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Ecumenism: Praying for Christian Unity

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity begins on January 18 and ends on January 25, feast of Saint Paul's conversion. An article on ecumenical dialogue by a well-known theologian.

01/16/2019

In the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, John Paul II stressed the central role of the work of ecumenism: "the movement promoting Christian unity is *not just some sort of 'appendix'* which is

added to the Church's traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her life and work."[1] Like his predecessor, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI also wanted to do everything possible to re-establish the unity of all our Lord's disciples. "For my part I renew here the determination I expressed at the beginning of my Pontificate to take on as a priority commitment and to spare no effort in the task of rebuilding the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers."[2] This deep concern for unity affects all Catholics. An essential aspiration of Christians is the full communion of all men and women with God, in accord with our Lord's prayer: *that all may be one*,[3] as members of the one Church founded by Christ, which "subsists in" (*subsistit in*) the Catholic Church, as the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* teaches.[4]

To attain full communion among Christians, the first thing needed is prayer, closely united to that of Christ: *I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word,[5] that they may be one even as we are one. I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one.[6]* "We cannot 'bring about' unity by our powers alone. We can only obtain unity," said Benedict XVI, "as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, spiritual ecumenism—prayer, conversion and the sanctification of life—constitutes the heart of the meeting and of the ecumenical movement." [7] All the faithful of the Work pray each day using our Lord's words: *Ut omnes unum sint, sicut tu Pater in me et ego in te: ut sint unum, sicut et nos unum sumus.* Moved by the desire to further unity, St. Josemaría urges us: "Offer your prayer, your atonement, and your action for this end: *ut sint unum!*—that all of us Christians may

share one will, one heart, one spirit. So that *omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam*—that we may all go to Jesus, closely united to the Pope, through Mary."[8]

The drama of divisions

The mission of the Church—the presence of Jesus in time, which we call precisely "the time of the Church"—is to build a unity of faith and communion among men. "It must not be forgotten," said John Paul II, "that the Lord prayed to the Father that his disciples might be one, so that their unity might bear witness to his mission."[9] Jesus himself pointed out a reason for that close unity: "*ut mundus credat*," so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.[10] Division is contrary to Christ's will and constitutes a serious obstacle to evangelization. "The lack of unity among Christians is certainly a *wound* for the Church;

not in the sense that she is deprived of her unity, but in that it hinders the complete fulfillment of her universality in history."[11]

The vicissitudes of history, nevertheless, have brought about discrepancies and separations among Christians, sometimes not without guilt on the part of those involved. [12] Therefore John Paul II invited all Christians to a "necessary purification of past memories" and to "re-examine together their painful past" so that "all together, they... acknowledge with sincere and total objectivity the mistakes made and the contingent factors at work at the origins of their deplorable divisions." [13] However, Christians who are now born in these Churches and communities—as the Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio* emphasizes [14]—are not at fault for past separations and are loved by the

Church and recognized as brothers and sisters.

A common patrimony

There are many things that all Christians share in common. We are united by Sacred Scripture, the life of grace and the virtues, communion of prayer and other spiritual benefits.

[15] "Likewise, we can say that in some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit, for to them also he gives his gifts and graces, and is thereby operative among them with his sanctifying power. Some indeed he has strengthened to the extent of the shedding of their blood." [16]

Most importantly, incorporation into Christ by baptism, the common patrimony of Catholics and of other Christians, establishes among all a special bond. All Christians are born in the waters of baptism. As the Second Vatican Council teaches in the Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*,

"those who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized are in communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect."[17] "Among Christians," said Benedict XVI, "fraternity is not just a vague sentiment, nor is it a sign of indifference to truth... it is grounded in the supernatural reality of the one Baptism which makes us all members of the one Body of Christ (cf. *I Cor* 12: 13; *Gal* 3: 28; *Col* 2: 12). Together we confess that Jesus Christ is God and Lord; together we acknowledge him as the one mediator between God and man (cf. *I Tim* 2: 5), and we emphasize that together we are members of his Body (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 22; *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 42). Based on this essential foundation of Baptism, a reality comes from him which is a way of being, then of professing, believing and acting. Based on this crucial foundation, dialogue has

borne its fruits and will continue to do so."[18]

