to do all in his or her power to raise the children in the practice of the Catholic Christian tradition. "In his or her power," however is much different than the previous requirement that the child "must" be raised Catholic.

When viewed as a whole, *Matrimonia Mixta* truly changed how the Roman Catholic community prepares for, celebrates, and assists couples in living out mixed marriages. Each marriage is now to be taken on a case-by-case basis with pastoral discretion to be placed at the hands of the local bishops and priests in dialogue with the couple. Norms and principles for pastoral action, particularly in the 1993 Ecumenical Directory, have since developed. Time does not permit me to go through these in detail, but it is generally true that the non-Catholic Christian spouse is given a more significant role in the decision-making process concerning where and by whom the marriage will be celebrated and how the children will be raised.

With all of these changes, rooted in an ecumenical mindset, supported by decades of collaboration, dialogue and pastoral activity among Christians, one core reality remains: until full communion is achieved among the various Christian churches, mixed marriage couples will face challenges that same church couples do not. These challenges present potential stumbling blocks for the couple as they lead a life of Christian discipleship in communion with their churches. I will not, and should not, deny that reality. What I will argue, however, is that it is past

the marital bond. In either case, does not the open discouragement of the union produce a certain tension within the very bond that the Catholic Church is so worried about keeping intact?

²⁰ *MM*, 510.

time that the Catholic Church and the entire Christian community more readily welcomed the gifts that these couples offer for the ecumenical movement and the wider spread of the Gospel. It is to that argument that I now turn.

3) Challenges to Gifts

Current church ruptures have introduced particular challenges into the interchurch home, of that we have been consistently reminded. What is less often addressed, however, is that these very challenges have forced interchurch couples to become proficient at considering one another's respective gifts, both within their marriages and within their relationship to their churches of ecclesial belonging. The challenges they face given the current situation provide them with a unique opportunity for becoming ecumenical pioneers and, as Pope Benedict XVI noted, "laboratories of unity."

From here on out it is essential to be clear on my use of terms. The Catholic Church refers to mixed marriages as marriages entered into between a Catholic Christian and a non-Catholic Christian. Marriages with disparity of cult refer to marriages between Catholics and members of other religious traditions. This reflection deals only with mixed marriages. It is an ecumenical, not an interreligious matter, which has profound theological differences. We can explore this point more in the time for questions to follow if you'd like.

By way of numbers, in the Archdiocese of Chicago, 21% of marriages contracted in Catholic churches were mixed marriages. That amounts to over 1000 weddings a year. Incidentally, in the past 20 years, we have seen a 50% decline in marriages performed in the Church. Perhaps another point of conversation later. I am told that in the Diocese of Cleveland, 21% of marriages are also mixed between two Christians. Two points must be highlighted regarding this fact: A) mixed marriages are not marginal in our local churches. More than one in five weddings are mixed! It begs the question about what are we doing to minister to these vast amounts of couples. How are they being accompanied?

A second point required further reflection is that these couples come to us within a vast spectrum of commitment to their churches. Many are loosely affiliated, nominal Christians who require much evangelization and re-integration into our congregations and parishes. Another large percentage of these couples come to us with one of the two spouses being deeply committed while the other

is much less so. Their situation usually leads to any children being raised in the church of the parent with a stronger faith commitment. Tensions in both of these homes, likely the majority of mixed marriages are relatively low as few challenges related to ecclesial decisions confront them.

What I am focusing on today, are those couples who I and others have come to term “interchurch.” By way of description, each spouse in a truly interchurch marriage is a practicing member of one church and, by virtue of their covenantal union to another baptized and practicing Christian, an active participant in the life of another church inasmuch as possible. Interchurch couples, should they be gifted with children, also jointly share the duty of raising them as Christian disciples, lived out in connection to their respective ecclesial communities through their communal discernment as members of their particular domestic church.

It is interchurch families, so defined, who are presented with unique challenges due to their diverse church belonging. Because of this reality, interchurch families also stand in a unique position to become leaders in the present and future of the ecumenical movement because they engage in a life-long ecumenical gift-giving exchange as they daily live the already/not yet of church unity in their homes. They offer a unique gift to all Christians by virtue of their bridge-building roles, exercised within and between two Christian churches. Challenging and challenged, yes; but gifted, as well.

The more I study and work with interchurch families, the more I am struck by how they are consistently categorized by the challenges and/or difficulties they pose to themselves and the church. Owning this reality, let me proceed not by disagreeing with this reality, but by reframing it more constructively. In what follows, I will name three specific challenges that interchurch couples will invariably face, followed by a reflection on how each particular challenge can become a gift when addressed in hope and love. This reframing better allows the tremendous gifts that interchurch families offer for the Christian community and the ecumenical movement to shine forth more visibly, while offering a greater chance that they will remain connected to our churches more directly.

