

From Experiment to Encounter: Receiving Interchurch Families in a Synodal Church

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Introduction

In 1966, when Pope Paul VI unexpectedly placed his episcopal ring it on the finger of Archbishop Michael Ramsey, it was widely seen as signifying “at least, the engagement of the two great communions”.¹ Although after 60 years many wonder if the initial ardour has cooled or the churches have settled for cohabitation or platonic friendship, the Pope’s gift symbolised a new ecumenical desire and commitment from the Catholic Church. In interchurch marriages we see both interpersonal and ecclesial love and unity realized in a concrete (but perhaps no less symbolic) way.²

Drawing on new opportunities for the dreaming of dreams afford by the Catholic Church’s current synodal journey, this article explores two main questions:

- 1) How can interchurch marriages be understood as realising a form of Receptive Ecumenism? and;
- 2) Can this interpersonal practice be adequately translated into patterns for interchurch relations?³

We write from the perspective of an interchurch marriage: Anglican (Diane)-Catholic (Greg), and as an interchurch family, having raised three children in both churches. Diane is a parish priest in the Church of England; Greg is a lay Catholic academic. Diane’s voice comes through most strongly in Part 2 of the essay, with Greg’s to the fore in Parts 1 and 3.

1: Dysfunctions, Wounds, and Holy Erotics

The 1966 meeting of prelates highlights a shift that was occurring in the Catholic Church’s attitude towards ecumenism in the 20th century: from suspicion and restrictions to toleration and experimentation, and eventually to embrace and “irrevocable commitment”. Over this

¹ <http://anglicanhistory.org/amramsey/macquarrie1990.html>.

² A standard definition of interchurch marriage is that it “(1) joins in marriage two baptized Christians from different traditions, (2) each spouse participates actively in her or his particular church, and to various degrees in one another’s church, and (3) each spouse takes an active, conscientious role in the religious education of children”, George A. Kilcourse, *Double Belonging: Interchurch Families and Christian Unity* (New York, Paulist, 1992).

³ For a recent overview and reflection on the literature relating to interchurch families and Receptive Ecumenism, see Diane Ryan, “Not Problems but Pioneers: Interchurch Families and Receptive Ecumenism”, in Paul D. Murray, Gregory A. Ryan, and Paul Lakeland (eds.), *Receptive Ecumenism as Transformative Ecclesial Learning: Walking the Way to a Church Re-formed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 181–192.

same period, a similar development can be observed in the Catholic perception of mixed marriages which were, as late as the 1950s being described as “an abhorrence”. By 1971, *Matrimonia Mixta* removed penalties for Catholics who transgressed church law regarding mixed marriages, although the church still discouraged the contracting of any such unions.⁴ Against the background of an alleged ecumenical winter under the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, more nuanced understandings of the pastoral reality emerged, including recognition not only of “mixed marriages” but “interchurch families”.⁵

Both ecumenical relations and mixed marriages have moved from a state of avoidance, to toleration, and onto varying degrees of recognition both by church authorities, and by church communities.⁶ Sentiments that interchurch families live out the hopes and dreams of Christian unity (John Paul II)⁷, or act as practical laboratories of unity (Benedict XVI)⁸, while encouraging, risk an idealised view of interchurch couples, and of the capacity for the churches to harvest the fruits of these lived experiments in Christian unity. For interchurch families to be a gift for the churches demands attention to the *realities* of interchurch families and church communities. This is not to say that the focus must be purely practical. Clare Watkins has ably demonstrated that practical theology should and can be “theological through and through”, and applied this principle to ecclesiology.⁹ And in the ecumenical sphere, a concern for attending to lived realities, in genuinely theological register is also found in the 21st century development of “Receptive Ecumenism”.¹⁰

At the heart of Receptive Ecumenism is a principle that further ecumenical progress is possible,

only if each of the traditions ... makes a clear, programmatic shift from prioritising the question “What do our various others first need to learn from us?” to asking instead “What do we need to learn and what can we learn, or receive, with integrity from our others?”¹¹

⁴ https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19700331_matrimonia-mixta.html

⁵ For an overview of historical development, see Ruth Reardon, “Interchurch Families”, in Geoffrey Wainwright, and Paul McPartlan (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Ecumenical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 459–467.

