THAT THEY MAY BE ONE

An Interchurch Marriage

Ruth Reardon

MARTIN AND I WOULD NOT HAVE MARRIED—indeed we were unlikely ever to have met one another—had it not been for the calling of the Second Vatican Council by Pope John XXIII in January 1959, on the final day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

I was living in Belgium and was visiting a house called the Maison St Jean at Louvain. This had been built by Lucien Morren, a professor at the University, and his wife, Hélène. With no children of their own, they had decided to make a home for some twenty or so overseas students; they also offered hospitality to far more. The Morrens were committed ecumenists. I remember the excitement of that Sunday afternoon when we heard of Pope John's announcement. At supper, we drank wine. This only happened on students' birthdays, or when there was some other reason for special rejoicing. We were rejoicing because we knew that the Council was to have something to do with Christian unity, although nobody knew quite what.

Our Backgrounds

The Church of England wanted to discover the thinking behind this amazing development. One of the methods chosen was to send a number of young Anglican priests to Louvain for a year, to study theology in the graduate Schola Major, and to pick up as much information as possible about current theological trends. This could not be done in England; in those days relations with the Roman Catholics were overseen by the Church of England Council for Foreign Relations. The priests who were sent each had to keep a diary that would be personally read by the Archbishop of Canterbury. At the beginning, the placement of these young priests was to be kept secret, because there might be strong objections from some Anglicans—and, indeed, from some English Roman Catholics. Rather than being

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incarcerated in one of Louvain's many residences for priest students, they were housed in the Maison St Jean, although they lunched regularly at one of the ecclesiastical colleges. Martin was the second priest who came to Louvain, for the academic year 1960-1961.

His predecessor was a jolly extrovert, an entertaining participant in the life of the house. Martin was quieter, with a deep ecumenical spirituality in the Abbé Couturier tradition. This humble priest from Lyon had founded the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the years between the two World Wars, and thus fostered the 'spiritual ecumenism' that Vatican II was later to designate 'the soul of the whole ecumenical movement'.[1] In 1960, Couturier was better known in England among Anglicans than among Catholics. Martin had been study secretary of the Student Christian Movement in Cambridge. He had visited Greece, and spent some time at the Orthodox seminary at Halki. He was a participant in the winter course at the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches, at Bossey near Geneva, in 1955-1956.

When he set out the reasons for his application to go to Bossey, he said that his principal hope in applying was 'to experience in community as intensely as possible the scandal of the divided Church'. There were of course no Roman Catholic students at Bossey in those days. Louvain widened his experience. In between he had been at Cuddesdon Theological College before becoming a curate in Rugby. The great excitement of the 1960 Week of Prayer at Rugby was Catholic involvement, in the person of Fr Henry St John OP. The prospect of Vatican II had opened up new ecumenical horizons, and Martin was happy to be asked to go to Louvain for a year on behalf of the Church of England. He thought he had been asked to go because there was no danger of his becoming a Roman Catholic.

I was also happy to be in Louvain. I had been brought up in a devout Baptist home, and intended to be a missionary in Africa from about the age of five. I had been opened up a little to ecumenical perspectives by my parents' involvement in the Religion and Life initiative during World War II. Later I represented Baptist students at the First British Conference of Christian Youth (Bangor, 1951). In

[1] Vatican II, *Unitatis redintegratio*, n.8; see Geoffrey Curtis, *Paul Couturier and Unity in Christ* (London: SCM, 1964).

1956 I became a Roman Catholic. I did not have any formal instruction; instead I went through a long process of discussion with Fr John Coventry SJ, following a talk he had given to the college Student Christian Movement on the development of dogma. I was fortunate in that a fellow postgraduate had contacts with French Catholicism. She introduced me early on to the Abbé Couturier tradition of spiritual ecumenism, and in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in January 1957 I organized daily prayer for unity in the college. Before the end of the year I was living in Belgium, however, and this was very congenial. I was working for the Institute of Race Relations on the history of what was then the Belgian Congo. Later I was to have the opportunity of doing Religious Studies at Louvain.