The awareness of sharing in these common riches is the foundation of ecumenism, for it fosters an especially positive consideration for the non-Catholic Christian confessions, and should lead to a mutual relationship marked by the joyful awareness of all being *Christians*. Therefore, "Catholics must gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brethren."[19] This positive evaluation is of great importance: it leads to esteem for our non-Catholic brethren and a special way of living charity with them. Since it is rooted in our common faith in Jesus Christ, the way of living Christian love with them acquires special features.

The situation is different in regard to non-believers and those who do not profess the Christian religion. With non-Christians we carry out an *inter-religious* dialogue, distinct from ecumenism, because the point of departure is radically different. In this context, the relation between Christians and Jews, as is well known, holds a special place. The Jews are our *older brothers*, to use an expression of John Paul II,[20] with whom the People of God of the New Testament are spiritually united.

Ecumenism and "conversions": relationship and distinction

As the Second Vatican Council taught, "the term 'ecumenical movement' indicates the initiatives and activities planned and undertaken, according to the various needs of the Church and as opportunities offer, to promote Christian unity." [21] The ecumenical movement is directed

more towards communities than to individuals, and has a specifically "corporate" focus: working to bring it about that the diverse Churches and Christian communities achieve full communion in a visible unity. The point of departure is their common Christian identity. At the same time, each confession should be aware of its own features, since dialogue is possible only through the recognition of one's own identity.

Although the ecumenical effort is expressed in a variety of institutional activities among the Christian confessions, it is not reduced to them, since all Christians have a personal responsibility to foster unity. It is not just a question for specialists, far removed from everyday life. Rather it is "a duty of the Christian conscience enlightened by faith and guided by love." [22] Ecumenism is thus simply a dimension of Christian life. For example, we are all required

"to avoid expressions, judgments and actions which do not represent the condition of our separated brethren with truth and fairness and so make mutual relations with them more difficult."[23]

Above all, among those who have received the sacrament of Baptism, the dialogue should first focus on fostering what the sacrament of regeneration means for everyone, and help bring about its ultimate consequences: *being good Christians*. In other words, a meeting with a person who is Orthodox, Anglican or Protestant should be aimed first at each person living their Christian faith more fully, or beginning to practice it, if they are not doing so already. The first emphasis should be on the shared treasure of the baptismal call to live *a new life* in Christ, since all Christian faithful are called to holiness.[24] "All the faithful should remember that the more

effort they make to live holier lives according to the Gospel, the better will they further Christian unity and put it into practice. For the closer their union with the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, the more deeply and easily will they be able to grow in mutual brotherly love."[25]

In light of this consideration, we can see the attractiveness of the message that God entrusted to St. Josemaría, and the wide range of possibilities for ecumenical action by his daughters and sons. At the same time, "elements present among other Christians can contribute to the edification of Catholics,"[26] who will also feel called to a personal conversion, because every authentic witness of Christian faith and love helps foster a greater dedication in everyone.

Within the framework of relations with other Christians, there is

another task to be considered: that is, in the words of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the work of "preparation and reconciliation" of "individuals [who] wish for full Catholic communion,"[27] that is to say, attention to those who wish to become Catholics. It is important to distinguish, as the Decree does, between ecumenical activity and attention to these particular situations. Ecumenism is oriented towards perfect visible and institutional union between the Churches and ecclesial communities as such. The work of helping those who want to become Catholics, on the other hand, is something that affects a specific person and the free decision of his conscience. These two tasks are based on the desire to collaborate with the designs of God, and, far from being opposed, are intimately intertwined.[28] The common presupposition is always respect and esteem for people, for

their ideas and the riches they possess through their religious dimension.[29] For example, the witness of the life a Catholic colleague or friend can enkindle in another Christian, with God's grace, a desire to join the Catholic Church. The Catholic friend can accompany that decision with prayer and words, with full respect for the other person's freedom. Thus we show that ours is a sincere friendship that stems from the charity that God has poured into our hearts. For only God, in the end, can change a person's heart.

