

COMMENTS ON NEW ECUMENICAL DIRECTORY

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Introduction

The search for unity and ecumenical concern are necessary dimensions of the whole of the Church's life. Everything can and must contribute to them. I have already asked on more than one occasion that the re-establishment of unity among all Christians really be considered one of the (Church's) pastoral priorities....

I must reaffirm that the Catholic Church is committed to the ecumenical movement with an irrevocable decision..... This movement is stirred by the Holy Spirit....(cf John Paul II, Address 28 June 1985, nn.4, 10).

Put simply: how can the Church be a credible sign of God's plan to "reconcile all things in Christ" if the members of Christ's body are themselves divided? That is why ecumenism is an essential part of Catholic life.

Unity involves sharing the same Christian beliefs, the same sacraments and the same ordained ministries. Less than that is disunity.

But it does not mean uniformity:

While preserving unity in essentials, let all members of the Church, according to the office entrusted to each, preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites and even in the theological elaboration of revealed truth.... (Second Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism, n.4)

Following the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism (1964), there was a time of excitement as new possibilities opened up. Our new appreciation of what Christians have in common led to a new perception of what still divides us. It was to be expected that the work of resolving these differences would be a gradual, difficult task. This change of pace is sometimes mistakenly interpreted as a turning back. There are even some who have given up on seeing unity as a goal. They would settle for peaceful co-existence and co-operation.

But for Catholics, genuine unity, which respects legitimate variety, is still the goal and task of ecumenism.

A New Directory

In 1967 and 1970, the Holy See issued a two-part Directory for implementing ecumenism. The Holy See has now issued a new Directory (1993), updated in the light of 25 years experience. This Directory clearly expects the work for Christian unity to be taken very seriously and positively promoted.

The following reflections are limited to those paragraphs of the new Directory which concern what the Second Vatican Council called "spiritual ecumenism", (U.R. 8)

The new Directory says that "in the ecumenical movement, it is necessary to give priority to conversion of heart, spiritual life and its renewal". It notes that in this way every Christian "can always and everywhere share deeply in the ecumenical movement". (n.63)

Catholics are urged to recognise those gifts of the Holy Spirit and sources of spiritual life which are found in other Christian Churches and communities. Moreover, our appreciation of these is not to be "merely theoretical"; it needs to be based on sharing prayer and participating in the public worship and devotions of other Christians. (cf n.63)

I believe this is the key to all ecumenical progress. First of all, it has the intrinsic value of prayer; unity is a gift to be prayed for.

But such sharing also serves to deepen our commitment to working for Christian unity. Our resolve to face the task can only be born out of the experience of pain and sorrow over our divisions. And the pain of division is born out of the experience of finding that we really are disciples of the same Lord. That is what we discover, and rediscover, when we are with one another in prayer and worship. If this doesn't happen, nothing does.

There is another reason why this shared experience is vital to ecumenical progress: the

way we understand our faith and the way we formulate our beliefs depend on how we first experience those truths in the practice of our faith. That is why Christian communities cannot come to the same understanding of the faith if they have not had the same experience of the faith. And so we need to create new ways of sharing each other's experience in order gradually to share each other's understanding.

This is also why ecumenical progress cannot depend merely on the comparison of doctrines. Doctrines have their roots in the life of Church communities.

Does the new Directory help us to know how we can share each other's experience of Christian faith and life?

Yes, it does. It not only encourages praying together in services that are specially created for ecumenical occasions (cf n.110), it also encourages participation in each other's liturgical worship of a non-sacramental kind. For example, "Morning or Evening Prayer, special vigils etc, which enable people of different liturgical traditions - Catholic, Eastern, Anglican and Protestant - to understand each other's community prayer better and to share more deeply in traditions which often have developed from common roots" (n.117).

The Directory also approves "spiritual sharing in the form of days of recollection, spiritual exercises, groups for the study and sharing of traditions of spirituality, and more stable associations for a deeper exploration of a common spiritual life" - without blurring differences of doctrine and sacramental practice (cf n.114).

(One suspects that the strong desire of many Protestant Christians to rediscover retreats and spiritual direction, and the extent of ecumenical involvement in these ways has grown even since the new Directory began to be drafted.)

So, what are we going to do to create the greater level of shared experience out of which we can hope for a greater level of mutual understanding?

I have a suggestion: what would happen if we all agreed to devote Sunday evenings to prayer and worship in each other's Churches over and above fulfilling our normal Sunday obligations? (The Directory's somewhat timorous reservation about organising ecumenical services on Sundays refers to special ecumenical services; it does not prevent our participating in each other's liturgical worship and devotions.) By agreement, our sacramental liturgies would be on Sunday mornings and vigils.

Of course, participation in any such services never substitutes for our Sunday Mass obligation; (n.115).

Such a practice would at least be a new initiative; it would give Christians an opportunity to experience the distinctive ways and ethos of each participating Church; it would enable us to come right in close to what each holds dear; it would allow for reciprocity; and it would lead to new levels of talking with one another about what we believe.

If someone has a better suggestion, let us all hear about it. The abhorrence of division among Christians should create in us a sense of urgency, and the new Directory certainly challenges us to do more than what is being done already.