

Conferenza Episcopale Italiana
Chiesa evangelica valdese
(Unione delle chiese metodiste e valdesi)

Preamble

We are happy to offer our communities the results of a dialogue on interchurch marriages which has lasted for more than ten years (1989-2000).

The first of the two texts we present, namely the “Joint Text”, is in fact an explanation by Roman Catholic authorities of statements contained in *motu proprio* “*Matrimonia mista*” (1970), in the Canonical Law (1983) and in the General Directory on Canon Marriage (1990), and by the Waldensians in the document on marriage approved by the Synod (1971). An ecumenical reading of the existing regulations has been carried out and a coherent pastoral application has been suggested.

The second document, namely “the Applicative Text”, derives from the need for the first text to be expressed in practical counselling, capable of enlightening and sustaining the pastoral action of the community and the decisions made by the spouses themselves.

The two texts are closely interwoven and should be read together as two parts which complete each other.

The contents of the “Joint Text” and the “Applicative Text” must now be made known to our communities, to our priests and ministers, to our church members and, especially, to couples of intermarriages: it is vital to enter into the pastoral and ecumenical spirit of the commissions who prepared these documents and of the communities which have already accepted and endorsed the texts.

This should be a foundation and condition for the growing unity and dialogue between our churches.

Italian Episcopal Conference
Synod of Waldensian and Methodist Church

JOINT TEXT FOR THE PASTORAL CARE OF INTERCHURCH FAMILIES OF ROMAN CATHOLIC AND WALDENSIAN OR METHODIST CHURCHES IN ITALY

Preamble

On 10th May 1988, during a meeting of the Ecumenical Secretariat and the Italian Episcopal Conference, in dialogue with the Moderator of the Waldensian Board and other members of the Waldensian and Methodist churches, the opportuneness of a series of encounters to discuss common issues was agreed on, the first suggested theme being mixed marriages.¹

The Waldensian and Methodist Synod of August 1988 welcomed the proposal, nominating a commission of five persons (Maria Sbaffi Giradet, coordinator; Franco Becchino; Gianni Long; Paolo Ricca; Giovanni Scuderi), to discuss "theological, pastoral and legal problems common to both communities", with a similar commission nominated by the Italian Episcopal Conference.

The chairman of the Italian Episcopal Conference, expressing the hope that the results of the discussions on the theme " would be a visible and positive sign on the path towards fellowship with the Waldensian brethren ", nominated a delegation of six members (Filippo Giannini, chairman; Velasio De Paolis; Giorgio Feliciani; Pietro Giachetti; Emilio Landini; Clemente Riva).

The Waldensian-Methodist commission nominated Alfredo Sonelli as a consultant to work alongside the regular members. The two commissions met for the first time in Rome on 3rd March 1989. The Waldensian and Methodist Synod of the following August 1989, endorsing the report of the commission's work, renewed its mandate, increasing the number to six members so as to equalize it to that of the Italian Episcopal Commission. Twenty-two sessions followed, (up to July 1993) during which the two delegations met, as well as more informal meetings when smaller groups worked together. The Synods of 1990, 1991 and 1992 reappointed the same members of the commission. During the winter of 1991-92, following the demise of Giovanni Scuderi and the resignation of Franco Becchino due to other appointments, two new members were nominated in the persons of Valdo Benecchi and Alberto Taccia. During this period, the members of the Catholic Episcopal Commission remained unchanged.

During the preliminaries, both delegations expressed the conviction that marriage partners having the same Christian tradition are facilitated in their starting out on a life of true communion together.

Nonetheless, it was unanimously agreed that there are also positive aspects to be found in mixed marriages, not only the elements of inherent value, but also the contribution they can give to their churches' search for visible Christian unity.

For these reasons the two delegations fully agreed that a mixed marriage can be an important sign on the ecumenical pilgrimage, a sign of God's sustaining grace, which is His gift to their union.

In context with this basic statement, however, it was pointed out that the goodwill of the couple alone is not enough to build up the right ecumenical relationship within the interchurch family. They need the pastoral support of their respective faith communities, both during marriage preparation and during the course of their life together.

With this point of view in mind, it was agreed that the aforementioned help could be given more easily if a clear line of conduct was adopted by those bodies which are responsible for the different Christian communities in Italy, which would back up the joint pastoral care of interchurch families on a local level, in the single dioceses and in the Waldensian and Methodist communities.