⁶ On toleration and recognition, see Risto Saarinen, *Recognition and Religion: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For application to Receptive Ecumenism, see Saarinen, “Recognition of Others and Receptive Ecumenism” in Nausikaa Haupt, Olle Kristenson, Michael Nausner, and Gregory A. Ryan (eds.) *Spirit Flowing Like Water: Conversations on Receptive Ecumenism* (Wipf and Stock, in preparation).

⁷ Pope John Paul II, Homily at the Mass for Families, York, May 1982, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1982/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19820531_famiglie-york.html

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, “Ecumenical Encounter”, Warsaw, May 2006, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060525_incontro-ecumenico.html

⁹ Clare Watkins, *Disclosing Church: An Ecclesiology Learned from Conversations in Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020)

¹⁰ For background and a comprehensive bibliography, see <https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/catholic-studies/research/constructive-catholic-theology-/receptive-ecumenism/>

¹¹ Paul D. Murray, “Introducing Receptive Ecumenism”, *The Ecumenist*, 51/2 (2014), 1–8 (1).

Beneath this openness to learning lies a double dynamic, drawn from concerted attention to lived realities. On the one hand, acknowledging specific deficiencies or wounds in one's own tradition, with a desire to heal them. On the other hand, recognising the graced potential of another Christian tradition as a source of learning and healing. The sharpened intensity of difference experienced by interchurch families is one reason why they might be possible sites of such reparative, expansive learning and constructive, pioneering journeying together.

Language of affection, attraction, and desire, which permeates the literature of Receptive Ecumenism indicates another aspect of the approach which resonates with interchurch marriages. Indeed, the instigator of Receptive Ecumenism even talks of "holy erotics":

when the movement of attending in the Spirit to our own and the other's reality is lent wings and achieves take-off then we have need and desire conjoined: both repentant recognition and the dreaming of dreams. This is the holy erotics of Receptive Ecumenism, which has the capacity to move our imaginations, wills, determinations, and minds to find ways, with dynamic integrity, to overcome the obstacles which stand in the way of consummated full communion.¹²

It is therefore not surprising that the relevance of Receptive Ecumenism for interchurch families has been noted since the early days of its development.¹³ This raises questions of pastoral and theological reception: if such couples are "laboratories of unity", who is studying the experimental results?

2: A Practical Laboratory of Unity

The idea of interchurch families as a laboratory of practical ecumenism has been comprehensively explored by Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi.¹⁴ A laboratory as a place of learning, exploring, testing, has the aim of sharing the results with a wider audience. This accords well with Receptive Ecumenism, which is a model that prioritizes "practical learning from the other" in contrast to bilateral discussions involving "mutual understanding of the other".¹⁵ The experience of interchurch families as documented shows evidence of experimentation in sacramental areas such as shared reception of communion and joint

¹² Murray, "Foreword: Receptive Ecumenism as a Leaning-into the Spirit of Loving Transformation", in Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes (eds.), *Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning, and Loving in the Way of Christ* (Adelaide: ATF, 2018), xv–xxiii (xxii).

¹³ Reardon, "Catholic Learning: Explorations in Receptive Ecumenism, Ushaw College, Durham, 12-17 January 2006. Reflections from an Interchurch Family Perspective",

<https://www.interchurchfamilies.org/ifir/2006/ifir04-200604Ushaw.pdf>

¹⁴ Knieps-Port le Roi, "Interchurch Marriage: Conjugal and Ecclesial Communion in the Domestic Church" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Summer 2009.

¹⁵ Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs", *Louvain Studies* 33 (2008), 30-45 (41).

confirmation,¹⁶ in profile-raising with ministers and bishops and in family spirituality. Thus interchurch families can make a claim for the practice of “receptive ecumenism at the personal level”.¹⁷ They are in an on-going practice of learning about each other’s church tradition, and receiving certain elements into the family spirituality, and as such rightly designated “an experiential resource in which an ecumenical relationship is being lived through the unitive sacramental love of spouses.”¹⁸ This section looks at some ways in which the learnt experience of interchurch families and the ways of working of Receptive Ecumenism overlap, and explores barriers and challenges to the churches’ learning from interchurch families. The laboratory is not effective if the learning is not spread more widely, and there may be aspects that prevent this.