While other challenges may exist, let me identify three specific challenges that these couples will face for the purposes of this reflection:

- 1) Challenge of family/ecclesial belonging
- 2) Challenge of Joint Worship, including Eucharistic Sharing
- 3) Challenge of Baptizing/Catechizing/Forming children

A first challenge that mixed marriage couples face actually occurs before the wedding. As an entryway to this challenge, let me offer a quick story. When my wife (then fiancée) and I went to visit with her local parish priest for the first time for wedding preparation, his first question after preliminary introductions was: “are you both Catholic?” We responded that we were, in fact, both practicing Catholic Christians. Breathing a pronounced sigh of relief, he gratefully proclaimed, “Thank God! It’s so much easier this way!”

While likely an attempt to set us at ease, I couldn’t help but wonder about what would have happened if our response had been different. Without questioning his underlying point that a mixed marriage wedding would have been “harder”, his response projected to us that our marriage was “better.” Since when did the “easier” in the Christian life become necessarily better?

Let me suggest a gift that can come from the challenges presented by the interchurch wedding.²¹ Most interchurch couples come from families of diverse ecclesial belonging. Whether it be a Catholic/Lutheran, Baptist/Presbyterian or Methodist/Episcopal “union”, it usually involves parents, siblings and friends from within those distinctive traditions.

Some family and friends may be uncomfortable with the spouse of choice given this diversity of belonging. However, in the lead up to these weddings, these newly forged relations can cause family and friends to come to learn about a new Christian church through the couple’s choice to wed. What respect for the covenant of marriage these Reformed Christians have! What value these Lutheran Christians afford to the living word of God! What wonderful music these Methodists have! What respect for tradition is evident among these Catholics!

²¹ More detail of this argument can be found in my article “Educating Ecumenically: Interchurch Families as Unique Pedagogical Models” found in *Being One at Home: Interchurch Families as Domestic Churches*, ed. Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi and Ray Temmerman (LIT Verlag, 2015) p. 69-84.

Whatever the particularities, the point is that in the interactions between the respective families as they prepare for, celebrate and then live out a mixed marriage can provide an unexpected opportunity to better understand the tradition to which their son/daughter, brother/sister or friend is marrying into. It can reduce misunderstandings among diverse Christians and cultivate a respect for one another's respective beliefs and practices.

This reality can also extend to the pastors and pastoral ministers that walk with the couple as they prepare for marriage. The Ecumenical Directory reminds us that in preparing for marriage "the priest or deacon, and those who assist him, should stress the positive aspects of what the couple share together as Christians..."²²

Even more directly, St John Paul II in his 1981 apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* states, "In order to highlight the ecumenical importance of mixed marriages which are fully lived in the faith of two Christian spouses, an effort should be made to establish cordial cooperation between the Catholic and the non-Catholic ministers from the time that preparations begin for the marriage and the wedding ceremony, even though this does not always prove easy."²³ Along with Pope John Paul II, I am not arguing that walking with this couple will be easy. Nor am I suggesting that getting to know and work with another Christian minister in this accompaniment will be easy. What I am suggesting is that an ecumenical gift exchange can occur if members of both families and churches become attentive to the growing life together of this couple and are open to learn from and with them about their respective churches of belonging.

A second challenge that interchurch couples are presented with is the decision of where and how to worship as a couple joined to two different ecclesial communities. From a Catholic perspective, the issue of Eucharistic sharing for these couples is paramount and will be turned to momentarily. However, let me first make mention of the fact that Christians can, and in the case of many interchurch couples should, worship together when able. In so doing, these couples can more fully understand and appreciate the rich liturgical tradition of another Christian communion. Even if Eucharistic reception in that spouse's

²² Ecumenical Directory, 148.

²³ St. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 78.

church is not yet possible, much fruit can come from praying with another Christian community on a regular basis.

Of more significance for this address, the challenge of Eucharistic hospitality for interchurch couples offers a unique and bittersweet gift to the ecumenical movement. Being denied shared access to the Eucharistic table means that faithful interchurch families are unable to remain oblivious to the painful effects of Christian division. As the Ecumenical Directory so plainly states, “when members of the same family belong to different Churches and ecclesial communities, when Christians cannot receive Communion with their spouse or children, or their friends, the pain of division makes itself felt acutely and the impulse to prayer and ecumenical activity should grow.”²⁴ This pain can lead to anger, misunderstanding and inner conflict, but it also leads to a renewed sense of purpose, prayer and growth for Christian unity.

To be frank, these families bear the brunt of our churches’ myriad divorces in ways that most Christians are not required to feel and, therefore, all too often blissfully ignore. Most faithful Christians find that they can go through their lives of faith without ever having to face the pain of division on a weekly, if not daily, basis. Truly interchurch families cannot. They are gifts to all Christians in reminding us that there are painful consequences to division.

By way of concluding this point, let me approach it somewhat differently. How many of us only go to the doctor after a pain that we are feeling impacts us so much that it begins to affect our daily functioning? One of my prayers today is that we all feel the pain of ecclesial division in ways that interchurch families are forced to feel each Sunday. Only then, I fear, will the majority of Christians begin to see with their hearts that the Ecumenical movement isn’t just a theological exercise, but a foundationally pastoral one as well. This gift that interchurch families offer to the wider Christian community is not experienced as such to them. Let us not exacerbate the pain they are forced to feel by proving it ineffectual in bringing about the unity we need for it to go away.