This common text, result of the painstaking work of the two delegations, is divided into three parts.

The first part contains that which we, as Christians, can be agreed on concerning marriage, despite our differences and distinctive denominational characteristics. Obviously, this is not a complete presentation of the doctrine on marriage held by the two churches: the text merely tells us what is essential to set up a Christian ecumenical discussion on mixed marriages.

In the second part, the different ways of understanding and living out married life of the different ecclesial communions are illustrated, the mark they make on the marital communion, their influence on the discipline of mixed marriages and so on.

The third part is of a pastoral nature; offering suggestions and guidance concerning the preparation, the celebration and pastoral care to the bride and groom or the betrothed belonging to different ecclesial communions, as well as to their families and the ministers of the two communities.

The joint text has been submitted to the competent authorities (The Italian Episcopal Conference and the Waldensian and Methodist Synod) for their approval; these will also decide how to put the contents of the text into practice, so as to be able to solve the problems which so often arise in mixed marriages between

Roman Catholics and members of the United Waldensian and Methodist churches in Italy. (From now on in this text the latter will be referred to as The Waldensian Church)The aim of the text is to help the respective churches to put into practice the specific documents already issued on a national level; i.e. the document on marriage of the Waldensian Synod of 1971, the general edict on canonical marriage of the Italian Episcopal Conference of November 5th 1990 and the Directory for the application of the principles and rules on ecumenism of the Pontifical Council for the promotion of Christian unity of 1993. (nn. 143-160)

Part one

THE COMMON HERITAGE OF CHRISTIAN SPOUSES

1.1. The creation of man and woman: diversity and reciprocity.

“God created human beings in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”(Genesis 1, 27).” “The Lord God formed a human being from the dust of the ground..” (Genesis 2, 7).”...the Lord God built up (the rib) into a woman, and he brought her to the man.”(Genesis 2, 22).

The creation of man and woman, in their diversity and yet in their reciprocity, is in itself an invitation to interaction, to communion, to dialogue, overcoming loneliness. “It is not good for the man to be alone;I shall make a partner suited to him.” (Genesis 2, 19)

1.2. Marriage

The human couple is God’s creation. God created man and woman, each in view of the other.

Marriage is characterized by this fundamental truth, willed by God, that husband and wife are united in the bond of conjugal love. Marriage is lived out as a joyful answer of a man and woman to their creation (Genesis 2, 23) and set up when the two are united as husband and wife, in mutual agreement, according to the divine plan.

Marriage makes the couple’s communication complete and lasting... “.....and the two become one”(Genesis 2, 24)means the union of bodies, but also of personal destinies. The man and woman no longer live out two parallel experiences but, as husband and wife, they live out a joint experience, in which both are called upon to enjoy the fulness of love in a complete union of reciprocity.

It is not by chance that the Bible speaks of mutual help in this text. The soundness of conjugal love is demonstrated by an active and lasting solidarity.

The creation of the couple reveals the fundamental dialogical nature of the human person and marriage as the place, the means and the school of communion.

1.3. The Parable of the Covenant

The Bible illustrates the great importance of marriage when it likens it to the Covenant between God and his chosen people (Hosea 2, 16-19) and as a symbol of Christ’s union with his church (Ephesians 5, 31-32). The word of God reveals the high level on which believers can live out their marriage.

The parable of the Covenant bestows strength and a richness of meaning to a union which are far above that concept which sees marriage as merely being an agreement;while Paul’s allusion to the “hidden truth”with reference to “Christ and the church”, reveals the quality and intensity of the love which governs the conjugal relationship when lived in the light of Christ’s salvation. This is the marriage vocation according to God’s Word.

1.4. Conjugal Love

According to the word of God (Mark 10, 8), marriage is expressed in the union of the couple, so that husband and wife are no longer two individuals but”one flesh”.

This union is such that it involves the members entirely in a love community where each lives for the other, in mutual regard, loyalty and faithfulness, substantialized by giving and forgiveness, in submission to Christ’s love (Ephesians 5, 21 ff.)

Conjugal love enables the partners to live out their ecclesial differences and their mutual sexual attraction as a gift from God which blesses them in their life of communion together.

The couple who are believers live out their sexuality with neither exaltation nor repression, each respecting the dignity and the freedom of the other.