Interchurch marriages are primarily relationships of mutual love, and this love is a strong motivation: “because of their underlying love and trust, spouses learn to understand one another and to forgive one another.”¹⁹ The “safe” environment of a loving relationship both enables and has the potential to transcend dialogue across difference. Paul Avis’s work on reconciliation theology emphasises the importance of a loving relationship for both recognition of the other and strengthening of personal or community identity. This has significance for ecumenism as well as personal relationships, and he concludes, “in ecclesial communion, the distinctiveness of churches must be respected and preserved.”²⁰ This is particularly important in Receptive Ecumenism, where “what is valued is the distinctive quality of the other.”²¹ Antonia Pizzey notes that spiritual ecumenism emphasises Christian hospitality “by placing, as its first duty, love for one another”,²² and notes the consistent use of affective language to describe Receptive Ecumenism²³ while also affirming hospitality as central to this approach, thereby situating both spiritual ecumenism and Receptive Ecumenism within relationships of love. Interchurch relationships are therefore particularly appropriate sites of Receptive Ecumenism, and with their aspects of trust, hospitality, forgiveness, and perseverance can offer an example to churches willing to engage in a similar relationship of love.

A relationship of love “opens us to vulnerability towards the other,”²⁴ opening up the possibility of the healing of wounds. A major concern of interchurch families over the years has been reception of the Eucharist. Being unable to regularly receive together has been an

¹⁶ Association of Interchurch Families, *Interchurch Families and Christian Unity*, (London: British Association of Interchurch Families, 2003) 13-15.

¹⁷ Association of Interchurch Families, “Contribution to the Synodality Conversation”, 2023.

¹⁸ Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi, Gerard Mannion, and Peter de Mey (eds.), *The Household of God and Local Households: Revisiting the Domestic Church* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 334

¹⁹ Reardon, “Interchurch Families”, 462.

²⁰ Paul Avis, *Reconciling Theology*, (London: SCM, 2022) 164.

²¹ Callan Slipper, “The Means is the End: The Spiritual Heart of Receptive Ecumenism” in Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes, (eds.), *Receptive Ecumenism: Listening, Learning and Loving*, (Adelaide, ATF, 2018) 153.

²² Antonia Pizzey, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Renewal of the Ecumenical Movement* (Leiden, Brill, 2019) 132.

²³ Pizzey, 51.

²⁴ Pizzey, 152.

ongoing source of pain for many couples, and this has spurred them on to work for, and to advertise, exceptions to this ruling from the Catholic Church. International bilateral consultations have yielded some fruit in this area but it is patchy, a “postcode lottery”,²⁵ leaving an open wound. Ruth Reardon talked about Interchurch Families as connective tissue²⁶ stretching across the sides; but in this instance, the wound cannot be healed by the interchurch families themselves. The natural impulse then is to avoid prodding the wound, it is painful and not healing, and for those not engaged in an interchurch relationship, the answer might be to avoid communion services on ecumenical occasions. But this painful experience has provided the impetus for much work on the part of interchurch families to publicise the exceptions to the ruling and to agitate for further recognition. It has thus had some positive outcomes, and the connective tissue, in the form of loving relationships, has the effect of providing at least some covering protection. Wounds can be sites of creative energy,²⁷ and interchurch families offer “an expertise and experience that we ask our church to listen to, and to address”.²⁸ The wound is a very powerful image in Receptive Ecumenism but it takes courage and that relationship of love and trust to reveal the wounds that need healing in our churches.

