

## **The Practice of Ecumenism on the Basis of *Unitatis Redintegratio***

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### **Introduction**

Together with *Lumen Gentium* and *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, the decree on ecumenism titled *Unitatis Redintegratio* establishes the Second Vatican Council's position on the Church's relation to other Christians. The present document presumes familiarity with the Church's constitution as described in *Lumen Gentium*. Whoever ignores or misrepresents that document will likely end up in confused error when interpreting this one. The vision of Catholic ecumenism outlined in *Unitatis Redintegratio* is markedly distinct from the loosely defined "ecumenical movement" of the post-Conciliar period in many respects. There is no hint of religious indifferentism or suppression of Catholic doctrine in any of the decree's pronouncements. The fact that such tendencies have come to be identified with the ecumenical movement only proves that there is a need for Catholics to regain familiarity with the authentically Catholic ecumenism taught by the Council.

### **Principles of Ecumenism**

When proposing specific actions to implement principles of ecumenism, the Council ranks first and foremost those that pertain to Church renewal. "Every renewal of the Church is essentially grounded in an increase of fidelity to her calling." (UR, 6) The Council does not specify exactly how the formulation of doctrine is distinct from the deposit of faith. They are not identical, yet the official formulas of doctrine are guaranteed to be free from error, so they cannot be deficient in the sense of being erroneous. Rather, they might be deficient in a relative sense, as not fully expressing the reality signified. By this standard, all human formulations of doctrine are deficient, since our concepts are only imperfect images of the realities they represent, and so there may be some aspects of reality that they ignore or de-emphasize. An authentic theological renewal, therefore, would consist not in the denial of the truth of

traditionally formulated teaching, but in complementing the traditional formulas with other expressions, which accentuate aspects of divine revelation that have not been fully captured or expressed by the older formulas.

Among the renewal activities oriented toward ecumenism, the Council enumerates: “Biblical and liturgical movements, the preaching of the word of God and catechetics, the apostolate of the laity, new forms of religious life and the spirituality of married life, and the Church’s social teaching and activity...” (UR, 6) Reforms in these areas had already taken place in the years preceding the Council, and these are pledges and signs of the future progress of ecumenism. The soul of the ecumenical movement, according to the Council, is a ‘spiritual ecumenism’ which is a reform of the heart. This requires the grace to become “self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others, and to have an attitude of brotherly generosity towards them.” (UR, 7) At its core, ecumenism entails a change in interior disposition toward one of greater humility, charity, and service toward others. Instead of boasting of the greater graces they have received, Catholics should humble themselves to engage other Christians as equals. Instead of polemically denouncing all other forms of Christianity, Catholics are called to recognize what is good in other Christian traditions and to acknowledge that not all errors are culpable, while at the same time faithfully representing the truth of Catholic tradition. Most importantly, we must recognize that the gifts of the Church are ordered not so that we may lord them over others, but to dispose us for the service of others. It is in this sense that Catholic ‘triumphalism’ has been abandoned, in favor of a more perfect emulation of the humility and service shown by Christ and the apostles. We more clearly perceive that the victory of the Church is to be over sin, the devil, and death, not against our fellow men and their churches.

### **Common Prayer Meetings as a Part of Fostering Ecumenism**

The Council acknowledges that Catholics are capable of all types of sin, including sins against unity. Such sins are found not only in the aforementioned historical events where Catholics helped occasion schism by undue severity or giving scandal but also in a general posture of hostility or bigotry toward other Christians, without giving due weight to their human dignity and status as baptized brethren in Christ. Any authentic spiritual renewal must begin with an acknowledgement of sin, followed by repentance.

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (UR, 8) The Council confines common prayer to special circumstances oriented toward Christian unity, as opposed to having Catholics participate in Protestant prayer meetings, for the latter have a sectarian character. Nonetheless, common prayer in an ecumenical context is positively encouraged, since this certainly can obtain the grace of unity. Most notably, the Council applies the words of Matthew 18:20, a verse traditionally applied to the Church, to the bond between Catholics and non-Catholics. In this way, the Council acknowledges that separated Christians are still bound to the Church, and Christ is among them by that bond.