1.5. Fidelity

Fidelity is an essential constituent of a marriage which is to last a lifetime and a commitment to faithfulness is a necessary sequel. A love declaration is a declaration of fidelity. To love someone means to be faithful to that person.

Conjugal faithfulness is not confined to the sphere of sexuality but includes every part of the shared life. Marriage signifies, in fact, a growing together in every aspect of the personality of each partner.

The integration of both husband and wife in the society of today, often having different professional and social spheres of work and interaction, has brought new aspects to the question of fidelity. These new interwoven relationships between men and women should be seen as positive: they help personal talents to develop and deepen, as well as supporting the single individual as he/she carries out his/her social responsibility.

There are those who believe that conjugal love can simultaneously give rise to many parallel loyalties which do not exclude each other, but which, on the contrary, can cohabit and even integrate each other. The Bible analogy of the covenant, lighting up Christ's union with his church, however, gives us a different indication: where there is faithfulness, there can be no other parallel relationships in marriage, but, on the contrary, such relationships would be equivalent to unfaithfulness. Conjugal fidelity, on the other hand, is of a very different nature; it is expressed in mutual trust, and from it spring uprightness and strength as well as serenity in the marriage relationship, and on a social and professional level. Conjugal love, in fact, does not annul or crush the other partner's personality, but rather accepts it and strengthens it. A true sign of conjugal faithfulness is mutual delight in the success and the best use of the other's gifts in daily life and work

1.6. An enduring relationship

Marriage is an open-ended covenant. A conjugal relationship has no deadline; it entails a total giving of bodies and personal destinies to each other, it is by its very nature and make-up destined to last. Conjugal faithfulness is for life.

The words of Jesus: "Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate", (Matthew 19, 6), strongly assert the lasting nature of the marriage bond.

When a man and woman who are believers bind themselves together in marriage, they do so in the conviction that their union is for life; a conviction which is upheld by hope and prayer. They believe that their marriage, destined to last their earthly life, is a gift of God. Every genuine love relationship brings its own promise of lastingness - as if it were a reflex of the love of God.

1.7. Families and offspring

By its nature and make-up, the married couple is open to and foreordained to propagate life on the earth. (Genesis 1, 28). Consequently the couple is enjoined to procreate; a man and woman marry because they love each other, and from this love spring many promises, in particular that of begetting children.

Although marriage as an institution must be distinguished from that within the life of the family, both are closely joined together and support each other. Marriage is not only fruitful when procreation takes place but in other ways too; in the social dimension and as an instrument and school of working communion between human beings (for example: in adoption, foster care, hospitality etc.). Children born out of wedlock have a right to be loved with the same intensity by their parents, who have an equal responsibility towards them.

1.8. Family, society, church

The family is intended to carry out a constructive, cohesive and developing role in society, with respect to the dignity and the progress of the human person.

The family nucleus in the Christian community should be a living example of true communion, witnessing to the love of Christ for His church (Ephesians 5, 21-33), committed to imparting the treasures of the Gospel to the new generations.

1.9. Interchurch (mixed) marriages

A marriage between Christians belonging to two different traditions takes place "in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7, 39), and therefore in his body, which is the church.

The married couple remain linked to their own ecclesial communions, with their own particular spiritual identities. The fact that these communions (or communities) are different and divided can prove negative as far as the couple's relationship is concerned. On the other hand, the couple having two different Christian traditions can contribute to a growing understanding between the two communities, creating occasions for dialogue, exchange and, even moments of spiritual fellowship. The communities themselves can support the interchurch couple by helping them to a better understanding of their spouse's faith communion and traditions, and by showing a true ecumenical spirit towards each other. As far as possible, every effort should be made to remove barriers and hindrances of any kind (theological, juridical, psychological) which could make it more difficult for the "other" member of the marriage to share the Christian fellowship of their partner's church. The most important factor however, is that both partners share a deeply rooted faith in the same Lord. This commonly rooted faith assumes different ways and expressions, according to the urging of the Spirit who leads towards visible unity, and can lead to a mutual willingness of each spouse to take some part in the life of the two communities, without being forced or made use of.

It is essential that neither member of a mixed marriage allow the ties with their own church to slacken but, on the contrary, to become stronger. Their experience, together with that of others, can serve as an inter-personal bridge of ecumenical understanding and trust between the two communities.