Learning in interchurch families can also come from the positive perspective of understanding difference as gift. Knieps-Port le Roi considers the expansion of horizons that comes with being an interchurch family:

interchurch families, with the hermeneutics that came from being inserted into the Church through two churches, could make a unique contribution [...] of the way the domestic church could be an instrument of Christian Unity.²⁹

We begin to see our own church through the eyes of the other, seeing what it looks like from the outside, for example the quality of welcome it offers. This hermeneutical leap can be startling and unsettling, but it is made within a perspective of love; love for our own church and love for our spouse who perceives the church as different. This reduces the impulse to react defensively or to see comments as criticism, instead receiving the experience as a critical friend. In interchurch families, this experience becomes part of the conversation, and both parties are changed. Can this be the case with churches engaging in Receptive Ecumenism? Only within that same relationship of love that enables comments to be made and received without acrimony or defensiveness.

²⁵ Association of Interchurch Families, “Contribution to the Synodality Conversation”.

²⁶ Reardon, “Interchurch Families”, 460.

²⁷ Mary McLintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

²⁸ Association of Interchurch Families, “Contribution to the Synodality Conversation”.

²⁹ Temmerman and Knieps-Port le Roi, *Being One at Home*, 9.

Recent Catholic theology views the Christian family as a “domestic church,”³⁰ and the experience of interchurch families clearly sits within that experience. However, church documents on the subject have tended to offer advice and teaching rather than listen to the experience that is offered. Is this because the domestic church is necessarily a sphere where the influence of women is dominant, hampering their response? As *Amoris Laetitia* admits, “ordained ministers often lack the training needed to deal with the complex problems currently facing families” (§202). Clare Watkins highlights the importance of viewing the domestic church not as “homespun anecdotes on the Christian family,”³¹ but as the vital handing on of the faith within the family, which is currently woefully under-appreciated and under-resourced in the Catholic Church. Attendance at church has been seen as the main sign of Christian faithfulness, rather than focussing on the quality of family religious life, which is the “most fundamental—and, it should be noted, most pedagogically effective”³² site of leaning. Interchurch families have seen men and women’s empowerment in searching for authentic patterns in being domestic church, but this learning has not always been received by the teaching bodies of the church. Watkins calls for a wholesale re-evaluation to focus on the domestic church; “the reorientation of ecclesiology demanded by an emphasis on domestic church requires that we centre our thinking about church precisely on those places which ‘organizationally’ appear to be on the edges of the church”.³³ Receptive Ecumenism seems to fit naturally into a scheme that depends on pre-existing ecumenical relationships³⁴ and relies on a strong positive underlying relationship and commitment. In particular, Local Ecumenical Projects could benefit from this analysis, committed by their covenant to living together under the same roof and receiving gifts from each other.

A laboratory is only helpful if the wider community is learning from the experimentation being done there. In the case of the churches learning from interchurch families, there are several barriers to learning. For the church as a whole, issues of ecumenism are not the constant lived reality “24/7” that they are for interchurch families, and therefore not the most pressing. Despite ecumenical commitments and covenants, churches can decide when to engage ecumenically, and issues of shared communion for example might be confronted at occasional joint services, while interchurch families experience this as an open wound afresh every week, giving an urgency and a motivation to the work of Christian Unity that may not be felt by others in the church.

The ecumenical movement has made great advances in increasing the level of mutual trust between denominations, so that we now expect good will on the part of the ecumenical other. This gives dialogue a positive character, but it is still hard for denominations to trust each other sufficiently to display their wounds and ask for healing. In some instances there are

³⁰ “In marriage, a new community is created, and we speak of the Christian family as being a ‘domestic church’.”, Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, *One Bread One Body*, §79; and, “The Church is a family of families, constantly enriched by the lives of all those domestic churches.”, Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* §87.

³¹ Clare Watkins, “*Traditio*— The Ordinary Handling of Holy Things: Reflections *de doctrina Christiana* from an Ecclesiology Ordered to Baptism”, *New Blackfriars* 87 (2006) 166-183 (170).

³² Watkins, “*Traditio*”, 172.

³³ Watkins, “*Traditio*”, 176.

³⁴ Pizzey, 20.

wounds caused by the actions of other denominations. The aspects of double belonging and shared perspective are possible from individuals and couples' points of view, but more challenging for a church to see itself from an external perspective.

