

WHAT IS ECUMENISM?

A Catholic Viewpoint

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Many might wonder how much sincerity there can be in the prayers of men and women throughout our country, and the world, for church unity.

How can a Catholic, they ask, who belongs to a church with clear-cut doctrinal requirements and absolute certainty about her doctrine, pray for unity without causing resentment among people of other faiths? On the other hand, how can a Christian, who belongs to a church, which considers itself one among many, unite himself with the prayers of Catholics, who maintain that their faith is the only true faith?

These are serious questions that need careful examination. Several considerations will throw light on our difficulty. Could we say that the religious differences, so very evident in this country, or in today's world, betray the very purpose of God, who intended mankind to be one family under a common Father? Is it not shocking that men, who are brothers, should call upon their common Father in so many divergent and contradictory ways? This is even more so when we consider the more-profound unity that fallen mankind has achieved through the redemption of Christ. Like scattered sheep, we have been gathered together into one flock, and reconciled with God through the blood of the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ. It follows, logically, therefore, that Christ should have asked for unity in His last will left to all His disciples. "That all may be one, even as thou, Father, in Me, and I in Thee; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that Thou has sent Me" (John 17:21). Are not all Christians

(Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, United, Baptists, Salvationists) disciples of Christ? And did He not teach all His disciples to pray for unity, when He prayed for the unity of His church? Therefore, it is because Christ demands it that we, though fully aware of our doctrinal differences, have to strive, pray, and work for unity. Our concern for unity, and our prayers to that end, do not evolve from a passing trend of modern times. Unity is the final and perpetual will of Christ, left as a precept to *all* His disciples.

Praying for unity must make us aware, in a practical way, that we are Christ's disciples, and that, as such, we are committed to carry out His will. But we cannot be His true disciples, nor can we hope to be doing His will, unless we dedicate our lives to the gathering of all peoples into one flock. Our eternal shepherd has entrusted the realisation of this unity to our works and prayers. The approval of praying for unity is motivated by the church's deep concern for carrying out the will of Christ.

There are three basic reasons for the church's encouragement of praying for unity:

1. The church wants each Christian to pray for unity, because of Christ's insistence on its necessity.
2. The church wants us to realise that *all* Christians have torn to pieces the seamless robe of Christ, which is His church.
3. The church wants us to become convinced that it is our concern and task to restore the seamless robe to its original beauty.

1. The urgency of Christ's Prayer for Unity

Prayer for unity is demanded by Christ. God the Father sent His Son to gather the scattered sheep into one flock. Christ's redemptive sacrifice was intended for all men, and was the source of our complete union among ourselves, and with God. But, just as it is true that the church, inasmuch as it is of God, possesses the divine gift of unity in a

mysterious manner, so it is also true that the men who compose the church would periodically cause disunity within some churches. This grim vision was certainly present to Christ at the moment of His passion. Like a father, who on his death bed fears that his children will contend with one another over the inheritance, Christ at the Last Supper had a foresight of the contention that would arise among His own over His inheritance, the church. So he prayed: "Holy Father, keep in Thy name those whom Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in Thy name. Those whom Thou hast given Me I guarded." (John 17:11-12) "Yet not for these only do I pray, but for those also who through their word are to believe in me, that all may be one, even as You, Father, in Me, and I in You, that the world may believe that You have sent Me." (John 17:20-21)

Unity must be hard to maintain if Christ prayed for it in an insistent way at the last hour of His life. He knew His apostles too well. He had taught them for some years, but they were not yet fit to be the cornerstone of His church. Their minds were still on earthly things (goods); their hearts on the future glory of the new kingdom. He knew also about the betrayal of Judas. It was for all of them, and for all their followers, that Christ prayed. Unity was not going to be easy among such people, and it would be even more difficult when the church would grow.

Dissensions started very early within the primitive community. Doubtless, on the day when they went out from the upper room to preach the resurrection of Christ, the apostles intended to be united. But soon conflicts began. In the community of Jerusalem, we find the first disputes over language, caste, and mentality: Hebrews versus Greeks. These were quickly settled. But, immediately, the acceptance of the Gentiles became a source of dissension: were the Gentiles to be admitted among the people of God? The conflict was a strong one within the community; but the apostles came to an agreement at Jerusalem. The danger of separation was prevented. Judaizers insisted that the Gentiles be subjected to Jewish rituals. Paul fought that view forcefully. Peter was equivocating on the matter. So Paul stood up

against him, and reproached him publicly. All this proves how quickly people working for the same Master could be exposed to misunderstanding, especially when they did not see each other often.

Nevertheless, Peter and Paul never separated in the moment of crisis. Although they disagreed, they knew that Christ was one, and that they could not divide Him. Paul became the great apostle of unity within the church. In fact, Peter and Paul died together as brothers in faith. Church tradition has always linked them together. Unfortunately, this example was not followed by the later generations of Christians. We can see from all this the urgent need of prayers for unity. Unity in the church has never been an easy matter. As long as unity exists, there is always a danger of shattering it. A trifling matter can destroy unity, but it takes centuries to reestablish it.

Church unity is something that should concern us very deeply. Let us pray for it more fervently. It is the will of the Lord. And, besides, He has promised us that our prayers will be heard, if made in His name. "Whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, in order that the Father may be glorified in the Son." (John 14:13) Did He not tell us also that, "Where two or three are gathered together for My sake, there am I in the midst of them"? (Matt 18-20) But we are never more obviously united than when not only two or three people, but two or three different denominations unite with one another in the name of Jesus, and in faithfulness to His Word, to ask for unity. However, the command of the Lord went unheeded. Maybe this is why we find ourselves so disunited.