Meeting One Another and Getting to Know One Another

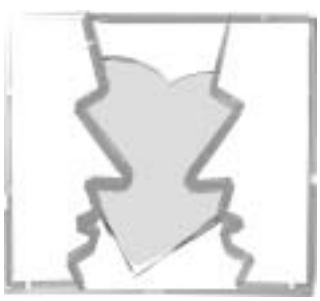
Martin arrived in September 1960. By then I had been living at the Maison St Jean for a year: the Morrens thought it would be good for their Anglican guests to have a native English speaker in the house who knew something about ecumenism. Martin and I were soon drawn together. Over the next few months we discussed at length the insights Martin was gaining from lectures in the Schola Major; he was amazed at the openness of some of the theology he heard. Martin used to say later that I exaggerated his anti-Catholicism in those days, but I remember feeling on the defensive quite often. A month after his arrival he recorded 'a long and illuminating discussion of Authority in the Church with Ruth Slade, who became an RC from the Baptists 5 or 6 years ago'. He was surprised to find that I too knew something about the creative theology that he was just discovering, and that I could talk about a doctrine like the Immaculate Conception in terms that made some kind of sense to him. I was never anti-Anglican, but had a deep nonconformist suspicion of Establishment. We enjoyed our lengthy and intense discussions, came to respect each other's integrity, and liked each other's company. We started praying Evensong together sometimes—I think it was a kind of ecumenical gesture on my part to

reciprocate Martin's presence at Mass (which he was surprised to find was not as difficult as he had expected) and at Compline (in which the whole household joined). But it was not until the following January, when the two of us were asked, together with an Orthodox student, to prepare a service for the Week of Prayer, that we realised as we worked together that something else had happened. We were in love.

It was a terrible shock. We were dismayed. A few years earlier Martin had dissuaded a friend of his from marrying a Roman Catholic. When I became a Catholic I had assumed I would become a religious—probably an enclosed nun devoted to praying for Christian unity. Catholics were known to be good at praying for unity, although in those days they didn't seem able to *do* anything about it. I had visited a number of communities, but had never felt a strong enough call actually to enter a novitiate, and by now I had discovered that even laywomen could play a part in promoting unity. I had thought of doing this as a member of a lay Benedictine community. I had not closed my mind to the possibility of marriage, but nevertheless a mixed marriage seemed out of the question, not something even to be considered. When I went, in some trepidation, to tell Mme Morren what had happened to us she was left speechless for what felt like five minutes—a very unusual occurrence. 'What, in our house?' I was relieved not to be sent away, and the three of us agreed that nobody else should get to know of it.

Loving One Another

Falling in love is always a gift, but in this case it was hardly a welcome one. Whatever were we to do with it? Yet there was delight as well, and awe and wonder. Marriage seemed totally out of the question. We were well aware of all the problems. Mixed marriages were strongly discouraged by both our Churches; even those committed to ecumenism could not see them as anything but a problem. Martin could never have promised to bring up his children as Catholics (and anyway, what if I died when they were young?—I agreed it didn't make sense). Similarly, the idea



that I should promise to try to 'convert' Martin offended my ecumenical sensitivity. Both these promises were absolute requirements of canon law for a mixed marriage to be recognised as valid. The situation seemed impossible. Yet we had the sense that we deeply wanted to throw in our lot with one another and spend the whole of our lives together. We also wanted this gift somehow to be fruitful for the coming together of our Churches. Living in Belgium, we were very aware of the welcome that Cardinal Mercier had extended to Lord Halifax and Abbé Portal at the beginning of what developed into the Malines Conversations:

> In order to unite with one another, we must love one another; in order to love one another, we must know one another; in order to know one another, we must go and meet one another.[2]

Well, we had met one another, we had got to know one another, and now we loved one another.