The experience of interchurch families necessarily includes women's experience, and in the Catholic Church, is a largely lay experience. Susan Ross's exploration of sacramental theology in the Catholic Church, argues that "women cannot have direct sacramental access to God but must go through a male mediator,"³⁵ despite the church's sacraments being "based largely in family practices: bringing new life into the family, sharing meals, reconciling, healing, maturing, marrying, dying."³⁶ These liminal moments in a family's life have been ritualised by the church and removed from the sphere of the domestic church into the sacred space. Ecumenical theology too can be conducted in a language that seems remote from this family experience, and might seem to devalue it. Recent exploration of the domestic church is welcome, but where its perspective is one of controlling the domestic space rather than listening to the experience of faith at home, mainly from women, it fails to take up the learning opportunity presented by such a laboratory. A theology that took interchurch families seriously would be willing to listen and learn from the laity, especially women, and people on the edges of the church community. Different voices are gradually making themselves heard in a more diverse theological community, and this process will have an impact on ecumenical theology also.

More fundamentally, the question arises of who do we mean when we talk about the church, and how can we say that the church learns? For this we will turn to the understanding of synodality in the Catholic Church.

3: Ours is not a Lab Faith

The image of the laboratory is something of a Janus. It can be a place of experimentation, pushing the boundaries of knowledge, from which new solutions may come. But it can also suggest sterility, control, isolation from the rest of the world, disconnection from nature. When Pope Francis draws on the image of the laboratory, which is not uncommon, this negative connotation tends to be to the fore (perhaps reflecting the instrumental reality of the industrial chemist- a role for which he trained- rather than the pioneering of an experimental laboratory). In his first major interview after becoming Pope, Francis contrasts such a controlled environment with the genuine locus of Christian faith on the frontier.

There is always the lurking danger of living in a laboratory. Ours is not a "lab faith", but a "journey faith", a historical faith. God has revealed himself as history, not as a compendium of abstract truths. I am afraid of laboratories because in the laboratory you take the problems and then you bring them home to tame them, to paint them artificially, out of their

³⁵ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 10.

³⁶ Ross, 169.

context. You cannot bring home the frontier, but you have to live on the border and be audacious.³⁷

In rejecting the instrumentalism of a lab faith, Francis unconsciously echoes a key principle of Receptive Ecumenism, but interestingly, a particular concern for the Pope here appears to be the danger of domestication: the impossibility of bringing the frontier home. For interchurch families, however, home *is* the frontier – and the laboratory. This may seem to be a playful point, but it highlights the strangeness of the situation for interchurch families. To borrow a term Francis used of theological formation, each interchurch family is a “sort of providential cultural laboratory” (*Veritatis Gaudium*, #3), thus governed not by a careful programme of hypothesis, experiments, and observations, but by a practical wisdom forged in the questions that arise in daily life.

Receptive Ecumenism is oriented towards *ecclesial* transformation. Now, when an interchurch couple learn from each other, this ecclesial end can primarily be understood as domestic church. That this is done without creating a third church, but as a deepening of one’s ecclesial identity in a new set of relationships is entirely of a piece with Receptive Ecumenism: that one becomes more, not less Catholic, Anglican etc.³⁸ However the domestic church does not exist in isolation but in communion, realised with real communities of Christians in particular traditions.

Translating from one to the other involves several different sites of reception:

- 1) *Between the couple themselves.* A variation of this mutual reception is the relationship of interchurch couples joining together in organisation such as the Association of Interchurch Families. These can also act as a kind of ecclesial community, and might offer insights to the churches which are not evident in the interpersonal ecumenism of couples.
- 2) *Between the couple and the local church.* This involves more than parishes “being hubs of support and accompaniment” for interchurch families. Important though this is it seems to address the pastoral care of them as a couple, rather than as church.³⁹ Nor is reception of the couple by the local church limited to an official recognition, e.g. by the parish priest, but by the church community. This can become important for maintaining ecclesial integrity during a change of clergy or parish reorganisation. Receptive learning here is not only one way. Interchurch families can also ask where in the local church the Spirit might be speaking and acting.
- 3) *Between local churches,* having received from interchurch families. Richer recognition and reception between local churches will typically be pastoral, walking

³⁷ <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>

³⁸ Paul D. Murray, “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Establishing the Agenda”, in Paul D. Murray, (ed.), *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5–25 (16).