Speaking in general, we could say that Christians who take this step are not really changing or converting from one Church to another, but are rather incorporating themselves *fully* into *the* Church, into the one true Church, to which they were already imperfectly united: the Church of Jesus Christ, one, holy, catholic and

apostolic, over which the successor of Peter presides. Those friends become fully what they already were imperfectly. For this reason, those who become Catholics sometimes prefer not to speak of a "conversion." For them, not without reason, their conversion was actually a series of conversions—and there are many in every person's lifetime—beginning with Baptism, until deciding, through a new impulse of grace, to take the step to full communion, to their home: Rome! Showing great respect for this outlook, the Second Vatican Council replaced the expression "conversion"—more proper to those who accept Christianity for the first time—with the term "full incorporation."

Certainly these decisions are a cause for deep joy for the children of the Catholic Church, who eagerly desire and work towards the goal that all men and women may attain full

communion with God and with one another in the universal Church.

Towards true dialogue

All men and women have a need to communicate with others, to overcome difficulties in seeking for the truth. As St. Josemaría insisted, "dialogue is a recognition of the humanity of the person one is speaking with. Therefore its climate is necessarily one of cordiality, friendship and charity." [30]

A Catholic's open and respectful attitude in the ecumenical dialogue requires a clear knowledge and exposition of the faith. [31] "*Equality*, which is a presupposition of inter-religious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content." [32] Therefore it is very important that Catholics know, each in accord with their own possibilities, the documents of the

Second Vatican Council, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and other important texts, for example, the letter *Communio et Progressus* and the declaration *Dominus Iesus*, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Establishing a dialogue with other Christians requires, in addition, that Catholics are able to recognize the positive values of the faith these Christians received in their own community, even in the midst of deficiencies. But this requires of Catholics formation and study, a deep knowledge of our faith.

First study, then dialogue. Christians can always learn from one another, and come to value more fully realities they already know. They also feel inspired on seeing how deeply others have assimilated their faith. It is impressive to see the study of Scripture that is so deeply rooted

in the lives of many Protestants, the beauty of certain liturgical celebrations among the Orthodox, and the love for the Holy Eucharist and its central place in the life of Catholics, so attractive in turn to many Protestants. St. Josemaría's teachings on the sanctification of work have a great interest and appeal for so many Christians. It is crucial to rediscover the convergence among aspects such as these, without losing sight of the fact that only charity enables divisions to be overcome. "The task for a Christian is to drown evil in an abundance of good. It is not a question of negative campaigns, or of being anti anything. On the contrary, we should live positively, full of optimism, with youthfulness, joy and peace. We should be understanding with everybody, with the followers of Christ and with those who abandon him, or do not know him at all. But understanding does not mean

holding back, or remaining indifferent, but being active."[33]

"Before speaking, we must take great care to listen not only to what men say, but more especially to what they have it in their hearts to say. Only then will we understand them and respect them," said Pope Paul VI.[34] If they do not find a sincere desire to know and understand in the person they are speaking with, no one will feel respected or inclined to dialogue: "Nothing is more foreign to the attitude of a Christian apostle than conceited arrogance, or as it is now usually called, triumphalism. Our doctrine is not the fruit of our own efforts, of our perceptiveness or insight. Rather it is the word of God that has come to us, not because we were better or readier than others, but because our Lord chose to use us as his instruments... Moreover, we realize very well that the divine truth that we bear transcends us. We know

that our words are insufficient to express all its richness, and that it is possible we may not even understand it fully, and that our role is that of someone who is passing on a message which he himself does not fully understand." [35] We are not the proprietors of the truth; it does not belong to us. We want to be co-workers of the truth: *cooperatores simus veritatis*. [36] We try to act in the truth and by it.