The interchurch couple desires, therefore, to live and witness to their personal faith in one Lord, whom they call upon as foundation and unity of all Christians.

Part two

DIFFERENCES AND DIVERGENCES

The foregoing text states the issues concerning marriage on which the Roman Catholic and Waldensian Churches are agreed on up to date. These fundamental and qualifying points are those on which the Catholic and Waldensian spouse of a mixed marriage can find a solid foundation for communion and true fellowship. This does not mean that the respective Catholic and Waldensian views of marriage are without differences and divergences, which must be known and carefully thought about when an intermarriage takes place.

2.1. Sacramentality

The most important difference between the two ecclesial communions concerns the sacramentality or not of marriage.

According to the Catholic church, marriage is one of the "seven sacraments of the New Law, established by our Lord Jesus Christ" (Council of Trent, 6th Session, Edict on Sacraments, can. 1), so that it does not only belong to the natural order of creation, but also to that of redemption. Marriage between two baptized believers is a supernatural reality, being a sign and instrument of the redeeming love of Christ and, as such, it is the foundation of a Christian family, primary cell of the ecclesial community. According to Roman Catholic doctrine, baptism is the foundation of the sacramentality of marriage. Therefore, every marriage between two baptized believers is a sacrament. Because of this sacramentality, the Catholic church has the authority to regulate the marriages of its own members. The regulation on mixed marriages is one aspect of this ruling.

According to the Waldensian church, marriage is part of God's good creation which has become an essential institution of the human society; and which believers receive and live out as a "gift" (1 Corinthians 7, 7): "The couple who are believers carry out their Christian vocation in their marriage", living their union "as a manifestation of love towards others and witnessing to the alliance of grace which unites believers to their Lord." (Waldensian Synod, Document on marriage, no. 8) The Waldensian church does not regard marriage as a sacrament.

The different understanding of the sacraments and of the church itself, leads to a different doctrinal valuation of the same by the two religious communities, as well as to a diversity in daily living and language.

The different concept of marriage is not without its effects, and the marriage couple should be aware of this. The diversity can bring mutual enrichment, but can also be a source of strained relationships. Both spouses should feel duty bound to respect the other's beliefs and not try in any way, directly or indirectly, to coerce the other's conscience. On the contrary, each will try to understand the other's convictions, any discussion taking place in the light of God's Word.

On the other hand, the different concept of marriage, whether or not sacramental, need not prevent a couple from sharing their common faith in one Lord and from living together in love and hope, from praying together and listening to the Divine Word, the greatest ecumenical message of all. Both should seek to

maintain a loyal and vital relation with their own church and try, where possible, to share moments of prayer and bible meditation with their spouse's church.

If their life together becomes a place which is open to communion, dialogue and service to others, the interchurch couple will form a small but vital cell on the ecumenical pilgrimage, not only important for their own churches but for the larger human community.

2.2. Indissolubility

The second doctrinal and disciplinal difference concerns the indissolubility of the marriage vows. Both accept that marriage is a covenant with no time limit, even though they express this belief in different ways and both Catholic and Protestant will arrive at different conclusions.

According to the Catholic church, the marriage love-vows, outlined by God in creation and raised by faith to signify and put into effect the mystery of Christ's love, are consequently indissoluble, which means that the contracting parties are bound together by a never-ending love. It therefore follows that neither divorce nor a second marriage is possible.

The Waldensian church also asserts that the couple are called to be "united in a life-long communion" and therefore "the possibility of divorce will not occur when the marriage is lived in a Christian way." (Waldensian Synod, document on marriage, no. 57). On the other hand, it is recognized that marriage crises do exist, and that sometimes these can lead to situations of irremediable break-ups in which it is impossible to ask the believers to "give up divorce proceedings in the name of the Gospel" (no. 59). In such cases, it is possible for a new marriage service to take place in the church, though this is suitably disciplined (no. 60), the Waldensian church "not being favourable on principle." On the other hand, the Waldensian church does not acknowledge those measures taken by Catholic church authorities which declare the invalidity of a marriage or which grant the annulment of a marriage by canon law. Nevertheless, a new marriage service can be celebrated for those who have benefitted by such measures - with the same proceedings contemplated for divorcees-provided that the free status of the interested parties has been certified by the competent authorities.