Worship in common is not an end in itself, nor is it oriented toward the merely human concerns of making friendly relations and being inoffensive to others. It is subordinate to the aim of restoring Christian unity, and thus should only be used when it helps and does not hinder this aim. Note the Council says that, in general, bearing witness to the Church’s unity ‘forbids common worship to Christians’. The Council would not say this if it conceived of the Church as some composite of all the various Christian denominations. Rather, the Council considers the Church to already possess full unity in the Catholic Church, and so common worship with other Christians would generally serve to deny the Church’s real, visible unity, by giving the impression that Catholic unity is deficient. Still, common worship may be commendable in certain instances due to the sharing in the means of grace. By such common worship, separated Christians may share in the graces of the Church, including that of unity, albeit imperfectly. This ecumenical worship is motivated by the desire to serve and minister even to separated Christians, sharing whatever graces of the Church they are equipped to receive. Catholics, who already have a proper grounding, need to acquire a more adequate understanding of the respective doctrines. (UR, 9)

Understanding the perspectives of non-Catholic Christians is not an end in itself, but is a necessary condition for conveying the true situation and belief of the Catholic Church to them. Without such understanding, Catholics will find themselves talking past the other party, as the conventional formulations of belief might not address the concerns specific to a denominational tradition. “Sacred theology and other branches of knowledge, especially of a historical nature, must be taught with due regard for the ecumenical point of view, so that they may correspond more exactly with the facts.”

(UR, 10) This dehumanizing of theology and ecclesiastical history does not entail falsification for the sake of diplomacy. Rather, these studies should take into account the perspectives of other Christians when making evaluations. The moral status of an act cannot be separated from intent, and the only way we can grasp other Christians is to learn something of their psychology, their cultural history, and their spiritual traditions. In this way, we may more accurately and fairly assess their condition concerning the Catholic Church.

### **Relevance of Dialogue in the Field of Ecumenism**

The method of expressing Catholic theology is to be changed in a way so that dialogue with separated Christians is not needlessly impeded. Yet at the same time, ‘the doctrine should be presented in its entirety’. There is no hint that any doctrine of the Church should be hidden or obscured from the view of non-Catholics. On the contrary, the purpose of reforming theological expressions is to make them more clearly understood by those who conceptualize the faith in different terms. For example, after the Council of Ephesus, John of Antioch was reconciled to the Church by a formula of union using terms distinct from the Ephesian doctrine he had misconstrued. The purpose of ecumenism is to bring all Christians to the one faith, so we must try to overcome verbal and conceptual obstacles to assenting to the faith.

The Council suggests that ecumenical dialogue may be aided by keeping this in mind: “When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists a ‘hierarchy’ of truths since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith.” (UR, 11) The concern here, as always, is to facilitate dialogue, not to suppress it. For example, if Protestants object to a Marian doctrine of the Church as being non-Biblical or extraneous to the faith, the response is not to exclude that doctrine from discussion, but to show how that doctrine is hierarchically linked to more central doctrines, e.g., the Incarnation. In this way, other Christians can better appreciate the organic structure of Catholic doctrine, so that what may seem arbitrary or extraneous is better understood in connection with the central mysteries of faith.

It is not admissible for a Catholic to interpret the ‘hierarchy of truths’ to mean that some doctrines are disposable or inessential to the faith. To participate in the fullness of

Catholic unity, it is necessary to accept the faith whole. To deny the Immaculate Conception, for example, creates defects in one's faith in the Incarnation, original sin, and Redemption. It also requires a denial of papal infallibility, which in turn requires a denial of the ecumenical council that defined it. All the doctrines are linked in an organic unity, so a denial of one detracts from one's faith in the whole. In these days when cooperation in social matters is so widespread, all men without exception are called to work together, with much greater reason all those who believe in God, but most of all, all Christians in that they bear the name of Christ. Cooperation among Christians vividly expresses the relationship that already unites them, and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant. (UR, 12)

### **Conclusion**

Christians have a special calling to cooperate in social matters, to show that they all serve in the name of the same Christ. Possible domains of cooperation include a just evaluation of the dignity of the human person, the establishment of the blessings of peace, the application of Gospel principles to social life, the advancement of the arts and sciences in a truly Christian spirit... the use of various remedies to relieve the afflictions of our times such as famine and natural disasters, illiteracy and poverty, housing shortage and the unequal distribution of wealth. (UR, 12) There are two aspects of Christian social activity listed here: (1) activities that apply specifically Christian principles to the public sphere, and (2) corporal works of mercy. The latter, no less than the former, are required by Christian duty. Catholics, or Christians more generally, may disagree as to the most effective or moral means of addressing social problems, but they are not permitted to ignore them as something extraneous to their religious duty.