2. Christians are Responsible for Tearing Christ's Seamless Robe, His Church

The second reason for which the church approved praying for unity is that all of us may realise that we have torn to pieces the seamless robe of Christ. Unfortunately, Christians have become unaware that unity is an essential element in the structure of the church.

Divisions became a regular feature in the history of the church. They succeeded one another with monotonous regularity. I will not go

into the historical aspects of it, but let us keep in mind that the causes of our divisions are not only dogmatic but also religious, cultural, and social.

After the Reformation, instead of a spirit of disunion, there breathes within our church, and all other churches, the Spirit of Union. It is a gift from the Spirit. The Spirit of God is breathing once again over the whole church, as over the primitive waters. He is impelling us to bring together what has been torn asunder. It is marvellous to see all the churches in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands today striving hard to come together, leaving aside their past animosity, and submitting, in all sincerity, to the implications of our common commitment to Christ.

It is in this spirit that the church has been encouraging prayer for unity. The church wants us to realise that sewing back together the seamless robe of Christ, and restoring it to its original beauty, is our concern and task.

Indeed, the same insights, that first animated many Protestant communities, are now spreading, and growing deep, within the Catholic church. Much ecumenical work has been initiated and carried out by Protestant churches and Protestant groups: their work was truly monumental. The World Council of Churches is a standing monument to their willingness and their efforts. This same spirit is now taking hold of the Catholic church, and we owe this especially to Pope John XXIII. "Ecumenism is a name for the contemporary movement for unity produced by the Spirit among all Christians, a single movement, to which each church makes its contribution, according to the principles proper to its own self-understanding" (Gregory Baum, "Ecumenism at the Vatican Council", in *The Ecumenist*, 2-2 (January-February 1964), p. 21.)

Truly Pope John has awakened the Catholic church to the reality and depth of ecumenism: his life was indeed an ecumenical life. He received and embraced the people of all Christian communions so

frequently and so warmly that someone remarked that a Methodist bishop had a better chance of seeing the Pope than a Catholic bishop.

His love embraced all, and made all people feel like brothers and sisters again. Using a quotation from St Augustine, and giving it a new meaning, he once said: "Whether they like it or not, they are our brothers; and they will cease to be our brothers only if they will cease to say the 'Our Father' ".

Pope John emphasised the serious obligation to foster ecumenism on the part of all Catholics, Cardinal Lienart, Bishop of Lille, France, quoted Pope John as saying that, at the final judgment, we will be sentenced according to what we have done or not done for unity.

Pope Paul VI has followed closely the footsteps of Pope John. In his opening address to the second session of Vatican Council II, he asked pardon from our separated brethren: "If we are in any way to blame for that separation, we humbly beg God's forgiveness. And we ask pardon, too, of our brethren who feel themselves to have been injured by us." With Vatican II, the church has definitely committed herself to ecumenism.

3. The task of Ecumenism

But what does ecumenism mean? Many, indeed, fail to see the meaning of this movement. For some, it is a new method of attracting converts; for others it is a public relations effort for the Catholic church; for still others it is a method by which one can compromise religious truths, and come out with an agreeable formula. None of these ideas could claim the genuine name of ecumenism.

Ecumenism is a movement that impels individual Catholics, and the Catholic church, to draw closer to those who, though separated from visible unity with the Catholic church, are already one in Christ, and belong in a real way to His church. Ecumenism creates among Christians an atmosphere in which all are stimulated to open themselves to the inspirations of the Spirit, who will lead all Christians to unity. The ecumenical movement is a leaven of renewal in all

churches: it teaches new dimensions of charity, it leads to a deeper understanding of the revealed message, and it brings to the fore the missionary awareness of the Christian faith. Ecumenism demands conversion, and willingness to live more faithfully, according to the dictates of the Lord: thus, if all Christian churches will live up to the demands of the gospel of the Lord, they will necessarily, one day, embrace each other as sisters in one and the same faith.

Christian divisions, even though they are due to God's chastisement for infidelity, are not to be looked upon only negatively: they also have a positive effect on Christian people. Many bishops, during the council, have repeatedly acknowledged that the Catholic church shares in the responsibility for the unfortunate division of Christianity. We Catholics must repent, live up as perfectly as possible to the demands of the gospel of Christ, and love each other. And Christianity will become, once more, a sign to the world, rather than a stumbling block. By means of unity, both internal and external, Christianity will once again be the great sign that will attract all to Christ.

Through the Ecumenical Council, the Catholic church wants to renew herself, in order to present to the world her pristine plenitude and spotlessness. As long as she remains on earth, however, she will always be a pilgrim church, a church of sinners. Other Christian bodies also are renewing themselves, and striving to fulfil Christ's will in its fullness. The day when we will sincerely call each other "dear brother, dear sister" may be not too far off. We long for it ardently.

Retaining the best of the catholic tradition, the Catholic church is beginning to stress some of those things that the churches of the Reformation have constantly emphasised: the Word of God, the priesthood of the faithful; as well as that which our venerable sister churches of the East have strongly stressed: the collegiality of bishops beginning to rediscover the sacramental and liturgical life.

We are now appreciating much more our common bond. We all want to be faithful to scripture, and to the early tradition of the great

Fathers, and all this says about the differences that separate us. Above all, we are interested in fulfilling God's will. We do not know when we will embrace each other as brothers and sisters; only God knows that. But, meanwhile, we have to pray and strive for unity, convinced that this is the work of the Spirit, to whom we must be faithful.