The doctrinal and disciplinary differences between the two churches, as far as the indissolubility is concerned, do not affect the common desire of the interchurch couple to build together a lifelong relationship of love and communion, especially as they share the same faith in Christ and have the same common desire to live according to his Word: "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19, 6). The possibility of the bond being broken is beyond faith's consent. From the Catholic point of view, therefore, the doctrinal and disciplinary differences do not necessarily affect the validity of the marriage, unless one or other of the spouses, deliberately rule out its indissolubility from the moment of the wedding ceremony itself by refusing to make a permanent matrimonial vow

The desire of the couple to build up a solid love relationship based on their common faith in Christ will encourage them to deepen the sense and the importance of the different positions of their respective faith communities regarding marriage, as they follow in faith the ecumenical pilgrimage, while awaiting that true union of believers, gift of the Holy Spirit.

2.3. Fecundity and procreation

Essentially, there are two divergences in this sphere. The first has to do with procreation. According to a doctrine shared by both the Waldensian and Catholic churches, the beginning of life is written in love's plan itself. Nevertheless, according to the Catholic church, though not the Waldensian, if one or both partners, during the ceremony, deliberately exclude the will to have progeny, the marriage is invalid.

From a Catholic point of view, the validity of a marriage between a Catholic and a Protestant is not questioned on a purely doctrinal level if the couple come together to fulfil their intent to live in love (which means, according to the Divine plan-see Genesis 1, 28- to live the experience of procreation with readiness and generosity) and do not willingly exclude any progeny. If this last condition is not fulfilled, the Catholic part considers the union to be void.

The second divergence has to do with birth control. Both churches agree that the principle of birth control belongs to the human and Christian responsibility of the married couple. A different moral judgement is given, however, on some methods of birth control. The question does not concern the nature of the marriage itself nor its essential attributes and, as such, does not affect the validity of the mixed marriage. Nevertheless, it should be considered seriously because it concerns such an important part of married life: conse-

quently, the couple should broach and clarify the problem before their marriage. The same principle of mutual respect for each other's conscience should prevail here, as for other questions in the interchurch couple: any duress or imposition must be excluded as the couple seek together, in love and freedom, answers which are able to satisfy both.

2.4. The religious upbringing of the children of mixed marriages

The problem of bringing up children in an interchurch family is one of the most difficult and requires the care and ecumenical commitment of both believers and churches. Roman Catholic canon 226, § 2- inspired by the edict *Gravissimum educationis* of Vatican Council II-states: "As parents have given life to their children, they have the serious task, as well as the right, of bringing them up; it is therefore the first duty of Christian parents to educate them according to the doctrines taught by the church". To carry out this principle, the Catholic church requires its members who are about to be wed to a non-Catholic partner, to make a solemn promise to "do all in their power to baptize and bring up their children in the Roman Catholic faith"(canon 1126, §2). This promise is the ratification of the natural right of the parents. The Roman Catholic canonic Code decrees that this promise must be made known to the non-Catholic spouse.

According to the Waldensian church,"as the parents are the only persons answerable to God for the care of their children, only they can make decisions concerning the baptism and religious upbringing of those children who are born of a mixed marriage". The Waldensian church does not, however, require a formal promise but "upholds and encourages parents as they carry out their duty" (Waldensian synod, document on marriage no. 31) always reminding them that the personal responsibility of a believer is "to testify to his/her faith to his/her partner and children"(no. 32).

For both churches, the religious education of children is the duty and right of both parents; therefore both should respect each other's rights, while keeping in mind the children's right to be brought up in a peaceful and loving atmosphere; any religious conflict in the home could bring about the children's indifference to either Christian tradition.

As children should be brought up in the Christian faith from the earliest age, any related problem should be faced before marriage. The parents-to-be should follow a clear line of conduct from the beginning, refusing to postpone any decision until the children are supposedly old enough to choose for themselves. The religious education of children is a problem which should be faced with a great sense of responsibility, having in mind the parents' relationship as well as the progressive development of the children's consciences; this education should be as homogeneous and complete as possible and is the responsibility of both parents.