Love and Unity

Might we both commit ourselves to an ecumenical community? Since his Bossey experience, Martin had been interested in the idea of such a community. His sense was that it was only if divided Christians could live, pray and work together that they would really be able to understand one another from the inside. A young American Methodist minister studying in Louvain for a year had brought news of discussions about the possibility of an ecumenical order among students at Yale. Martin had organized a small meeting in London in early January 1961, so that he could talk with people in England about the 'interim fellowship' that had been set up at Yale. A variety of ideas had been pooled, with very different kinds of communities envisaged, but no concrete plan. It was rather nebulous.

Martin and I were both sufficiently steeped in the tradition of the Abbé Couturier to know that the road to Christian unity must include suffering, the way of the cross. I have a little card in Martin's even handwriting dated April 1961: on one side there are some thoughts illustrated by a design he had asked his mother to embroider on his

[2] Curtis, *Paul Couturier*, 48.

ordination stole a few years earlier, and on the other there is a prayer we had written for daily use.

The reflection reads:

> The cross is neither the beginning nor the end of life, neither the centre nor the circumference of love. The beginning, centre and source is the love of the Trinity in Unity. The end and circumference and summing up of all things is a ring, the unity of all in the love of God, the marriage supper of the Lamb. The cross then cannot be of our own choosing, for God is at the centre of it; nor can we seek it as an end, for the end is the unity of love. There are two tests, then, of whether the cross is the true cross, whether it is the one God has chosen for us: its creative source must be the reconciling love of God; its end must be the reconciling of all to God. If it is the true cross, running all along it will be the reconciling grace of God, giving us the ministry and power to be the servants and apostles of His unity, the procreators of His love.

And the prayer runs as follows:

> Father, we have given ourselves absolutely to you, and you have given us utterly to one another. Deepen and strengthen our love and unity through your Holy Spirit. Lead us along the way you have chosen for us—which the sin of man has made into the form of a cross. Hold ever before us the vision of the unity of all in the love of God, that we may fight to the last against the devil and all that divides us. Draw us closer to the source of our love and unity, that we may become closer to one another and more fruitful channels of your creative and reconciling love for all mankind; till we come to the source and end of all, are taken down from the cross, and are raised from death to share in the marriage supper of our saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

When, much later, we added a version of this prayer to a little pack prepared by the Association of Interchurch Families, among other changes the devil in person was removed, and 'man' had become 'human'.

A Proposal

At the end of the summer term Martin returned to parish work in Rugby, and I went home to Bath for the vacation. We travelled up and down the Fosse Way on our scooters; we discussed and pondered and waited. We wrote to one another regularly once I had returned to

Louvain. The future was very unclear, but increasingly it seemed to us that it should be a future together. A strange idea was simmering in our minds and hearts. But by the end of 1961 we were far enough forward in our thinking to write it down.

Entitled '"Mixed" Marriage: A Concrete Case', it took up two and a half sides of foolscap. We looked at marriage in terms of both companionship and procreation. We began with companionship:

> In this companionship of two baptized Christians, founded on their common faith in Christ and on their fellowship in the Holy Spirit, it is the vocation of each partner to help to bring the other to perfection in the love of God.

Thus marriage between Christians of different communions, which have much to learn from one another, could 'contribute to the understanding and healing of the divisions of Christendom', since,

> … understanding can only be achieved by sustained personal contact between individuals. The companionship of marriage provides such contact in the highest degree.

It would need to be expressed in common prayer and worship:

> Mixed marriages themselves seem to be a form of *communicatio in sacris*. Intercommunion is clearly impossible in present circumstances. However, it would seem to be essential not only to pray together privately but also regularly to attend one another's public worship.