³⁹ For examples of pastoral care, see Daniel Olsen, “Signs of Union: Interchurch Families in a Fragmented World” in Jason King and Julie Hanlon Rubio (eds.), *Sex, Love, and Families: Catholic Perspectives*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020), 223–33.

and working together. Theological dialogue on disputed ecumenical issues “cannot be done in a laboratory: it must be done as we advance, along the way.”⁴⁰

- 4) *Between church communions*, in terms of theology, doctrine and practice. This relies on receiving learning directly from interchurch families through appropriate structures (such as the Association of Interchurch Families submission to the 2021-24 Catholic synodal process) or through the flow of ecumenical learning across levels of ecclesial organisation.

The Catholic Church has itself recently resembled a giant laboratory, experimenting with synodality in a pioneering mode, exploring and not defining in advance, trying new things, and learning as it goes. A major concern in this has been to allow for the voice of the faithful to be heard at all levels. The current openness to a renewed and new synodality creates a unique opportunity for a fresh look at how interchurch families as realities embodying receptive ecumenism might be received in a synodal church in ways that touch the depths (what is fundamental to the church itself) rather than finding an accommodation with awkward pastoral demands.

Citing Pope Francis, section B1.4 of the *Instrumentum Laboris (IL)* sets out the fundamental principles regarding synodality and ecumenism: “The path of synodality, which the Catholic Church is on, is and must be ecumenical, just as the ecumenical path is synodal”. It asks how a synodal church can fulfil its mission through a renewed ecumenical commitment, noting that all the Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies identified a “close relationship” between synodality and ecumenism. The synod itself started with an ecumenical vigil inspired by Brother Alois of the Taizé community encountering the notion of Receptive Ecumenism.⁴¹ The rationale for the fundamental relationship of ecumenism and synodality relationship is both pragmatic— mutual credibility and receptive ecumenical learning (on synodality and on dialogue), and theological—the *sensus fidei* gifted to all the baptised. How does this relate to interchurch families? The ecumenical movement is described as a “laboratory of synodality”, with interchurch couples and families having an important contribution to play in the active participation of the whole People of God in the ecumenical movement, and interchurch marriages are understood as part of “coexistence” in an “ecumenism of life”, but the preparatory document is less concrete than the synthesis report emerging from the October 2023 synod itself.

The October 2023 synod report, *A Synodal Church in Mission*⁴² contains a section on unity, which includes an openness to fresh thinking on Eucharistic hospitality, as well as concerns for some of the areas which are more widely applicable, but relevant way for interchurch families, such as the role of women (§9), and the importance of parents as first formators (§14). Most significantly for the current topics, the synthesis report contains a short but theologically rich discernment from the synod gathering:

⁴⁰Pope Francis, Visit to All Saints Anglican Church in Rome, February 2017, <https://iarccum.org/?p=2522>

⁴¹ <https://together2023.net/info-page/genesis-of-the-project/>

⁴² <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>

Interchurch marriages constitute *realities* in which the *wisdom of communion* can mature (§7)

There are several things to unpack from this single statement. The use of “interchurch marriages” is noteworthy, particularly as the Association of Interchurch Families sent a submission to the synod as a Catholic organisation. More significant than the use of this nomenclature, however, is the far greater theological weight afforded by the remaining terms in the synodal statement compared to language of laboratories or pioneers.