Above all, it is essential that children born of an interchurch family should be brought up in an ecumenical atmosphere, where the testimony of God's Word is the foundation and the focal point of both Christian traditions is the living Christ: in Him, in fact, we are baptized and we belong to Him in life and in death, being part of His body. (1 Corinthians 12)

Because of the ecclesial differences of the two traditions, much understanding will be needed by both partners. In the light of the foregoing considerations, the need for a homogeneous education may lead to the necessity of one of the parents assuming a special commitment. The right and duty of the other parent to witness to his/her faith by word and example, however, still remains, so that each member of the family will be able to discover the value of both communions, and remain always open to the search for Truth.

In this perspective, both the Roman Catholic church and the Waldensian church remind the partners of their commitment to the Lord who has called them to His service, to their own ecclesial communion, to its doctrine and discipline. At the same time, they exclude any form of pressure on the consciences of the married couple, either by the churches themselves or by one of the partners on the other. These two churches also promise to respect the decisions made by the parents, regarding the baptism and religious upbringing of the children as being their right.

2.5. Practical aspects deriving from the doctrinal and disciplinal divergences

In the past, the doctrinal divergences of the Catholic and Waldensian churches concerning marriage in general, and mixed marriages in particular, gave rise to marked differences which caused not a few difficulties for the celebration of interchurch marriages, and have very often caused suffering to one or both marriage partners.

The Catholic church regarded the differences between them and another Christian communion as an

“obstacle”, and the non-Catholic spouse was forced to give certain “guarantees” concerning his faith, the baptism and religious upbringing of any children born of a mixed marriage.

The new Canon Law has removed the “obstacle” and, as far as the religious coherence and the education of the children are concerned, the Catholic partner is only required to promise to live according to his/her faith, and to make it known to the other partner. The current canon law contemplates the following regulations both for spouses of a mixed marriage and for marriages between two Catholics:

- a) “premarital investigatory procedure”, with the aim of verifying the validity and lawfulness of the marriage and to make sure that the attitude of the Catholic spouse is correct;
- b) the “canonic form”, which expresses the religious aspect of the marriage and attests the ceremony;
- c) the “special permission” of the Bishop, as required for marriages with any specific problem.

These regulations, which are in keeping with the social and legal concept that the Catholic church has of itself and with its ecclesial-sacramental vision of marriage, only concern the Catholic partner directly, but, because of the intrinsic unity of the marriage covenant, the non-Catholic partner is also indirectly affected.

The Waldensian church has its own discipline concerning the wedding celebration but has no proceedings which affect the Catholic partner, or, anyway, which determine the validity of the marriage itself.

Difficulties may arise from these two different church disciplines, but if there is a true ecumenical interrelationship between the two communions and a commitment to the basic principle of mutual understanding, they can be overcome. In view of the irregularity of the two disciplines, that is, the concepts of rights and responsibilities are not the same, the two churches are pledged to respect and be sensitive to the needs of the other, doing all that is possible to ensure that both partners enjoy the same dignity.

In this context, where possible, suitable measures may be taken by the same persons who have drawn up this document to overcome any problems arising from the different disciplines.

The difficulties for the celebration of an interchurch marriage connected to the Canon Law (e.g. the canonic form, the special permission, the exemption etc.) can be overcome with the following procedure: the betrothed, after fulfilling the obligations to their own community, will decide which kind of wedding ceremony they feel is more suitable to start their spiritual and ecumenical life together. Both communities should give their approval to this decision and the Catholic bishop can consider this approval to be a valid reason to justify the granting of the special permission, after having carried out the requirements of can. 1127, §2, of the Canon Law (consultation of Bishop in whose bishopric the marriage takes place).

Once the regular legal-pastoral procedures have taken place, the Bishop will give the “special permission” to the Catholic partner for the marriage to take place, indicating the contracting partner and the form of the wedding ceremony.

The Catholic or the Waldensian or Methodist spouse who has been married in a different church, will remember to inform his/her community so that the marriage will be registered, if this is in the norm.

It must be remembered, however, that despite the good will of the Catholic and Waldensian churches, it is not possible for all marriages celebrated in the respective churches to be recognized; this because of the different consideration of their validity. Thus, a Bishop may not give his consent to the marriage of a Catholic to a non-Catholic if there are any impediments that he is unable to exonerate (e.g. a previous family tie, sacred order etc.) or if any other motives of invalidity according to the Catholic church should be discovered (exclusion from indissolubility, children etc.); there are no problems in the Waldensian church for such marriages. On the contrary, while for the Waldensian church a marriage which has been recorded in the Register Office, without a church wedding ceremony, is valid, a religious celebration is essential for the Catholic code.

