

The Household of God and Local Households

The report written by William Odling-Smee

Anne and I went to this conference held in the Catholic University of Leuven from March 10th-13th, 2010. The sub-title of the Conference was “Revisiting the Domestic Church” and this is particularly relevant to Interchurch Families. It is a subject that the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity asked us to discuss, when we met them in the Vatican in 2005.

This was a high powered conference. Fifteen theologians who specialise in the theology of the family addressed us, and they came from every part of the world. After discussing what the domestic church was, we then went on to discuss what type of family was needed for the (domestic) church. Logically the next subject was what church do families need. Finally we discussed the relation between the universal church and the local church, which included the domestic church. And in passing we found time to hear papers about the Jewish ideas and African ideas concerning family and religion. We were struck by how similar the Jewish ideas are to Christian ideas, and appalled to learn that in Ghana 80% of Roman Catholics are married according to traditional African rites and not in Church. They are then not allowed to receive Communion at the Eucharist. The African theologian who presented this paper did not seem to be concerned by this fact.

Listening to all the papers and reflecting on them afterwards, it became clear that there was a very wide gulf between the idea of the family held by the official Church, as described the recent Vatican documents, and the reality of the family as lived in the world today. And it was also clear that the Vatican had no notion that such a gulf existed. Significantly, there was no one from the Vatican present at the Conference, and we wondered if the next

job is to see how this gulf can be bridged. How can we talk to each other?

There were two sessions at which papers were presented to represent other interests. At each of these sessions there was a group of papers about Interchurch families, both chaired by Fr. George Kilcourse and Professor Thomas Kneips. Some of these were very good. In particular, I liked the paper by Fr. George Kilcourse in which he described an Interchurch Marriage as an “Improbable Grace” and reflected on the lacunae in the US Bishop’s pastoral letter *Marriage, Love and Life in the Divine Plan*. He finished by describing the spirituality of Interchurch families as an ecclesial expression of Trinitarian models of reciprocity and unselfish love. This paper was followed by that of Professor Bernard Prusak from Villanova University in Pennsylvania, who described the ecumenical household as the domestic church. This was a very good paper. Finally Jean-Baptiste Lipp from Lausanne read an excellent paper in which he described the Interchurch family as a microcosm of the Church.

There were many more papers which were excellent, but I have not the space here to comment on them. The International Network of Interchurch Families met and had dinner together in the Irish College and laid some plans for the future, which you will hear about in the future. We returned home refreshed and full of ideas.

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