First of these is “realities”. The significance of this word is weaker in English than *realidad* in Latin American theology, particularly in the work of the Jesuit martyr, Ignacio Ellacuría. When Pope Francis talks of “reality” or “realities”, as in his well-known dictum that “realities are greater than ideas”, this is reducible to neither an abstract philosophical concept, nor a merely sociological or historical category. It is the whole reality of a particular instance, be that a person, a society, or a country, or, as in this case, a particular group. In the practice of synodality anthropological and spiritual are integrated not juxtaposed.⁴³ Indeed Francis describes synodality as “the implementation in the history of the People of God on the way, of the Church as a mystery of communion”.⁴⁴ While liberation theology emphasises the need to attend to negative aspects of reality (oppressive structures, poverty, discrimination etc), there is also in concrete reality “something of promise and unsilenced hope... There is a gracious structure of reality [which] calls for a response with the spirit of gratuity and gratitude”.⁴⁵ Interchurch marriages can be seen as part of this gracious structure of reality despite the negative reality of church disunity. Can they be received in a spirit of gratuity and gratitude?

All of this coheres with the emphasis in Receptive Ecumenism on attending to what is and discerning what might be. Interchurch couples present a reality of marriage and a reality of church to which the local church may not otherwise have access. In a synodal church interchurch marriages ought to be recognised as witnesses of these realities, to be accompanied and pastorally supported, but also to find ways to participate in the communion and mission of the church in a way that respects their baptismal dignity and ecclesial integrity. Attending to realities requires an encounter with those who live those realities; not imposition of rules for general cases, something the Catholic Church came to understand in the previous synod on the family.⁴⁶

⁴³ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *A Synodal Church in Mission*, §9g

⁴⁴ Pope Francis addressing the International Theological Commission, November 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/november/documents/papa-francesco_20191129_commissione-teologica.html

⁴⁵ Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, *Mysterium Liberations: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 702–703

⁴⁶ See Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §300

While “ideas are debated, reality is discerned”, according to Pope Francis. This leads us to the second key term. Wisdom is obviously a term fraught with theological weight, in the scriptures and in later traditions of spirituality in many denominations. It has an obvious affinity with the desire to learn that lies at the heart of Receptive Ecumenism. The synodal process has discovered Wisdom above all in listening: “is the word that best expresses our experience”⁴⁷ Such listening is the beginning of learning, and an opportunity for wisdom to mature: “As a Church committed to listening, a synodal Church desires to be humble, and knows that it must ask forgiveness and has much to learn.” (*IL* §23)

The wisdom surrounding interchurch marriages includes an element of *techne* – for example through theologians who work alongside or belong to interchurch families, and can operate as “organic theologians”. But most of the wisdom that interchurch families bring into a synodal church is a kind of *phronesis* – practical wisdom from experience. Specifically, it is a practical wisdom of communion, which discloses theological (specifically ecclesiological) truth.⁴⁸

The treatment of communion in the synodal documents is rich and multifaceted, and here only a few of the most significant points can be touched upon in relation to interchurch marriages. First, there is a great emphasis through the synodal journey on unity which includes difference, and diversity which results not in conflict but in fruitfulness: “A synodal Church is a Church of encounter and dialogue... not afraid of the variety it bears.” (*IL* §24) The value of this unity is however not only *ad intra* but is a sign to the world of unity with God and with humanity.

Characteristic of a synodal Church is the ability to manage tensions without being crushed by them...[Synodality] reconstitutes the Church in unity: it heals her wounds and reconciles her memory, welcomes the differences she bears and redeems her from festering divisions...Authentic listening and the ability to find ways to continue walking together beyond fragmentation and polarisation are indispensable for the Church to remain alive and vital and to be a powerful sign for the cultures of our time. (*IL* §28).

While there are other questions to be addressed regarding diversity—in cultures, theologies, and pieties, for example—applying the discerned wisdom of the synod to interchurch marriages offers a test case for how these principles look in practice. How can the local church communities, bishops and synods, and the various churches express this delight in diversity, and practice this therapeutic handling of tensions? Receiving from interchurch families surely has a role to play in healing wounds, reconciling memories, welcoming difference, and even redeeming division.

⁴⁷ *A Synodal Church in Mission*, §16a

⁴⁸ See Watkins, *Disclosing Church*.

Space precludes comment on the integration of communion with mission except to note the missionary activity and potential of interchurch families. How their wisdom of communion and the missionary witness are integrated into structures of participation is a further, pressing question. Should certain ministries – reader for example – be extended to members of an interchurch marriage from another tradition? Do the rubrics of the parish council allow for them to play a full part, or is it restricted to communicant members of a denomination?