Part three

A GUIDE TO PASTORAL CARE AND UNDERSTANDING OF INTERCHURCH MARRIAGES

3.1. The responsibility of the churches

The dialogue established between the Roman Catholic and Waldensian churches as set out in the preceding chapters, have underlined the fact that, despite problems arising from the differences between the two communities, mixed marriages can be seen in a positive light for the contribution they give to Christian unity and the ecumenical movement, especially when both partners are faithful to their calling in their original church.

It is therefore to be hoped that a pastoral understanding will develop, not only between the pastors but between the congregations of the two churches, creating a spiritual environment which will be an authentic

witness to a common faith in one Gospel, where different spiritual traditions are compared and where the best answers to any problems which may arise can be sought for with serenity.

This joint pastoral action will be able to accompany the interchurch family through the different phases of their shared spiritual journey

3.2. Preparing for the marriage

Both the Catholic and Waldensian churches believe that a marriage which is celebrated in the Christian faith is a response to a calling which comes from God for which every baptized believer needs appropriate information and preparation. This should take place in the catechesis of the local churches, with special attention to the problem of interchurch marriages, regarding which, the whole community should be informed and prepared

When a member of the Catholic or Waldensian community informs their congregation of their intention to marry someone of another ecclesial-communication, it should be pointed out that the mixed-union must be lived in the reality of faith, being a sign of the “great mystery”, that is, the love of Christ for His church (Ephesians 5, 32). A marriage union that is understood in this way will experience a true union of life and love, open towards others and to social and religious responsibility.

Despite the problems that may arise in a mixed marriage-problems that can affect family life and the education of the children-the communities involved should be reminded of the positive aspects:the mutual spiritual enrichment of the partners and a visible sign of unity in the ecumenical movement.

The two churches will be encouraged to support and accompany the interchurch family with solidarity.

Given such premises, the betrothed will be exhorted not to allow these problems to lessen their faith or their commitment to their original community. Their common faith in Christ will sustain them in their love for each other. The minister or pastor who has been consulted by one of the partners for information concerning their planned marriage, should invite them both to make contact with the minister of the other church. Faced with the desire expressed by the betrothed that the marriage should be recognized by both communities, the ministers should be willing to prepare for the wedding ceremony together, each respecting the regulations of their own church, all in an atmosphere of brotherly and mutual cooperation.

Both will accordingly meet the betrothed to talk over the specific obligations established by the discipline of their own church;obligations which can indirectly involve the member of the other community, who is free to invite his/her minister to the talks. If they consider it advisable, the ministers of both churches, as well as carrying out the procedures of their respective communities and being agreed, can meet the betrothed together to help the bride and groom to start on their ecumenical journey.

The objective difficulties which could arise concerning the validity of the marriage, the religious upbringing of the children and the wedding ceremony itself, will be solved following the agreed lines of conduct to be found in the second part of this text.

3.3. The marriage ceremony

The Waldensian church believes that “every believer knows by faith that their marriage is covenanted before God, whatever form they decide to follow to announce this publicly”(Waldensian Synod, Document on marriage, no. 15);nevertheless, the church has its own marriage service, considering that”believers should of their own free will desire to publicly attest their marriage to the faith community where they live and testify”.

The Catholic church, on the other hand, conscious of applying conditions to the validity of the marriage, requires the Catholic spouse to celebrate the marriage according to the canonic form;both to establish the validity of the marriage and, above all, to witness to its sacramental value. Nevertheless as previously illustrated in this text, the Roman Catholic bishop has the authority to exonerate the catholic spouse from the said canonic form.

The interchurch marriage may therefore be celebrated in more than one way, all of which require a loving and Christian preparation so that the bride and groom are fully aware of the natural and spiritual value of their union.

Both the Catholic and Waldensian churches trust that any marriage celebration will be lead and upheld by the Word of God and by the faith of their ecclesial communion.

a) The canonic form marriage ceremony

It is taken for granted that any marriage celebrated according to the canonic form will put into effect the

arrangements made during the preparation.

The Catholic rite will usually be without the Mass. The solemn celebration of the Word will express the interfaith union of the bride and groom and will be a witness in the presence of relatives and friends, who are able to share the spiritual unity of the occasion without being troubled by an uneasy conscience.