The problems raised by procreation, however, seemed intractable. 'One has a more direct responsibility for the religious belief and behaviour of a child than for those of a spouse.' Quite apart from any canon law, we could not envisage the three most obvious possibilities when it came to bringing up children: all as Anglicans, all as Roman Catholics, or dividing the children between the Churches. 'There is therefore a fourth possibility: a virginal marriage. This seems justifiable in Roman Catholic theology.' (We had done our homework

The cross design on Martin Reardon's stole

—I remember finding that someone had written a thesis in Paris on the question of whether the marriage of the Virgin Mary to Joseph was a true marriage. I wrote about the possibility of seeing a copy, only to be told that one had been deposited in the University of Louvain.) It also seemed canonically justifiable, for in the canon law of the time marriage was defined,

> … by mutual consent, not by the act of bodily union. By this consent, each of the partners gives and receives the marriage right (*ius in corpus*) perpetually and exclusively. However, if the spouses have a good reason for doing so, and, while recognising themselves fully and voluntarily orientated towards procreation as one of the ends of marriage, they can renounce for a time or for ever the use of their right to the marriage union.

The next paragraph of our paper was crucial to our understanding:

> It can be noted that there is an analogy between an unconsummated marriage and the inability of the two possible spouses to receive communion together. If reunion between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion comes in their lifetime, they would be happy to consummate their marriage. If not (as does not seem humanly possible, although with God all things are possible), they would live their marriage with a sense of its eschatological significance, looking forward with longing to the marriage supper of the Lamb and the final consummation of the union of God and His people.

On the Anglican side, it seemed to Martin to be essential to receive episcopal permission, and to recognise that renunciation of the use of the marriage right would be the direct result of a combination of circumstances. If these changed, the marriage should be consummated.

There remained on the Roman Catholic side the question of whether Martin would be expected to make the canonically required promise about children (which he did not feel he could do, even a hypothetical one). We also had to think about the relatively secondary question of the wedding: would Roman Catholic and Anglican clergy be able to officiate at the same ceremony?

Waiting and Wondering

In January 1962 Martin started his new work in Sheffield as the first full-time Secretary of a city Council of Churches, financed by all the Churches. Between Easter and Christmas I spent most of my time nursing my mother while she was suffering from terminal cancer. It was a year of waiting, wondering and asking advice of a small number of trusted people. I took a dim view of the advice that, if we committed ourselves to a virginal marriage, we should 'make sure enough people know of your intention, in case you want to get an annulment later'. My mother's advice (she had early detected a propensity to a martyr complex in my make-up) was better: 'If you do decide on this kind of marriage, don't ever feel sorry for yourself'.

Later we got to know an Italian couple who married around this time. The Catholic had married without a dispensation so that his Waldensian bride would not have to make a promise about the children, but it had also been agreed that the marriage would be regularised immediately afterwards by the Catholic Church (with no promise involved). Nobody suggested that to us, and I think it would have shocked our Anglo-Saxon sensibilities at that time. We had written in our document that:

> … what is quite clear … to both of them is that Christian unity cannot be furthered by disobedience to church authority; and so any solution they find must be fundamentally acceptable not only to their own consciences but also to their respective ecclesiastical authorities.

We always kept our respect for church authority, but later came to understand that obedience is a much more complex reality than we thought then. We realised that norms written by Italians should be applied according to Latin principles.

For us, however, it was the late summer of 1963 before we came to a decision that, so far as we were concerned, God was calling us to marriage, and we were ready to go ahead and apply for a Catholic dispensation and for Anglican permission. In November I went in fear and trembling to Archbishop's House in Malines and had a difficult interview with a cleric. He was very discouraging about the idea of a virginal marriage, and I came away depressed, feeling certain that we would not get a dispensation. But then a letter came. 'To my surprise',

wrote the cleric, 'Cardinal Suenens is very sympathetic to your proposal'. With great pastoral sensitivity, the Cardinal decided that Martin need make no promise about the upbringing of any children we might have, although at the time this was an absolute requirement of canon law. Even if the Cardinal accepted our intention, he could not be expected to be confident that we would not change our minds later. But in lieu of a promise, Martin wrote a statement explaining his position, and also saying he would do nothing to cut me off from my Church, and the Cardinal was satisfied. Later we were to learn that 'going beyond the law is not necessarily going against it'. Nobody ever suggested that I should make any promise. Eventually Cardinal Suenens said that he would give us a dispensation to marry in any case, but asked us to see Cardinal Heenan before we married, since we would be living in England. He felt this was a matter of courtesy on his part.