The synod also presents some challenges to interchurch couples, not all of which are explicit. The *Instrumentum Laboris* reflects Vatican II ecclesiology in situating the Eucharist as the source and summit:

a synodal Church unceasingly nourishes itself at the source of the mystery it celebrates in the liturgy... particularly in the Eucharist. (*IL* §30)

For interchurch families this theology intensifies the difficulties of a lack of eucharistic hospitality. Ecclesiologically, it puts further strain on the tension between a synodal church operating within a Catholic paradigm, and a synodal theology rooted in a common baptism.

Finally, interchurch marriages are seen as realities in which the wisdom of communion *can mature*. At first glance, this language seems to undermine some of the depth of what precedes it. A qualified, if hopeful “can mature” is progress from Paul VI discouraging mixed marriages, but hardly seems much progress on John Paul II in 1982 saying that “You live in your marriages the hopes and difficulties of the path to Christian unity”. However, the process of maturing in wisdom is integral to synodality. This is not merely because synod is a walking together, but rather reflects the eschatological and historical nature of ecclesial communion, “the inevitable incompleteness of a synodal Church” in which “the readiness of its members to accept their own vulnerabilities become the space for the action of the Spirit, who invites us to recognise the signs of his presence.” (*IL* §31) Recognising our incompleteness, and presenting ourselves in our vulnerabilities – displaying wounded hands, is not only an essential attitude for receptive ecumenical learning, but describes the spiritual journey of interchurch couples as they bring together their everyday lives and ultimate concerns.

The coherence between the synodal path and Receptive Ecumenism becomes even stronger when the exploratory nature of both processes is noted. Receptive Ecumenism, like synodality, is an indirect method -it does not target the object of change directly, but indirectly through helping the church to become what she is created to be, in the strong hope that new things will become possible. The Catholic account of its synodal journey equally well describes the journey of many interchurch couples, as well as the fundamental hope for Receptive Ecumenism:

The synodal process has been an opportunity to begin to learn what it means to live unity in diversity, a fundamental point to continue exploring, *trusting that the path will become clearer as we move forward*. Therefore, a synodal Church promotes the passage from “I” to “we”. (*IL* §25)

How might the wider church receive this wisdom? The synod synthesis gives some indication, although not regarding interchurch marriages specifically:

A synodal Church is also a Church of discernment: As we listen attentively to each other's lived experiences, we grow in mutual respect and begin to discern the movements of God's Spirit in the lives of others and in our own. In this way, we begin to pay more attention to "what the Spirit is saying to the Churches" (Rev 2:7), in the commitment and hope of becoming a Church increasingly capable of making prophetic decisions that are the fruit of the Spirit's guidance. (*IL* §31)

Conclusion

For historical and ecclesiological reason, marriages between Catholics and Protestants have had a problematic status in the Catholic Church. Since the Second Vatican Council, there has been a development from treating such unions as undesirable accommodations, to legitimate objects of pastoral care, to recognition of their active subjectivity in shaping experiences of communion, mission, and participation. We can view this as a journey from toleration to recognition.

The synodal process has rightly highlighted many of the concerns raised by interchurch families over the past sixty years, but perhaps more importantly, has recognised that interchurch marriages have a theological status—a wisdom of communion matured and maturing realities—from which the wider church can learn.

These realities bear the scars of wounded hands, but also witness to ecumenical forms of domestic church. As such they are potential sites of Receptive Ecumenism, between the partners in the marriage, and between the couple and the churches to which they belong. Realising this potential requires certain spiritual dispositions to learn, discern, and act:

Whenever we encounter another person in love, we learn something new about God.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ *IL* §40, citing *Evangelii Gaudium* §257.



Citation on deposit: Ryan, D., & Ryan, G. A. (2024). From Experiment to Encounter: Receiving Interchurch Families in a Synodal Church. *Marriage, Families & Spirituality*, 30(1), 6-20. <https://doi.org/10.2143/INT.30.1.3293276>

For final citation and metadata, visit Durham Research Online URL:

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