If so desired by the couple, the Bishop can give permission for the ceremony to take place during Mass.

The presence of a minister or representative of the Waldensian church is also possible, if desired, though this is not a concelebration; only the Catholic minister is authorized to receive the consent of the bride and groom. The Waldensian representative expresses the pastoral concern of his/her church for the new couple and could take part, for example, during the liturgy of the Word or with a prayer of intercession.

b) The Waldensian marriage ceremony

The celebration of a mixed marriage, in conformity with Waldensian regulations, after carrying out the arrangements made during the preparation, and having obtained the authorization of the Catholic Bishop, takes place according to the liturgy for this occasion.

If the couple so desires, the presence of the Catholic minister is admissible and welcome as a sign of understanding and support of the united project of their Christian life together.

While the Waldensian minister will receive the marriage vows, the Catholic minister, as the Waldensian in the Catholic ceremony, is not a concelebrant but will express the pastoral concern of the Catholic church for the newly married couple.

c) Civil marriage conducted in the Register Office

In the event of the mixed marriage being celebrated in the Register Office, the Catholic spouse having obtained the Bishop's permission according to the directions already mentioned in this text, the ministers of the two churches have the responsibility of helping the bride and groom to understand the value of this civil rite and the Christian meaning of their union.

The Catholic partner will be asked to go to confession and to receive Holy Communion before the marriage ceremony. In these cases an ecumenical service can take place, with the aim of announcing the Gospel and of asking God's blessing on the couple and their families. The marriage vows will not be renewed during this meeting.

d) Marriages without civil registration

In exceptional cases and with the Bishop's authorization, the Catholic church allows marriages to be celebrated according to the canonic form without civil registration.

The Waldensian church does not contemplate any form of marriage ceremony which is not registered by the civil authorities, nor does it accredit value to marriages celebrated in other places which have not been registered.

In such cases, as for those marriages celebrated according to the Waldensian discipline and not valid for the Catholic church (eg. marriage of divorcees), although the doctrinal and disciplinary differences between the two churches do not permit either a joint preparation or the mutual acknowledgement of the marriage, this does not prevent the pastoral care of the two communities for the interchurch families from taking place, which is, in fact, another positive sign on the ecumenical journey together.

3.4. Pastoral care for the interchurch couples

The presence of the Lord Jesus Christ is not limited to the wedding ceremony, but as promised, His grace accompanies the married couple throughout their lives, as they strive to journey together towards a perfect union.

It is the responsibility of the Christian community to teach and sustain the couple in the spirit of constant conversion; to exhort them to ask for advice when faced with difficulties; to encourage them to grow together in faith and in those virtues which help produce a serene and ordered life together.

In this spirit, the interchurch couple will be ready to live fully and unselfishly the experience of fatherhood and motherhood as they accept, as a divine gift, the new life that is born from their union.

To assist them as they face their new responsibilities and problems which may occur, those who have been married in the Christian faith, need the daily help of the Word of God, of prayer together and the fellowship of the Christian community.

The two ecclesial communions should therefore further as many contacts as possible with the interchurch couple, in both congregations, as well as in united prayer meetings, offering help and understanding which

is inspired by the common faith in Jesus Christ and the hope of that true unity of believers invoked as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

The present text, drafted by mutual agreement and concerning a particularly delicate theme, was thought up as a first positive step along the ecumenical path and as being an opening towards further development.

While respecting each others' convictions, careful attention has been paid to discover our common heritage of faith and to impartially interpret the differences which only faith in Christ and His grace can help us overcome.

It is hoped that the present joint text concerning mixed marriages will make a contribution to our mutual understanding and help us renew our commitment to the pilgrimage of our churches along the ecumenical pathway.

The text has been approved by the Italian Episcopal Conference and by the Synod of the Waldensian and Methodist Churches, who will decide together how the guidance for pastoral care contained therein, can be put into practice.

Rome, 16th June 1997

The Moderator of the Waldensian Executive Board
Gianni E. Rostan

The Chairman of the Italian Episcopal Conference
Camillo Cardinal Ruini

The President of the Methodist Committee in Italy
Rev. Valdo Benecchi

¹ The Waldensian Church uses the term “interchurch” marriage rather than “mixed” marriage, as used in this text