With Christ's charity

"In order to fulfill as we ought the part that corresponds to us in the Church's mission, we must not forget the example of Christ. There is no true Christian dialogue, if it does not reproduce our Lord's way of being and acting. The example of Jesus leads us to dialogue; and that same example teaches us how we have to speak with people." [37] In the words of St. Josemaría, this entails two

fundamental features: "faithfulness to the truth, friendship with people. A fruitful dialogue is impossible unless there exists or there is created a climate of friendship, honesty and trust between those who are dialoguing." [38]

Without love for others there can be no true ecumenism, but only strategies, which by themselves will end up fruitless: "Our Lord has called us, it is true, in a time when everyone talks about peace, and there is no peace—whether in souls or in institutions or in social life or among nations. Everyone talks about equality and democracy, and what we see all around are closed and impenetrable castes. He has called us in a time when everyone demands understanding, and understanding is conspicuous only by its absence, even among persons who act in good faith and want to be charitable. Don't forget that charity, more than in

giving, consists in understanding."[39] True dialogue is possible only when a desire for sincere friendship exists, an eagerness to help and serve others. "Dialogue thrives on friendship, and most especially on service."[40]

Catholics engaged in ecumenical activity need to be concerned about their brothers and sisters, praying for them and trying to get to know them better. Love has to be at the root of all our actions. In the words of St. Paul, *omnia vestra in caritate fiant*, [41] let all that you do be done in love. Therefore, besides mutual acquaintance, there must also be esteem and true affection, which arises spontaneously, as we saw on October 7 2002, when the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church spoke at the end of the audience granted by John Paul II to the participants in St. Josemaría's canonization. This ecumenical event

had an enormous repercussion on people from Romania and on many others; some knew little about the Work, while others were already taking part in its apostolates, including the Lebanese Orthodox families who were present at the ceremony and who reacted with immense joy.

The lives of the saints allow us to discover what God is carrying out in those who belong to other Churches and ecclesial communities. "It is right and salutary to recognize the riches of Christ and virtuous works in the lives of others who are bearing witness to Christ, sometimes even to the shedding of their blood. For God is always wonderful in His works and worthy of all praise." [42] Those who have given their lives for Christ thus constitute a common meeting point: "Such a joint witness of holiness, as fidelity to the one Lord, has an ecumenical potential

extraordinarily rich in grace."[43]
"Perhaps the most convincing form of ecumenism is *the ecumenism of the saints* and of the martyrs. The *communio sanctorum* speaks louder than the things which divide us. The *martyrologium* of the first centuries was the basis of the veneration of the Saints. By proclaiming and venerating the holiness of her sons and daughters, the Church gave supreme honor to God himself; in the martyrs she venerated Christ, who was at the origin of their martyrdom and of their holiness. In later times there developed the practice of canonization, a practice which still continues in the Catholic Church and in the Orthodox Churches."[44]

Fostering cooperation in service to mankind

Creating possibilities for joint activities among Christians of different confessions, or encouraging

other Christians to cooperate in activities of the Catholic Church, fosters mutual knowledge and facilitate the path towards full communion.

Cooperation in social undertakings is a specific way suggested by the Second Vatican Council for the work of ecumenism; the faithful of the Prelature, like all members of the Church, should foster these endeavors. "Cooperation among Christians vividly expresses the relationship which in fact already unites them, and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant. This cooperation, which has already begun in many countries, should be developed more and more, particularly in regions where a social and technical evolution is taking place, be it in 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, or also in 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. All believers in Christ can, through this cooperation, be led to acquire a better knowledge and appreciation of one another, and so pave the way to Christian unity."[45]

Especially in many parts of the West today, but also in the rest of the world, "our Christian presence will be incisive and enlightening only if we have the courage and determination to take the path of reconciliation and unity," Benedict XVI said. "We all have a specific responsibility...; there are more opportunities to increase our reciprocal knowledge and esteem

with an enriching mutual exchange of gifts; and we feel the need to join forces to face the great challenges of the present day, starting with those of modernity and secularization. Experience amply shows that sincere, brotherly dialogue generates trust, eliminates fear and preconceived notions, dissolves difficulties and opens people to serene and constructive comparison."[46]

"I have so often written to you, with the words of St. Paul: *veritatem facientes in caritate* (Eph 4:15), 'doing' the truth with charity: this is the way to dialogue, to spread doctrine."[47] The ecumenical "encounter," lived out in secular life, requires that *all of us* strive to walk in the truth and in charity and to be better disciples of Jesus Christ, because *all* are called by God, from the moment of Baptism, to personal holiness. This is St. Josemaría 's great message,

reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council.

