

OBOB NORMS FOR EUCHARISTIC SHARING

Summary of the consultation held at Oscott College on 21 – 22 September 2004 between three members of the Bishops' Conference with their supporting team and representatives from the Association of Interchurch Families, L'Arche and Hengrave Hall (and subsequent reflections received later from two of them.

BACKGROUND.

Following the publication of OBOB in 1998 the Bishops had invited responses to the document from their ecumenical partners and were looking forward to continuing dialogue. This consultation was part of that process.

SETTING THE CONTEXT.

Bishop Evans explained the theological principles underlying OBOB during which he stressed the crucial one of the relationship between Eucharist and Church as the basis for considering all other issues while Bishop Hine focussed on the need to expand the perception of Eucharistic beyond that of simply receiving holy communion because otherwise inclusion or exclusion would be seen only in those terms. Each group had been invited to make their own presentation along the lines suggested to them in Fr. Faley's preparatory letter. At the conclusion of the consultation they were further invited by Bishop Pargeter to reflect on what had been said highlighting the significant points from their point of view in terms of understanding, clarification and progress. What follows in a synopsis of their respective submissions.

WHAT THEY HAD TO SAY.

Association of Interchurch Families:

1. Observation of many interchurch couples shows that those whose special needs are listened to and understood and who can openly receive communion together are more committed in working for and witnessing to the growing unity between their respective Church communities while it often has the opposite effect on those who are refused.
2. AIF speaks for the relatively small number of mixed marriages where the partners attend each others Churches together. It is sometimes difficult for those whose pastoral experience has been of other kinds of mixed marriages to appreciate the intensity of the desire for Eucharistic sharing that some interchurch couples and families experience. They feel it is their sacramental married union in Christ, their one-flesh relationship signifying Christ's relationship with his church that is the ground of this longing and of their wish to demonstrate visibly to their children the unity in the spirit that is given them in their marriage.
3. There are many ways to avoid or minimise the pain of separation at communion – couples act very differently, some lacking completely, others attending rarely. However, some interchurch couples for whom the Eucharist is at the heart of their marriage and family life, continue to be together at the Eucharist. Where they participate in the life of both their church communities they come to feel in a very real way committed to both. They realise how difficult it is for those who do not experience it to understand this powerful sense of "double belonging".
4. The norms in OBOB appear to restrict the admission to communion for interchurch spouses to unique and unrepeatable occasions. They ask might it not be possible to be restrictive in terms of "cases" rather than "occasions?" This would better meet the expressed wish of some

interchurch families whose need is on-going because of the nature of the marriage covenant. May it not be that the “cases” which can be shown as furthering Christian unity are precisely those in which “exceptional” Eucharistic sharing is to be commended?

5. AIF asks to Bishops to consider delegating pastoral decisions about Eucharistic hospitality more widely (and more clearly) to ministers who are in direct contact with the couples or families who make a request, i.e. pastoral dialogue to discover what is needed and what is possible in the concrete circumstances of each couple and family concerned. For the Bishops to acknowledge that in some cases, there may be an on-going need, would be helpful.
6. The Catholic community at large needs more help in understanding that reasons for allowing exceptional admission to communion and this would be good for ecumenism generally.
7. In any reconsideration of the norms, please consult the other churches if for no other reason than to avoid possible misunderstanding.
8. The question of reciprocity, AIF appreciates that Catholic partners should only ask for the sacraments from a minister who is validly ordained. Some do otherwise and AIF is well aware that the Bishops cannot approve this practice: some however has said that they can understand it in terms of conscience and this is welcomed.

L’Arche:

1. Their main concern is that the Eucharist which should be at the centre of their community life is becoming increasingly marginalised. Practice varies – some communities do not celebrate the Eucharist at all, some alternate celebrations between traditions and respect the norms, some respect individual conscience and decisions and some adopt alternative patterns of worship and prayer. The liturgy of the washing of feet as practiced in L’Arche affords a good example of a ritual way of embracing everyone present.
2. As “intentional ecumenical communities” they wish to remain rooted in and faithful to the churches and see themselves as on a journey of discovery with no easy answers to hand. They are conscious all the while of the special needs of their vulnerable members from whom they benefit so much in community through the development of relationships. For Christians with learning difficulties the “personal” is what really counts in their faith and this is primarily the perspective from which they approach religious practices and understand them such as questions of inclusion or exclusion.
3. OBOB says on the one hand Christian communities must be rooted in the Eucharist and that receiving the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ is vital for the Spiritual life and on the other, that the celebration of the Eucharist and sacramental sharing is not appropriate at ecumenical gatherings.
They ask “how do we situate ourselves within this teaching?”

Hengrave Hall:

The community there has at its core four religious sisters of the Assumption with a mission for reconciliation. The rest of the community is “mixed” and in a constant state of flux with members attending local churches of their own tradition for sacramental services thus tending to obscure the pain of Eucharistic separation. This consultation has reopened for them soul-searching questions about the rightful place of the Eucharist in the context of their community life and mission.