A third challenge that interchurch families face is where and how to baptize and catechize their children. When interchurch couples welcome children, a great gift itself, they are presented with the potentially divisive challenge of which

²⁴ Ecumenical Directory, no. 27.

church to raise the child in. Without minimizing the challenge this brings, the gifts that this reality can bring are great.

Theologian George Kilcourse reminds us that whenever a person is baptized, he or she is brought into some kind of communion, however imperfect, with every other church by virtue of the mutual recognition of Baptism. When someone is baptized at Covenant Presbyterian Church, the membership of St. Anne's Catholic Church a block away is somehow enriched.²⁵

Interchurch families manifest the unifying nature of baptism for Christian families in ways that often go unnoticed in same-church families. As couples, interchurch spouses find particular spiritual strength in this sacrament. St. John Paul II spoke of the importance of baptism for interchurch spouses when he noted that "their common Baptism and the dynamism of grace provide the spouses in these marriages with the basis and motivation for expressing their unity in the sphere of moral and spiritual values."²⁶ Interchurch couples, as they concentrate on the unifying effects of baptism in structuring their Christian life in common, concretely express baptismal unity in ways that many same-church couples may not consider.

The introduction of children into interchurch families can further heighten the unifying effects of baptism in these domestic churches. This reality is seen plainly when interchurch families include ministers of both of their Christian communities in the planning and celebrating of the baptism itself. Furthermore,

By inviting members of their parishes and congregations to gather for the baptismal liturgy, interchurch couples and pastors can make visible this common baptism as a sacrament of unity. What the couple must avoid at all costs is an impression or feeling that a wedge has been driven into their marriage and family by the baptism of their child. At this moment they together reaffirm their identity as an interchurch family of faith (just as in the marriage liturgy) and a joint role in the child's religious education. They help the gathered community to understand the divisions of the churches

²⁵ Catholic/Reformed Dialogue in the United States, *Interchurch Families: Resources for Ecumenical Hope*, John C. Bush & Patrick Cooney, ed., (Washington: USCC, 2002), 26.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio (FC)* (On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World), (Washington: USCC, 1981), §78.

without accepting or tolerating them. Here is manifest the gift of an interchurch couple as the conscience and catalyst of Christian unity.²⁷

In the very act of celebrating baptism, these families grant members of their local faith community a foretaste of ecclesial unity amidst Christian division.²⁸ As they are recognized, blessed and encouraged in their task of welcoming their child into Christ's Body, interchurch couples become signs of unity to their brothers and sisters in Christ.

How might this ecumenical act be recognized better within the Church? Some have suggested that including the name of the baptized into the registers of both churches or publicly announcing the baptism in both communities would be a simple, yet significant way to underscore baptism's unitive nature.²⁹ However their experiences are made manifest in the gathered church, the theological foundation for this pastoral recognition already exists.

Interchurch families experience daily the spiritual unity brought about through baptism. They reveal to themselves and to others the importance of rooting a shared ecclesial life in the gift of the Holy Spirit received through baptism. In confronting the challenge of how to baptize and raise children in an interchurch home, these families can serve as gifts for the entire Christian community as it seeks further unity in Christ, rooted in our common baptism.

Concluding remarks: Various studies have been provided to indicate that spouses who marry members of a different Christian tradition do, indeed divorce at a slightly higher rate than same-church couples. What a 1999 study by the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University found, however, was that for those interchurch couples who were highly committed to their faith, the divorce rates were nearly identical to same church couples who also were highly committed to their faith at the time of the wedding. More telling of how

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *Interchurch Families: Resources for Ecumenical Hope*, 28. "[T]his universal sacrament [of baptism] is most often celebrated in denominational or even congregational or parish isolation. The faithful rarely 'see' the ecumenical reality being signified. Of help is the fact that more and more baptismal rites share a common order, use common creedal affirmations, and employ similar baptismal prayers. The practice of having 'ecumenical witnesses' at baptismal services can do much to make the ecumenical significance of baptism visible. Ecumenical services 'commemorating' or 'affirming' our common baptism can also highlight the implications of baptism for the unity of the Church."

²⁹ See, for example, Kilcourse, *Double Belonging*, 99.

challenges to Christian faith as experienced in a marriage would manifest themselves as marriage dividing was not the fact that two churches were involved, but how involved each spouse was to their church.

Given this reality, my core argument is that the Catholic Church and all Christian churches need to do a better job of recognizing the gifts that these couples are offering to our churches, particularly to the ecumenical movement. When Christians identify our time as an ecumenical winter, I often challenge them by saying that ecumenism is alive and well in a growing interchurch family community. These couples are finding ways of living out a shared commitment to Christ despite the challenges Christian division throws their way. They are doing so while remaining committed to their churches, jointly exploring the gifts their respective churches offer to the one Church of Christ while calling their churches to pave the way for ever more perfect communion.

They know that commitment to Christ and the ecumenical movement is about love because that is how they experience it. Until our divisions move beyond the “church-dividing” stage, they will continue to live out their discipleship amidst the pain that this state of affairs brings to bear on their daily lives. As they do, they will continue to manifest themselves as prophetic signs of the future church and as gifts for those who seek it together in Christ.