Today the Church needs the "practical ecumenism" that the spirit of the Work also gives rise to: an ecumenism in the midst of all human activities. These efforts help bring about everywhere many different "networks" of Christian friends, of disciples of Christ, of "friends of God," for the conversion of the world. These are the "nets" of the *Duc in altum!* and of the apostolate *ad fidem*, the nets St. Josemaría so often talked about. They are the nets which will catch *piscium multitudinem copiosam*: men and women who are living in paganism or neo-paganism. And while the fishermen fulfill Christ's command, united in human and Christian friendship, the love of God the Father will grant them the full communion for which his Son prayed—and is praying for in heaven. *Ut unum sint*, and as Jesus

added, *ut mundus credat*: so that the nets will be filled to overflowing.

All this will become a reality with one condition: that "you never stop dialoguing with our God, living and loving, with the Holy Spirit, with Christ our Lord, and with Mary, Queen of Heaven and Mother of the Church. There you will obtain each day the light of doctrine, apostolic desires, zeal for souls, a universal and refined charity." [48]

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Footnotes:

[1] John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, 25 May 1995, no. 20

[2] Benedict XVI, *Address to the Preparatory Commission for the European Ecumenical Assembly*, 26 January 2006.

[3] *Jn* 17:21.

[4] Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 8.

[5] *Jn* 17:20.

[6] *Jn* 17:22-23.

[7] Benedict XVI, *Address to ecumenical meeting at the Twentieth World Youth Day*, 19 August 2005.

[8] *The Forge*, no. 647.

[9] John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, 25 May 1995, no. 23.

[10] *Jn* 17:21.

[11] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, 6 August 2000, no. 17.

[12] Cf. Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 3.

[13] John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, 25 May 1995, no. 2.

[14] Cf. Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 3.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, 25 May 1995, no. 12.

[17] Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 3.

[18] Benedict XVI, *Address to ecumenical meeting at the Twentieth World Youth Day*, 19 August 2005.

[19] Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 4.

[20] Cf. John Paul II, *Address in the synagogue of Rome*, 13 April 1986.

[21] Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 4.

[22] John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, 25 May 1995, no. 8.

[23] Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 4.

[24] Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 40.

[25] Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 7.

[26] *Ibid.*, no. 4, and John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, 25 May 1995, no. 48.

[27] Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 4.

[28] Cf. *Ibid.*

[29] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, 7 December 1990, no. 55.

[30] St. Josemaría , *Letter*, 24 October 1965, no. 30.

[31] Cf. Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, nos. 9-11.

[32] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, 6 August 2000, no. 22.

[33] *Furrow*, no. 864.

[34] Paul VI, Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, 6 August 1964, no. 87.

[35] St. Josemaría, *Letter*, 24 October 1965, no. 25.

[36] 3 *Jn* 1:8.

[37] St. Josemaría, *Letter*, 24 October 1965, no. 15.

[38] *Ibid.*, no. 20.

[39] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 123.

[40] Paul VI, Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, 6 August 1964, no. 87.

[41] 1 *Cor* 16:14.

[42] Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 4.

[43] John Paul II, Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, 25 May 1995, no. 48.

[44] John Paul II, Apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 10 November 1994, no. 37.

[45] Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, no. 12.

[46] Benedict XVI, *Address to the Preparatory Commission for the European Ecumenical Assembly*, 26 January 2006.

[47] St. Josemaría , *Letter*, 24 October 1965, no. 75.

[48] *Ibid.*, no. 76.

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