When Martin gave a Cardinal Heenan Memorial Lecture at Heythrop in 1990, he recalled our lunch with Cardinal Heenan at Ware in Easter Week of 1964. The Cardinal had expressed his hope that we would have children. He courteously but firmly suggested to Martin throughout the meal that the solution to all our problems would be for him to promise that his children would be brought up as Catholics, and perhaps for him to become a Catholic himself. This would not be too difficult, since Anglicans and Catholics were already so close—Catholics just believed a little bit more. Then the whole family would belong to the one true Church.

We went to see Martin's bishop. He talked with us at length, and said he would like to pray about it. Next day Martin received his letter. 'Not only do I think that you *may* get married; I think you *should* get married', he wrote.

So we married in the year that the Second Vatican Council passed its Decree on Ecumenism. Our wedding took place in the chapel of the Maison St Jean, in a ceremony in which Catholic and Anglican priests both shared. In England at the time, this would have been impossible, although it is standard practice now. Earlier in the morning, we had been present together at both Catholic and Anglican eucharistic

celebrations. We had waited a long time, and it had been a difficult decision; but we were sure of our vocation. Later we found that this was true of many other interchurch couples. Precisely because families and Churches had made such difficulties, these couples had been led to make mature decisions to marry that could not be shaken, whatever the problems that lay ahead.

The Experience of Marriage

We had come to our married spirituality through spiritual ecumenism. We wrote it into our rings: inside the one Martin gave me was the inscription *That they may be one*, and inside the one I gave him *That the world may believe*. For many interchurch couples it is the other way round. They come to a commitment to Christian unity because of their commitment to one another in marriage. In the end it is fundamentally the same thing. We are called to weave together our baptismal lives by sharing in the same love with which Christ loves the Church—the love with which the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father in the communion of the Holy Spirit. That is the only way to our unity. Everything that furthers our unity—between married partners or between Churches—is an expression of that love. Everything that hinders it is an obstacle to the free flowing of that love. But, paradoxically, it is by overcoming such obstacles that we put ourselves in a position to receive that love and unity.

Both in our married relationship and in our Churches' relationship, we came so often to see that things which at first appeared to be mutually contradictory were in the end either complementary or even different expressions of the same reality. We began to learn not to try to shape the other in our own image. When we hurt one another, we learned to forgive and to be reconciled. There were amusing moments. I was a member of the Roman Catholic Ecumenical Commission for England and Wales, set up after Vatican II. Martin was a member of the Archbishop of Canterbury's newly established Commission on Roman Catholic Relations. An informal meeting was arranged between the two bodies. At this gathering somebody tried to introduce us to one another!

Growing into Unity

There were exciting developments in the 1960s for mixed marriages. Vatican II had changed the climate. Its decrees on religious liberty and on ecumenism meant that the conscientious responsibility of the other Christian partner for the religious upbringing of the couple's children had to be respected by the Roman Catholic Church, as had the ecclesial community of which the partner was a member. It was clear that change was coming when, in 1966, *Matrimonium sacramentum* said that difficulties over the promises made by prospective mixed marriage partners were to be referred to Rome. Research soon told us that where this was done, a dispensation was granted provided that the Catholic partner promised to do their best for the Catholic baptism and upbringing of all the children. No promise was asked of the other Christian partner. The dispensation was given even in cases where it was clear that the children would in fact be brought up in the community of the non-Catholic partner.

Relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and other Churches were changing by leaps and bounds. The Anglican–Roman Catholic Preparatory Commission raised great hopes. There was considerable confidence at the Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches that the Roman Catholic Church was likely to become a member of the Council before the next Assembly. In Britain, the British Council of Churches–Roman Catholic Joint Working Group seemed set to prepare the way for Catholic membership of the BCC. Local Councils of Churches were admitting Roman Catholics into associate or full membership, and the excitement of this gave a renewed impetus to local ecumenism. Liturgies were changing in a way that made ordinary Christians feel much closer to one another.

It was in this climate of ecumenical hope that a daring new thought came into our minds. Clearly *Matrimonium sacramentum* envisaged only the case in which the Catholic partner might not be obliged to insist on the Catholic upbringing of the children because of special circumstances, so they would be brought up in the other Christian Church. Normally the Catholic partner was supposed to 'win', as it were; sometimes, however, there might be reasons for the other partner to do so. But the way was also left open for another possibility—one which gave greater weight to the joint responsibility of the two partners and even opened up new ecumenical perspectives.

This was a particularly exciting development that came out of our experience of being married, of being committed to one another in love, of seeking the truth together, and of worshipping in both our churches week by week. We came to see that perhaps a child could come into this unity that was growing and deepening between us all the time—however fragile and limited—and be brought up in both our church communities. Maybe a child would only have to opt for one or the other on leaving home. We went back to some of those who had advised us before our marriage. In January 1968 we floated the idea of dual upbringing in *One in Christ*, a Catholic ecumenical review that I was editing at the time, and asked for and received many responses. To our delight, a child psychologist, a Sister of Notre Dame, said that she saw no psychological problems that would arise for children brought up in this way. What would matter for them would be the unity and integrity of their parents. Moreover, why, she asked, should they not continue in both Churches? They might never need to opt for one or the other. That possibility was something that had not occurred to us.

Our son was born on the very day in 1970 that a *motu proprio* from Rome was published on mixed marriages. Martin sat by my bed writing a commentary on it for *The Times*. It announced what seemed a revolutionary change in Roman Catholic discipline: no longer was a promise needed from the non-Catholic partner regarding the Catholic baptism and upbringing of the children. The obligation was simply that the Catholic partner was to do all that he or she could in that regard. Rome was acknowledging that both parents in an interchurch marriage are responsible for the religious upbringing of their children, and that a decision on how this was to be done should not be enforced unilaterally.

Marriage and Eucharist

Before our son was born we had had the experience of eucharistic sharing in the Catholic Church, something that had seemed to us totally out of the question in 1964. In 1968 we received communion together at a Eucharist celebrated by a staff member of the Secretariat

for Promoting Christian Unity; the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had already allowed an American Presbyterian bride to receive communion at a Nuptial Mass in Italy. In 1969 we were on a Greek island where the Catholic priest came by boat to celebrate for a small congregation on Saturday evenings. We could only speak with him in French. 'Do you believe in the Holy Eucharist?' he asked Martin, and on receiving an affirmative answer welcomed him without reservation.

The strong link between our eucharistic sharing and our sexual union always seemed very important to us. Both were expressions in this world of our participation together in the love of the Father for the Son, of Christ for the Church, of our love in the Spirit for one another. Marriage and the Eucharist both also point forward to the final consummation: the union of all in the love of God.

Now that Martin has died after forty years of our marriage, I wear both our rings. They remind me, not only that Martin has not abandoned me, but also that I remain committed not to abandon the work to which we were called together in this world, both in our family life and in our Churches. He is alive in Christ interceding for me, for our children and grandchildren, and for the unity of all. Marriage is for this world, but the love and unity between us is a participation in God's own love, and is therefore eternal. One day I too will be called to the fuller knowledge of that love in our Father's house.

Martin and Ruth Reardon were founder members of the British Association of Interchurch Families in 1968. There are similar associations in other parts of the world, and an international network has been formed. The Second World Gathering of Interchurch Families held near Rome in 2003 adopted a paper, 'Interchurch Families and Christian Unity', following an international process of drafting and consultation co-ordinated by Martin. It is obtainable in booklet form from info@interchurchfamilies.org.uk.